

# Editorial: Media and Cultural Studies

**Jean-Philippe Wade**

*Alternation* has kindly agreed to this special collection of recent academic work from the Department of Media and Cultural Studies (Durban) of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Cultural Studies is an inter-disciplinary field with an endless generosity towards new theoretical emigrants, with the result that it has constantly developed from its early days at the University of Birmingham to its present postmodern incarnation. It encourages experimental and innovative research, and this is reflected in the articles gathered here, which work in that ‘blurred’ space between the humanities and the social sciences - a key and liberating element of Cultural Studies work in our department.

Adam Meikle and Marco Gennaro Bozza – both young academics – have been doing ethnographic research into very contemporary South African subcultures. Adam Meikle’s focus is the local videogaming subculture, and his research drew attention to the necessity of making his careful way through the highly contested terrain of subcultural theory, a journey that was greatly helped by his field-work, whose data entered into a dialogue with competing subcultural conceptualizations. Marco Gennaro Bozza researched the local ‘modder’ subculture – people whose obsessive interest is in the modification of computer hardware, a community sustained on the Internet. Both Meikle and Bozza in their separate ways concluded that these subcultures were ‘substantial’, rather than superficial and transient, as some more adventurous postmodern subcultural theory would have it: their members were dedicated, committed and profoundly passionate about their subcultural activities. In an age of self-fashioning, subcultures were also importantly about the making of identities. What emerges from their studies is the great distance of contemporary subcultural studies from the model provided in the 1970s by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, whose perception of subculturalists as youthful romantic outlaws no longer obtains in a globalized postmodern consumer culture.

Cultural Studies prides itself on encouraging experimental – even carnivalesque – work, drawing the lessons from the ethnographic ‘crisis of representation’ from the 1980s to explore ‘post-objectivist’ research that draws on ‘narrative knowledge’, and uses the genres of poetry, short stories and drama to write about the unique and creative ethnographic encounter between researcher and researched. Genevieve Akal’s article is the most experimental – a postmodern autoethnography written in a fictional form. It is an ethnographic study of the Hipster subculture in Durban: the usual qualitative research of participant observation and interviews was conducted, but then the gathered data was imaginatively transformed into a fictional story, with Akal herself – a hipster insider – autoethnographically providing data on the subculture, and appearing in fictional guise.

Akal’s article – a small part of a larger project – brings to our attention the importance of ‘narrative knowledge’, the insight that social knowledge is not the monopoly of social scientists and their abstract conceptualizations, but can also emerge in fictional story-telling, which also has the unique advantage of showing the concrete ‘lived experience’ of (often everyday) social life. Literature has the added advantage over social science of being able to give *meaning* to human experience: what does it *mean* to live in Sophiatown in the 1950s? This has of course always been assumed in literary studies – why else do we read James Joyce or J.M. Coetzee or T.S. Eliot? – but it is remarkable how resistant more traditional social scientists are to the rival claims of literature to produce truths. For Carolyn Ellis, ‘There is nothing more theoretical or analytic than a good story’ (Ellis 2003: 194), while for Alasdair MacIntyre (1981: 20) ‘man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth’.

If we are a *Homo narrans*, our narrative truth-telling has a great advantage over others who anchor their knowledge-production in claims of detached objectivity, because fiction always has a narrator who situates the fictional discourse within a subjective frame. Fictional writing is almost always a specific *contextual* and thus *embodied* view on human reality, and thus reveals the truth of all research on human beings by human beings – that it can never be objective or naively scientific, and that the great insights into our humanity are not the result of fact gathering and the setting into motion of pseudo-scientific methodologies, but the consequence of the creative imagination at work.

Because it is so challenging to orthodox ways of conducting social science research, I was inspired to write an article which works through the extensive writings and debates on experimental ethnographies, especially the increasingly popular autoethnographies. Nowadays, it is quite usual to encounter in academic ethnographic journals poems, stories, plays, and so on, and Akal's difficult article works within that innovative tradition. I hope my article will provide the theoretical framework necessary to appreciate and understand these new – and powerfully imaginative – ways of doing ethnography.

Zakia Jeewa explores the often huge fandoms that congregate as global virtual communities on the Internet, particularly the social media site *Twitter*, and pays particular attention to role playing, where fans masquerade as fictional characters, and in so doing reveal the remarkable ability of cyberspace – as an autonomous zone – to enable a *playing* with individual identity. Identity is no longer the determined and stable effect of omnipotent social and ideological apparatuses, but instead suddenly appears as malleable, fluid, something to be creatively (re-) made rather than suffered. Such self-inventing, where fans move effortlessly between 'reality' and 'fiction', enables the deconstruction of the reality/fiction opposition itself. As Jeewa explains it, 'with fandom, *the fictional becomes real, and reality becomes fictional*'.

These essays then draw attention to the remarkable ability of Cultural Studies to ask properly *subversive* questions of the traditional academic logics which prevent us from creatively encountering the nature of our contemporary world, including the disabling binary logics of abstract concepts/narrative truth, truth/fiction, and reality/fiction. The only serious work will be that which chooses to live in the exhilarating deconstructing spaces 'in-between' these rigid oppositions, to which we need to be relentlessly opposed.

## **References**

- MacIntyre, A. 1981. *After Virtue*. Los Angeles, California: University of Notre Dame.
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