Seminar

**Beginning Cultural Studies: Concepts | Texts | Practices (#WueOnline)**

Time: THU, 16-18 // There will be a live Zoom meeting *every other week* (see below for details).

⚠️ *Please study the syllabus closely before registering for the course – and then again before the first meeting.*

**KURS-KATEGORIE (SUV-BESCHREIBUNG):**

This course is in the category ('SUV-Kategorie') 'Level 1: Seminare für niedrige Semester / Seminars for advanced beginners.' The SUV catalogue (see website of the Chair for English Literature and British Cultural Studies) describes this category as follows:


**COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

"Cultural studies," Stuart Hall explained around the turn of the 21st century, "are based on the assumption that it takes a lot of theoretical work to bring light into the darkness of the obvious." Building on the introductory lecture in cultural studies (Einführungsvorlesung britische Landeskunde und Kulturwissenschaft) this seminar aims to further clarify the central concepts on which cultural studies draws. However, it is also high time to begin a lively engagement with actual cultural phenomena.

Accordingly, we will combine the close reading of seminal theoretical texts (on entertainment, youth and media cultures; representation; ethnicity and gender; subjectivity and performance) with discussions on cultural practices and present fields of research. Issues range from human/animal interaction to the sounds, consumption patterns and social practices of popular music culture.

**PREPARING FOR THE COURSE:**

Participants are urgently asked to engage with and prepare for the course already before the beginning of the lecture period. Here is a checklist of options:

- Brush up your knowledge of cultural studies by reviewing the material of the introductory lecture and by studying titles from my 'Basic Bibliography' ...
- Familiarize yourself with the seminar programme ...
- Start reading the texts listed in the seminar programme ...
PROGRAMME

AR = assigned reading → This may be texts or other materials. Please read (or watch) & prepare these texts/materials carefully. ADEQUATE PREPARATION includes researching contexts & difficult terms. The goal of such preparation is not only to achieve a clear understanding of the texts but also to define a position in relation to their argument.

Study weeks & Zoom meetings:

Every second week, we will meet on Zoom for a regular seminar discussion (always on Thursdays, 4.15 to 6.00 p.m.). Participants need to prepare for these meetings by doing the assigned reading and by working with the study questions.

The other weeks of the teaching period will be used for studying, writing and online exchange in the WueCampus course room. There will be assigned reading also for these weeks. And participants will be set research and writing tasks. Written responses (usually in the form of short academic essays of c. 2 pages) need to be handed in through WueCampus by Friday evening (6 p.m.). These essays and written responses will go into the portfolio on the basis of which the performance of participants will be assessed at the end of the semester.

Please note the exception from the rule: The seminar will conclude with a succession of two consecutive Zoom meetings (on 01/07 and 08/07).

Assessment:

This semester, there will be no final test. Assessment will be according to the 'PORTFOLIO' PRINCIPLE. → All written contributions you will make during the semester will automatically become part of your portfolio. Successful participation will depend on timely and satisfactory contributions. The portfolio will be graded at the end of the semester.

Visit the WueCampus 'course room' at least once every week.

The 'course room' features a separate DISCUSSION FORUM for every week. Use it for posting questions, comments and ideas. Here, you can also raise topics or concerns that you think should be addressed in the respective Zoom meetings.

W 1 Study week (12/04–16/04)

Cultural studies?

CONCERNS:

Establishing an adequate critical understanding of the OBJECTS & OBJECTIVES of cultural studies / cultural criticism.

AR:

❖ Consider the material covered in the INTRODUCTORY LECTURE & the resources listed in the 'BASIC BIBLIOGRAPHY.'

❖ Catherine Belsey, "General Editor's Preface" to the Readers in Cultural Criticism Series (Palgrave); here qtd from The Body, ed. Tiffany Atkinson (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2005) vii-viii.
**TASK:**

Make up your mind & do research in relation to the following questions:

- What is cultural studies (or, as Belsey has it, 'cultural criticism')?
- What is the point of cultural studies?
- On what premises are cultural studies based?
- What are some typical objects of analysis in cultural studies?
- What do you hope to learn and achieve by ‘doing’ cultural studies?

(These questions may look simple, but please be aware that they are in fact demanding.)

⇒ State your take on the questions in a short but clearly argued academic essay of c. 1 page. Please upload your essay (as a text file in Word or as a PDF) to WueCampus by Friday, 16/04, 6 p.m.

**W 2 Zoom meeting on 22/04, 4.15-6 p.m.**

**Key concepts in cultural studies**

**CONCERNS:**

Establishing an adequate critical understanding of the key CONCEPTS and key APPROACHES that cultural studies use to deal with their objects of study and to achieve their objectives.

