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Cultural Studies as Performative Research in a Digital Age

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This paper aims to explore the nature of digital culture research, and the fitting methodology. Although it is still felt to be a novelty, it is not so different from the more general domain of Cultural Studies. The aim of research for both domains is meaning, or the challenge to understand the dynamics of the encoding and decoding process. Both domains endorse a wide variety of subjects, although typically the concrete methodology of Cultural Studies still remains restricted to qualitative approaches. The question of quantitative data and their analysis is highlighted in digital culture, and we should consider both its opportunities and limitations for the research at hand. In our reflection, Cultural Studies research emerges as a performative enterprise, and this is one of its unique distinctions as a research domain.

Introduction

Digital culture is felt to be a novelty in Cultural Studies. Even recent and popular readers of Cultural Studies only devote somewhat limited, and often scant, attention to the topic.[1,2] However, the nature and methodology of digital cultural studies are no different from other branches in the more general research domain of Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies generally studies 'meaning,' facing up to the challenge to understand the dynamics of the encoding and decoding processes. Messages conveyed and mediated are typically subjected to qualitative analysis, as will be discussed in greater detail below. Quantitative methods are not commonly favoured in Cultural Studies. They assume greater prominence, though, in digital culture, particularly when it comes to encoding phases. This importance should not be overstated, but at the same time we feel that Cultural Studies should be open to a variety of research methods, similar to its openness in its choice of subjects. In this article, we want to explore the particular interest and nature of the research endeavour in digital culture. What is particular to its point of view, which methodologies come into play, and how does it relate to the general domain of Cultural Studies?

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The Topic of Cultural Studies

The reality of mediation brings culture to us in signs and symbols that have a certain materiality. In the activities we undertake, we tend to make choices of form. Those formal expressions convey a message to others, a meaning. Paintings and logos, artwork, road signs, make-up and clothing are visual stimuli carrying a background of cultural viewpoints. Similarly, culture can be carried through music, fabrics and substance, dance and movement, compositions, light, etiquette rules, patterns of eating, greeting, rituals of marriage, birth and death, and so on. All in life is mediated by signs, which makes semiotics one of the key methods of analysis in Cultural Studies. A sign hardly ever 'speaks for itself'. This means that a Cultural Studies researcher actively seeks to understand the encoding and decoding processes of culture, and the construction of meaning that occurs in these dynamics.[31]

Our cultural practices, in which we shape the world to our expectations, desires, imaginations and fears, produce this symbolic realm of formal expressions that we call culture. In most cases, our expressions follow existing encoding/decoding conventions, in particular from those other people we want to relate to. In our most creative moments, we design new codifications, which brings an even more interesting interplay between expression and impression of meaning. There is no ultimate meaning corresponding to any cultural realm; only the interpreted framework. All perspective is culture-bound, because it is construed through the meaning-making network. For example, in *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*[3] a new technological medium is analysed in the various representations through advertisement (visual signs), name-giving (linguistic signs), participants' anecdotes and biographies (narratives). This study is representative of contemporary research in that it not only gathers interpretations of the artefact through the participants' eyes, but is also sensitive to the processes of producing these interpretations within the culture. It shows that there is no essential meaning to 'a Walkman', only the framework of reference provided by different cultural viewpoints. As all culture is mediated, the study further shows that the self-representation by Sony, driven by economic motivators, did not always account for perceptions on Sony's identity by other participants in the target culture. It is a typical feature of culture that meaning is never fixed, but constructed, reconstructed, and deconstructed in the process of dissemination. The typical interest in the disconnection between the message sent and the message received is what sets Cultural Studies apart from, for example, Communication Science: the meanings generated in (un)conscious encoding and decoding go beyond the simplicity of a stimulus/reaction pattern of exchanges between individuals or socially defined groups of people.

