



## *What is Cultural Studies?*

### **What is cultural studies?**

*What and where is cultural studies today? What is it becoming? What should or could it become? What is its meaning? What is at stake as we assess the ongoing development and maturation of cultural studies as field? The International Journal of Cultural Studies is soliciting provocative answers to these and related questions, from a range of scholars internationally. We will publish their responses as an ongoing series, across multiple issues.*

## **Towards a futurist cultural studies**

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### **Abstract**

Cultural studies is a future-oriented discipline, but it at best maintains tangential connections to futurism, a field of study devoted to the systematic study of the future. Why? This essay endeavors to answer that question. It explores how cultural studies has conceptualized ‘the future’ and identifies some of the limits of those conceptions. The article then speculates on what futurism and cultural studies might gain from more robust and purposeful integration.

### **Keywords**

critical future studies, cultural studies, futures, futurism, futurology

## **Toward a futurist cultural studies**

In November 2019, *New York* magazine invited writers to speculate about the year 2029. The result was a wide-ranging series of essays and vignettes, covering everything from artificial intelligence to Frankeneating, plastics to Xi Jinping, TikTok to Ava DuVernay. As imaginative and thought-provoking as the articles proved to be, the magazine did not offer a panorama of the future – at least not exactly. Rather, its target was the

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long present: examining how the current moment suggests a world that might be while marveling in disbelief over the world that is. In that sense, the ‘uncanny shimmer of future weirdness’ (*New York* magazine, 2019) that percolates through our times is better understood as a tangle of hopes, confusions, and uncertainties about where all this is leading. What future are we driving toward? What will happen when we arrive there? And how much of the journey is under our control?

The journalists, fiction writers, critics, and creatives who contributed to *New York*’s Future Issue are not alone in grappling with these questions. Imagining tomorrow has long been a central, if under-appreciated, facet of cultural studies. Work within the field considers the implications of cultural developments (Abidin, 2018; Banet-Weiser, 2012, 2018; John, 2017; Lotz, 2018), raises alarms about technological, political, and economic shifts (Andrejevic et al., 2015; Benjamin, 2019; Couldry and Mejias, 2019; Zuboff, 2019), and ponders how evolving sociocultural dynamics might extend or challenge power relations (Beer, 2016; Lash, 2007). The future itself has also been an object of inquiry within cultural studies. Representations of the future, from science fiction to World Expos, serve as cultural texts which illuminate expectations and assumptions about futures (Bacon-Smith, 2000; Hubbert, 2017; Wang and Chan, 2020; Wood et al., 2019). Scholars endeavor to theorize the role of the future in everyday life and thought, intersecting in various ways with work on temporality, memory, and the relationship of technology to both (Alper, 2019; Szpunar and Szpunar, 2016). And in works like John Urry’s 2016 *What is the Future?*, the future is understood as a crucial terrain for the contestation of power. Urry thus implores his readers to reclaim the future as within our domain, since ‘a key element of power is thus power to determine – to produce – the future, out of the many ways it is imagined, organized, materialized and distributed’ (2016: 11, 17).

In addition to the aforementioned pursuits, which get at the heart of the ‘culture’ of cultural studies, cultural studies scholars also mind the future of the subfield. There are regular debates about what direction the field should go and how it might get there (Grossberg, 2010; Hartley, 2009). As Larry Grossberg argues in his 2010 book *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*: ‘Cultural studies matters because it is about the future, and about some of the work it will take, in the present, to shape the future’ (2010: 1). Grossberg views cultural studies as a political project that ‘takes contestation for granted, not as a reality in every instance, but as an assumption necessary for the existence of critical work, political opposition, and even historical change’ (2010: 8–9). It is not, in his view, enough to study or decipher culture, not enough to analyze cultural texts in terms of meaning and power. The duty of cultural studies, for him and many others, is to effect change within and beyond the academy. To do otherwise is to become irrelevant or complicit (Grossberg, 2010: 7).