**AR:**


The file on WueCampus contains pp. 3-12; please read all, but focus in particular on pp. 7-12, which contain the following sections:

"Culture and signifying practices" | "Representation" | "Materialism and non-reductionism" | "Articulation" | "Power" | "Popular culture" | "Texts and readers" | "Subjectivity and identity"

**TASK:**

- While reading & preparing the text, highlight the key concepts mentioned.
- Do further research to make sure that you fully understand these concepts and will be able to work with them.
- From the concepts highlighted, select the three that you consider to be most important in the light of your own interests.

⇒ Be prepared to give an informed oral response on the following questions:

  - Why should the concepts you have selected be regarded as especially important?
  - What can be achieved by using them as 'tools' for an analysis of cultural texts and cultural phenomena?
Contemporary media culture – A first specimen

CONCERNS:
Transferring previous findings to the critical ASSESSMENT OF A CULTURAL DOCUMENT
Establishing a critical understanding of what may be 'at stake' in CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS & DISCOURSES
Specifically: problematizing cultural constructions of 'CULTURE,' 'CHANGE,' 'AGENCY,' and 'MEDIALITY.'

AR:
 "The Only Thing That's Changed Is ..." (iPhone 6s Commercial, 2015) [LINK].

TASK:
Watch the clip several times & pen a short response essay (c. 2 pages) that ponders the following questions. Please consult relevant texts and study aids in order to work out satisfactory responses to these questions:
• Why might the commercial be interesting, not only to a prospective 'consumer' but also to a scholar of culture?
• Is it enough to lay bare the methods by which the clip tries to 'sell a product' and 'deceive' the public? Or can/should scholars in cultural studies learn more from the clip?
• How does the clip represent contemporary culture? What specific aspects/dimensions/spheres of culture or cultural activity are represented in the clip?
• What 'hot' topics (i.e. potential social or political problems, divisions and conflicts) are alluded to in the clip?
• Does the clip suggest solutions to such problems / divisions / conflicts?
• How does the clip approach the (interrelated) topics of change, agency and mediality?
• How can the key terms you selected for the last meeting be brought to bear on the clip?

While all of these questions should 'resonate' in your essay, it is OK to focus on one or two in particular. Moreover, you need not stick to the order in which I have arranged the questions. Please feel free to also introduce your own concerns.

➔ Please upload your essay (as a text file in Word or as a PDF) to WueCampus by Friday, 30/04, 6 p.m.
Early cultural studies and post-war entertainment culture

CONCERNS:

Understanding the HISTORICAL CONTEXT (the specific moment in national, social and cultural history) from which 'British Cultural Studies' emerged | Discussing the ACHIEVEMENTS as well as the LIMITATIONS of a 'foundational text' in cultural studies | Discussing the relationship of that history and that text to our PRESENT CONCERNS.

AR:

❖ [From:] Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy (1957; Boston: Beacon, 1961):
   - front matter, including the list of contents and the preface;
   - subchapter on "The Juke-Box Boys" (202-205).

TASK:

Read & prepare the text carefully.

➔ Be prepared to give an informed oral response on the following questions:

- Be sure to understand all terms and phrases in the text. In particular, you should be prepared to explain the somewhat difficult passages on the "eighteenth-century town-house" and the "hedonistic but passive barbarian" riding "in a fifty-horse-power bus for threepence."

- Do research on Hoggart and on the historical environment in which he penned his text.

- Use the information researched as well as Hoggart's text itself to ponder the developments and (perceived) problems that originally motivated (British) cultural studies. (Do not forget to also consider the title of the book, its list of contents and its preface!)

- How would you describe the mood and character of the text? How would you explain and how would you evaluate that mood and character?

- Is this text totally obsolete? Or does it contain concerns and ideas that are still valid today?

[13/05 Holiday (Ascension) ➔ No special tasks and no meeting this week.]

I'll use this week to catch up with providing feedback on the written work handed in by participants.
W5 Study week (17/05–21/05)

New perspectives on the 'young audience'

CONCERNS:

Continuing the assessment of the history of (British) cultural studies → Understanding how NEW PERSPECTIVES on YOUTH CULTURE & CONSUMER CULTURE were established by introducing the notion of 'CULTURAL WORK' and by developing a theoretically grounded understanding of culture as a domain of (POLYSEMOUS) SIGNIFYING PRACTICES.