Cultural Studies, in any guise, is about those encodings/decodings and the meanings conveyed. It is a listening to the unspoken. When we look at phenomena of digital culture, for example the 'tilt-shift' practice in online photography (a particular kind of photography using a digital effect mimicking an axial shift of the lens as a way to obtain 'miniaturised' representations of people, cars, buildings), we want to understand the messages that are conveyed, and that we willingly or unconsciously

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attend to. Of course this relates to groups of people, their behaviour, their social status. Yet Cultural Studies is not about segmenting the world in pre-existing classes, or the objective relation between them. We do not really care if teens and adults differ in their use of tilt-shift, or to which classification of 'photographer' you belong if you engage in tilt-shift – which could be a valid sociological question – or what the relation is between the reasons for this technical innovation and the pattern of society in which it occurs – which is the topic of STS (Science and Technology Studies). Cultural Studies is about meanings and their generation. What are people expressing in tilt-shift photography that they do not express in family photography? How does it relate to them, to their aspirations, their fears? How do they understand the world they are shaping or undergoing when living those experiences – and how can we describe those? And how does all this relate to their perceived, constructed identity – in their own eyes and those of others. It is important to understand as a researcher of Cultural Studies that identities are constructs. There is no given identity, only that which is storied by ourselves, fed by the culture in which we live.

When we look at digital culture, mediation and cultural encoding/decoding is just as relevant as other topics of the domain of Cultural Studies. One particular concern of Cultural Studies is medium effect. Evidently, making a sculpture from marble differs from modelling the same from clay. The same holds for digital media: when they get encoded with information, they add their own message in its materialisation. This notion, already advanced by McLuhan,[4] has been explored in the works of Bolter and Grusin,[5] Stuart Hall[6] and Lisa Gitelman.[7] Cultural Studies is interested in how the medium contributes to the cultural message, and helps forge identities. Lev Manovich[8] describes five properties of 'new media' that should be understood when looking into expressions of Digital Culture. These are Numerical Representation, Modularity, Automation, Variability and Transcoding. The first requires little explanation: new media are digital. This means that, in our case of studying digital culture, the encodings are in digital form. 'Modularity' is inherited from ICT in general, and has to do with the modular, self-contained approach of different parts of digital media objects, that combine together in the object as we experience it. A website is a typical example, being composed of text, images, interactions, all juxtaposed and together providing a holistic experience. 'Automation', starting from a simple scenario where the computer helps the user to perform actions through software aids such as a word processor, can become quite complex, e.g. when entire news sites are automatically curated from different sources by computer algorithms. Under 'Variability' is understood the fact that digital objects can be changed infinitely and can come in a multitude of variations. This can of course be exploited in a cultural practice, as the manifold online representations of the Mona Lisa prove. But it can also be the underlying mechanism that facilitates the emergence of certain cultural practices, such as in the example of tilt-shift photography. Of all the properties of new media mentioned by Lev Manovich,[8] 'Transcoding' is probably the most important here. The fact that new media are digital media, and that they are produced on the computer, brings about the fact that those computers are contributing to the encoding/decoding. They have a hand in it, and alter our experience

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and expressive possibilities in quite a pervasive way. Walter Benjamin[9] had already hinted at what a camera frame does to the photographer's perception, as well as the viewer's perception. But once an image is digitized – or born digital – the impact of this digital medium is omnipresent and profoundly alters the meaning generation taking place. The computer becomes a co-author of the content produced. The tension between agency and structure, a main theme of Cultural Studies as a whole, transpires in this way in media studies. This also implies that interesting fields of research are created through cross-media, as has been studied by Jenkins.[10]

Cultural Studies is not history. When we discuss vintage culture or cultural heritage, we are not looking at studying the past as such. We are interested in how the past lives today, what it means today. So cultural heritage is for Cultural Studies a part of today's world, something that generates meaning now. Of course it can make sense to study how meanings have evolved over time, but the finality for Cultural Studies is always how it relates to today. The same holds for topics close to futurology.

Cultural Studies is no futurology: it does not want to understand or predict the future. Yet it has a keen interest in how we view the future, how we anticipate it, imagine it. Its interest is in what the future means for us today, particularly in relation to the fears and utopias attached to it. For example, technology offers great possibilities to enhance the human body, stretching its lifetime and pushing its natural boundaries. Bionic legs and mechanically operated organs quickly lead to visions of cyborgs, fed by and translated into popular sci-fi.[11] A cultural analysis of *Star Trek* could look at the mediation of the viewpoints on cyborgs, but equally take a critical stance on the cultural background in which this translation of culture took place. It is not a coincidence that the captains of the starship featured throughout the series produced in the 1990s was first a Frenchman, then a black man, then a woman. It is equally significant that 'the Borg', a community of cyborgs, inspired great fear throughout the series, but also that the likeable Borg woman 'Seven of Nine' was in every way the embodiment of female attractiveness in mainstream American culture. Her image was purposefully encoded to get the message across.

