



About

Raymond Williams

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Contents

<i>Preface</i> MONIKA SEIDL AND ROMAN HORAK	ix
1. Raymond Williams – towards cultural materialism: an introduction ROMAN HORAK AND MONIKA SEIDL	1
2. Raymond Williams and the absent modernity LAWRENCE GROSSBERG	18
3. 'All forms of signification' JOHN STOREY	34
4. The perspectives of radical democracy: Raymond Williams' work and its significance for a critical social theory RAINER WINTER	45
5. The 1968 <i>May Day Manifesto</i> STEPHEN WOODHAMS	57
6. Fellow-travellers at the conjunction: Williams and educational communicators CHRISTOPHER JOSEPH WESTGATE	68
7. The pedagogy of cultural materialism: Paulo Freire and Raymond Williams HYWEL ROWLAND DIX	81
8. Raymond Williams and online video: the tragedy of technology GEORGIANA BANITA	94

viii Contents

9. Cultural studies and common culture: Raymond Williams' approach towards media cultural studies	106
UDO GÖTTLICH	
10. 'Even the dead will not be safe': on dis(re)membering Williams	117
JOHN HIGGINS	
11. Raymond Williams in the South Atlantic	129
CLARA MASNATTA	
12. Williams and ecology	141
H. GUSTAV KLAUS	
13. Cultural studies is ordinary	153
GILBERT B. RODMAN	
14. Raymond Williams: reading novels as knowable communities	165
ANA CLARA BIRRENTO	
<i>Bibliography</i>	177
<i>Index</i>	190

F
A

T
S
M
C
T
B
P
N

L
J
V
E
O
L
S
S

S
J
I
C
A
U

Z
V
V
S
H

J

Raymond Williams: reading novels as knowable communities

Ana Clara Birrento

His work is still 'in time for us', Stephen Connor wrote in 1998 about Raymond Williams. In fact, twenty years after his death, Williams' intellectual legacy is, indeed, still in time for us. Williams remains an influential figure and a source of inspiration for any theorist or practitioner of cultural studies, into whose grammar he engraved a set of fundamental concepts and relevant analytical tools. In the perplexity of understanding (Ingليس 1993), Williams reflected, revised and developed his critical positions about the nature of culture, the politics of literature and social relations, rehearsing them to find new definitions which enable us to know the modes of how and what a text expresses about a culture.

Out of the body of knowledge and critical intervention, two core legacies have engaged my attention: the concepts of 'structure of feeling' and 'knowable community'.¹ The alliance of these methodological and analytical tools helps us to apprehend the active processes involved in the social and cultural changes and to clarify the textures of historical experience. As cultural categories, they have allowed us to reassess and to recontextualize novels as cultural constructions, putting into perspective what have been two torn halves: the great tradition of high, institutional, canonical culture; and the common, exterior culture, product of a democratization process of culture and society, a process which has connected human beings and the social, political and economic structures of the great arch of history.

Williams brought together what modern thought has separated in the relation between culture and society. The study of the literature and the analysis of the culture of a period are recurrent in Williams' critical work. His use of literary texts to exemplify the concept of 'knowable community', as well as the concept of 'structure of feeling' is one of his achievements. The latter allows Williams to examine the interrelation between areas of individual experience and social experience, allowing him also to examine interrelations between public and private processes and between historical formations and social structures, turning these active and communicable (John and Lizzie Eldridge 1994).