

The Role of Aesthetics in Cultural Studies

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Bashing cultural studies is a popular pastime. While critics often dismiss the field as mere fashion, nowadays it is attacks on cultural studies that are highly fashionable. But which cultural studies? I have a hunch that “cultural studies” has overtaken “postmodernism” as one of the most misused words in contemporary intellectual life. In the recent tidal wave of epitaphs, elegies, and jeremiads on what’s happening to the humanities, cultural studies has a starring role as chief villain and scapegoat.¹ Only a few years ago, cultural studies was an obscure field that few American scholars knew or cared about. Now, it seems, everyone knows about cultural studies. But what exactly is it that they know?

In this chapter I discuss some recent complaints about cultural studies emanating from departments of literature. Two ideas come to the fore in these arguments. The first is that cultural studies had declared war on art and aesthetics. It is the implacable foe of all talk about beauty and pleasure, style and form. Cultural critics believe that such terms are nothing more than mystifying babble that distracts us from the coercive rule of hierarchies of taste. In their leveling zeal, they want to reduce text to context, poetry to propaganda, works of art to lumps of text churned out by a ubiquitous ideology machine. The second idea is that this anti-aesthetic has become the new norm. Practitioners of cultural studies have invaded and set up camp in English departments and are forcing everyone to think their way. “Cultural studies,” mourns Marjorie Perloff, “currently dominates the arena of literary study” (2000: 24). The glittering prizes of tenure and publications, fellowships and invitations, now depend on knowing how to talk cultural studies talk. Pity the poor soul who still dreams of writing a monograph on the role of metaphor in Robert Frost. Cultural studies, its critics

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like to claim in a sly mimicry of their opponents' vocabulary, has become hegemonic.

It is the conjunction of these two ideas – cultural studies' sovereignty in the academy and its blithe disregard for language, beauty, and form – that lies behind the rallying cry for a return to aesthetics. In 1998, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* ran the headline "Wearying of Cultural Studies, Some Scholars Rediscover Beauty." The accompanying article drew attention to a growing backlash against cultural studies and its slighting of the aesthetic. There were quotes from disgruntled literary scholars fed up with the social agendas of contemporary criticism. They wanted to get back to talking about style and sensibility, the lilt of language and the play of form, the beauty of poetry and what makes Shakespeare a great writer (Heller 1998).

In the last few years, other voices have joined the chorus; rallying to the defense of the aesthetic has inspired a publishing mini-boom. Apart from James Soderholm's book, *Beauty and the Critic: Aesthetics in the Age of Cultural Studies*, prominently featured in the *Chronicle* piece, there is also Michael Clark's boldly titled collection *The Revenge of the Aesthetic*. In 1999, Elaine Scarry published her widely reviewed *On Beauty and Being Just*, followed by Wendy Steiner's *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Thought* and Denis Donoghue's *Speaking of Beauty*. And we should not forget the many recent books such as Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature* and John Ellis's *Literature Lost* that lament the current state of literary study in American universities. In such publications, as well as in the best-selling volumes of Harold Bloom's one-man publishing industry, it is simply taken for granted that the rise of cultural studies means the death of aesthetics.

I have no quarrel with those who want to defend the value of studying literature and high art, but I am growing weary of reading overwrought accounts of beauty under threat from the villainous machinations of cultural studies. This Beauty and the Beast scenario bears little relationship to reality. I want, then, to take issue with the two claims I have just outlined. Let us look at the first idea, the tyrannical sway of cultural studies in American universities. It is now so deeply entrenched as the new orthodoxy, its critics claim, that impatient scholars are itching for something new. In the above-mentioned *Chronicle* article, after a scathing dismissal of current trends in literary study, Heller quotes Marjorie Perloff as declaring: "people are really tired of the old cultural studies" (1998: A15).

The *old* cultural studies? On first reading this sentence I did a double-take. My own sense is that cultural studies is still a relative novelty whose impact on the day-to-day workings of literature departments has been modest. Of course, the *idea* of cultural studies is thrown around a great deal lately. There are more than a few card-carrying deconstructionists who are hastily tossing in a few references to shopping malls and Stuart Hall to meet the current trend. As a marketing category, cultural studies undeniably has a certain allure.

