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CULTURAL STUDIES AFTER THE CULTURAL STUDIES PARADIGM

If cultural studies is in crisis, the answer to it is not to be found in some theoretical or methodological claims proper to the field (for instance, concerning the specificity of its object, culture), but in its two 'transversal' qualities: on the one hand its political commitment, on the other hand its interdisciplinarity. Discussing two attacks launched against inderdisciplinarity (S. Fish and R. Krauss), this article attempts to reconcile a new cultural studies agenda (language, technology, history, law) and a permanent reflection on the very sense of the whole enterprise (and this is where cultural studies and philosophy meet).

Keywords crisis; interdisciplinarity; commitment; language; technology; law

Cheers: one more crisis

No other stereotype is so deeply rooted in the self-representation and self-construction of the humanities as that of crisis. Cultural studies, which can be considered a reply (and momentary solution) to the dramatic crisis of formalist structuralism and over-formalist semiotics in the late 1970s, has now, in the eyes of its long-time adversaries as well of some of its early defenders, entered itself a period of deep crisis, at least in those countries and those fields where its influence had spread most rapidly (Bathrick 1992, Ferguson & Golding 1996). But since crisis is undoubtedly the ultimate rite of passage before entering the pantheon of theoretical and methodological paradigms in humanities, the current situation of cultural studies and its announced death are inextricably linked with the final legitimization of the discipline. We are entering new and post-cultural studies paradigms, but, of course, this does not mean that cultural studies will vanish from the field, on the contrary. What it does mean, however, is that cultural studies will have to reposition itself within the ever moving and shifting field of the humanities, instead of taking for granted, as some theoreticians used to believe around 1990, that the only future of the humanities will be that of cultural studies itself. In this article, I would like to present some very personal reflections on the future of cultural studies, not at all in a nowadays fashionable spirit of 'CS-bashing', but in a

spirit of respectful dialogue with other disciplines, orientations and sensibilities within the global field of the humanities. Cultural studies has much to learn and much to offer, and so have or should have other disciplines, whatever may be the preferences and the quarrels of the day.

But first of all, let us have a brief look at the now widely commented upon crisis of cultural studies. If we define cultural studies as the interdisciplinary approach of culture which aimed to redefine the very concept of culture itself, it would be unfair not to acknowledge the important achievements of the movement: the fact that culture is now seen as a 'way of living' and no longer as a set of literary 'masterworks'; the fact also that culture is no longer defined by small groups of academic and upper-class 'specialists' but by polemical interactions between several social groups; and the fact that culture is a theoretical construction which can only result from the exchanges between a cultural practice and a theoretical framework — all these elements are paramount and groundbreaking innovations which have pervaded so deeply the field of the humanities that its lasting influence can in no way be denied. Thanks to the cultural studies paradigm shift, literary studies have become what they are today (the last decade of a journal such as *PMLA* gives a good survey of this transformation); theory is now being taken seriously even in those disciplines where it had always been a dirty word (I am thinking of course of art history, in the first place); and the curriculum is now opened to many other practices and, very importantly, to many other types of students whose self-empowerment may be, in the final instance, the most important change made possible by cultural studies (women, blacks, queers and third-world citizens, inside and outside the first world, are not only being studied, but they are now studying themselves: they can now look more freely, even at 'us', instead of being only gazed at). Even if the crisis of cultural studies were so deep that the discipline would disappear, these results cannot be undone: the scholarly and social transformations made possible by cultural studies have reached that point of no return that characterizes all major changes (the same is true for psycho-analysis for instance: even if modern medicine would make psycho-analysis superfluous, the theoretical insights of the Freud-Lacanian movement cannot, unless of course by ostracism, be put away).

Yet, we know today that cultural studies has not been so new and revolutionary as it may have seemed to be during the years of its academic boom and fast institutionalization. Jonathan Culler has argued very cleverly that cultural studies was in fact the more politicized and more low-cultural version of the almost forgotten structuralism:

Now when I think about what it is that makes these essays seem cultural studies rather than something else — philosophy or sociology or history — I conclude that it is the attempt to identify the underlying structures, the powerful mechanisms at work in these cases. I am led to the hypothesis

that cultural studies is (or should be) structuralism, that crucial enterprise which has been unfairly, in my view, shunted aside, especially in the United States, in that enthusiasm for the new that generates 'post-structuralism'. Since what we call 'theory' is generally linked with *post-structuralism*, one might imagine that the inclination of people in cultural studies to dissociate themselves from theory might be the displaced form of a return to the analytical projects of structuralism, which sought to help us understand the mechanisms that produce meaning in social and cultural life.