Yet despite these investments in the future, cultural studies has yet to embrace futurism – the systematic study of the future – in a meaningful way. Futurological literature has been around since the mid-20th century, but cultural studies does not engage with it, except at the fringes. We flirt with futurist language (such as ‘futures’ and ‘futuring’) and methods (such as trends, scenarios, and pattern recognition), though usually only by accident. In cultural studies, it is common to make predictions and deliver warnings, but it is rare to find scholars who identify as futurists or who consider the purpose and

implications of future speculation. Moreover, like the *New York* magazine contributors, our considerations of the future often speak more to current anxieties and obsessions than they do to plausible shifts or practical outcomes. And while there is certainly utility in envisioning desirable futures or lamenting the slide toward unwelcome ones, cultural studies is at constant risk of making future speculation more about hubris and ideology than humility and curiosity. Rigid beliefs sound righteous but can limit one's ability to see the world as it is or might be (Tetlock and Gardner, 2015: 71–2). And despite our constant handwringing, the sky is not always falling.

The contemporary moment presents challenges and opportunities that should push cultural studies toward clearer perception. In his book *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Reinhart Koselleck argues that the 'weight of the future' intensifies during certain epochs, '[forcing] upon its inhabitants ever briefer intervals of time in which to gather new experiences and adapt to changes induced at an ever-increasing pace' (2004: 3). One can certainly argue over whether and for whom the pace of time has demonstrably increased (Sharma, 2014); we nonetheless find ourselves within one of these heavy moments, where discussion of the future is frequent and deliberate, and the demands of the future necessitate conversation and action. As it stands, elite interests – often with the aid of futurist professionals – are making decisions about the future on behalf of the rest of us, without our input or knowledge (Powers, 2019). The kinds of questions that drive cultural studies could bring much-needed critical awareness to future imaginaries, but it will require endowing cultural studies with more robust methods and theories for thinking, acting, and making change. In short, we need a futurist cultural studies. Futurism can increase our efficacy; cultural studies can increase futurism's humanity.

Mandating 'change' has been an operating assumption of cultural studies since its inception. In its quest to engage in critique – of power; of class, race, and gender relations; of totalizing narratives of all kinds – cultural studies is praxis aimed at refashioning society toward progressive goals (Hartley, 2003; Johnson, 1986). Cultural studies likewise is dedicated to changing itself: flexibility, reflexivity, and experimentation are its bulwarks against stasis, conservatism, or obdurate institutionalization. As Johnson influentially wrote, what defines cultural studies is 'its openness and theoretical versatility, even self-conscious mood . . . cultural studies is a process, a kind of producing useful knowledge; codify it and you might halt its reactions' (1986: 38). These characteristics have made cultural studies at times paralyzingly solipsistic. At the same time, they have also ensured that cultural studies questions its founding assumptions and tests out new ways of doing things.

A constitutional commitment to change links cultural studies to the future as both a concept and a temporality. Cultural studies tends to conceptualize the future as a contest between change and the status quo, where change signifies a progressive political project that blends empowerment of the *demos*, radical equality, and critical awareness. The status quo, on the other hand, is often regressive, marginalizing, and discriminatory. Thus, the future cultural studies desires is often implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) deemed possible only within democratic socialism, though there have been moves over cultural studies' history to realize emergent elements of that future, especially through the embrace of the revolutionary aspects of popular culture (Webster, 2006: 579). The

future thus exists as the current struggle as well as an ideal temporality that will be achieved only once certain forms of revolution are actualized. Taken together, these dual notions of the future perform the rhetorical and theoretical work that makes cultural studies possible.

But what if the future of cultural studies never arrives? An impossible question. One way to make it manageable is to ask what happens if cultural studies does not achieve the equity, emancipation, and empowerment that are its expressed goals. Take for example the wild disciplinary success of cultural studies since its inception – the classes, departments, journals, conferences, students, faculty. On the one hand, this flourishing can be read as evidence that cultural studies sallies forth toward the future incrementally, even if its utopian vision remains unrealized. On the other hand, one might argue that the formalization of cultural studies is evidence of its connivance – proof that the project of cultural studies has failed to critique systems, to interrogate and unmask power, so much so that it has become part of the machine. In both scenarios, and dozens of others we could conjure, cultural studies remains intact, on the one hand thanks to its acceptance, on the other because its project is incomplete. Change, it seems, can go in many different directions – ironic considering the subfield’s dedication to ‘radical progress.’

Let’s pose the question of the future of cultural studies in a different way. How should the field make sense of the futures that compete with cultural studies – the utopian futures upon which other philosophies depend, the tomorrows they are striving towards? How can cultural studies contend with the fact that the future is not solely ours to imagine, but involves competition and cooperation between ways of thinking and being that not only transcend what we believe and know, but directly challenge it? There are a few ways to respond to this question. First, it reminds us that cultural studies has not been very good at considering perspectives that do not see its aims as progress. Another important point of response is that like the present and the past, the future exists in multiple layers. The world is full of temporal configurations that don’t drive toward the future in any progressive sense, but which rather experience time as multidirectional, discontinuous. The push toward progress, however that progress is defined, always comes from a limited vantage point, and always ignores other epistemes.