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Nevertheless, I suspect that the key works of cultural studies are still largely unknown in most literature departments. How many scholars around the country are really up to date with the work of Kobena Mercer and Larry Grossberg, Meaghan Morris and Tony Bennett, Constance Penley and Ien Ang? Outside a few well-known centers for cultural studies, I wager not many. I often find that otherwise well-read graduate students are utterly unfamiliar with the central debates and methods of cultural studies. This is particularly true when it comes to the large body of scholarship that is written or published outside the United States. The number of academic jobs in cultural studies each year remains pitifully small. How can we reconcile these facts with the claim that English professors are wearying of the “old cultural studies,” a phrase that suggests many years of relentless, numbing exposure? How can cultural studies be both old and new?

Perhaps we can solve this mystery by looking more closely at the second idea I've sketched out, that cultural studies wants to do away with aesthetics. Where does this idea come from? In many recent polemics, it is taken for granted that cultural studies is just another word for ideology critique. That is to say, doing cultural studies means looking suspiciously at works of art and debunking them as tools of oppression. It means reading them against the grain and denying the truth of art in favor of the truth of politics. It is another word for what Soderholm calls “inquisitorial criticism” (1997: 3) and what George Levine memorably describes as “seeing the text as a kind of enemy to be arrested” (1994: 3).

A good example of this view of cultural studies can be found in the epilogue of Richard Rorty's *Achieving our Country*. Rorty agrees that cultural studies is taking over departments of English. Its practitioners, he writes, can be identified by their dry, sardonic knowingness. They are suspicious of romance and enthusiasm and lack all sense of awe. They risk turning the study of literature into one more dismal social science and driving students away in droves. Rorty singles out Fredric Jameson as an example of this pernicious trend. He quotes Jameson's gloomy pronouncements on the death of the individual in postmodern culture as a way of driving home what is in store if departments of literature turn into departments of cultural studies. Instead of benefiting from the inspirational value of great works of literature, we will be left, says Rorty, with nothing but expressions of political resentment clothed in jargon.

There is one major problem with Rorty's argument: Jameson does not do cultural studies. His work is closer in spirit to Marxist aesthetic theory, especially the Frankfurt School and its gloomy vision of popular culture as a form of capitalist domination. In fact, cultural studies came about as a reaction against this very tradition. One of its goals was to question the standpoint of academic critics who pride themselves on their knowingness and superior political insight. But this discrepancy does not seem to bother Rorty, who cheerfully admits that his knowledge of cultural studies comes from friends like Harold Bloom. Cultural

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studies, for Rorty, is simply a handy label for all the bad things that have happened to literature departments in the last 30 years.

Rorty is not the only one to think this way. John Ellis, for example, also assumes that cultural studies is just another word for the invasion of English departments by hordes of what he calls “race-gender-class critics.” Cultural studies, in recent American debates, is often just short-hand for political readings of literature. In particular, when used by hostile critics, doing cultural studies means focusing on content and context and paying no attention to form. It is synonymous with the crudest forms of sociological analysis. It means looking through a text as if it were a transparent vehicle for a simple political message. It means, quite simply, being a bad reader.

I want to leave aside, for now, the accuracy of this view of the political turn in literary criticism.² My question is simply: what does all this have to do with cultural studies? After all, such approaches to literature have been around in American universities for some time. Feminist, Marxist, and African American scholarship, for example, has been thriving since the 1970s. But critics in these fields, until recently, did not see themselves, and were not seen by others, as doing cultural studies. Indeed, not so long ago, this term meant little to the average professor. In 1987 Richard Johnson published an influential article called “What is Cultural Studies Anyway?” that introduced the field to an American audience largely unfamiliar with its main ideas.

What we’re currently seeing, in other words, is a classic case of semantic drift. Cultural studies, once a name reserved for a specific intellectual tradition, is now being applied, often quite haphazardly, to any attempt to link literature, culture, and politics. A phrase that once identified a specific field of study originating in Britain is now being used as ammunition in America’s own culture wars. History is being rewritten; those who once saw themselves as feminist literary critics or practitioners of New Historicism were, it seems, doing cultural studies all along. When people complain that they are tired of the “old cultural studies,” this history is usually what they have in mind.

Let me be clear about my argument. I am far from suggesting that American cultural studies has no right to define its own goals and methods, that it should doff its forelock in deference to the British founding fathers. In fact, cultural studies has long since migrated from its Birmingham roots; Britain has no monopoly on an international field in constant flux. Much of the interesting work in cultural studies now comes from places like Australia, Canada, South Korea, South Africa, and indeed the United States, by scholars who are often deeply critical of the Birmingham tradition. It is widely recognized that this tradition paid scant attention to the politics of race, gender, and sexuality and that its research agendas focused on British examples that do not always translate into other contexts.

