Cultural and Media Studies: The Politics of Location
// An interview with Ann Gray

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It is not an easy task to summarize the academic achievements of Ann Gray, currently a Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Lincoln, one of the key representatives of this field in contemporary British academia. Following her first book *Video Playtime: the Gendering of a Leisure Technology* (1992) which focused on gender aspects of the domestic use of media technologies she established herself not only as a pioneering scholar in feminist media research, but also made a significant contribution to the development of qualitative methodology in cultural studies (*Research Practice for Cultural Studies: Ethnographic Methods and Lived Cultures*, 2003). For a number of years Ann worked at the Department of Cultural Studies, the successor to the legendary *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* at the University of Birmingham (1989-2002) and a few months ago Routledge published two mighty volumes of the edited collection of the original CCCS Working Papers in cultural studies (*CCCS Selected Working Papers*, Vol. I, II, 2007) for which she was lead editor. She has been a member of the organizing committees of major conferences in the field – the *International Crossroads in Cultural Studies* (2000 which was hosted at Birmingham; 2004 and 2008), a founding member of the international *Association of Cultural Studies*, and, along with Joke Hermes and Pertti Alasuutari, an editor of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Recently Ann's research interests has moved to the area of televised representation of the past and she is director of a four-year project, *Televising History – 1995-2010* supported by a substantial grant from the British Arts and Humanities Research Council. This interdisciplinary project, which involves a research fellow (Dr Erin Bell) and two doctoral studentships, follows the boom of non-fiction history programming on British and other national televisions since 1990s and explores the construction of historical meanings in media. At Lincoln – a new, dynamic and rapidly developing university in the East Midlands – Ann and I also established a *Centre for European Cultural Studies*. The Centre set up a network of cultural researchers from both parts of the formerly divided Europe and currently involves scholars from Austria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, the Netherlands and Slovakia. The key idea behind this project has been to facilitate dialogue between mainstream cultural studies (mostly produced in the Anglo-American academic context) and other European cultural researchers, mainly in the new EU member states. Some of the key projects-in-progress include a series of colloquia mapping different intellectual histories and perspectives in studying culture in Europe, joint publications and curriculum development in cultural studies, comparative audience research in the 'new Europe', and participation in the EU funded inter-university exchange programmes (ERASMUS and MUNDUS).

The idea to conduct this interview with Ann certainly grew out of the lucky coincidence that brought us together under the same institutional umbrella several years ago, and gave us the opportunity to think about number of issues that might connect the disciplinary

backgrounds we identified with, i.e. cultural studies on the one hand, and area/East European studies on the other. But mainly it was inspired by an attempt to demonstrate the variety of ways in which professional and personal choices often come together even without an intentional master plan, how a certain institutional dynamics could both facilitate and undermine an entire field of study, and how ideas and approaches – no matter how canonised – are never isolated or separated from the lives and careers of those who develop and promote them.

Institutions

You studied communications and social history of art and did your PhD in sociology – what attracted you to the 'arms' of cultural studies? And perhaps more importantly, when did you begin to define your work as cultural studies?

When I did my undergraduate degree in Communication Arts & Media, ending in the early 1980s some of the work was coming out of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), The Working Papers and especially Stuart Hall's work. I remember being astonished by his 'The Social Eye of the *Picture Post*' and, of course, Dave Morley and Charlotte Brunsdon's work on *Nationwide*, the collection *Working Class Culture*, all of which seemed to be engaging in really ways in society and culture. The tutors on my undergraduate programme were very keen to explore CCCS, so although it hadn't been on the curriculum, they put it on, for that final year. It was a very small student group, so we were able to explore that new work. I was also very influenced by their work on media, particularly the feminist work, for example, Janice Winship's work on women's magazines (Winship 1980) which located the texts within the social, the economic, the political.

I did my Masters in the social history of art at the University of Leeds. The course had been established by T.J. Clark, who became a very well known art historian. His social and class analysis of art was an intervention in mainstream history of art. There were two other people working on the course who were very influential: Griselda Pollock the feminist art historian (Pollock 1981; Parker and Pollock 1987) and John Tagg (Tagg 1988) who looked at photography. It was a highly theoretical course, Marxism(s), feminism, Foucault, psychoanalytic theory, etc. So that was actually quite critical for me in working through my own position.

I came out of that, that MA with a strong interest in feminism, and Marxism, or the ways in which we might think through a material feminism. My interest in the media and popular culture had not diminished and I had a strong sense of the importance of empirical research, gathered from CCCS, which was rather unfashionable at the time. I was then able to pursue, through a scholarship from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) a PhD at the University of York in the Department of Sociology. My proposal was to look at the use of what was a new form of entertainment technology in the home, the video recorder. (Gray 1987; Gray 1992) The focus of the project formed a useful catalyst bringing together my developing theoretical and methodological frameworks. (Gray 1995) Also, when I was still doing my MA, I designed a course on Popular Culture with Jim McGuigan for the Workers' Educational Association, and started tutoring on the Open University's distance-learning Popular Culture course which ran from 1982 to 1987. Both were important because I found adult education interesting – I had started my higher education as a student with the Open University – and the course itself had attracted some of the key people in cultural studies, e.g. Tony Bennett, Angela McRobbie and John

Clark. It took a largely Gramscian approach to popular culture and through its publications shaped a number of curricula.

