

John Hartley. 2003. A Short History of Cultural Studies. London and Thousand Oaks: Sage. ix + 189 pages; \$24.95 paper; \$69.95 cloth.

Reviewed by Rhonda Hammer and Douglas Kellner, UCLA
(hammer@ucla.edu and kellner@ucla.edu)

John Hartley opens his short history of cultural studies by evoking a sense of the contested nature of the field in the contemporary moment and the intense debates about its objects, scope, methods, and goals: “Even within intellectual communities and academic institutions, there is little agreement about what counts as cultural studies, either as a critical practice or an institutional apparatus. On the contrary, the field is riven by fundamental disagreements about what cultural studies is for, in whose interests it is done, what theories, methods and objects of study are proper to it, and where to set its limits” (1).

Hartley also correctly points to the political thrust of many versions of cultural studies, of “how they connect with unprecedented personal freedoms and affluence at least in the developed world, new opportunities in education and cultural expression, and expanded horizons of experience for young people, women, gays and lesbians, people of color, and many other social groups and identities” (2-3). Cultural studies, Hartley usefully reminds us, is part of an upheaval in education, in which new groups entered higher education, demanded innovative courses and revisions of the curriculum, and often called for more culturally and political relevant teaching material. As a result, cultural studies has challenged orthodoxies since its development in Britain in the 1960s and continues to be a highly controversial and contested area.

Hartley presents cultural studies as an arena of “plenty” and “inclusiveness,” signifying the multiple topics, disciplines, and methods that the project has absorbed. Following figures as diverse as Raymond Williams and Michel Foucault, cultural studies links knowledge with power and the study of culture with society and politics. Moreover, as Hartley contends: “Because of its position as a crossroads or bazaar for the exchange of ideas from many directions, cultural studies has been at one and the same time a motley confusion of difference, and an ambitious intellectual enterprise, seeking nothing less than to rethink received truths and remake inherited frameworks of explanation. On the ground of difference, debate and disagreement, it has sought to build a new consciousness” (2).

Within this framework, Hartley provides a generalized history and analysis of cultural studies within six loosely organized chapters that present six different “landscapes” of cultural studies (9ff). He argues that there can be no linear history of this “postdisciplinary” perspective, which is constantly expanding and drawing on new theories and methods. This idea appears to underlie much of his discourse and organization of the six major areas of discussion which are identified as: Cultural Studies and Literary Criticism; Mass Society; Art History; Political Economy; Feminism, Anthropology, Sociology; and Teaching. The substantive issues of each chapter are more adequately reflected in the chapter subheadings of each section. For example, Chapter 1

(playing on George Bernard Shaw but flirting with a paternalistic sexism) is titled “The Intelligent Co-ed’s Guide to Cultural Studies: From Virginia Woolf to Tom Wolfe (destination O’Hare).” As the oblique title suggests, Hartley’s text demands a particular literacy on the part of the reader, in areas of literature, literary criticism, political economy, British Cultural studies, and geography. The short history demands as well familiarity with leading writers associated with cultural studies traditions for understanding and appreciating the multiplicity of iconoclastic, intellectual and popular themes and references being addressed by the well-versed and multi-disciplined author.

Although Hartley claims that his book tries to “underplay its author’s preferences, predilections and prejudices” (7), it is the author’s expertise in popular media, cultural history, and textual analysis which provide some of the book’s greatest insights, relevance, and humor. Moreover, Hartley’s background as a controversial cultural studies scholar appears to inform much of his analyses. Associated with Cardiff University in Wales and then universities in Australia, his writings and co-writings with John Fiske provoked major debates and critiques in the 1980s, as well as academic celebrity status, and Hartley has been a prolific and influential force within cultural studies since the 1970s. This is especially apparent in his many knowledgeable references and assessments of leading cultural studies schools and theorists (which tend to emphasize British Cultural Studies contributions and be Anglo-Oz Empire-centric in focus).

