

Brain Drain or Brain Gain? The Future of Cognitive Literary Studies

Sibylle Baumbach, Ralf Haekel, Felix Sprang

More than a decade has passed since the ‘decade of the brain’ (1990-1999), and after a sobering phase of taking stock, neuroscience has picked up pace again recently and has inspired new research areas in the field of cognitive literary, cultural studies, and neuroaesthetics (cf. Herman, Hogan, Zunshine, Zeki). These approaches suggest innovative ways to think about the production of, and aesthetic response to works of art in general and literary texts in particular. At the same time, they serve as springboards for discussing the ways in which we view, read, and perceive artefacts. In the case of literature, these approaches spark off critical reflections upon the various mechanisms that inform both production and reception aesthetics. The recent trend towards neuroaesthetics, however, also raises questions with regard to the applicability of these approaches to literary studies and their potential limitations. One of the critical points frequently raised in this context is to what extent neuroaesthetic analysis can help reform traditional literary studies. Do neuroaesthetic approaches merely offer descriptions of processes that are already known or do they bring significant new insights to the study of literature? Which new perspectives does empirical aesthetics have to offer to literary studies and what is its (expected) impact on the future of literary and cultural studies? To what extent can cognitive processes, which are activated in the act of reading, be regarded as human universals and to what extent are we dealing with culturally constructed phenomena that are specifically literary? What do we gain by neuroaesthetic approaches to literature and what, if anything, is lost?

In our section, we wish to address these questions and raise new ones in order to map the field of literary and cultural studies in current research. We will focus on particular phenomena of cognition that are ‘literary’, i.e. are observed only or predominantly in the process of reading literary texts. It is one of our objectives to further explore the relationship between rhetoric and cognition for the construction of literariness. We further aim to scrutinize the contribution of literary studies in the field of cognitive cultural studies, to discuss the recent neuro-boom and its impact on traditional literary studies, and to open up new perspectives for further research in this field.

Papers might address, but are not restricted to, one of the following topics:

- rhetoric and cognition
- cognitive literary theory
- the literary mind and “theory of mind”
- literature, cognition, and emotions
- psychonarratology / cognitive narratology
- aesthetic attention
- empirical aesthetics and the study of literature

Please send your abstracts (of no more than 300 words) to Sibylle Baumbach (baumbach@uni-mainz.de), Ralf Haekel (Ralf.Haekel@phil.uni-goettingen.de) and Felix Sprang (felix.sprang@hu-berlin.de) by 31st August 2014.