



## *In a sort of slanting fashion, it was 'love at first sight'*

A conversation with Iain Chambers  
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**Ester Gendusa:** How did you first encounter Cultural Studies? Was it "love at first sight"?

**Iain Chambers:** I suppose, in a sort of slanting fashion, that it was 'love at first sight'. For my first degree, I attended an unusual, for Britain, four-year BA programme at the University of Keele. It is a campus university near Stoke-on-Trent. The programme, with educational cuts, 'rationalisations' and 'audit culture', no longer exists. Its principle was



to provide an education across the board: from the hard sciences to the humanities. In the first year, the undergraduate body attended daily lectures that ranged from the theory of the Big Bang and the history of the universe to the works of Dante, Descartes, and modern politics and history. Alongside these, you attended three seminar streams. The only rule for participation was that if your choice prevailed for the humanities, then at least one of the seminars had to be in science, and vice versa. The idea was that the first year gave you the chance to experience diverse fields of knowledge before deciding on your subsequent three-year study. I then opted for a double honours degree in History and American Studies as my principal subjects, with Music (studying the Renaissance lute) and Biology as my subsidiary subjects.

In this programme, it was American Studies in particular, where you studied the historical formation of the United States through politics, geography, literature, and history, that initially opened up the idea of interdisciplinarity to me. As students, we were encouraged to make connections across the diverse disciplines involved. It promoted forms of speculative enquiry. I am not saying that everybody did that. Many simply prepared for the exams in each of the disciplines without exploring further connections. However, it was certainly permitted and somewhat unavoidable when dealing with themes such as the frontier, Manifest Destiny, slavery, cinema, and music cultures. Is the frontier simply about cowboys and Indians (and the extermination of the natives), or is it also etched in space programmes and the saxophone journeys of John Coltrane?

Meanwhile, while my courses in History tended to be more traditionally empirical, there I had a professor who introduced me to the idea of the problematic. We studied the Enlightenment as a series of theoretical questions. The 'Scientific Revolution' and the concepts of religion, reason and enlightenment were open to critical interpretation rather than a decided issue. It is where I read Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Although remaining within the history of ideas, it nevertheless opened up a door to thinking of history in a more open, complex, and interpretative fashion. To consider paradigms of interpretation and their shifts was already, although it was never posed in those terms, to consider ideology and its critique. So, it introduced, at least to me, the idea that debate is essential to the production of knowledge.

Then, in my final year, which concluded with sitting five three-hour written exams in both American Studies and History, there was the option of writing up to two short theses (around 5,000 words, if I remember correctly) to reduce the written exams from ten to eight. I choose to write two theses. For History, I wrote a rather pedestrian account of the diplomatic prelude to the Second World War, while for American Studies, I conducted a semiotic study of the Western, focusing on Sam Peckinpah's film *The Wild Bunch* (1969). This choice was motivated by reading Peter Wollen's path-breaking *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema*, also published in 1969. There, I learnt that philosophy and critical thinking could be mixed with popular culture to achieve innovative analysis of film. Wollen's book was part of a series published by the British Film Institute, which included studies of the detective film, the Western, and the musical. Cinema Studies at the time were path-breaking, leading in a second moment via the journals *Screen* and



*Screen Education* to the powerful ingression of Parisian thought into the stunted theoretical world of the UK. Just as earlier, while at school, I had encountered James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and discovered that language could be different, even explosive. It was about thinking outside the box and breaking the mould. It was all very immediate and exciting. After all, Jean-Luc Godard was filming with the Rolling Stones: *One plus One* (otherwise known as *Sympathy for the Devil*), again in 1968. It was a time of experimentation and cultural crossover, marked by the political recognition of Black music, subcultures and style. Charles Swann, my tutor in American Studies (who died in 2006 and was buried to the strains of the Stones' 'Paint it Black'), was well-versed in the work of Raymond Williams, with whom he had studied at Cambridge. He showed me the first issue from Birmingham of the self-published journal, *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (1971). He suggested that I apply to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

At the time, I was not particularly thinking of further study and was more focused on taking a trip to the United States and hiking across the continent. Jack Kerouac, rather than Williams, was my compass at the time! After spending three months in North America, forging my father's signature to get there on a student exchange scheme involving a summer job (I taught karate to privileged kids in a summer camp in upper New York State) and then travelling through the Southwest to the Pacific, I returned to Britain. I took a job sawing steel at an engineering firm on the outskirts of Bath, and while continuing to read *Rolling Stone*, I slowly came to face my future. In this period, I also joined a film club and remained profoundly struck seeing a trilogy of films by Pier Paolo Pasolini—*Edipo Re* (1967), *Teorema* (1968) and *Porcile* (1969)—in a film club in a once Roman City (Aquae Sulis) that had become a sleepy Georgian town in Somerset. It was a very different time, and also a world of seemingly full employment, at least for manual work (I had done similar things in my school summer holidays, working in parks and timber yards). Anyway, during that period, I applied to the CCCS (along with some Film Studies programmes at universities on the West Coast, still in pursuit of my hippy leanings).