Futurism is a useful beginning for engaging with such multiplicity. For sure, futurism has many embodiments and its own internal contradictions – even the word ‘futurism’ is a gauntlet to those who identify with futurology, future studies, or some other term. Yet for the sake of argument, here I use futurism as an umbrella term to refer to the field of study devoted to the future – both analyzing future signals and influencing future outcomes. The discipline of futurism, like cultural studies, made inroads during the 1960s and 1970s, a time during when the social sciences erupted with new paradigms for understanding the world. Futurism, like cultural studies, embraced change as its organizing concept and, in certain manifestations, possessed idealized notions of how change might unfold. Both traditions, then, are interested in how human beings can influence the world around them and bring about their preferred futures.

Cultural studies and futurism share meaningful connections, but much separates them as well. A major distinction concerns futurism’s acceptance of uncertainty: less concerned with ‘knowing’ the future than with influencing how it unfolds (Powers, 2019). Especially in later manifestations – where futurism took shape within corporate rather

than academic settings – this comfort with uncertainty frequently manifested in a *laissez-faire* attitude toward those future directions, where the goal was simply to gain advantage no matter the future. For example, within strategic foresight, a branch of futurism especially popular among military, intelligence, and government entities, forecasting involves determining the likelihood of possible outcomes, not to alter those outcomes *per se* but to plan suitable tactics (Tetlock and Gardner, 2015). In the corporate arena, capitalizing on uncertainty translated into staying adaptable in the present, which generally has not pushed for big, systemic change so much as the kinds that are easily marketized (Powers, 2019).

Practical and professional versions of futurism have had influence despite the field's relative obscureness. Similarly, academic futurism remains a niche discipline across much of the globe. Even so, as Andersson explains, futures research gave rise to the 'expertise, methods, and technologies that have become part of governmentality of the contemporary' (2018: 6) – futurism helped make strategic management of the future a present-day concern. The irony is that the use of these tools by powerful interests has tended to limit the capacity for humans to shape their future, and instead compelled many of us to give in to powerful dynamics and accept developments that feel beyond our control.

This is all starting to change, however. Futurism is beginning to expand beyond its confines in military and corporate strategy, becoming an activist tool or a generalized method for future speculation. And in light of climate change, environmental degradation, polarizing nationalisms, rising inequality, and major geopolitical and public health crises with enormous human costs, futurism is increasingly necessary as a means not simply to react to the onslaught of problems but to imagine beyond the despair and create solutions that dispense with old ways of thinking. For example, while we can say that major technology platforms are increasingly powerful and intrusive, a futurist approach transcends critique to plot how political, social, economic, and behavioral trends might shape how those powers develop, and how that in turn might suggest different critical interventions.

It is at this moment that cultural studies and futurism need one another most.

Critical future studies, for example, offers a playbook for cultural studies to adopt. Critical future studies may be defined as an interdisciplinary field of study that 'investigates the scope and constraints within public culture for imagining and debating different potential futures' and 'interrogates imagined futures founded – often surreptitiously – upon values and assumptions from the past and present, as well as those representing a departure from current social trajectories' (Godhe and Goode, 2018: 109). The aim of this work is to enhance public debate about the future. Godhe and Goode accurately recognize that 'in terms of shaping society's capacity to imagine and deliberate on potential futures (and therefore to steer towards or away from specific scenarios), we are always and unavoidably dealing with matters of culture' (2018: 111). That is, the tendency within future studies to instrumentalize the future needs to be balanced against the ends that instrumentalization has traditionally served, the cultures of futuring it has supported and the ones it has not. Cultural studies has much to contribute in this regard, to help to understand the future as more than a zone of capitalist strategy, but rather one of democratic possibility.

Too often, the future is a handy signifier – a word we use to mean surprising, distant, or different. Or ‘future’ gets used promotionally, to give our thinking the appearance of foresight or specialness. But the future is too important to be embraced merely as rhetoric. Instead, we must think of the future as a zone to be occupied, fought over, theorized, envisioned, and possibly emancipated, if our imaginations and our best thinking will allow.

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