

Cultural Studies through Literary and Semiotic Approaches: A Review Article of New Manuals by Walton and Thwaites, Davis, and Mules

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Recommended Citation

Zalbidea Paniagua, Maya. "Cultural Studies through Literary and Semiotic Approaches: A Review Article of New Manuals by Walton and Thwaites, Davis, and Mules." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.4 (2009): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1566>>

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Volume 11 Issue 4 (December 2009) Book Review Article 12
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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss4/12>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.4 (2009)
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss4/>>

Maya ZALBIDEA PANIAGUA

Cultural Studies through Literary and Semiotic Approaches: A Review Article of New Manuals by Walton and Thwaites, Davis, and Mules

David Walton's *Introducing Cultural Studies: Learning Through Practice* (2008) is one of the most notable recent manuals on cultural studies on the making of British Cultural Studies. This volume benefits from Walton's (Joycean) insights attempting to redefine concepts ("punccepts" 300) so as to encourage a creative approach to cultural criticism, a tone already displayed in some of Walton's previous publications ("Theme-Antics and the The-Eerie Class: CrWit(t)icism in Wrap" (1998) and *Ac(unofficial)knowledging Cultural Studies in Spain* (2002). Thus the book is written for those who "wish to *do* cultural studies for themselves (rather than just read about how others have done it)" (2). The volume is oriented towards the practice of learning and includes a number of varied strategies such as warnings against oversimplification, diagrams, comics by José María Campoy Ruiz, and the performative dramatization of imaginary critical dialogues. The dialogic form allows space for debate, dissent, and uncertainty and while this is not alien to cultural studies (see Jordan and Weedon; Morley and Chen), this book is particularly appealing in that it mixes imaginary fictional characters with real people who theorized cultural studies. Each chapter is headed by clearly stated "Main Learning Goals" showing awareness of pedagogy in terms of developing students' critical competencies. This, in particular, I welcome in view of the new kinds of university curricula and constructivist approaches to education. In addition to "References," in every chapter there is a "Further Reading" section with an annotated bibliography.

The volume furnishes the reader with an idea of the historical developments and changes within the field of cultural studies in the United Kingdom, a chronological approach similar to John Storey's approach in his *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (1993). The book is divided into four parts, each addressing matters of culture from the turn of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. While the first part presents work by some of the most important cultural theorists where the chapters work like individual critical introductions, the second part is with focus on debates over abuse and dominance of the working classes by the upper levels of society. The third part provides solutions to re-evaluate popular mass culture, and the fourth and last part turns to issues of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. In Chapter One Walton explains Matthew Arnold's theories in Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) through a conversation with *Notlaw* (one of the anagrams of the Walton's name) with Arnold's ghost. The dialogue shows how Arnold contemplated culture as related to curiosity: "a question of looking at things in a disinterested way and for the pleasure of seeing them as they really are" (qtd. in Walton, 15). For Arnold, culture brought positive changes from above and based on reason and a cultivated mind. He believed that the study of culture provided a counterbalance to the excessive materialism and utilitarianism of the industrial age and that the pursuit of knowledge was more important than politics and religion. Arnold made up his own division of classes into Barbarians, Philistines, and the Populace. Barbarians were the aristocratic classes who enjoyed external qualities such as strength and beauty; Philistines were the middle classes, obsessed with materialism and acquiring economic power; and the Populace represented the working class, whom Arnold despised because of their demands for rights and liberties. He believed in the authority of the State, rejecting any kind of revolutionary manifestation as an agent of change.

In Chapter Two Walton focuses on F.R. Leavis, T.S. Eliot, and contemporary mass culture. Leavis and Eliot are associated with cultural forms and historical change and they continued the tradition of the culture as a set of canons of works and critical practices with an understanding of culture as elitist and as an instrument of power. However, in Walton's understanding Eliot argued for an anthropological approach which offered a wider view of culture and that included everything from religions to world literature, considering that cultures were transnational owing to their interaction with one another (note that Eliot was one of the founders of the International Comparative Literature Association / Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée). In Chapter Three Walton introduces Theodor W. Adorno and the Frankfurt School: Adorno described popular mass culture as a product of the culture industry and products of the culture industry were understood as anything produced for mass consumption (the press, music, films, television, etc). Adorno's collaboration with Max Horkheimer in *The*

Dialect of Enlightenment showed (cultural) barbarism as a result of the Enlightenment's tendencies of rationalization and pointed out its associations with the rise of totalitarian regimes such as fascism and nazism. Representatives of the Frankfurt School employed Marxist and Freudian perspectives to explain how social masses are victimized and barbarized by the cultural industries. However, Adorno's critical method is adapted here by Walton in a memorable passage where the author writes a rap text putting himself "in the position of a rapper who tries to take up a critical but appreciative attitude towards the method we have been exploring" (65). Thus, the author gives another example of the creative criticism that he recommends throughout the book.