In the Spring of 1973, I was called for an interview at the Centre in Birmingham. There, in a small room, were four or five students and Michael Green, who taught part-time in English and part-time at the Centre, arranged around the table, and facing the empty seat that was left for me. I was questioned about my interests and how I envisioned my future at the Centre. The students did all the talking. I had to bluff some of it. There were words in the air—diegetic, overdetermined, conjuncture—I had never heard before. I used my possible offers from American universities as a counterweight. Anyway, I was later offered a place and subsequently a grant to cover me for a year (This was the epoch when the offer of a university place was frequently accompanied by state financing to cover fees and living costs—all now lost in the bonfire of the Welfare state).

**Emanuele Monegato:** How did you experience the porosity between the social ferment in 1970s/1980s England and the academic environment in Britain?



**Iain Chambers:** I am not sure that 'academic' is the appropriate term. At the Centre, we saw ourselves as a collective and deliberate trouble-makers. What I mean by that is that we considered academia as a sort of enemy. We were determined to rewrite the intellectual script. Apart from Stuart Hall and Green (the founder, Richard Hoggart, had by then moved to UNESCO in Paris), we were all in our mid-20s or younger, reading Karl Marx, along with Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, and had emerged from the student protests and the events of 1968. We were also encountering feminism, the question of racism and the emergence of Black Britain. These were not voices or trajectories that could find ready accommodation in higher education. We were essentially part of a research centre composed of around twenty graduate students working in clusters and often publishing collectively. Out of our diverse interests, honed in the clusters on media, subcultures, political theory, feminism, working-class history, and other areas, we developed a series of differentiated but broadly shared perspectives. We were not involved in teaching at the university and were left to our own devices. Many of us, including Stuart, considered the Centre as a red base, a Marxist collective researching radical change. Looking back from today, this might seem a little crazy, but it was that time and place. It was possible to push these perspectives in multiple situations, both in the new and more open arena of Film Studies and, above all, in the expanding field of Further Education represented by the new polytechnics (that later became universities). The Polys were far less weighed down by the stifling weight of Oxbridge and the traditional policing of the disciplines.

Many of us felt that social ferment was both our study and our practice. We were operating with the tools and languages at our disposal to elaborate in a manner that today would be considered militant research. The fact of eventually obtaining a further degree, such as an MA or PhD, was often regarded as secondary to the task at hand. You must also remember that the structure of the Centre was that of ongoing discussion and debate channelled through research group meetings and a general presentation seminar or report back every week. Ideas, readings and research were collectivised.

Further, the porosity was evidenced in the fact that many of us were also involved in political activities around questions of housing, racism, feminism, and fascism, outside the walls of academic research. After my first year, and with no further grant money, I was in a political group called Big Flame (that had close ties with Lotta Continua), teaching part-time in a technical college and living in a squat. After a while, my political activities began to outweigh my participation in the Centre, and I abandoned my teaching for a factory job and political organising on the shop floor. This involved getting up at five in the morning to go to the British Leyland car factory in south Birmingham to distribute Big Flame leaflets to the changing work shifts, and then going to my factory job at eight. All of these non-academic activities obviously fed into discussions within the Centre. Then there was the military coup in Chile, the revolution in Portugal following the liberation struggles in their African colonies, and the anti-colonial resistance (although nobody in Britain, either then or now, would use this term) in Northern Ireland. This was the lived texture—both politically and intellectually—of that moment or conjuncture (I had by then learnt to use the term). All of this meant that



visits to the Centre were increasingly to 'appropriate' materials for the printing of political leaflets, and I only wrote up and submitted my MA thesis in 1977 after moving to Naples. I never studied for a PhD. Mine was not a planned academic career! The latter happened through a series of accidents.

**Ester Gendusa:** During your years at the CCCS working alongside Stuart Hall, in which terms did you feel that you, as a group of intellectuals, were actively contributing to the transformation of Western interpretative paradigms? And how did it feel to be engaged, committed, and radical in the CCCS years?

