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(eds.)

# Cognition and Culture

An Interdisciplinary Dialogue

p a s s a g e m

Estudos em Ciências Culturais  
Studies in Cultural Sciences  
Kulturwissenschaftliche Studien

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# Introduction

Some books seem to land on our desk at the most opportune moments. As we prepared to write the introduction to this volume, a very unrelated book, brought from afar by a common friend, oddly seemed to provide a good start: *Atlas of Remote Islands*, a curious guide to fifty unknown, secluded islands, off any popular tourist guide and probably away from any actual travel intentions. At least from the author's, Judith Schalansky, judging by the subtitle: *Fifty islands where I have never been and which I shall never visit*. The book is intriguing, both because of its subject matter and because of this prompt determination of the author.

Long before we came to know of this good read, the Research Center for Communication and Culture of the Catholic University of Portugal organized an international conference on Cognition and Culture, which brought together in Lisbon in May 21 and 22 of 2009 several researchers and an interested audience to discuss the relatedness of these two major topics: Studying culture in the age of cognitive science and studying cognition with culture in mind. The interest in both culture and the human mind is timeless, the legacy is rich, and the time is right to add to both fields of cognitive science and culture studies the gains of each other's knowledge, methodology and results.

But what does it really mean to study culture in the age of cognitive science? We should not be mistaken. The object of cognitive science is the human mind: this comprises both its visible side – human behavior and its neural structural and functional underpinnings, ever more amenable to observation by sophisticated technologies – and its less observable yet equally real side of mental operations and thought processes (in other words, the mind, proper). This view of the mind seems to place it far from the auspices of the study of culture, at least if we view the latter as a plural phenomenon, i.e. human cultures. Cognitive science does in fact not deny the influence of local culture in shaping views of the world, and linguistic research is just one of the areas that reveal this awareness about diversity. Nonetheless, it remains the central focus of cognitive science to unravel the human mind (singular) above and beyond the variation of its cultural editings.

The second equation – studying cognition with culture in mind – seems even more obscure. Are we to study the human mind from the bias of our cultural rootedness? Are we to look for culture in the circuitry of the mind's underlying brain? Such questions are epistemic as much as they are methodological. However, it is beyond doubt that they matter.

Studying the human mind goes beyond scrutinizing the brain or dissecting individual thought. Our minds, intricate, manifold and capable of the most intriguing thoughts, plans, beliefs, are as much the output of a sophisticated brain enhanced through the ways of phylogeny, as they are the product of the environment, which in the case of our species means a highly social environment: without the fine networks of kin and community, we are doomed as a species, hopelessly frail in our physical existence and cognitively limited, if not stimulated in and by the synergy with other minds. And here is where the relation between cognition and culture begins to make sense. Humans are cultural by nature, and the human mind is not only the individual, but also the social mind.

This notion of culture is wide and abstract, not immediately amenable to pin down as an object of study. It is difficult to consider how culture, in this sense, can be studied with respect to its influence in shaping the human mind. Likewise, this broad view of culture is hard to reconcile with the understanding of culture in the tradition of cultural studies, which aim at describing the plurality of cultural codes and manifestations. It is however from cognitive neuroscience and from culture studies that two compatible insights arise which could point out in a direction for this joint study. The first is formulated by neuroscientist Semir Zeki, a renowned researcher of the visual brain and the founder of the field of neuroesthetics. In the introduction to his book *Splendors and Miseries of the Brain*, Zeki surprises his usual reader with a proposal that is as humbling as it is daring:

Rapid technical advances in imaging brain activity will allow neurobiologists to profane the secrets of the brain and how they affect and determine mental and emotional states; [...] In the service of these states mankind has reached the heights of joy and the depths of despair and in the process it has created works of art, literature and music which have become an invaluable asset not only of our enjoyment but also of the enrichment of our understanding of ourselves.

Yet this direct evidence, obtained from observing brain activity, is not enough in shaping our understanding of how the brain functions. *We cannot proceed in this direction without using the products of the brain in our explorations of its functioning.* (Zeki 2009: 2-3, our emphasis)

What Zeki proposes is thus that the research of the human brain (and of the mental structures and processes it gives rise to) is not complete if we do not add to the direct observation of behavior and of its neural interface, the exploration of its creations. Art, which he chooses as the privileged object in his inquiry, is just one of the fields of human creation that can provide a privileged path to the thinking and the emotional brain, just as other anthropologically relevant products – from religion to political systems, from economics to kinship relations – can pin down that abstract concept of human culture into describable objects, whose study can be just as insightful as to the way our brain works and our minds – both individual and social – unfold their potential.