So the shift from social history of art to sociology was a good thing to do from the Cultural Studies perspective?

(laughs) The interesting thing about the MA was that they were absolutely anti-sociology. So anything sociological was considered empirical – empiricist, actually, and you know, just not what they were interested in. In fact, Janet Wolff (Wolff 1981; Wolff and Seed 1988) was also at Leeds at that time, in the Department of Sociology and doing fascinating work on the social production of art, and she wasn't talked about on the MA in social history of art. But my move to sociology was really because my supervisor, Andrew Tudor, had always had an interest in film, and not so much television, but he certainly was a kind of cultural sociologist, and so it was moving to work with him on this partly funded project, really, that took me into sociology. I think my experience reflects what was happening in the UK intellectual scene at the time where cultural studies was influencing and being influenced by different disciplines.

So how did you end up in Birmingham and how would you define the last decade of the legendary centre?

The year I finished my thesis I was offered a one year post at Birmingham to teach gender within a Cultural Studies context. Birmingham was obviously a terrific place to be. After one year I was offered a permanent post, but it was always a struggle. The Cultural Studies unit particularly, had quite a troubled relationship from the beginning with the institution, with Birmingham University. Stuart Hall speaks about this eloquently, and when I was working on the collection of working papers recently, he talked again about the times when they were at risk of being closed down. (Gray 2007) So it was never a stable unit, it was always in a way fighting for its survival. When I joined it in 1989, they had just moved to the Social Science Faculty from the Arts Faculty which is where they had been since Richard Hoggart established the CCCS in 1964. It was primarily a postgraduate research centre but from quite early on they offered courses for undergraduate programmes and in 1971 the taught Masters was launched. As belts began to be tightened in the higher education sector the CCCS was not considered to be viable. Stuart Hall left for the Open University in 1982 and Maureen McNeil joined Richard Johnson and Michael Green at the Centre. Birmingham University had closed their Sociology Department in the early 1980s but two members of staff, Jorge Larrain and John Gabriel were working on social theory and 'race' respectively and in 1988 these five formed the new Department of Cultural Studies and moved across to the Faculty of Social Science. A single honours undergraduate degree, 'Media, Culture & Society' was launched in 1989 and that really was the start of a very different era.

The legacy of CCCS was wonderful in some ways, but weighed heavily on our shoulders in others. The Department didn't change overnight and the ethos of the CCCS, especially its ways of working and its relationship with its students, was maintained as long as was possible within the constraints of the demands of the institution. (Gray 2003) Newer members of staff inevitably wanted to develop their own research which often took issue with the Birmingham approach. There were quite a lot of heated debates about that. Also, the Masters programme continued to attract brilliant students, some of whom took issue with the curriculum – it was known by the staff as the 'fought course' – it was a very lively place to be, intellectually and politically.

Even though you have discussed this already on other occasions (Gray 2003a), could you briefly summarise your experience of the closure of the Centre in 2002?

The story starts a long time before the end. I think one of the quite important institutional decisions which was in retrospect very bad news for Cultural Studies, was the re-establishment of Sociology at Birmingham. For a number of reasons we had kept a joint honours programme in Sociology. There were some colleagues who were very keen to expand that and we offered a single honours programme in Sociology from 1995. In 1998 the University appointed a Chair in Sociology and the Department became Cultural Studies & Sociology. During that period investment was made in Sociology which inevitably weakened Cultural Studies. However the staff base expanded to ten.

Would there be more of that kind of trend towards sociology?

Yes, although the Department's approach was always cultural, and in fact that echoed what sociology was doing anyway, as sociology become influenced by Cultural Studies. So the people we had, who identified themselves with sociology, were in every respect interested in culture, and their work was influenced by Cultural Studies. Although there was pressure when we were appointing a chair, to appoint somebody who did quantitative sociological work, we did end up appointing someone who wasn't that kind of sociologist – Frank Webster, who had done work on the information society and all sorts of other cultural dimensions of sociology. But it fragmented Cultural Studies, as it were. When a significant resource came, the University decided not to advertise for a chair in Cultural Studies. I mean, it is surprising that there has never been a chair in Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham.

So then when it came to the final days...?

Our result in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise[1] was a shock, which fell below the University target. It was a matter of deep concern to us and the University but we weren't allowed by the Vice-Chancellor to appeal against the decision. We then spent a period of around eighteen months actually fighting for our survival. There was talk of absorbing 'cultural studies' into a new modern languages unit which we resisted. The staff put forward a proposal for a new Research Centre, drawing on the CCCS 'brand' but to no avail. The Department was economically buoyant. We ran two undergraduate programmes which recruited well, a taught MPhil and had around forty postgraduate research students.

