

## Research into Critical Media Pedagogy as a Cultural Study

Richard Kahn

University of California, Los Angeles

The social maps called classical social theories are to some extent torn, tattered, and fragmented, and in many cases outdated and even obsolete. Fresh theories need to be constructed constantly, using both the resources of past theories and salient sketches of the contemporary era to make sense of our current historical condition.

-Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (2001)

The still relatively emergent field of research that constitutes the metatheorizing of critical media pedagogy (Kellner, 2000) is not particularly easy to define as its research object is itself complex and generally best characterized as transdisciplinary, methodologically open to the novelty inherent in everyday media culture, and as a science that would potentially seek to explain and describe the wide totality of media artifacts, practices, ideas, representations, and active meanings of sociocultural life broadly conceived. An analysis of critical media pedagogy's own heritage as a form of cultural studies, however, can help to illuminate its present challenges and future trends.

While cultural studies was born of a deeply political project based in an intellectually critical and Marxist heritage, with the popular rise of postmodernism within the academy, many practitioners of cultural studies today have taken to celebrating a more de-politicized form of explanatory exoticism in which the cool, the absurd, and even the completely banal, are often paraded in a descriptive style as haughty as it is abstract. Yet, on the other hand, cultural studies has also become linked to the North American project of critical pedagogy by theorists such as Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and Douglas Kellner (Winter, 2004), and in this respect its ability to serve as an important educational and political method continues to evolve. Thus, cultural studies today can be problematic, even as it holds out great promise as a tool for sociocultural analysis and even political liberation.

As Kellner (2002) himself alludes, these positive and negative aspects of cultural studies can be mapped as emerging in part from the original models of the research field first developed by the Frankfurt and Birmingham schools respectively. Therefore, I would like to briefly summarize the nature of the research of these two schools, while then noting their limitations, before making some final comments about how I see contemporary critical media pedagogy unfolding as a research project in line with critical theory and cultural studies as explicated here. In this context, I speak in conclusion of "research into critical media pedagogy," by which I want both to demarcate critical media pedagogy as a research field and critical media research as a potentially pedagogical act.

### The Frankfurt School

The most lasting methodological contribution of critical theory to social science is the way it attunes empirical social researchers to the assumptions underlying their own busy empiricism.

-- Ben Agger (1991)

Founded in 1923 at the University of Frankfurt am Main by student followers of the Hegelian Marxist Karl Korsch, The Institute for Social Research is probably best known today for the dissident Marxists like Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Leo Lowenthal, Friedrich Pollock and Franz Neumann that utilized the Institute to explain and critique the rise of German fascism, corporate monopolism, and the failure of proletarian revolution during the 1930's. Many being Jewish radicals, they took exile within the United States upon Hitler's ascension, where they largely worked out highly original and productive analyses of the intersections of politics, economy, psychology and culture to which they felt they bore witness. It was also there that they had the opportunity to theorize the beginnings of Hollywood film making, a new thriving music industry based on the concept of the "hit" song, and new forms of mass culture built around emerging media forms like radio and television (Wiggershaus, 1994).

Associated with the Frankfurt school, though independent of the Institute's membership proper, was Walter Benjamin, whose work has proven very important for the future of cultural studies. It is in large part to Benjamin that we owe (for both good and ill) the idea of the postmodern *flaneur* who seeks to artfully produce an exhibitiv science beyond mere description by violently juxtaposing fragments of experience to realize a greater truth in

history (Markus, 2001). Indeed, the Frankfurt school's research program can likewise be characterized by its anti-systemic nature, and it was perhaps a crucial realization for the school that research systems are often developed that exemplify ideological programs that claim to explain everything, but in fact these systems are really masked conceptual tools to justify and legitimate ruling class interests (Horkheimer, 1972).