What distinguishes the new work in cultural studies, however, is a familiarity with the tradition that it criticizes, a sense of dialogue with a previous generation

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of scholars. Those working in the field, after all, expended considerable time and effort into hashing out basic issues of methodology. To see some scholars claiming to do cultural studies with no apparent knowledge of these debates is disconcerting. Both foes and fans of cultural studies often use the term in curiously careless and decontextualized ways. The field falls victim to a widespread amnesia, a studied indifference to its rich and contradictory history.³

Part of the problem, no doubt, has to do with the beguiling yet treacherous simplicity of its name. Cultural studies sounds like a synonym for studying culture, a convenient handle for anyone with interdisciplinary interests. Yet cultural studies is, of course, only one way of analyzing culture; there are many others, including anthropology, communication studies, American studies, cultural history, new historicism, cultural sociology, and other fields. The lines between these traditions are by no means hard and fast; indeed, some of them have cross-pollinated with cultural studies in fruitful ways. And yet they also have different names and distinct histories. One result of the diffusion of "cultural studies" is an increasing ignorance of the specific tradition it names. Scholars feel free to use the term without needing to learn anything about the field.

Against popular misconceptions, then, I want to stress that cultural studies started off not as ideology critique, but rather as a critique of ideology critique. It took left-wing intellectuals to task for their knee-jerk dismissal of popular culture, their airy assumption that mass-media forms were always aesthetically dreary and politically pernicious. From the standpoint of cultural studies, such attitudes revealed more about the professional blinkers of intellectuals than about the intrinsic qualities of popular culture. Cultural studies, then, did not seek to destroy aesthetics, but to broaden the definition of what counted as art by taking popular culture seriously. It was always as much about form as about content, as much about pleasure as about ideology. Cultural studies is as indebted to semiotics as it is to the work of Antonio Gramsci and the politics of new social movements. In retrospect, its emergence at a time when our everyday environment was becoming saturated with ever more sophisticated media images seems inevitable. Cultural studies provided a vocabulary for talking about the formal complexity of contemporary culture. It made a much wider variety of objects aesthetically interesting.

The work of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, often seen as two of the founders of cultural studies, makes this commitment very clear. Neither of these scholars is particularly interested in arresting and strip-searching works of literature. For example, Raymond Williams's work spans a wide variety of subjects, from television to tragedy, from Welsh working-class culture to the more arcane works of the English canon. One of the first scholars to offer an eloquent defense of popular culture and ordinary life, Williams was also a scrupulous reader of literary works who argued strenuously against reducing such works to vehicles of ideology. In fact, as both Williams's supporters and his critics have pointed out, his vision of culture is powerfully influenced by the heritage of Romantic

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aesthetics (see Bennett's *Culture: A Reformer's Science* and Johnson's *The Cultural Critics: From Matthew Arnold to Raymond Williams*). Similarly, Richard Hoggart argued that the techniques of literary criticism would play a central part in the new field of cultural studies, allowing critics to attend to the specific formal qualities of popular culture. "Unless you know how these things work as art, even though sometimes as 'bad art,' what you say about them will not cut very deep" (quoted in Mulhern 2000: 96).

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was an intellectual shift in center of gravity as scholars turned in ever greater numbers to structuralist and poststructuralist theories. One result was a growing formalism in cultural studies, a concentration on the signifier rather than the signified. Scholars drew on semiotic theory to describe and analyze the patterns and conventions through which meaning was produced. An organic and romantic vision of culture gave way to an avant-garde sensibility that highlighted moments of rupture, contradiction, and ambiguity in popular texts. The aesthetic theories of the Russian formalists, the art of the European avant-garde, and the ideas of Bertolt Brecht all fed into the cultural studies project.

We can see this *mélange* of influences very clearly in Richard Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, one of the classic works of cultural studies. Hebdige made a persuasive case for the parallels between the aesthetics of the European avant-garde and 1970s British subcultural style. Punks, for example, drew heavily upon experimental techniques of collage, bricolage, and surreal juxtaposition. They combined random mass-produced objects – dog collars, safety pins, garbage bags – in a perverse mimicry of consumer culture. Their manipulation of signs was knowing, self-conscious, and parodic. Clearly, it was no longer possible to draw a sharp line between the subversive experiments of the literary avant-garde and the mawkish tastes of the masses: intellectuals did not have a monopoly on formal sophistication and irony. Thus Hebdige wrote with the eye of an aesthete as much as a sociologist, doing close readings of the multilayered meanings of subcultural styles.

