

Aesthetic matters: writing and cultural studies

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Aesthetic Matters: Writing and Cultural Studies

Abstract

What would it mean to treat Cultural Studies as a project that has had amongst its accomplishments the production of new forms and styles of writing, and a generative approach to aesthetics? An initial answer to this question would be that this would recognise how Cultural Studies interceded in an academic environment not only through its concern with supplying ambitious questions and insisting on a broad range of objects of scrutiny, but also by showing how this often entailed reconfiguring the forms through which intellectual inquiry conveyed its cargo. This article doesn't seek to provide a taxonomy of Cultural Studies' forms and styles; what it seeks to do is to encourage a self-reflexive attention to aesthetics within Cultural Studies as a form of practice. It suggests that there are two guiding questions that might frame such an attention: how might Cultural Studies generate forms that are adequate to the complexity of the configurations that it seeks to register; and how might Cultural Studies generate forms that could reach the ear of new audiences not attuned to the cadences of scholarly writing? The tension between these two questions should be seen as an invitation to purposeful experimentation within Cultural Studies.

Keywords

Aesthetics, Forms, Conjunctures, Angles, Orchestrations, Stuart Hall

Aesthetic Matters: Writing and Cultural Studies

‘Everything is just the tip of the iceberg of everything else.’

(Hall citing Lord Hailsham in MacCabe 2008: 25)

‘That’s what culture is about, finding form. Culture always arises out of experience, but it’s different from experience because it finds significant form for it.’

(Hall in MacCabe 2008, p. 30)

Introduction

What happens when Cultural Studies takes aesthetics seriously, not as an investigation of art, or as a concern with beauty, but as a generative, form-giving mode of exploration and articulation? Or to put it slightly differently: what sorts of forms and genres has Cultural Studies generated in the past and what forms and genres might it produce in the future as part of its ambition and desire for a distinctive engagement with the world (both in academia and beyond that troubled terrain)? A central characteristic of Cultural Studies has been the range of tones of voice and forms of address it has adopted (people migrating to Cultural Studies from other disciplines often describe a sense of liberation in being able to write with different voices). It has often sought out complex ways of connecting divergent materials in the attempt to critically articulate a conjunctural moment. The striving for forms that are adequate and productive for Cultural Studies’ ambitions needs to be seen as an on-going aspect of its project; the striving for forms that could communicate and constitute new audiences needs to be seen as part of its politics.

When in 1896 Georg Simmel announced a programme of sociological aesthetics, which could be seen as an important antecedent for Cultural Studies, he saw the project as having at least two elements. On the one side it was clear that sociality can be discovered in all aspects of life and that these aspects were often aesthetic in nature because they produced sensation, feeling and experience: ‘Even the lowest, intrinsically ugly phenomenon can be dissolved into contexts of colour and form, of feeling and experience, which provide it with exciting significance’ (Simmel, 1968, p. 69). On the other side, aesthetic inclinations also exist within disciplines like sociology which establish specific procedures of research and forms of presentation that, while facilitating certain kinds of understandings, discourage

others. For Simmel a love of symmetry can be found in academic conventions and procedures that want to match too perfectly an explanation with a phenomenon. One way of seeing Simmel's project is that he treated social life as having a distinct aesthetic force (the sensational conditions of the modern metropolis, for instance), and that he crafted new aesthetic forms or vehicles for apprehending and describing these forces. One of these vehicles was the short essays that he called *Momentbilder sub specie aeternitas* (a compound of German and Latin, meaning, literally, fleeting images or snapshots seen from the perspective of the eternal). In these essays he could take seemingly banal and inconsequential phenomena (new fashions, for instance) and treat them with a gravity that was usually reserved for materials already deemed important (the political concerns of the day, morality, religion, and so on). You can see the same gestural reflex in Roland Barthes' little mythology essay from the 1950s, where he treats plastic as if it were a product of Greek mythology (Barthes 2012, pp. 193-5). Today, 120 years later, after decades and decades of cultural journalism where such riffs are the bread and butter of colour supplement magazines and blogs, we hardly notice that this was once a deliberately contrarian manoeuvre.

To write about the aesthetics of intellectual work today has an almost nostalgic feel to it. It was in the early 1970s when the critical theorist of history, Hayden White, suggested polemically that 'the best grounds for choosing one perspective of history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological' (1973, p. xii). Looking back, you could see this as a moment of a general 'cultural-ing' of the human and social sciences. It was the moment of the cultural turn or the linguist turn, and the beginning of all those other turns that have kept us in a spin ever since. It was part of the ground that allowed Cultural Studies to have such ascendancy in the 1980s and 1990s. Hayden White had announced his project on historical poetics in the mid-1960s and, as part of his analysis of what historians were up to, he offered a veiled invitation or challenge for historians to adopt more radical poetic forms:

When many contemporary historians speak of the 'art' of history, they seem to have in mind a conception of art that would admit little more than the nineteenth-century novel as a paradigm. And when they say that they are artists, they seem to mean that they are artists in the way that Scott or Thackeray were artists. They certainly do not mean to identify themselves with action painters, kinetic sculptors, existentialist novelists, imagist poets, or *nouvelle vague* cinematographers.

In the heyday of poststructuralism, especially in the work of writers like Derrida, Irigaray, Cixous, and Lyotard, and in the work of those who were drawn to their mesmeric light, academic writing sometimes did feel as if it was riding the same poetic wave of energy as ‘action painters, kinetic sculptors, existentialist novelists’. Or failing that, sharing the same poetic energy as an obscure sub-genre of sci-fi.