The Frankfurt school is also comprised of a number of periods, arguably extending into the present day, that incorporate not only shifts in opinion amongst its founding members but also fresh approaches such as that offered by second-generation member Jürgen Habermas. For instance, Habermas proposed that research descriptions must be understood as partaking of the realm of "systematically distorted speech" and that hence true descriptive explanations can only emerge as ideology critique in the regulatory context of an "ideal speech situation" to which it is dialectically related (Habermas, 1970; 1981). Thus, while Frankfurt critical theory constitutes similarities of a kind, any general characterization of the Frankfurt school as a whole is bound to be limited by being inattentive to the various ideological and methodological nuances of its members (Lowenthal, 1989; Kellner, 1990). The school is not itself the institutional apparatus for a singular systemic method.

Still, we can say that the Frankfurt school "developed a critical and transdisciplinary approach to cultural and communication studies, combining political economy, textual analysis, and analysis of social and ideological effects" (Kellner, 2004), as well as psychoanalytic techniques, and that the forms of critical theory which they developed were intended to be a form of "dialectics of the present" (Best and Kellner, 2001) capable of countering the intellectual vogues of naïve positivism, crude materialism, and idealistic phenomenology that characterized the period in favor of a normative and historical descriptions of sociocultural phenomena. To this end, the Frankfurt school drew upon a wide array of imaginative concepts that attempted to reveal the negative effects of modern culture's ideological blinders, while offering socioeconomic explanations and the hope for solutions through the production of a rigorous epistemological stance that sought to tether the act of research to the emancipatory critique of social foundations (Adorno, 1969). In this way, Frankfurt school critical theory attempted to gain research perspectives outside of what it took to be the mainly unconscious, systematic complicity of researchers with the domination built into the social order. As Horkheimer remarked, the methodology of critical theory distinguished itself from the form of socially determined research that "binds a scholar and his science into the apparatus of society" (Horkheimer, 1972).

It is this fundamental commitment that ultimately girded the collective critical research work of the Frankfurt school, and in this respect perhaps too much has been made of the school's methodological difference from an American-styled empiricism that had the tendency towards producing "administrative" research (Slack and Allor, 1983) that sought to describe process and not structure. While there often were (and are) sharp differences between critical theory and other forms of research, the Frankfurt school in fact drew upon many modes of research, both inside and outside of administrative constraints, and developed instruments that were capable both of providing results that had descriptive power and normative explanatory value. Again, the distinguishing mark of critical theory is ultimately that it attempted to expose instrumentalist knowledge, not that it abhorred particular research instruments per se.

### **British Cultural Studies and the Birmingham School**

Working class subcultures of 'resistance' – teds, mods, rockers, skins, punks and so on – were read *politically* as symbolic challenges to the dominant culture.

-- Jim McGuigan (1992)

As with the Frankfurt school, the tradition of British cultural studies has developed over a number of periods and should not be thought of simply as a singular entity, even if the history of these periods can be shown to be related to one another as a form of continuum. British cultural studies arose in the 1950's with the Marxist-informed work of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and E.P. Thompson that analyzed the significance of working-class cultures in Britain and the negative effects of mass culture on the proletariat. Williams, in particular, legitimated such cultural exegesis as an academic endeavor, relating it to a new form of literary criticism that would attempt to incorporate sociological and anthropological approaches to generational studies in order to explain "the whole way of life of a people" (Williams, 1961).

In 1964, Hoggart teamed with Stuart Hall, founded the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and thereby began what would be known as the Birmingham school. Initially, the school would continue in its project of analyzing mass media and popular culture, attempting to chart forces of resistance and demonstrate how the dominant culture attempted to meet such opposition with integrative measures. To this degree, it shared a common vision with the Frankfurt school. As Kellner (2002) has noted, "Like the Frankfurt school, British cultural

studies concluded that mass culture was playing an important role in integrating the working class into existing capitalist societies and that a new consumer and media culture was forming a new mode of capitalist hegemony... Both traditions focused on the intersections of culture and ideology and saw ideology critique as central to a critical cultural studies." It was similar also to the Frankfurt school in utilizing synthetic research methods that blended Marxism and structuralism with a variety of continental traditions, in order to produce a "culturalism" that blended humanism with empirical social science (Hall, 1980). However, whereas the Frankfurt school often sought to develop scientific studies that had universal applications, it has been charged that the Birmingham school was insular in focusing solely on the "British case," and that they held the possibility of cross-cultural social science as suspect on ideological grounds (Dunning in Rojek, 2004).