Indeed, Hartley’s “short history” of cultural studies can be read as John Hartley’s odyssey through the field and its sometimes-dramatic polemics and debates. The chronicler provides short synopses of his academic career, a list of his books, and personal reflections on various debates, figures, and episodes that he has experienced within cultural studies. His concerns with semiotic and textual analysis, audience construction, and the changing roles of regulatory bodies punctuate the text’s discussion of various topics. The back cover of the book advertises that “cultural studies has found its Boswell” in Hartley, a claim that may be an exaggeration, though Hartley provides a tour of his university schooling, conference going, reading, and provides his construction of various themes and contributors within cultural studies and related fields.

Hartley has long extolled the significance of semiotics as one of the most powerful components of cultural studies research, and grounds his interest in popular culture and theory within the context of political literary theory and cultural history (19f). Hartley also grounds cultural studies within the history and vicissitudes of publishing, identifying the republication of George Bernard Shaw’s *The Intelligent Women’s Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism and Fascism*, in the accessible and inexpensive Pelican books paperback form, in 1937, as the launch of the project of cultural studies (20). One of Hartley’s main discussions traces the influence of early technological innovations in publishing formats, and of editorial control on the consumption and production of audiences and/or readers of cultural studies texts. As he puts it: “The history of cultural studies can be traced via publications that addressed the free (activist) reader and the student (academic) audience” (150). Hartley goes on to describe the making of multiplicities of texts which range from print, broadcasting, film, music and advertising to cultural policy, tourism, flaneurism, fashion and the “resistive” walk of

supermodels, like Kate Moss (whose face graces the cover of the paperback). He situates these discussions within the context of debates about Marxism, economic determinism, hegemony, “governmentalism,” popularization, depoliticization, textual analyses, ideological critique, audience research, anthropology, abstraction, marginality, resistance, commoditization, and globalization which have defined and continue to characterize theoretical and practical work in cultural studies.

Arguments concerning the nature and role of the readers of cultural studies textbooks take up some of Hartley’s earlier positions on audience construction and provide a provocative dimension of his history. In particular, Hartley highlights the paradoxical and shifting nature of conceptions, substance, and roles of textbooks in cultural studies. He notes that, at one level, writers and publishers of cultural studies imagined a community of readers and students (149). These readers are not a passive audience but are “textualized by the writing that addressed them” (149). The history of cultural studies textbooks (including his own?) for Hartley includes the reading of major published Readers to trace shifts in cultural studies research, writing, and audience.

As Hartley explains, the original audience for cultural studies Readers was presumed to be “adult, probably male, politically radical or already socialist... and activist in some political pursuit” (150), presumably in the 1960s and 70s. The readers for these textbooks, he argues, were seen as primarily “intelligent laymen,” whereas more contemporary audiences for texts are identified as “people working or studying in the academy.” He goes on to argue that there was a shift in the actual or perceived readership of cultural studies to an internationalist, “juvenated, feminised, multi-race, multiculturalised and institutionalised student” audience who were not presumed to be activist, but were encouraged to “radical activism” (ibid.) The earlier readers, he asserts, were considered to be the equals or co-subjects of the writer, while later on a hierarchy of power was imposed, whereby the writer became the all-knowing authoritative subject, perhaps like Hartley whose “short history” presupposes vast interdisciplinary knowledge and interests.

Hartley appears to relate this commoditization with the advent of American university cultural studies programs, as well as the initiation of academic conferences which published textbook Readers, based on discussions and papers presented at these events. His critique of these tendencies of cultural studies to over-privilege the “supply side” and “undervalue the demand side” is curious given that he was part of a highly successful and leading pedagogical series on cultural studies, published by Methuen New Accents series, which was edited by his mentor Terry Hawkes and featured writers from Cardiff, in the late 70’s and 80’s and a later series by Methuen in *Studies in Communication*, and he himself is obviously continuing to engage in textbook production.¹ Indeed, Hartley’s Readers were highly influential in colleges and universities, especially in the United States, although, as Graeme Turner notes, his book with John Fiske *Reading Television* “was subjected to some very negative reviews and ignored by much subsequent work coming from the CCS” (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham).²

