



Cultural Studies

by Brett Farmer

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Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field concerned with the forms, practices and experiences of contemporary cultural life. Blending ideas and methods from both the humanities and the social sciences, cultural studies examines the diverse relations through which cultural meanings and values are produced and received.

Within this context, the field attends centrally to the intersections between subjectivity and power: how identities are formed and transformed through the operations of social discourse, especially those pertaining to class, race, gender, and sexuality. The significance of cultural studies for glbtq people stems from, among other things, its concern with social and sexual politics; its focus on subcultural production and consumption; and its commitment to progressive social change.

The Politics of Everyday Life

Cultural studies developed out of the work of various post-World War II scholars who sought to challenge traditional modes of studying and thinking about culture. Rather than limit focus to canonical works of art, official history, or quantitative social data, these critics argued the need to attend to the full range of forms that constitute the varied landscapes of contemporary culture.

In particular, they stressed the importance of taking seriously what Raymond Williams, a pioneering figure in the development of cultural studies, termed "ordinary culture." In this reading, culture is not simply a rarefied set of practices valued by certain social or intellectual elites (that is, "High Culture"), but "the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds" that make up the lived experience of culture as "a whole way of life."

Thus, cultural studies emerged as an academic field devoted to the serious analysis of such diverse and previously denigrated forms of everyday culture as popular media, sports, fashion, and shopping.

Cultural Materialism

As part of its reconceptualization of culture as ordinary and extensive, cultural studies stresses the need to situate and analyze cultural forms within the real world contexts of their production and use. Often dubbed "cultural materialism," this approach contends that culture can never truly be understood independently of society and its governing conditions.

Any given text or practice will always be produced and consumed in material (that is, real) social and historical contexts and will bear the trace of those contexts. The aim of analysis, therefore, should be to identify how a text circulates in material conditions and how it serves to reproduce shared cultural meanings and beliefs.

This approach sees culture as broadly political, as something that is both articulated through and

reproductive of social ideologies. Indeed, many of the key figures in the early development of cultural studies were committed Marxists and one of their central objectives was to show how the culture of everyday life functions as a site of hegemony, the reproduction and naturalization of social power structures.

Given its Marxist roots, much of the focus of early work in cultural studies was on exposing the investments of everyday culture in power structures of class. The approach has subsequently broadened, however, to attend to competing systems of social power organized around such varied axes as race, ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, and sexuality.

Hegemonies of Gender and Sexuality

The attention in cultural studies to hegemonies of gender and sexuality is of particular relevance to glbtq people. Considerable work has been done in cultural studies by examining how everyday culture relays patriarchal and heterosexist ideologies and thereby maintains social heteronormativity.

To use a classic example, the constant reiteration in contemporary media cultures of endless images of idealized heterosexual romance and families works both to promote heterosexuality as a universal ideal and to secure its ongoing status as social norm. By contrast, mainstream media regularly represents gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer people as "other" to this heterosexual norm, thus reinscribing conservative views of queer sexualities and subjects as socially marginal and devalued.

As Larry Gross and James D. Woods argue, glbtq people "are usually ignored altogether [by mainstream media], but when they *do* appear, it is in roles that *support* the natural order and are thus narrowly and negatively stereotyped." By exposing these political maneuvers in the culture at large, cultural studies seeks to denaturalize their operations and loosen the hold of heteronormativity and other strategies of exclusionary power.

Popular Resistance

Importantly, cultural studies asserts that such tactics of political resistance are not simply the preserve of scholars and analysts, but are in fact widely practiced by ordinary people in everyday life. Unlike traditional approaches where the audiences of mass culture are regularly assumed to be abstract collectives that passively imbibe the meanings of cultural commodities, cultural studies insists on both the diversity and agency of cultural consumers.

As Stuart Hall proclaims in what has become something of a cultural studies catch phrase: people "are not cultural dopes" but "active"--and often critical--participants in the production and negotiation of meaning. This insistence on the active capacity of popular consumers has led cultural studies to explore the myriad ways in which culture is used and transformed by "ordinary" and "marginal" social groups.