In part two, Walton focuses on Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957). Hoggart, who came from a working class background, was interested in the working classes and believed that they held "an active role in making, choosing and adapting culture" (qtd. in Walton 86). He introduced the idea of active resistance which contrasted with the old concept of the working classes as passive victims. The chapter on E.P. Thompson's presents Walton's take on working class groups in their active struggle in search for parliamentary reform. An imaginary young man preparing for a cultural studies exam meets a friend with a prodigious memory who happens to lecture on Thompson. While strolling near Marx's tomb, and sharing a sandwich, we learn how *The Making of English Working Class* (1963) contemplates class as a form of relation, not a category, and how Thompson proposes to "excavate these dark areas of history" (103) when he researches documents reflecting the repression of the working classes. In Walton's understanding, Thompson's aim was "to understand the lives, experience, consciousness, values and struggles of particular groups of society" (108). In Chapter Six Walton introduces Raymond Williams, for whom it was necessary to take into account the material circumstances in which cultural forms are produced because the results of a product of culture depend on the economical and social situations which originated it. Williams divided forms of culture into the ideal, the social, and the documentary to understand there is no sense in trying to marginalize popular mass culture and privilege forms of minority or elite culture. Thus, it is just as important to study and analyze films and television programs as is to study and analyze written literature. Walton reviews and illustrates how concepts like Raymond's "keywords," "the structure of feeling," "sequencing and flow" in the media, and "dominant, residual, and emergent cultures" may work in practice.

In Chapter Seven Walton focuses on popular and youth subcultures by bringing into attention Stuart Hall's and Paddy Whannel's *The Popular Arts* (1965) which contributed to re-evaluate popular culture by means of getting readers and audiences to judge popular forms from their own point of view. Hall and Whannel accepted youth rebelliousness and nonconformity as a useful characteristic that distinguished them from adults and that youth culture manifestations gave young people a sense of identity. The same theme of resistance and subcultures is the object of Chapter Eight: relevant publication on this topic is Hall's and Tony Jefferson's edited volume *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (1976). They analyzed how youth subcultures developed personal styles which were used as forms of resistance. These youth subcultures in post-World War II England experienced some important changes: the increased importance of the market and consumption, the rise of mass culture (radio, mass publishing, and particularly television played a key role) and it is in this period that the so-called "society of leisure" began. Other relevant questions regarding subcultures were race and ethnicity, for instance Rastafarianism and Black music. The fact that these topics are discussed in Hall's and Jefferson's volume contributed to the introduction and development of ethnic issues into British Cultural Studies. In order to help readers to assimilate concepts of subcultures, in Chapter Nine Walton offers practical examples of analysis taken mainly from film studies, for example the British post-World War II film *Quadrophenia* and another is contemporary multicultural and multiethnic Britain in *East is East*. Both can be said to be representatives of the topics on which British Cultural Studies focus at two decisive moments in their development, i.e., the 1970s with their focus on subcultures and the 1990s and after with their reflection on gender and ethnicity. Both chapters complement the theoretical chapters of the book and include annotated filmographies for further study.

Another step further in the move towards forms that challenge power is Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Walton explains in Chapter Ten. Gramsci realized that hegemonic control did not manipulate the classes just by power or naked aggression, but in a more subtle way, for it also had to do with questions of moral and intellectual leadership. Following Gramsci, Hall contributed a concept to cultural studies to define the place of popular culture related to the theory of hegemony: "what is es-

sential to the definition and study of popular culture is the recognition of how popular cultural forms are in tension with the dominant culture" (204). There is a decisive contribution to the study of cultural in Chapter Eleven, namely the notions of the problematic of symptomatic reading and interpellation developed by Louis Althusser, who understood that ideologies were formed by individuals' practices in every day life. Althusser's concept of interpellation helped scholars in cultural studies to understand that people are products of ideologies and are involved in the cultural, political, and economical system in which they were born. Walton presents creatively his case introducing the imaginary figures of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde engaged in conversation with cultural studies scholars such as Catherine Belsey, John Storey, Pierre Macherey, and Judith Williamson about the subject and its hidden dimensions.

