

LAWRENCE GROSSBERG (2010) *CULTURAL STUDIES IN THE FUTURE TENSE*. DURHAM AND LONDON. DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS. ISBN: 978-0-8223-4830-6.

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The ‘thriller’ is usually assumed to be a popular genre, its visceral energies radically at odds with the difficult concepts of scholarship. *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* challenges any such separation. For all its theoretical intricacies this book is nonetheless a true thriller. It is an academic page-turner in the best sense, taking its reader on a liberating and fast-paced journey through received wisdom, and across the trajectories of Grossberg’s thought.

First and foremost, this book is fascinating in its rigorous defence of a conjuncturalist approach to cultural studies – an approach which would, quite frankly, rule out as inauthentic much (if not the vast majority) of what travels under the banner of ‘cultural studies’. And it is perhaps also a little frustrating at times, given the degree to which it lives up to its title. Rather than getting into a developed, substantive analysis of any contemporary conjuncture – say in relation to the ‘credit crunch’ or what has now been defined as a ‘deficit’ problem (rather than a failure of deregulated capitalism and the free market) – Grossberg instead lays the foundations for future analysis. As a result, the book does a lot of ground-clearing and preliminary justifying (especially in chapter three on the economic), without ever fully implementing its own precepts and approaches via sustained analysis.

Grossberg’s work is also caught up in some potentially contradictory tensions. Although he advocates the value of surprise (25), where cultural studies is ‘committed to telling us things we don’t already know; it seeks to surprise its producers, its interlocutors, its audiences, and its constituencies’ (54), I lost count of the number of times that Deleuze and Guattari, or Stuart Hall, or John Clarke were

approvingly quoted in ways that resolved points of debate. Grossberg wants us to be surprised, yet he is surprisingly certain about where answers are to be found, and whose words should be taken as authoritative. In the end – and the beginning and the middle – we are left in no doubt as to where his intellectual debts, loyalties, and dialogues have been most productively worked through.

Cultural Studies in the Future Tense can be read as an argument for a specific mode of cultural studies' work where theories which worked yesterday may not apply today or tomorrow, and where 'cult studs' therefore cannot be defined via particular theoretical baggage (e.g. applying Gramsci equals 'doing cultural studies'). In short, it is the ultimate anti-textbook, wanting to throw over established paradigms in favour of a pure openness to contextuality, and wanting its readers to unlearn as they read on.

Where Graeme Turner's (2012) *What's Become of Cultural Studies?* strikes a note of lament, to my ears at least, Grossberg resists the temptation to align cultural studies with breezy, yesteryear sounds of nostalgia. You can guess the title of his conclusion a Deleuzian mile off, and it's never going to be about what poor old cultural studies has become (it is, of course, 'Becoming Cultural Studies' [288]). In fact, *Becoming Cultural Studies* might have been an even better overall title for the project. But in any case, by way of challenging readers to let go of the past (past theories and past understandings), Grossberg suggests that within the contemporary conjuncture:

Culture... matters less... It seems reasonable to hypothesize that films, television, and music, the dominant forms of 'culture' in the postwar years, do not matter as much. More accurately, let us say that such cultural forms do not mean the same sort of things for most people. (180)

And yet this is a vast generalisation for which no empirical evidence is proffered here. On what basis, then, is it a reasonable hypothesis? While the domain of the economic may have become increasingly important to people as they face a public sphere dominated by (specifically ideological) accounts of the European or global economy, it nonetheless seems problematic to assert that 'films, television and music' have *tout court* been transformed in terms of their mattering 'for most people.' These industries have not yet fallen into terminal decline, after all; and where they have

encountered problems these have more likely been about consumers finding ways to acquire products without paying, rather than being about such products failing to acquire significance. Television certainly continues to be important in the UK context, in terms of mass ratings for 'event' TV which fleetingly becomes the pop cultural glue of social interaction, and perhaps more importantly in terms of attempts to defend public service TV ideals against coalition, Murdoch-favouring ideologies. Subcultures, youth cultures, consumer tribes, elective affinities, fandoms and audiences arguably all continue to imagine, perform and user-generate their cultural identities through and around structuring media materials.

As such, the rupture or reorientation proposed by Grossberg reads culture as newly embedded in ordinary life, and as relocated without necessarily being wholly co-opted (181), but this ontology comes dangerously close to fetishising 'the new', or abstracted novelty, without perhaps giving sufficient weight to continuities of culture, and generational circuits or cycles of culture's mattering maps. Or, for that matter, even the dull regularities of habit, emphasised *contra* Grossberg in Nick Couldry's (2012) *Media, Society, World*. On occasion, Grossberg's call to conjuncturalist arms reads, for me, as a sort of rampant 'neo discourse' – constantly emphasising the new; the not-yet-known; the need for new understandings and new articulations. This is somewhat curious, as 'neo discourse' seems, most often, to find its cultural home in marketing and consumer culture – 'new and improved' – whereas here it is filtered through a complex web of critical politics. Nevertheless, 'make it new' seems to be the implicit or explicit (modernist) order of the day, and it is an impetus that has broken out elsewhere around the badges of media studies 2.0 and fandom 2.0. Paul Booth's *Digital Fandom* (2010) insists constantly on the need for a 'new media studies', in much the same vein as Grossberg mounts his defence of a type of 'cultural studies 2.0' called upon to break out of its prior common sense, culture/economy binaries, and self-secured politics/theoretical concepts.

The consideration of 'euro-modernity' (or multiple modernities) across the book – a topic which Grossberg sets up in chapter two and then returns to in the final chapter – again put me more in mind of culture's continuities rather than discontinuities, and of continuous battles over the economic and cultural powers of claimed modernity or 'development'. This discussion also provides a key context for what I'm terming Grossberg's 'neo discourse', since the struggle is ultimately not to be 'new' *per se*, but rather to be

‘modern’ in a way which does not submit to universalist logics of (singular) identity, thus permitting ‘a more ethically desirable modernity’ (268). It should be said that, to his credit, Grossberg is resolutely unafraid of tackling big questions in *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*. But on the deficit side, small details of the empirical are occasionally downplayed as a result. And it is uncertain what cultural politics could, would or should remain legible in light of Grossberg’s argument that ‘the self-assurance of political certainty’ needs to be struggled against’ (54). Despite such modesty, *Cultural Studies in the Future Sense* evidently adopts an ethical stance – opposing ‘a single logic of productivity and efficiency’ (55) in matters of cultural analysis, and seeking to open up consideration of modernities, as well as seeking to bridge the analysis of culture and economy in new ways. For all its rhetorics of not knowing (294), I think Grossberg knows very well where his political allegiances lie.

This frequently inspiring anti-textbook calls for surprise and uncertainty while its citations don’t always surprise, and its politics seems fairly certain. It is the performative contradiction of not quite practicing what it preaches that makes this volume so provocative, so energising, and so thrillingly vital. Its affects will, I suspect, be felt for a long time to come.

References

Booth, P. (2010) *Digital Fandom*. New York: Peter Lang.

Couldry, N. (2012) *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Turner, G. (2012) *What’s Become of Cultural Studies?* London: Sage.