The fact is that the management at Birmingham University never recognised the significance of Cultural Studies internationally. This was in spite of the fact that we had hosted the 2000 International Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference with 900 participants. In fact the Vice Chancellor was very shocked when he got masses of emails from around the world when the closure was announced. I think it was part of a macho ethos of management that was determined to stick to its word. Anyone who didn't reach their targets in the Research Assessment Exercise had serious questions to answer. We finally heard about the closure right at the end of the summer term, and that was after we'd offered places to new students, and set up our continuing second and third year

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1   The Research Assessment Exercise is carried out in the UK regularly (1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008) and the rating scale for units assesses research quality on the basis of which state research funding is allocated to British universities.

students with their courses. The University's plan was that four academic posts should remain for which the 11 staff should apply. This was to run the three programmes with input from existing staff and postgraduates in a range of Departments. As a staff group we considered this to be a cynical strategy which would result in a steep decline in quality of teaching and learning delivery. It was an utterly ruthless way of dealing with a department. We did have tremendous support from outside the University. A campaign group emerged, mainly former students, but which included the local Members of Parliament. They, on our behalf, approached the Higher Education Funding Council who informed us that it was the Council's policy not to interfere with the management of individual Universities. One, of many, painful lessons we learnt from this process was that Universities seem to be unaccountable for their internal management, in spite of the increasing audit culture. The outcome was that eight of the staff resigned and two went to other departments at Birmingham.

Theory, Methods and Teaching Practices

If we come back to the methodological and theoretical issues: does Cultural Studies provide a consistent media theory?

I don't think it does provide a consistent media theory, but I think it insists on asking a number of questions of representation, texts, practice, that places media forms within the social, the political and the historical context. It's not enough to look at texts, it's not enough to pay attention to textual analysis, but it has to engage with production and reception as well. I also think that feminist scholars made a major contribution to our understanding of the importance of media in terms of representation, of power, of pleasure and of its embeddedness in everyday life

You also wrote one of the first books on methodology and Cultural Studies (Gray 2003b); how did your interest in methodology emerge?

Yes. I think by doing it, really, by doing the research. Mine was from the start an exploratory study and as such I became interested in ethnographic research – again an important part of the work at the CCCS. I also found that some of the most significant discussions about research methods were coming from feminists within sociology and the history of science. They were talking about the nature of knowledge and epistemological issues as well as the politics of research and, indeed, what qualified as appropriate topics for research! As I had elected to interview women for my VCR project this raised issues about the power relations between researcher and researched, so I actually started to build up my own methodological tool kit which was appropriate to the topic and the questions which I wanted to ask. But I did become really interested in the whole area of epistemology. How we know what we know, and the ways in which we might mobilise those questions. (Gray 1997) I started presenting conference papers on my PhD research quite early. When I'd completed my first clutch of interviews, I gave a paper in London at the 1986 International Television Society conference, and because I was one of a few people doing any kind of empirical audience research, I found myself on a panel with David Morley, who was researching his *Family Television* with Stuart Hall as the discussant, and I was terrified! You can imagine, it was a kind of baptism of fire, really. But even at that stage I was starting to think about what we do with this material which was gathered through long

'conversational' ethnographic interviews and how we might use theory and theoretical frameworks for analysis. So I'd already started doing some work on that and when I went to Birmingham, their taught MA programme which had emerged absolutely from the CCCS, didn't actually have a methods course. They had one big theory course, and then small seminars led by different tutors depending on student interests. In re-structuring the programme I designed and delivered the methods course which I found very stimulating. The students were great contributors to my thinking on methods as research practice.

If we can agree that there isn't a specific or defined theory of media in Cultural Studies, can we say that there's a method in Cultural Studies?

No, not at all. My view is that the choice of methods must be dependent on both the theoretical framework or methodology and the topic under study itself. The other important element for me is the dimension of reflexivity in research. That you reflect as the research develops, you reflect on your own contributions to the project, that is you reflect on your own subjectivity, the way in which what you're bringing to the project actually shapes it, and you also reflect on how the project is building, so you allow the creature to develop from the actual data that is being produced. I think reflexivity is a very important part of whatever set of methods you choose.

In the late 1990s you wrote about the division between the popular culture project and the public knowledge project. Can you say more about that?

Well, I think we are going beyond it now but I think for a long time there was this real divide between what Corner calls the 'public knowledge' project, which focuses on the news, current affairs, the public sphere, largely informed by a political economy approach and the 'popular culture' project which adopted approaches from feminism and cultural studies. (Gray 1999) These studies, including mine, were often described as micro 'domestic' studies which couldn't tell us anything about the so-called 'real' world of politics. In actual fact feminist work looked at precisely how the macro or the 'public' world was implicitly experienced within the micro or 'private' world. Early work on the pleasures of the text, cultural competence, discourses of gender, romance and heterosexuality explored important aspects of the media and popular culture which was simply ignored by the political economists. I think, as is often the case in academic wrangling, different sides set up easily dismissed, caricatures and the figure of the 'active audience' was one such. My argument when I wrote that piece was that people weren't actually reading the research that was being published.