(Culler 1999, p. 342)

(Of course, Culler had some hidden agenda by claiming this historical family resemblance, to which I shall return in a few moments.) We also know that cultural studies has partly failed in what it aimed to (re)valorize: history, politics, the popular. Stuart Hall's statements on the necessity of linking cultural studies and socialism on the one hand, and the danger of cultural studies' institutionalization in the US on the other hand, must have sounded already a little odd when he made it to the newly conquered American audiences. As the 1960s' Jean-Paul Sartre spoke of the final uselessness of literature in real political battles, Hall says:

AIDS is one of the questions which urgently brings before us our marginality as critical intellectuals in making real effects in the world. (...) Against the urgency of people dying the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies? (...) I don't know what to say about American cultural studies. I am completely dumbfounded by it. (...) There is no moment now, in American cultural studies, where we are not able, extensively and without end, to theorize power — politics, race, class, and gender, subjugation, domination, exclusion, marginality, Otherness, etc. There is hardly anything in cultural studies which isn't so theorized. And yet, there is the nagging doubt that this overwhelming textualization of cultural studies's own discourses somehow constitutes power and politics as exclusively matters of language and textuality itself.

(Hall 1992, pp. 284–6)

(It is probably no coincidence that the term of 'class' is making a curious come-back in contemporary literary studies: this renewed interest is of course the return of the *concrete* political 'refoulé'.) And we finally also know that several new disciplines are impatient to pick up the threads cultural studies dropped at the time of its savage but successful institutionalization. *After* cultural studies, we are now about to welcome '*cultural analysis*', i.e. a type of cultural studies that emphasizes the historical dimension of culture: 'Cultural analysis as a critical practice is different from what is commonly understood as "history". It is based on a keen awareness of the critic's situatedness in the

present, the social and cultural present from which we look, and look back, at the objects that are always already of the past, objects that we take to define our present culture. Thus, it can be summarized by the phrase: "cultural memory in the present" (Bal 1999, p. 1). (One of the promoters of cultural analysis is Jonathan Culler, whose putting forward the similarities between cultural studies and 'dehistoricized' structuralism can now be understood much better.) *Instead* of the pseudo-homogeneous field of 'one' cultural studies, we can observe now a burgeoning of 'subcultural' cultural studies which clearly tend to ignore both each other and the larger discipline itself. The role model of these new disciplines, such as queer studies, is obviously that of feminist studies, which have always managed to resist their incorporation to the cultural studies field. In the margins of cultural studies, but today more and more *in front* of it, we witness the return of several neo-formalist approaches seduced by the strong claims of 'cognitivism' (a term used as vaguely as the term 'cultural studies' ten years ago, but with a scientific aura that the latter has never been able to obtain). And, most radically and also most astonishingly, one can also detect a move *beyond* cultural studies as a scholarly activity, i.e. a plea for cultural activism which goes back to basics, back to the roots of cultural studies: *political action*, and even agit-prop. One may assume that the last years of Pierre Bourdieu are a good illustration of this shift, which has now become clear with the success of the anti-globalization movements in the academy: this is a no nonsense political action, which does not compromise with the scholarly necessities of academe and the 'profession' (a word that will reappear at several occasions throughout this text.)

Yet, simultaneously cultural studies goes on influencing other disciplines. It has not only overtaken large parts of literary studies (both in the theory departments and in the 'applied', nationally oriented programmes), but its presence can be felt in *science and technology studies* (Du Gay *et al.* 1997), just as it penetrates *law studies*, a field where the irruption of a cultural studies sensibility is a really explosive matter and whose 'return' on the original field is very promising (Coombe 1998, Simiers 2001, Vaidhyanathan 2001). The cutting edge of cultural studies is much less lost than some of its enemies would like to believe, so that once again an old question is to be asked: what is cultural studies, and why should we doing it?

