



## Resource Review

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<b>Name of reviewed item:</b>	Culture and Power in Cultural Studies, The Politics of Signification
<b>Author:</b>	John Storey
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### Review:

These essays and chapters were originally written between 1986 and the present day, and are re-published here under the themes of 'power' and 'the politics of signification'. This is not just an introductory book, or an arbitrary anthology, it bears repeat reading and contains a very complex, well-linked set of critiques.

The term 'signification' makes the text essential for our purposes and Storey essentially begins where my students do, with Raymond Williams and his notoriously widescreen explanation of 'culture', before moving into its re-theorizing, via the work of Stuart Hall and others at the CCCS, who imported Gramsci and 'hegemony'. Storey then takes us through 'culture' and 'power' many times, weaving example after example into theory.

Raymond Williams began a similar journey across borders and ideas, through the lives and ruins of cultures, only a short walk from the lecture theatre in which I teach, for his essay 'Culture Is Ordinary', in 1958. Williams was collapsing high and low culture, moving away from F.R. Leavis and his generation. Fifty-odd years have changed nothing in that sense, 'culture' is still upper-case Ordinary, everyday, but worthy of serious attention, and Storey's book holds strongly to that idea.

The point of this text is to allow people access to the tools with which they might take culture to pieces and see how it operates. Understanding signification creates more effective communicators in any media industry, and sharper contemporary artists. In my experience, students who are starting out either leap right through cultural artefacts, searching for 'deep' meanings, which may ultimately be fugitive, or they

remain on the thinnest of surfaces, tending to naturalize them. 'Depth' is a misleading term to use here though. What Storey often does is account for the way any one cultural artefact brings other signifying surfaces into play. In his example of recent car advertising, he shows how the automobile is often presented as solitary, rather than just another atom of congestion, essentially using discourse analysis to show that what is missing is just as important, sometimes, as what is presented or re-presented. The car advert reveals the myth of the individual, lone vehicle. This is a point Storey makes in passing, to illustrate something else, but it alerts me to the usefulness and scope of this text for students. It also serves, for me, as a metaphor for the doing of cultural studies, which should link isolated objects up to the wider social world and its issues.

Raymond Williams took his journey on a bus, Storey occasionally arrives in a Rolls Royce, grandly stepping out to declare it a charabanc: 'Ceci n'est pas une Roller!' He describes the increasing visibility of opera in advertising, on film soundtracks, tracing this back to the invention of opera as art, in nineteenth-century Manchester. He collapses the continuing distinctions between art and entertainment, rightly seeing the danger in elitist discourses.

Storey then describes how 'the sixties' are articulated in an imaginary form, in and through the 1990s. Key to this is understanding how some seriously edgy narratives get channelled into consumerism for profit. This could be what Marcuse called, in that notorious mouthful, 'repressive desublimation', only Storey allows for agency at the same time as he accounts for the entertainment market's unstoppable assimilation, on permanent cruise control. 'Agency' here is a kind of lower-case 'resistance', the often-overlooked caveat to Foucault's work.

Storey turns things over thoroughly, viewing them as prisms. The range of examples he works through is appreciated. Taken together they explain how we can go in any historical direction, making different sized leaps, from the 1960s to the 1990s, or the 1880s to the 1980s, and make some very potent insights about *now*. Grand-narrative history may be off the curriculum for good, but Storey does what Fredric Jameson urges - he always historicizes.

We know that Santa doesn't exist, but the essay on how Christmas was invented is a gift, not a disappointment. Exposing historical 'invention' is Storey's craft. He reveals the hidden, understanding how culture is made and re-made, rather than imagining it as developing from some original point of authenticity. This book does what all great cultural studies courses and texts should. It shows that the floor we stand on is less stable than we previously thought. As room-shakers we run risks though, if students leave lectures ever so slightly disturbed, things are going well. If they are so alarmed that they never return, we have gone too far. This book will rattle cages, but it also provides some advice on how to rattle back.

The humanities often unwittingly present easy targets for critics. This book's index features 'The Beatles', 'Ulrich Beck' and 'Beethoven, Ludwig van', because Storey considers high and low culture to have been shaken from the shelves, through the history of cultural studies, and its aforementioned little quakes. 'Foucault', 'The Four Tops' and 'The Frankfurt School' are a page away, but Storey presents a fast-moving target to the enemy, explaining how discourses are saturated with power at every step, staying with that core, undeniable drive.

He takes his subject seriously, describing how signifying practices such as melodrama and acid rock can reach outside their spaces of signification, for instance in a three night theatre run, and point to issues and debates outside that space. These are crucial things for students to understand. To see how power both shapes meaning and shape-shifts through it is possibly one of the few guaranteed

transferrable skills any art college now provides. But then I would say that, wouldn't I, and perhaps I should also point to myself pointing it out, in a review of a book on cultural studies and power, by a cultural studies lecturer.

On my return from Planet Meta-, I find a country preparing to measure research via 'economic and social impact', so we do need to remember these points. Software packages change faster than Vice-Chancellors, but these issues remain, for media students as much as fine art acolytes, and understanding how signification and power courses through both Photoshop and institutional hierarchies can only prepare them for the 'real world', which critics of this kind of book claim to exist beyond its pages.

Each case study confirms this. Storey re-inserts politics into the work of Matthew Arnold, claiming that he was hegemonic, as essentially a reformist, urging for the middle classes to step up to leadership and displace the aristocracy, rather than the more revolutionary recommendations posited by Marx. Arnold had some unpleasant things to say about the middle classes, but Storey reveals how cultural critics need to go further than the rhetoric on the surface, locating deeper veins, and even blacker track marks, on the skin of culture.

His 'symptomatic' reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* shows how it attempts to construct 'bad' imperialisms, which are bracketed off from British forms. In this case, the 'bad form' is Belgian, re-situating *Heart of Darkness* in a nationalist discourse, even though it is identifiably anti-imperialist, thus teasing out and revealing hidden strands of hegemony. Storey returns us to the way in which cultural texts refer to grand-narrative power discourses such as imperialism at the same time as they resist them, creating ambivalences, as well as meanings, in their semi-lit, beating centres, with all of their shadows.

This level of nuance in Storey's critique is exemplary, a target for students to aim at, as a level of attainable detail, even if their take on the subject might be very different. At the end of this last chapter I sense a way in which reading Conrad like this might lead us to question more contemporary cultural documents and ask the 'imperialism' question of them all over again, in the manner Storey so ably demonstrates.

I have described how certain 'c' words have shameful connotations on this island before, connotations which need inverting, and so here 'c' stands for both 'clever' and 'compliment'.