There was a criticism of something, which people didn't really know...

That's right. John Fiske, (Fiske 1989a and 1989b) who came in for a lot of criticism, was referred to and no one else, and in the 90s, actually, the work on audiences was one of the liveliest parts of media and Cultural Studies. It was really moving things on, and internationally was considered to be very important and innovative. So they didn't engage with that body of work. And I also argued that it was almost as if we had to argue for the importance of the 'popular culture' work, whereas the political economists never felt under the same pressure to justify the 'public knowledge' research. Since then, questions of identity, self hood, etc., which feminists adopted a long time ago have become much more mainstream.

How is the Cultural Studies methodology, or the impulses you've just talked about, to be translated into a concrete analytical and pedagogic practice? At some point, you insisted that Cultural Studies is not a field suitable for undergraduate teaching – could you explain why.

I think it's still an issue for me in that you have to construct a space for a curriculum, but if you think of Cultural Studies as I do, as a kind if interdisciplinary field of enquiry, in which we can see influences from a number of disciplinary areas, then it is sometimes very difficult to encourage students to engage in, say, film analysis, for instance, without them knowing something about the development of the use of psychoanalytic concepts, and why that might have been the case. So it's almost like have to do an historical explanation of why those theoretical frameworks were important. And I still have concerns about how to get into any kind of depth of Cultural Studies, in an undergraduate curriculum. I think there are some very good courses in media and culture, the one we ran at Birmingham, called Media, Culture and Society, engaged with contemporary culture by looking at and using concepts that have been developed within the fields of Cultural Studies. It also had some historical dimension. We looked, for example, at the city, Birmingham itself, its history, its development and regeneration, the significance of the cultural and so on. That was a very interesting exercise. So I think it has to be done quite carefully, it's not an obvious curriculum.

A number of students we had on the MA at Birmingham, came from History, Sociology, English, Literary Studies, Creative Writing, Geography, so they had a disciplinary background, and then moved into cultural studies. They almost had an agenda before they came; they knew why they thought Cultural Studies was important, whereas of course for undergraduates you somehow have to kind of create a raft for them to be on, a starting point as it were.

When you designed your Cultural Studies MA courses, here at Lincoln and Birmingham, what kind of texts did you define as canonical? Is a canon possible in this field which considers a polyphony of voices, the undermining of authorities and hierarchies and of high culture, including the academic canon, to be its key characteristics?

I think that's a really interesting question, and I think that any Cultural Studies programme will vary, people will come up with different sets of key texts. However, I do think, and this is another significant aspect of Cultural Studies, that it is located, socially, politically, intellectually and geographically. For example my kind of experience of Cultural Studies has been located here, in the UK, and for quite a lot of my academic career, at Birmingham and therefore I draw on what, for a number of those people of my academic generation, are considered to be the most influential texts. I therefore focus on the formation, of British Cultural Studies, which was the first one to find its place within an academic institution, as having a particular kind of emergence. When I put my course together in Birmingham and also here, it is not to say 'this is Cultural Studies', it is to say 'this is how this particular field of inquiry emerged, and why'. We then look at the kinds of texts that it produced, that people accessed, the kind of influences from obviously Gramsci, in relation to the Birmingham work, and why other work wasn't looked at more carefully, such as the Frankfurt School. So I would not take those texts as an unquestioned canon, and I would certainly investigate them, but I would encourage students to see them in their historical location. I used this approach in my methods book which is almost like a case

study in understanding how these particular intellectual formations emerge. And I think it is very important, particularly at Masters level, for students to have some kind of understanding of how intellectual strands, thoughts, approaches emerge, no matter what the discipline is, actually.

Gender, lies and videotape

I would like to go back to the gender issue that you've mentioned quite a few times. I would say that you belong to one of the pioneering scholars who has contributed to the elaboration of the category of gender in the context of media analysis, and the study you already mentioned, of women and video, belongs to the grounding work. Would you like to say more about the way you chose to focus on women's media, and then why television and video in particular, because you said you were supervised by a scholar who was interested in film?