**Iain Chambers:** I would suggest that our understanding of what we were doing was more grounded in the immediacies of life in Birmingham and Britain. Subsequently, it was to have far more extensive effects. The work that was published in the collective volume *Policing the Crisis* (1978) arose out of addressing racism in Birmingham and the media construction of a 'mugging' crisis involving Black British youth, while the subculture analyses emerged from clubbing in Birmingham and London. Obviously, such analyses engaged with and frequently dismantled interpretative frameworks in sociology and studies of the mass media. So, they were never simply about phenomenological reportage. They were making claims about interpretive paradigms and the premises of the social sciences, which essentially boiled down to either conserving the status quo (and the British 'way of life') or radically transforming it. So, the empirical analyses and critical questions pursued eventually evolved through various levels of consideration to culminate in debates surrounding race, culture and British identity, both in socio-political and musical-everyday life contexts. And out of this emerged all the questions tied to the exercise of power in racial, gendered and sexual terms: from the dance floor to empire. This was then further developed and deepened in the Centre's work after I left Britain early in 1976. Apart from Stuart's writings, I'm thinking in particular of the work of Angela McRobbie and Paul Gilroy.

To return to the question of interpretative paradigms. As mentioned, at the time we were all reading Marx, Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, and then Antonio Gramsci (already ghosting the lines in Althusser and Poulantzas), but also Roland Barthes, Sigmund Freud and Foucault, structuralism and deconstructionism. As in all 'translations', we were invariably betraying these texts and voices, bending them into our perspectives and analyses: the semiotics of subcultures famously elaborated by Dick Hebdige, cultural hegemony and popular music, the state and the articulation of race, working class culture, education and Britishness, women taking issue... And then there were guest speakers, such as E.P. Thompson, the Glasgow Media Group, and Juliet Mitchell (*Woman's Estate*, 1971; *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, 1974), who presented their work at the Centre.

Fundamentally, it was the freedom not to adhere to disciplinary protocols and rather to cross them with our immediate political and cultural concerns that led to an innovative interdisciplinary approach. This allowed the premises of the discourse to be examined, exposed to criticism and deployed in an unauthorised fashion. In my opinion, this was the politics of intellectual work that the Centre proposed.



Of course, in terms of paradigm shifts, I'm sure that Stuart had a decidedly clearer view of the full implications of what we were all doing. Coming from the Caribbean, a black man in the very white world of British (and Occidental) academia, he encountered every day the differences that were condensed in the challenge of Cultural Studies to the old order. The younger generation was probably more engaged in the 'bover' they were creating and only subsequently registered the wider consequences and significance of the project. Of course, this also worked in mutual inter-generational flows. Stuart's later thinking about Black identity and diasporic aesthetics was deeply influenced by young Black British photographers, filmmakers and artists. Just as I know, as Terry Eagleton once charged me, Stuart also drew sustenance from the younger members of the Centre. Essentially, Eagleton accused me and my close friend Robin Rusher (with whom I edited the sixth issue of *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, known as the 'Theory issue') of seducing Stuart and then abandoning him on the dance floor. Not true, of course, but an amusing myth of me and Robin as supposedly postmodern iconoclasts. In the Theory issue, Robin wrote a scathing critique of Althusser's idealism, while I attacked the positivist impulses in Barthes' earlier structuralism. In my case, it led to receiving a postcard from Vancouver sent by Anthony Wilden, author of a then important Lacanian-inflected study entitled *System and Structure* (1972). It simply read: YOU BASTARD! Back then there was no blind-peer reviewing. We just read each other's work and made suggestions. That, too, created a critical cohesion, rather than academic individualism. Perhaps, it was such collective work and exchange that helped Stuart, and helped us all, from becoming boring, orthodox Marxists and pedants.

It was the United States that actually alerted some of us to the idea that Cultural Studies were having a broader impact. I recall participating in the massive conference organised by Larry Grossberg (also an ex-CCCS student) at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana in 1983, where it was clear that the 'Birmingham School' (as it was referred to, like the Frankfurt School) was clearly taking off. I think it was that moment, intercepted by what in the United States they called 'French Theory', or simply Theory, that Cultural Studies became part of a significant wave sweeping through North American academia. I'm not sure it was Cultural Studies as we had thought and practised it in Birmingham, I think it was packaged more in terms of intellectual innovation and curriculum change, with some of the deeper political impetus stunted or sidelined. But, then again, Birmingham or British Cultural Studies did not have proprietary rights. The label and perspectives travel, and certainly impacted the altogether more professionalised procedures of US further education, as opposed to the wishy-washy empiricism in the UK. Of course, this had other consequences with Cultural Studies being transformed into courses, university posts and their general institutionalisation.

I believe that the story of Cultural Studies in Latin America and the Caribbean emerged later, primarily through Stuart's work on Gramsci, race, and the Black diaspora, and Paul Gilroy's uprooting and re-routing of modernity via the Black Atlantic. However, I would not say that Cultural Studies had a significant impact in France, perhaps slightly more in Germany. It was not 'scientific' enough. It was a floppy discourse, and that



precisely was the point. Its refusal to cohere was an attack on the ideology of 'science' in the social and human sciences. Refusing to be disciplinary and queering the social sciences' premises in eighteenth-century positivism, Cultural Studies was always going to have a hard time in those contexts. I understand that Pierre Bourdieu hated it. More recently, things have changed there, but not too much.