The discussion of cyborg culture is currently a 'hot topic' of the digital culture domain. Researchers are not looking to explain why the idea of cyborgs exists, but at the *meaning* of the fear or excitement surrounding the concept. What does it mean for our understanding of being human?[12] How do we perceive technology through this understanding? Is technological enhancement a utopia or dystopia, do we speak of it as 'an invasion' or 'an addition' or even 'an integration'? Our cultural practices always have this threefold dimension of being at the intersection of past, present and future. The present as such doesn't exist on its own, it is always co-defined by our imagination of the future. It incorporates our desires and the way we want to see the present. This is very typically the case when you buy a car. First, for some reason, you just cannot buy a new car that is not 'new' in a quite supercharged meaning. The car they sell you, if it is not second-hand, is always 'new' in the sense that it is touted as improving on your old car. But somehow it strongly resembles the 'old' model. If it did not do so it would not attract the same customers. They would not recognize that

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it is supposed to be their new car. But on the other hand, clever designers simultaneously make sure that it already resembles your next new car. Because when you buy a new car, you buy into a dream. You buy into a vision of what the future holds for you. You can compare this to what Lisa Gitelman[7] calls 'always already new'. We really do not live in the physical world of things. A thing, as we know it, only exists as something we relate to at an intersection of past, present and future. For us it is always what it will become, and what it has been. In a way, it has to do with the instrumental relation that we have to objects: we tend to see them in line with our goals, with what we want to do with them, with our practices. But on the other hand, objects simultaneously always have that symbolic relation to the meanings we attribute to them. When we recognize something as an object, it represents for us our aspirations of use. There are no cars that do not relate to our vision of future cars, and our acquaintance with old cars.

In essence, Cultural Studies wants to tell the story of the present. And by doing so, it is perfectly aware that it is shaping the story of that practice at the same time. Cultural Studies research is a performative enterprise. It has an impact on the phenomena studied by describing them, by telling their story and 'coining' the practice. The interaction of the researcher and the researched is discussed in more detail in the following.

The Method of Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies wants to understand how cultural practices, social communities and mediating environments together yield meanings. By choosing or adhering to ranges of colours, forms, textures, smells, we form identities that differentiate and bind. Just like wearing the wrong shade of red can mean exclusion for a 14-year-old girl in her social environment, our cultural territories and tribes are being defined through a complex mixture of encodings. When the encoding changes, old meanings are presented in another way and new meanings emerge. An ambiguity arises, since the same tokens get a different meaning. But of course not only the meanings change: it is the practice behind them that shifts. How then do you register a dynamic, elusive subject?

One key methodology in Cultural Studies has grown historically from its roots in anthropology. Living culture offers great opportunities to be analysed through close contact with the observed, which involves fieldwork. Through watching, listening and participating intently, the unspoken assumptions that lie at the core of the cultural dynamics may be brought to the surface. This is a qualitative method often referred to as *participant observation*, where the researcher 'integrates from a distance' into the target culture for a given amount of time. It is an exercise of balance between experiencing a viewpoint and remaining distant enough not to be fully submerged. Culture operates just below the surface, but the ripples of the water and the reflection of the sun make it hard to distinguish for the inattentive observer. The idea is, however, not to go fully under water, for the lack of light at the bottom of the pool disorientates. Studying tattoo culture for example, does not imply getting a tattoo yourself.

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Painstakingly precise and accurate observations are key to any endeavour in Cultural Studies. Details are of great importance, as culture is strongest in the things that go (almost) unnoticed. There are no hard-coded boundaries to what is the main issue and what are side issues: it is perfectly conceivable that for a YouTube trend of amateur music, the decoration of the players' rooms or garages is as important as the guitars they play, or the songs they listen to. A Cultural Studies observer tries to be as acute a witness as an art historian, but with less awe and a more critical attitude: there is not the same drive to define or accept a canon, but a compassionate quest for where the agency lies and where constraints, structures or hegemonies are betraying or nullifying the creative effort.