For a while Fiske and Hartley enjoyed a high global profile in the burgeoning field of cultural studies, although the work of both was subjected to strong critique (and not only from Birmingham). In fact, much of the criticism directed at aspects of Hartley's work was his apparent opposition to traditional cultural studies' ethnographic examinations of the audience, which raised a number of important issues in regards to audience research. Hartley long argued that like publishers, television and film also had to invent audiences. Drawing on writings of Benedict Anderson, he argues that audiences, like nations, are "imagined communities" in which everyone participates.³

As the late Canadian theorist Ioan Davies puts it, Hartley "argues that the idea of 'audience' is a fiction, conjured up by academics, journalists and pressure groups, by the television industry, and by the legal/political bodies that regulate the media. The curious feature in all this is that if the 'people' disappear in the study of media, than most of the questions raised by earlier formulations of cultural studies are either unanswerable or else were the wrong questions."⁴

Debates over the audience were once, and continue to be, a major field of contestation within cultural studies. Arguments over the role of political economy in cultural studies were even more heated and polemical and Hartley takes up this minefield of controversy in Chapter 4. Those within cultural studies who focused on text and audience were attacked by political economists for neglecting production and political economy, while scholars of the latter were sometimes accused of being economic reductionists who fail to see the autonomy of text and audience, or to properly address the issues of culture and consciousness. Although Hartley agrees with Larry Grossberg in finding the political economy debate "boring" (105), he rehearses it in traumatized detail laying out the same polarizing and polemical screed against political economy that has long impeded dialogue. Political economy is chided for being reductionist and determinist and is identified with all the sins of old-fashioned Marxism and the Communist Party. The Frankfurt School is reduced to denouncing manipulated audiences as dupes or dopes and even Walter Benjamin is said to warn against a manipulative aestheticizing of politics (in fact, he was urging the left to do precisely this and, contra Hartley, was one of the first to argue that media culture helps produce an active and critical audience).⁵

Although Hartley concedes that Stuart Hall and his comrades in Birmingham saw that Marxism needed a "theoretical makeover," he does not indicate how more dialectical forms of Marxism were developed within cultural studies and reduces Marxism to vulgar economism. Hartley fails to mention the key dialectical category of mediation, closely related to Stuart Hall's category of articulation, which involves connecting things like culture to the economy. Indeed, it is possible to use political economy in productive and non-reductive ways, but Hartley has no interest in mediating in the debate between culturists and political economy, but rather in rubbishing the latter so that the former emerges triumphant. Moreover, Hartley displaces the debate by arguing that the category of the "creative industries" (hyped by the British Labour Party) provides a whole new terrain and even "manifesto" (118) for cultural studies. But his presentation hardly provides a clue concerning how the creative industries are to be studied and engaged

beyond providing a long list of what is included in the industries (117-118) and then a list of “culture-jamming” (119-120) that exhausts his efforts at articulating an oppositional cultural politics.

Obsessed with academic conferences that establish hierarchies and canons of cultural studies, Hartley goes into painful detail about the 1983 Urbana conference that produced one of the first textbooks in the US and globally on cultural studies and generated debates about the fields and methods of cultural studies and its relations to Marxism and other current theoretical discourses. Admitting he wasn’t there, Hartley goes on and on about the tortured discussions of Marxism at the conference (157-161), but fails to note the key fact that the conference was experienced by many largely as a clash between Marxism and postmodernism and clearly Fredric Jameson’s now-famous article on postmodernism was the highlight of the conference, generating passionate debate and pro and con positioning and discussions of the relationship between Marxism and postmodernism. Nor was the second Illinois cultural studies largely about John Fiske as Hartley recounts (161-166). Bereft of primary knowledge of the US cultural studies scene and its complex history, Hartley constructs his own mythologies while leaving out topics, theorists, and regions of the world that do not interest him.

