

Art — depression — fiction: A variation on René Thom's three important kinds of human activity

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Abstract

The construct of 'alexithymia,' formulated in the late 1960s, described the inability to express one's feelings as a deficit in the signifying-abilities of men and women. In this study, the profile of the alexithemic serves as a point of reference for a discussion concerning language and consciousness and the cognitive/neuroscientific turn in the past decades. The objectives of this paper are to show that the cognitive/neuroscientific turn profoundly affected the understanding of alexithymia in particular and the relationship between language and consciousness in general. As the dominant cognitive/neuroscientific models of consciousness ignore the social embeddedness and the importance of the signifying abilities of human beings, this paper presents alternative models of consciousness and issues of intersubjectivity by proposing a variation on a model from René Thom's 'catastrophe theory' and Uexküll's theory of 'autoambience.' These models, predicated upon social embeddedness and semiotic ability, explain how certain circumstances, such as are often identified as 'depression,' can be catalysts of productive outcome. In particular, the notion of 'play' in René Thom's catastrophe theory underscores the primacy of 'language play' as a combinatorial signifying activity with a restorative function that is exemplified in the notion of fiction in the work of David Lodge.

1. Toward a science of consciousness?

In recent years, philosophers, psychologists, linguists, literary scholars, and neuroscientists have copiously articulated their theories of consciousness. Proponents of a science of consciousness are animated by the intersections between these fields and are thus hoping to bridge the gap between the sciences and the humanities with a unified theory. Two models of the mind have come to dominate the popular views concerning

consciousness: the computer model and the notion that the mind is, in fact, the brain.

The computational theory of mind is predicated on the central idea that cognitive mental processes are operations defined on syntactically structured mental representations that are like sentences. According to philosopher and cognitive scientist Jerry Fodor, the current situation in cognitive science justifies the postulation of a language of thought, but 'is light years from being satisfactory' (Fodor 2000: 5).

A prominent version of the notion that consciousness is just the brain — an entirely biological problem — has been promoted by Berkeley philosopher of language, John Searle (1997, 2002), who argues that we have to abandon the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy once and for all and think about consciousness simply as a property of the brain the way our digestion is a property of our stomach (Searle 2002: 2).

While Searle rejects the computer model of the brain, he believes his ideas are compatible with the neural Darwinism of Gerald Edelman (2000). Edelman postulates a basic consciousness and higher-order consciousness which gave rise to the evolution of language. Edelman's theoretical model is evidently also compatible with the claims that Mark Turner made in his book *The Literary Mind* (1996).

Turner, in a nutshell, attributes the evolution of language to the need of human beings for metaphor and narrative; metaphor, in that sense, precedes language and is grounded in bodily experience. The compatibility of Edelman's model and Turner's *Literary Mind*, therefore, rests on their speculations on the mechanisms that may have contributed to the evolution of language and not to an actual theory of consciousness.

In a review of *The Literary Mind*, Alan Richardson declares Mark Turner preeminent among the few literary scholars conversant with cognitive theory and neuroscience at a time when 'an entire new set of frameworks and paradigms, inspired by advances in neurobiology and computer science that were nearly unimaginable half a century ago, has proliferated ... and the cognitive neurosciences have emerged as the most exciting and rapidly developing interdisciplinary venture of our era' (Richardson 1998: 39). About Turner and his forerunners, cognitive linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson (1980), Richardson says further:

Lakoff, Johnson, and Turner were engaged in a set of overlapping projects with a common agenda: to assert the centrality of 'literary' subjects like metaphor and imagination to language and to mental life generally; to ground cognition in bodily experience; and to advance a non-reductive materialist approach to the

mind that challenged mind/brain and mind/body dualisms without losing sight of the claims of the social and physical environment. (Richardson 1998: 40)

This determined optimism about a ‘non-reductive materialist approach to the mind’ stands in stark contrast with recent statements by the architect of the so-called *cognitive revolution*, Noam Chomsky. Almost half a century after inaugurating the *innateness hypothesis* — the idea that human beings are pre-wired for language — Noam Chomsky cautions the proponents of an allegedly unified theory of consciousness:

Integration of mental aspects of the world with others appears to be a distant goal. Even for insects, the so-called ‘language of the bees’ for example, problems of neural realization and evolution are barely at the horizon. It is, perhaps, surprising, to find that such problems are lively topics of speculation for the vastly more complex and obscure systems of human higher mental faculties, language and others; and that we regularly hear confident pronouncements about the mechanisms and evolution of such faculties — for humans, not for bees; for bees the problems are understood to be too hard. Commonly the speculations are offered as solutions of the mind-body problem, but that can hardly be, since the problem has had no coherent formulation for 300 years. (2002: 56)

Chomsky, in particular, criticizes cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker (1999, 2002) for his claims about the evolution of language and cognition. To be sure, Pinker’s evolutionary psychology not only makes far-reaching conjectures about evolution, but he takes innateness (or behavioral genetics) to the extreme when he makes such precarious claims as ‘[all] those differences among parents and homes have no predictable long-term effects on the personalities of their children . . . [and] much of the advice from parenting experts is flappedoodle’ (2002: 384).

At a time when linguists and psychologists are excited about collecting data on blood circulation patterns in the brain while subjects read words off flashcards, Chomsky warns that ‘it may be fair to say that current understanding falls well short of laying the basis for the unification of the sciences of the brain and higher mental faculties, language among them, and that many surprises may lie along the way to what seems a distant goal’ (2002: 61).

The impact of the neuroscientific/cognitive turn on the discipline of linguistics can be seen in the compartmentalization and specialization of sub-disciplines in the field. The linguist who considers herself a humanistic scholar may find herself estranged from the objectives of a computational linguist or cognitive scientist at the other end of the spectrum, *precisely because* they diverge in their approach to questions concerning

consciousness and language. Unfortunately, this unbending enthusiasm for insights concerning language and the brain is happening at a time when many have stopped questioning the feasibility of a unified theory of language and consciousness.

‘The data are gorgeous’ says Dartmouth College cognitive neuroscientist Laura-Ann Petitto of her experiments with near-infrared spectroscopy on babies’ brains while listening to someone say ‘Hello baby, are you a good baby?’ (Duenwald 2003: 31). Near-infrared spectroscopy can visualize how much oxygen is used in different parts of the brain. Surely, it is more than optimistic to claim that this allows her ‘to see how babies’ brains *operate* while they’re awake and learning to talk’ (Duenwald 2003: 31, emphasis added).

Some linguists may find the recent ‘convergence’ of cognitive and neuroscientific models suspect on the grounds of very fundamental principles in semantic theory or, for that matter, philosophy. For instance, the German linguist Theodor Ickler lamented the fundamental semiotic problem in the hybrid character of psychological concepts such as consciousness when he wrote:

When we speak about thoughts and emotions, we specifically do not refer to the brain or hormones; we do not even have to know anything about these things, in order to speak of *thoughts* and *emotions*. These problems have long been settled by the analytical philosophy of language. [...] The solution is a non-referential interpretation of the semantics of psychology. (1993: 273)

This non-referential interpretation implies that our psychological concepts rely on a folk-taxonomy that depends largely on the cultural context in which the concepts exist. This is particularly obvious when we examine a word like *depression*. We speak about depression as a disease, because many people suffer from it, we assume that it has been well enough studied and described by psychologists and psychotherapists that it can be classified in its intensity and that it can be treated based on the effects chemical substances have on the nervous system. According to Ickler’s observations, it is because the language of psychology is so easily integrated into our every day communication that its non-referential character escapes us.

The significance of usage and cultural background becomes apparent when we compare the way we speak about depression now to other cultural arenas and time periods. Consider the way Goethe described the *Sorrows of Young Werther* or Kierkegaard the melancholy of the *Unhappiest Man*; is that melancholy the equivalent of our modern day depression?

Furthermore, with our understanding of depression as a disease that can be treated and perhaps cured, we accept a particular conception of normality and psychopathology; in other words, the belief that depression is caused by a physiological imbalance that can and should be rectified by medication and/or therapy is predicated on the cultural understanding that the happy self is normal and the depressed self is pathological.