AR:


TASK:

(1) Read & prepare the text carefully. This includes finding out about the gestation/context of the text. Be sure to clearly understand especially the following concepts or phrases and their function within the essay:

- "Teenage culture is, in part, an AUTHENTIC response to this situation, an area of COMMON SYMBOLS AND MEANINGS, shared in part or in whole by a generation, in which they can WORK OUT OR WORK THROUGH not only the natural tensions of adolescence, but the special tensions of being an adolescent in our kind of society." (22)

- "creative minority" (22)

- "The culture provided by the commercial entertainment market [...] MIRRORS attitudes and sentiments which are already there, and at the same time PROVIDES AN EXPRESSIVE FIELD and a SET OF SYMBOLS through which these attitudes can be PROJECTED." (23)

- "Teenage culture is a contradictory mixture of the authentic and the manufactured [...]"

- "popular art" (26) | "popular culture" (29; 30)

- "And this consideration brings us back to one of the basic problems in POPULAR CULTURE—does the audience get what it likes (in which case, are those likes enough?) and needs (in which case, are the needs healthy ones?), or is it getting to like what it is given (in which case, perhaps tastes can be extended)? Nowhere in this whole field is it so true that the real answer lies in an understanding of how these two factors INTERACT in contemporary popular culture." (30)

(2) Write a short academic essay (c. 2 pages) on ONE of the following questions:

- In which ways are the texts by Hoggart, on the one hand, and by Hall and Whannel, on the other hand, different? In which ways are they similar? How do such similarities and differences reflect a progressive development in (British) cultural studies?

- Select a sentence or short passage from the text that you consider particularly significant or relevant (especially in light of the present situation and of your specific con-
cerns). Explain the sentence/passage selected and give reasons for your choice.

- Consider the following dictum by Edgar Morin, which Hall and Whannel quote in their essay: "In the last analysis it is neither talent nor lack of talent, neither the cinematic industry nor its advertising, but the need for her which creates the star" (qtd Hall/Whannel 28). Explain the dictum and its function in the context of Hall's and Whannel's essay; then comment on your take on the dictum and on the (sociocultural functions/implications of) the star phenomenon.

- Choose a significant contemporary music video or current fashion style (if appropriate, please provide a link etc.). Attempt to assess/interpret your chosen clip or style from the perspective established by Hall and Whannel. Finally, comment on the insights gained in the exercise. (Can be combined with the following question.)

- Comment on both the achievements and the potential problems/limitations of Hall's and Whannel's text. In other words: Is Hall's and Whannel's perspective on youth / consumer / popular music culture still valid? (Can be combined with the previous question.)

- Please upload your essay (as a text file in Word or as a PDF) to WueCampus by Friday, 21/05, 6 p.m.

W6 Zoom meeting on 27/05, 4.15-6 p.m.

'Subcultures, 'hegemony,' and 'style'

CONCERNS:

Continuing the assessment of the history of (British) cultural studies → Assessing the evolution and perspectives of 'SUBCULTURE STUDIES' | Understanding the influence of MARXIST THEORY on (British) cultural studies, especially concerning the concepts of CLASS, IDEOLOGY, and HEGEMONY.

AR:


TASK:

Read & prepare the text carefully. This is the most difficult text so far. However, it also helpfully introduces or re-states many concepts and perspectives that are central to cultural studies as well as to many other kinds of criticism.

- Please be prepared to explain and comment especially on the following terms, concepts or references:
  - "subversion / subversive" (430; 431; 440) [What is being subverted how?]
  - "mundane objects" taking on "symbolic dimensions" and a "double meaning" (431)
  - Matthew Arnold and/versus Raymond Williams (432-433)
- Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes and semiotics (434-435)
- "bourgeoisie" | "ideology" | "systematic distortion" | "dehistoricized" | "naturalized"/"naturalization" | "myth" | "rhetoric of common sense" (434 and passim)
- "ideology" as "a lived relation" (435-438)
- Louis Althusser (and his concept of "ideology") (436)
- "The domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. [...] Whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too." (Valentin Volosinov; qtd. on p. 437)
- Antonio Gramsci and the concept of "hegemony" | "hegemony" as a "moving equilibrium" (438-440)
- "breakdown of consensus in the post-war period" (439)
- "Sign becomes the arena of the class struggle." (Volosinov; qtd. on p. 439)
- "Style in subculture is [...] pregnant with significance. Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization'. As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority', which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradict the myth of consensus." (439-440)

[03/06 Holiday (Corpus Christi) → No special tasks and no meeting this week.]

I'll use this week to catch up with providing feedback on the written work handed in by participants.

W7 Study week (07/06–11/06)

'Subcultures' – Discussing representations & practices

CONCERNS:

Applying the concepts and approaches dealt with so far (especially subcultural theory) to the critical ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS AND PRACTICES.

No specific AR → Do research on specific 'subcultures'!