While Hartley covers some of the major fields of cultural studies, he presents a somewhat suspect categorization of the different forms of cultural studies that emerged out of the British context. In a highly questionable section which concludes Chapter 2 (pp. 27ff), Hartley uses the maverick rightist journalist/cultural critic Tom Wolfe to bash Herbert Marcuse and those critical intellectuals, like ourselves, who managed to find things to criticize in post-60s US culture. Then, switching to Britain in Chapter 3, Hartley established a genealogy of cultural studies by distinguishing between a “democratisation strand” (33), contrasted with a “struggle strand” (32ff). The “struggle strand” is associated with an elitist tradition that struggled against “mass society,” with advocates on the Left and Right, and that defended high culture against creeping massification and cultural barbarianism, or on the Left valorized working class or socialist culture. According to Hartley, the democratisation branch is primarily concerned with “the possibilities of renewal from below,” and was more “pre-occupied with meaning than power” and “less interested in ruling than in teaching” (33). This form of cultural studies, with which Hartley identifies himself, is usually designated as “cultural populism” and is more appropriately contrasted with a more critical and political form of cultural studies.⁶

The problem with Hartleyan cultural populism is that it is too uncritical toward dominant forms of media culture, that it finds resistance in watching television and Kate Moss’s “resistive” fashion walk. Critics of popular media are stigmatized by the populists as elitists and in a meandering discussion of Shakespeare and the popular, Cardiff cultural studies and Raymond Williams, Hartley mocks intellectuals who criticize forms of popular culture such as jazz (sometimes with justification), and Hartley himself provides apologetics for television and film studies (not necessary since these activities are well-developed). The problems with Hartley’s model become apparent in his discussion of the Arnold Schwarzenegger film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. (Hence, the clever title of his chapter “Culture from [Matthew] Arnold to Schwarzenegger.”)⁷

Hartley never really bothers to do cultural studies in his text, making lists of talking points about topics, like the Schwarzenegger film (56-57), rather than engaging in systematic analysis or critique. Hartley cites a Meagan Morris passage valorizing the “empowering vision of the future” in the ending of Terminator 2 and then makes a list of topics that a more detailed analysis could engage. Rather than cataloging thematic talking points, Hartley might have noted that a critical cultural studies, among other things, would engage the politics of representation in the film, noting sexist, racist, homophobic, and other problematic moments, while also valorizing moments of social critique, resistance, and a utopian dimension (and perhaps the film’s contradictions and ambiguities). One might also do a diagnostic critique of what the film tells us about contemporary US society, the Hollywood film industry, or a variety of other topics with which the film articulates.

The contrast is not between an elitist disdain for the popular and a democratic embrace, but rather how one engages popular media texts. Much of British cultural studies, and other versions, have critical dimensions, but there is a strain of cultural populism that is contemptuous of critique and posits itself more in the affirmative mode. It is ironic, indeed, that Hartley seems to align himself with the populist strain and against elitism because his short history is distinguished by the amount of material he brings into his presentation from the fields of literary studies and art history.

In fact, Chapter 3 on cultural studies and art history contains some of Hartley’s most praise-worthy contributions to conceptualizing and doing cultural studies. He quite correctly points out that art history, along with literary history, had long carried out a form of cultural studies and appropriately points out how John Berger’s Ways of Seeing contains a model and anticipation of cultural studies, as well as an exemplary textual pedagogy in his book of the title and a visual pedagogy in the television series. Hartley provides some interesting and useful examples of art and cultural studies, a domain often neglected in the field’s mainstream. The chapter comes to a bad end, however, with several unilluminating pages on English supermodel Kate Moss where, once again, Hartley offers a catalogue of names and lists in place of engaged cultural analysis.