Well, it was quite a pragmatic decision to choose the video. It just happened to be a new entertainment technology that had completely boomed, certainly in the UK and I realised that this was a really interesting moment to do some research into how people are using this new technology.[2] Of course when I started to look into it we didn't know much about how people used television in the domestic sphere. There were very few studies at that time. Dorothy Hobson (Hobson 1980; 1982) had carried out research with women soap opera viewers but, although important, it was quite a small project. It was really the lack of knowledge about how we understood media consumption that made me want to explore that. And I was also very interested in the dynamics of everyday life, household structures, relationships, sexual politics, and how we could somehow grasp that moving target in relation to media consumption. I wanted to explore these areas because I had a hunch. This was drawn from my own experience, about what the world was like, what domestic life was like which simply wasn't reflected in any research into television audiences. Indeed the concept of audience in previous work tended to subsume women altogether. Social class had been identified as an important category, in Dave Morley's work on *Nationwide* (Morley 1980) for instance, but the specifics of gender had really not been addressed, and my hunch was that once we move into looking at media and the everyday within the domestic setting, asking women about their experience, their feelings and their views on media consumption, gender would become a highly significant category. So I then decided that I would actually look at women specifically within the domestic setting. I was concerned to allow female voices to come through about their experiences, again something which was uncommon in scholarly work at that time. I was actually arguing that there is something very specific about women's relationship to the domestic environment, i.e. that they were positioned especially in relation to housework and childcare which would impact on their attitude towards leisure and spare time.

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2   See *Video Playtime: The Gendering of a Leisure Technology* – which sought to explore women's experience of media use in the home with particular reference to the then new VCR device. By adopting a conversational interview method many issues emerged such as the gendered nature of the domestic environment, particularly in relation to domestic labour, the encoding of the VCR as a masculine technology, the unequal distribution of leisure time in the home and, above all, the sexual politics of domestic space. These constant themes shaped women's experience of media consumption and the interviews revealed some striking material about gender and genre as well as power relations in the home.

Would you say that the gendered dimensions of media behaviour have changed since the explosion of new media? What is the significance of that work today?

I think it's actually quite interesting, some of the more recent work that has been done, particularly on the use of computers in the home (Lally 2002) has actually indicated quite strong gender differences. Lally also argues that this is nothing to do with competence actually, which is what I found, therefore it is not suggesting an essential idea of gender. But it is all to do with context and the kind of roles that are suggested by domestic life. And I think who is responsible for the domestic environment, whether it's childcare or cleaning or shopping, that is really critical. Of course this can be either men or women, but if that person is responsible for the domestic duties it means that it is a workplace. I found that time was such an interesting commodity in households – who has the right to time – to spend time rather than use it effectively is a very interesting question to think about. Helen Wood (Wood 2007) is doing some work on the use of satellite television and especially Sky Plus. She has found that the remote control is still very much dominated by the male and again, what kinds of programmes are valued over others is still an issue here. The kinds of genres that have value in public discourse, which tend to be sport, documentary, current affairs, etc. compared with genres which women might want to watch are not given high value or status within the household. So again that created a problem.

I think that another way to look at it would be simply to explore houses where there are women only.

That's right, that would be interesting, and I don't think there's been enough work following through on that, actually. I think that would be interesting because I'm very critical of my own work now because, and Dave Morley's the same, because we concentrated on the family unit, in his *Family Television*, in my *Video Playtime*. However, my argument was that this was the domestic unit which dominated the early take up of the video,. It would, of course, be interesting to look at different kinds of households. I think the other dimension, which is important, and came out was the continued significance of class. The women I interviewed came from different social backgrounds, and that turned out to be a really important variable in relation to how much power they felt they had in the household. For example, the middle class women tended to like the same kinds of programmes and films as their male partners. I do think a lot of scholars now are really quite dismissive of that earlier work, and assume that it's providing very old fashioned and traditional views of gender, but I'd be very interested if people came up with different kinds of work.

Now your interest in television has developed further, resulting in a major project 'Televising History', which examines the way in which history programming is 'produced in the changing landscapes of television'. So if I'm not mistaken there seems to be a certain shift from audience research into textual analysis and cultural history. Would you say something about the development of this new project, about how the projects are related?

Once I finished my, my research methods book I began to think about a new project. After the disruption of Birmingham I moved to Lincoln, which is a much more media oriented faculty and of course our institutional location influences the direction of our research. There is a constant demand call in media studies that we should develop ways of looking at how production, text and reception could be connected so that we can understand

some of those relationships. When I was thinking about developing such a project, history was one of the booming areas of television programming. I thought that an interesting question to ask was 'how do we get the kinds of history programmes we do?' Production studies of television are very thin on the ground and it seemed that questions of how particular programmes get commissioned, who was producing them, what involvement might the academy have in providing historical research, etc. opened up a very fertile area for research. I was fortunate in that Lincoln funded a research fellow, Dr Erin Bell, to work with me here. She is an historian, and therefore added another dimension to the project, that of historical knowledge, historiography and television history as a form of 'public history'. Our 'reception' site is the school -how and in what ways is history programming is used in schools. So it was really the need to find a project that could begin to answer some of the questions that had emerged out of media and television studies, I think, rather than a complete break with my past work. Erin Bell and I are interested in gender issues and that is obviously quite important in relation to history programming.

Politics and cultural studies

I would like to come back to the issues of Cultural Studies, its methodology, and theory. Cultural Studies has traditionally been interested in Marxism. How do you see this connection today, and how has the Marxist link developed in the course of the last decade?

