

Interview

ON HUMANS, FICTION AND CULTURAL SCIENCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HARTLEY

Burcu Şimşek*

John Hartley is John Curtin Distinguished Professor of Cultural Science at Curtin University, Western Australia; and Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow at the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University, Wales. He was co-founder of the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation at Queensland University of Technology, where he held an ARC Federation Fellowship and was founding Dean of the Creative Industries Faculty. He has held visiting scholar positions in the USA, UK, China, Germany and Denmark. He was awarded the Order of Australia for service to education, and is an elect Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Learned Society of Wales, Royal Society of Arts, and International Communication Association. He has published 30 books (as author, co-author or editor) in communication, cultural and media studies, including *Cultural Science* (Bloomsbury).

In your talk *Humans vs. Westworld: A Cultural Science Approach*¹ that took place in the Adventures in Culture and Technology seminar series held by the Centre for Culture and Technology at Curtin University on April 2017, you take a look at contemporary television through a cultural science approach to examine some of the issues that surround us globally, that are widely discussed, reflected in popular texts such as Harari's two books *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus* that you also refer to in your talk. With

* Assoc. Prof. Dr., Hacettepe University, Faculty of Communication. bsimsek03@gmail.com

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¹ "Humans vs. Westworld: A Culture Science Approach by John Hartley" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taO0plbBFnk>

Jason Potts in recent years, you developed an approach in the examination of culture in relation to science.

What cultural science approach offers us in our attempt to understand our world?

The ‘cultural science’ approach (Hartley & Potts, 2014) recognises that while individuals act with imagination and talent to create meaningful expression and to make sense of the world in which they act and make, they cannot do it outside of the large-scale cultural systems that have evolved over many centuries. Obviously these systems include language as a whole – a uniquely human creation – in all of its different forms, but it also includes cities, institutions, artefacts, and many different practices, from dancing to warfare. Individual activities are the output of more or less coherent groups, acting coherently and collectively. Individuals motivated by their own self-interest are an *effect* of cultural systems, not a cause (as the behavioural sciences have told us for so long).

So ‘cultural science’ is the attempt to understand how culture makes groups, how groups make knowledge, and the relationship between individual creative expression and the interactions of groups. We are particularly interested in where *new* ideas come from – artworks, novelties, innovations. Rather than emanating from the head of individual genius, we think “newness” is produced in the interactions and tensions along the borders between different groups and different cultural systems. Here is where you might expect the most dynamism and intense generation of new information – arising from conflict as well as cooperation.

What do you set differently in the cultural science approach than in cultural studies?

Cultural *studies* is organised around cultural practices in media and everyday life. Cultural *science* starts from the same place. Cultural studies has led the way in investigating the discursive relationships between various groups and their ‘others’; especially relationships of power along differences of gender, ethnicity, class, national and other markers of identity. Cultural studies has also led the way in shifting critical attention away from an exclusive focus on the ‘high’ arts towards an engagement with ordinary lives.

Cultural *science* takes this approach two important steps further. First, it uses a *systems approach* (derived originally from information theory, cybernetics and web or network sciences). Second, it adopts an *evolutionary approach*, seeking to explain the long-

term dynamics of whole populations, not simply the activities of leading individuals or elites.

Of course the natural and biosciences have followed the evolutionary path for a century, but the social sciences have been slow to follow suit, and the humanities are often resistant to evolutionary theory, which has been used for racist purposes in the past.

But Evolutionary Economics has shown how important new insights are possible using evolutionary approaches, into how humans make knowledge, and how they produce value. Cultural science seeks to learn from these interdisciplinary fields, just as it wants to take advantage of recent advances in computational theory, which has grown so quickly in the digital era. Now it is possible to 'read' human activities at scale, as coded and algorithmic. Indeed, it is hard to make sense of modern global cultures without attending to the giant social networks and the 'big data' that they amass via computational technologies.

So, 'cultural science' wants to understand how culture makes groups, groups make knowledge (we call inter-knowing groups 'demes'), how knowledge grows over the long term, and is challenged and changed. Within that overall structure, we want to understand how knowledge can be 'translated' (rather than 'transmitted', since knowledge is not inert data but also meaning, value and use) across all sorts of demographic borders among populations: national, ideological and the apparently more personal 'demes' built around identity, affect, affiliation and creativity. And cultural science investigates how those cultural systems, once they have emerged, evolve and change both internally and in their dynamic interactions with other, often competing systems.

What is the potential of speculative representations, namely fiction, for the analysis of the contemporary global issues?