Although Hartley objects to the policing of who does and doesn’t figure in the official cultural studies hierarchy, he does much policing himself. While he identifies a “new cultural studies” as a “hybrid, global, post-disciplinary conversation, whose differing participants could mutually recognize that ‘knowledge increased when it was shared’” (176), only a few of his mates bear worthy as inclusion in the emerging global cultural studies. Indeed, since the Trajectories conference in Taiwan in 1994, there has been an expanding global thrust to cultural studies, but one does not see this exciting development evident in Hartley’s rather old-fashioned short history. Hartley tends to exclude new voices of color, diverse sexualities, regions of the world, and new perspectives within a globalized cultural studies for citation of his favorite Brit and Oz pals. While he pays lip service to feminism, only the estimable Meagan Morris deserves extended mention. And while he evokes the importance of new terrains of study like the

Internet, new political movements and forms of resistance, and a democratization of cultural studies there is not much evidence of this in Hartley's text.

Hence, the version of cultural studies privileged tends to be the good old White Boys network of British Empire trained cultural theorists. Such a history and truncated focus is going to be of limited interest to new generation students and practitioners of cultural studies. Hence, Hartley's short history is probably a swan song to the heroic days of the populist phase of British cultural studies before the Empire's Last Hurrah got buried in a global proliferation of new themes, methods, projects, and voices.

Nonetheless, those who have already gone through the adventures of cultural studies that Hartley depicts may find his narrative quite enjoyable, though we fear that younger students beginning the journey may find themselves disoriented and confused. Rather than another tour over the old ground of what cultural studies "was," it would be useful to have a book that indicates some of the many ways in which cultural studies is actually done today and that provides some concrete models of specific studies rather than just another participant story.

Notes

¹ See Graeme Turner, British Cultural Studies. An Introduction. Boston and London: Unwin Hyman 1990: p. 83. In retrospect, although published more than a decade before Hartley's short history, Turner provides a superior introduction and overview of the field of British cultural studies. Moreover, the recently published second edition of Chris Barker Cultural Studies. Theory and Practice (London and Thousand Oaks) provides what is perhaps most comprehensive introduction and overview of the field of cultural studies.

² Turner, *Ibid*.

³ See Turner, pp. 162ff. for discussion of the critique of Hartley's notion of the audience within British cultural studies.

⁴ Ioan Davies, Cultural Studies and Beyond. Fragments of Empire. New York and London: Routledge, 123). In retrospect, we also find Davies book on cultural studies to be richer, more stimulating, and to provide a better overview of the field and history than Hartley's book under review.

⁵ On neglect and misrepresentation of the Frankfurt School within British cultural studies, see Douglas Kellner, "Critical Theory and British Cultural Studies: The Missed Articulation," in Cultural Methodologies, edited by Jim McGuigan. London: Sage, 1997: 12-41.

⁶ While Hartley strives for the encyclopaedic in his short history and mentions every British figure imaginable, he seems to forget Jim McGuigan's widely discussed Cultural Populism. London: Routledge, 1992. For other critiques of the sort of cultural populism associated with Fiske and Hartley, see Douglas Kellner, Media Culture. New York and Routledge, 1995, and the anthology Cultural Studies in Question, edited by Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding. London: Sage Publications, 1997.

⁷ Several of Hartley's chapters have rather cryptic "destination" subtitles, such as in Chapter 2, "Culture From Arnold to Schwarzenegger. Imperial Literacy to Pop Culture

(destination democracy?).“ While the question mark probably lets him off the hook, in view of Schwarzenegger’s problematic election as Governor of California through a manipulative recall process that many seen as a corruption of democracy, simply associating Arnold Schwarzenegger with democracy in any form raises the question of what the author has in mind with his “destination democracy.” We see from this point (early 2004) and place (California) the jackboots of the Bush Reich behind Schwarzenegger and his Republican handlers who are viciously cutting back education, social welfare, environment regulation, and other positive aspects of the state of California and thus are disclined to be amused by the consistently rightwing and reactionary figure of Arnold Schwarzenegger who should not be associated in any way a la Hartley with “democracy”.