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PROJECT

Neuro-Aesthetics: Constructing Human Interiority

In the arts, design theory, and new media studies a history of the senses is springing up. Simultaneously, the multiplying brain sciences are developing a finer neurobiology of feeling. Still to be provided, however, is a combined story of the emergence of subjectivity. We need to formulate a soma-poetics of human interiority, or what Thomas Metzinger calls "a truly internalist state space semantics". I propose that exploring this deep corporeal capacity for forming moving images or substantive neural patterns (using the elementary representational tools of the sensory and motor systems (entails the creation of a neuronal aesthetics. Yet we lack a mutually informed cross-disciplinary inquiry into the complexities of human behavior from the inside out.

How might humanists studying images contribute to this bridging project? I want to suggest that formalism (that is, the physicalist recognition that visual form is a powerful signifier (is a major area ripe for re-evaluation in brain studies. From the vast sweep of artistic practices and within the limited scope of this book, I look at only two such cases. Nonetheless, this offers a key instance of sensual perception, the anti-dualist conviction that emotional and physical feeling share the same material core. This book takes up the problems of the mind made flesh as evinced in the binding into an organic unit of the parts of a composition with the arousal of emotions.

Recommended Reading

Stafford, Barbara M. Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1991.

-. Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.

Stafford, Barbara M. and Frances Terpak. Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen. (Catalog for an exhibition at the Getty Research Center, 2002). Los Angeles: Getty Museum Publications and Oxford University Press, 2001/2002.

COLLOQUIUM, 01.11.2005

Forms of Compression. Emblems, Symbols, and the Problem of Synchronization

My goal this year is to complete a book developing the outlines of what might be called a cognitive history of images. To date, the project resembles Novalis' "Das allgemeine Brouillon". I have case-study fragments on romantic systematics and the rise of a genealogy of human thought, on the difference between contemporary non-mimetic views of how mental representation functions and classical mimetic theories of representation, etc. These, and other, essays do not fit the rubrics of traditional intellectual history, the history of mentalities, or more recently,

"historical epistemology" (Daston, Poovey, Wahrman).

Specifically, I ask how might we see complex cultural surfaces differently (in this case, a wide range of images) because of current neuro-research on everything from brain modularity (Semir Zeki and V.S. Ramachandran), self-organization and autonomy (beginning with Varela and Maturana), the "cultured" brain of neural Darwinism and neural constructivism (Hebb, Deacon), reentry and "distributed" cognition (Edelman, Clark). In reviewing what I have been struggling fitfully to do (which has involved learning a new field), I've come to realize that a driving interest of mine involves radically reassessing what, after Clement Greenberg, has been derided as "mere" formalism.

While new media artists as diverse as Olafur Eliason, Janet Cardiffe, Jim Campbell, or Warren Neidich are, for example, quite aware of the phenomenological underpinnings shaping the research of such neuroscientists as George Baars or Thomas Metzinger, visual historians of older historical material generally have not pursued this or other lines of brain inquiry. Therefore, for this paper, I want to tackle a special sort of formal compression with deep historical roots: the interlocked emblem and what I believe to be its prototype, the compounded "real" symbol developed in late antiquity. I will argue that such enduring artisanal "inlaid" forms have much to reveal to humanists as well as to neuroscientists about binding and, more importantly, the synchronization of neural events occurring in circumscribed and widely distributed areas of the brain.

It is this dynamic correlational process that allows for the coordination of perceptual and motor events. Translating this major organizational/compositional problem into cultural terms, I cite here - just by way of example and clarification - the anthropological research of the musicologist Steven Field working among the Kaluli people of Papua. He speaks of synchrony as a "lifting up over sounding" (i.e., drums, water falls, forest noises). Similarly, what I am after is understanding from the inside out just how intarsia-like images can achieve an overall feeling of togetherness (not melding) with parts that are out-of-phase. By that I mean - like Novalis' encyclopedia of fragments - that such bits and pieces are the distinctively different and shifting points of various formal structures perceived at any given moment. And that each of these parts continuously changes and even competes with the others before transiently coming together during self-assembly.