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Culture/Communication/Theory in Australia

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"Culture/Communication/Theory" is a difficult, maybe impossible object to survey, for this special issue of *AUMLA*, and if I claimed to know exactly what I was talking about I would thereby show that I didn't. A crucial issue in this field is whether C/C/T in its parts or as a whole does or should exist in a definite form. All the terms on their own have meanings, but they are re – configured in this new complex. The study of "culture," with its 2000 – year history, develops a different inflection in this complex, affected by specific understandings of "communication," and both by a specific body and type of "theory." Since interactions like this are what makes C/C/T important, and not any strand in isolation, I will deal throughout with the irreducible complex, rather than simpler substitutes.

For instance, "cultural studies" appears in many descriptions of departments, courses, journals etc., but currently in Australian universities what is studied under this name could be found under many headings, such as English, Cultural/Communication/Film/ Media Studies, sometimes separately, sometimes combined. There are as well differences between "traditional" and "post-traditional" universities, but something important has happened in the Australian academic world underlying all these differences.

A Kind of Success

In place of definitions, I sketch a narrative that indicates a change so great it could be called a "revolution," though I will also point to signs in this history that an equally sudden collapse lurks as a dangerous possibility. A snapshot of 1983 contrasts markedly with the position in 2003, two decades later. In 1983, there were no "cultural studies" courses in Australia, and no Professors in the field. The few Communications departments were located in marginal tertiary institutions, either in new universities (eg. Murdoch and Griffith), institutes of technology (what were later to be Curtin, Queensland and Sydney Universities of Technology), or in colleges of advanced education, such as the now Edith Cowan University. Today, all universities teach aspects of C/C/T, under many names. "Sandstones" have incorporated it in their curriculum, mostly associated with "English." In the mid-1990s, it became an official Australian Research Centre category. In 1983 there was only one Professor of Communications, Michael O'Toole at Murdoch University. By 2003, the Australian Humanities Academy lists 23 full professors under "communications and cultural studies" (a category introduced in 1996). I know of at least sixteen other C/C/T professors. These all indicate a presence at the peak level of the university system unimaginable twenty years earlier.

Another indicator of C/C/T's strength is its presence overseas. I know of at least thirteen C/C/T academics occupying significant positions in overseas institutions, who come from or

once worked in Australia (Tony Bennett, Simon During, John Fiske, John Frow, Gareth Griffiths, Sneja Gunew, Stephen Knight, Gunther Kress, Ken Wark, Toby Miller, Lesley Stern, Terry Threadgold, Theo Van Leeuwen). Some were imported to Australia and then exported (John Hartley was imported, exported and then re-imported). This flow shows the worldwide credibility of Australian C/C/T, and its capacity to participate strongly in global flows of knowledge.

To illustrate the Australian role in this emerging global academic area, take the *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, whose first issue of 1983 launched the fledging area in Australia. It was so successful it morphed into the Methuen international journal *Cultural Studies* in 1987. Other important international journals in the field initiated by or with significant input from Australian C/C/T academics include *Social Semiotics*, *Visual Communication* and *Continuum*. Two of the four influential Routledge readers in C/C/T in the 1990s were edited by Australians: During's *Cultural Studies* and *Post-Colonial Studies* by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin.¹

Meanwhile the senior "English" curriculum for tertiary entrance has been transformed across Australia, to include film, television and popular culture. Revisions and reversals still continue, and calls for the "return of Shakespeare" still resound in letters pages to editors, but C/C/T is now taken-for-granted in the Australian school curriculum. The change has occurred *mostly* since 1983, mostly in parallel to changes in university curricula, not driven from above.

Mid-Term Report

Such a success story needs explaining: what exactly it is, why it happened as it did, and where it might still go wrong. Conveniently for the purposes of this survey, two major readers were published in 1993, edited by such leading figures in C/C/T that they become historical documents: one by John Prow and Meaghan Morris, the other by Graeme Turner. Two years later Peter Goodall published an outsider's report, from the standpoint of "English". I draw on all three for a snapshot of C/C/T in transition.²

Turner was a founding figure of Australian cultural studies.³ He begins his introduction with a crucial worry: "Only two or three years ago it seemed as if cultural studies was heading into its disciplinary phase" (1). He foresaw two ways this might happen: to "be accommodated within an established discipline such as English, or be forced to articulate its difference by adopting the guise of a discipline itself" (1). He hopes this worry is misplaced: "It would seem, even from these few indications, that cultural studies may have paused at the brink and pulled back, ready to re-embrace its own multiplicity and mutability, or what John Clarke

¹ Simon During, ed. *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993); Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, ed. *The PostColonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993).