I think the whole question of Marxism, and what was understood by Marxism, in the west, is so interesting. And clearly, it was critical for the New Left and for the early development of Cultural Studies, and also for some feminist work. The feminists engaged with Marxism, in a kind of sense materialism, I think that was really critical and important. And I engaged with Marx on my social history of art course. It was an important intellectual development and informed our critical thinking. I think that we distanced ourselves from anything that was going on elsewhere which might be called Marxism, because we simply believed that we were doing something different. We were interested in the intellectual ideas, and for instances the *Grundrisse* was one of the important texts that we read on the MA, in relation to historical methods. It was a working out of a way of understanding culture, that wasn't determinist, overly determinist, and wasn't idealist, and there was something that we thought Marx could offer to that problem. So that certainly was a very strong influence. But I think Gramsci then came, certainly in relation to Birmingham, as a much more nuanced kind of set of ideas, particularly in relation to culture and especially popular culture. So I think that you can still see foundations of that in a lot of work that people do, the remnants of earlier thinking can still be traced through. But when I thought about your questions I was trying to think what 'we' were occupied with in the post-1989 period. We seemed to be completely occupied with Thatcherism, you know, and the shock of this sort of neo-liberal development, the privatisation of culture in public spaces, universities, and the thing we thought of as the 'New Times'. People started defining a post-Fordist era and those kinds of influences. Certainly since we've been working together it's really brought my attention the parochial nature of the work.

This brings me to the next question; two years ago at a conference in Austria (the *Landscapes of Cultural Studies* conference at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria, 13-15 October, 2005, at which the paper 'Rethinking Culture in the New

Europe' was delivered jointly by Ann Gray and Jirina Smejkalova), we had a discussion with Lawrence Grossberg[3] and he noted that Cultural Studies had no relation to the Cold War, and that Cultural Studies and whatever it stands for had actively tried to stay away from the Cold War discourses. But my question would be, wasn't the rather naïve view held by British Cultural Studies of everyday cultural life under the Soviet regimes also a form of counter-discourse against Western anti-Soviet propaganda, and as such a product of the Cold War black-and-white approach in academic discourse? How do you see Cultural Studies relation to the Cold War?

I think it's becoming noticeable now. I think it is partly to do with the enlargement of Europe, but I think in very general terms British Cultural Studies looked to the US and the US looked back, so the Anglo-American connection is very strong which in some respects has excluded other parts of Europe. And of course cultural studies took on a very different kind of complexion in the United States. Larry Grossberg has written a lot about how Cultural Studies was simply bolted onto ailing literature courses, looking at popular texts and so on, and none of the actually politics of Cultural Studies was transported into that. And certainly with regard to Cold War ideologies, we were very dismissive of the US's Cold War discourses, we could spot them a mile off, we could see what they were. But we didn't think about our own discourses, which I think is a very interesting point to make. You and other scholars will be able to analyse those discourses.

As you know there has been quite a big gap between so-called Eastern European studies (at least as produced in the Anglo-American context) and Cultural Studies, and it seems to continue even today. For example, at a recent conference at the Czech Embassy in London, a distinguished scholar of Czech literature Prof. Robert Pynsent[4] referred to Cultural Studies as a way of simplifying and banalising serious academic concerns, and Prof. Evgeny Dobrenko[5] talks about Cultural Studies as 'something very vague (…) neither a subject nor a field, it is a grey area which covers basically the whole spectrum of human ideas and includes history and philosophy and film and literature. For many, Cultural Studies is something very superficial, and rightly so (…).'

Well, I think my first question is: what do they mean by Cultural Studies? It has many different manifestations and examples that you might draw on, so it's not one unified discipline. This is probably the root of their concerns. At the event to which you refer no-one talked about any specific research within Cultural Studies, no examples were

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3 Lawrence Grossberg is the foremost commentator and interpreter of British Cultural Studies in the USA. He is co-editor of the journal *Cultural Studies* and some of his relevant publications include Nelson, C. & Grossberg, L. (1988) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place; Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* New York & London. Routledge.

4 Robert Pynsent is a Professor of Czech and Slovak Literature at SEES, London. His work includes *Ďáblové, ženy a národ. Výbor z úvah o české literatuře* (2007), *The Literature of Nationalism: Essays on East European Identity* (1996) and *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality* (1994).

