Cognitive Psychology, or the Deconstruction of Subjectivity

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Abstract

The present paper is drawing on information from various fields (cognitive psychology, philosophy, technology, literature) in its attempt to define cognitivism in the context of debates on posthumanism. Apparently the cognitive turn in the humanities, defined by Line Brandt in "The Cognitive Turn in Poetics", a chapter of her 2013 book, *The Communicative Mind* [1], as ”the discovery of the mind.” [1], does not contradict the Cartesian notion of man as a thinking, rational subject. The cognitivist approach however overturns the notion of reason in its early modern acceptation. Descartes had associated reasoning with identity, thinking with the self-consciousness of being or with the individual's awareness of its separate existence from other human beings with whom he shared the rational faculties. Present-day cognitivism conceives of the mind as a sort of cybernetic machine whose main virtue is that of recognizing pre-existing codes. We will further discuss pattern recognition as a cognitive science principle and as a key concept in the understanding of the way the mind functions and which ultimately affects the behavioural pattern.

Keywords: *Cognitive psychology, Deconstruction of subjectivity, Pattern recognition, Fairy tales.*

Interoduction

Cognitive psychology considers that we are sort of programmed beings endowed with "competencies for goal-directed self-regulation", "person prototypes and exemplars" who dispaly patterns of behaviour:

W. Mischel and Youiki Shouda studied the invariance of personality and the variability of behaviour across situations and found out that individuals show stable individual differences in their overall levels of behaviour and stable patterns of behaviour variability across situations.

When personality is conceptualized as a stable system that mediates how the individual selects, construes, and processes social information and generates social behaviors, it becomes possible to account simultaneously for both the invariant qualities of the underlying personality and the predictable variability across situations in some of its characteristic behavioral expressions [2].

Such views are vehemently contested by the advocates of constructions of the mind centred on humanist traditions of subjectivity, such as Stefan Herbrechter, in his *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* [3].

Posthuman technological developments increasingly erode our traditional humanist reflexes: consciousness, emotion, language, intelligence, morality, humour, mortality - all these no longer demonstrate the unique character and value of human existence. Instead, the spectre of the 'posthuman' is now being widely invoked as the 'inevitable' next evolutionary stage that humans are facing.
http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/178833 04-posthumanism

It is true that in cognitive psychology, perception is viewed “as the organization and explanation of sense information, and the process of acquiring the meanings of sense information. Correspondingly, this process is treated as a series of consecutive information processing, and the ability of the process depends on the past knowledge and experience” [4]. When an object is perceived,

irrespective of the distance or angle at which one looks, the changing size of the image does not affect the invariant perception of the image.

In human pattern recognition we make use of the perception process which is based on prior knowledge and experience:Generally, pattern recognition refers to a process of inputting stimulating (pattern) information and matching with the information in long-term memory, then recognizing the category which the stimulation belongs to. Therefore, pattern recognition depends on people's knowledge and experience.Without involving individual's knowledge and experience, people cannot understand the meanings of the stimulating information pattern inputted, then neither possible to recognize the patterns, which means to recognize the objects. Current cognitive psychology has proposed such theoretical models or hypothesis as the Theory of Template (Model of Template Matching), the Theory of Prototype (Model of Prototype Matching), the Theory of Feature (Model of Feature Analysis), and so on" [4].

Pattern recognition uses templates, prototypes and features. They all have in common the idea of pattern, make use of prior information in the memory and work through matching. **Templates** are mini copies of exterior patterns formed in the past in long term memory and work by simulation acts on the senses, the simulating information being coded, compared and matched one-by-one with patterns in the brain. The notion of "template" corresponds roughly to Immanuel Kant's Schema which structures the perception of new information into Representation (Vorstellung).

A **prototype**, unlike a template, is the inside copy of a certain pattern, *that is*, it possesses the abstract characteristics of all the individuals in a certain type of category. Pattern recognition is realised by matching input information with the prototype in an up-down processing. Each fairy tale is based on such a prototype.

Features, unlike templates and prototypes which apply to the entire pattern, represent

constitutive elements. In pattern recognition, features of a pattern are matched to those stored in the memory in a bottom-up processing model.

In order to perform these matching operations we have to consider some basic requirements. We have mentioned perception so far, but in the case under consideration it is related to memory. "Memory, in cognitive psychology, can be seen as a process of information inputting, coding, storing, and extracting, therefore, it can be separated as instantaneous memory, short-term memory, and long-term memory according to the time of storage"[4].

The way we store information is linked to three hypothetical models.

The symbol-net model is based on the idea that knowledge is organised as an up-and-down layering: a concept is linked to another with an arrowed line, and when the concept which is nearest can answer the question, there is no need for further search. For instance, the particular entity "ostrich" is subsumed under the category of "birds".