Yuval Harari – who as a historian is concerned with facts – has made the startling observation (in *Sapiens*, 2014) that what is distinctive about humans is that we create 'fictions' and then live by them. He means the big ideas – religion, money, states, corporations, the law – all of which are unknown in nature. They live in discourse. We institutionalise these fictions and live by their rules, which then determine many of our individual actions, which turn out to be coded, path-dependent and contextually determined.

What is so remarkable about speculative fiction – that is, science-fiction, fantasy genres, and various ‘world-building’ narratives in both action and romantic entertainment – is that we can collectively think through possible and impossible ‘fictions’ of this fundamental type, in order to imagine how humans might (or should) act in some unexpected encounter with a new kind of ‘other’.

Nowadays, such beings are likely to be aliens, robots, Artificial Intelligence (AI) or various mythical beings, either desirable ones, like fairies and wizards, or fearful ones, like dragons and monsters. How will humanity deal with non-human and post-human beings? Do they have consciousness? Should we fight them, or learn from them? Enslave them, or live with them? What does our humanity amount to if it can be reproduced or bettered in an AI robot? Speculative fiction is a very effective way of thinking through the possibilities.

Your discussion on two contemporary television series that are consumed globally, one European, *Humans*, and the other, North American, *Westworld*, set a concrete example for the use of the cultural science approach. How can fiction extend knowledge and how can we pose differently the question of meaning in an era of power where borders are either vague or strict?

I took these two shows as examples of two contrasting ‘semiospheres’ (Yuri Lotman’s term): the American (*Westworld*, HBO) and the European (*Humans*, Channel 4). I wanted to see if the differences between the shows could tell us something useful about the different kinds of knowledge that two contrasting cultures can produce.

In particular I wanted to see if the contrast itself would bring those differences into sharp relief, where focusing on the internal features of just one of them would not reveal so much. So this was an attempt to see how culture-made groups make knowledge that may guide the actions – certainly the reactions – of characters and audiences alike, by showing how two colliding and overlapping semiospheres produce intense new information at the borderline between them, from which we can learn about the identity of each.

What I found was that the interactions between humans and robots in the two TV series could be interpreted according to the cultural dynamics of the two semiospheres. For the American *Westworld*, the problem – an unresolved running sore of history – was a distinction between individualism (‘freedom’, American-style) and *slavery*. For the European *Humans*, conversely, the problem – also an unresolved tension of history – was

class distinction. Thus, the ‘hosts’ in *Westworld* are effectively slaves, operating at the whim of visitors, who may use them or kill them as they please.

In *Humans*, the ‘synths’ are located in households, and the series follows their interactions with both adults and children in this context. When a *Westworld* ‘host’ breaks free, it is to *make a decision* that amounts to free-will or self-determination, in other words to see themselves as an individual. On the other hand, when a ‘synth’ breaks free in *Humans*, her first instinct is to find and *join others of her class*.

The two series also reveal many other opposites: in *Westworld*, sex is for ‘transmission’ of the will of the visitor; in *Humans* it is for ‘translating’ between humans and synths. *Westworld* is about winning, and death; *Humans* is about accommodating, compromising, finding the mind of the other, and living with that.

In short, comparing *Westworld* and *Humans* in terms of the difference between two semiospheres allows us to see otherwise unstated differences between the preoccupations and uncertainties of the two cultures.

Like this:

Contrasting Semiospheres: *Westworld* vs. *Humans*

	<i>Westworld</i> (HBO, 2016) *	<i>Humans</i> (C4, 2015-16) *
National culture	USA	UK/Europe
– <i>preoccupations</i>	– Slavery, power	– Class, meaning
Location	Fantasy ‘Western’ park	English suburbia
Characters	Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood)	Anita/Mia (Gemma Chan)
	Maeve (Thandie Newton)	Niska (Emily Berrington)
– <i>motivation</i>	– Individualism	– Mutuality
– <i>self-realisation?</i>	– Making a decision	– Joining a group
– <i>relationship</i>	– Sex, death	– Love, accommodation
Children? †	Little Boy (Oliver Bell), robot	3 Hawkins children, human
Dénouement (outcome)	Catastrophe, death (winning)	Compromise, life (cohabiting)
Perspective on robots	Power, owner (‘they’)	Culture, user (‘we’)
Kagan ID ‡	‘Mars’ (hegemony, force)	‘Venus’ (law, institutions)
Model of communication	Transmission of power	Translation of meaning
– to/through individuals	– between groups/cultures	
– <i>Comm. theorist</i>	– Claude Shannon	– Yuri Lotman

Notes

* Both shows are preparing further seasons at time of writing (December 2017).