² Graeme Turner, ed. *Nature, Culture, Text* (London: Routledge, 1993); John Frow and Meaghan Morris, ed. *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). Peter Goodall, *High Culture, Popular Culture* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995). I also draw on a survey by another significant figure, Tony Bennett, "Cultural Studies," in *Knowing Ourselves and Others: The Humanities in Australia into the 21st Century*, 3 vols (Canberra: DETYA, 1998), 2:77–87.

³ He is author of the authoritative *British Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1990), *National Fictions* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), co – author, with John Fiske and Bob Hodge, of the influential *Myths of Oz* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987), among other works.

refers to as its own 'undiscipline'" (3). He finishes exhorting cultural studies "to remain an undisciplined, contestatory, fluid field of theory and practice" (12).

Of the fourteen authors in Turner's anthology, two were professors at the time, but six more became professors in the following decade: symptom of the relentless upward mobility of this "undiscipline". Turner's worries were more prescient than his optimism. Goodall's book only two years later records a response from outside C/C/T. Goodall regrets the militant exclusions he sees in cultural studies, in opposition to "English." Cultural studies he thinks celebrates popular culture and denounces "high" culture, including literature. It also, he says, renounces history and the cultures of the past, partitioning the two fields neatly, allowing them to co-exist unequally within a single department as clearly demarcated sub – fields, or as separate "disciplines."

Frow and Morris are authoritative voices in C/C/T. With many qualifications, their mid – term report largely accepts and welcomes the coming of disciplinarity. Although like Turner they acknowledge the anti-disciplinary claims of cultural studies they also note that "those who work in cultural studies tend to have strong opinions about what distinguishes their work from other fields of enquiry" (xxi). They then explore the principles underpinning these "strong opinions".

They first mark it off from anthropology, and the exotic "culture" which is its object".⁴ They then mark it off from a number of fields, as differences of focus more than kind: sociology of culture, social history, and literary studies. These differences are put carefully and tentatively, but all these will translate into the "strong (and exclusionary) opinions "that shape C/C/T, in the "disciplined down" cultural studies of 2003.

There is a sense in their exposition that the roots in "English" are ultimately still the defining and unifying principle in C/C/T. This can be seen in their use of "reading" as the dominant metaphor for analysis in C/C/T. So also is the centrality of text: "There is a precise sense in which cultural studies uses the concept of *text* as its fundamental model" (xxi). This textualist form of C/C/T approaches a transformed English, as seems implicit in Frow's words a year earlier, that cultural studies is part of "the normal process of formation and reformation of the discipline of literary studies in response to real intellectual and social pressures: not with the scattering of a coherent discipline into incoherence."⁵ Here cultural studies (or C/C/T) replaces an obsolete literary studies, a discipline as coherent as that aspired to be but no longer is, now reshaped into relevance. This sounds like the hostile takeover Goodall feared, and Turner disowned.⁶

⁴ They go too far in distancing new anthropology from C/C/T. Major anthropologists like Goffman, Geertz and Levi-Strauss are surely common ancestors, and the list of Australian C/C/T anthropologists is long (eg. Eric Michaels, Annette Hamilton, Nick Thomas, Stephen Muecke, Ghassan Hage).

⁵ John Frow, "Beyond the Disciplines: Cultural Studies," in *Beyond the Disciplines*, ed. K. K. Ruthven (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1992), 22.

⁶ Bennett, in his essay "Cultural Studies," instead uses the metaphor of an "interdisciplinary clearing house," still situated in "Humanities" but in essential contact with social sciences.

Method and Interdisciplinarity

The same tension between unity and dispersion exists in discussions of method. Frow and Morris describe a core method: "starting with the particular, the detail, the scrap of ordinary or banal existence, and then working to unpack the density of relations and of intersecting social domains that inform it" (xviii). On the one hand this is like the core method of literary criticism, with "ordinary or banal" replacing "important or beautiful," and "existence" replacing text. Yet the substitutions are not simple in their effects. The method they describe can be applied to a rich array of unexpected situations, always connecting with social relations and forces.

