
Volume 47

Issue 4 *Learning to Read in the Long Revolution: New
Work on Laboring-Class Poets, Aesthetics, and Politics*

Article 8

2005

Keywords (the Remake)

David R. Shumway

Carnegie Mellon University, shumway@andrew.cmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Shumway, David R. (2005) "*Keywords* (the Remake)," *Criticism*: Vol. 47: Iss. 4, Article 8.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol47/iss4/8>



D A V I D R . S H U M W A Y

Keywords (the Remake)

New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society, by Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Pp. 456. \$29.95 paper.

THE FILM INDUSTRY HAS long made it a practice to recycle films, remaking, sometimes repeatedly, the same stories. While this practice is often held up as evidence of Hollywood's lack of imagination and unwillingness to take risks, not all remakes are inferior to their originals. Sometimes it takes the industry multiple tries to get it right, as in the case of the *Maltese Falcon*, which had been adapted twice before John Huston remade the film with Humphrey Bogart in 1941. Sometimes a good film is remade as a great film, as when *The Front Page* (1931) was remade as *His Girl Friday* (1940). Very seldom does the remake of a great film seem equal to or better than the original. Though there are some people who think Peter Jackson's 2005 version of *King Kong* surpassed the original 1933 film, more seem to have wondered why this story needed to be filmed for the third time. There was almost universal agreement that Gus Van Sant set himself up for inevitable failure in remaking Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, especially as the later film (1998) copied the original 1960 version shot for shot.

I'm not sure whether Raymond Williams's *Keywords* is regarded with as much reverence by scholars of literary and cultural studies as Hitchcock's *Psycho* is by film critics, but the comparison is close enough to be illustrative. Williams's book has been an indispensable reference and a useful textbook almost since the date of its publication in 1976. Some of the entries, in part because they were recycled by Williams himself in places like *Marxism and Literature*, have become part of the required intellectual equipment for practitioners of cultural studies. Williams's locating of the emergence of "literature" in the nineteenth century as a term for imaginative writing of a certain quality or importance was essential to understanding the history of English as a discipline and to the emergence of cultural studies. Similarly, Williams's distinguishing of three categories of usage of "culture" has provided cultural studies with a widely shared terminological starting point.

In *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris, three of the leading practitioners of cultural studies, have undertaken the daunting task of remaking Williams's classic work. This distinguished trio has not imitated the original slavishly, as Gus Van Sant treated Hitchcock, but they leave no doubt that Williams provided their model. The proper filmic equivalent might be the "update," such as *Switching Channels* (1988), a film that moves the story of *The Front Page/His Girl Friday* from a newspaper to a television newsroom, apparently to better reflect the culture of America in the late 1980s. The editors justify producing a *New Keywords* by asserting that the original "is now showing signs of age." They claim to improve upon it by taking account of new usage of the terms Williams discusses, by adding words that have recently emerged as keywords out of new social movements, and by deleting words that they believe are no longer important. There are other distinctions worth noting. Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris have not written *New Keywords*, but instead have edited a collection of entries prepared by sixty-one different contributors. Where Williams followed a standard formula for each entry, beginning with the term's emergence in English and tracing its history of usage in the language, contributors to the remake often deviate from this pattern. Finally, *New Keywords* includes a lengthy bibliography, a welcome feature that was absent from the original.

I've chosen to consider *New Keywords* through an analogy with the film industry because the kind of relationship this book has with Williams's *Keywords* is unusual—although not necessarily unprecedented—in the world of publishing. While it would be inaccurate to describe *Keywords* simply as a reference work, it is that among other things, and academic libraries typically keep a copy in the reference room. New editions of reference works often appear at regular intervals, but they are typically revisions. This is true even though the original author may no longer be responsible for the new edition. *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* (1996), for example, is a revision by R. W. Burchfield of H. W. Fowler's original (*Modern English Usage* [1926]), and is not an entirely new work. Competing books, such as *Garner's Modern American Usage* (1998), by Bryan A. Garner, use different titles. Whether *New Keywords* is intended to compete with or to supplement Williams is unclear. While the editors first remark on the earlier volume's "signs of age," they later allow, "*Keywords* is and should long remain available as a primary text" (xxii).