Looking back on all of this, it is remarkable how a small group of young and militant researchers, over the course of ten years, radically changed the way we think about culture, history, and cultural change in the contemporary world. I say ten years because, while the Centre certainly had a longer institutional life, it was really between 1970 and 1980, under Stuart's guidance, that it was the intellectual boiler house that left its mark. Stuart departed the CCCS in 1980 for the Open University. He says because of feminism. Women did take issue. And like the feminists at Rimini in 1976, who took over the platform at Lotta Continua's second congress, it was a critical moment of both political and intellectual significance. In both cases, it signalled the end of an epoch.

**Ester Gendusa:** How would you describe your encounter with Stuart Hall and the CCCS? How did Cultural Studies first make its way into Italy via Naples?

**Iain Chambers:** Well, I first met Stuart in the corridor while waiting for my interview. He gave me an encouraging smile. Of course, it was in the Monday morning general seminars that I really encountered him. In these three-hour marathons, where research clusters reported back and we all shared our readings and thoughts on specific theoretical texts, his sharp observations pointed us in all sorts of directions. What comes back was the radical openness of it all. The world was up for grabs. What I mean by that was the feeling that we were collectively struggling to mint a new language. It was not simply about adopting sociology, literary analysis, and social history and stitching them together, or being seduced by the sirens of semiology (this was the moment of structuralism and Ferdinand de Saussure, Barthes, Algirdas J. Greimas, and Umberto Eco). It was more than that. And it certainly marked an exit, at least that is how I felt it, from the narrow tracks of provincial study and the predictabilities guaranteed by common sense and academic accreditation.

Although I was not aware of it at the time, Cultural Studies had already made inroads into Italy. My lifetime companion, Lidia Curti, had translated Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy—Proletariato e industria culturale*—in 1970. She had also begun to visit the Centre in the late 1960s when Hoggart was still there. She became good friends with Stuart and Catherine Hall and they came to the Orientale during that period. And then there was Gramsci and his subsequent centrality to Cultural Studies. Lidia was instrumental there. She was a good friend of Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, one of the translators of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971) into English. So, it was mainly through Lidia and Naples that Cultural Studies made their initial way to Italy. I actually met Lidia in 1974 when she visited Birmingham with Fernando Ferrara. The following year, she spent her sabbatical leave at the CCCS, mainly working in the Media group. In the Spring of 1976, I moved to Naples.



Back in the late 1970s, Cultural Studies in Italy, which at that point in time was then simply the Istituto Orientale in Naples, embarked on the Gramscian task of seeking to transform southern subalternity into an academic power base. Within the recently established Associazione Italiana di Anglistica, AIA Sud was created. Under the benevolent eye of Professor Ferrara, the innovative research and teaching that was extending the field of English literature was fundamentally pioneered by Curti, Marina Vitale, Laura Di Michele and other colleagues. It led to conferences in Naples, Pescara and Rende in Calabria. It was not a secession, more a critical counter-weight, where we discussed the media, popular television, pop music, working class literature and what would have then been considered rather low-life intellectual combinations. Much of this work was initially published in *Anglistica*, launched in 1979 as a self-produced in-house journal. Inside AIA itself, Cultural Studies were recognised as an emergent third stream, alongside Literature and Linguistics, and given space both at the national congresses and in the association's journal that subsequently became *Textus*.

I, personally, after a year of commuting to various factories—Alfa Romeo, Alenia, Alitalia, Mecfond—in and around the city to hold English conversation classes, obtained a yearly contract to teach English for scientific purposes at the Istituto Navale (these days the Università degli Studi di Napoli Parthenope). I spent ten years there. I was given the use of a computer, some research funding for library acquisitions, and wrote my first two books on British pop music and popular culture. I also wrote articles on language learning published in an educational journal edited by Valmartina in Florence to justify my academic existence. In 1983 I became an associate professor and four years later transferred to the Orientale. There the students—as I remember, there were overwhelmingly female—were highly receptive to the perspectives of Cultural Studies. I probably learnt as much from them as they did from me. It was an open, experimental time of new courses, intense seminars and many visitors—Homi Bhabha, Gilroy, Hanif Kureishi, and others—who nearly all later became famous. In 1994, while I was in California with a Rockefeller research grant, I was informed that I had become a full professor in what in those days was called English Literature and Language. This was a rather twisted outcome given I had no degree in those disciplines. However, it was symptomatic of the changes at work, certainly in the area of Italian English Studies. A few years later I partially rectified my academic persona by asking the CUN to transfer me to Cultural Sociology. As I had never participated in a *concorso* in that discipline, no one recognised me there either!