Frow and Morris illustrate how productive the method can be with a single example, a 1990 interview with Rupert Murdoch, on the ABC current affairs program, *The 7.30 Report*. Asked "what 'we' should do to save our economy ... Mr Murdoch replied perfunctorily, 'Oh, you know: change the culture'" (vii). They construct around this phrase a complex context, rapidly reaching a social world in which neo-liberalism and economic rationalism are self-evidently trying to reshape the world of work. They elegantly analyze competing senses of "culture" against the background of a picture of "reality" which comes from many studies in politics, economics, and social policy, assimilated by these two highly intelligent, well-informed critics. The starting point is typically trivial—an unconsidered phrase uttered on a TV program by a single individual. The trajectory is passionate and polemical, quickly reaching some major issues of our time. However intellectually reprehensible it may seem by some academic standards, it is imbued with the energy of the kind of debate that is the life blood of any democracy, any society in this difficult contemporary world.

If C/C/T followed the trail where it leads from this instance, it might reach management studies, where Stuart Clegg's "critical management studies" draws on C/C/T strategies and assumptions. Frow and Morris's critique is triggered by TV, from the "high end" of the media, a national broadcaster providing "serious" programming. Murdoch's own media mix includes "quality" print media and also popular newspapers, TV and film, linked by new technologies and global marketing strategies that include political influence. Murdoch's media empire is a phenomenon of globalization, a crucial theme for C/C/T in the twenty-first century, a major challenge for disciplinary systems which are too rigid, too compartmentalized, with too much intellectual inertia to respond adequately to this and other challenges of the contemporary world. Globalization and cyberculture are two major new objects which C/C/T is especially well suited to study. It is not clear that disciplinary C/C/T academics are following this line as vigorously as they once pursued the "popular."⁷

This C/C/T method can analyze topics covered by many disciplines, which is a powerful and attractive aspect of the project, but much good C/C/T does not rely much on it. Tom O'Regan's work on Australian film for instance has a strong empirical base. It contributes to the study of culture, taking seriously a body of texts that would have been disregarded by literary critics, or collated but not interpreted in the same depth by traditional historians. Conversely, many fine historians use C/C/T assumptions and methods to do better history (eg. Richard White's constructivist historiography of Australia, Barry Morris's history of frontier violence, Kay Schaffer's history of the bush). All these could be equally classified as historians or C/C/Ters, and the productivity of C/C/T comes from this disciplinary impurity.

⁷ For instance the exciting e-journal *borderlands* is edited by Tony Burke from a politics department at Flinders University.

Even Frow and Morris have their methodological promiscuity. Morris's famous virtuoso C/C/T analysis of the Henry Parkes motel at Tenterfield buries solid historical research in footnotes.⁸ Frow was involved in a study of Australian "taste," which included an original analysis of Bourdieu's theory, policy studies, and a large-scale quantitative survey.⁹ Rather than catch these critics out in a contradiction, my point here is that C/C/T practice is too diverse to be the basis of any definition. This mix of methods is *within* C/C/T, not a tension between it and some disciplinary other. Given the pressure of current funding mechanisms in higher education, which reward the "careful collection of "data," this tendency is a strength and is likely to increase.

“Theory” and the Reality Problem

Most critics of C/C/T see "theory" as definitional and problematic. Turner refers to it briefly in passing, as an irritating non-problem that has arisen between Australian cultural studies and Australian studies: "this relationship is now breaking down under the pressure of arguments about 'theory' (we seem doomed to relive the seventies!)" (5). Frow and Morris are formidably well-read in theory but give only a short list of theorists—Foucault, Baudrillard, Lefebvre, Bourdieu, de Certeau—as new names to add to an earlier list that includes Williams, Hall, and Gramsci. There are of course other names they could have cited—Barthes, Derrida, Bakhtin—but the list is not huge or disparate. The nature and place of "theory" in C/C/T seems unproblematic.