The reader will want to know how the remake stacks up against the original, and this reviewer must report a mixed judgment. While the book is by no means a mere redundancy like Van Sant's *Psycho*, neither is it a transcendent success such as *His Girl Friday*. As a supplement to Williams's book, *New Keywords* deserves a place beside it on any good reference shelf. It cannot be considered, however, a satisfactory replacement for the original, and it would be a loss if the remake were to be assigned as a textbook in its stead.

As my movie analogy is meant to show, remaking a classic is a risky enterprise. It is almost inevitable that a book titled *New Keywords* would look inferior in comparison to *Keywords*, but the new book was conceived in a way that might also have doomed its chances. Williams saw himself as an academic who often wrote for the general public; indeed, many of his best-known works, including *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*, were not conceived as contributions to a disciplinary specialty. The presumption behind *Keywords* is that the complex meanings of these terms exist within a public sphere, and therefore unpacking their complexity, though it requires academic expertise, is not merely an academic exercise. Williams's goal was to produce a book that would clarify political debate. In 1976 in the United Kingdom, Williams's presumption was probably correct, since Marxism continued to inform mainstream political discourse, even if the Labour Party was not professedly Marxist. By 1983 (the date of the revised edition), after the election of Margaret Thatcher, public debate may have shifted enough to make the presumption questionable. Nevertheless, in assuming a political landscape that had long existed, Williams gave himself a frame in which the relativity of his terms could be limited. Moreover, since *Keywords* is, as Fred Inglis put it, "heavily partisan in both selection and treatment," one always knows where Williams stands (246). One is able to disagree with Williams's judgments but still find his discriminations useful, because one knows from whence they come.

New Keywords is also partisan, but in a quite different way. While Marxism is clearly part of its heritage, the book is best described as post-Marxist. Its commitments are rather to what must be called the "academic left," which is to say the broad array of new knowledge formations that began with cultural studies, women's studies, and black studies, and that have gone on to include knowledges representing numerous additional identity groups. These groups share little besides an opposition to the dominant, which means a glossary that attempts to use all of them as its starting point is very likely to end up reading like political glossolalia. One of the features that these knowledge formations do generally share, the influence of post-structuralist theory, makes the project even more difficult. Since post-structuralism attacked the notion of stable linguistic meaning and promoted neologism as a way of escaping from the illegitimate stability of received vocabularies, these new knowledges have been actively engaged in reinventing the language. As a result, the terms that Williams discusses have taken on so many new shades of meaning that they defy definition. The biggest difficulty, however, is that the meanings *New Keywords* discusses are often restricted to the academy. All but one of the contributors is an academic, and although they hail from a broad range of disciplines, by far the largest numbers are from sociology and communications. While the editors claim their volume is "not a glossary of contemporary cultural and social theory," it is that much more than anything else. The "public debate" they mention is often on the horizon, but it is not captured by

many of the entries in the way it is so often captured by Williams. The editors and contributors may wish the debates within academic movements had broad social currency, but in general they do not. The larger problem here, the failure of the academic left to translate its theory into political action, is thus ignored.