5 Evgeny Dobrenko is a Professor in the Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies at the University of Sheffield. His work includes *Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (2007), *Aesthetics of Alienation: Reassessment of Early Soviet Cultural Theories* (2005), *The Making of the State Writer: Social and Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Literary Culture* (2001), and *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature* (1997). For his view on cultural studies see an interview conducted by Gian Piero Piretto for *eSamizdat-La Rivista. Laboratorio di Slavistica Creativa*, 2005 (III) 2-3, pp. 27-29; on line: http://www.esamizdat.it/temi/piretto2.htm (10. 1. 2008).

given as to what offended them so much. Of course Cultural Studies has been attacked from so many disciplinary areas: sociology, literary studies in the early days, anthropology, and I think now what's happening is that Cultural Studies has had an influence in a number of different disciplinary areas, so we can now see that the so-called cultural turn in sociology couldn't really have happened without Cultural Studies. I think the other way of approaching it is to say well, what is the advantage of being a discipline? What are you gaining if you can describe yourself as a discipline? Why is it important? Many people working in Cultural Studies would deny that there is such a discipline and that is mainly because it has always had a very open approach to ideas. For instance some of the more recent work on globalisation, cities, diasporic studies, etc has been carried out within anthropology and geography but the influence of Cultural Studies is obvious in this work. Cultural Studies asks 'what's the question? What do I want to look at? Let's look at the way that media has become global', I mean, it's a banal example, but, what do we need to look at that? What are the significant aspects of that? And it starts from that point rather than 'what as a discipline can we do?', 'what do 'we' look at?' So what is the advantage of being defined as a discipline? Probably to protect your own collective skin!

Backlash

This brings me to the next question: perhaps you would agree that Cultural Studies has been through several waves of backlash, but one very strong one seems to have emerged in the 1990s. Cultural Studies was accused, among other things, of redirecting attention away from the 'real' world of parliamentary politics, hard facts, and economic truths towards 'unimportant' areas of the domestic functioning of media, and of placing increased emphasis on the 'micro-processes' of viewing relations while avoiding 'bigger' questions of media power and ideology. It was also argued that it was time to move 'beyond' Cultural Studies and to return to more secure disciplinary foundations, such as sociology or political economy, and of mistaking the work of the Birmingham CCCS for something equivalent to the 'mysteries of daily life in Plato's academy'. Would you like to comment on some of these arguments?

Yes, well, the first one refers to the world of Politics very narrowly defined, hard facts, economic truths, etc. I think that goes back to what I was saying earlier about how the macro is considered to be very different from the micro, and there's that failure to engage or even to understand what I think is so obvious, is that micro is the macro as well, you can't separate the two. But I think that has been a constant criticism, that we are just not serious and that our work is trivial. And I think that's particularly also because most of the people working in this area were feminist scholars. Again the second one is also rather similar, that in fact media power and ideology can equally well be dealt with when you're looking at how people watch television, as it can be by any other mode of analysis. Certainly the way I analyse my work, without sort of doing violence to the actual data, you could see the public ideas of what constitutes a 'good' text, the right kind of knowledge, what kind of person you should be, coming into the domestic arena. So it requires a bit of imagination to think about how the macro is intimately demonstrated. Yes, to move beyond Cultural Studies, to return to more secure disciplinary foundations, well again I would ask why and for what purpose. I think that there are now studies being done that are drawing on political economy models. Recently I have been looking at some very

interesting work on new forms of television, subscription, satellite channels and so on, and understanding them in relation to an economic model, but it's also done through looking at the texts themselves. Thus it's informed by both political economy and cultural studies. I do think that work can go beyond the binaries rather than retreating to old positions.

The Birmingham – the mysteries of daily life – yes, this is the Ferguson and Golding quote. (Fergusson and Golding 1997: xxiv) Well, I think there is a grain of truth in that, and I think the CCCS was rather romanticised probably through a nostalgic longing for the intellectual hot-house environment which it produced in the early years. A lot of the work itself was rather romantic, especially in relation to the young male working class but I think that the work of the so-called 'Birmingham School' has been reduced to this particular strand. As we can see in the *CCCS Selected Working Papers Volumes 1 and 2* which I have just jointly edited the work was much more diverse than this suggests.

The collection of working papers to which you have already referred will be a significant contribution, turning the legend into more solid ground.

Yes, the uncritical populist mode of interpretation – and again with all these things there is a grain of truth, I mean I think a lot of the projects have been to celebrate the popular, both popular forms themselves – and there was a very good reason for doing that initially, because they weren't taken seriously at all. Nobody was seeing the importance of looking at them, and also people's consumption of popular forms, and that's where John Fiske is used as the prime candidate for this. But, once again, I think that work carried out in the last ten or fifteen years has gone beyond that. Just thinking about locating that work, it had its function, its reasons, at the time.

Location, location, location …

Talking of location, which you touched on a little already, to what extent were the leading themes and approaches of Cultural Studies connected to Birmingham itself and the West Midlands region?

Yes, I do think it is located, the work was contingent, and in some ways that was a strength because it produced specific, concrete studies. And the other thing they were trying to do was to work out a research practice that engaged qualitatively with the empirical world and trying to relate that theoretically to the broader social structures Thus quite a number of the studies undertaken, had a bigger yield than might be expected from a small-scale study. So although they were contingent and set in a place and time, I think they did provide an interesting model, and certainly kinds of questions that might be asked about particular social and cultural practices. .

That leads directly to my next question: how do cultures travel, so to speak? As editor of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* for 10 years (co-editors Joke Hermes and Pertti Alasuutari 1998-date, Sage), you have been involved in various permutations of the Cultural Studies approaches, in the European context at least. Would you define the continuities or discontinuities of the British tradition in the continental context?