Theoretical frameworks that are particularly suited to support this critical activity for the study of digital culture are SCOT, the Social Construction Of Technology theories, and the Actor-Network Theory (ANT). SCOT stresses how technology is the product of our actions, desires and ambitions rather than a determining factor of sorts. Exposing how the traps of technological innovations are of our own making, of our own fears and pursuit of the beautiful, are a steadfast ingredient of the better Cultural Studies work in this field. For those with a predilection for the brighter side of digital existence, the actor-network theory offers a framework to include non-human agency in the picture.

Discovering what message has been forced upon the messenger requires an unbiased, open, receptive view on what is being produced. A good example comes from a study where a student of Cultural Studies examined logos that cities or regions typically use for websites promoting their tourism portfolio. Where one would expect those logos to exhibit the rich global diversity, hinting at national or traditional themes, it is absolutely striking how much these logos resemble … one another. Their primary aim is to look like a city logo, so they adopt dominant colours and adhere to unsung hegemonies shaping the globalized tourism industry.

Every observation is essentially human, which implies that it is subject to cultural filters. A first critique of the favoured methodology of participant observation in Cultural Studies is, then, that the analysis is closer to an interpretation, seen through the researcher's eyes. It is an argument that may apply to many methods, however, and Cultural Studies researchers perform their analysis in the full awareness of their own cultural background. This makes self-reflexivity an essential skill in observational research. As an experiencing subject, the researcher is aware of the filters operative in mediating the data, and awake to the fact that the analysis or report should not serve as validation of his or her own experience and viewpoint. The researcher's own account of how the research proceeded, his or her consideration of the methodological difficulties, clarity and reflexivity in the report are of vital importance.

Awareness of this *being* in research – rather than *existing* as a researcher – means that there may be an interaction between the researcher, the research report, and the researched culture. It is a natural consequence of the fact that nothing can be mediated outside of culture. However, awareness of this position empowers the Cultural Studies researcher to make informed and critical decisions about his or

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her interactions. The story was in practice before he or she came along; but he or she may also affect it. This makes Cultural Studies a performative enterprise, as it adds a layer of creativity in this active observation; not only actively decoding the message of what is being researched, but also encoding its meaning and one's own understanding of it in new messages. Not only description; but also construction.

A large part of the work will be conceptual: getting a grip on the many concepts that are used in a cultural practice context, and trying to grasp the finer nuances of their meaning. A vital sign used in the modern world is that of spoken or written language; through language people constitute narratives, or stories making sense of the world around them. Certain events or elements occurring in a person's life are arranged in a particular way to provide an explanation. Passed on from person to person, they constitute a framework of reference, so future events and elements can be interpreted in the culturally shared way. Therefore, another qualitative method used in Cultural Studies consists of *interviews* and *focus groups*, which may occur naturally along the way of observational research, or which may be separately planned in advance. They help to understand the views and underlying motives of the target culture through narratives and discourse of its participants. Thematic organisation is the most common way to analyse qualitative data[13–15] A second phase of the analysis involves tying these blocks of meaning together. Where relevant and appropriate, more specific modes of analysis can be followed such as discourse analysis, content analysis, conversation analysis or narrative theory (Ref. 16, p. 83).

Grasping the many colours of cultural expression, and being able to 'speak culture' with the participants is a strong advantage for the Cultural Studies researcher. In this way, the Cultural Studies researcher becomes an 'interactional expert', to use a term coined by Collins and Evans.[17] An interactional expert masters the language of the domain expert to a very high degree, but is not required to be able to do the job himself. For example, in studying meaning expressed by stylistic elements on websites, one is not required to be an online developer him- or herself. Just as the art historian would not have to be a grand master of paintings. It is, however, of the utmost importance that the Cultural Studies researcher is able to participate in any debate on the subject at hand, so the first and foremost requirement is that of being literate. Ideally, when one studies digital culture, a good understanding of digital technologies is commendable – one should compare this with the similar debate on the requirement for programming knowledge in Digital Humanities.

