

Fiction's in the Know: Reassessing Epistemologies of Cognitive Science and (Un)Consciousness

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Abstract:

In *Fictions of Cognition*, Stephan Freißmann focuses on the circulation of ideas between scientific and literary writing. To sketch out what he argues to be a dialogic relationship between what he calls 'fictions of cognition' and cognitive science, the study focuses on the types of knowledge of cognition that can be formed on the basis of fiction, and the representation of (un)consciousness and cognitive science in fiction. After asserting the epistemic power of fiction and significantly expanding the spectrum of elements of narrative able to represent consciousness, six contemporary English and American novels, 'fictions of cognition', are analyzed in pairs according to dominant theme and their stance toward consciousness and/or cognitive science. The book convincingly relativizes the authority of science by emphasizing the cultural dynamics inherent in the negotiation process of knowledge formation. It is well-argued, intelligible, and an overall thought-provoking, relevant contribution to cognitive literary and cultural studies.

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Stephan Freißmann's study takes as its origin what he terms "the dialogic relationship between fictions of cognition and cognitive science" (p. 1). *Fictions of Cognition* examines how a number of contemporary British and American authors of fiction published since 1995 have actively engaged with findings and theories in cognitive science that have of late challenged popular assumptions about consciousness and, consequently, agency. As a result, so Freißmann, 'fictions of cognition' (his term) have emerged, a subgenre that refers to and interacts with ideas in cognitive science and which constructs fictional characters and their cognition (p. 4).

Including both the thematic and the structural dimension of representing (un)consciousness and cognitive science in narrative fiction in his detailed analysis, Freißmann pairs up six such 'fictions of cognition' based on dominant theme and the type of stance these fictions adopt towards cognitive science. He specifies these stances using Hubert Zapf's theory of "Literature as Cultural Ecology" (in *Literary History/Cultural History*, Ed. Herbert Grabes, 2001). In the process of literary configuration (sensu Ricoeur), 'fictions of cognition' can establish three kinds of relationships with the prefigured material of cognitive science: as a 'cultural-critical meta-discourse' a literary work can criticize scientific claims to the sole authority of explanation, bringing alternative accounts into play (cf. first novel pairing); as an 'imaginative counter-discourse' a fiction of cognition confronts the mainstream opinion of cognitive science with a fictional representation of a marginalized account (cf. second pair); or, a literary work can function as a 'reintegrative inter-discourse' that links cognition with seemingly distant phenomena (cf. third pair).

Concerning the dominant themes, the first two 'fictions of cognition' (cf. III.2), David Lodge's *Thinks...* (2001) and Richard Powers' *Galatea 2.2* (1995), both stage the competing perspectives on consciousness that are developed in narrative fiction and cognitive science, respectively. The next two novels (cf. III.3), Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) and Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker* (2006), foreground the production of coherence by protagonists whose mental condition challenges their ability to process experience. The third and final analyses (cf. III.4) of Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) and Mark Haddon's *A Spot of Bother* (2006) focus on the interplay of cognition with the body.

The second major analytic lens through which Freißmann scrutinizes his 'fictions of cognition' ties in with his argument that new insights from cognitive science have found their way into literature through authorial innovations of literary techniques for representing consciousness. In a critical reassessment that broadens the spectrum of representational modes (II.2), Freißmann takes a cursory account of modernist classical stream of consciousness narration as his starting point to add several modes and elements of narrative to the potential means of representing consciousness and cognitive science in 'fictions of cognition'. These include mind-style, the cultural technique of narrative as a cognitive instrument, characters' direct speech and actions, and the discursive macro-structure of the novel. Although his compilation is clear, extensive, and well researched, the "Distinctive-Feature-Matrix" (II.3) that the second chapter builds up to is rather brief (pp. 83-86) and would have greatly benefited from a graphic representation. By the same token, the other three figures included in this chapter (pp. 48, 49, 59) are quite helpful, especially figure two (p. 49) which correlates different taxonomies for consciousness representation. The next edition may also want to include a table of figures.

The final cornerstone of the literary analyses is taken from epistemology. In support of his central argument that fiction is a medium of knowledge formation in its own right with serious consequences for the circulation of knowledge in a society, a number of different types of knowledge formation are introduced. Freißmann summarizes the difference in potential of the two central discourses as follows: "whereas the scientific discourse can only make statements about cognition, the literary discourse has the potential for conveying experience of cognition" (p. 8, emphasis original). In other words, the discursive formation of cognitive science can develop objective facts of inter-subjective testability, but always remains confined to a third-person perspective.

By contrast, fiction is able to make cognition understandable from an interior, first-person viewpoint. More specifically, 'fictions of cognition' offer three ways of knowledge formation. The first is through intertextual links to propositional knowledge of cognition ('that-knowledge' of general validity at the time of its currency) formed in cognitive science. Secondly, fictions of cognition are able to form implicit knowledge of cognition, for example procedural ('knowing how') or tacit knowledge (integrating particulars into a meaningful whole). Third, narrative knowledge unfolds in the process of storytelling and occupies a hybrid position between propositional, procedural, and tacit knowledge.

Fictions of Cognition is a relevant and stimulating contribution to cognitive narratology, cultural studies, genre theory, as well as English and American literary studies. Freißmann touches upon a number of current trends in these fields of research: a focus on consciousness; a critical reassessment and expansion of how it can be represented; the emphasis on the embodiment of cognition; the use of a broad notion of cognition to include and stress the importance of emotion; the literary representation of autism and dementia (third set of analyses) that also ties in with an increasing number of critical and primary texts dedicated to age studies (... to name but a few).

As is typical for German dissertations (cf. the table of contents), there is no arc of suspense. The reader will find the aims, a brief outline, and the main arguments laid out in the first paragraphs of each (sub)section. Combined with the many summarizing sections, a general strong point of the book (cf. especially the "Comparative Conclusion" subchapters after each novel pairing), *Fictions of Cognition* is consistently lucid and persuasively argued. In conclusion, the book is recommendable for students and faculty interested in contemporary narrative means of consciousness representation, as well as knowledge formation and the configuration of cognition in contemporary fiction.