Looking back on it, I suppose that all these tendencies came to a head and publicly gelled in 1993 when Lidia and I organised an international conference at the Orientale entitled “The Postcolonial Question. Common Skies, Divided Horizons”. It subsequently became a publication in English and Italian. Amongst those we invited to speak were Stuart and Catherine Hall, Gilroy, Vron Ware, Trinh T. Minh-ha, McRobbie, Grossberg, along with Alessandro Triulzi, Marie H  l  ne LaForest and Clara Gallini from the Orientale and our graduate students Marina De Chiara, Wanda Balzano, Annamaria Morelli and Demetrio Yocum. The resulting volume also included contributions from Bhabha and Kureishi who had visited Naples earlier in the year. We additionally invited our



colleagues from the Oriental Studies sector of the institute. No one came. The 'unscientific' Edward Said was anathema, and Postcolonial Studies an ideological smokescreen obscuring proper research. With some grumbling and moaning perhaps things have also changed a bit in that area.

**Emanuele Monegato:** In your view, what is the legacy of Stuart Hall and the experience of the CCCS, both in the UK and in Italy?

**Iain Chambers:** I cannot speak fully about the situation in the UK. I have had no experience of teaching or researching there. Of course, I am fully aware of Stuart's powerful legacy that continues right down to the present in so many fields, both academic and more extensively (just think of visual culture and the art works of Isaac Julien and John Akomfrah). Clearly, Cultural Studies have altered the parameters for discussing culture, identity, race, and everyday life. It provided another critical language. What is worth emphasising is both its interdisciplinary approach and the fact that it sustained emerging critical discourses in the public sphere. I'm thinking about questions of race, identity, gender, political formations, nationality, the Black arts, and how they intersected with broader currents around gay culture (I'm thinking of the pioneering work of Richard Dyer—he, too, was amongst those who interviewed me when I applied to CCCS), feminism, racism, the visual arts and popular culture. I don't think the same can be said about Italy, although there are some exceptions in English Studies and among younger sociologists and more innovative developments in art discourse. In the academic world, interdisciplinarity has largely remained a rhetorical flourish rather than a critical practice. Cultural Studies, for the most part, have been viewed as a threat rather than a beneficial opening and critical opportunity. If in English Studies, both in the area of literature and linguistics, it has found a certain resonance, in the social sciences, still seduced by the positivism of an illusory 'science', it is largely abhorred, considered an eclectic and undisciplined proposal that does not warrant serious attention. As for the public sphere, that is a more complicated question.

History moves along multiple grooves and with shifting temporalities, and I think that the wider fall-out of Cultural Studies, whether acknowledged or not doesn't really matter, has sedimented in critical syntax also here in Italy. How we respond to debates on citizenship and race, Italy's colonial inheritance and its institutional amnesia, and questions of political power and their cultural and media representations draws heavily on this inheritance. The critical coordinates, compared to 20–30 years ago, have undergone significant transformation. I believe that Cultural Studies, along with its subsequent extensions and reworkings in Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies, have played an important role in this.

Stuart's voice in the field of thinking critically on race and identity as mobile processes that rework the national agenda, whether in Britain or Italy, and in Europe in general, has been of utmost importance. For it has not simply brought into the light the colonial fashioning of modern metropolitan cultures by what they have repressed and refused—the subjugated racial body of the slave, the immigrant and the subaltern—but has proposed a very different critical agenda for all of us. It is frankly no



longer possible to operate along binary divisions between European ‘natives’ and supposed ‘foreigners’, with the latter being ‘othered’ and externalised by physical distance and epidermal pigmentation. All the empires—British, French... Italian—have come home. In the metropolitan mix that operates throughout planetary modernity, all the roots become routes. The self-assured white, Occidental subjectivity that has historically exercised its sovereignty over the world has been challenged and is being undone ‘within’ its very own languages and grammar. This is the fundamental challenge to existing critical practices and their expression in academic disciplines. Apart from sociology, history and political science, I am also thinking of philosophy at this point. Along this front, Cultural Studies have had a limited impact.

But shifting to critical understandings of contemporary literature, cuisine, music and how everyday styles are being refashioned according to other rhythms and keys that is another story. I consider Stuart’s understanding of these processes and their historical significance is central to how we respond to what is happening right now, both in Italy and the West in general. And by that, I don’t mean the placid acceptance of a Benetton-style multiculturalism, but rather the social antagonisms and political struggles that increasingly see a white supremacy feeling under siege, threatened by ‘replacement’, and viciously lashing out in the fading light of its hegemony. Just as colonialism has never concluded (look at Gaza, the West Bank and the question of Palestine), in the same manner, its moral authority, exercised through the dehumanising codification of racism, has never died. And I think that what Cultural Studies have brought to this discussion and analyses of the present is precisely the centrality of culture as a lived-in everyday texture that is central to the making of political and historical formations. In other words, political prospects and pronouncements do not exist in and for themselves. They require languages and institutions—from the school to television, from political parties to sporting events and pop music—to be broadcast, gain traction and achieve consensus. This is a very Gramscian point, and one central to the whole Cultural Studies project, both then and now.

