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Cultural Criticism and Post-Discursive Approaches: An Insider's Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

Cultural criticism, as a cognitive strategy emerging from post-discursive paradigms, seeks to revalidate and centralize the marginal by exploring issues overlooked by traditional literary criticism. The latter confined itself within aesthetic preoccupations, leading to epistemic blind spots and cultural myopia due to its excessive focus on beauty while neglecting the underlying systemic flaws hidden beneath aesthetic form. Consequently, cultural criticism turned toward activating systemic strategies aimed at uncovering the implicit and the unspoken, by shifting away from textual analysis toward the critique of systems both visible and hidden. It regards the text as a comprehensive cultural discourse or cultural event shaped by various interacting forces. Its decoding requires the convergence of multiple interdisciplinary mechanisms cultural, political, social, and ethical to expose the systemic flaws within both the text and culture at large, thereby deconstructing their mental and cultural structures.

Building on these premises, this study seeks to examine the strategies employed by cultural criticism to reveal underlying systems and to evaluate their role within contemporary critical discourse.

Keywords: Cultural criticism – Post-discursive paradigms – Interdisciplinary studies – The implicit – Cultural systems.

INTRODUCTION:

For decades, literary criticism dominated approaches to literary texts, remaining confined within immanent structural analysis, which established a descriptive and scientific method detached from context. However, this confinement reduced the text to the authority and metaphysics of a single model, disregarding its other manifestations. This prompted a reexamination of critical tools to free them from rigidity and open them toward interpretive horizons that reject the principle of singularity.

Thus arose the need for a methodological shift inspired by postmodern studies—one that embraces intersection, interactivity, and dialogism, acknowledging multiplicity and the legitimacy of difference in thought, taste, theory, and method. This openness aims to illuminate the full range of discourse both the said and the unsaid given its complex nature and the emergence of new discursive forms through sound and image.

Such transformations call for methodological integration and procedural dialogue that expand criticism beyond narrow aesthetic and structural confines, inviting attention to the implicit and the systemic. These gaps gave rise to cultural criticism as both a complementary and transcendent epistemic alternative to prior critical paradigms. It thus became necessary to develop new tools capable of engaging the potentialities of discourse and the evolving realities of sound and image.

From this standpoint, the present study explores the discourse of cultural criticism, raising key questions concerning its subject, methodology, and operative mechanisms, such as:

- What is meant by cultural criticism, and why did this shift occur?
- What are its dimensions, tools, and levels of application?
- Does it rely on a culture of erasure or a dialogical culture?
- Has it succeeded in formulating interactive, interdisciplinary procedures that transcend purely textual methods?
- Has cultural criticism managed to go beyond the propositions of literary criticism and produce effective analytical tools that surpass the previous paradigm?

Prologue

Cultural criticism was founded as a postmodern intellectual and epistemological project, embodying a historical epistemic shift across various domains—critical, cultural, and intellectual. It arose from a fusion of methods and theories that collectively contributed to building its conceptual and procedural framework. Methodologically, theoretically, and epistemologically, it intersects with multiple disciplines such as sociology, psychology, history, communication studies, political science, philosophy, and anthropology. It also draws on diverse schools and references, including cultural studies, the critique of culture, techno-narratives, institutional criticism, and multiculturalism (such as New Historicism and Civic Criticism).

As an intellectual endeavor, cultural criticism takes culture in its comprehensive and multidimensional sense as a core component in constructing open interpretive models aligned with the expansion and fluidity of cultural boundaries, which enable it to interact with various fields of knowledge under the concept of **interdisciplinarity and transversality**.*

Cultural criticism, as a new intellectual product, was deeply influenced by postmodern thought, from which it emerged. Postmodernism values plurality, transformation, dynamism, and the interpenetration of references and theories, all serving to better understand the nature of literary and cultural texts. This represented a reversal of the modernist paradigm, rejecting the notion of a single, absolute truth that early modernists in the West attempted, in vain, to transfer from the natural sciences into the human sciences. As postmodern thinkers confirmed, such a claim is false, for knowledge is grounded in multiplicity—of cultures, artistic and literary discourses, and identities.ⁱ

From this standpoint, cultural criticism aligns with postmodern thought, which operates in the absence of a fixed methodology. Postmodernism is inherently deconstructive, seeking to dismantle methodological rigidity, destabilize centralities, and reconstruct meaning through plurality, difference, and anti-essentialism.