But as the Birmingham school continued through the 1970's, incorporating the work of young scholars like Dick Hebdige, Paul Willis, and Angela McRobbie, important differences from both the Frankfurt school and the earlier wave of British cultural studies emerged as the school's research began to deal more explicitly with explanatory issues of race, gender, nationality, and subculture beyond the sole descriptive focus on a political economy of class. Along with Willis, Hebdige helped to generate the first reflexively ethnographic and empirical analyses of youth culture, and youth styles were described as subcultural "noise" capable of jamming dominant media transmissions (Hebdige, 1979). The eventual reality of oppositional culture-jamming, they found, was not that it replaced dominant media representations with its own. Rather, in the view of the Birmingham school, alternative subcultures strive to capture media attention and in so doing become involved in the Janus-faced process of attempting to transform dominant codes even as they become appropriated, commodified, and redefined by the hegemonic culture with which they contest (Hebdige, 1979). Correspondingly, one can surmise that the school's own oppositional research partook of a similar logical development in its relationship to mainstream sociological and educational research paradigms.

Hall himself originated the move to incorporate Barthesian semiological studies into their research and his famous article "Encoding/Decoding" (1973) identified how audiences can demonstrate agency even within the codification process presented by dominant culture. Based still in a neo-Gramscian theory of hegemony, such theory moved in opposite directions than earlier work in cultural studies toward articulating potentials within capitalism for people to actualize their desires and transform mass culture into popular culture (McGuigan, 1992). Finally, with the rise of postmodernism in the 1980's, many involved in British cultural studies abandoned any semblance of the explanatory Marxist project altogether as they began to focus instead on the descriptive tracing of the schizophrenic flow of group identities and the global play of cultural differences in contemporary life.

This has led to a new form of British cultural studies, Post-subcultural Studies (Muggleton, 2003), that attempt to illuminate the many and mixed cultural meanings of globalization. Post-subcultural theorists chart the complex forms of hybrid culture and identity that increasingly occur throughout the world due to the proliferation of media like film, television, popular music, the Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) in people's (and especially youths') everyday lives. According to Post-subculturalists, the rise of an Information Society based on new media technologies has produced a particularly dynamic media culture and in this cultural matrix, global and local, as well as homogenizing and diversifying, influences continuously merge in the lifestyles, performances, and sociopolitical practices of contemporary youth and others. While some forms of this research offer the promise of attempting to account for the ways in which global youth negotiate individualism amidst market-based tribalism and strive for political agency within a world of media spectacles, thereby tethering their cultural description to the larger explanatory role played in its production by global capital (Kahn and Kellner, 2006a), a critique based in political economy has been largely lost in others.

### **Explanatory Limitations**

...both traditions to some extent overcome the weaknesses and limitations of the other.

-- Douglas Kellner (2002)

As Kellner (2002) and McGuigan (1992) have both stated, while postmodern turns in British cultural studies are not in themselves without merit, their tendency to romanticize the rebel consumer and move away from critique of the political economy of globalization is a serious limitation. As Kellner further notes, that many of Stuart Hall's circle have either rejected or ignored the critiques of the culture industries and other concepts advanced by the Frankfurt school is highly unfortunate considering the massive restructuring of the global economy that has led to an unprecedented corporate hegemony over the cultural sphere of people's lives. McGuigan, for his part, correctly surmises that while Gramsci's model of hegemony provided the Birmingham school with a sound theoretical

foundation for understanding cultural politics, as British cultural studies moved from subcultural studies to theorize popular cultural generally, it lost the possibility of maintaining an explanatory political direction. For example, as British cultural studies has taken to valorizing as oppositional popular counterhegemonies that are neither clearly left nor right on the political spectrum, the result is that movements in the direction of neoliberalism are promoted in the same vein as those that struggle for participatory democracy. This has resulted, one might argue, from a research agenda that favors cultural description over political explanation.