In the reaction against those heady days of poststructuralism various fields in the humanities and social sciences instituted a return to the empirical, a return to history (for instance, in film studies). The academy was sobering up. It was a twelve step programme: one day at a time; one funding bid at a time. Don’t go off the rails. Easy does it now.

Disciplining the World, Describing the World

Of course it isn’t true that there is the world on one side, in an infinitely complex, sensorial, and chaotic state, and the academic disciplines on the other side, busily finding patterns and shapes so as to bring order to the chaos, but jettisoning a mass of living and lively intricacies in the process. It isn’t true because those forms of editing, of abandoning, of ignoring, and of finding order and reason amongst the vast complexity of the world is also what we do all the time in our everyday lives. In daily life, though, we call it for what it is: practical life or getting on with getting on. In the disciplines we dress it up as something more profound: epistemology, methodology. We can’t get up in the morning if we are too profoundly aware of the connection between our meagre resources and the global military-industrial-entertainment-nature-exhausting complex. We can’t finish that funding bid or journal article if we are too profoundly aware of what we have to bracket-out simply to describe something as ‘cultural’.

As White says there is no absolute reason why the narrative forms of William Makepeace Thackeray are epistemologically superior or inferior to the fragmentary narrative forms supplied by Jean-Luc Godard, or those uncanny durational forms of Chantal Ackerman, or the peripatetic trajectories of Med Hondo. They will, however, have different affordances, different capacities, and establish different states of reception. Here is not the place to compile a complete audit of Cultural Studies’ genres and forms of intellectual work (if such an undertaking was possible), but it is worth noting some of its major

accomplishments in this area, and some of the emergent forms that are currently appearing, as well as highlighting some of the areas of creativity and experiment that deserve to be revived. One of the textual moods that has often characterised Cultural Studies' work, and is the signature style of a writer like Stuart Hall, is the combination of intellectual, political, and moral seriousness with a lightness and looseness of presentation and performance. Hall's prose consistently undermined the institutionalised academic conventions that were often its setting (the conference paper, the journal article, the keynote presentation), as if to insist that intellectual work always needed to outdistance its academic performance. Hall's prose was vocal (and its foundational orality wasn't simply due to the circumstances of its production as 'talks'), it deployed contemporary vernacular turns of phrase, and nimbly traversed diverse bodies of knowledge: and it was also profoundly serious and ambitious in its intent.¹

Alongside orality we could say that another important Cultural Studies genre has been the use of mixed registers. Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape of a Good Woman* (1986) mixes confessional first person narration with historical reconstruction, it pursues dreams as evidence, and explores working class autobiographical writing and feminist politics. It shifts tone and mode of address in ways that are constantly suggestive, and endlessly productive. If it didn't invent mixed registers as a Cultural Studies genre (and perhaps it did) it remains one of the most vivid examples of such work.² Today there is a good deal of evidence that 'mixed registers' is one of the most productive genres within a broad Cultural Studies' approach to writing and that the deliberate jumps in perspective and shifts in tone (which are its signature characteristics), encourage a particular kind of engagement in the reader. In recent examples of this genre, such as Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012) or Elizabeth Chin's *My Life with Things: The Consumer Diaries* (2016), where some sections are written as autobiographical diary entries, while other sections employ short story narrative conventions, alongside displays of disciplinary sensitivities (as scholars of literature and anthropology), the reader is coaxed into the prose, not as a subject who needs convincing about the correctness of a mode of analysis, but as a fellow traveller or companion who may or may not share these feelings and thoughts, but has the capacity to connect to them, to recognise them, and to respond to them, not by agreeing or disagreeing, but by echoing their modes of attention.

Other genres that once seemed so promising seem to have fallen by the wayside. The collective conversation undertaken by the editors of *New Left Review* (Perry Anderson, Anthony Barnett and Francis Mulhern) and Raymond Williams that was published in 1979 as

Politics and Letters seemed, at the time, to forge a new genre of collective Cultural Studies. What seemed, and still seems, so extraordinary about that book was the way that a life (Raymond Williams') unfurled in ways that were simultaneously political, personal, intellectual, emotional, romantic, academic, rural (and so on), and which, through being questioned by a trio of 'critical comrades', allowed the reader to witness that unfurling 'live' so to say, to see experience feeling itself, and thought thinking itself. Perhaps today that genre could be revived, but without the 'boys' club' feel, and with a less combative style.

Last in this quick snapshot of available forms I'd like to mention the place of long form cultural journalism that, at its most incisive, is often a form of Cultural Studies.³ One recent and notable example of this genre is the book *Let's Talk about Love: Why other people have such bad taste* by the music critic Carl Wilson. The book began life in the Bloomsbury series 33¹/₃; these are short books dedicated to iconic rock albums (and rock's many variants).⁴ The list of books shows a distinct leaning towards the more avant-garde end of pop music recording: more punk and hip-hop than easy listening and country. The choice of Céline Dion's 1997 album *Let's Talk about Love* already marked Wilson's book out as unusual in the list, but the fact that he was writing as a music journalist besotted with nearly every genre of music *except* the sort of sentimental MOR music that has been Dion's métier, suggested that the book would offer something different from the mixture of hagiography and contextual back story that is often a feature of the series. What unfolds in the book is a taste experiment: he doesn't ask if Dion is good or bad, or even decide that that is a non-question, instead he wants to know what it feels like to love Dion's singing? And that tale turns out to be a story of class, ethnicity, language, history and music. In the end Wilson doesn't get to like Dion's album but it does cure him of a reflexive disdain for the tastes of people who do love Dion's albums. It is one of the few Cultural Studies books that could be described as a page turner.

