

## Cultural Studies and the Political Hologram

Ioan Davies

**T**wo visions keep me awake as I write this piece, visions of the role of the media in politics. One is of Ronald Reagan, the acting Emperor of an imaginary kingdom of Beverley Hills, with imaginary heroes, imaginary battles, imaginary locations but all the images playing havoc on real people for whom the imaginary and real are barely distinguishable. The other is of René Levesque, sometime leader and communicator for a social movement, for a living, vibrant culture piercing through the fog of media make-believe to demand an affirmation, a place. The one, carefully manicured, embalmed, wearing his other hair dye, lives on as the reruns of his own movies play over the wreckage which his social policies built high; the other, quite clearly dead, cigarette and *vin rouge* surrounding him on the catafalque, leaves a *différence*, a *distinction*, a *sens de l'utopie pratique* which others will have to continue to develop. The one is a fitting conclusion to a Baudrillardian fantasy world where images are more real than the strategies of everyday life. And the other, a symbol of collective survival, earth of the earthly, the rumples, tousled, hesitant, irascible man who tore away the gauze of any theology that clung like cobwebs over the faces of the living. But he is definitely gone. *Si le grain ne meurt . . .*

### II

And yet. And yet. The simulacrum of the real, reality transformed into its simulacrum. We have to start knowing that that snapshot of the real (the real pain, real violence, real death) is frozen

into an image that can be spliced, duplicated, reproduced in a way that defies the moment of pain/joy which gave it birth. And any talk of cultural studies has to be conscious of the split between our readings of all media (including our own), of the social conditions that the media tries to represent or distort, and of the tensions between the two. At the core of all radical/socialist concerns with culture has been the frustrations/hopes of social movement. It was true of the Frankfurt school, of the Parisian Existentialists, of the *Annales* and *Tel Quel* schools, of the Bourdieu project, even of *Encounter* and the 'God That Failed' critiques of Daniel Bell and Irving Howe, certainly of the Birmingham Centre, of the *Radical America/Cultural Correspondence* group, of the old, middle and late *New Left Reviews*, of *Social Text* and *New German Critique* and of the transnational, decentred feminist critiques. And even though much of this work sits on the margins of academia (which is content to explore narrow ideas in narrow contexts), there is little doubt that it contributes to a critique of our contemporary world. Most of the cultural journals themselves (see the appendix to this article) are clearly now engaged in political and theoretical stocktaking. The purpose of this article is to try to situate ourselves in relation to those discourses.

In many respects the major cleavage is between what Jürgen Habermas calls the Posties (post-modernism, post-marxism, post-structuralism, or what Dick Hebdige, in the first issue of *New Formations* more strategically designates as *The Post*), and with those whom I shall call the left populists. The division is an uneasy one and perhaps should be seen in terms of polarities on the relationship of cultural studies to

the linguistic paradigm at the one end and the praxis of everyday culture at the other. But because the linguistic paradigm ultimately has to confront the impossibility of saying anything about anything in a world where values and principles seem to have been made irrelevant by practices, it is doomed to examining mere surfaces. We are locked, as in John O'Neill's *Five Bodies*, or Arthur Kroker's *The Postmodern Scene* into the trap of metaphor. The 'discourses' are therefore discourses between the interpretations of facticities: we act out and display the apparent because either the real does not seem to exist anymore or because we accept that all our practices are contained in our language. But of course there is a reality behind the images, and cultural and social life goes on, whatever the post-modern dismissal or appropriation of the practices. Thus surface and deep structures provide the contrasting points of cultural studies. If the meaning of our lives is to be found merely in the languages we use, the myths we create and the films that confine us forever to Plato's Cave, then neither economy nor sex nor history nor even the transcendental can be tapped to unlock the mysteries of our existence. The game of reading the cards is the important task, which may reveal the meaning of our fate but, if not, will at least have provided a stimulating, even whimsical, occasion for examining this apparently timeless space we inhabit.

Against this, the critique based on praxis or left populism confronts culture with an alternative vision. In Paul Buhle's words "they seek out the exemplary moments when Mikhail

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Bakhtin's description of the Rabelaisian world of mass carnivalesque creativity takes new life in modern conditions, or when Walter Benjamin's expectation that audience and artist will blend into one another is briefly realized." This is, of course, a far cry from earlier Marxisms and earlier radical critiques, even those influenced by Gramsci and Trotsky. It owes a lot to the recognition that the "Post" is there, that it reflects a theoretical impasse based on real political conditions (Stalinism, Hitler, Reaganism, Thatcherism, the Left's political impotence), that it carries in its wake important methodological tools (semiotics, deconstruction), but that its uncontextual, a-historical, narcissistic pessimism is based on an allegory which simply reflects the present without in any way wanting to change it. The left populist studying culture knows "that cultural studies has to be open to external influences, for example to the rise of new social movements, to psychoanalysis, to feminism, to cultural differences" but that its ultimate stand is to operate "somewhere within...the discursive limits of a marxist position." (Hall in *C/10/2*). Like the "Posties", we stand in the only space we know, but, unlike them, that space is shot through with sparks of messianic light.