The Frankfurt school, for its part, may have been overly harsh on popular culture, expected too much from the countercultural avant-garde, and been too ambiguous in attempting to theorize an anti-authoritarian revolution in terms of texts that could be styled as elitist. While the school's theories often contained a legitimation of rational authority, which they would claim for themselves, as opposed to the irrational authority of a totalitarian force such as the American culture industries, the category of "authority" itself proved difficult to clearly define *a priori* in its good/bad varieties and their very attempt to legitimate constructive authority figures itself was historically challenged by radical students in the 1960's (Morrow and Torres, 1995). In this respect, British cultural studies, stands as a balancing corrective to some of the more dogmatic and high brow modes of the Frankfurt school (Kellner, 2002).

### **Considerations for Research into Critical Media Pedagogy**

If new media are becoming accepted in pedagogy, the question remains whether and when humanists will extend their notion of critical research beyond print to include new media forms.  
-- Jay David Bolter (2003)

With the mushrooming emergence of a global media culture, developing research into critical media pedagogy that draws upon the cultural studies insights of the Frankfurt and Birmingham schools is arguably more important than ever. Media have become a dominant educative force in society, and to a meaningful extent the new media characterized by information and communication technologies (ICTs) are revolutionary sociocultural forces. On the one hand, they may constitute a dramatic transformation of everyday life in the direction of more emancipatory and democratic potentials (Kahn and Kellner, 2005). Yet, it must be admitted that this progressive dimension co-evolves with processes that also promote and disseminate the capitalist consumer society, drives for narcissistic individualism and repressive competition patterns. In this manner, the globalized extension of new media has also supported novel modes of commodity fetishism, self alienation, and cultural domination yet to be clearly perceived, theorized, or combated.

Recently, cultural studies and critical pedagogy have begun to teach us to recognize the ubiquity of media culture in contemporary society, the growing trends toward multicultural education and the need for a media literacy that addresses the issue of multicultural and social difference (Kellner, 1998). On the other hand, research in media studies has often followed postmodern trends of late that valorize the plethora of hybrid forms within media culture while unfortunately neglecting critical economic considerations of the media themselves (Ampuja, 2004). Research into critical media pedagogy now must overcome this cultural populist tendency by also deconstructing the normalization of new media as capitalist technologies, and, on the one hand, reconstructive technoliteracies (Kahn and Kellner, 2006b) should be investigated that attempt to understand how people can turn new media into oppositional and participatory tools for empowerment and the overcoming of social oppression, as models and concepts of critical media literacies are developed that challenge mainstream, corporate approaches (Kellner and Share, 2006), on the other.

Critical media research is thus needed that focuses on how new media such as ICTs constitute a contested terrain, used by the left, right, and center of both dominant cultures and subcultures to promote their own agendas and interests. The political battles of the future may well be fought in the streets, factories, parliaments, and other sites of past struggle, but politics is already mediated by broadcast, computer, and information technologies and will increasingly be so in the future. This is at least in part a positive development that opens radical possibilities for a greater range of opinion, new modes of virtual and actual political communities, and original forms of direct political action. Those interested in the political and cultural research of the future should therefore be clear on the important role of the alternative public spheres offered by new media and intervene therein accordingly, while critical media theorists and activists have the responsibility of engaging students in the literacies that ultimately amount to the skills that will enable them to participate in the ongoing struggle inherent in cultural politics.