It is also the Gramscian dimension that somewhat paradoxically signals the ingression of British Cultural Studies into Italian critical thinking. Against a homegrown tutelage of Gramsci’s heritage by the political weight and orthodoxy of the then PCI, together with associated academic philology, the Gramsci that returned from abroad was, altogether lighter (more superficial, its critics would say) and more flexible. It was more insidious and crept into every discussion of political power and cultural hegemony. It was less about a revered historical figure sealed in the past and more about adopting and reworking his critical language better to address the complexities of the present. A sort of dispossessed Gramsci, who, like Stuart Hall, Frantz Fanon or Aimé Césaire, came from a peripheral island to disturb the metropolitan syntax. Such out of place figures, to which we could add Edward Said, Jacques Derrida, Sylvia Wynter, Gloria Anzaldúa, displace and rewrite the master’s script. I suppose the local ‘Italian’ Gramsci has by now been ensnared in critical tentacles emanating from Birmingham and Delhi, from Cultural and Subaltern Studies, from thinking the colonality of power



in Latin America, and can never go 'home' again. We have Stuart writing on the importance of Gramsci for the study of race, or critical considerations on the manufacture of hegemony through popular television, the news, pop music, the Internet, and AI. These are possibilities that have matured through Gramsci's travels, many of them elaborated in a seminar room in Birmingham some fifty years ago.

I would also suggest that a large proportion of the perspectives pursued today in the practices of contemporary art, in galleries and museums, as well as in public discussions of culture as a modality of historical memory and responsibility, have also been shaped within this matrix. Cultural Studies are not a discipline. Indeed, here in Italy, there are no chairs or degree courses in Cultural Studies. We are talking of a critical paradigm that is social and political in intent. I think today, alongside a certain success in changing the terms of academic research and the syllabus, Cultural Studies are also about changing public consensus and its pedagogical formation, contesting what passes for common sense and disseminating the disturbance and discomfort that accompanies the interruption of languages sustaining the status quo.

**Ester Gendusa:** What is your perspective on the future of Cultural Studies? Do you believe it remains a thriving field, or do you sense it is undergoing a scientific "dilution" that risks weakening its radical edge?

**Iain Chambers:** Well, I think that I have already hinted at the idea that Cultural Studies were of a particular historical moment and conjuncture. Certainly, as an institutional presence it had a life, which like all lives involves birth, development and death. But I have also suggested that it is by escaping institutional claws that the critical impetus of Cultural Studies best lives on. So, perhaps where it is being officially recognized in institutions, journals, conferences and academic appointments, it is in some way being gutted. Perhaps it should be taught in the manner of a critical wager that walks the line between the possibility and impossibility of offering accredited knowledge. I consider this trajectory to be equally distant from the numbing predictability of anglophone empiricism as from the idealist arrogance of 'scientific' protocols. So, in this particular moment of audit culture and the 'management' of knowledge it has no future. It returns to its 'punk' origins. But this time around, with its cut-up style—that is, the tearing and disassembling of orthodox discourses—operates with a far wider resonance. After all, Cultural Studies have a history. And apart from the march through the academic institutions of the human and social sciences, it has also gone elsewhere, spilled out into alliances with wider critical concerns around the politics of gender, sexuality, popular culture and music, race, racism and the right to narrate. These are perspectives that are neither limited to higher education nor the privileged north of the planet. In this manner, the work, research and questions posed over half a century ago in a post-industrial city located in the ruins of empire in the middle of England continue to travel and reverberate. Obviously, no one is going to pretend to legislate or authorize these planetary peregrinations, but we can certainly register them. They have unleashed questions that in many cases are still waiting to be answered.



Perhaps in the reconfiguration of universities and higher education occurring across the globe as they busily seek to mirror the neoliberal mandate and the mystical metaphysics of the market, and education and qualifications becomes a fetish that veils and suffocates critical thinking (the last thing that capital desires), then the extra-curricular impetus of Cultural Studies sustains a lifeline. As universities are absorbed into the service industry, and knowledge evaporates in financial return, perhaps Cultural Studies, with its insistence on questioning and puncturing academic authority, has now decamped elsewhere to avoid the conclusive logic of managerial decisions and the certitude of scientific inquiry. Cultural Studies have always maintained questions as questions. That is rather difficult to evaluate on a spreadsheet or academic score card.

