British Cultural Studies is a comprehensive introduction to the British tradition of cultural studies. Graeme Turner offers an accessible overview of the central themes that have informed British cultural studies: language, semiotics, Marxism and ideology, individualism, subjectivity and discourse.

Beginning with a history of cultural studies, Turner discusses the work of such pioneers as Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson, Stuart Hall and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. He then explores the central theorists and categories of British cultural studies: texts and contexts; audience; everyday life; ideology; politics, gender and race. The third edition of this successful text has been fully revised and updated to include:

- applying the principles of cultural studies and how to read a text
- an overview of recent ethnographic studies
- a discussion of anthropological theories of consumption
- questions of identity and new ethnicities
- how to do cultural studies, and an evaluation of recent research methodologies
- a fully updated and comprehensive bibliography.

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Reviews of the second edition

‘An excellent introduction to cultural studies … very well written and accessible.’

John Sparrowhawk, University of North London

‘A good foundation and background to the development of cultural studies and its associated theories.’

Paul Rixon, Roehampton Institute

‘A short and good overview of the history of cultural studies and a useful discussion of central categories and seminal texts.’

Udo Goettlich, Universitaet Duisburg, Germany

‘A comprehensive study of the field, easily understood by students …’

Tom Grainger, Faculty of Sciences of Luminy, Marseille, France
British Cultural Studies

An introduction

Third edition

Graeme Turner
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If it had been written thirty years ago, a book with this title would almost certainly have been expected to deal with ‘high culture’: the elite art forms seen to provide the best that has been written, spoken or performed over the ages. An index of how large a shift has occurred in those thirty years is that I will deal primarily not with elite but with popular culture. This book will chart some of the reasons for this shift, while outlining cultural studies as a set of key sites of investigation, key methodologies and theoretical orientations, and a critical practice.

The term cultural studies is now well known as the title for an important set of theories and practices within the humanities and social sciences. As its international journal, Cultural Studies, puts it, the field is ‘dedicated to the notion that the study of cultural processes, and especially of popular culture, is important, complex and both theoretically and politically rewarding’. While the field has now achieved recognition, it is not a discrete or homogeneous formation, nor is it easy to define. It is not surprising that, although there had been many readers and collections of articles dealing with specific aspects or applications of cultural theory up until 1990, the original edition of this book was the first to attempt to introduce it accessibly and comprehensively. Since this book was published, however, there has been something of an explosion of such attempts – Brantlinger (1990), Gray and McGuigan (1993), Storey (1994), Tudor (1999) and Mulhern (2000) among them. The need, however, for the particular perspective offered by this book remains. While few outside the US would use the term ‘British cultural studies’ without at least some of the reservations I will go on to make later in this introduction, the label has become more widely used in recent
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years within the UK. Notwithstanding its difficulties, it continues to be a useful way of directing attention to the original and fundamental concerns of the broad and changing field of cultural studies. For the third edition, some changes have been made to acknowledge shifts in the field or to implement revisions in the approach. In particular, a new section has been added to Chapter 7, dealing with ‘Identity’, to reflect the significant shift towards such issues within British cultural studies over the last decade.

As Paul Willis (1979) has said, the ‘culture’ that is the subject of British cultural studies is ‘not artifice and manners, the preserve of Sunday best, rainy afternoons and concert halls. It is the very material of our daily lives, the bricks and mortar of our most commonplace understandings’ (pp. 185–6). What we wear, hear, watch and eat; how we see ourselves in relation to others; the function of everyday activities such as cooking or shopping: all of these have attracted the interest of cultural studies. Emerging from a literary critical tradition that saw popular culture as a threat to the moral and cultural standards of modern civilization, the work of the pioneers in cultural studies breaks with that literary tradition’s elitist assumptions in order to examine the everyday and the ordinary: those aspects of our lives that exert so powerful and unquestioned an influence on our existence that we take them for granted. The processes that make us – as individuals, as citizens, as members of a particular class, race or gender – are cultural processes that work precisely because they seem so natural, so unexceptional, so irresistible.

The work of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and in particular the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) has established the consideration of popular culture – from the mass media to sport to dance crazes – on an academic and intellectual agenda from which it had been excluded. This exclusion had exacted a great cost; what it regarded as peripheral and meretricious included the most basic and pervasive of social processes, practices and meanings. It is from these ‘peripheral’ networks of meaning and pleasure that culture is constructed, for

it is one of the fundamental paradoxes of our social life that when we are at our most natural, our most everyday, we are also at our most cultural; that when we are in roles that look the most obvious and given, we are actually in roles that are constructed, learned and far from inevitable.