Part four, entitled "Remembering the Forgotten," is useful for scholars in cultural studies interested in race and gender. In Chapter One, Walton uses Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* to show what cultural criticism looks like from a feminist perspective. The question of gender comes up gradually in previous chapters through Angela MacRobbie's contribution to the Birmingham Center's work on subcultures (159-64). Further, Walton debates if Woolf, a champion of women's rights, merits a place in the pantheon of cultural critics. Her pioneer ideas that sexual differences "gender" life experiences through the opportunities available to women opens up the topic of discrimination in terms of racial and gender issues, the object of the final chapter of the volume. Here, Walton draws attention to the relationship with contemporary feminist approaches marked by advances in the study of semiotics such as by Julia Kristeva, Hélèn Cixous, etc. To end the volume, Walton synthesizes all concepts discussed in the book: that is, the fact that cultural criticism cannot be separated from politics and that cultural studies is about popular manifestations and products of culture, as well as such of so-called high culture in both instances including material and ideological contexts of production. He points out that one of the most recent strategies to study the politics of identity and difference is ethnography and that the proponents of cultural studies are well aware of and study matters of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Walton is conscious of the impossibility of embracing the wide field of cultural studies because, as he points out, we are "only scratching the surface" (192) and "the theoretical thematic and concepts of cultural studies are dynamic and thus subject to constant (re)negotiation" (297). Following his performative approach, Walton compares the complexity of cultural studies to *The Lord of the Rings* character Gollum to explain that ogres are multilayered like onions and so is cultural studies a layered discipline and approach (294-95). This chapter includes an up-to-date list of journals and webpages, pointing to the sheer width of the field (306-07; although this journal, publishing since 1999, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* is not listed) and a brief annotated bibliography of studies with a social sciences approach to method (305; neither is the field of Comparative Cultural Studies referred to), including the compilation of Mimi White's and James Schwoch's edited volume *Questions of Method in Cultural Studies* (2006). To me, the best asset of the book is the author's creative, sometimes funny, and always engaging effort to present cultural theory in a way to appeal to students by helping them draw implications in their own lives.

Walton's book and Tony Thwaites's, Lloyd Davis's, and Warwick Mules's *Introducing Cultural and Media Studies: A Semiotic Approach* (2002) — although the latter published some years earlier -- are companion volumes in their make as introductory textbooks for cultural studies and cultural analysis. The latter provides a solid grounding in the key terms and theories necessary for the study of popular culture and media texts because the Thwaites, Davis, and Mules book's inclusion of media studies, a field often associated with cultural studies. Without underestimating the complexity of the social, the authors encourage a critical and inventive attitude to cultural theory through its practical step-by-step approach. The book includes "Tools for Cultural Studies," thoroughly revised and updated from the authors' earlier book *Tools for Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (1994). *Introducing Cultural and Media Studies: A Semiotic Approach* begins with a definition of culture taken from Williams: "culture is the ensemble of social practices by which meanings are produced, circulated and exchanged" (1). The authors use the semiotic method with a pedagogical purpose, thus in approach similar to Walton's book. Its goal is to help the readers' critical capacities for scholarship in cultural studies and to raise awareness about the kinds of signs used in socio-cultural environments. The first element for semiotics theory introduced in the book is the sign. In order to analyse a text or a picture the authors propose to take into account the functions of significance: referential (content), metalingual (code), for-

mal (form), expressive (addresser), phatic (contact), and conative (addressee). In Chapter Two they introduce Fernand de Saussure's distinctions between signifier and signified and Saussure's differentiation between *parole* and *langue*, showing how code changes from culture to culture. Subsequently, the authors comment on the distinction between the notions of syntagm and paradigm in relation to that of code, where "a paradigm is a set of interchangeable signs and a syntagm an ordered array of signs combined according to certain rules (43). They relate the interpretation of signs to cultural background where metaphor and metonymy are explored, and cultural differences, ideologies, and intentions explained in terms of connotations and denotations. The first come from a given socio-cultural code and produce different signifieds out of one signified while denotations are more verifiable and might be proven more objectively. The authors also focus on the question of myth, "a dominant term which stands metonymically for all terms in the system" (67).

