
What comes after postmodernism? The cognitive turn, perhaps? Not that any of the critics in Lisa Zunshine’s edited collection *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies* go so far as to claim this, however much the notion of a revolutionary turn back to science colours each chapter. In fact, many contributors to the volume explicitly marry postmodern approaches to cultural studies with their borrowings from cognitive science. But there is no doubt that these writers are very aware that they are breaking new ground in ‘the rapidly growing interdisciplinary field of cognitive approaches to literature and culture’ (p.1), and much of the strength – and occasional weakness – of the collection as a whole springs from just that. This is the cutting edge of literary scholarship, and the blade can cut both ways.

Zunshine has assembled a veritable who’s who of the advance guard of cognitive cultural studies. She herself is no mean contributor to the field, with *Why We Read Fiction* (2006) marking a milestone in the application of theory of mind to fiction. Two of the more provocative chapters in the book (Patrick Colm Hogan’s ‘Literary Universals’ and Ellen Spolsky’s ‘Darwin and Derrida’) have previously appeared in *Poetics Today* as journal articles. These, and other contributors such as David Herman and Bruce McConachie, have been prominent voices during the field’s infancy. Yet despite this impressive assembly – or perhaps because of it – Zunshine’s *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies* is not the ideal introductory text, at least not for the target audience of ‘students in a broad variety of literature and culture courses’ (p.1). The individual chapters are too diverse, each too narrowly specialised, to offer either an overview or any easy entry into cognitive studies. Perhaps this is mere quibbling, but a lecturer designing a course on cognitive cultural studies could not rely upon this book to guide them or to function as course text. However, the reader already familiar with the field will find that the range of inventive approaches presented, from ‘multisensory imagery’ in poetry to cognitive ecocriticism, will profitably expand intellectual horizons.

While it is impossible within the scope of a review to describe and discuss the merits of each article within the volume, I will review at least one chapter from each partition of the book, whilst indicating the remaining scope of that division.

Patrick Colm Hogan’s chapter is the only entry under Part One, ‘Literary Universals’, and a difficult entree for anyone with postmodernism sympathies to digest. The very word ‘universal’ smacks of grand narratives and a scientific search for unchanging laws, and Hogan is well aware of the resistance to universals within the humanities. Yet his initial defence does nothing to win such a reader over, for in endeavouring to show that this resistance is misguided, he targets postcolonial critics’ supposed rejection of universals (on the basis of a solitary example) for failing to realise that racism depends more on emphasis of difference than on human universal qualities. Such an example hardly proves the case. Despite an inauspicious beginning, Hogan’s basic argument, that: ‘Like the laws of nature, cultural universals are instantiated variously, particularized in specific circumstances’ (p.40), is sound and a theme of the collection as a whole.
The chapters grouped under Part Two, ‘Cognitive Historicism’, are more in tune with established literary historicism and so both less confronting but also probably less groundbreaking in approach. I particularly enjoyed Mary Thomas Crane’s study of analogy in medieval and early modern thought. In a remarkably clear exposition of a complicated subject, Crane proposes that the fundamental change marking the early modern scientific revolution off from earlier medieval science was a shift in analogical thinking: ‘Analogy didn’t disappear from [scientific thought] … but became more important, albeit in altered form’ (p.104), a form that, because less direct also became far less accessible to non-scientists. The implications remain with us still. Alan Richardson’s essay in the same section approaches the writing of Keats, Austen and playwright Joanna Baillie in the light of facial expression theories current in their milieus. His argument that these authors display an active engagement with contemporary medical theories is entirely convincing, yet this piece would fit just as easily into a more conventional collection of historicist literary analysis; quite how it helps to ‘introduce’ the new wave of cognitive cultural studies is a mystery.

The contributions in Part Three hone in on cognitive trends in narratology. David Herman, a notable contributor within that field, opens the section with an article that comes closer than most in the volume to an ‘introduction to cognitive cultural studies’. Of particular value to a beginner is his concise summary of ‘recent conceptions of mind: some swings of the post-Cartesian pendulum’, which traces approaches to mind and body from Descartes through to the current ‘second cognitive revolution’. Herman goes on to describe a stream of cognitive psychology of great potential interest to narratology – discursive narrative analysis. Herman then applies aspects of discursive psychology to a Hemingway story in order to demonstrate the light it sheds on literary dialogue. What results is a clever and clearly structured analysis of ‘Hills Like White Elephants’, yet one that tempts the question, ‘so what?’ What has cognitive psychology enabled us to see that an equally insightful but more traditional close analysis would not have revealed? While this reservation does not decrease the validity of Herman’s analysis in any way, it is a question that might be put to many chapters of the book; that is, a purported revolution in cultural analysis needs to maintain its revolutionary quality or it simply becomes a rewording of the old. Later in the same section, Blakey Vermeule’s stated aim of investigating a key attraction and source of aesthetic pleasure in literature – clearly a cognitive topic – turns out instead to demonstrate the existence of a pervasive literary character-type: the reflexive and intricate (indeed often overly clever) ‘Machiavellian thinker’. While this is in itself an interesting and persuasive argument, again it is one that might just as easily have been made without the cognitive dressing.

Ellen Spolsky’s chapter on ‘Cognitive literary theory as a species of post-structuralism’ concludes both Part Four and the volume itself on a provocative, rigorous, yet slightly defensive note. This article has a very ambitious scope – nothing less than asserting that post-structuralism takes the same approach to the unstable (and evolving) meaning of words and texts as Darwinian theory takes to the evolution of species. The point is ably made and convincing. While there is no need to defend post-structuralism in terms of the scientific canon, this article reflects well the aim of the volume as a whole: to show that science and humanities are not at odds with each other – in fact, that they find their ideal meeting ground in cognitive cultural studies.

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To conclude, while this volume is not the ideal introduction to cognitive cultural studies, it certainly presents a rich array of innovative approaches to textual analysis for the researcher wishing to explore the ‘cognitive revolution’.

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