Thinking about Cultural Studies' genres and their productivity might mean examining the affordances of genres: what does a particular form allow a practice to do? What forms encourage complexity and contradiction? What genres are best at navigating across the micro-levels of daily life and the macro-levels of society? Do we have a descriptive language that can begin to attend to the aesthetic affordances and propensities of our scholarly worlds and intellectual practices? Should we shift our attention from terms like 'method' and 'theory' to thinking about size, shape, angle, breadth, connection, attitude, tone? And perhaps this might bring us back to method in a more pragmatic way.

Angles and Orchestrations

The world is phenomenal. Before it is meaningful, before it settles into opinion, it exists as energy, as forces of attraction and antipathy, as constellations of materials and rhythms, as orchestrations of moods and feeling. We are thrown into a lively complexity; a hot mess. The angles matter of course. You can see the choreographies, the ways that angles and velocities intersect and diverge if you look hard enough, if you listen for the testimonies. For some, the actuality of angles is impossible to avoid.

It's 6.45 in the morning. The commuters are gathered on the station platform waiting for their train. They are steeling themselves, gathering themselves together, to face a day directed from elsewhere. They are foggy from sleep. They are marshalling capacities, assembling a self out of a patchwork of habits. The tangle of last night's dreaming is gradually being discarded, cast adrift. Caffeine seems to help. Slightly to the edge of this mass of office workers is a small group of revellers on their way home from whatever nightclub they have been dancing their night away in. Their clothes hang differently: while the office worker's clothes are still struggling to reach a companionable compromise with the contours of bodies, the night-clubbers' clothes have completely surrendered to their hosts. They have settled. The revellers are sleepy too, they are foggy. But unlike the office workers they are eagerly edging towards their tangle of dreams.

The two groups are moving through this same space at a different angle. Is one coming down from kissing the sky? Is the other coming up, preparing grudgingly to become 'match fit' for the world of work? Different energies and qualities are coursing through neural systems: the revellers are still channelling the syncopations of electronic dance music, but only just; the office workers are animated (but only just) by short and long-term plans of achievements, of hopes and dreams realisable at work or delayed for the evening, the weekend, the holiday, the retirement plan.

I read a writer (Sara Ahmed) describing the angles and orchestrations of rooms and of tables that gather people around them in acts of repetitive arranging, so that lines are drawn and angles produced (2006). She describes the production of 'straightness', of compulsory heterosexuality, as a story where orientations, angles and direction are orchestrated through objects that are gathered together (tables, chairs, family members, family photographs, mementos) and which then gather together ways of being, ways of moving through a life, a

space. In such spaces, in such gatherings, not to fit the orientations of the arrangements is to queer the pitch, to be placed as out of place and to find that your directions, your angels are askew.

I read a writer (Garnette Cadogan) who loves to walk; he likes to get to know cities through his perambulations. He tells the online world of how he used to walk through the dangerous suburbs of Kingston, Jamaica where he might be killed for wearing the signs of a wrong political affiliation or not wearing the colours of a right one. I read how he learnt to negotiate danger, recognise its signs and ameliorate its effects (he had an act where he would appear deranged so as to ward off threatening people who became curious about him). But he was just as adept at attuning himself to possible companions ‘when the cadence of a gait announced friendliness’ (Cadogan 2016). He had learnt a pedestrian poetics that could practice a hasty exit without appearing hurried and a dawdling set of diversions so as to linger in a place without arousing suspicion. He had developed a practice that could respond to the unforeseen forces and attractions of place and people. He writes:

Walking had returned to me a greater set of possibilities. And why walk, if not to create a new set of possibilities? Following serendipity, I added new routes to the mental maps I had made from constant walking in that city from childhood to young adulthood, traced variations on the old pathways. Serendipity, a mentor once told me, is a secular way of speaking of grace.

(Cadogan 2016)

That was in Jamaica, as a black man amongst other black people, where the colour of his skin didn’t amount to anything much. When he came to United States, first to New Orleans, and then to New York, his pedestrian poetics, so subtle, so nuanced, didn’t amount to anything much. What counted was the colour of his skin. He found himself an object of fear and of mistrust and contempt. He would dress in a way that attempted to deflect the apprehensions that anticipated him (ultra conservative); he learnt the submissive politeness needed to talk to a police officer so as not to be verbally and physically abused (or worse). If walking-while-black was already a suspicious activity, running-while-black was an invitation to violence:

One night in the East Village, I was running to dinner when a white man in front of me turned and punched me in the chest with such force that I thought my ribs had

braided around my spine. I assumed he was drunk or had mistaken me for an old enemy, but found out soon enough that he'd merely assumed I was a criminal because of my race.

(Cadogan 2016)

Angles are not freely chosen, angles are deadly.

Adequacy of Forms

I was, as they say, 'art school educated', which to some means not really educated properly. Apart from Friday mornings when we did something called 'contextual studies', we only ever had one class and it was continual: it was called 'studio practice'. Tutors sometimes came round to talk to us. The only formal aspect of 'studio practice' was 'THE CRIT' and this always seemed to involve a form of ritual humiliation as one of us (and it was never clear if it was our 'work' or ourselves that were to be critiqued) were subjected to the general indifference, misunderstandings, or derision of everyone else. It wasn't really a '*crit*' unless someone, usually the person undergoing the crit, ended up in tears. I guess this was a form of tough love designed to prepare us for a cold, unfeeling world that might also be indifferent and derisive about our art. This was a decade before there was anything like 'learning outcomes' or 'assessment criteria' that could be used to mitigate the emotional turmoil of such practices and alienate the process on a whole different level. It was mystifying. We had no idea what would count as good work or how we were being judged. The usual blather about originality and expressivity was used to prop-up what seemed like arbitrary decisions that we had a sneaky feeling were simply based on favouritism.