In Hebdige's book, as in much cultural studies work, form was not incidental but essential. To confuse an interest in popular culture with a sociological stress on content is to mistake the essence of the cultural studies project. In a well-known essay, Peter Brooks argues for the continuing relevance of poetics, defined as a sense of "not only *what* a text means, but as well *how* it means" (Levine 1994: 161). It is precisely the curiosity about how things mean that lies at the heart of cultural studies. By training their eye on works once dismissed as aesthetically unworthy, cultural critics challenged the opposition between formally sophisticated high art and content-driven mass culture. It now seems obvious that many popular forms, from rap music to sitcoms, from science fiction novels to slasher movies, rely on a sophisticated manipulation of stylistic conventions. Can anyone sit through a Hollywood blockbuster that is orchestrated and marketed around

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the spectacular nature of its special effects and still believe that popular culture is primarily about content?

Of course, people in cultural studies also want to talk about politics, power, and ideology. In this sense, its opponents are right. Cultural critics do not believe that art is autonomous. They see it as embedded in the world rather than as transcending the world. They do not believe that aesthetic experience soars above the messy scrimmage of social relations. But this is a long way from saying that cultural studies has no interest in aesthetics. If by aesthetics one means looking at the “how” as well as the “what” of symbol-making and pondering the distinctive pleasures and meanings that arise from that “how,” then any such claim is off the mark. There are, in fact, some interesting convergences between cultural studies and contemporary aesthetic theory. Even a cursory glance at the academic literature makes it clear that many philosophers of art no longer have much faith in an ideal of pure and contemplative detachment. Instead, they are moving, in Marcia Eaton’s words, from a Kantian to a contextual aesthetic. Eaton writes:

“pure,” conceptless, valueless uses of “beauty” are rare. It has certainly been a mistake for aestheticians to take this sense of beauty as the paradigmatic aesthetic concept – to act, that is, as if by giving an account of it one automatically has given an account for all aesthetic properties. Many, I would wager most, aesthetic terms are “impure” – they reflect, even require, beliefs and values: sincere, suspenseful, sentimental, shallow, sensitive, subtle, sexy, sensual, salacious, sordid, sobering, sustainable, skillful...and that, of course, only scratches the surface of the s-words! (2000: 34)⁴

Certainly, when I first stumbled across cultural studies as a graduate student, it excited me not because it talked about politics – there were plenty of other approaches that did that – but because it made a compelling case for how rich and multifaceted works of popular culture could be. It forced me to look afresh at some of the assumptions that I had absorbed as an aspiring student of literature. Often, my professors spoke as if they were the sole guardians of the aesthetic sensibility, as if outside the hallowed walls of the academy there was only hideousness and horror. The problem with literature departments, I would argue, is not that they study literature, but that they often see themselves as having a monopoly on what counts as aesthetic experience.

There are various reasons for this belief, including the need to justify one’s professional status and authority by laying claim to a unique form of expertise. In fact, the professionalization of aesthetics is not necessarily a bad thing. But it leads to problems when critics start to equate their own specialized techniques of reading with aesthetics *tout court*. In the heyday of New Criticism, scholars of literature were trained as technicians of language. They cultivated a reverence for words, assiduously poring over literary works that were rich in ambiguity, irony,

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and paradox. In spite of recent changes in the profession, things have not changed that much. Not surprisingly, literary critics still like works that reward their own professional prowess, that are satisfyingly indeterminate, that allow them to dig for obscure allusions to other literary works, that repay endless rereading.

Yet there are, one hardly needs to say, other aspects of art beside innovation, difficulty, and verbal pyrotechnics. For example, literature was once prized for its suspenseful plots and its powerful archetypal figures. But you will not get far as an English major nowadays by enthusing about an exciting story. If we look at the history of modern literature and professional criticism, we see a fastidious disdain for the well-made plot. Instead, storytelling continues to flourish in the popular fiction aisle, where it brings in stupendous royalties for Danielle Steele and Stephen King.