(Willis 1979: 185)

Willis’ concluding phrase is the one that bites: if the roles we take for granted should not be taken for granted, then their exclusion from academic inquiry is, at least, unwise. So the focus on popular culture has quickly become a focus on how
our everyday lives are constructed, how culture forms its subjects. No idle interest, the aim is to locate the social and political effects of these formations.

The following chapters present a history of the development of these ideas, specifying what seem to me the central principles of British cultural studies. The book is organized in two parts. Part I sets up the basic theoretical principles in Chapter 1, and sketches a history of British cultural studies in Chapter 2. Part II looks more in depth at the central categories within the field: texts, audiences, the social production of everyday life, the problem of ideology, and finally the politics of cultural studies through race, gender and identity. The first chapter, necessarily, has some heavy ground-clearing to do, and those who are already familiar with semiotics and structuralism may wish only to skim through it on their way to Chapter 2. Throughout, I present descriptive accounts of significant contributions to each topic; in many cases, this work is quite daunting to read in its original form, and my account aims to guide both those who intend to seek out the original book or article and those who do not. As often as possible I have chosen to allow the original works to speak for themselves, and I have quoted liberally. For the conceptual organization of the material, of course, I alone am to blame.

Before proceeding with this account, however, there are a number of admonitory points to be made about the ‘tradition’ constructed through this history, its ‘Britishness’, and the status of the theoretical formulations made in the process of constructing it. The title British Cultural Studies is itself a touch too precise. While I am going to concentrate on British work in the wide and shifting field of cultural studies, and while I am also going to examine some of the British origins of British cultural studies, it is important to recognize that this tradition is not sealed off from other influences. As Adrian Mellor (1992: 664) has said, ‘the Brits don’t own cultural studies’. While I may argue that the role of Williams and other British researchers is seminal, the work of the European structuralists – Lévi-Strauss, Saussure, Lacan, Barthes, Foucault – and certain inflections of European Marxism – Althusser, Gramsci – are also central to the formation of what is now recognized as British cultural studies. Further, although I will not deal with these corollary movements, readers should be aware that there are other important, non-British, traditions in cultural studies: the work emanating from the sociology of Bourdieu or de Certeau in France, for instance, or the American anthropological tradition James Carey (1989: 61) identifies with Clifford Geertz and calls ‘cultural science’. This book is not aimed at appropriating the whole of the field and incorporating it into the category of British cultural studies; rather, it looks at one, relatively discrete but particularly influential, corner of this emerging intellectual terrain.

The distinctiveness and usefulness of the British tradition of cultural studies for those working in other contexts could be said to lie in its relatively accessible
applications of European theoretical models to specific cultural formations. It is unusual in the degree of emphasis it has given to ‘concrete’ or applied studies – applying complex social theory to, say, the process of leaving school or organizing a lift home from the local dance. Richard Harland (1987) may be too sweepingly dismissive, but he is also roughly correct when he claims that ‘Anglo-Saxon Semioticians are largely indifferent to matters of philosophy; their interests are more practical, focusing upon various specific studies in various specific fields of communication’ (p. 4). Far from limiting the tradition’s appeal, this practicality has expanded its usefulness and contributed to the influence it has enjoyed. If such an attribute enhances the desirability of constructing an introduction to the British tradition of cultural studies, it must also be admitted that this very particular focus is maintained at some cost. This book necessarily omits detailed discussion of some work which has had an influence on cultural studies in Britain but which comes from elsewhere: examples which come to mind would be Ien Ang (1985), Meaghan Morris (1988) and Janice Radway (1987). Further, my approach implicitly aligns this tradition with an idea of the nation that many within British cultural studies would resist. Paul Gilroy (1993), for instance, has criticized British cultural studies for its ‘morbid celebration’ of national characteristics (p. 10). However, it is worth pointing out that for many this ‘morbid celebration’ was made possible by the implicit universalization of (white) British cultural experience, accompanied by a slightly disingenuous disavowal of any interest in ‘the national’. A significant feature of British cultural studies over the latter half of the 1990s is the explicit focus on British national identities and their complex relation to issues of ethnicity, gender and class.