The difficulties mentioned so far would trouble anyone attempting to update Williams, and they speak to the reality that Williams's own book does not cover the current usage of his terms to the degree that it once did. But *Keywords* continues to be of use because so much of what Williams does is historical. His history remains largely unchallenged, even if it is not up-to-the-minute, and thus his book is likely to remain a valuable resource for some time to come. The lack of history is one of the most glaring weaknesses of *New Keywords*, though it was perhaps entirely predictable. Communications, sociology, and especially cultural studies, which was originally defined as "contemporary," are not known for historical research. The editors acknowledge that "Williams usually begins with a history of the usage of the word in question," and they claim that "this format is broadly followed in this volume with the exception that etymological roots are often less detailed and lengthy than in Williams" (xxi). This is, I think, a misleading description. What Williams does is not chiefly etymology but the history of usage, and it is this history that many of the remake's entries omit or foreshorten. Most entries do include a brief etymology, but they lack a broad picture of historical change. For example, the entry for *discourse* lacks any etymology and confines its discussion to usage in recent theory, while *difference* apparently entered the language only in the late twentieth century. In the introduction, the editors, in defending their move away from etymology, ask, "[H]ow, for example, does one discuss the etymology of *virtual*?" (xxi). But one wonders why this term should be any more resistant to etymology—or, more accurately, to a historical discussion of its usage—than any other. In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which is cited in the *New Keywords* entry, offers several hints including its use in optics and theology. In the latter we find in the definition of *virtualism*, "the Calvinistic doctrine of Christ's virtual presence in the Eucharist." A better explanation for the omission of history is offered by the editors when they note, "As *Keywords* developed out of notes taken over more than 20 years, Williams was able to supplement the OED's resources from his own extensive reading. We could not ask our contributors to do this, given the ruthless time constraints imposed on academics today" (xxii). In another revealing admission, the editors provide a list of terms that were omitted because "authors encountering unexpected difficulties, whether of their own or our editorial brief, could not be replaced in time, or we did not know how to replace them: entries on *boundaries*, *criticism*, *leisure*, *pleasure*, *pluralism*, *romantic*, and, *violence* fell out of the book in this haphazard and mundane way" (xxiii).

Despite post-structuralism and the proliferation of meanings of many terms, entries in *New Keywords* often exhibit the tendency to fix the definition of a term

in the first sentence, in contrast to Williams's habit of opening either with an account of a word's emergence in English or an assertion of its difficulty. So in *Keywords* the entry for *history* begins, "In its earliest uses *history* was a narrative account of events. The word came into English from *fw* *histoire*," while "*class* is an obviously difficult word, both in its range of meanings and in its complexity in that particular meaning where it describes social division" (146, 60). Compare the two terms in *New Keywords*: "In the English speaking world *history* principally signifies a retelling of past events which is professedly true, based reputedly on what really happened" (156). "In its most conventional and persistent sense, *class* refers to 'a division or order . . . or rank or grade of society,' common in the phrases 'higher (upper), middle, lower classes'" (39). The desire to fix meaning may indeed be a response to the proliferation of meanings of many of the keywords themselves and to post-structuralism's general problematizing of language. It may also signal that *New Keywords* is intended first and foremost as a textbook, and the authors may believe that students need clarity rather than complexity. Or, finally, it may have to do with the particular partisanship of contributors, who seek to assert their position against a myriad of competitors.

There are other indications, I think, that *New Keywords* is designed with college students as its chief audience. For example, if we compare the entries on *materialism* in each volume, we find that the more recent one assumes much less background knowledge than did Williams. And it illustrates its points by reference to late-twentieth-century popular culture, mentioning George Harrison's *Living in the Material World* (1973), Madonna's "Material Girl" (1984), and Howard Hawks's and Marilyn Monroe's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953). Yet here it is simply asserted that it is "strange" that *materialist*, given its history of usage as a distinctly different term in philosophy, has been used "as a rough cognate of 'greedy,'" while Williams explains how this usage may have come about. The comparison here is not entirely in Williams's favor, however, as the new entry, by Michael Bérubé, is written with an essayistic verve lacking in the old. Indeed, while Williams's entries are almost always clear, they are seldom inviting. As is inevitable in a collaborative work of this kind, the writing in *New Keywords* is highly variable, ranging from compelling to opaque.