Again, while critics once enthused over novels that could freeze your blood, make your hair stand on end, or inspire copious tears, the professionalization of literary study has put an end to such talk. As an academic discipline, literary criticism teaches certain techniques of interpretation and ranks highly the works that reward such techniques. It teaches students to decode works according to accepted parameters and places a high premium on aesthetic difficulty. It leaves little room for attending to emotion, excitement, escapism, and other aspects of aesthetic response that cannot be evaluated, graded, and ranked. In fact, critics have often argued that such responses do not qualify as aesthetic at all. Thanks to modern ideas about the primacy of form and the linking of art to other artworks rather than to life, art is often defined as the province of specialists. Matei Calinescu is refreshingly blunt on this point: "true aesthetic experience may be rare to the point of being statistically irrelevant" (1987: 228).

This, then, is the real challenge posed by cultural studies. Not its denial of the aesthetic, but its case for multiple aesthetics. It insists that English professors and other cultural mediators do not have a monopoly on imagination, fantasy, playfulness, and delight in form. It struggles to unravel a longstanding distinction between the authentic art of the few and the mindless kitsch of the masses. John Frow underscores this point when he talks about regimes of value. "The concept of regime," he writes, "expresses one of the fundamental theses of work in cultural studies; that no object, no text, no cultural practice has an intrinsic or necessary meaning or value or function; and that meaning, value and function are always the effect of specific (and changing, changeable) social relations and mechanisms of signification" (1995: 145). In other words, the very appeal to aesthetic value presuppose a framework that defines certain properties rather than others as aesthetically valuable. Simon Frith puts the case more succinctly: "value judgements only make sense as part of an argument and arguments are always social events" (1996: 95). Cultural studies reminds us that there are other arguments, other values, other ways of appreciating and discriminating between works, than those that reign in the classroom.

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It is, in fact, highly ironic that cultural studies now stands accused of neglecting beauty. It is not cultural studies that has outlawed beauty, but modern criticism and theory. Beauty, as Alexander Nehemas points out, is one of the most discredited ideas in contemporary philosophy. The history of aesthetics is the story of the ascendancy of the sublime over the beautiful. Modern art has been prized for being bleak, difficult, anguished, demanding – but certainly not for being beautiful. When Umberto Eco states that the timeless value of Beauty is “generally only a cover for the mercenary face of Kitsch,” he is speaking for several generations of critics (1989: 216). Rather than agreeing that beauty is truth and truth beauty, critics have typically argued the opposite. Only the bleak, the ugly, the discordant, could do justice to the grim realities of modern life. Meanwhile our hunger for beauty, for harmonious, well-proportioned forms that are pleasing to the eye, is sated in popular culture, where we can feast our eyes on endless images of well-muscled Adonises and spectacular sunsets. But this is not a kind of beauty to which scholars of art have paid much attention.

In her recent book *On Beauty*, Elaine Scarry also averts her eyes from such questions. Instead, her archly archaic prose conjures up a genteel, inbred world, where we are all surrounded by exquisite *objets d'art*; a chance encounter with a flower begets a Rilkean moment of ineffable plenitude. Here is Scarry's list of beautiful things: a trellis of sweet pea; sonnets; mother-of-pearl poppies; Matisse paintings; Gallé vases; gods of both East and West; dances; birdsong; Phaedrus; Nausicaa; the daylit sky; mathematical proofs. It is a curiously rarefied account of beauty; Scarry's book blocks out the bustle of modernity, the hubbub of the marketplace, the voices of women, people of color, and others who have talked about art. It is as if Duchamp and Disney, camp and cyberpunk, muzak and MTV had never happened. The challenge, surely, is to think what beauty might mean in the light of this history rather than to push it out of sight.

Nor does Scarry's “we” ever consider differences, indeed clashes, of taste. Millions of Americans are enthralled by Thomas Kinkade's paintings of babbling brooks, forest glades, and ivy-covered cottages nestling in the twilight; indeed Kinkade himself has waxed eloquent on the life-affirming quality of his paintings in contrast to the ugliness, nihilism, and irrelevance of modern art.⁵ Is the delight inspired by Kinkade's work akin to Scarry's own pleasure in Matisse? Is beauty simply in the eye of the beholder? Or are the 10 million consumers of Kinkade products being duped by the pseudo-harmony of kitsch, as some scholars would argue? Do perceptions of what is beautiful unite us or divide us? These seem like crucial questions, but Scarry never even attempts to answer them.