A further reason for caution in writing such a book as this is that cultural studies is pre-eminently a critical field: many have warned against the dangers of an orthodoxy developing. When the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies launched its journal, *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, it ‘refused’ to define the field, choosing instead to embark on what Hall (1980a) calls a ‘sustained work of theoretical clarification’ (p. 15). While not every product of the Centre could be said to achieve this objective (and resisting an orthodoxy can certainly limit the achievement of clarity), such work continues, and it would be wrong to see these pages as describing a stable, fixed field of theory or practice. This book, I hope, offers instead a kind of narrative in progress, proposing ways of conceptualizing where the field of study has been and where it might be now.

This dogged and perhaps slightly curious resistance to the establishment of a theoretical orthodoxy in cultural studies is a product of two of its defining characteristics: the complexity and comprehensiveness of the theoretical issues it has confronted in order to deal with the problem of culture, and its commitment to
critical, political objectives. The first characteristic creates real problems in a book such as this, since the issues dealt with are genuinely complex and difficult to simplify for the purposes of an introduction without sacrificing accuracy or comprehensiveness. This is also a problem for the tradition itself, and has led to accusations of ‘theoreticism’, an elitist fondness for the intricacies of theory for their own sake. Such theoreticism is seen to produce a particularly self-regarding kind of writing, couched in an exclusive and intimidating jargon that is deployed as proof of the academic seriousness of the field of study and its objects. Readers of this book will have to judge for themselves how successfully I have compromised between the demands of simplicity of expression and an appropriate complexity of conceptualization.

The second issue, however, is more substantive. Work in cultural studies has consistently addressed itself to the interrogation of society’s structures of domination. It has focused most particularly on the experience of the working class and, more recently, on that of women as locations where the action of oppressive power relations can be examined. In its theoretical tradition it is inextricably linked with a critical European Marxism that seeks to understand how capitalist societies work and how to change them. This means that, while cultural studies’ subject matter may be popular culture, and while this may even be dealt with in ways that involve an element of nostalgia, for instance, the objective of cultural studies is not simply to recover aspects of social experience that were dear to the researchers’ own hearts. It is all too easy to characterize work on the media, or on youth cultures, or on the music industry, as a kind of ‘slumming’ by middle-aged academics who want to legitimate the activities of their youth. Such motivations are at odds with the basic enterprise of British cultural studies. As Richard Johnson (1983) says, it is important to recognize the inadequacy of studies of popular culture that occur for ‘purely academic purposes or when enthusiasm for popular cultural forms is divorced from the analysis of power and of social possibilities’ (p. 9). Popular culture is a site where the construction of everyday life may be examined. The point of doing this is not only academic – that is, as an attempt to understand a process or practice – it is also political, to examine the power relations that constitute this form of everyday life and thus to reveal the configuration of interests its construction serves.

This political dimension is one legitimate reason there is concern about the establishment of a cultural studies orthodoxy, about cultural studies’ inclusion within the traditional academy, or about the incorporation of its work and its challenges within more conventional academic discourses. Cultural studies defines itself in part through its disruption of the boundaries between disciplines, and through its ability to explode the category of ‘the natural’ – revealing the history behind those social relations we see as the products of a neutral
evolutionary process. It is understandably worried at the prospect of becoming a ‘natural’ discipline itself.

Nevertheless, a book like this is necessary to provide an accessible introduction to an important body of theory that is in many cases unavailable outside journal articles and that is not easily assimilable by undergraduates. So, while I am under no illusions as to what the fate of a book like this might well be – it could support the installation of an orthodoxy within teaching programmes if not in research – there seems no alternative if I want the material it contains to gain a wider currency. Therefore, I offer what must look like something of a ritual disclaimer: this book does not set out to offer the definitive account of the tradition, nor do I feel we need such an account. The aim of this book is to provide a guide for students entering this important and complicated field to enable them to search out the appropriate primary sources relevant to their interests or needs.

There could be substantially different accounts of this tradition from what follows. While I have dealt with all aspects of the field that seem most significant, I am aware of placing some emphasis on the textualist/structuralist aspects; those who work in, say, history and use cultural studies theory may feel that my literary and media studies background has skewed my definition of the field in this direction. I would acknowledge that possibility, and invite alternative accounts. Nor is the British tradition the only way into an understanding of, or engagement with, cultural studies. Cultural studies is a variously and vigorously contested field, yet this very fact makes it necessary for students to have some kind of map that will organize the territory at least provisionally so that they may then begin to explore it and reframe it in their own ways. This book is intended to be that map.

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