What cultural studies aims to be and what's wrong with that

To answer the 'what' question, it seems easy to list the major keywords that assured cultural studies' emergence and rapid institutionalization: culture as text, theory, the breaking down of disciplinary boundaries, politics, feminism, minorities, high and low culture, etc. The 'why' question, however, is much more difficult to answer, for it is obvious that no one needs cultural studies to

analyse one of the listed items (the principal reason of the current crisis in cultural studies is the disintegration of its own field, where all possible types of cultural 'substudies' are proliferating, whereas cultural studies as a single discipline is unable to feed them with a more general and, more crucially, with a scientific looking, framework).

I am personally convinced that cultural studies '*droit de cité*' is not to be found in some theoretical or methodological claims proper to the field (for instance concerning the specificity of its *object*, culture, although this discussion should be reopened urgently); yet as things are now, cultural studies can be just about anything, which means that in fact it is just about nothing). It is to be found in its two 'transversal' qualities: on the one hand its *political commitment*, on the other hand its *interdisciplinarity*. After the collapse of Marxism as a credible model for political action, cultural studies has been one of the biotopes (or reservations?) in which the spirit of criticism and resistance has proved able to survive. As such, it has been a privileged ally (and sometimes more than just that) to the claims of newly emerging groups and movements, whose diversity reflects the shift from the modern Great Narratives to the postmodern explosion of micronarratives. The spread of antiglobalization and the subsequent return of Great Narrative political activism explain why cultural studies has lost much of its political appeal: this discipline is, from this viewpoint, no longer necessary, and I doubt whether we should really lament this loss. After all, there has always been a gap between what cultural studies pretended to do and the down-to-earth realities of the academic struggle for life: we should not forget that the cultural studies project has been embraced in the first place by those scholars who had been rejected from the traditional literary departments by job-cutting policies of the 1980s, and then no less enthusiastically defended by the university managers themselves, who considered cultural studies a good 'trick' to re-increase enrolment in order to compensate for the dropping numbers in literary programmes.

If things are much clearer now on the side of *politicization*, what can one say about the issue of *interdisciplinarity*? The situation here is completely different. Indeed, cultural studies political role has always been acknowledged and respected (or at least it was paid lip-service). Yet it is exactly for its claim of interdisciplinarity that cultural studies has been subject to massive attack. A fine observer and critic of academic life, Stanley Fish perfectly describes what is at stake in cultural studies' refusal of monodisciplinarity, in a move which is a strategic and thus far from innocent, defence of professionalism. And since the modern university is about professional standards, cultural studies is, in the eyes of Stanley Fish, an occupation whose place can only be outside academia. This is the way Fish argues his claim – first step, a definition of cultural studies:

'Specialized academic disciplines', Ben Agger complains, contribute to 'overall domination by refusing a view of totality desperately needed in this stage of world capitalism, sexism and racism' (Agger 1992, p. 17). Since the 'fragmentation and specialization of knowledge leads to its hierarchization', academic disciplines are complicit in 'the reproduction of historical domination' (id, p. 18) (...). The name of this [Agger's antidisciplinary] project is cultural studies (...)

(Fish 1995, pp. 77-8)

Second step: a blatant condemnation of the intellectual project of interdisciplinarity:

The vocabularies of disciplines are not external to their objects, but constitutive of them. Discard them in favour of the vocabulary of another discipline, and you will lose the object that only they call into being. (...) if you slide off the defining question and ask another, you will no longer be doing the same job. (...) The conclusion (resisted by many) is that the effects of one's actions will be largely confined to their disciplinary settings even when those settings receive some grandiose new name like cultural studies.

(Fish 1995, pp. 85-6)

Third step: away from interdisciplinarity (i.e. cultural studies and political agency) and back to the business of professional disciplines:

But, one might object, who is to say what is and is not academic work? Well, it is certainly true that what is and is not academic work is not for me to say or for you either. But the discipline can and does say (...). But shouldn't we be enlarging the criteria so that more things will count as academic work and academic work will look like, and touch, more things. But if the category of academic work were enlarged to the point that it included almost anything an academic did (...) the category would have no content because it would contain everything.

