

# “Cultural Studies can undermine political power, and that’s good”.

## Short Dialogs about Cultural Studies and slavic World with Evgeny

### Dobrenko e Vladimir Papernyj

By Gian Piero Piretto

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**Gian Piero Piretto** *Do you consider yourself a Cultural Studies scholar?*

**Evgeny Dobrenko** Not really. First of all, because I am interested in particular aspects of culture such as literature, film, cultural policies and so on. Each field has its own methodology. Cultural Studies is something very vague.

**Vladimir Papernyj** I was when I was writing my PhD thesis *Culture 2* and when I was teaching at University of Southern California. Now that I spend 50% of my time on design, I am 50% of a Cultural Studies scholar.

I was always interested in the 1930–40s. First, it was the time when my parents met, got married and had me. Second, architecture of the 1930–40s was the environment I grew up in. I wanted to understand how it came about. Traditional architectural theory (columns, orders, tectonics, structures) did not explain much to me. I thought the answers should come from culture.

**G.P.P.** *What’s your own definition of Cultural Studies?*

**E.D.** Cultural Studies is neither a subject nor a field. It is grey area, which covers basically the whole spectrum of Humanities and includes history and philosophy, film and literature. For many, Cultural Studies is something very superficial, and rightly so. If you work on film, for example, and do it professionally and in depth, this is “film studies”, but if you write on film in conjunction with history or politics, it’s already Cultural Studies. If you write on Eisenstein it is “film studies”, if on Pyřev it’s Cultural Studies. If you write on Mandel’shtam it is *literaturovedenie*, but if you write about Mikhalkov - it’s more Cultural Studies. I think

people sometimes think that Cultural Studies is some “junk”. What is not a “serious” subject, is “Cultural Studies”. I think that Cultural Studies is a response to the separation of subjects, fields, and research disciplines. Nevertheless, it doesn’t make it a discipline.

**V.P.** To me, culture is something that is “playing”, as Arnold Hauser put it, “with people’s motivations and interests and giving them a sense of freedom”.

**G.P.P.** *Do you think Cultural Studies can develop only in western or capitalistic countries?*

**E.D.** Not at all. In Russia, for instance, it is a subject that covers all “bad”, middle-brow literature, film, kitsch, in a word. Also, it covers all the lacunas “between” disciplines and fields.

**V.P.** No, my thesis was written entirely in the Soviet Union, before I ever visited any western capitalistic country.

**G.P.P.** *What’s the difference, if there is a difference, between western Cultural Studies and Russian kul’turologija?*

**E.D.** No difference. It’s not even translation. It’s calque.

**V.P.** In general, Russian studies in humanities tend to be more global, they tend to try to explain everything with one single theory, they have “grand narratives” (I am guilty of that too). The drawbacks of Russian studies: at their worst, they ignore details that contradict theories. Western ones are more precise; they usually have a well-defined scope and an elaborate refer-

ence material. The drawbacks of the Western ones: at their worst, they don't see the forest for the trees (*za derev'iami ne vidiat lesa*).

**G.P.P.** *Why is kul'turologija still an underdeveloped method in post-soviet Russia?*

**E.D.** It is underdeveloped not only in Russia. It's underdeveloped in the West as well. The problem is not geographical as I've said but internal: it is a coherent discipline.

**V.P.** I am not sure it's true. There are so many PhDs in *kul'turologija* these days. But I admit, I haven't read their books.

**G.P.P.** *Do you consider Cultural Studies a method still worth the attention or something old and outgone?*

**E.D.** It is not "old". It is simply an aborted project, but it is broad enough to be convenient for the Academia so it will flourish, I think. It is especially true in the era of postmodernisation. Postmodernism is interested in all the marginal, interdisciplinary areas. And Cultural Studies is an excellent umbrella for all of this.

**V.P.** Don't know anything more important. The problem of our times - lack of communication between various disciplines in humanities. Cultural Studies seem to be the only one to bridge the gap.

**G.P.P.** *Do you think Cultural Studies requires a specific training or preparation for tuition, research and study?*

**E.D.** I think not. And that's what makes it so attractive to many students: It's about everything and about nothing. But I think you have to have a training in some specific discipline (literature, history, art history, film, and so on) the more discipline you have the more "Cultural Studies-person" you are.