The long and influential tradition in cultural studies of theorizing subcultures, especially youth subcultures, is a good example of this critical attention to everyday modes of popular resistance. Cultural studies understands subcultures to be engaged in overt, if complex, processes of aberrant identity production in which cultural consumption is used to articulate distinctive modes of social selfhood and to foster alternative cultural values.

Glbtq Bricolage

The term often used for this process of resistant subcultural consumption is "bricolage," the adaptation of existing forms and commodities to produce new significances unintended by their original producers. It is a process widely evidenced in queer subcultures, where glbtq people regularly appropriate texts and objects from mainstream culture--films, songs, celebrities, fashion--and imbue them with new queer meanings and

values.

That this practice can assume vital political significance is neatly illustrated by the bricolage strategies of AIDS activist groups in the early 1990s, such as ACT UP and Gran Fury, whereby various mainstream texts from Nazi symbols to Benetton advertisements were recycled in order to critique and challenge institutional homophobia and complacency in the face of the AIDS crisis.

Media Fandoms

A slightly different site of popular resistance and one that has also been the focus of sustained critical attention in cultural studies is media fandoms. Cultural studies refutes dismissive views of popular culture fans as immature or pathological, arguing instead that they are involved in significant and often highly sophisticated processes of what Paul Willis terms "symbolic creativity," reworking media commodities to accommodate the fans' own social needs and desires.

Glbtc people have long cultivated fan-based practices around various popular media forms, and the cultural studies reading of media fandoms as creative agencies offers a productive frame within which to consider and make sense of these practices. To offer but one example of many, Henry Jenkins's examination of glbtq fans of the ever popular television series *Star Trek* demonstrates how these fans engage in extensive and skillful interventions with the text in order to claim it for queer investment and use.

One particularly striking queer fan practice surveyed by Jenkins is "slash fiction," a form of fan writing that takes same-sex characters from popular media forms--such as Kirk and Spock in *Star Trek*--and features them in fictional homosexual romance narratives. While slash fiction might seem an innocuous, if quirky, act of projective fantasy, Jenkins suggests that it is in fact engaged in subversive processes of "semiotic guerrilla warfare," whereby the ideological norms of the original media material are upended and replaced with utopian queer possibilities.

Significantly, this particular fan practice is not limited to glbtq-identified fans alone--indeed, its most popular adherents seem to be straight-identified women. As such, it serves to highlight that manifestations of queer resistance, like queer desire, are surprisingly unpredictable.

Critical Interventions

When cultural studies engages with the popular and the "ordinary," it does so primarily to understand--and thus to try to *change*--the power relations that shape the most intimate and/or quotidian details of our lives, power relations that are ordinarily no more apparent or remarkable to us than the air we breathe. In this respect, cultural studies is not a disengaged mode of academic knowledge but a political practice in its own right.

Most fundamentally, cultural studies seeks to promote an understanding of the competing possibilities and constraints of everyday culture, thus enabling both the development of critical knowledge and the production of new cultural forms and spaces consonant with emancipatory interests.

The commitment of cultural studies to developing a transformative critique of contemporary culture--one that exposes social inequities and divisions while equally promoting modes of tactical resistance--renders it an invaluable critical practice for glbtq people.

Not only does it furnish tools with which to dismantle oppressive hierarchies of power, such as heteronormativity and homophobia, or help recover the important histories of ordinary and marginal social groups, but cultural studies also ultimately helps work toward the realization of what Laclau and Mouffe term "radical democracy": "A society where everyone, whatever his/her sex, race, economic position, sexual orientation, will be in an effective situation of equality and participation, where no basis of

discrimination will remain and where self management will exist in all fields."

Cultural studies has the admirable and indispensable objective of imagining--and striving toward--a better and more inclusive social future.

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