A cursory look at Turner's collection of essays finds the Frow – Morris canon well represented. Hall and Gramsci are most cited, Foucault only mentioned once, and not many others. The impression given by these figures is that "theory" did not play a dominant role in 1993, and such theory as was used was limited in scope. Counting citations in 2003 would suggest a similar conclusion. Perhaps Deleuze and Guattari would be added – they have been "hot" over the past decade. But this is not a dynamic picture. New ideas or thinkers are not jostling to break through into the consciousness of Australian C/C/T. In 2001 the Australian Cultural Studies Association conference addressed the theme: "What's left of theory?" The pun implied a worry that "theory" has shifted the field away from social criticism and engagement, and/or that this "theory" may be exhausted. I believe the worry is justified.¹⁰

There is another way of counting that finds "theory" important, structural and problematic in C/C/T. In most articles in both collections, a common vocabulary circulates, usually without reference to a theorist. There are terms about power ("resistance," "appositional," "other(ness)," "critique," "society," "culture" and "power" itself), and about representation ("representation," "spectacle," "fashioning," "rhetoric[s]," "discourse," all opposed to a highly problematized "reality"). In this way "theory" is not named but circulates freely without being contested, encoded in orientations and conclusions: invisibly to C/C/Ters, but (as can be seen in Turner's throwaway about Australian studies) a barrier to outsiders.

⁸ In Frow and Morris, *Reader*.

⁹ Tony Bennett, Michale Emmison and John Frow, *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Symptomatically neither anthology includes a "theory" article, and theoretical innovation has not been prized in Australia. Few Australian C/C/Ters aim to be original theorists, rather than theory-brokers. Exceptions are Hodge and Kress's work on "social semiotics," Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual semiotics, and McHoul's fusion of semiotics and ethnomethodology.

Frow and Morris describe a central dogma of C/C/T, "the conception of culture that, we argue, increasingly informs the discipline of cultural studies" (xx), with their customary precision and authority. It depends, they say, on "a theoretical paradox, since it necessarily presupposes an opposition (between culture and society, between representation and reality) which is the condition of its existence but which it must constantly work to undo. Both the undoing of these oppositions, and the failure ever completely to resolve the tension between them, are constitutive of work in cultural studies"(xx). To construct this nested set of contradictions is an impressive theoretical achievement. It also describes, or prescribes, a paralysis of thought which has proven damaging and limiting to what they call here without qualification "the discipline" of cultural studies. Instead of a voracious inclusiveness, in which "reality" and "representations" intermingle promiscuously to constitute, precisely in this intermingling, the open dynamic field of C/C/T, "reality" remains forever outside the scope of C/C/Ters, in a hall of mirrors from which there seems no escape. Frow and Morris position the field asymmetrically in an impossible space between two negations and their negation. "Reality" is remote and inaccessible, but a world only of "representations" comes to seem irrelevant, lacking a "sense of *urgency*," as they put it, leading to the criticism that it reduces reality to "'nothing out texts' as the caricature goes" (xx).

The caricature is a half-truth that has been used maliciously against C/C/T. In 1996 in USA, it manifested itself in the "Sokal hoax," an episode that reverberated in academe in Australia. Alan Sokal, a physicist, published an article in a special issue on "the Science wars" in *Social Text*, a leading C/C/T journal. Later he claimed his article was clearly intellectual garbage, a parody of "postmodernism," particularly the "social constructivist" position on reality that underlies Frow and Morris's essay. His claim was immediately seized on. in Australia as in the USA, to "prove" that "postmodernists" (the C/C/T cabal under another name) had lost all academic credibility, all intellectual standards, all contact with a "reality" they denied existed.¹¹

This critique gained traction, damaging the C/C/T project, for instance in November 2001, just after September 11, Luke Slattery, then editor of *The Australian* Higher Education section, published an opinion piece waving the "reality" of the attack and its casualties in the faces of obdurate "postmodernists," whose pathetic anti-war protests he pre-emptively demolished before they had time to write them. One effect of Slattery's influential intervention was to undermine critical debate about the "war on terrorism," discrediting C/C/T intellectuals. Australia and its academics alike were the losers from this turn.

C/C/T Futures

Rather than try to predict the directions C/C/T may take in the coming decades, I will focus on alternatives I see flowing out of its present contradictions, hoping that it will follow more of the better. The crucial contradiction to be negotiated is between heterogeneity and "disciplining down." Turner's words in 1993 were poor prophecy but timely warning, even more timely a decade later. C/C/T will have an ever decreasing scope and relevance the more it seeks to consolidate itself around the idea of a "discipline," to secure its boundaries and place in the curriculum. It needs a logic of "both – and" instead of a limiting "neither – nor," fluidly moving between a full respect for disciplinarity and a capacity always to go beyond

¹¹ On the Sokal controversy, including reverberations in Australia, see Bob Hodge, "The Sokal 'Hoax,'" *Continuum* 13.2 (1999): 255–69.

boundaries. As many scholars have noted, fluidity, openness, radical interdisciplinarity and capacity for multiple connections are qualities every curriculum area will need in the turbulent times ahead. C/C/T has these in abundance. It would be tragic if it were to discard them.