(Fish 1995, p. 87)

This is an important statement, made by a smart, albeit a slightly cynical polemist whose liberal convictions, and this too is crucial, are, if not very close to cultural studies, at least very sympathetic to it. Fish's comments have indeed the merit to single out what cultural studies is really about: not just politics, but interdisciplinarity, and on this point Fish is clear: it's a silly thing.

At first sight, the charge made by Fish can be explained by the ongoing guerrilla war between literary departments and cultural studies programmes in the American academy, with the later overtaking, little by little, the positions

kept by the former. Given the focus on contemporary culture in cultural studies, it is therefore perfectly logical that non twentieth-century literary departments (please remember that Stanley Fish himself is a respected Miltonian!) have no interest at all in making alliances with cultural studies in order to save what can be saved from shipwrecked literary studies. From this perspective, the stance held by Fish fits well the strategy of all non-contemporary literary departments.

At second sight, however, something more important is going on. The attack on interdisciplinarity, however cynically it may be conceived of in Fish's book, signifies an important shift in reflections on the role of cross-disciplinary research in literature and, more generally in the humanities. One would indeed have expected that a scholar as progressive as Stanley Fish would prove a great promoter of interdisciplinarity. If he explicitly refuses to do so, this cannot be explained by any reluctance to support innovative scholarship, but by the metamorphosis of the very notion of interdisciplinarity. Indeed, far from being thought of as an intellectual challenge, as an adventure with an uncertain outcome, as a democratic and liberal bottom-up sharing of competences, expertise and imagination, as it used to be in the 1980s, interdisciplinarity has now become a managerial strategy of local ad hoc problem solving, decidedly top-down and justified by the necessity to maximize the academic workforce.¹ Fish's defence of professionalism may rightly scandalize all those who have recently been excluded from the profession (Fish is smart enough to know that you don't enter the profession because you want it and because you are better than the others, but because the institution allows you to do so), but what is at stake here is the cry of protest against the transformation of the so-called 'humanities' in 'centres of excellence' (to reuse the term coined by Bill Readings (1996) in his book *The University in Ruins*), i.e. in types of organizations where the decisions are no longer taken by the academic community itself by their managers. Cultural studies' plea for interdisciplinarity, Fish argues, is a way of selling out academic values to new ways of working, thinking and managing which prove to be in full contradiction with the liberal values cultural studies ought to defend. As 'anti-disciplinarity', cultural studies helped to dismantle the ancient (disciplinary) structures which are felt to be an obstacle to competitive excellence by the new academic managers.

A small digression is called for here. Until now, I have only discussed the anti cultural studies arguments of one author, and since we should never forget the ancient dictum '*testis unus, testis nullus*', it is crucial to state that Fish's stance is far from an isolated one. Even more violent attacks against fashionable interdisciplinarity have indeed been launched during the same period, for instance by Rosalind Krauss (1995). Her enemy, however, was not cultural studies, but visual studies (the name often given to cultural studies in the field of art history, whereas cultural studies as a concept belongs more to the

literary field; logically visual studies and cultural studies cannot but tend however to be one and the same mega- or antidiscipline). The particular interest of Krauss's intervention, in which earlier work by Fish is widely quoted, is the result not only of the links she draws between the rise of interdisciplinary visual studies and the fall of disciplinary art history as part of a changing context of competition around power and jobs, but also to the history of artistic *deskilling*, the negative side of twentieth-century avant-garde. Deskilling may indeed have proved a useful arm in the battle against fossilized iconography and academic art-production, but one of its negative consequences is the disgust with formalism and theory that helps university managers to bury intellectually exciting and necessary but expensive and difficult programmes, which are replaced by cheap but attractive cultural studies programmes.

Fish's and Krauss's protests against 'dehumanization' are furthermore a denunciation of the false and maybe hypocritical hopes raised by the politicization of academia since the 1960s, and this is how the critic of antidisciplinarity encounters the critique of (pseudo)social involvement. Also in the name of disciplinary coherence, it is argued by those authors that you cannot, at the same time, be doing politics and an academic job: of course you can (and ought to) do politics as an academic, but this involvement should not be confused with the job done as an academic, which is a different one. Assuming that you can combine both, i.e. doing politics when doing your job inside the academy, is an insult to all those who are really doing politics in the field. Hence the now regularly quoted accusation of cultural studies' fakeness (the word 'chic' that is often used in this context has the same negative connotations as 'elitism', for instance). As Žižek puts it:

The true corruption of American academia is not primarily financial, it is not only that they are able to buy many European critical intellectuals (myself included, up to a point), but conceptual: notions of European critical theory are imperceptibly translated into the benign universe of cultural studies chic.

