CULTURE REVIEW

The Persistence of Cultural Studies: A Brief Consideration of the Place and Purpose of Cultural Studies in an Otherwise Turbulent World

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Two prevailing inflections of 'persistence' occupy the social imagination. In the first, generally considered the domain of toddlers, journalists and telemarketers, persistence comes as something troublesome, incessant, and largely irritating. In the other, persistence is held as a virtue; a capacity maintained by those capable of 'seeing things through'. Each version of the term may well share a common foundation (hanging on too long can, after all, descend to irritation), but either way, persistence is a capacity that declares its presence; a signifier of the 'stuff' of its bearer, and the nature of the situation. Persistence notifies the intention that whatever may come is here to stay.

I want to outline two visions of Cultural Studies in light of these inflections of persistence in order to pose questions of what it is that Cultural Studies should hope to achieve in a world grown precarious. In extension to recent, notable expressions that have surveyed this consideration[1], I make the point that Cultural Studies needs to be a little more careful in how it continues to understand itself, and perhaps more crucially, how it should continue to imagine its 'project'. What I mean by this is that, in this current moment of direct challenge to all that seems reasonable and rational, from multiple angles both within the University (as the primary site of Cultural Studies' practice; we are institutionalised, after all) and those wider publics from which we claim we speak, it is with the persistence of troubling ways of doing things that Cultural Studies has customarily identified a primary purpose. In fact, troubling these troubling aspects of the world is a somewhat romanticised preoccupation for Cultural

Studies and something that permeates the desire that most in the discipline hold (at least in passing) for enacting what they do.

But it is here that Cultural Studies' greatest challenge–actually changing the world–is also evident. Consideration of *persistence*, then, as both an irritation and a virtue, suggests something about both the conduct of Cultural Studies but also those problems to which it is put. To consider Cultural Studies in these two ways, and as something that has managed to (and should continue to) 'persist', equally raises questions regarding the persistence of those things we seek to remedy. In avoiding some well-trodden (if not just plain tired) arguments about Cultural Studies' 'emancipatory potential', its 'critical spirit' and otherwise idealised calls to arms in the telling of truth to power, I want to pose a brief abridgment of Cultural Studies' scholarship that doesn't take as its initial cue an innate sense of 'goodness' in the discipline's purpose. In other words, what should indeed persist in Cultural Studies (and what might be jettisoned)?

From Whence It Came

In earlier work[2] I have referred to this dual conundrum in terms of the conjuring of those 'halcyon' remembrances that define, with almost sacred regard, the discipline's formations. Part of this process of telling the story of Cultural Studies include the relay of tales of its heroic formation and countenance of the vicissitudes of a complex world. While there are indeed contributions from the discipline that are profound in their significance, I can't but feel that something akin to what Stuart Hall noted is also present: 'I think as a field it contains a lot of rubbish'. What then is left, and from whom should directions on what is (and isn't) 'rubbish' be derived?[3]

This formulation might just as easily be framed by asking what traditions and narratives in the discipline persist and why. Certain people, certain projects and certain ways of doing things constitute the name of Cultural Studies and mark the discipline in discernible ways. We are as prone to trends as anything we study, and while these prevailing touchstones otherwise declare the disciplinary boundaries of Cultural Studies, a further challenge of such formations is the risk inherent in hanging-on too dearly to traditions that may well be insular. What might it mean, in this present moment, to 'do' work under this title of 'Cultural Studies', at the hard edge of this conjuncture? Indeed, 'what might a continuing Cultural Studies practice look like if we commenced anew, without the reference points and disciplinary baggage that current cultural studies practice invokes?'[4] Others, including Lawrence Grossberg (2010), Graeme Turner (2012) and Gilbert Rodman (2015) have equally pointed to similar concerns, but what I suggest is crucial in all of this is the desperate need for an unabashed (re)appraisal of what persists within Cultural Studies and why it should remain. Are those connections to halcyon past(s) of any continuing use? What might need to change in order for Cultural Studies to more fully respond to a world that largely doesn't see it as important?

Persistence in Cultural Studies

The challenge for Cultural Studies, it seems to me, is in identifying what is worth persisting with in the first move, and then 'activating' (as Baden Offord refers to this[5]) ways of practicing the sort of persistence that stand as valuable to the values we feel identify the discipline. This means not only persistently speaking-out against those prevailing logics, troubling articulations, and ways of doing things that constitute the conjuncture, but finding ways of doing things within the discipline that move beyond older formulations, familiar routines, and perhaps anachronistic practice.

Persistence, perhaps, is more about courage and fearlessness than irritation and annoyance. Of course, we should, as a discipline primed to do these things, continue to point-out that which is 'wrong'. But this should be matched by an equally unabashed critique of that which is going-on *inside* the discipline. Certain persistent traditions and ways of speaking about the discipline may require overhaul–their own critique–as might wider calls for what this discipline actually does and how it might meaningfully contribute to the world. This is no call for self-flagellating pity, but a request for a deep introspection geared to something beyond the further rehearsal of the discipline's persistent formations. We must be intent on something more pragmatic and meaningfully demonstrable about what it is we hope to achieve.

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Notes

1.   Lawrence Grossberg. *Cultural studies in the future tense*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2010; Graeme Turner. *What's become of cultural studies*. Los Angeles: SAGE. 2012; Gilbert B Rodman. *Why cultural studies?* Chichester: Wiley. 2015; Andrew Hickey (ed.). *The pedagogies of cultural studies*. Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies (85). New York: Routledge. 2016.

2.   Andrew Hickey. The pedagogies of cultural studies: a short account of the current state of cultural studies. In: A. Hickey (ed.). *The pedagogies of cultural studies*. Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies. New York: Routledge. pp 3-23. 2016; Andrew Hickey. Halcyon daze: cultural studies' crisis narratives and the imagined ends of a discipline. *Cultural Studies, 32*(6): 975-996. 2017.

3.   Lurie Taylor. Culture's revenge. *New Humanist, 121* (2). 2006. Available from: from: https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/960/cultures-revenge-laurie-taylor-interviews-stuart-hall.

4.   Andrew Hickey. Halcyon daze: cultural studies' crisis narratives and the imagined ends of a discipline. *Cultural Studies, 32*(6): 975-996. 2017. 197.

5.   Baden Offord. Ramping up cultural studies: Pedagogy and the activation of knowledge. In: A. Hickey (ed.). *The pedagogies of cultural studies*. Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies. New York: Routledge. pp. 51-67. 2016.