The journals that explore cultural studies are either pulled close to the linguistic paradigm in form (like *Raritan* or *Yale French Studies*) or to its ontological implications (like *Zone*, *Semiotexte* or *C* magazine), or like *History Workshop*, *Feminist Review* or *Social Text*, they see cultural studies as an active participant in movement. In between lie a range of academic fence-sitters (*Culture*, *Theory and Society*, *New German Critique*, *Telos*, *Cultural Critique*, *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*) whose commitment is probably more to the Theory of culture than to anything else (contrast with Stuart Hall: "I am not interested in Theory. I am interested in going on theorizing"). Most, but not all, journals concerned with specific form (film, TV, art, photography, fiction) sit inside the linguistic paradigm (with *Screen* the archetype), while the Birmingham influence has generated several journals on "patterns of power and meaning in contemporary culture" (*Cultural Studies*, *New Formations*, and *Communication Inquiry*).

Reappraisals of these territorial boundaries abound and in a sense have been the very stuff of contemporary cultural studies since the early sixties. What is perhaps particularly important now is that the implications of what the

"Posties" have been saying for 30 years has sunk in, both ontologically and methodologically, and the reappraisals have to contend with discourses which do not depend on any 'deep' structural props. And cultural studies, an erstwhile academic and political guerilla movement, is compelled to come to terms with its own institutionalization and some attempts to 'codify' its activities. Several articles stand out in this reappraisal. They include Richard Johnson's in *Social Text*, 16, Dick Hebdige's in *New Formations* 1, the reappraisal of Stuart Hall's work in *Communication Inquiry* 10/2, the dialogue between Perry Anderson and Marshall Berman in *New Left Review* 144, and the various debates round the work of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Terry Eagleton as well as Richard Rorty's review of Habermas in the *London Review of Books*. On the 'Post' debate Laclau and Mouffe's book, chaotic and unreadable as it is, stands as something of a watershed because it pushed neo-Marxism through the discursive post-modernist door while daring to retain a political, engaged stand. Terry Eagleton's recent work on the other hand pulled us back from the primacy of text to resituate cultural studies in the everyday: "Men and women do not live by culture alone, the vast majority of them throughout history have been deprived of the chance of living by it at all ...." (and by 'culture' we know that Eagleton means 'text'). The debates on cultural studies are in many respects a debate between the privileged and nihilistic elitism of discourse theory and the grounded optimism of practical existence, between those of us who have had the advantages of reading all or most of the texts (which means the ones we think are significant) and those whose only 'texts' are those which happen to be around or which are heaped on them by a series of interconnecting structures.

The groundwork of left populism - the territory that it has to defend against 'the Structural Allegory', to use John Fekete's phrase, or 'The Post' in Hebdige's, is marked by four strategic positions. The first is the American populist tradition (formulated in its most eclectic and undisciplined sense in the *Journal of Popular Culture* and its offshoots, but also in its neo Marxist sense in Paul Buhle's old *Cultural Correspondence* or in some of the livelier contributors to the *New York Village Voice* or *Communication Inquiry*). The second is what, for want of a better term, might be called the Jameson/Williams/Eagleton axis where textuality is turned against itself in order to reveal the practice of being and knowing *each other*. The third, indicated by Pierre Bourdieu in France,

Michael Apple in the States or Basil Bernstein in England, emerging out of an apparently deterministic sociology (Durkheim, Marx, Weber) demands to know the conditions under which we make ourselves. The 'text' here is not language, but social structure; the metaphor is not the linguistic map of hollow meanings but the biological one of reproduction. The fourth tradition is a British/French/American one founded primarily on a praxological reading of history, from the *Annales* school (Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel), the Warwick/Ruskin schools (E.P. Thompson, Raphael Samuel) and American social history (Eugene Genovese, Herbert Gutman). Here in reading history we must recognize not only the conjunctures of events and relationships that brought us to this place but also that we have been here before and that the knowledge of these two spaces provides a dialectic for making our own culture. All of these approaches posit a collective agency, and therefore the task of critical theory is to explore the collective presence against both the elite and the personalist definition of the dominating other.

The fun of this kind of cultural studies is found in the exploration of the possible, seeking meaning in the hopeful, living in the actual while trying to overcome it. The fun of the 'Post' is the fun of amplifying the surface, the acoustics of vacant space, the engrained texture of different voices, the democracy of probabilities. Left populism tries to regain voice and reclaim the democracy of possibilities. The fun of cultural studies is in exploring our actual experiences as a conflict between how they are lived (left populism) and how they might be read as surface appearances (the 'Post'). At the flattest, empirical populist extreme there stands the jouissance of claiming that everything that the people do must be culturally important, and hence the *Journal of Popular Culture*, a Disneyworld of experiences, visions, bric-a-brac. At the plumpest, phenomenological, further end, stands E.P. Thompson, who in "Writing by Candlelight", sees the whole of English cultural history, its' pretensions and hopes, in the correspondence-columns of *The Times* of London, written at the darkest hour of the miner's strike. Between the aridity of *Popular Culture's* eclectic democracy and the certainty of E.P. Thompson's cultural hologram lie the search for knowable communities, realistic transcendences: the study of culture as not only that which is there, but that which can only be there because it is *made*.