(Žižek 2002, p. 546)

Those subfields of cultural studies that have really made a difference, socially and politically speaking, such as gay studies or women studies or Black studies, are not subfields which have grown from within cultural studies, but which have been 'imported', and then (and thus?) neutralized, at least at an academic level. To recognize this fact is not a shame, but a way of saying goodbye to an inconsequential and largely inefficient way of doing politics.

So what now?

Given the fact that there are serious problems both with cultural studies' object (anything, hence nothing), with its methodological priorities (interdisciplinarity becoming dangerously close to antidisciplinarity, i.e. the dismantling of the disciplines, not their collaboration), and with the naïve belief in its political effectiveness (which everybody today mocks as window-dressing), there seems to be only one possible conclusion: let's close the brackets around the cultural studies paradigm and go back to business as usual.

For several reasons, such a conclusion seems too radical. One can even ask who will most benefit from such a decision: the former humanities disciplines perturbed and sometimes even destroyed by the logic of cultural studies, or the new managerial anti-humanist academia which is now preparing to kill its cultural studies ally, now that the traditional disciplines have been 'disciplined' and their independence, tamed. Better than kicking a dead horse, the logic of excellence is now turning its arrows against cultural studies, this time with the help of the semi-restored or recovering disciplines.

If one decided to remodel cultural studies, which is the stance I would like to defend here, it will be necessary to give it a new place in the academic curriculum, in the first place, and to find sustainable answers and solutions to the problems raised above, in the second place.

As far as the first, institutional problem is concerned, I assume that it is now time to leave behind excessive claims for 'complete', BA and MA, cultural studies curricula. Where those experimental programmes exist, one can observe that they display a dramatic tendency to 'narrow-down' over the years, i.e. to include specialization and disciplinarity, whereas one would have expected more the inverse. But the tendency is clear: after the overwhelming antidisciplinarity of the first years, the claim for a more traditionally organized curriculum gets stronger, not in the last place from the students who really feel that they are missing something. Therefore I would like to argue that the best solution is to conceive cultural studies, not as a complete programme, but as a kind of superstructure, for instance at the MA or advanced MA level, where students would learn to broaden their professional and disciplinary skills and knowledge, critically putting them into question and mutually enriching them, provided also that the classroom is opened to students coming from very different disciplinary backgrounds.²

All this may seem down to earth, and excessively modest, yet in its awful pragmatism it may be a warrant for the further development of any cultural studies curriculum whatever. Students and staff will benefit from this change, the former because their methodological underdevelopment would be stopped, the latter because they would be freed from sterile isolationism and antidisciplinary rhetorics which are sounding more and more hollow,

while the renewed confidence in the disciplinary bases of humanities could open refreshing perspectives for new interdisciplinaries as well.

Besides this essentially administrative reorientation, cultural studies will also have to face more important intellectual challenges in the years to come (and it is by purpose that I choose the word 'challenge', which also suggests fun and excitement, and not 'danger', which already supposes a regrettable closing of the discipline on its own self-proclaimed truth). Briefly said, these challenges are the question of disciplinarity, the question of political involvement, and last but not least, the question of the proper object of cultural studies.

I assume it is rather useless to repeat here the main stances of what has been argued above: interdisciplinarity is a good thing, which deserves to be encouraged, not as a synonym of antidisciplinarity, but as the creative collaboration of well-established disciplinary backgrounds; and political critique remains as necessary as ever, provided it is considered an output of academic reflection, not academic reflection itself. I assume these two points are now shared by a significant part of those working in the field. The third and last point however, which is also the point where the big adventure of cultural studies started in the early 1960s, is that of the very object of the 'discipline'. Culture, indeed, had always been defined as 'high-culture', on the one hand, and as 'literary culture' on the other hand, until cultural studies managed to make some dramatic openings: popular and low-cultural dimensions are now taken as seriously as high-cultural ones (in fact one may say that current scholarship in culture may be accused of ignoring traditional high-cultural forms of expression); artistic and individual forms of culture are no longer preferred to mass-mediatized ones (although the taking into account of mass culture does not mean at all that the sense of hierarchy has been lost. Although we are no longer able to define what is might be, the label 'art' is still a very marketable value); and there is room for studies of technology.