Keeping the current debate on language and consciousness in mind, in what follows, changing views of a psychiatric construct called *alexithymia* serve as a point of reference for a discussion concerning language and consciousness and the cognitive/neuroscientific turn in the past decades. The complex of alexithymia, which was conceived in the late 1960s, described the inability to express one's feelings as a deficit in the signifying abilities of men and women.

It will become clear that the effect of the cognitive/neuroscientific turn on the understanding of mental disorder mirrors this new approach to the relationship of language and consciousness. It will be shown that more suitable, alternative models of consciousness and the self and issues of intersubjectivity can be found in Jakob von Uexküll's theory of *auto-ambience* and in a variation on a model from René Thom's *catastrophe theory*. These models promote an understanding of depression that attributes productive value to certain syncretistic states and processes. In particular, the notion of *play* in René Thom's *catastrophe theory* underscores the primacy of *language play* as a combinatorial signifying activity among humans whose restorative function is exemplified in the notion of fiction, which will be examined using the work of the novelist David Lodge.

2. Consciousness as a process of communication

In order to understand the nature of Shands and Meltzer's work on alexithymia, it will be helpful to consider Jakob von Uexküll's theory of autoambience as a basic model of consciousness. It was Thomas Sebeok who first recognized Uexküll's contribution to general semiotics; as one of the main devotees to his theory of autoambience, Sebeok understood consciousness or the self as *a process of communication* (1977: 181).

Uexküll's theory of autoambience (*Umwelt*) 'was devoted to the problem of how living beings perceive their environment and how this perception determines their behavior ... Of particular interest to Uexküll was the fact that signs are of prime importance in all aspects of life processes' (T. Uexküll 1987: 147). Uexküll describes the self as psychophysically suited to its autoambience, the non-self, which in turn has its existence through the particular self; he speaks of functional circles

(*Funktionskreise*) of individual experience. Uexküll's son, Thure von Uexküll, explains the model of functional circles as elements of the subjective self-world which form an ultimate reality:

Reality, to which all is subjected and from which everything is deduced, is not to be found 'outside,' in infinite space, which has neither beginning nor end, and which is filled with a nebulous cloud of elementary particles; nor is it to be found 'inside,' within ourselves and the indistinct, distorted images of the external world created by our mind. Reality manifests itself in those worlds — described by Uexküll as *Umwelten* (subjective-self worlds) with which sense perception surrounds all living beings like a bubble — clearly delineated but invisible to outside observers. (1987: 148)

For Jakob von Uexküll, signs and sign processes are the only true reality and 'the laws under which the signs and sign processes communicate themselves to our mind [...] are the only true laws of nature' (T. Uexküll 1987: 148). One of the fundamental notions in Uexküll's theory of autoambience is the sign relationship *self* and *non-self* in which each is indicative of the other. This most primitive of sign relationships 'results in a strangely reciprocal relationship between nature, which has created man, and man who not only in his art and science, but also in his experiential universe, has created nature' (T. Uexküll 1987: 149).

This primitive sign relationship is most effectively expressed in the dictum that the *self and the universe are reciprocals* (cf. Shands and Meltzer 1977: 89). Just as Goethe's *Werther* and Kierkegaard's *Unhappiest Man* were products of the cultural practices that determined the meaning of melancholy, they created through their expression that which can be experienced.

3. Problems in introspection

The term *alexithymia*, literally 'no word for feeling,' has recently been studied as a complex of *disorders of affect regulation* (e.g. Taylor 1997) with associated medical and psychiatric illness. While the latest studies associate alexithymia primarily with neurobiological factors such as brain lateralization, at the time of its 'discovery' and investigation in the early 1970s Harley Shands located the causes of alexithymia in the patient's social context, the non-self, implicitly following the postulates of Uexküll's autoambience theory.

The psychiatrists Harley Shands and James Meltzer (1973) characterized their interest in alexithymia by the applications of semiotic understanding to psychiatric and psychological problems. The neurobiological

orientation of contemporary studies on alexithymia may make the work of Shands and Meltzer seem like armchair psychiatry; however, what distinguishes them fundamentally is Shands' and Meltzer's definition of alexithymia as a 'deficit in higher semiotic functions' (Shands 1978: 175).