Poststructuralist studies (poststructuralisme) achieved a qualitative leap in text analysis through profound conceptual revisions and innovative procedures that reshaped both the method and the material of criticism. Two pioneering moves can be noted:

The first was the opening of cultural studies (followed by cultural poetics and cultural criticism) to academic disciplines by breaking down the barriers between them. Thus, the literary, historical, philosophical, and anthropological intertwined; the written and oral, the popular and marginal, and the officially recognized all merged into a single cultural framework. This greatly enriched critical studies in unprecedented ways.ⁱⁱ

The second was the recognition of two contradictory levels within discourse:

- A conscious, explicit level, represented by the aesthetic or literary dimension that had long preoccupied traditional criticism.
- An unconscious, implicit level, which resists direct expression and can only be uncovered through an archaeological investigation in the manner of Michel Foucault, revealing how knowledge is constructed and how exclusion operates under the guise of rational discourse, while concealing its opposite within.ⁱⁱⁱ

This implicit layer holds accumulated residues of the collective unconscious, revealed only through subtle hints and symbolic traces. Therefore, it becomes necessary to disrupt the intellectual structures of the text to reach what is unspoken and hidden—the underlying concepts and ideas that constitute the unconscious of literary texts^{iv}—in order to grasp their semantic nuclei and expose what they conceal.

1. Cultural Criticism and the Discourse of Interdisciplinarity:

Those engaged in cultural criticism rely on a diverse and multifaceted epistemological toolkit, because the cultural–textual phenomenon under study is inherently complex and cannot be fully grasped from a single perspective. In this sense, “the cultural critic is an inter-field, multifaceted, and encyclopedic thinker, entitled to draw upon every theoretical arsenal available across all fields of knowledge, without methodological coercion or orthodox academic oversight.”^v

Cultural criticism thus departs from rigid academic classifications and from the confines of monolithic methodologies, moving instead toward what might be called post-method or trans-method inquiry. Its field is vast “the entire range of human activity in all societies, whether primitive or advanced; it does not stop at intellectual production but extends to material production. Its subject is the readable, audible, and visible: language, painting, sculpture, music, drama, cinema, advertising, and all other human activities.”^{vi}

All these are seen as equal cultural products, each carrying meanings and expressing implicit systems hidden behind aesthetic or formal appearances. Hence, there is no room for closed, self-contained epistemologies; the focus is now on interpenetration and interdisciplinarity. This shift marks the dissolution of boundaries between fields of knowledge, heralding the end of the eras of “pure science,” “pure culture,” and “pure art,” and the emergence of an age of epistemic interconnection, cultural overlap, and methodological intersection, where “no barriers divide knowledge or culture, nor borders restrict methods and strategies.”^{vii}

Since cultural criticism is a critical practice that employs analytical tools to examine and interpret texts linguistic, visual, or auditory it seeks to uncover the political, cultural, social, and economic systems embedded within them. This practice has developed through multiple, overlapping entry points, which have granted it stability and prominence in the contemporary critical landscape. The cultural critic, therefore, analyzes discursive systems from within specific intellectual traditions, such as hermeneutic, deconstructive, feminist, Marxist, semiotic, anthropological, or sociological approaches, among others.^{viii}

For instance, when cultural criticism studies popular culture, media, or journalism, it often employs concepts drawn from psychoanalysis, borrowing Freud's notion of the individual unconscious and Jung's idea of the collective unconscious. It also utilizes semiotic theories, expanding their application to visual and textual media alike. Critics focus on images and symbols, examining their relation to prevailing political and social systems, as well as the ideological functions such representations perform within social and political life.^{ix}