This literacy is key to a good understanding of the practice. To give an example: if you study a phenomenon such as social media, it is important to know about all relevant studies on the subject. This would be the case in any research of course. But more typically, for Cultural Studies, suppose there is a box office movie on the topic (in the case of social media, for example, *The Social Network*), we take it for granted that the researcher knows about it, has seen the movie, understands and is able to discuss it. What in another research field might be a more marginal activity becomes central in Cultural Studies, for these narrative representations are part of the reality we want to understand. Social media is not just a phenomenon on which there happens to be a film. Our notion of what Social Media are, what we mean by the

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term, has been shaped by this very movie. This artefact has contributed to the encoding/decoding process. So any research in Cultural Studies starts with a comprehensive, critical reading of the – primary and secondary – cross-medial history of the subject. As demonstrated in the example of the Sony Walkman above, viewpoints expressed through media are vital to cultural analysis. The combination of different data sources is in fact a good measure of validity.[18] To contrast or strengthen the results of the research, content triangulation may be used to cross-reference findings; drawing from multiple sources of data to confirm or contrast any conclusions. Another validity check would be methodological triangulation, where different ways of data gathering and analysis are brought together in a meaningful research. This can be the combination of different qualitative methods, of which a few have been discussed above, as well as a more quantitative approach. This raises a particular question for Cultural Studies, which is explained in the following paragraph.

The Question of Quantity

The basic methodology described above is highly qualitative in nature. Until now, research in Cultural Studies has engaged very little in quantitative methodology, such as derived from original surveys with large samples, and analysis through statistical software packages. The predisposition of the field towards qualitative data can be explained from several historical developments,[19] and a general disinterest in numbers is still felt throughout Cultural Studies today. When some statistics are used, these will typically remain descriptive. However, critical awareness of this stance shows that the field of cultural research is determined by the filters of culture itself. The disengagement with quantitative methods is linked to the focus on the subjective, particular dimension of a human's configuration of life that is prominent in Cultural Studies research. It aims to unearth meaning through the analysis of signs, whereas statistics aims to construct standardised meanings on the basis of signs. The first concern of Cultural Studies is decoding messages and understanding the meaning-making dynamics of the encoding/decoding process, whereas the priority of statistical analysis is to create a new meaning framework based solely on signs. It is, however, an illusion that statistics are less performative than Cultural Studies; facts are no less fabricated than narratives, for example.[20]

Where many of the social sciences want to describe general trends, and want to use somewhat streamlined representations to be able to make more general statements, Cultural Studies does not shy away from what is unique, ephemeral, contingent.[21] Quantitative studies typically aim for predictive power through the unearthing of large-scale patterns in grand explanations. Still, Cultural Studies counts proponents of grand theory too (such as Fredric Jameson[22]).

Cultural Studies should not be hesitant in exploring the new possibilities of digital means. Certainly in digital culture, data mining can deliver valuable input for the encoding process. The potential of large sample analysis can provide a good basis for generalisation or simplified larger-scale probing of participant views, whereas the case studies of Cultural Studies fail to go beyond particularities. Opinions still differ

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on this issue, but if Cultural Studies as a research domain takes pride in openness, it should be equally liberal when it comes to methodological horizons. Digital Cultural Studies would not be meaningful without the more humanist, interpretive stance, but Cultural Studies likewise can benefit from a bigger toolbox through the addition of digital means.[23] A growing number of voices advocate the benefits of mixed-method research, where qualitative and quantitative strands of research are combined.[24] Research along these lines is still tentative, but promising. For example, many technology acceptance studies have focused on the application of a survey following popular conceptualisations such as TAM (Technology Acceptance Model[25]), with a statistical test such as linear modelling to obtain predictive power. However, the notions 'ease of use' and 'perceived usefulness', which are key to TAM, should be translated into a methodology fit for Cultural Studies, precisely because they are perceived notions. Their definition is fluid and highly specific to the human interpretation. As Wu[26] in his study on emergency alert technology on a university campus noted, the input of his qualitative research strands helped to gain a better understanding of the situation, and vice versa.