The increased emphasis on neurobiological factors in recent studies of alexithymia stands in stark contrast to Shands and Meltzer's interpretation as a *social disease*. In these recent experiments, subjects are typically presented with so-called emotion-eliciting images while monitoring skin conductance, heart rate deceleration, and the circulation of particular parts of the brain. Recent research in alexithymia is predicated upon physiological causes or correlates, while for Shands and Meltzer physiological symptoms were secondary to a social disease.

Shands (1978) described alexithymia as the incapacity for introspection and self description; he presented an array of case study narratives which he linked primarily to socioeconomic correlates. Alexithymia in this early interpretation was understood as a *social disease* to which medical and psychosomatic symptoms were secondary. This is exemplified by Case 4 of his study; Shands calls this a tragic accident of modernization:

He cannot stand the long continued presence of even his immediate family on a pleasure trip and develops ulcerative colitis in that context. His job is one of editing and preparing manuscripts, at which he is very good — but which he finds boring. He stays by himself except for seeing his small son. He thinks of himself as 'healthy' because he does not smoke, is not overweight, and he takes exercise — but at the same time he develops hypochondriacal fears. When the physician tells him he looks extremely depressed, he takes his word for it — even though he can find no 'depressed feelings' in himself. Instead he says to himself 'I wish I were dead' without suicidal affect — and even with relief. (Shands 1978: 195)

Shands presents as a hypothetical explanation for alexithymia 'a general lack of *education* in the disabled,' and 'a marked deficiency in *education to intimacy* and to the description to others of his or her own feelings, positive or negative' in the psychosomatic patient (1978: 178, emphasis added). Shands sees a prophylactic effect of education to knowing one's own feelings and their implications of relatedness to others.

He describes a *circular model* of preserving the self when he says: 'The cultural requirement in a highly complex civilization for the internalization of the social environment is a curious circular process involving first an "externalization" of one's own behavior followed by an "internalization" of the description of that behavior associated with the perception of the internal components' (Shands 1978: 184). This corresponds to the reciprocal relationship between self and non-self proposed by Uexküll's

theory of autoambience and anticipates the model of the predation loop in René Thom's catastrophe theory.

Shands states further that in a complex society, the self that is learned varies in relation to the linguistic context in which the person lives. Those living in the context of a restricted code learn a *restricted self* — that is, primarily a self that is context dependent. In more highly educated persons, the context of an elaborated code allows the development of a far more context independent or generalized self according to Shands.

While Shands' emphasis on the prophylactic implications of learning and the notion that formal education can prevent alexithymia seems intuitively acceptable, it is in part unsatisfying considering the patient in his 1978 study was a well-educated man with a 'degree from a first-class American university, . . . solvent, obviously highly intelligent' (Shands 1978: 195). In order to further disambiguate the general notions of *education* or *learning*, it is important to examine what aspect or type of *learning* can prevent these accidents of modernization and what could be the *content* to be learned in order for an individual to conserve the self.

4. Three important types of human activity

Shands and Meltzer's model of conserving the self is akin to the *permanence of the ego* described in René Thom's *catastrophe theory*. In *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis* (1975 [1972]), Thom proposes basic models in thought and language in the animal and the human mind that may serve as a starting point for the interpretation of problems in intersubjectivity.

He introduces the model of the *predation loop* in the animal mind which contains the basic morphologies of perception, capture, and ingestion. In the process the animal is alienated by the sight of the prey and, in what he refers to as the 'confusion of the actants,' *becomes* the prey before ingesting it, after which the animal restores the ego. This resembles the circular process described by Shands above for the internalization of the social environment, which first entailed an externalization of the subject's behavior, and then the internalization of the description of that behavior (1978: 184). The 'confusion of the actants' in the predation loop corresponds further to the pattern of 'othering' in Shands' interpretation of intersubjectivity:

Human beings know how to describe actions in others by observing the others from the outside. Ultimately the human being by 'othering' himself in association with a preceptor (cf. Mead 1934) comes to be able to describe himself from inside. (Shands 1978: 199)