By contrast, cultural critic Simon Frith offers a more substantial engagement with questions of beauty and pleasure. His book *Performing Rites* is a wide-ranging exploration of popular music, its diverse styles and genres, its various audiences, and the complex and often inexpressible emotions that it arouses. As Frith points out, the appreciation of popular music is full of talk about aesthetic value. People

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feel passionately about the talents of particular artists and performers; and they often struggle to put into words the powerful effect that music has upon them. "We all hear the music we like as something special, as something that defies the mundane, takes us 'out of ourselves,' puts us somewhere else" (1996: 275). Transcendence, Frith concludes, is a crucial aspect of musical experience, even if it is less about independence of social forces than an alternative experience of them. While paying scrupulous attention to how musical response is framed by different expectations and contexts of reception, Frith adamantly refuses to see aesthetic experience as a mere mirror of social identity. Instead, he stresses the imaginative, emotional, and sensual power of music, its power to transport us, to create new registers of perception and feeling, to make us see the world differently.

Thus when Rorty argues that cultural studies means an end to aesthetic pleasure and romantic enthusiasm, he is dead wrong. Because he equates cultural studies with unmasking and debunking, he remains oblivious to its intense emotional commitments, its often buoyant mood, and its longstanding interest in desire and pleasure. Opposing romantic utopianism to the dryness of cultural studies, he seems unaware of the rich vein of utopian thought and romantic insurgency in writing on popular culture. Indeed, when scholars complain that cultural studies is rote sociology or one more dry social science, they are simply revealing their ignorance of sociology. Many sociologists hate cultural studies even more than English professors do, complaining about its lack of rigor, its retreat from politics, and its excessive reliance on aesthetic and textual forms of evidence. Much the same can be said about anthropology, history, and other neighboring fields, which often view cultural studies with considerable suspicion (see Morley 1998; Ferguson & Golding 1997; Nelson & Gaonkar 1996).

What, then, is the home of cultural studies? Where does it belong? I want to conclude with these questions because much of the controversy inspired by cultural studies has less to do with its intellectual content than with fights over turf. I have no objection to professors deconstructing Madonna videos, the argument goes, as long as they don't do it in my department. When I first voiced some of the arguments of this chapter in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, English professor William Dowling wrote in to make precisely this point. "I have many colleagues," he observes, "who have come to loathe the empty trendiness of cultural studies." But, Dowling graciously concedes, "Not one of them is against studying the things that Ms. Felski wants to see studied – rap music, TV sitcoms, slasher movies – in the appropriate academic departments." In other words, "American universities are so structured that they already have departments – anthropology, sociology, history, communications – that study the sort of thing she's interested in" (1999: B10).

In fact, as I've just pointed out, Dowling is wrong. There is a great deal of disagreement about what the institutional location for cultural studies should be. One reason it has often taken root in English departments is precisely because its

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concerns are not identical with the traditional methods of anthropology, sociology, communication studies and the like. But what I want to address here is Dowling's assumption that my account of cultural studies is also a defense of the English department as its natural home. This belief is mistaken. I have tried to show that the study of culture is infused with aesthetic concepts, but it does not follow that cultural studies is the future of literary studies or that literary and cultural studies should become one.

This view is proving unfortunate not just for literary studies, as Dowling suggests, but also for cultural studies. When scholars trained in textual analysis decide to remake themselves as cultural critics, the results are not always salutary. Inevitably, old habits die hard. Cary Nelson (1999) comments on the sorry spectacle of scholars renaming or repackaging close readings of texts as cultural studies without bothering to learn anything of the field's traditions. Thus the influence of cultural studies on English goes along with a marked dilution of its features as a distinctive intellectual project. A complex interdisciplinary blend of social theory, anthropology, media studies, and textual analysis is slowly being turned into a subfield of English literature, often embraced by scholars far more familiar with Melville than with Marx or *Melrose Place*.

What defines cultural studies, moreover, is not just its object of analysis but its frameworks and methods. A long time ago, Raymond Williams argued that cultural studies was not about "isolating the object," but about "discovering the nature of a practice and its conditions" (1980: 47). What this meant was that cultural studies saw meaning as dynamic and interactive, forged under particular conditions, mobile and open to change. The pleasures, problems, and politics of texts were not etched for all time in the form of the texts themselves, but were created and recreated in the social flux of engagement and interpretation. Seeing culture as a practice meant shuttling between texts and institutions, aesthetics and social analysis, semiotics and power. The second term in these pairings is often shortchanged when the primary venue for cultural studies becomes the English department. Literary criticism gives us sophisticated ways of reading texts and signs, but it is a poor guide to the workings of structures, institutions, and systems.

