Critical Discourse Analysis
A Concise Guide

At root, Critical Discourse Analysis is a technique for understanding the social factors involved in the production and consumption of "texts". It provides a systematic method for seeing how words, images, festivals, performances, and similar cultural artifacts both reflect and create the societies of which they are a part. Its goal is to reveal the hidden dimensions of such things – particularly the ways in which these artifacts make power-relations seem "normal", even to those who do not benefit from them.

CDA comes in several varieties, but Norman Fairclough's approach is the clearest and easiest to implement. Fairclough proposes a three-step analysis.

1. How are the texts/images/festivals/events/etc produced? What social practices can one find that structure this production? How do these practices influence the shape or form that the texts/images/etc take?

2. What patterns or messages can one find in the texts/images/events/etc themselves? What world(s) do they present as normal? What world(s) do they not present? What is the nature of their "discourse" – i.e., their taken-for-granted reality? By what techniques do they create that reality and suppress other realities?

3. How are the texts/images/festivals/events/etc used? Who reads/sees/hears/participates in them? In what circumstances is this done? What effect does this have, both on people's behavior and on the way they make sense of the world? How does this support/undercut/change/maintain/etc social power-relations?

Fairclough focuses on power-relations, but CDA can have other foci, as well. Anthropologists, for example, can use similar techniques for analyzing "culture" (though they should ideally avoid a naïve use of that term).[1] The basic effort – exposing ordinarily hidden reality – is the same.

Depending on the situation, one's resources, etc., it is possible to emphasize just one or two of Fairclough's steps. Aptly labeled, this is a perfectly legitimate aim.

---

[1] Renato Rosaldo (Culture and Truth, 1988) provides a cogent critique of the culture-concept, though he ends up reinventing ethnomethodology for a new audience (Garfinkel, Studies in Ethnomethodology, 1967). Despite Foucault and some of his followers, "power" is as problematic a foundational concept as is "culture" – and for many of the same reasons.