With a headful of politics and a shelf-full of theory, I and some like-minded friends (OK, one friend), set up a magazine (OK, two folded photocopied sheets) to interrogate this so-called education! With indignation coursing through every grumpy sentence, we demanded answers (though of course we doubted that there would be any response to our unanswerable critique). We got a rather lovely letter in return from the Dean of the college who thanked us for engaging in such an important debate. The letter went on to suggest that the fundamental goal of an art practice (and it would be this that we would be assessed on) was its capacity to generate a form that could be adequate to the ideas we wanted to articulate. Our task was to craft forms that could productively present and interrogate the

ideas we were keen to explore. These forms would act as vehicles and machines that would not just convey thoughts and feelings, but would be generative in amplifying them or exposing them to a form of duress in such a way that something unforeseen might emerge. We published the Dean's letter in the second edition of our magazine, which, I'm afraid to say, was also the final edition.

It might have been at this time that I learnt a sentence that I think was written by Samuel Beckett but that I have found no reference for since (and I have scoured the literature), which in its wording insists that we always have to account for the capacities of form as the 'how' of our work: 'How it is what it is, is what it is'. Did I dream it?

On the Portability and Productivity of Forms

After a rotation as chair of my department's exam board (or 'deputy chair', as the head of school was the titular chair) I had gained a relatively clear overview of what was being taught to our undergraduate students. Although there was a decent amount of variety, and students could choose from a range of different module options, it seemed to be relatively hard for a film studies student, for instance, to escape having to read Laura Mulvey's essay on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) at least three times across the duration of the three-year degree. It must have felt like an annual ritual by the end. For Cultural Studies it was Bourdieu (1986) that provided the inescapable texts. By the end of the degree you could be sure that undergraduate dissertations, depending on their field, would nearly always include some mention of the 'gaze', or some deployment of the phrase 'cultural capital'.

So it would seem that we taught 'Mulvey' and 'Bourdieu'. And yet looking at the essays and dissertations that passed through my hands, in stylistic, aesthetic terms, they shared little with either writer. Mulvey's essay, for instance, while it mentions Freud and Lacan only references one book across its thirteen pages: if our undergraduates handed in such under-referenced work it would immediately be a problem. The aesthetic form that Mulvey's essay most insistently inhabits is the manifesto. In Mandy Merck's (2007) account of the 'compositional circumstances' of Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' essay, she configures it in relation to feminist activism, filmmaking as a semiotic and social intervention, and *Screen's* (the journal that Mulvey's essay was published in) enthusiastic translation and reprinting of Soviet film writing from the 1920s (from *Lef* and *Novvy Lef* – the journal of the Left Front in Art). Similarly, Bourdieu's layered and often labyrinthine

articulations of cultural and educational capital in relation to social hierarchies, where different size print fonts are used to designate varied weights to the writing, and where section breaks and boxes appear to interrupt any straightforward linear progression, were not something our students followed.

We clearly ‘taught’ Mulvey and Bourdieu, but not their forms, not their aesthetic labour. The aesthetic procedures and conventions we taught were being conducted elsewhere. It wasn’t hard to spot a good deal of it in documents on library websites, in module guidance notes (particularly those related to assignments), and in the responses to their assignments that we gave to our students. Sometimes it was an explicit set of commands; sometimes it was a tacit knowledge that was being passed on via trial and error and peer-to-peer rumour. These conventions and procedures resulted in the ‘undergraduate essay’, which might give rise to the ‘postgraduate essay’, which might, if no one was particularly vigilant, give rise to the ‘doctoral thesis’. I don’t want to dismiss these standardized forms: Raymond Williams shows us that those who rail against the conventions of the day are necessarily offering another set of conventions to take their place which will at some point seem ossified and routine (Williams and Orrom 1954, pp. 15-25). The undergraduate humanities and social science essay, standardized in so many ways, is a pedagogic machine which is also an enabling machine. The conventions of the ‘case study’ and textual analysis enables students to focus on specific arguments and objects. The undergraduate essay is a humility machine in that it shows them (via aspects like a literature review) that the students are working within a field that has already been well cultivated. It is an investigative machine because it encourages students to stress-test their interpretations of the world by connecting them to theoretical procedures. It is also a negatively disciplinary form, of course, and disenables students from randomly stringing together opinions that aren’t supported or informed by reading or research.

These conventions produce sensitivities. The aesthetic forms of the final outcome (the essay) establishes frameworks for the readings and explorations that proceed them. For instance, students get to think of ‘theory’ and more particularly of named theorists (Pierre Bourdieu, Laura Mulvey) as authorities that are required to anchor a position taken in relation to a text or a social phenomenon. This, in turn, establishes conventions of reading, where texts are mined primarily for those authoritative anchors. Similarly, exploration of cultural texts and social phenomena will proceed from an aesthetics of ‘positioning’ where the investigation sets out with a pre-established set of co-ordinates and positions irrespective of

what is being investigated. Eventually such procedures will just become academic habits. Again, any criticism of this state of affairs has to recognise how inescapable habit is, as well as being able to gauge the productivity of such conventions (the shared discursive space it creates, the way it engages with the terms of an argument rather than just the outcome, and so on). But we also need to be mindful of the desensitising that these aesthetic procedures produce. For instance, one of the aspects that this essay form often discourages (though this differs from discipline to discipline) is description: the inevitability of the leap from the naming of phenomena to the interpretation and critique of the phenomena often makes description seem like an unnecessary luxury, or an obligatory rote-march that is best undertaken hastily and efficiently. And yet description (and extravagant description at that) might be the aesthetic work that is necessary to break a circuit of repetitive interpretations and critiques. Indeed, it could be argued that description constitutes the animating energy of Cultural Studies as can be seen in ‘foundational’ books such as Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*, from 1957. What forms would help enable a more extravagant engagement with description? The short story? The portrait? Some detailed attempts at scene-setting? Some form of Martian ethnography?