A frequent stumbling-block here is the axiological dimension of literary criticism, its powerful attachment to the exemplary text. Critics often operate on the assumption that certain works, by dint of their formal properties, can give us unparalleled insight into how things really are. When this idea is translated into the register of cultural studies, it leads to poring over a popular text in the belief that a close reading of a metaphor or camera technique will unlock the secrets of the social system or the dominant ideology. A magazine or a movie becomes a magic conduit to the *Zeitgeist*. For example, it is not uncommon to see a reading of two or three films being used as evidence of pervasive anxieties (currently a much-favored word) about gender or race. Yet in at least some of these cases, picking a different sample might easily result in a dramatically different conclusion.

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George Levine picks up on this point in discussing the relationship between aesthetics and cultural studies. He takes scholars like Stephen Greenblatt and Eve Sedgwick to task for spinning big stories about history and culture from a meager sample of literary works (1994: 5–10). Levine is right to point out the problems of trying to use close reading in this way as a source of reliable evidence about social phenomena. Textual skills are not a substitute for historical grounding and command of empirical detail. Literary critics who hold forth about politics, society, and economics need more than a superficial knowledge of how scholars in the social sciences have talked about such questions. Levine is wrong, however, in thinking that he has scored a point against cultural studies. What he clearly does not realize – and this is yet another example of the amnesia I have mentioned – is that scholars in cultural studies have been making similar arguments for a very long time. One of the ways in which cultural studies distinguishes itself from the politicized wing of literary studies is precisely by questioning the view that a single work can be treated as an allegory of social relations.

Let me summarize, then, what I see as the distinctiveness of cultural studies. First of all, it draws upon an anthropological as well as an aesthetic idea of culture, seeking to make sense of the full range of images, texts, stories, and symbolic practices. Such an approach does not exclude the analysis of literature and high art, but it does require an awareness of the relations and flows of interchange between different cultural spheres. Cultural studies also links descriptions of texts and practices to analyses of power. It does not believe that the making and getting of culture are free of social interests, needs, and struggles. But it is wary of grand theories of capitalism, patriarchy, or imperialism that look down on the patterns and practices of everyday life from a haughty distance. Cultural studies, at its best, is meticulously attentive to the local, the contingent, and the conjunctural: that is to say, the ways in which relations between texts, political interests, and social groups are formed, severed and realigned over time. Cultural studies, in this definition, involves a balancing act between the macro and the micro and between the competing claims of textual and social analysis.

What this suggests, then, is that any attempt to do cultural studies requires a more than superficial knowledge of different disciplines and traditions. It is not about collapsing aesthetics and politics into a general theory of textuality. Rather, cultural studies defines itself in relation to the tensions and competing pulls of different fields of knowledge. As Cary Nelson puts it, “if you only know one discipline intimately, and you operate securely within its principles, you cannot do cultural studies” (1996: 64).

The other side of this coin, however, is that cultural studies needs these other disciplines as intellectual resources on which to draw. This is one reason why I am opposed to any attempt to subsume literary studies into cultural studies. Such an encroachment threatens the integrity of an archive of important and enormously influential works and a longstanding body of commentary on those works as well

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as on general problems of hermeneutics and interpretation. Literary studies and cultural studies are related fields but they are also distinct fields. It makes as little sense to deny the differences between them as it does to think of them as implacable enemies locked in a struggle for supremacy.

Having chastised some literary critics for their ignorance of cultural studies, I must also, in all fairness, acknowledge the *bêtise* of some cultural critics on the subject of literature. Certainly, one influential trend within cultural studies has been to turn popularity into a new source of value. The worth of a text is measured solely by the status of its imagined constituency – young people, women, the working class, a vaguely defined notion of “the people.” As some scholars in the field have pointed out, such a perspective soon runs into problems. There is more than an element of bad faith in an uncritical embrace of the popular. Some leftist academics seem to believe that such an embrace will absolve them of their role as intellectuals implicated in the hierarchies and distinctions of academic life. In fact, the opposite is true; romantic visions of the people as “more real,” as standing for authenticity, spontaneity, and sexy, sweaty, nonalienated bodies, merely testify to the vivid fantasy life of intellectuals. Cultural studies means taking popular culture seriously and without condescension, but it should not lead to a flip-flopping of value, such that studying the popular becomes a sign of political righteousness, whereas high art is placed on the side of conservatism and reaction.

