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Mind the Brain!

At academic conferences and in various publications that explore the links between neuroscience and culture, the following statement is repeated like a mantra: George W. Bush proclaimed the 1990s the Decade of the Brain, and ever since interest in this enigmatic organ has been soaring.¹ Nowadays, we can observe many different developments brought about by this curiosity about the functioning of the grey matter. As Alva Noë observes, the excitement about the findings of neuroscience is equalled only by the enthusiasm about the gene research.² The neuroscientific research has permeated into the academic world of humanities, where it has successfully converged with many disciplines that have willingly taken on the prefix neuro- to demonstrate their allegiance to the brain science. Popular culture has not remained unaffected – countless novels, films and works of art use neuroscientific models and theories to construct their imaginary realms.

¹ But as many critics point out, the intense interest in brain functions, both among researchers and artists, can be traced at least to the nineteenth century and the development of phrenology (for details, see for instance Francisco Ortega, "Toward a Genealogy of Neuroascesis," in: *Neurocultures: Glimpses into an Expanding Universe*, eds. Fernando Vidal and Francisco Ortega (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011), pp.31-48.

² Alva Noë, *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang), p. xi.

On the one hand, there is an increased optimism about the potential of neuroscience to provide answers to the most fascinating questions concerning human consciousness, cognition, and memory that have puzzled scientists and philosophers for centuries. This optimism is reflected in the ever-growing number of research projects which make use of the latest technological advancements (in particular neuroimaging) to show us the workings of the brain. These findings are then presented in a more accessible way through various media outlets so that we can be repeatedly mesmerised by colourful images that allegedly explain what is happening inside our heads. On the other hand, many critics, especially with background in humanities or social sciences, question research methods employed by neuroscientists, together with their ways of data interpreting, and raise an alarm reminding us that human beings are too often reduced to their brains.³ They point out sceptically that, despite many years of research devoted to the brain, we still know very little, and demonstrate the dire consequences of regarding people in terms of their neuronal activity at the expense of individual differences and social contexts.

The essays included in this collection demonstrate how differently scholars approach the relatively recent – and in many ways problematic – convergence between humanities and neuroscience. While some academics incorporate neuroscientific concepts into their analyses of literary or cinematic works, or even employ them to cast light on how the properties and functions of the brain can influence the lives and creations of individuals, others take a more critical stance, demonstrating the pitfalls of applying knowledge from one field to another in an indiscriminating manner.

Interestingly, almost all the essays in this volume fall into two categories, i.e. neuroscientific considerations that take either science fiction or (auto)biography as their research material. The authors whose essays are included at the beginning have chosen to refer to science fiction as the most suitable conceptual testing ground with which to explore the potential re-definitions of the possibilities and conceptualisations of the relationship between the mind and the brain, or between the brain and the self. The approach adopted in the articles gathered in the second section of this volume is a diametrically different stance on the topic. Rather than search in the imaginary realms of science fiction for the boundaries of how our brains – or minds – make us what we are, these scholars turn to the most immediate, direct, personal experience. Focusing on biographical and autobiographi-

³ For details see for example Fernando Vidal and Francisco Ortega's works, including their latest book *Being Brains: Making the Cerebral Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), which critically investigates the consequences of the neural turn.

cal works, or the relations between the authors' life experience and their artistic output, these texts show that the questions of personal identity and their link with the cerebral constitute a timeless and profoundly intimate concern.

The volume opens with Sonia Front's investigation into the most recent cinematic representations of human consciousness within the sci-fi genre. The author grounds her analysis in the observation that, if they derive from the philosophical-scientific discourse on time and temporality, these representations can be interpreted as commentaries on the relationship between the conceptualisation of time and identity, and on how these notions are grounded in our corporeality. Using Duncan Jones's *Source Code* as her example, Front argues for a redefinition of the notion of personal identity. The need for redefinition is also the *spiritus movens* of the following article. Michał Różycki's reading of *Blindsight* suggests that Peter Watt's text is a disquisition on the idea that human brain/consciousness might be viewed as a modifiable body part – one that can be tailored to the need of situation. Whether such redefinition is beneficial for humanity is the point under consideration in Różycki's article, which – in a circumlocutory manner – seems to be warning against capitalism's tendency to commodify everything, consciousness included.

The idea concatenating the next two articles is that the state of one's mind eventuates from the way one interacts with his or her environment. In Piotr Czerwiński's text, the argument is that the contemporary man's immersion in the technological environment might generate a situation in which it is the cyberspace that becomes the greatest shaping power of being. To substantiate his thesis, the author works with Nikesh Shukla's *Meat-space* as well as the theories of the extended mind and the technological unconscious. Damian Podleśny puts forwards a thesis that is the reverse of Czerwiński's argument. In his reading of two novels by Philip K. Dick, i.e. *Martian Time-Slip* and *A Scanner Darkly*, it is the social-physical space that transpires to be the prime mover of one's existence.

The article by Katarzyna Szmigiero opens the second part of the collection and offers a review of the takes on mental disorders that can be found in the so called pathographies. According to the taxonomy the author proposes, three discernible trends can be identified in these. A number of patients disagree with the reductionist view of mental diseases as brain diseases. Some of them veer towards the biomedical model. And there are also those who see their own mental problems as results of both biological and socio-cultural conditions. Whatever stance they adopt, the authors of

illness narratives seem to find in their writing a chance “to fill the gap between the incomprehensible medical discourse and individual experience of being ill,” as Szmigiero puts it.

Su Meck’s memoir, analysed by Anita Jarczok in the next essay, is a representative of the tradition of pathographies because Meck, who has suffered from amnesia, tries to make sense of her mental condition on the pages of her narrative. The primary purpose of Jarczok’s text is to demonstrate how one’s sense of self is affected by memory limitations and failures. Furthermore, Jarczok uses her analysis to comment on the blurred boundaries of life writing genres and on the overemphasising of the role of memory in self-definition. The working of memory and its representation in writing is also the focus of Katarzyna Biela’s reading of *The Unfortunates*. Biela considers the way the author of the book, B. S. Johnson, conceptualises the processes of recalling the past and thinking about the present, and how these are represented through the literary techniques he employs. Referring to a set of theories, Biela uses, i.a., the notions of flashbulb memories, mental control processes, the stream of consciousness technique, as well as memory, material and conceptual metaphors, to address the issue.

The next essay shows how mental disorders can affect a writer’s life and works. For Aleksandra Fortuna-Nieć, the likeness that Emily Dickinson’s and Halina Poświatowska’s “poetic representations of the mental processes connected with illness and suffering” evince is palpable not only at their most overtly lexical level. As Fortuna-Nieć observes, both poets convey in their writings the idea that an individual suffering from a mental problem is like a prisoner locked in the cage of his or her “thoughts and feelings.” The author demonstrates how the approach of Dickinson and Poświatowska is informed by their intense self-scrutiny of the experience of their afflictions.

The closing essay by Donna Jung steps beyond the division into science fiction and (auto)biography and delves into the interdependencies of neurosciences and humanities in the exploration of human identity. The author takes a much more abstract approach in her very thought-provoking meditation on the limitations of the application of neuroscientific concepts to other disciplines. Jung points to the neuroestheticians’ non-interdisciplinary attempts at experimental testing of beauty. In her text, she argues against the neuro-centred perspectives which ignore the aesthetic facet(s) of the investigated objects. In Jung’s view, the idea of beauty can be illuminated with interdisciplinary perspectives in a more insightful way.