† Sophie Hawkins (Pixie Davies) is the youngest (aged 8-9) of *Humans*’ central family; she welcomes the synths and is especially fond of Mia (who she named Anita). Her older teenaged brother Toby (Theo Stevenson) is attracted to and protective of Anita; the oldest daughter Mattie (Lucy Carless) is strongly motivated to discover more about the synths, using her computer hacking skills, and becomes a major ‘translation’ link between them and the human world. In *Westworld*, Little Boy (Oliver Bell) is a ‘host’, thought by fans to be a clone of the park’s fictional creator, Dr Robert Ford (Anthony Hopkins): http://westworld.wikia.com/wiki/Little_Boy

‡ ‘Kagan ID’ refers to Robert Kagan (2003), who famously argued that ‘Americans are from Mars; Europeans are from Venus’; see also *Policy Review*, 113 (2002), and 172 (2012).

What is the relationship between self/identity and society/group at planetary scale in reference to *Humans* and *Westworld*? And which narratives emerge in these we/they story sequences?

I saw *Humans* as an attempt to understand how individuals fit into groups, and how groups with fundamental differences – humans and synths, but also men, women and children; communities and classes – can learn to tolerate each other, and the difficulties associated with that.

This helped me to understand why I ‘liked’ *Humans* so much but ‘loathed’ *Westworld*! Perhaps it is also because I am immersed in European as opposed to US culture. Sometimes it was hard to see *Westworld* as anything other than a very expensive celebration of hegemonic power: masculine, individualist, American and with an untrammelled ‘will to win’. The ‘other’ in this show is treated not as an *interlocutor* but as an *ant*. Of course the viewer knows that this is not the case, but it’s going to be a long, hard lesson for all!

I’m all too aware that the TV shows I’m discussing are not ‘user-created’ in any meaningful way, but they are made in a production system where creativity feeds on uncertainty (Leslie 2017), not least about what viewers will want to follow. Thus, those who make ‘deep’ stories (showrunners and their teams) can win backing from those with the capital to reach ‘wide’ audiences (subscription TV and broadcasters). When it works, as with both *Westworld* and *Humans* in their semiospheres, it offers a model for how knowledge can be made intensely (in ‘clubs’) and shared widely (across ‘commons’).

How does all this translate to our world and how do you think new demes, new groups are formed in a world of divides?

Popular television has evolved as a world-spanning system for constructing and reflecting on contemporary human subjectivity. At its most compelling, it is able to pose the question of how dangerous humans are to the world, to itself as a species, and to other systems, living or artificial. It allows viewers to crowd-source and share their deliberations about what should become of the Western-oriented ‘we’ of modernity. There are many moderns who have enjoyed the fruits of freedom and comfort but who fear for what their children may inherit at planetary scale. The prospect of the unfurling Anthropocene era is that the universalising Western ‘we’ (the ‘we’ of *H. sapiens*, rather than just Americans) have become our own worst enemies. Globalising inter-group conflict, imposing cruelties on ‘they’ classes, from robots to migrants, presents a doubtful

future for our own children. Television routinely pursues this unquiet thought through its most visible discursive elaboration, in the pop-culture forms where philosophy and children meet. What becomes of our children there? Do they succeed, or succumb?

I'm convinced that new groups are formed around new uncertainties all the time. Within them people cooperate – sometimes through conflict – to explore and settle the problem and so to grow knowledge, just as the characters in sci-fi shows interact with robots and learn from the encounter. One of the major uncertainties in many such shows is whether or not a character is human or not, and how you can tell. This tribal desire to test out who is 'one of us' (therefore trustworthy) and who's 'one of them' (and therefore duplicitous) is as old as the hills.

At some point, such knowledge itself becomes coded in cultural practices and discursive 'fictions', which can be used among larger groups, and translated by outsiders for their own use. This process of cultural exploration and exchange is important not just for our inner, imaginative lives, but also for our social organisation and belonging, and for the distribution of powers and powerlessness between insiders and outsiders of all kinds.

Humanity has been migrating across the world since *H. sapiens* crossed the Arabian Sea about 75,000 years ago. But it is only in the last 500 years or so that the planet has been brought into knowledge as a single unit; and only in the past century or so that communications, media and sociality have been shared globally and instantaneously among the general populace. Humanity is for the first time having to think of itself as a global species, but it is still divided by boundaries and conflicts.

It is taking *H. sapiens* a long time (in terms of individual lifetimes) to see that we are not simply scattered bands of competing groups but one organism with an impact on ourselves and on the environment. The collective actions of the species are now as much a cause of uncertainty and potential destruction as they any 'other' that has been confronted in the past. In short, *Homo sapiens* is turning into its own worst enemy.

It is partly because of the cultural signs and codes that have evolved to help small bands of humans to survive in an uncertain world that we persist in looking for 'others' across our own 'fictional' borders. So we need to understand that process. I'm hoping that cultural science will be able to help.

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