
REVIEWS

Patrick Fuery and Nick Mansfield. *Cultural Studies and the New Humanities: Concepts and Controversies*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997. 223p.

SHAWN ALFREY
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT DENVER

In a gesture of seemingly postmodern skepticism, Gertrude Stein's 1934 lecture on her massive tome, *The Making of Americans*, addressed her earlier attempt to transmit what she knew: "When I was up against the difficulty of putting down the complete conception that I had ... gradually acquired, ... I was faced by the trouble that I had acquired all this knowledge gradually but when I had it I had it completely at one time" (147). Stein's statement came back to me while I was reading Fuery and Mansfield's book. A lot of knowledge is presented in this text. The writers' collaboration treats most of the big names of critical theory, and many of the most influential contemporary critical practices, from feminist theory to "deconstruction" to queer theory. Presenting such completed knowledge, however, does not necessarily open a space for the gradual development of the reader's own, as Stein knew. This is the problem *Cultural Studies and the New Humanities* grapples with. Ironically, its many strategies of opening often close off this possibility for the newcomer to this sometimes daunting mass of knowledge.

As the introduction and conclusion make clear, Fuery and Mansfield are themselves committed to the value of critical theory and, as the preface indicates, their approach is a response to their own experience teaching it. They find their structuring logic in the category they call the "new humanities" and its divergence from the established assumptions and methods of the humanities as they are traditionally defined. This focus is useful both because it gives a historical and cultural context to the rise of "cultural studies," and because it makes the new critical theories meaningful, answering the "so what" that both uninitiated students and resistant academics often ask when faced with the convolutions of contemporary critical debate. At its best, the book gives the reader a useful overview of the current state of theory. Especially in its more historically-inflected moments — those concerning the relation between the genres of realism and modernism (chapter 7) and the "genealogy" of the subject as conceived by Foucault (chapter 11) — the

text offers useful illustrations of the relation between the amorphous category called culture and its social, political, and artistic products.

As part of its own self-conscious desire to avoid authoritarian control and canon-enforcing formulations, the text is organized, as the writers describe it, “around a set of controversies” (vii). It focuses on four key issues: what is “culture,” what is “textuality,” what are the “contexts” of textual expressions and construction, and what are the issues concerning “subjectivity.” This grouping seems meaningful to me — certainly it foregrounds important sites of theoretical debate. Unfortunately, however, its effect is often to splinter the material and concepts discussed and to miss the opportunity to build on a discussion already set in motion. The text’s open-ended arrangement sometimes works against its writers’ purpose, limiting the reader’s engagement with and obscuring the contexts and relevance of the theoretical practices discussed.

In many ways, I think it is the question of which reader the text actually intends that presents much of the trouble. The introduction claims the book found its purpose in the enthusiastic undergraduates the writers have taught. The conclusion focuses on the academics “in mid-career” who seem predictably and unrelentingly hostile to the value of critical theory. In the pages between, I struggled to find a reading position appropriate to the open but ignorant reader for whom this book was written. I kept wondering just how the student new to theory would navigate the gaps, the brief passages briefly explained, and the division of concepts and writers into capsulized thematic camps. There is little sustained discussion of the documents chosen; complex passages are often treated as self-evident. Frequently, the text relies on a shorthand of jargon and complex clauses. The discursive style itself could rebuff the very audience the text invites.

The book does deploy some strategies that would help a new learner in the field. In keeping with the gesture of cultural studies, it usually enlists two texts to illustrate the theoretical issues it discusses, one of which is mainstream and literary (Shakespeare, most often), the other, a filmic text emblematic of popular culture, such as *Blade Runner* and *Body Heat*. Its discussions of difficult theoretical material often begin in more traditional readings in order to establish the general concept, and then move to a more theoretically-inflected practice. For instance, treatment of theory on “the gaze” (chapter 5) begins in a discussion of Renaissance developments of perspective in painting, moves into a discussion of narrative or filmic “point of view,” and concludes with a discussion of Freud’s concept of scopophilia and Lacan’s treatment of the gaze as a term of art.

Such domesticating gestures don’t always provide the necessary grounding a new student would need in these complicated issues, however. The discussion of

the gaze is one good example of this. As it is prepared and introduced, it is accessible and useful. But once Lacan's theory is addressed — a theory central to so many articulations of the issue — it becomes abbreviated and vague. This is largely because of the book's thematic arrangement, by virtue of which Lacanian theory is divided among different chapters. The complex triad of Real/Imaginary/Symbolic is presented early on, in a whirlwind discussion of the social unconscious (chapter 2) that is probably the densest part of the book. This section, too, would have benefited from preparation through the issues of subjectivity, including the concepts of the gaze and the mirror stage, that don't come until much later on (chapter 10). Discussing the gaze separately from the mirror stage and before the analysis of subjectivity in general seems a big mistake to this reader, who has seen students struggle with Lacan's formulations. To split this subject is further to obscure some very obscure work indeed.

Just as importantly, by denying development or continuity, these textual moments become almost rigid, resistant to interaction or development. For a text anxious to avoid totalitarian control, this is an unfortunate irony, one especially on view in the discussion of feminism. The first sustained treatment of feminist theory appears in chapter 8 with the questions, "is feminism a poststructuralist theory?" and, what the writers call its inverse, "how much has poststructuralism been shaped by feminism?" (117). Despite its location in the section on "texts and contexts," its relationship to other poststructuralist knowledges remains nonetheless unexplored; it is not discussed in terms of psychoanalytic theory, sexuality, "deconstruction," or, amazingly, subjectivity. Presented through only two writers (Kristeva and Cixous), it is instead ghettoized and restricted. Its fullest discussion is via, of all things, the masculinist practice and tradition of *film noir*. I recognize the possibilities of feminist "readings" of such texts, but this approach does not elucidate the varieties of feminist theory for students who often approach this very controversial "ism" with strong preconceptions.

For all my reservations with the book's overall effect, many of its particulars are good and could be useful for students and teachers alike, especially as a supplement to other readings. Its lists for further reading (at the end of each section) are suggestive without being daunting. Its organization provides a quick overview that can help issues be formulated. I might worry, however, that if it were adopted as a primary text, one more of the unintended consequences of its intentionally open structure would be to enforce its particular critical program on syllabus, teacher, and student alike. ✱

Works Cited

Stein, Gertrude. "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans." *Lectures in America*. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1985. 135-164.