I'm not sure I can fully answer this question. I think that what emerges through the kind of papers, and the kind of work that's being done, are, as I said before, just sort of models

of thinking through research. Youth Studies, for instance, is still, certainly in Scandinavia, the most significant contribution that Cultural Studies has made. This has influenced both academic studies of culture but also social policy and so on within those countries. There's still a lot of interest in television- the early emphasis at the Centre was to look at media and take media seriously and we do get a lot of papers on the media and textual analysis of the media. I think in terms of theoretical frameworks, work drawing on Foucault and discourse analysis would probably be the most dominant approaches. The journal, as you know, is interested in publishing empirical work and has a strong interest in method. But I think there's a wide variety of approaches, and now consumer culture, and the ways in which the self is constructed – again rather Foucauldian but drawing on other theories of governance and so on – are also very strong areas in the papers which are being submitted.

Do you have any of your own unwritten criteria for selecting the papers for your journal beyond the quality of the piece? When would you say 'this is not Cultural Studies'?

Well, I don't think we say this is not Cultural Studies, what we do say is this is not our kind of Cultural Studies, because we do ask for papers that have some empirical grounded research. We're interested in theorised empirical work, but not, as it were, theoretical papers on their own. We also do get papers that come in because of our European title, that are often, we would say, area studies. So they might look at politics within a particular setting, or some other aspect that we are looking for. There are other journals, the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (1998- date, edited by John Hartley and published by Sage) for instance, which I think is much more theoretical, and perhaps more textual.

With the risk of oversimplification, where would you see the line between the North American and the British version of Cultural Studies?

Well, I think it's very blurred, but I do think it's a dynamic relationship. Larry Grossberg is a very interesting commentator, particularly on US Cultural Studies. I think there is some interesting work, particularly in relation to media, actually, going on in the States.
When Cultural Studies was first taken up there was a real reluctance for instance to engage with Marxism. So again it's kind of a power relation of culture or the power aspect and dimension of culture. I think at Birmingham we were very open to looking at American studies, for example. We looked quite a lot at the understanding of urban culture, which again there was quite a lot of work coming out of the States, from the Chicago School up to more contemporary notions of that. So we did use a lot of American work, which came from sociology, from geography, from anthropology, I mean then Jim Clifford's work (Clifford and Marcus 1986) was absolutely critical.

Thus to reduce the American version of Cultural Studies to purely textual analysis is actually not correct. It leaves out all that very interesting work that has enriched the field.

One of the key questions is what happens to the ideas and theories, which are critiqued and displaced, and could they become passé eventually? There has been a lot of debate about the possible import of Cultural Studies to other intellectual contexts. If we take the situation of 'New Europe' as an example, where are the potential applications of contact between what's considered to be current mainstream Cultural Studies, and the analysis of European culture?

The obvious thing is the centrality of culture to what's happening, and that sounds such an obvious thing to say, but it's not always obvious. So I guess that kind of initial acknowledgement is to say that culture is a very important part of a society and of change, it's the way that we can understand the difference between individuals and society, and historical change. So I would say that theorising culture would be a very important thing, and again that dimension of power relations, that culture is not just a neutral element of society, that it has integral power relations. The question is how you conceptualise that power, within certain periods of change.

I think again that the way in which culture becomes actually very important could usefully be imported. So I think that would be as far as I would go, because one couldn't impose theoretical frameworks. However, when I talked to colleagues in Estonia, they had done a lot of work on the study of youth and consumer culture, which was considered to be an important aspect of change. Some of the early CCCS studies were found to be a useful starting point. And once more I would return to methods and the understanding of the relations between the market and young consumers which are relevant to contemporary developments.

One of the issues, which may be perceived with a certain discomfort in social and intellectual contexts which experienced all sorts of social engineering, is the prescriptive dimension of some of the work in Cultural Studies, clearly related to its Marxist roots. Would you like to comment on this issue?

Yes, I think that's interesting because that was very much the ethos of the centre, at the beginning: it was kind of, understand the world in order to change it. And certainly for a long time at the Centre they talked about the project. The Project. And it was to develop Gramsci's organic intellectuals. Certainly, I remember that was the ethos, and I remember a much younger scholar coming and joining us at Birmingham, and saying 'what's this all about?' 'What are you trying to change?' 'What can you do?' 'How can you change things?' I think it is to do with the residual economic determinism of Marxism, I mean it is still very difficult to get away from that. David Harvey's work, e.g. *Conditions of Postmodernity,* which draws on a Marxist analysis, still has a lot to offer in my view. I've still got quite a lot of sympathy with that kind of analysis; I think in some ways it's very productive. But it does leave out a lot of other elements and other factors.

My last question is: what do you think cultural studies offers media studies?

The importance of understanding the power relations intrinsic to all aspects of the media and the significance of 'meaning' within those processes.

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