The boundaries C/C/T is currently seeking to discover and enforce would limit a critical advantage of C/C/T as "undiscipline." Disciplines typically assume that practitioners can draw on their own discipline for most tools and concepts they need about the defined problems they are professionally equipped to deal with. The problems that generate anxiety today are normally not defined. They require strategies of networking, sharing, respecting and being able to use and adapt expertise from wherever it comes.

This can be seen in the 2003 response of the Australian Academy of Humanities to the Government's list of "National Priorities" for research.¹² At this level, differences between C/C/T and English and other disciplines do not appear as important as creative alliances across "arts" and "humanities" disciplines to create an effective force. C/C/T as undiscipline is equipped to play a key role, with its direct engagement with issues as they emerge. Stuart Hall, an architect of British cultural studies, claimed it arose out of a sense of crisis in the humanities in Britain, arising out of a crisis in Britain as a post-colonial society in a global world.¹³ Both crises have exploded into new forms, in Australia as in Britain, generating new challenges and opportunities.

Turner wrote one of 4 appendices supporting the Academy's submission, "Frontier Technologies: New Media and Creative Industries," emphasizing the contribution of "The Humanities, especially the new Humanities like media, culture and communication studies but also the more established fields like anthropology," which form a "discipline cluster" (24). He emphasizes the role of this field in studying the uptake of new technologies, its close association with the "creative industries," the study of "cultures of use," and its potential role in development and design of new media and cultural technologies. This justification points to the "creative industries" initiatives of John Hartley and Stuart Cunningham, housed most notably in the Queensland University of Technology. Like a previous attempt to connect C/C/T with the "real world"—the "policy studies" movement associated with Tony Bennett at Griffith University—it tends to be opposed within C/C/T.

Different issues are raised by the submission's first Appendix, by Tom Griffiths, connecting "the Humanities and an environmentally sustainable Australia." He begins with a big claim: "Science and the Humanities—so often separated in our training and thinking—are now turning towards one another with a grateful and urgent sense of opportunity and collaboration" (13). He lists three "revolutions" that cumulatively have made this happen: recognitions that "humans are elemental and animal"; that "nature is also historical"; and that "nature seems holistic rather than reductive, creative rather than predictable" (13–14).

I wish I thought Griffiths was right. The war between "Science and the Humanities" in USA was the context for Sokal's hoax, and the case is no different in Australia. In Science, Technology and Society (STS) departments, there is a bitter war between "social constructivists," who could be seen to have affinities with C/C/T, and their "realist"

¹² Australian Academy of Humanities, *The Humanities and Australia's National Research Priorities* (Canberra: AAH, 2003).

¹³ Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities," *October* 53 (1990): 11–23.

opponents, but STS is not usually seen as part of C/C/T and does not figure in the Frow and Morris or Turner anthologies. Zoe Sofoulis's work on technology comes from C/C/T but has not been widely debated or adopted. Griffiths' "third revolution" has hardly touched C/C/T or the Humanities."¹⁴ I agree with Griffiths about what ought to happen, but in this case C/C/T academics as much as the government need to hear and heed him.

C/C/T is good at scepticism about grand claims of "crises," at showing how "rhetoric" does not connect well, as in this case, with reality (C/C/T practice). The "discourse" of the Academy is surely generated by institutional interests. But beyond such deconstruction further analysis is needed, showing the multiple "realities" that are not in alignment (the state of the world, the pressures and priorities of government, the situation in universities), and what might be done. C/C/T needs to be as radically open and transdisciplinarity as this rhetoric, not as narrow and (currently) secure as it often is in practice. C/C/T academics would do well to listen hard to the statements of these academic leaders, and as Jean-Luc Picard of *Star Trek* would say, "make it so." And perhaps they will.

¹⁴ Zoe Sofia, *Whose Second Self? Gender and (Ir)rationality in Computer Culture* (Geelong: Deakin University Press, 1993). The only C/C/T use of "chaos theory" is V. Dimitrov and B. Hodge, *Social Fuzziology* (Heidelberg: Springer Physica, 2002).