The reception of text is the topic of Chapter Three and it deals with the notion that the actual reading of any text can involve the acceptance, rejection, or negotiated response to it, and in particular, of the addressee's positions it presents. The possibilities involved are: a) dominant readings where readers accept the addressee role the text offers and the ways in which they are positioned, b) negotiated readings in which readers question certain myths, and c) oppositional readings where readers reject myths and the addressee's role altogether. The objective of Chapter Four is to explain semiotically the conditions of intertextuality, as the expression of differing social viewpoints. The focus is on work by Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin and his work *The Dialogic Imagination*. In the Bakhtinian approach, a dialogic study is the one in which one work carries on a continual dialogue with other works of literature and other authors. In Chapter Five the authors focus on narrativity and readers response and on the "two pleasures involved, a kind of double desire: the motivation to follow a narrative, and the satisfaction from doing so" (121). After some examples of films to illustrate the elements of cinematographical language such as events, disruption and closure, story and plot, characters and characterization, the authors' conclusion is that narratives offer opportunities "to tell and retell their own versions of social stories" (132). Chapter Six is about "Cultural Practices" and in Chapter Seven the authors discuss the way signs work in particular social and institutional contexts. Negotiations in our social life are made of discourses which concrete social sites, roles, and power relations between participants. And other elements contextualize social practices: embodiment, (interaction with others), medium (the institutional and social dimension), and mediation (mediation between different social domains). An example of one institution mediated by another is news broadcasting. In Chapter Eight the focus is on Althusser's idea of interpellation and explains how the conflict of ideologies in an element of our heterogeneous society.

In "Systems and Strategies," Chapter Nine, the authors return to Saussure's idea of sign systems and the importance of the context in making an utterance differ from another even if they are verbally identical. Saussure explained that the basic object of semiotic study was the system of *langue*, and that the basic unit of meaning was the syntagm, so that "the basic situation in which meaning occurs is the exchange" (183). The authors explore the functions of significance — the phatic, conative, and emotive functions as more significant than the metalingual function. Therefore, "rather than see signs as a result of the simple application of a system of rules, we must now try to think of them in terms of strategies of behaviour" (187). Paying attention to the importance of *bricolage*, a term coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (1962, English translation 1966), and to other strategies such as Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, that is, mental dispositions individuals acquire from their status, family, and social environments, the authors explain the relationship between class position and educational (schooling), cultural (representations such as art, movies, etc.), and symbolic (the use of signs ruled by class, fashion, etc-) "symbolic capital" (193).

The following parts of the book are the most useful for scholars of contemporary culture because the focus is on cultural studies and ethnography. Thwaites, Davis, and Mules explain the importance of ethnography for the opening up of the ideological representations of a particular group. Here, they express concern about the lack of clear methodological approaches in cultural studies, a fact they think it creates difficulties concerning the possible personal values researchers might reproduce in the context of research. Here, I would like to suggest to the authors to look into the in my review article previously referred field of Comparative Cultural Studies, a field — taking the interest of the authors in systems approaches (see Chapter Nine) into account — the systems approaches, as well as a precise

methodology are proposed and applied (see., e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek's works, as well as the journal *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>> and the Purdue University Press print monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/seriespurdueccs>> & <<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/comparativeculturalstudies.html>>). For Thwaites, Davis, and Mules, the often referred to and discussed lack of methodology in cultural studies would be reduced with the use of ethnomethodologies, where the focus is on descriptions by the participants, i.e., subjects of empirical research themselves. Nevertheless, to me an inconvenience of this kind of criticism is that we cannot be sure if the critique has the power to change social structures. As a consequence, policy studies — an area at times within cultural studies although more often than not a field more in political science and/or sociology — can serve for the development of an ethics of citizenship, with contemporary criticism particularly oriented to integrate academic aims with media studies and policy in order to engage "with the policy-forming bodies which determine media discourse" (216) and, I would add, cultural discourse both public and in scholarship. With regard to the ethics of citizenship and cultural studies, the authors are encouraged to inquire into the work of, for example, Will Kymlicka. The volume ends with a section on cyberculture discussing the possibilities in the use of the internet as site of equality and non-discrimination on the grounds of nationhood, class, gender, or property: "The Internet may represent a newly emerging form of the public sphere: an arena separate from the existing political and governmental spheres, in which democratic and critical scrutiny of all aspects of the social world can take place" (225).

In conclusion, the books reviewed here present cultural studies as an area and field, or as Walton prefers, a "space" with the possibility of constant changes and negotiations. They both propose practical approaches to theory and encourage readers to think in a critical way by producing analyses of texts and problems containing multimodal contemporary materials such as films, magazines, or images. Following the reading of these books and the application of the proposed concepts and ideas, readers become aware of the importance of cultural studies and their influence not only in scholarship but also as a field of study that proves socially relevant. Cultural manifestations allow us to express our own versions of reality and it is by learning about our differences and similarities across class, gender, and race ideally grasp and transmit the frail constructions of what it means to be human.

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