Descriptions and Evocations

You can hear the voices everywhere. It’s often a low murmur rather than a rallying cry. But the voices are getting stronger. They were there all the time, of course. It’s not really a demand; more like a recognition that beyond or before all the pomp and bluster of opinion and critique lies something substantial, unfinishable and persistently intriguing; that to the side and underneath the cleverness of an interpretation or the rigour of a method lies a practice that calls to novelists and ethnographers, geographers and geologists, historians and botanists, parents and children, talkers and listeners. And that practice is the practice of description.

‘How do you feel?’

‘Oh you know; I’ve been better... it’s just that I can’t see any end to it. It’s like, it’s like...’

‘What’s happening with the world?’

‘I know, everything is going to shit, everywhere seems to have taken a turn for the worst, I can’t bear the way that...’

As Sharon Marcus, Heather Love and Stephen Best suggest, academics rarely declare their love for description: “‘That talk was wonderfully descriptive; let’s give him the job” – said no one ever’ (Marcus, Love & Best 2016: 1). And yet they also recognise that description is what most academic writing has to do at some point as it tries to apprehend the world.

You can hear the voices of description calling explicitly in some of the best current Cultural Studies writing. You can hear it (and see it) in Kathleen Stewart’s anthropologically nuanced descriptions of the ordinary affects that she pays attention to, and feels-out in sidewalks, cafes, neighbourhoods, parks, in kitchens, in larders, in doorways and downtowns (2007, 2008, 2016). You can hear it in the many voices that want us to be suspicious about the hermeneutics of suspicion and want us to provide more substantial alternatives to its paranoid pleasures (Felski 2015, Sedgwick 2004). And it is there, of course, and in spades in those works with more literary ambitions to evoke a time, a place, a person, a situation, a sensation, an object, a mood, a context.

But description is never simply a raw empirical apprehension of the world. It is already a form of interpretation. To choose to describe a slightly out-of-focus photograph as ‘distorted’ rather than ‘blurred’ is already to set off at an angle, already to invoke forms of interpretation. The world appears to us as already the product of our collective apperception (what else is it that we call culture?). Isn’t lightning already jagged, even before it has sparked? Doesn’t it already ‘streak’ across the sky (rather than tear through it) before the storm has ‘brewed’? Metaphors and adjectives are part of our ‘at hand’ world. The cliché is what we already have to grasp the world. And to grasp the world in all its worldliness might not require the endless search for the un-coined phrase, the unused metaphor, the brand new analogy: it might mean looking more closely at those clichés and the adjectival world closest at hand, so that we can linger a little longer at the level of description.

There is no single correct description. Which means that we are in a world of evaluation, a world where descriptions need to be described, and investigated for their productivity. Description stretches from a tautological insistence on singularity (‘a rose is a rose is a rose’, which is already to acknowledge that a ‘rose’ is also a sign of something else,

something that it is not) to an endlessly recursive attempts to exhaust a phenomenon through descriptive cascades. Description, then, is often, and necessarily both a form of vigilance (avoiding the immediate cultural reflex, weighing possible adjectival directions) and a form of self-reflexivity (in describing this rock in this way I am purposefully not describing in that way). And this is where description, for Cultural Studies, can offer a ‘more open-ended comportment’ (Bennett 2010, p. xv): ‘We see and want to encourage the essential generosity that can attach to description as a practice when it attends not only to its objects but also to the collective, uncertain, and ongoing activity of trying to get a handle on the world’ (Marcus, Love & Best 2016, p. 4). Getting a handle on the world would be an impossible task without description and without the fussy, fidgety activity of constantly recasting description.

Everything Communicates

He lost the set of filters that would allow him to edit the world. He started moving through the world every which way. Instead of angles, his direction was diffuse, scattered, saturated. To him everything communicated, and communicated directly. Every piece of junk mail was directed to him personally. And he would reply. And by replying his details (particularly his address) would be passed on to other junk mailers. And so it continued, and so it grew. Sex cards in the few remaining telephone boxes around London called out to him personally with promises of ‘Fuck Fests’. Nothing could be let go of. He became a hoarder. Unable to cope with the sheer welter of things he seemed to be sinking beneath his connection to things.

It was clearly a health hazard.

They called me in to try and persuade him to clear out some of his boxes. They were worried that in an emergency, a fire for instance, he would be trapped. They worried about the smell. They feared that vermin might be attracted. You couldn’t move around his two rooms, except gingerly. You had to follow a tightly delineated path, along the sides of chests and teetering boxes. His shower was piled high with papers, books, clothes, shoes, boxes. It couldn’t be used for washing of course. He’d always been a collector. He loved music, played the piano and had scores and scores of scores. But now his collections consisted of biscuits whose sell-by dates had expired a decade ago. He kept old sanitary pants. Luckily he had at some point turned the heating off and seemed to like having the window open. The smell, if you didn’t mind the earthiness of it, was somewhat homely, if a little ripe.

He felt oppressed by people trying to get him to clear stuff out all the time and I'm sure he saw me as a collaborator in their persecution of him.