Of course, this overtly pessimistic view could, and should, be contested by the student body. After all, it is there that we encounter those who are most receptive to novelty, innovation and seeking their voice as a counter to the predictabilities they are expected to adopt. But this requires that the university fully becomes a democratic space; perhaps teachers could accommodate the idea that pedagogy and study is a collective enterprise that moves in multiple directions. Professors can also learn in the classroom. I know that in present circumstances we cannot return to Birmingham and have the graduate students conduct application interviews, or encourage undergraduates to set the syllabus, but we need to remember that knowledge involves a process of critical construction and is neither a commercial product nor a gift of the *noblesse oblige* to offer to the masses. Cultural Studies have successfully dismantled both those understandings of culture and rightly insists that education, like politics and change, can only operate with consenting adults. Otherwise, education is merely propaganda for the reproduction of the existing relations of knowledge and power. Such perspectives and interrogations find their home in the contingencies of everyday life rather than in formal accommodation. If the latter is open to the challenge, fine. If not, then it, too, becomes part of the problem and needs to be deviated, subverted and undone, where that is possible. If that is not possible, then other spaces need to be identified and elaborated. Critical thought and practice, as the history of Cultural Studies I have sought to recount here, neither commences nor concludes in academia. The latter offers hospitality only to symptoms, rarely to sources.

**Emanuele Monegato:** Do you feel that teaching Cultural Studies allows young generations (of students and teachers) to be aware of interplay between language and political/institutional power?

**Iain Chambers:** Of course, all that I have been saying up until now takes us in this direction. Rather than a seamless scenario, Cultural Studies have always identified and inhabited the gaps. It is there that the limits of language—whether institutional and academic, or directly political and historically operative—are registered, assessed and contested. In this sense, Cultural Studies propose a sort of critical caravan. Much to chagrin of the gatekeepers of intellectual orthodoxy, it can set up camp anywhere. As I have understood and practiced them, Cultural Studies depend less on disciplinary competence (although you need to do your homework, done the reading and be



acquainted with the premises) and more on critical rigour in response to complexities that flee the easy arrest of disciplinary definition. It does not pretend to present complete answers, aware of the pitfalls of conclusive reasoning, but rather questions the order of discourse. In other words, it works the ambiguity of language to unpack claims of neutrality and the defence of 'critical distance' to propose language itself as an agonistic activity in the struggle for political and historical sense.

More precisely, it insists on the idea that communication does not involve a transparent message, as though the phrase is spoken or the camera pointed and the world—what we call 'reality'—is simply captured. Analysing the construction of the ideology of transparent communication, its unconscious presumptions and censoring powers, it seeks the powers of critical thought to sustain the possibility of other worlds and realities.

**Ester Gendusa:** In what ways has Cultural Studies influenced your life, personally, professionally, and as an educator?

**Iain Chambers:** Precisely because, as I have tried to illustrate in this interview, Cultural Studies cannot be reduced to an academic discipline or institutional proposal, Cultural Studies have been integral to my life. What I mean by that is that it has provided me with a critical disposition with which to traverse and negotiate institutional and social relations. Which does not mean reducing them to individual antagonisms—I have always been argumentative in nature and adopted a 'fuck you' attitude to authority since I was a child—but through recognising the structures and asymmetrical relations of power involved. This is not a discipline in any academic sense of the term, but rather an epistemological, even ontological, approach to my living, writing, teaching, thinking and moving in a deeply unjust world. Again, and to return to the wider extensions of what we might mean by Cultural Studies, I would offer a quite simple explanation. Cultural Studies are about picking a quarrel and dissenting with where you come from. In other words, it initially involves unpacking the historical and cultural formation that authorises your voice and presence in the world. So, questions of gender, race, ethnicity and nationhood, come very much to the fore. Here lies the difference between simply innovating and fine-tuning the institutional syllabus and an intellectual and political commitment to a "whole way of life", as Raymond Williams famously defined culture in his *Culture and Society* (xvi).

**Emanuele Monegato:** In 2007 you wrote a foundational volume, *Mediterranean Crossings*, advocating a profound rethinking of the Mediterranean. Still, such a new vision struggles to be adopted by the international community notwithstanding its inner economic advantages. How could it be possible?