TASK

• Rethink the concepts and approaches discussed so far, especially those discussed in the meeting on subcultures, hegemony and style.

• Do research on actual cultural movements or 'subcultures' (past or present) and decide to focus on one that seems especially significant.

• Choose one or two cultural documents (images, a film clip, a music video, a journalistic report, a manifesto, etc.) that can be used to discuss the (self-)representation of your chosen group/subculture and its practices or style.

• Use the relevant concepts from cultural studies in order to introduce your chosen
group and discuss your chosen document/s. What is at stake here? In what ways are your group's practices and your document "pregnant with significance"?

➔ Your essay should be c. 3 pages long. Please upload it (as a text file in Word or as a PDF) to WueCampus by Friday, 11/06, 6 p.m.

➔ You can choose to either write an essay for this week or for the next 'study week' (= W9).

W8 Zoom meeting on 17/06, 4.15-6 p.m.

Ethnicity & the politics of representation

CONCERNS / KEY TERMS:

'ETHNICITY' (and 'race') | 'IDENTITY' | (the politics of) REPRESENTATION

AR:


Further reading:

❖ Stuart Hall and his work on the politics of representation and ethnicity is informally but helpfully contextualized by Andrew Robert on the following website:

Stuart Hall: White and Black Subjects <http://studymore.org.uk/yhall.htm>

TASK

Read & prepare the text carefully. This is again a relatively difficult text. The reason is partly in that the text draws on various aspects of structuralist and poststructuralist theory in order to make its point.

➔ Please consider especially the following terms, concepts or passages in your preparation:

- Hall speaks of an ongoing "significant shift [...] in black cultural politics" (441). ➔ What does he mean by "black cultural politics"? And what is the shift he talks about?

- "Thatcherism" is mentioned as the context of the argument. So we should find out about this phase in British politics and its significance in relation to the sociocultural situation of black people.

- We need to know about the concept of DISCOURSE in order to understand the following key passage in the essay:

"My own view is that events, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and REAL EFFECTS, outside the sphere of the DISCURSIVE; but that it is only within the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed within meaning. Thus, while not wanting to expand the territorial claims of the discursive infinitely, how things are represented and the 'machineries' and REGIMES OF REPRESENTATION in a culture do play a CONSTITUTIVE, and
not merely a REFLEXIVE, after-the-event, role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation — subjectivity, identity, politics — a FORMATIVE, not merely an EXPRESSIVE, place in the constitution of social and political life. I think it is the move towards this second sense of representation which is taking place and which is transforming the politics of representation in black culture." (443)

- "the end of the innocent notion of the ESSENTIAL black subject" (443)
- Why does Hall have such a positive opinion about the film *My Beautiful Laundrette*? (Cf. 444 and 449.)
- "the 'epistemic violence' (Spivak) of the discourses of the Other" (445)
- What is the role of sexuality in the "new politics of representation"? (Cf. 445.)
- What does Hall mean by (re-)theorizing the concept of difference? (Cf. 446-447)
- Why does Hall opt for the term "ethnicity" — and specifically "new ethnicities" — and how does he want to use these terms for a new politics of representation? (Cf. 446-447)

W9  Study week (21/06–25/06)

**Ethnicity and gender — Discussing representations & practices**

**CONCERNS:**

Applying the concepts and approaches dealt with so far to the critical ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS AND PRACTICES.

**No specific AR**

→ Research concrete examples of how ethnicity OR gender are represented & negotiated in contemporary culture.

**TASK**

Analogous to the task for week 7.

! You can choose to either write an essay for this week or for week 7.
W 10  Zoom meeting on 01/07, 4.15-6 p.m.

GENDER

AR:


TASK:

Read & prepare the text carefully.

➔ Please prepare informed oral responses to the following questions:

• How does the conceptual pair 'sex'/gender' compare to the pair 'race'/ethnicity'?
• What are the objectives of Butler's text? (In other words: what does she want to achieve?)
• In what ways does Butler's text function as a critique of specific kinds of feminism or of identity politics in general?
• What relations between power structures, discourses and subjects/subjectivities does the text observe or construct?
• What does the adjective "prediscursive" mean? And what is Butler's argument in this regard?
• Does Butler argue that the physical and chemical characteristics of the body are irrelevant?

W11  Final Zoom meeting on 08/07, 4.15-6 p.m.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

No specific AR ➔ In order to prepare for the concluding discussion, please rethink the general progression of the seminar. Questions:

• How do the texts, representations and practices encountered in the course of the seminar 'hang together'?
• What, specifically put, have I learnt in the course of the seminar?
• What are the specific tasks of and the most pressing topics for cultural studies / cultural criticism / cultural scholarship in the present (i.e. at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century)?