On my first attempt in trying to clear some space in the flat (apartment) all I managed to do, after an hour, was to get him to surrender a few newspapers and some old envelopes. A sop for the turncoat. He wasn't giving anything much away. I kept getting distracted. It was all too interesting. Amongst the junk mail was a life: some of it was in photographs. There was a collaged frieze he had made using a decoupage method. It could have been from the 1930s but I think, judging from the clothes, it was the 1970s. There were plenty of bits and pieces that I recognised because they had a link back to his childhood, which was the same childhood (almost) as my mother's (his sister). The green glass paper weights had once been my grandfather's. I had one in my home as well. But there were loads of other things that piqued my interest. I tried to get him to tell me about them. He was fairly deaf so it was always hard to know if he had heard. He told stories about the past and often complained about the present, especially about the constant hassle he got about the amount of stuff he had in his room.

I suggested once that he could get rid of an old collapsible chair that was resting on top of one of the huge towers of boxes. It looked broken to me, and I didn't see how he could have any use for it. I have never seen anyone look so affronted, so shocked and frightened. How could he possibly get rid of that?

He came up with a solution about the hoarding that seemed to work for him. He had, he told us, actually cleared out his entire flat, and it was now spotless. It just wasn't this particular flat. It was the other flat (the one that didn't exist), the one that was exactly the same as this one, the one you had to cross London and then take a train out into the countryside to get to. It had been exhausting clearing that flat out and he was as sure as hell that he wasn't simply going to do that again with this other flat (the one that did exist). So, stick that in your pipe and smoke it.

He spent the daytime walking around London and we got worried that he would get into some sort of altercation. He would often leave a café without paying for his food. Luckily most of the café owners knew him and were happy to help him. But what if he went somewhere where he wasn't known, or managed to upset someone by getting upset himself? He did end up having a fall, somewhere around Piccadilly Circus. He was hospitalized. Then sectioned. He'd probably had a series of small strokes as part of his fall. He didn't recognise me again.

Angles and Orchestrations (Again); Or Conjunctures and Forms

For many, the loadstone of Cultural Studies has been ‘the conjuncture’. For some Cultural Studies is another name for ‘Conjunctural Studies’. What, you may ask, is a conjuncture? Simply put, it is where things come together. Indeed, it might be that Cultural Studies itself is best treated conjuncturally: ‘Cultural Studies appears and remains on the scene’, wrote Stuart Hall in 1988, ‘as an intellectual and political space between a number of intersecting, intellectual, and academic disciplines’ (Hall 2016, p. 40). A conjuncture names the configuration of various ‘levels’ or ‘aspects’ of life at a particular moment: the political, the ideological, the economic, the artistic, and so on. But more than that it names the peculiar character and pattern that such a configuration takes. And because the orchestration of the configuration isn’t stable, and because it articulates different characters and patterns across time, a conjuncture is never simply a settled state, it is also the movement from one state of affairs to another. The genealogy of the term ‘conjuncture’ is Marxist, but more specifically it signals a form of Marxism that wants to show its sophistication and its distance from forms of economic determinism, primarily through the way it can describe the complex intermingling of a range of determinants that would include the economic and the ‘mode of production’, but would also include all those other areas of ideas and ideology, of philosophy, of political formations, of class consciousness, and so on. To make matters even more complicated the ‘relative autonomy’ of these different aspects have their own temporalities and tempos, their own rhythms and durations, their own force and scope. For Louis Althusser (with a slight nod to the historian Fernand Braudel) writing in 1968:

For each mode of production there is a peculiar time and history, punctuated in a specific way by the development of productive forces; the relations of production have their peculiar time and history, punctuated in a specific way; the political superstructure has its own history...; philosophy has its own time and history...; aesthetic productions have their own time and history...; scientific formations have their own time and history, etc. Each of these peculiar histories is punctuated with peculiar rhythms [...].

(Althusser & Balibar 1979, pp. 99-100)

No doubt there is much that could be said about Althusser at this point, and much that could be said about the way that Cultural Studies both adopted and adapted the idea of the conjuncture.⁵ What I want to notice, though, is the complex orchestrations that are being imagined with this notion of conjunctures: not only is a range of intersecting social and cultural arenas being imagined as converging (and diverging), entangling (and disentangling), and harmonizing (and conflicting); they are all moving at different speeds, with different durations in play, syncopated by different forces and interruptions. We might want to ask what aesthetic forms are going to offer the best way of revealing such complex orchestrations: surely coloured pens will be involved at the very least, or 3D modelling, or graphs and computer graphics showing the lags and leaps of particular formations, and the way that a formation will seem to come into the foreground while other formations sink into the shadows?

The idea of the conjuncture was, of course, central to thought of the late Stuart Hall. In reading the interviews he undertook towards the end of his life, I was struck by the way that he describes conjunctures, the evidence he marshals, and the sorts of procedures he undertakes to recognise them. Put away those coloured pens! Of course an interview is not the place for discussing the technical procedures of a methodology, yet it is worth following a line of thought as he develops a discussion of the ‘conjuncture’ when he talks to Les Back. To start with he stays close to the Marxist tradition:

I really believe that the work [of recognising a conjuncture] is done by historical specificity, by understanding what is specific about certain moments, and how those moments come together, how different tendencies fuse and form a kind of configuration – never one that’s going to last for ever, hegemony never does, it always has unruly elements and it’s always struggling to master a terrain etc. And those forces are going to produce a shift to another conjuncture.

(Hall & Back 2009, p. 665)

It speaks the same ambition, to register something like the totality of relations as they are configured at a particular moment, normally a moment of change, with a strong sense of their dynamic orchestration (tendencies fuse, elements are unruly, struggle is always there). And yet when it comes to the intellectual labour involved in registering a conjuncture something else emerges, something that looks a lot like ‘intuition’:

But about my sense of that break [the shift from one conjuncture to another], people do ask me, ‘How do you know of that?’ I can’t tell them that. It’s not a precise methodology; it’s not something which I apply outside to it. It’s interpretive and historical. I have to feel the kind of accumulation of different things coming together to make a new moment, and think, this is a different rhythm. We’ve lived with one configuration and this is another one.