The quality of the content of the individual entries also varies enormously. Among the least successful is *identity*, which begins, "*Identity* is to do with the imagined sameness of a person or of a social group at all times and in all circumstances; about a person or a group being able to continue to be itself and not someone or something else" (172). This is, of course, one usage of the term, but it does not seem to be the most common one in contemporary society or cultural studies. When this use does occur in the latter, it is generally as a theoretical "straw man," set up to be knocked down by the assertion that "within us are contradictory identities" (Stuart Hall, quoted in *New Keywords* 174). In fact, that is exactly the rhetorical strategy of this entry. Part of the problem is that the definition given ignores

the psychoanalytic use of the term and its important relation, *identification*. The issue is less a matter of psychoanalytic theory itself—though Jacques Lacan’s usage of these terms has been highly influential in the very contexts with which *New Keywords* is most concerned—but with the popularization of its terms. *Identity crisis*, for example, which is mentioned but not explained, owes its currency in American usage to Erik Erikson, who regarded such an event as a common occurrence in late adolescence. The popularization of a psychoanalytic concept of identity makes it difficult to accept the claim that “dominant and conventional discourses on identity may be characterized as being essentialist” (173). Perhaps this limited understanding of *identity* explains why *identity politics* is not mentioned.

Identity is not to be found in the older *Keywords*, and its addition in the new volume accurately reflects the term’s more recent prominence in debate over culture and society. The best feature of the new volume is the presence of new entries that are successful in capturing current usages and their role in public or academic debate. Among these, one might include *audience, body, canon, citizenship, colonialism, copy, deconstruction, diaspora, economy, evolution, fashion, fundamentalism, gay and lesbian, globalization, holocaust, information, knowledge, market, movements, multiculturalism, objectivity, person, poverty, power, pragmatism, public, queer, resistance, sign, utopia, value, and youth*. Some of these terms, such as *multiculturalism* and *deconstruction*, are genuinely new, while others, like *queer*, have taken on complicated new meanings. Others are newly significant because of new social realities and debates (*fundamentalism, evolution*) or new academic theories (*body, knowledge, power*). A few, such as *globalization*, are all of these, and Lawrence Grossberg’s entry provides an excellent historical and theoretical clarification of this much-used term. Such words attest to the degree to which cultural studies—and to a lesser extent, public debate—have changed over the past twenty years.

One particular complex of differences between the old and *New Keywords* involves the role that Marxism plays in each. I’ve already indicated that Marxism was no longer central even in Britain in 1983, and since the fall of the Soviet Union it has receded even further to the margins of politics in most of the world. Yet during this period, the influence of what might better be called various Marxisms on the humanities and some social sciences increased significantly, at least in the United States. These new theories, sometimes labeled neo-Marxism, have given birth to some new keywords and seem to have demoted terms that were previously considered key. In this regard, *New Keywords* is a useful text for charting such changes. For example, one is surprised to find *economy* and *market* missing from Williams’s text, but their absence is explained by their relative insignificance in traditional Marxist thought. Marxism didn’t regard *economy* or *economic* as especially problematic, and *market* was of importance mainly to other economic theories. The rise of neoliberalism has made both of these terms far more important in public debate and for critique from the political left. As *New*

Keywords observes, “*economy* became an everyday term in the LC20, denoting a force to be reckoned with outside of politics and society, located both above as a mystical abstraction, and below as the grounded bottom line” (94). The somewhat less satisfying treatment of *market* aptly notes that “It was naturalized as the elementary basis for social life—and its advocates insisted that all social life should be subjected to it” (206).

At first, one is equally surprised to find Williams’s terms *alienation*, *anarchism*, *bourgeois*, *collective*, *communism*, *dialectic*, *exploitation*, *idealism*, *imperialism*, *labour*, *mediation*, *monopoly*, and, *progressive* are all missing from the remake. On further reflection, most of these omissions seem to accurately reflect the decline of Marxism as a political force and the changing discourse of the academic left. Neither *communism* nor *imperialism*, for example, are likely to be regarded by many as terms in need of explication, even though one could argue that, for that very reason, they could use it. Perhaps more to the point, their meanings have not perhaps significantly evolved since 1983, though their cultural valences have. Some of these terms—*dialectic*, *mediation*—seem to reflect theoretical problematics the editors no longer regard as significant. These terms were more important to older Marxist theory than to more recent variants, again suggesting perhaps a lack of new developments that would necessitate updating Williams’s treatment of these terms. It is distressing to think that cultural studies doesn’t find *exploitation* or *alienation* to be keywords, but I am afraid this judgment is correct. It was surely a mistake, however, not to address how the word *progressive* has come to stand in for terms like *socialist*, *liberal*, and *left* in recent public discourse. This is a development that Williams’s entry for *progressive* may anticipate, but that it does not analyze.