Yet, some important questions remains largely undertheorized and/or underanalysed. Some of them has to do with the choice of the objects put under analysis. The domain of media and popular culture seems now a little exhausted; that of sex/gender/race studies is cruelly lacking the political dimension one cannot reasonably do without in these matters; the rapidly progressing and very promising encounter of cultural and technology studies, on the contrary, often radically ignores any political statement (or when it tackles political issues, it is generally undermined by its naïve techno-utopianism, as in many studies on cyberculture, see Baetens 2000). The cultural blindness around the language question is concerned, is even more astonishing, since very often promoters of radical politics simply assume that the whole world either already speaks English, or has no good reason not to do it within the very near future. As Mike Kelly notices, this linguistic imperialism is

undoubtedly one of the reasons that explain the reluctance of many leading French intellectuals such as Bourdieu, whom some Anglo-Saxon authors consider one of the founding father of cultural studies, to refuse vehemently the very concept of 'cultural studies' (Kelly 2000). To put it shortly once again: there is undoubtedly room for an enlarged version of cultural studies, provided the very notion of culture is linked with new and concrete objects (instead of being the personal 'dadas' of the baby-boom professors, who just teach in their class-rooms what they like to do at home during their spare time) on the one hand, and provided also culture is studied in a more historical or diachronic way (one should remember here the warnings of Jonathan Culler) and in a truly multicultural way (where the clash of cultures is no longer seen in merely social or political terms, but also in terms of language and technology). After the (small) boom of 'culture & technology' studies, as exemplified in the much debated but unfortunately less often emulated group research on the story of the Sony Walkman (Du Gay *et al.* 1997), the most interesting research is being done without any doubt in the emerging field of the 'cultural law studies', for instance in the discussions about the rights and wrongs of copyright, intellectual property, brand management, etc. (Coombe 1998, Smiers 2001, Vaidhyathan 2001). The advantage of this research is that it can establish a fruitful dialogue with contemporary discussions on problems such as genetic engineering, which should not remain the private property of 'ethics'.³

Other questions, more philosophical ones probably, belong to the sphere of definition of culture itself, which has indeed been defined in terms of 'way of living' (this is the great leap accomplished by the first generation of cultural studies authors such as Hoggart and Williams), but whose radical difference from the traditional ideal of culture has not been sufficiently emphasized. Today's culture has become 'postcultural', as Herman Parret argues. Following Omar Calabrese's theses on postmodernity as neo-baroque (Calabrese 1992), he writes:

Our contemporary culture is repetitive and iterative, rhythmical and pulsion-oriented ad infinitum. If the 'classic' respects limits and builds up a structure around its centre, the 'neo-baroque' transgresses constantly every threshold and makes every limit elastic. It cultivates decentering, searches for excentricity and excess — excess of speed or of slowness, of greatness or smallness. Detail and fragment are the two neo-baroque geometries which block the construction of the unity in perception and hurt the soul with dysphoric uneasiness. Instability and metamorphosis, disorder and chaos, labyrinth and enigma, complexity and dissipation, distortion and perversion, all these neo-baroque characteristics shatter the classic ideal of modernity. (...) So one may ask whether it is possible to transpose the concept of culture, which is so heavily marked by

Enlightenment, to the very different constellation we find in contemporary society?

(Parret 2000, p. 47).

The dialectical reconciliation of a new cultural studies agenda (language, technology, history, law) on the one hand and a thorough and permanent reflection on the very sense of the whole enterprise (this is where cultural studies and philosophy meet) on the other, may sketch some of the borderlines the new cultural studies will have to explore and, why not, to cross and to dissolve once again.

Notes

- 1 I am indebted for these insights to Prof. Rein de Wilde (University of Maastricht).
- 2 Of course, this point of view is not merely personal. It is supported by the whole faculty of which the institute where I am currently working is part of.
- 3 Seen from the outside, the proliferation of 'ethical studies' may be interpreted as the analogon, in the field of philosophy, of the spread of 'cultural studies' in the literary field. However, maybe this remark is too simple.

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