As a branch of cultural studies, cultural criticism not only borrows from neighboring disciplines but also integrates and expands across diverse fields. "Cultural studies have drawn upon the social sciences and various branches of the humanities to establish a sophisticated network of theories and methodologies applicable to a wide range of disciplines related to human sciences in the broadest sense—literary theory, communication theories, media studies, discourse analysis, cultural policy, social engineering, and economics."^x

For this reason, cultural critics have "boldly combined most analytical tools developed in different disciplines, coordinating among them while discarding those that no longer serve their purpose. They have formed alternative research networks independent of traditional academic divisions, encouraging others to do likewise."^{xi}

Thus, cultural criticism can be seen as a multidisciplinary approach rooted in historical awareness, seeking to explore cultural systems and structures by treating the text or discourse as a means to understand the cultural components embedded in the linguistic, literary, and aesthetic unconscious. Its objective lies not in the text's architectural form but in its semantic nuclei, where cultural systems accumulate and interact.^{xii}

Accordingly, discourse is understood to have two faces: a visible surface and a concealed underside, between which a sharp dialectic operates. The surface level employs language to disguise meaning, using aesthetic expressions as rhetorical masks such as total metaphor or cultural irony where the overt meaning hides its opposite.^{xiii}

These are the cultural mechanisms through which criticism investigates underlying systems, deconstructs cultural structures, and deciphers both their explicit and hidden codes, revealing the conscious and unconscious dimensions of discourse.

2. Methodological Steps for the Cultural Approach:

Interpretation as a Cultural Procedure:

Interpretation in cultural criticism operates on two levels the visible and the hidden. The first level deconstructs the apparent cultural systems of texts, revealing their causes and underlying ideological controls. This process relies on deconstruction, displacement, and the exclusion of centralities, independent of the aesthetic or structural autonomy of the text. The second level embodies an additional postmodern perspective that may be called "the critique or deconstruction of absorption," centered on uncovering the historical contexts that the text has absorbed and that contributed to its production.^{xiv}

In addition to interpretation, the cultural approach follows specific methodological steps based on the following procedural mechanisms:^{xv}

- Starting from the text or discourse as a carrier of cultural signs and meanings that require critical reading (understanding, interpretation, and analysis).
- Approaching the literary, artistic, and aesthetic text with the goal of uncovering its implicit cultural system.
- Recognizing the existence of latent and unconscious cultural systems, and paying attention to the various strategies and techniques through which culture transmits its hidden patterns.
- Prioritizing the implicit cultural meaning over the visible linguistic signifier.
- Focusing on the systemic cultural significance of the hidden structure, and on rhetorical mechanisms such as metaphors, metonymy, imagery, and connotation.
- Moving from the stage of analytical understanding to the stage of cultural interpretation.
- Drawing upon the human sciences, particularly those that maintain an organic and direct relationship with the analyzed text.

In performing his critical task, the cultural critic remains guided by a central goal: to reveal cultural dimensions, expose ideologies, and deconstruct the illusions and myths embedded within the institutions that produce the text under study. By succeeding in this, the critic affirms the true value of cultural criticism, which lies in:^{xvi}

- Avoiding selectivity and elitism.
- Experiencing the text through cultural appreciation (beyond aesthetic value).
- Paying attention to marginalized and excluded texts.

3. Cultural Criticism — Concepts and Features:

According to critic Mustafa Al-Dabbaa, cultural criticism is characterized by several essential features that form the core of its practice:^{xvii}

- **Integrative Nature:**
Cultural criticism does not reject other critical approaches but refuses the dominance of any single one. The exclusive control of a single method limits the discovery of many significant signs within texts. Hence, it aims to establish a transversal procedural system that transcends disciplinary boundaries, grounded in the belief that discursive borders are inherently interconnected.
- **Expansiveness:**

It broadens the scope of inquiry to include all forms of human activity, opening its field to multiple expressions of culture under the umbrella of cultural criticism. This expansion enriches art and liberates human thought from ideas that have solidified over time, helping it avoid falling into the traps of uniformity and centralization such as the dominance of sports or music as cultural obsessions which, according to Al-Ghadhami, create systemic imbalance. Cultural criticism seeks to counter this by engaging both central and marginal discourses.