Such a view relies on a flawed understanding of the politics of literature as well as an overestimation of its influence. It is hard to make a convincing case that the values of canonical literature do much to shore up the political status quo or that there is much connection between knowing about Milton or Melville and running a country or a corporation. High art has a complex and often dissident relationship to social norms; in fact, modern literature is a major source of the bohemian, critical, antibourgeois sensibility that ultimately gave birth to cultural studies. Moreover, decrying high art as the culture of the ruling class reveals not just a poor grasp of aesthetics but also of politics and sociology. In contemporary Western societies, the relations between economic and political power and possession of cultural capital are hardly so straightforward. High culture and popular culture do not function as homogenous and mutually exclusive blocks that are closely tied to specific class interests. As John Frow points out, “‘high’ and ‘low’ culture can no longer . . . be neatly correlated with a hierarchy of social classes” (1995: 1).

Thus I find myself in the odd position of siding with both the old fogies and the young Turks. The forced marriage of literary and cultural studies is not good for either side; it will diminish the study of literature and blunt the cutting edge of cultural studies. That is not say that individual scholars cannot work productively on the cusp of the two fields, but any systematic attempt to merge them into a megadiscipline should be resisted. Those who claim that literature is defunct, that literary studies should give way to cultural studies, are engaged in the worst kind

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of disciplinary imperialism. It is as if the sociologists were to march over to the psychology department to inform its faculty that their discipline were now obsolete, that psychology would henceforth be a subfield of sociology. Do we really want to endorse such a corporate ethos of mergers and acquisitions? Tony Bennett (1998a) is surely right when he points out that, high-flown rhetoric to the contrary, the role of cultural studies is neither to subsume nor to replace the traditional disciplines.

What, then, is the place of cultural studies? Cultural studies is both like and unlike literary criticism, communication studies, sociology, anthropology, and history. By becoming too closely associated with any of these fields, it risks becoming lopsided and surrendering its distinctive identity. My own sense is that cultural studies continues to work best as an interdisciplinary major, where faculty and students are forced to confront the competing truth claims of different disciplines. Bennett puts it well when he describes cultural studies as an interdisciplinary clearing-house that stimulates intellectual traffic between various fields in the humanities and social sciences. It is out of such alliances and quarrels about the status and meanings of culture that the best cultural studies work emerges.

Of course, as an interdisciplinary enterprise, it is the permanent fate of cultural studies to be faulted by historians for not being historical enough, by sociologists for not being sociological enough, and by literary critics for not being sufficiently interested in literature. Moreover, people in cultural studies disagree passionately about its goals and methods, about the merits of textual versus social analysis, and about the meanings and merit of popular culture. Still, while cultural studies can mean many different things, there are limits to what it can mean. Cultural studies has become a term of abuse and a much-abused term in America's culture wars. I have tried to show that cultural critics are neither as beastly nor as insensitive to style and form as their detractors often make out. If we can arrive at a more careful and circumspect use of the term "cultural studies," – and a more careful and circumspect *practice* of cultural studies – then I, for one, will live happily ever after.⁶

NOTES

This chapter draws on some material first published in a short article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, entitled (not by me) "Scholars who Disdain Cultural Studies Don't Know What They are Talking About," July 23, 1999.

- 1 For a brief history of the American moral panic about cultural studies and an interesting discussion of cultural studies' "public relations problem," see Rodman 1997.
- 2 For an evaluation of this account as it applies to feminist approaches to literature, see Felski's *Literature After Feminism* (2003a).

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- 3 A pertinent analysis of this phenomenon can be found in Cary Nelson's "Always Already Cultural Studies: Two Academic Conferences and a Manifesto" (1997).
- 4 A volume such as *A Companion to Aesthetics*, edited by David Cooper (1992), gives a clear sense of the changing register of much aesthetic theory. One good example of the convergence between aesthetics and cultural studies is of course Richard Shusterman's important *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992).
- 5 See, e.g., Orlean, "Art for Everybody" (2001).
- 6 I want to underscore that this chapter is intended as an attempt to clarify the meaning of the term "cultural studies." (For another such attempt, see my "Modernist Studies and Cultural Studies," 2003b). While I have some sympathy for the project of cultural studies, my point is not at all to make a case for the superiority of cultural studies *vis-à-vis* other critical methods, but to encourage a more clear-sighted recognition of their differences.

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