Between the textual and the collectively experiential falls the shadow of the subject. (You and Me, to those who don't like this discursive jargon). In major ways this culture is dominated by those Feminist and Third World discourses which have brought the subject, the individual to the forefront. Where the signs of language and the collective solidarity of males has provided no apparent culture except that of servitude, the language of becoming is necessarily autobiographical. Yet this autobiography can never be written in the same way as before. No more sagas of self-appointed saviours - no more Journals of Malcom Xs, no Nehrus, no more Emma Goldmanns, Golda Meirs, or Anais Nins. The new autobiography tries to make sense against the deconstruction of itself by the signs that try to put it in its place, but also against the collective solidarities that would claim it. That is its guilt-ridden task. Its guiltless task is to affirm pleasure, desire, experience. Ronald Fraser's making sense of self against class background, psychoanalysis and Marxist solidarity was a major breakthrough in this direction, as is Dick Hebdige's account of his 'father', reprinted in this issue, or Norman Lear's TV series of the 1970s, *Mary Hartman! Mary Hartman!* or the Frears/Kureishi *Sammy and Rosie get laid*. In prison literature, Bienek's *The Cell*, Breytenbach's *True Confessions*, Adam Michnik's *Prison Journal*, Nawal el Sa'adawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* - provide other examples. But the collective/separate/different retelling of fractured narratives by women and all of the world's many minorities is the point at which the structuralist allegory explodes into the new collective and down to the subjective voice. They're singing my song - no, not mine, but one with a similar tune. This is my song. I'll sing it, but if you won't listen, steal it. I'd like to hear you sing it again. It will be different, of course. But then we may be able to sing a new song together.

Singing Songs, making film, talking, writing letters to the editor, playing games, having fun: a joint project of the textual journeymen, of the collective hologram, of the affirmative self. Cultural Studies is predicated on the probabilities of their integration.

## Major Journals in Cultural Studies

Ioan Davies

**B**y no means is this list/appraisal definitive. On the whole I have chosen to list those journals which seem to me to have illustrated the theoretical/movement points of departure. My selection is bounded by Canada, Britain, USA, France, Australia as geographical entities and, more or less by journals (as opposed to newspapers) and cultural studies (as opposed to specific genres - science fiction, theatre, etc.) except where the journals seem to be saying something which relates to ourselves as cultural actors. My concern, above all, is to what they say to us in Canada. My distinction, crudely made, is between those journals which think about the culture as opposed to those who simply report it (with whatever prejudices), between reviews of the action (*New York* or *London Review of Books*, or *Books in Canada*, which I ignore at my peril) and rethinking what the action means. I am not interested in journals which take their own genre as the only world worth talking about (any academic journal concerned purely with politics, or sociology, or literature, or music), but with journals which see themselves as part of a wider concern. But the entries in my notebook of journals are very selective. The issue is to provide discourse. I apologize to Italians, Germans, Spaniards, Portuguese who may have marvellous journals, centres which debate their own culture. I haven't read them, nor pretend to know what they might be about. I only read the authors in translation, and therefore never the journals. In addition I do not discuss Quebec, Feminist or Third World journals which will provide theme pieces in subsequent issues of *Border/Lines*.

But a few books, before the journals. The Birmingham Centre published several books before its untimely demise at the hands of Thatcher and a frightened professoriat, but *Culture, Media, Language* (edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis) is still the best over-all account of what it was up to (published by Hutcheson in 1980 and reprinted 4 times since). Paul Buhle's collection of articles from *Cultural Correspondence*, published as *Popular Culture in America* (University of Minnesota, 1987) is the best introduction to the left populist catalyst of the 1970s, though Todd Gitlin's *Watching Television* (Pantheon, 1987) is the best collection of what the left populists are now doing. Colin McCabe's *High Culture, Low Theory* (St. Martin's Press, 1987) though suffering from sloppy editing and thinking, is a British rethinking in the same vein. Frederic Jameson's *The Prison House of Language* (Princeton, 1972), and John Fekete's *The Structural Allegory* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984) are probably the best introductions to the 'Postie' debate, while Brian Wallis' *Art After Modernism* (Godine, 1984) is as good a compendium as any in dealing with the aesthetic implications. Two feminist collections - *Yale French Studies* No. 62 (see below) - and Tania Modleski's *Studies in Entertainment* (reviewed in *Border/Lines* #9/10) - are important. Andrew Arato's *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* is still essential, while Raphael Samuel's collection, *People's History and Socialist Theory* (Routledge, 1981), provides the basis of British debates on culture/history. Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (see below) shows how much we have to learn from France about researching popular culture. On history, literature and theory, Peter Humm, Paul Stigant and Peter Widdowson have edited

(1986) a collection in Methuen's 'New' if you are concerned write what you do. Russell Jaccoby's *T* (Basic Books, 1987) in culture, the absence of voices, perhaps the generation."

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