- **Discovery:**

It seeks to direct attention toward new aesthetic forms both within literary texts and within reality itself, considered as a broader text that projects signs and systems with intellectual and cultural value.

- **Freedom as its Foundation:**

Practicing cultural criticism requires a greater degree of freedom in subject matter (as it studies all human activity, not just literary texts) and in method (by creating new critical mechanisms). This expansion of freedom has created a point of convergence between cultural criticism and feminist criticism, as both advocate intellectual and methodological liberation.

4. Cultural Criticism and the Problem of Methodology:

Despite its many strengths and its open analytical capacity, critical practice within cultural criticism is not free from methodological pitfalls and challenges, the most significant of which include: ^{xviii}

- Excessive focus on external, referential, or ideological dimensions.
- Dependence on subjective and personal interpretation, which results in impressionistic conclusions that undermine objectivity and scientific precision.
- Viewing the literary or aesthetic text from a narrow and trivial cultural perspective, treating it merely as a system filled with ideological or cultural content.
- A renewed form of limitation and closure when aesthetics and artistic dimensions are neglected—especially problematic when dealing with literary texts, where aesthetic value is an indispensable component.
- Falling under the dominance of politicization, where results are reduced to political or ideological judgments that lack aesthetic grounding.

In this context, one may refer to the methodological problem inherent in Cultural Criticism, which renders it somewhat fluid and non-methodical due to its vast and heterogeneous epistemological foundations. This breadth has prevented it from claiming a single, original subject matter or a distinctive specialization. The concepts it adopts are dispersed across numerous disciplines philosophy, sociology, media studies, politics, and literary criticism, among others without relying on a clear or consistent method.

As a result, cultural criticism has been described as strategic yet methodologically hybrid, characterized by a lack of strict discipline. This openness has led to several challenges, notably the ambiguity of its concepts and the absence of unified critical and procedural tools, leaving critics to constantly devise new analytical instruments for each text or context. This, in turn, raises a deeper issue the absence of a clearly defined methodology ^{xix} since the field depends on transdisciplinarity and dialogical thinking, which some scholars interpret as a weakness.

In this regard, critic Charbel Dagher observes that: “This new form of criticism, as promoted by some, remains methodologically infirm if not entirely devoid of method especially when compared to the rigor and demonstrative strength of structuralism. The troubling question, then, is whether we are, knowingly or not, returning to traditional criticism in the end.” ^{xx}

Thus, excessive openness and the blurring of boundaries have at times become an obstacle and a sign of instability in the development of cultural criticism.

However, pointing out these limitations does not imply that cultural criticism lacks value or purpose. On the contrary, its procedural and analytical tools represent a methodological revolution and a critical breakthrough in literary and cultural studies, as well as in the broader human sciences. Through it, many preconceived ideas and dogmatic assumptions have been reexamined and corrected, leading to more dynamic and self-reflective approaches.

Cultural criticism has thus helped move critical and philosophical studies away from dogmatism, encouraging greater continuity and vitality in cultural inquiry, and prompting deeper questioning of cultural and ideological orientations in the reading of modern texts. ^{xxi}

These new texts, with their semantic and aesthetic productivity, call for innovative analytical tools that correspond to their complexity and creative richness.

CONCLUSION:

We conclude that cultural criticism is not a negation of literary criticism, but rather an expansion of the horizons of critical reading, liberating it from the confines of disciplinary boundaries and moving beyond the assumptions of poetic theories that often overlook the interwoven relationship between texts, history, politics, existence, society, and humanity.

- Cultural criticism has succeeded in overcoming several limitations of traditional literary criticism, as it no longer confines itself to what is considered “high literature” within the framework of the official literary institution.
- It can be regarded as a constructive critical discourse that seeks to uncover latent and operative systems and the references that creative works conceal in order to gain legitimacy and assert dominance—thus exposing the relativity of aesthetic values.