A decade ago Sholle and Denski (1995) polemicized against the "schizophrenia" in media education, demanding that media theorists take up and understand the production literacies of actual media artifacts. Likewise,

in a manner akin to the Frankfurt school's move to overcome the compartmentalization of disciplinary controls through supradisciplinarity, Kavoori and Matthews (2004) envision research experiences that integrate critique and production and overcome the typical research distinctions between spectators, critical viewers, and media creators. Hammer (2006) has most lately argued convincingly for the bridging of theory and practice in this domain, and Dahlberg (2004) has pointed out the need to overcome deterministic media research by blending investigations and explanations of ICT usage, with those of their technological form and social nature. However, too often research explanations by media experts who have largely failed to manage this level of integration in their own work and lives remain the norm. Therefore, researchers who seek to adequately describe and explain new media need to have achieved at least some manner of literacy in their constructive uses, even if the larger aim of any particular piece of research is to interrogate ICTs as problematic culturally or politically.

It is clearly a major task of contemporary critical media pedagogy to produce research that explains how new media can provide the possibility of an alternative symbolic economy, of empowered forms of culture and politics, and of instruments of democratic political struggle. Consequently, it is an additional challenge for the researchers into critical media pedagogy to be involved themselves with the oppositional groups that utilize new media to develop the forms of technopolitics that can produce a freer and happier world and which might liberate humanity and nature from the tyrannical and oppressive forces that currently constitute much of our global and local realities. In this manner, research into critical media pedagogy would be more deeply grounded in a politics whose very realization of emancipatory aims would verify that critical media research has tethered its cultural descriptions to transformative socioeconomic explanations.

To conclude, media research and pedagogy can be reconstructed as part of a radically democratic project, and cultural studies insights gleaned from the Frankfurt and Birmingham schools can be involved usefully in the attempt to develop strong explanatory theories to that effect. But it cannot be stressed enough: the project of reconstructing research into critical media pedagogy must take different forms in different contexts. In almost every cultural and social situation, critical research can be enhanced so that it enables citizens to name the media system, describe and grasp the technological changes occurring as defining features of the new global media order, and learn to experimentally engage in critical and oppositional practices in the interests of democratization and progressive transformation. As part of a truly multicultural world, then, we need to encourage the growth and flourishing of numerous research standpoints (Harding, 2004) into media culture, always looking out for and legitimizing counterhegemonic needs, values and understandings, and thereby "embracing the pedagogical... confrontation with difference" (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 2006). Following Ernest Morrell (2006), this means fostering an action-oriented element to critical research that includes nonacademics' voices in the construction of discourse, working collaboratively and in intimate solidarity with subject populations, and always towards the goal of intervening in power imbalances to effect liberatory social transformation. Taken altogether, this would be to produce the most rigorous research on global media culture to date – a cultural research which defies assimilation into dominant orders, and which is accordingly critical and pedagogical in both its form, content, and scope.

## Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor. (1969). Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America. In D. Fleming and B. Bailyn (eds.), *The Intellectual Migration: Europe and America, 1930–1960*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press/Belknap.
- Agger, Ben. (1991). Critical Theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism: Their Sociological Relevance. *Annual Review Sociologique*, 17: 105-31.
- Ampuja, Marko. (2004). Critical Media Research, Globalisation Theory and Commercialisation. *Javnost-The Public*, Vol. 11, No. 3.
- Benjamin, Walter. (1969). *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken.
- Best, Steven and Kellner, Douglas. (2001). *The Postmodern Adventure: Science, Technology, and Cultural Studies at the Third Millennium*. New York: Guilford.
- Bolter, Jay David. (2003). Theory and Practice in New Media Studies. In *Digital Media Revisited: Theoretical and Conceptual Innovation in Digital Domains*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Dahlberg, Lincoln. (2004). Internet Research Tracings: Towards Non-Reductionist Methodology. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. Vol. 9, No. 3.
- Hall, Stuart. (1973). Encoding/decoding. In Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (ed.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. London: Hutchinson.
- (1980). Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms. *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 2.
- Habermas, Jürgen. (1970). On Systematically Distorted Speech. *Inquiry*, Vol. 13 (1970): 205-218.