An ostrich----------is a kind of------------bird

The level-semantics-net model is also based on concepts which are linked by an arrowed line to various concepts, describing the affiliation with "a kind of" relation, and each concept has one or more characteristics in a "have" relation of concept.

An ostrich-----[have] has feathers

The activation-diffusion model regards knowledge in two ways: first, concepts are related through lines, the shorter the line, the tighter the relation ("fruit"is closer to "pear" than to "student"). Secondly, the intension of the concept or of the model is decided by other related concepts.

What has technology to do with the way people understand literature? It has influenced it to such an extent that all the traditional humanist reflexes are now left out and we are facing *posthumanism* ... as a product of '*cognitivist* popularizers of "hard" sciences' – (Herbrechter: 17).

A new name has been coined for this hybrid culture which may very well replace Postmodernism, also displacing the manner of defining cultural phases according to stylistic features. Its proponents call it The Third Culture.

The Third Culture comprises the vast field that reaches from the debaters of evolutionary theory (Dawkins and Daniel Dennett versus Gould), through physicists dealing with quantum physics and cosmology (Stephen Hawking, Steven Weinberg, Fritjof Capra), cognitive scientists (Dennett again, Marvin Minsky), neurologists(Oliver Sacks) and theorists of chaos (Benoit Mandelbrot, Ian Stewart)- authors dealing with the cognitive and general social impact of digitalization of our daily lives – up to the theorists of an autopoetic system who endeavour to develop a universal formal notion of self-organizing emerging systems that can be applied to „ natural living organisms and species and „social organisms" (The behaviour of the markets and other large groups of interacting social agents) [5].

This change from „an" analog (i.e., humanist, literate, book or text-based) to a "digital" (Posthumanist, code, data or information-based) social, cultural and economic system does indeed affect both the production and the perception of literature, including the genre we are concerned with now, the fairy tales.

Characters in Fairy Tales are usually on a way to enlightenment, magically transformed for the better. Now characters have become nothing more than "a medium of transport become a destination", and experience (initiation and growth) is reduced to pattern recognition. The character does not change, he is what he is and his way in life is predetermined and encapsulated in a pattern. We have just quoted from Neil Easterbrook's recontextualization of William Gibson's homonymous novel (*Pattern Recognition)*, in light of the interpenetration of technology, subjectivity and ontology… The greater change wrought by cyberculture in Gibson's work , Easterbrook concludes is " how *homo sapiens* has become *homo significans,* the hyperbolic posthuman of the

Sprawl books recuperated to a more humanist, humane task.

William Gibson's character in *Pattern Recognition* is reduced to: "a medium of transport become a destination". In our case fairy tales are a vehicle for sending a message (e.g. feminisim).

True enough that that such speculations apply to fairy tales as well, as they are patterned narratives and maintain this pattern unchanged despite transformations and rewriting through times. Nevertheless, rewriting, the reproduction of a pattern does not necessarily mean the end of imaginative writing or of the defence of traditional humanistic values which come under the attack of the machinic theories about the human being.

Our test case is the way Angela Carter has refurbished *Bluebeard*, a fairy tale that has many variants, but it is the "original" story (that is Perrault's story) that readers will assess the variant against. Bluebeard is a widespread European folktale with many variants German, French, Basque, and Estonian, to name but a few. In Norway the husband is a troll, in Italy, a devil, and in ancient Greek version, death itself. According to Funk and Wagnall's *Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, the central motif of the story is the broken taboo, the forbidden chamber" Charles Perrault's first moral to the story reads as a warning to young wives: "Curiosity is a charming passion, but may only be satisfied at a price of a thousand regrets; ones sees around one a thousand examples of this sad truth every day. Curiosity is the most fleeting of pleasures; the moment it is satisfied, it ceases to exist and it always proves very, very expensive."

The second perspective of pattern recognition regards the fact that fairy tales have a simple structure and therefore a new inscriptor can operate changes (of perspective, relations, of the Bakhtian space-time chronotope, etc.) on it, and yet it will still be understood as a fairy tale. In Carter's revision *The Bloody Chamber* we are told the story from the heroine's perspective, in a different time and space from the Bluebeard story.

The third perspective of using pattern recognition is that one can even open or rewrite wrong on old fairy tales and make a new modern or postmodernist version out of it, inserting into it some personal agenda (such as Angela Carter's feminist perspective in *The Bloody Chamber*), without rendering unreadable the traditional fairy tale which can still be identified as the original matrix on which the later bricoleurs have worked.

As Carter herself said „ I am putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode." She makes use of the old well-known fairy tales, or the well-established pattern in the readers' long-term memory and subverts the original message. It is this familiarity of the reader with the fairy tale that makes it possible for Carter to deliver her message, for "Carter, a feminist, to speak through Perrault's tales"(M. Roemer and Bacchilega: 12) and for readers to get involved into a text they have previously known and stored in their memory but rediscover it with new feminist implications.