- Cultural criticism distinguishes itself from literary criticism by rejecting selectivity, aiming instead to bridge the gap between the official and the marginal. It is characterized by its interdisciplinary and intertextual nature, which forms a fundamental aspect of its structure and purpose. Its function lies in giving voice to the silenced texts within society those marginalized, suppressed, or neglected works that do not belong to the officially sanctioned canon studied by elite literary groups serving specific social or ideological interests.
- It can therefore be seen as an open-ended critical strategy, engaging with diverse discourses and fields that have nourished its approach with a limitless range of cross-disciplinary and nonconformist procedures.
- Ultimately, cultural criticism stands as a postmodern discourse that approaches texts through a contextually open perspective, grounded in the critique of systems and structures, both visible and hidden, that shape meaning and ideology within cultural production.

FOOTNOTES:

* **Interdisciplinarity** The concept of interdisciplinarity is sometimes used to mean **connection, interaction, or collaboration across disciplines**, and it is also defined as the **process of deliberately bringing together specific components** drawn from two or more different fields. The components of a discipline include **methods, concepts, values, objectives, skills, and data**.

Another perspective views interdisciplinarity as what is required for studying **complex problems, concepts, or situations** with multiple dimensions that cannot be adequately addressed within a single discipline. It is therefore the **process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing an issue** of such breadth or complexity that it cannot be studied through one discipline alone, with the goal of forming a **comprehensive picture of the subject from multiple viewpoints**.

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ⁱⁱ Boukhal Lakhdar, Cultural Criticism – In the Memory of the Term, Journal of the History of Sciences, no. 8, vol. 2, June 2017, p. 383.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 383.

^{iv} Salim Heiloula, Contemporary Reading Strategies in Modern Western Criticism: Cultural Criticism and the Strategy of Revealing Implicit Patterns, Al-Madawwana Journal, Laboratory of Literary and Critical Studies, Blida, no. 5, January 2016, p. 11.

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^{vi} Abdullah Habib Al-Tamimi & Sahar Kazem Hamza Al-Shujairi, The Evolution of Cultural Criticism in the West, University of Babylon Journal, p. 162.

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^{viii} Nazem Oudah, The Formation of Theory in Islamic and Contemporary Arab Thought, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Jadid, Beirut, 1st ed., 2009, p. 353.

^{ix} Ben Said Mohamed, Cultural Criticism and the Wave of Globalization, Studies Journal, Algeria, no. 4, June 2016, p. 119.

^x Chris Barker, Dictionary of Cultural Studies, trans. Jamal Belkacem, p. 15.

^{xi} Abdel Fattah Al-'Aqeeli, Culture and Cultural Criticism: Translated Articles, Faculty of Arts, Minya University, p. 56.

^{xii} Jamil Hamdaoui, Theories of Literary Criticism in the Postmodern Era, Arab Intellectual Foundation, Sydney, Australia, n.d., 2010, p. 93.

^{xiii} Elyamine Ben Toumi, The Text and the Procedure: From Systemic Criticism to Cultural Criticism, Ma'arif Journal, Bouira, p. 160.

^{xiv} Bushra Mousa Saleh, Poetics of Culture: Toward a Poetic Theory in Cultural Criticism, Ministry of Culture, Iraq – Baghdad, 1st ed., 2012, pp. 8–9.

^{xv} Ben Said Mohamed, Cultural Criticism and the Wave of Globalization, p. 117.

^{xvi} Ibid., p. 118.

^{xvii} Mostafa Al-Dabbaa, Questions of Cultural Criticism, Conference of Egyptian Writers in the Regions, Minya, December 23–26, 2003, pp. 10–13.

^{xviii} Ben Said Mohamed, Cultural Criticism and the Wave of Globalization, p. 127.

^{xix} Tarek Bouhala, The Genealogy of Cultural Criticism Theory, Notebooks of the Algerian Poetics Laboratory, M'sila, no. 3, October 2016, p. 268.

^{xx} Charbel Dagher, On Structuralism: A Critique of It in the Need for It, in Horizons of Contemporary Literary Theory, ed. Fakhri Saleh, Arab Institution for Studies and Publishing, Beirut, 1st ed., 2007, p. 38.

^{xxi} See: Ben Said Mohamed, Cultural Criticism and the Wave of Globalization, p. 127.