- (1981). *Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 1*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Hammer, Rhonda. (2006). Teaching Critical Media Literacies: Theory, Praxis and Empowerment. *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*. Vol. 2, No. 1.
- Harding, Sandra (ed.) (2004). *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Hebdige, Dick. (1979). *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Horkheimer, Max. (1972). *Critical Theory*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor. (1993). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Continuum.
- Kavoori, Anandam and Matthews, Denise. (2004). Critical Media Pedagogy: Lessons from the Thinking Television Project. *Howard Journal of Communication*, Vol. 15, No. 2.
- Kahn, Richard and Kellner, Douglas. (2005). Oppositional Politics and the Internet: A Critical and Reconstructive Approach. *Cultural Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1.
- (2006a). Youth Culture. In R. Robertson (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Globalization*. New York: Grolier Publishing.
- (2006b). Reconstructing Technoliteracy: A Multiple Literacies Approach. In John Dakers (ed.), *Defining Technological Literacy: Towards an Epistemological Framework*, Palgrave.
- Kincheloe, Joe and Steinberg, Shirley. (2006). An Ideology of Miseducation: Countering the Pedagogy of Empire. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, Vol. 6, No. 1.
- Kellner, Douglas. (1990). Critical Theory and the Crisis of Social Theory. *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 33, No. 1.
- (1998). Multiple Literacies and Critical Pedagogy in a Multicultural Society. *Educational Theory*, Vol. 48.
- (2000). New Technologies, New Literacies: Reconstructing Education for the New Millennium. *Teaching Education*, Vol. 11, No. 3.
- (2002). The Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies: The Missed Articulation. In J. Nealon & C. Irr (eds.), *Rethinking the Frankfurt school: Alternative legacies of cultural critique*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- (2004). Frankfurt School in George Ritzer (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kellner, Douglas and Share, Jeff. (2006). Toward Critical Media Literacy: Core Concepts, Debates, Organizations, and Policy.
- Lowenthal, Leo. (1989). *Critical Theory and Frankfurt Theorists*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Marcus, Gyorgy. (2001). Walter Benjamin or: The Commodity as Phantasmagoria. *New German Critique*, No. 83: 13.
- McGuigan, Jim. (1992). *Cultural Populism*. New York: Routledge.
- Morrell, Ernest. (2006). Toward a Bottom-Up Accountability System in Urban Education: Students as Researchers in Urban Schools. In J. Cammarota, S. Ginwright, and P. Noguera (eds.), *Youth, Communities, and Social Justice: Toward a National Strategy for Youth Development*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Morrow, Raymond and Torres, Carlos Alberto (1995). *Social Theory and Education*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Muggleton, David. (2003). *The Post-subcultures Reader*. London: Berg.
- Rojek, Chris. (2004). An Anatomy of the Leicester School of Sociology: An Interview with Eric Dunning. *Journal of Classical Sociology*. Vol 4, No. 3.
- Sholle, David and Denski, Stan. (1995). Critical Media Literacy: Reading Remapping, Rewriting. In P. McLaren, R. Hammer, D. Sholle, and S. Reilly (eds.), *Rethinking Media Literacy*. New York: Lang Publishers.
- Slack, Jennifer Daryl and Allor, Martin. (1983). The Political and Epistemological Constituents of Critical Communications Research. *The Journal of Communication*, Vol. 33, No. 3.
- Wiggershaus, Rolf. (1994). *The Frankfurt School*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Williams, Raymond. (1961). *The Long Revolution*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Winter, Rainer. (2004). Critical Pedagogy. In G. Ritzer (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.