Of course, data in digital culture often comes in vast amounts. For example, to investigate how public opinion shapes events, 2.6 million tweets (or messages delivered through the social media platform 'Twitter') in relation to the London riots of 2012 were harvested and analysed by digital means.[27] Technology is needed to perform the analysis, and quantifying tools are often the only way to cope with such large data sets. Although these forms of data collection and analysis have their value and certainly are fit for use in Digital Culture Studies, once again the search for meaning must not be undermined by lack of methodological openness. There is an argument to be made, then, for 'close reading big data', as is done in Digital Humanities research.[28]

Surveys are one form of data gathering tool suitable for quantitative analysis. For example, in culture participation surveys aiming to quantify the degree and population associated with a certain cultural activity. However, this alone would not be enough in Cultural Studies; it ultimately does not aim to measure the degree of participation, but rather the kind of participation, and the meaning participants attach to it. We might ask whether people post pictures online because their friends are doing it, and try to gauge what kind of postings are deemed appropriate in their view, and why.

Numbers and statistics should never be uncritically reported in any case, without adequate reflection on what the *meaning* is of certain figures, graphs and correlations. For example, it was found that in 2001 that about 60% of seniors who used the Internet were men and about 40% were women.[29] In 2010 the gender ratio among wired seniors had shifted to 50% men and 50% women. Simply reporting these statistics is not meaningful in Cultural Studies research. The first action is to look at the background in which the research was embedded. Power structures always affect data collection, analysis and reporting, and these structures are culturally determined. If the statistics pass a critical review, what do they *mean* culturally? This is not the same as giving an explanation to the reasons why the numbers are

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what they are. One explanation could be the later generation of seniors, in the technology-gender example given above, dates from a time where women were increasingly employed rather than stay-at-home mothers, which means chances were higher that they were computer users before their retirement, as technology is often a part of the work environment in the first place. But what does this equalisation of gender in senior internet users mean with regard to perceptions on technology for example? Technology has often been associated with male culture, but is it now deconstructing the typical axis of male–female? Does technology, a medium, therefore have the power to transform traditional structures on which society is built? Do we perceive it that way – and if we confirm this in the research report, do we not contribute to that cultural perception?

Note that gender is a cultural construct like anything else in this world; biology is often given as argument, but it is hardly a valid one in today's world. So, a more significant Cultural Studies research question on a digital culture topic could be: how does Instagram change what we call 'photography'? How do we experience nostalgia through Instagram? How does Instagram encode this feeling; how do its users decode it? Not solely whether there are more Instagram users in the age-group 15–21 than in the age-groups 50–60.

Conclusion

Is Cultural Studies an *Erklärungswissenschaft*? That is a question too broad to answer in this essay, but for the sake of our topic, the answer can be very simple: no. In using Dilthey's concept,[30] Cultural Studies is rather in the league of *Verstehenswissenschaften*. Understanding how agency comes about in cultural practices, and being witness to its tragic limits. In this sense understanding digital culture is always a dialogue and struggle with, and a criticism of, new media. It is an empathic resistance to the way we are happily 'facebooked' into Chaplin's *Modern Times* over and over again.

Cultural Studies research therefore has a predisposition to qualitative data gathered from such empirical methods as interviews and active observations, and theories of narrative, semiotics, media studies, studies of power relations and reception theory. However, the thematic openness of the field could equally apply to methodology, and take advantage of the increased analytical potential through technological means. The goal remains the same: obtaining a better understanding of the framework of meaning in which life is comprehended and structured. It is more than the description of a spider's web and its participants, it is the sensitive and positioned analysis of all the threads and constructs – without getting caught in it.

In Cultural Studies research we do not stop on the surface of the ubiquitous or the apparent daily grind. It is about meanings that transcend just that: the more intensive meanings that colour our lives, even when they sometimes are dark colours. It can indeed be *une esthéthique du laid,* where the fascination of the uncanny, *das Unheimliche* is explored. Cultural Studies is not a free ride. It wants to tell the fascinating story of unravelling the spider's web until you face the spider.

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