Carter uses the basic element's from Perrault's tale, namely the rich and powerful man who marries a series of young wives, lets them the key to a forbidden room in which they are told not to enter, this being a test of obedience to him. Each woman will not resist her curiosity which is afterwards revealed by the blood stained key. Bluebeard killed his previous wives but the cycle is broken when his current wife is rescued just in time and he is then killed.

The differences are noticed in the end, in the bloody chamber the mother of the wife comes to save her and kills the marquis, while in bluebeard tale it is the brothers who come to save the "damsel in distress". This is clearly an example of Carter wishing to portray a stronger female character or the female ability to fend for herself and equal the power of a man. Another difference ist that in *Bluebeard* the wife quickly remarries the perfect nobleman inheriting all Bluebeard's riches and lives happily ever after. In *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter breaks the stereotypical ending by making the protagonist invest the majority of the Marquis's money in a school for the blind,

living on a modest life. She does this to show that a female can live independently od a man and still live "happily ever after". Perrault's "dragoon and musqueteer", figures of the Ancient Regime militaristic order, are displaced by the non-European mother, the racial other, the "Indo-China daughter of a rich tea planter", whose heroic feats do not exalt service to the king and state but serve justice and humanistic values: in her girlhood, the mother had "outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand".

Unlike Perrault, who sides with the male partner, blaming his femal victim's curiosity, Carter's master opening shows the heroine's first voyage to a marrital relationship into which she had been drawn by fascination with antequated French aristocracy and their paraphernalia (castel, jewels, deadly mystieris of the Catherine de Medicis sort) as emprisonment into machinery:

I remember how, that night, I lay awake in the wagon-lit in a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement, my burning cheek pressed against the impeccable linen of the pillow and the pounding of my heart mimicking that of the great pistons ceaselessly thrusting the train that bore me through the night, away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage.

The patriarchal husband portrait gains in the precision of its outline by contamination with one more fairy tale plot pattern, *Tristan and Isolde*. Further symbolic energy is gained in the association of woman with professional skill, a former wife having been a successful interpreter of Isolde, while the present wife is a talented poiano player.

Carter is also probing into psychoanalysis, the husband's behavioural automatism being explained within the context of the French Revolution rebellion against the ancient regime:After the Terror, in the early days of the Directory, the aristos who'd escaped the guillotine had an ironic fad of tying a red ribbon round their necks at just the point

where the blade would have sliced it through, a red ribbon like the memory of a wound.

Maybe the trauma produced back then has effects on the Marquis's unconscious desire to avenge the "aristos" against a plebeian colonial by giving her a morbid wedding gift:His wedding gift, clasped round my throat. A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat.

One more expalnatory narrative is imperial egomania, the marquis looking like "ancient Egyptians painted upon their sarcophagi". Another narrrative "link" is to sultans and harems. Whereas the racial Asian is capable of appreciating and performing European art, the pedigree European acquires Orintal vices. It is Carter's use of the tale to fight back the Europocentrism that emerged in Perrault's time. It is the feudal order that resembles machinery, while the protagonists of the postcolonial age long for the simple life of the loving family. The castle is unwrappped from romantic associations: "extraordinary machine, this anchored, castellated ocean liner". The marquis's lack in affections (his face looks like a mask) couples with his reification of woman turned into a parcel that can be dispensed with when he feels burdened with the yoke of matrimony. For him, women are no longer individual human beings but objects of desire that can be serialised like Baudrillard's simulacra, copies without original:

Our bed. And surrounded by so many mirrors! Mirrors on all the walls, in stately

frames of contorted gold, that reflected more white lilies than I'd ever seen in my life before. He'd filled the room with them, to greet the bride, the young bride. The young bride, who had become that multitude of girls I saw in the mirrors, identical in their chic navy blue tailor-mades, for travelling, madame, or walking. A maid had dealt with the furs. Henceforth, a maid would deal with everything.

'See,' he said, gesturing towards those elegant girls. 'I have acquired a whole harem for myself!'
I found that I was trembling. My breath came thickly. I could not meet his eye and turned my head away, out of pride, out of shyness, and watched a dozen husbands approach me in a dozen mirrors.

Here is a pattern enriched with other patterns in order to release the exponential woman from the cage of patriarchal matrimony. What Carter did is an excellent study in the deconstruction of fairy tale into recycled stuff emptied out of its original potential for magic (the magic key, the magic chamber) and resymbolized as utopian project (a cultural reconstruction of gender and female sexuality). The two pieces have common themes, characters, plots, motifs, yet are engaged in sending different messages adapted to the historical and cultural background, the rewriting allowing the female author to reopen the old pattern and introduce therein a narrative written from the other end of the male-female asymetric power relantonship, as if she were looking through the other end of a telescope.

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