**Iain Chambers:** What that book sought to do was punch holes in the existing maps of the Mediterranean through insisting on precisely what those maps have obscured and negated. Bringing into play other archives and the histories, cultures and lives of those from the African and Asian shores of the basin—without pretending to fully explain or



speak for, or in their name—served to deliberately disturb the hegemonic European coordinates. I was arguing that historically and culturally there were other ‘Mediterraneans’, and that those other histories do not disappear but rather live on in all sorts of complicated ways—from cuisine to music, from language to religion—and challenge what Walter Benjamin called the empty homogenous time of Occidental ‘progress’. The messiness and multiplication of tempos and spaces, and the fact that the past does not conveniently disappear but accumulates in the present, is obviously not a welcome suggestion to those who like to see the world laid out, flat as a map, ready for possession and rendered transparent to a certain will for knowledge and power: from geopolitics and the European Union to the historian clinging to the liberal illusion of the progress of linear time and the media believing that history is only about what makes it into the news. That is what Antonio Gramsci would call a hegemonic bloc. In fact, it was Gramsci’s commentary on the arbitrary nature of maps as reflections of political and historical power that provided me with my critical compass. In a certain fashion, *Mediterranean Crossings. The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*, sought to extend the critical perspectives proposed by Gramsci in his unfinished essay *The Southern Question* (1926) on an altogether wider scale involving the whole of the Mediterranean and its hinterlands.

Another impetus behind the text, which also explains some of the resistance it would encounter in official circles, is that of migration. The arrival of migrants from Africa and Asia, crossing the sea in perilous conditions, sometimes dying there, had for me a double valency. Firstly, it reopened the archives of modernity to suggest that migration has been the fundamental motor of economical development and cultural creolisation. With the arrival of black slaves from Africa in the Americas to the mass migrations from the poverty of Europe’s rural peripheries in the Eighteenth century (Scandinavia, Scotland, Ireland, the Iberian Peninsula, Italy, Greece) to what is happening today is part of the shared history of a communal modernity stretching across the globe. And then the contemporary migrant also exposes all the limits of European humanism and its values. Rendered illegal by European juridical power and its economic and political control of the Mediterranean as a colonial lake (less than a hundred years ago all of its southern and eastern shores, with the exception of Turkey, were directly controlled from London, Paris and Rome), the concept of citizenship, of the right to have rights and the right to explain are brutally exposed. It is this double valency that registers most significantly the colonial constitution of the present. To acknowledge the Mediterranean, where the body bags of drowned migrants are found alongside bathers on its beaches, as the scene of the violent exercise of European power is hardly going to be accepted and acted upon by institutional actors. Of course, Europeans went all over the globe without documents or permission (unless we believe in a mission authorised by a Christian God). It seems that this privilege is not to be granted to other travellers.

There would be much more to say on why this text and its invitation to rethink the Mediterranean would be, and has been, resisted. I like to think of the Mediterranean, which in the geography of modern powers, is largely considered marginal, as a



laboratory of modernity. Here the stitching in the seamless authority of the West is frayed, the sea challenges the ontological certainties of terra-centrism. It proposes a sort of critical black hole. That is, both in the sense of the Occident burning up the presumed superiority of its moral values—the carceral treatment of migrants as less than Europeans, less than human, and the sustenance of the colonial apparatus in the obscenity of the genocide of Gaza and the ethnic cleansing of the West Bank by an increasingly messianic group of white European colonisers—which, like all black holes, simultaneously proposes a site full of historical and cultural energies sustained by counter-vailing subaltern forces: the damned of the sea and the wretched of the earth. It is they, as Baldwin once pointed out, who, violently forced to see the world from below, know far more about modernity than either you or I.

So, I am not surprised at all that the rethinking of the Mediterranean that I try to propose—reiterated in an even sharper vision in *The Mediterranean Question* (2025) that I have translated and rewritten with Marta Cariello following the Italian edition of 2019—should be shunned. After all, and putting it most crudely, it is about disturbing and contesting an existing order. It poses questions of who has the right to narrate, define and direct the Mediterranean; who has the right to have rights? Europe is certainly willing to forsake some economic advantages if this means ensuring the historical continuation of the rights to rule of white, Occidental hegemony.

**Ester Gendusa:** Since the ideal target readers of this issue of *Altre Modernità* are prospective teachers of English Studies in Italian high schools willing to adopt a culturalist analytical framework in their lesson plans, which publication among those you authored would you recommend to them? And why would you opt for that specific work?

**Iain Chambers:** Strange, as it might seem, I would go back to my beginnings as a writer and propose *Urban Rhythms. Pop Music and Popular Culture* (1985) and *Popular Culture. The Metropolitan Experience* (1986). I think that both texts, especially in the cut-up and montage structure of the second and its punk aesthetic, draw on much of the above discussion, in particular of how to understand history and culture in an alternative fashion. And then the arguments about popular music, metropolitan life and the undoing of national identities under the impact of other sounds and cultures, under the impact of others, offers immediate resonance with the contemporary world. The examples may well be dated, but I think that the cultural and historical articulation both books propose offer an accessible manner to understanding Cultural Studies as an ongoing and always incomplete critical project.

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