(Hall & Back 2009, p. 665)⁶

Of course, by this point, Hall had a lifetime of sensitising himself to the subtleties of these shifts, he’d honed his ‘intuition’ (if that is what we could call it) through historical reading, through theoretical sophistication, but primarily I think, by living a particular history. It would be hard to simply imagine a teachable methodology that could apprehend the ‘accumulation of different things coming together’. It seems much more like the product of lengthy experience; of being about to feel-out change, of sensing shifts in rhythms.

It is also, I think, the product of the particularity of a life. Or more crucially, it is due to what we could call an angle of apprehension that will make some aspects of a conjuncture vivid to one person and invisible to another. In his conversation with Les Back, Hall describes being a well-liked black British teacher in an inner city secondary school in London, where there were a few black kids amongst a predominantly white working class studentship. This was in the late 1950s where racial tensions were often focused on areas like Notting Hill. In 1958 Notting Hill was the scene of prolonged struggles, often involving hundreds of whites attacking houses where West Indians had barricaded themselves in a desperate attempt to protect themselves. Hall, saw a number of his white pupils there, joining in with the white racists. When he asks them about their presence there, they respond by saying:

[Stuart Hall] ‘They’re taking our things’ etc. So I said, ‘Do you mean these?’ And I pointed to several black kids in the class and they looked at them as if they’d never seen them. ‘No sir.’

[Les Back] *He’s one of us.*

[Stuart Hall] ‘They’re one of us.’ So I said, ‘What about me?’ ‘No sir. Not you. Them.’ It was a very important experience to me.

[Les Back] *Incredible. What an incredible scene actually, and also I guess in that one moment a whole conjuncture really.*

[Stuart Hall] That's the conjuncture. There's no doubt, yes.

(Hall & Back 2009, p. 665)

The conjunctural moment, in this instance, is a complex configuration that includes: the 'sun setting' on a history dominated by colonial relations; an economic recalibration as finance capital is concentrated in various manufacturing industries; the consolidation of anti-black racism (as distinct from anti-Semitism) as an activist presence, which will lead to the National Front; a class-consciousness (which is also a class-unconsciousness) amongst white working class, who can't recognise these abstract Young Englanders and their families (Hall 1967) as fellow workers, and instead misrecognise them as a threat that is at once economic and sexual. And on top of this a situation where the experiences of living a multicultural life (among concrete Young Englanders who are often their friends and colleagues) is absolutely divorced from the politicisation of immigration. In this historic arena Stuart Hall moves at an angle (as well all do, of course), and his directed trajectory renders that conjuncture especially vivid and concrete: he is both 'you' and 'them', both paternal figure, and the figure crouching inside a besieged house with rocks being thrown at it.

The Many Lives of Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies' writerly forms, and the experiments that drive them, desire at least three conditions: a condition of complexity (complex enough to allow for conjunctural configurations to be articulated); a condition of vividness (in the attempt to describe the worldliness of cultural forms and the angles that intersect with them); and finally a condition of popular realism (in the attempt to talk beyond the confines of the academy, and to constitute possible new Cultural Studies audiences). Such a desire is a utopian project. It would be highly unlikely if there could be a single writerly form that could meet all these conditions, but utopia isn't a state of affairs that is given in advance but a method for imagining (and working towards) different kinds of futures (Levitas 2013).

One possible direction for achieving manageable complexity is suggested by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's book of a single year – 1926 (1997). It is clearly an experiment in

presenting a historical moment as an enormous configuration of ‘elements’ (technologies, cultural practices, ideas, and so on) moving in and out of focus across a number of geographical sites (primarily Berlin, Buenos Aires, and New York, but also taking in other national cultures). The elements (called ‘arrays’) include Jazz, telephones, mummies, assembly lines (and so on) and could be seen as an attempt at itemising the ‘simultaneous non-synchronicity’ of any contemporary moments as different elements of a conjuncture get calibrated as emergent, residual, dominant, in their claims for the modern. Each of the arrays includes contemporary testimony (from newspapers, novels, letters, etc.) and each array is linked to a range of other arrays. This is followed by a set of ‘codes’ which draws out a number of coded themes that forge configurations across the arrays but don’t exhaust their configuring abilities (there could be other codes that you would make after reading the arrays). This is followed by a section on ‘codes collapsed’ as the codes are refined through meta-thematic connections. Lastly the book is finished with two meta-methodological chapters that offer ways of describing the form of the book.

What Gumbrecht’s book provides is a capacious form that allows for registering complex orchestrations (which, in this case, is an endlessly productive concordance of modernity in 1926); what it lacks (and purposefully so) is the critically positioned angle that could make the conjuncture particularly vivid and politicised. While the examples of ‘angles’ that I have given above have often insisted on the autobiographical mode this is by no means the limit of what a critical angle can consist of. For instance, Kristin Ross’ 1995 book, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, manages to configure a complex conjuncture of France in the immediate postwar decades (primarily the mid-1950s to mid-1960s) made up of newly ‘electrified domestic bliss’, torture in Algeria, new road systems and housing projects, and a new cultural emphasis on the ‘young couple’. But what gives it its intense vividness is the distinct angle that allows for transversal connections to be forged between the national discourse on cleanliness (which could be found in magazine journalism and advertisements for cleaning products) and the torturing practices of Algerians by the French military under the euphemism of ‘cleaning house’. Cleanliness and torture don’t just sit together as part of the complex simultaneity of the conjuncture: what makes them conjunctural is precisely their analogic connections that can be perceived by the critic sensitized not just by experience but by an engagement with anti-imperialist politics and postcolonial theory.

