

ESSENTIAL ESSAYS, VOLUME I BY STUART HALL

I still remember my first encounter with the work of Stuart Hall. He gave a lecture in the Great Hall at Sheffield University while I was completing my PhD. Sitting rather than standing, he delivered a talk that I can only describe in terms of my visceral and emotional reaction. It felt like somebody pouring knowledge into my head. I sat, often with eyes closed to aid my concentration. After he finished I almost literally staggered out, knowing that my way of seeing the world around me, not to mention the position of my work within this world, would forever be different.

Famously, Hall didn't really write books: the scholarly article was his chosen form, and I'd argue that he pretty much perfected the form. But since this is the *JAS* Bookshelf, I have to select one: the recent *Essential Essays*, Volume I. Even a quick look at the contents page should get anybody's brain fizzing. The book collects some of Hall's most enduring contributions to cultural studies, his stupendous "Rethinking the 'Base and Superstructure' Metaphor"; "The Great Moving Right Show," which first articulated Thatcherism and surely needs no introduction; and many more essays that reveal his ideas about articulation and moments of conjunction. And that's just for starters.

Why is Hall so important? Why are the works of somebody who rarely wrote about the United States so central to the work of a scholar in American studies? Put simply, Hall theorized many of the things I felt about the world. He helped construct the theoretical and intellectual architecture that underpins my work, and of countless others whose work focusses on the intersection between politics and popular culture. Following Antonio Gramsci, Hall demonstrated that society's superstructure deserves our full attention. As he put it,

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture – already fully formed – might be simply "expressed". But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why "popular culture" matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it.¹

Some cultural studies scholars, such as Tara Brabazon and Steve Redhead, argued that this meant that Hall had no interest in popular culture in and of itself; that without this "struggle" it was not worth giving a damn about.² Brabazon and Redhead suggest here that all Hall does is attempt to find out what a cultural production explicitly says about political struggle, and that he dismisses anything that is not politically engaged. Obviously, this is myopic. Hall merely points out that popular culture is a site on

¹ Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" in Hall, *Essential Essays*, Volume I, *Foundations of Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019; first published 1981), 360–61.

² Tara Brabazon, "Memories of the Future: (Post) Steve Redhead, Cultural Studies and Theories for a Still-Born Century," in Steve Redhead, *The End-of-the-Century Party: Youth, Pop and the Rise of Madchester*, new edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

which struggle plays out, irrespective of any deliberate attempt at engagement on the part of its authors. Moreover, our job as analysts of it is to consider what role it plays in these struggles, to think about who wields it, how, and why. He feared that without a political mooring, cultural studies could become little more than a vehicle for theory and end up speaking only to itself, uncritically celebrating that popular culture exists rather than thinking critically about what it *means*. Watching cultural studies abandon this political project clearly stung him; no wonder he later lamented that he could not face reading yet another cultural studies analysis of Madonna.

In “Base and Superstructure” he leads us through one of Marx’s core concepts before considering Antonio Gramsci’s contribution to Marxism, pondering the notion of ideological consent, and concluding by offering a brief consideration of some key concepts in Althusserian thought. It remains a great place for readers to begin thinking flexibly about cultural studies and hegemony, not to mention structuralism and post-structuralism. “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular’” demonstrates the breadth of his thought, evaluating the development of British popular culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries before questioning what “popular” can mean and the dialectical qualities of this popular culture. Elsewhere, the collection includes “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,” the 1973 article acclaimed as one of the texts that reconstructed our understanding of mass communication theory. Here Hall thinks aloud about the language of television, using westerns, which he understands as “*the* archetypal American story,” as a key example of the encoding–decoding process.³ He wonders about the signifying power of the genre’s messages about violence before critiquing scholarly analyses that focus solely on this aspect of the genre. This leads to a discussion of the rituals replayed in westerns, which prompts thoughts about the cultural norms that the genre attempts to uphold. He follows this by thinking more broadly about television’s role in helping determine the relationship between dominant cultural orders and individuals. Using the concept of selective perception, Hall proposes a more complex understanding of the viewing public’s relationship with the cultural forms it encounters than had thus far been considered, all in about twenty pages.

The above might suggest that Hall is quite a formidable read. This is far from the case, however. He argues patiently and clearly, and while his terminology might be a tad recondite at times, the patient reader is rewarded with manifold insights that are so illuminating that I can only compare reading him for the first time to the moment in *The Matrix* where Neo finally sees the code underpinning the world that the Matrix constructed for humans (or maybe that moment when Neo gasps, “I know kung fu”). Other new readers might think that some of the ideas Hall expresses are a little obvious. I would respond by pointing out that many of his ideas have become so embedded in our ways of thinking that we simply accept them almost without question.

What is so beautiful about Hall’s work – and particularly his prose – is that he always prompts and pushes towards further analyses rather than assuming that his is the final word. He sees scholarly work as permanently in process. Hence he only offers thoughts about what *might* be the case, implicitly encouraging his readers to

³ Stuart Hall, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,” in Hall, *Essential Essays*, 257–76, 262.

build on or undercut him, aware that he is engaged in conversation with previous works, and that later works will exist in conversation with him.

Even a couple of decades later, I still remember feeling during my early forays that, to misapply Gertrude Stein, a “there” existed in my research but I wasn’t sure what that “there” was or indeed where it was. Hall enabled me to map out how to get “there” and I’m sure anybody who has had the misfortune to read any of my works will espy the debt I owe to him, especially in the way that I approached the *Dirty Harry* film series as an articulation of conservative ideology at a conjunctural moment in American history, when the postwar consensus and 1960s liberalism frayed and ultimately were eclipsed by the renaissance of American conservatism. Similarly, I turned to Hall when writing *Silicon Valley Cinema*, as I thought about a different conjunctural moment, one closer to our present, and the way that Hollywood responded to the challenge posed by Silicon Valley corporations to our world.

Every now and again – well, when I get the time – I dig out one of Hall’s essays, and each time I do, I get a little thrill of intellectual excitement, knowing that I’ll read something that will once again tilt the world on its axis a little bit. That’s why I always have his essays within arm’s reach. Just don’t get me started on *Essential Essays*, Volume II, or “Gramsci and Us,” *Cultural Studies* 1983, or “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture,” or *Familiar Stranger*, or the brilliant *Policing the Crisis*, or, well, take your pick.

Northumbria University

JOE STREET

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DISCOVERING *THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN ARM*

BY NELSON ALGREN

I don’t know when I first heard of Nelson Algren. I grew up in the Chicago suburbs, and if, like me, you were a nerdish reader of a kid, you noticed his name here and there. The *Chicago Tribune*, a newspaper that, when Algren was alive, despised him around as much as he despised it, had a short-story prize named after him. Algren wrote novels and stories about down-and-out Polish people in Chicago; he won the National Book Award in 1950; and his 1951 book-length prose poem *Chicago: City on the Make* carried some kind of name recognition as a book that captured the corruption, which is to say the essence, of Chicago politics.¹ But, nerdish or not, the idea of reading a book-length prose poem wouldn’t have crossed my mind until well past the age of eighteen. His 1956 novel *A Walk on the Wild Side* gave Lou Reed a title and a theme for one of his most famous songs, but that didn’t lead me to Algren either. Maybe some parent or another had his books on their shelves – who knows. Anyway, Algren’s name was kind of an extra, as in, a background artist, somehow, in my literary

¹ Nelson Algren, *Chicago: City on the Make*, fiftieth-anniversary edn, annotated by David Schmittgens and Bill Savage (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001; first published 1951).