
Stepping into the world of studying cultures

Kouri, Jaana (ed.) 2015. *Askel kulttuurien tutkimukseen*. Scripta Aboensia 3. Folkloristiikan, kansatieteen ja uskontotieteen oppiaineet. Turku: Turun yliopisto. 392 pp. ISBN: 9789512960132. ISSN: 1457-5469.

The book *Askel kulttuurien tutkimukseen* (*Taking a Step into Cultural Studies*) is an extensive collection of writings focusing on cultural studies at the University of Turku. Written by a number of researchers in folkloristics, European ethnology and comparative religion, it presents general theoretical approaches, research methods and ways of looking at the world around us and it gives ideas about how to become aware of cultural phenomena and their meanings in our and other societies; it also offers a more detailed view on a variety of research topics and cases in the field of cultural studies. According to the editors, the book serves as a reader for a general audience, but it is especially targeted at those who are studying for the entrance examination at the University of Turku and students just becoming acquainted with cultural issues and culture-related studies at other universities and educational establishments.

The introductory part takes a look at the essential concepts and research methods applied in cultural studies, proceeding from there to more detailed, chronologically orientated presentations that focus on folkloristics, European ethnology and comparative religion as separate disciplines. The introductory chapters are quite short in comparison to the breadth of the entire book, but they provide quite a clear view on what is essential in studying cultures within these three disciplines in general and at the University of Turku in particular. The methods applied in the making of the book, process writing and process editing, appear as an interesting effort to bring together quite a large number of authors and involve them in the overall process of writing a book of this extent, but perhaps this process could have been taken still a couple of steps further. Having read the book as ethnologist made me think a couple of times that non-specialists might find it somewhat difficult to understand what, for example, a theoretical reference frame means and how it is applied in culture studies without prior knowledge of the field. Nevertheless, the book is an ambitious effort to cover a truly wide range of topics.

After the introduction, the book has nine thematic chapters that present research on everyday life, festivities and sacred life. Ethnology in par-

ticular has everyday life as its central focus, and in Turku, the urban environment as a context for everyday life has been an important field of interest for researchers over the years. The themes covered in the first chapter continue from micro history as a method to questions concerning technologies as an essential part of our everyday lives, from communication in day-to-day situations to festival traditions, carnivals and rituals and from gender issues to religion and the temporality of everyday life. At the end of this chapter, three researchers focus on several of the topics in more detail by introducing their own research. The other chapters of the book follow this same structure. Several sections of the book have been written as a form of introduction, while others resemble more scientific articles, which is probably unavoidable with such a large number of writers and a wide range of topics. Taking the editing process a bit further might have made the book more coherent and also a bit easier for readers to grasp what is really essential, especially in the academic study of cultures.

Questions on tangible and intangible culture and their interconnectedness in cultural studies as well as how to understand them as cultural phenomena are discussed within the contexts of material culture studies, semiotics and performance theories and from the perspective of fan culture. The chapter on space, place and environment starts by talking about the cultural turn in geography in the 1980s, which led to the rise of a new research field, namely cultural or humanistic geography, which focuses on the spatial aspects of cultural processes and their material expressions. It directs the reader to consider questions on how spatial aspects in cultural studies have become more important and have opened up new perspectives on cultural phenomena. Also, cultural ecology is introduced as another scientific field that studies how people relate to their varying and changing environments and how such relations should be understood and problematised in cultural studies. These are some examples of how many other scientific fields in addition to ethnology, comparative religion and folkloristics are introduced via very short introductions, which may be a place for making certain areas of cultural

studies and their backgrounds more understandable, but may at the same time prove somewhat confusing for novice readers, especially when often explained in just a few short sentences.

The chapter on power and agency is the most coherent and logical chapter in this book, mainly because the writers clearly stay focused on what is crucial in understanding the relevance of power and agency within cultural studies. Furthermore, all of the sections are quite similar in style and support each other in presenting the main topic. In a review of this length, it is impossible to discuss all the topics, which in addition to the ones described above, cover the topics of language and communication, identity, body and cultural heritage. The last chapter, 'From student life to working life', is targeted at those persons who are planning to apply to the university and are asking themselves what they can do with a degree in cultural studies when transitioning into working life. Actually, this chapter might have been better placed somewhere closer to the beginning of the book, since it could as a starting point for all of the topics discussed later on. It would have, in my opinion, supported the idea of getting out of academia and branching out into the surrounding society, which the editors brought up in the foreword to the book.

Putting together a book of this extent can be a challenge both thematically and in terms of presenting so many authors, let alone taking on the additional challenge of presenting a wide array of research within three disciplines. I understand the idea of including everyone, but unfortunately it has led to a collection of chapters that are somewhat incoherent and mixed in their result. This is quite understandable since the topics covered in the ten chapters of the book would probably have been enough for a separate book as such. Having said this, I still missed at least some kind of a reference to the Degree Programme in Cultural Production and Landscape Studies in the University Consortium of Pori, administered by the University of Turku, where students can specialise in digital culture, cultural heritage studies or landscape studies, all of which are related to many of the topics covered in the book. Also, the book would have benefitted from having an index, which would have made it more useful as a reader

since, for example, many concepts are discussed in varying contexts and in different parts of the book. Even though the book appears in many respects a bit overwhelming and somehow even overflows with topics and writers, I found it an

interesting attempt and approach to describing the kinds of research being done in the field of cultural studies at the University of Turku.

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