The other insight comes from one specific tradition in the study of culture, namely the concept of *Kulturwissenschaft*, of German tradition, literally the

‘science of culture’, a field of study which is less focused on the description of difference (as is the case of cultural studies, of Anglo-Saxon imprint) and more centered in unraveling the historical and philosophical conditions of cultural creation. This particular tradition shifts the focus from cultural variation to the conditions that enable and shape this variation. Such an approach seems more compatible with a cognitive agenda.

When cognitive science and the study of culture meet, their dialogue is necessarily interdisciplinary. This was the case of the CECC Conference on Cognition and Culture, which was the trigger for the essays collected in this volume. Interdisciplinarity was not only one central aspect of this event; it was also one of the issues debated as a methodological condition for common research in cognitive science and the study of culture. The questions that oriented that conference were manifold: What is the point of bringing the areas together into a cognitive oriented study of culture? What purpose might the interdisciplinary enterprise serve, that is not already covered by either of the fields? What can be its object, how can a methodology be unfolded? What should and what can be its scope? And, apparently more trivial yet equally important, what should we name it?

This volume follows the structure of the presentations given at that international conference. The first section – *From Body to Mind to Culture* – explores the cognitive conditions for human culture, and the mental processes, in particular blending or conceptual integration, that enable the creation of cultural products (Turner), the neurobiological interface of cultural processes and the way these in turn contribute to changes in the individual brain (Castro Caldas), and the epistemic challenges of bringing together cognitive science and culture studies, a venture to overcome the divide between the humanities and sciences (Hanenberg).

In the second section – *Culture Studies in the Age of Cognitive Science* – a cognitive semiotic account is proposed, in which signs are viewed as the fundamental elements of culture assigned with differentiated functions in culture and in cultural contact and conflict (Brandt). Moreover, a cognitive informed approach to metaphor in its cultural and discursive embedding is outlined (A. Nünning), in which metaphor is not just a way of describing reality, but rather a strategy by which that reality is construed, in the first place, and further negotiated in discourse and stored in collective memory. One further field of studies that is informed by cognitive science is the study of language, in particular the study of meaning, which mirrors human experience, both embodied and cultural, cognitive and dynamic (Silva).

The third section – *Applying Cognitive Science to the Study of Cultural Products* – further explores the synergy of culture studies and cognitive science on the basis of concrete cultural phenomena that can be described. One of these is the recurrence of blending or conceptual integration of unrelated though culturally framed

domains in the language of sports press (Almeida). One further phenomenon in exploration is narrative, viewed in the broad sense of an instrument of thought and in the concrete manifestation of story, informed by culture (Abrantes). The section and the book closes with a meta-theoretical reflection on the chances and consequences of an interdisciplinary project for bringing together sciences, the humanities and literature, and takes academic disciplines in their particular ways of achieving knowledge, as the lab for these reflections and considerations (V. Nünning).

A volume of this nature, which brings together cognitive science and culture studies, is a meeting of disciplines for discussing a topic that interests them all, namely human culture as made possible by the uniqueness of the human mind. An interdisciplinary dialogue in this view is as desirable as it is inevitable. Nevertheless, such an enterprise is only meaningful if the original disciplinary grounding of the interlocutors is ensured. Interdisciplinarity is as much *inter*actional as it is *disciplinary*. Questions, discourses, methodologies and results can inform each other in an enriching way, yet the significance of this exchange is only possible if the discipline's own perspective on the subject matter is preserved. In this sense, the disciplines brought together in this volume (and in the conference that preceded it) are in some way like the secluded islands presented by Judith Schalansky: they all are unique in their location, story, topography; and they all share some remoteness as their common denominator. The same goes for the academic disciplines, with the advantage that these are much less secluded, scientifically speaking, and certainly far more interesting to venture into.

Just as the naming of new found land makes a place come to existence – both on a map and in the common knowledge – so does the area of intersection of cognitive science and the study of culture require a designation that ensures so much its scope as it guarantees the object, formulates the questions, determines the methods and enables the sharing of the results. Cognitive Culture Studies was the name given to this area of study and this research project within the research center CECC. It is in the frame of that project that this volume now emerges, one we hope to be the first landmark in the cartography of this new field.

The editors

## References

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