We might want to ask then: is a conjuncture perceivable outside of a trajectory that moves through it? In other words, although a conjuncture might name that worldly orchestration that organises experience, meaning, perception, and so on, is it the case that the *worldliness* of a conjuncture can only be apprehended at an angle? How then to combine attention to complexity, to a concern with vividness, to the possibility of new popular forms that might bring new audiences to Cultural Studies? That is the question that this essay leaves hanging. It will require collective effort, and it will require multiple responses. One of the main reasons for writing this article though is to show that such labour is already being undertaken and is a key part of the Cultural Studies heritage. We have some forms, and a range of aesthetic sensitivities, often coming from the convergence of Cultural Studies and the more empirical sciences (geography, anthropology, sociology). When the Cultural Studies anthropologist Stephen Muecke brings together his various writings about indigeneity, cultural politics and storytelling under the banner of ‘fictocriticism’ he is offering Cultural Studies new forms for pursuing the desire of Cultural Studies. As he states it: ‘The *ficto-* side of fictocriticism follows the twists and turns of animated language as it finds new pathways. The *-criticism* part comes in the risky leap of taking the story to a different “world”’ (Muecke 2016, p. xii). We need to pursue these new pathways as we leap into different worlds...

Conclusion

Aesthetics matters not just because it names the forms we generate so as to perform Cultural Studies (or any other kind of study for that matter). It matters because it names the matter and mattering of our living. It names the racialized ‘profiling’ that a cop performs when he or she pulls over one person and not another (what are they ‘going on’ apart from phenomenal forms of clothing, skin pigmentation, hair styles, comportment?). It names the sense-making and feeling-out that constitute our day-to-day lifeworlds: the angles that draw us across a crowded room; the trajectories of our practised improvisations; the attunements and attachments of our interactions. It names the forms that our institutions take and the styles they have of inveigling us into particular ways of operating. It names our everyday practices of editing and ordering, and sometimes our inability to edit and order. It names our *whelmings*: the constant overwhelming and underwhelming (and that bit in-between, that denotes just the right amount of submersion into a phenomenal situation). It names the

distributions and circulations of ‘things that matter (or not)’, ‘things to be concerned about (or not)’, ‘things to perceive (or not)’, ‘things to be attentive to (or not)’.⁷

To move from a position that thinks it is important to recognise the world as having aesthetic forces that are basic to how the world is orchestrated, to then asserting that it is important that we reflect on our own aesthetic choices in apprehending and registering this world would seem logical. Aesthetic decisions name how we apprehend this world (*whose* voices we hear and listen to, *which* places we evoke and invoke, and our sensitivities to a myriad of angles and orchestrations) and how, in turn, we shape it into something that can be communicated (as vivid description, as complex conjuncture, as a different form of popular realism). To self-reflexively perform Cultural Studies, as an aesthetic writing practice, might be the best route to engaging with the world in the most direct and most material way.

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¹ The recent, posthumous publication of Stuart Hall's lecture series (given at the University of Illinois in 1983) demonstrates (amongst other things) that for Hall writing and speaking were deeply entangled in ways that can be unusual amongst academics (Hall 2016). His lectures were written, but they were also 'speech-ful': in this sense, like some forms of poetry, they were written to be spoken, even if that speaking takes place silently. His writing, even when there was no oral presentation connected to it, had a lively orality at its heart, and in this an openness to be heard and a willingness to communicate. Orality isn't, of course, a unique property of Cultural Studies and could be seen as part of a much older rhetorical strategy. But Cultural Studies did embrace aspects of a much looser and informal presentation style as a distinct rejoinder to the some of the pompous formality of academia.

² A similar case could be made for the joint works of John Berger (as writer) and Jean Mohr (as photographer) in two much earlier works – *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor* from 1968 and *A Seventh Man: A book of images and words about the experience of migrant workers in Europe* from 1975. Berger and Mohr's work brought together images and writing in an innovative form, as well as using a mixture of registers (testimony, poetry, economic statistics, and so on) within the writing. These two books need to be more widely known.

³ A sustained account of Cultural Studies as long form journalism would necessarily include a discussion of the pioneering work from the 1930s, such as Siegfried Kracauer's *The Salaried Masses* (1998) and George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (2003). It would then need to include discussion of the way that the form allowed writers

such as Susan Sontag, and more recently Rebecca Solnit a platform to develop popular forms of cultural analysis.

⁴ It was first published in 2007 as part of the 33½ series. It has since been republished (2014) with a number of added responses by cultural critics, novelists and others. None by Dion.

⁵ Explicit literature the ‘conjuncture’ and conjunctural analysis is far from extensive. In thinking about conjunctures I’m indebted to discussions with the editorial board of *New Formations*, and from the following books: Braudel 1980; Chen 2017; Hall 2016; Grossberg 2010; Osborne 1995.

⁶ Yi Chen (2017) takes Hall’s phrasing literally and uses it show how rhythmanalysis both augments and problematizes conjunctural analyses.

⁷ Which is why Jacques Rancière’s contribution to Cultural Studies is both profound and ongoing (2004, 2009). His recognition that our social and cultural worlds are constituted by ‘distributions of the sensible’, which are always in both a dynamic state of flux, while at the same time forging the policed orchestrations of our interactions, is a foundational contribution to a social aesthetic understanding of culture and society.