**V.P.** A film director should know what a cameraman, sound engineer, set designer, composer and actors are doing, but should also do his/her own thing. Similarly, a Cultural Studies scholar should know sociology, economics, history, and so on, but do his/her own thing.

**G.P.P.** *What are the perspectives of Cultural Studies in*

*your opinion?*

**E.D.** I think cultural history is the way ahead.

**V.P.** I hope it becomes the leader of the humanities.

**G.P.P.** *Do you agree with the idea of an excessive development of Cultural Studies in American Universities and a consequent fall of their quality level?*

**E.D.** Absolutely. I worked in American Universities for many years. For many scholars Cultural Studies is a synonym of low quality research. At the same time, the majority of critics of Cultural Studies are traditionalists and their only goal is to maintain status quo of their subject so nobody bothers to analyze their Vjačeslav Ivanov for next hundred of years. . . .

**V.P.** That's a typical American problem. After WWII, modern architecture and psychoanalysis were put on a conveyer belt and mass-produced in America. Quantity turned into quality (bad in this case), as Marx would say.

**G.P.P.** *Do you consider Cultural Studies a threatening for literary studies or traditional methodological approaches to culture?*

**E.D.** No. I think it is quite benign. It does not give any new approaches. It brings them together - from political theory, from history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, critical theory, and others.

**V.P.** Yes, because of its potential strength.

**G.P.P.** *How should universities prepare students for a Cultural Studies curriculum? Which subjects should be compulsory for a serious preparation?*

**E.D.** Special subjects first of all. Literature, film, art history, critical theory, basics of sociology, political theory and others.

**V.P.** Philosophy, history and literature seem the most important to me. Next - sociology, economics, art history, musicology, history of science. . . .

**G.P.P.** *In the country where you live and work is there any resistance towards Cultural Studies?*

**E.D.** Generally, not but I do not see a big prospective for Cultural Studies. See above.

**V.P.** In Russia, scholars resent when their Western colleagues apply methods of Cultural Studies to Russia itself. They feel that only they earned the right to do that.

**G.P.P.** *What's the connection between Cultural Studies and political power?*

**E.D.** I see no direct link. Cultural Studies is an indicator of the general shift to the analysis of the mass culture. It means that mass culture play much bigger role in a contemporary world. On the other hand, Cultural Studies is close to the public management, political technologies, and others.

**V.P.** Cultural Studies can undermine political power, and that's good.

**G.P.P.** *Do you consider the study of visual culture an important branch of Cultural Studies?*

**E.D.** Of course, but it is field by itself.

**V.P.** As important as the study of texts, sounds, scientific ideas, political structures, and so on.

**G.P.P.** *How important do you consider the cooperation among teachers-scholars of different subjects, and how much attention should be dedicated to interdisciplinary approaches?*

**E.D.** To be able to work interdisciplinary one has to be able to work within one discipline. One has to be open for the different disciplines but interdisciplinary

approach is something that grows out of separate disciplines.

**V.P.** Extremely important. Without cooperation they will be like 5 five blind men describing an elephant: it's like a column, no it's like a rope, no it's like a mountain.

**G.P.P.** *Do you share or how do you react to objections about superficiality and eclecticism of Cultural Studies?*

**E.D.** As one could see from what I've said, I do share this view. I think that real Cultural Studies are something close to a cultural history.

**V.P.** The good ones are not superficial. They may be eclectic, but Plato's dialogos are also eclectic.

**G.P.P.** *You are one of the best known and more appreciated scholars of Russian Studies. Did you ever consider going back to more conventional methods or to more traditional studies?*

**E.D.** No. It is beyond one's consideration. One can't "choose" these things. It's beyond one's control. If one is a modernist writer or an artist, film director, composer, and so on), he cannot simply to change his methodology just because it is more fashionable or safe. We have lots of examples of this sort in 20th century Russian culture. People knew what was "better" but it didn't help.

**V.P.** Thanks for the honorable title. For me, the more conventional method would be literature. Have you seen my book *Mos-Angeles* (<http://www.paperny.com/mosangeles.html>)?