What is cognitive theory (aka "cognitivism"), and what does it have to offer people interested in media? The first essay below undertakes to sketch out an answer, but very roughly: Cognitivism holds that people's perceptions, feelings, and actions result in significant part from processes which go beyond the input to the senses. These processes include prior mental representations which to an important degree are projected onto the world out there, as a way of ordering it. These processes construct, in a significant sense, something new out of the data a stable perceptual world, an inference about the state of affairs in the environment, high-level abstractions like ideas and theories and attitudes. For evolutionary reasons, the "top-down" constructs we bring to the task usually correspond nicely to patterns shaped by the environment itself.

A simple example is the fact that objects have edges. It so happens that in our world objects are more or less rigid and bounded. But the raw data striking the eye don't unequivocally signal those properties. What psychologists call "early vision" processes taking place in the cells of various parts of the eye has the job of sharpening and exaggerating minute variations of illumination, texture, and other cues. By the time we recognize a pencil or terrier in our visual field, our visual system has "constructed" that object for us, sculpting it out of a fairly messy array. Construction doesn't mean wholesale creation: I don't imagine seeing a pencil or dog, it's really there; but that perception is the product of a collaboration between external information and internal processes.

Illusions often occur when our mental processes outrun the information coming in, jumping to a perceptual conclusion that isn't warranted. Illusions, though, are rare. Our perception is veridical nearly all the time; we wouldn't have survived as a species if we couldn't tell a tiger from a mottled patch of shade, and fast.

Lest you think that this theory pertains only to visual perception, consider language. When you listen to a language you don't understand, you can't determine the boundaries between words, and you can't tell an intonation used for effect from an intonation required by pronunciation. What's more, sound spectrographs indicate that there are almost never distinct pauses or other markers between distinct words. Yet when you listen to a language you know, you have no trouble parsing it. Your knowledge of the lexicon and syntax of the language is in a real sense projected onto the auditory input, sorting and clarifying it into an intelligible stream of information. Once more, sensory information is amplified, exaggerated, and
organized by prior conceptual structures.

Cognitivism has proven a rich perspective in many domains, from linguistics and psychology to anthropology and education. I see cognitive theory as having several appeals. First, it seems to me a very plausible account of mental life. Secondly, it offers a perspective within which interesting work on media and arts can be done. Most specifically, it fits well with the agenda of a poetics of film. If we want to know how films work upon us, then cognitive theory offers a range of concepts which correlate nicely with notions like norm, form, function, and psychological experience.

I first explored these issues in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985). There I argued that in grasping a story on film, the spectator had to execute certain activities. These activities are most consistent with a cognitivist account of mental activity. In *Making Meaning* (1989), I suggested that we could understand how film interpreters behave by looking at the tasks they set themselves and studying the schemas and heuristics they deployed in order to accomplish those tasks (always within the boundaries of the critical institutions).

I have therefore become typecast as a cognitivist, so that even noncognitivist work (eg, *On the History of Film Style*) have gotten that label. But to anticipate one thesis in what follows: Sometimes the questions you ask urge you toward a cognitivist position, but other questions don't, or don't necessarily. Cognitivism isn't a Grand Theory which will make sense of everything that interests us.

At the same time I was working on *Making Meaning*, I wrote the first piece that follows. It is an effort to tell my colleagues what the cognitive revolution in the social sciences was all about, and to point toward future possibilities. I also meant it to be the sort of simple summary of a perspective that no one had yet provided for psychoanalytic theory, as conceived by film studies. There is also some polemic in places.

The piece did have some influence, I think: many members of the Center for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image, founded by Joe and Barb Anderson, found the piece a worthwhile summary. And I was pleased to learn at the Institute's second conference (*Film, Mind, and Viewer*, Copenhagen 27-30 May 1999) that the essay was being used as a reference point in classes. I follow it with a piece I wrote in reply to some objections raised by Dudley Andrew in his introduction and by Marcia Butsel in her piece in the same issue of *Iris*. Eventually I'll be adding some further reflections on cognitive film theory.

**Articles**

"A Case for Cognitivism"
"A Case for Cognitivism: Further Reflections"

Further Thoughts