

Setting up expectations: A recent phenomenon

[SA2 Edition]

Toronto Star - Toronto, Ont.

Author: Buell, Timothy

Date: Feb 18, 1989

Start Page: M.12

Section: MAGAZINE

Document Text

The Cognitive Revolution

In Western Culture

Volume I: The Birth of Expectation

by Don Le Pan

Broadview Press, 304 pages, \$29.95

When Emilia picks up Desdemona's dropped handkerchief and announces her intention of giving it to Iago, we sense that the action is precipitous. Since we know Iago has been plotting against Othello, we expect that the handkerchief will be procured as "proof" of Desdemona's infidelity, despite Emilia's assertion that "What he will do with it, Heaven knows, not I."

While a modern audience would readily recognize this sort of dramatic cause-and-effect relationship, Don LePan believes that such an ability to formulate expectations from perceived events is a cognitive ability that had been only recently acquired by the audiences of Shakespeare's day. It simply did not exist, or lay dormant, in the medieval mind. In other words, if Othello, rather than having been first performed in London in 1604, had instead been performed 300 years earlier, then the medieval audience probably would have appreciated only the essential narrative action of the play and would have remained unaware of the portentous nature of the handkerchief episode, even as Desdemona was being murdered by Othello.

In his preface, LePan states that *The Cognitive Revolution In Western Culture* had its origins in his study of medieval and renaissance literary plots, in which he concluded that Shakespeare had introduced a new type of plot construction. As the play progressed, the audience was informed of the characters' intentions prior to their enactment. This form of plotting has dominated English literature up to the present day. LePan's examination of the literary evidence in support of this thesis - which is itself reasonable - begins about two-thirds of the way through the book.

What is more contentious is his preceding attempt to demonstrate why the element of cause and effect was largely absent from pre-Shakespearean literary and dramatic texts. LePan compares the mental orientation of medieval people to that of children, and finally, to that of "primitive" cultures who similarly appear to lack the cognitive ability to form expectations.

A substantial portion of the book is devoted to a generalized rendering of anthropological, historical, literary and psychological intertextuality in support of this notion. It should be emphasized that LePan is not speaking metaphorically: He is not simply likening the medieval mind (or that of a Kashdan peasant) to that of a child, he is stating that they are one and the same, that they employ similar cognitive processes.

The spectre of ethnocentricity - and racism - is immediately raised. LePan is fully aware of this danger, and does his best to pre-empt it. He is careful to emphasize that if the faculty of expectation is not present in non-Western cultures it does not mean that those people are mentally incapable of developing it, but simply that their environment and way of life has hitherto not required the exertion of this cognitive process. Still, LePan applies the word "primitive" to non-Western cultures with distressing ethnocentric regularity.

Few who have studied the history and literature of the middle ages would dispute the notion that the medieval worldview differed in many respects from our own. Medieval chroniclers, for example, seemed obsessed with the suspicion that the past was superior to the present. This is understandable, given the tremendous social and political upheavals of the time. But it is one thing to note a difference in worldview and suggest that it is environmentally caused, and quite another to suggest that cognitive faculties are altered or left undeveloped as a result.

ALTHOUGH the book is scholarly and extensively documented (there are 55 pages of footnotes), LePan has in some instances relied too heavily on a single source. An example is the numerous citations of C. R. Hallpike's *The Foundation Of Primitive Thought*, which contends that different cultures employ different cognitive processes, a view

that LePan accepts unquestioningly.

LePan has tried almost too hard to include evidence from authoritative secondary sources in support of some of his claims. The result is that some fascinating ideas and intuitive connections are frequently burdened by numerous citations and extensive literary quotations. Nevertheless, the chapter on the medieval conception of time is particularly interesting.

While LePan succeeds in demonstrating the emergence of a new cognitive faculty of expectation in Western culture, his likening of this development to present-day cultural transformations in the less developed countries is flawed. One is left wishing that LePan had been content to provide a provocative historical look at cognition in Western culture, and had not fallen victim to a rather ethnocentric attempt at a cross-cultural connection in his postscript.

Timothy Buell is a writer and professor of communications at the University of Calgary.

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