Another group of Williams’s terms dropped in the remake are those deriving from literature and literary studies. These include *criticism*, *dramatic*, *fiction*, *formalist*, *myth*, *naturalism*, *realism*, and *romantic*, as well as *literature* itself. One could also note dropped terms that are less directly connected to literature but that nevertheless were associated with cultural criticism, including *genius*, *medieval*, *standards*, and *tradition*. Some of these terms—for example, *myth* and *tradition*—certainly have receded in importance in both public and academic discourse. Others perhaps have not evolved much since Williams discussed them. Moreover, it is at least arguable that the whole realm of the literary has become less important than it was in Williams’s era or, indeed, that even then Williams overestimated its importance. The keyword here is “arguable.” In keeping with the character of their volume, the editors don’t offer an argument, though such could have been made had *literature* been included. Given the fact that they are non- or ex-literary scholars, one suspects that their choices result as much from an agenda as from an attempt to reflect contemporary discourse. The suspicion is strengthened when one notes that the term *writing* has been added, presumably as a replacement for *literature*. It’s not just that this is a

leveling term standing in for a hierarchical one, but also that there is nothing in the entry to justify its inclusion as a difficult or new term.

The issue here is not merely a question of literature and print culture. It is also a matter of the specificity of cultural forms, which is much reduced in *New Keywords*. *Media* is present here in a much fuller entry than Williams gave it, but this term must stand in, not only for each and every medium, but also for each and every form conveyed by them. If drama and fiction, naturalism and realism, or romanticism and formalism are no longer central to cultural debates, surely there remain debates about the specific qualities or character of many different kinds of cultural products. In keeping with the book's indifference to history, the only period or movement of cultural production to be discussed is *postmodernism* (the entry for *modern* being focused elsewhere). *Realism* may no longer be central as a cultural movement, but it remains a difficult and contested term across media. The editors' claim that Williams's entry suffices mentions only the term's use in specifically political contexts. No terms specific to film, television, music, or the visual arts appear in *New Keywords* despite the fact that all of these realms supply public debate with verbal difficulties. *Film* has become a much more problematic term now that movies can be produced digitally and are no longer dependent on celluloid. *Performance* has become an enormously complex term with its continuing usage in the context of the traditional performing arts—music, drama—and new usages such as “performance art” or simply “performance.” One could argue, then, that culture, which in Williams's text may be overly identified with the literary, seems here to be dematerialized and not identified with any particular objects or practices at all. Unfortunately, some versions of cultural studies do seem to treat culture in this way.

Some of the best entries in *New Keywords* are those that clearly develop out of Williams's earlier versions. Tony Bennett's entry for *culture* begins by noting questions about the term's continued value—including by Williams himself—but goes on to examine the growing complexity of what he quotes James Clifford as calling “‘a deeply compromised idea’ . . . he ‘cannot yet do without’” (63). Bennett assumes Williams's entry as background, but he does not therefore simply ignore the term's history. Instead, he provides his own take on it, which enriches Williams's version without contradicting him. He is better on the term's twentieth-century usage, explicitly addressing *cultural relativism* and the emergence in the work of Franz Boas of the plural *cultures*. In his treatment of *elite*, Bennett finds a useful history of usage in horticulture that is missing from Williams, who connects the term rather to *elect* and, in theology, *the elect*. Lawrence Grossberg's discussion of *ideology* usefully simplifies Williams's extensive exposition of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, while adding important additions to the term's usage from such theorists as Louis Althusser, Ernesto Laclau, and Stuart Hall. He also adds specifically American usage from the cold war through what was called “the end of ideology.” Meaghan Morris and Noaki Sakai give an excellent discussion

of *modern*, a term that Williams gives rather short shrift. There are many other good entries, but given the consistently high quality of their own contributions, one wishes the editors had been able to write the whole book.

Carnegie Mellon University

Works Cited

Inglis, Fred. *Raymond Williams*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

