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Paradigm Shift in Humanities: The Cognitive Turn. Solving an old Aporia: Sensibility *Is* Sense

Abstract: *My paper focuses on an emergent research field in the humanities that may create the intellectual Weltanschauung, ideology and praxis of the XXIst century: the cognitive paradigm. The pioneering concepts and methods of Pinker, Damasio, Turner, Fauconnier, Lakoff et alii coalesced as a coherent intellectual program, aiming to rethink art, literature and their metalanguages on neurophysical bases. Two study-cases are discussed: Fauconniers and Turner's* The Way We Think *and Antonio Damasio's* The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotions in the Making of Consciousness.

Key words: *cognitivism; Gilles Fauconnier; Mark Turner; mental space; conceptual blending; Antonio Damasio; emotion;* aisthetic *markers.*

> *Theorizing about literature is always a palimpsest.*
> Valentine Cunningham

The theoretical design of our times resembles a puzzle testing our capacity to absorb and discriminate metalanguages, methods and concepts. At a retrospective approximation, the theoretical melting pot is a dish too eclectic to be ingested. Choosing the favourite topping ingredient from the menu is a matter of choice – *de gustibus non disputandum*, so all key concepts and critical tools have their zealous fans or skeptic antagonists. The theoretical lexicon is extremely diverse, including a plethora of technical terms as: Baudrillard, canonicity, codes, decentered, Deleuze, Derrida, discourse, erotic, Eurocentric, feminism, Foucault, Freud, gay, gender, heteronormative, identity, ideology, Lacan, logocentric, Lyotard, Marxism, modernism, patriarchal, phallocentric, postcolonialism, postmodernism, power, praxis, queer, text, sex, structuralism, subaltern, subjectivism etc. (Cunningham 24).[2] Indeed, this archive of ubiquitous terms injected in the sociolinguistic sciences changed the cultural discourse.

It is undeniably true that the most radical vector of scientificity in the humanities was Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*. It triggered what we call **the linguistic / textual turn** and pointed out one of the most valuable ideas of the XXth century: all human structures can be seen and analyzed as language; subsequently, all human practices can be

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[2] This list can be used to spot the "postmodernist" departments of literature, if their Course Catalogues contain any item (Cunningham 24)

understood as structured and finite chains of signifiers. All the following theoretical and critical trends – Russian Formalism, structuralism, all varieties of semiotics, poststructuralism, discourse analysis, textual linguistics, but also psychoanalysis or anthropology[3] - imported and put into perspective the Saussurean terminology; after one hundred years of literary theories, the jargon (softened and more user-friendly) is in the kitbag of each intellectual. Today it is pure common sense to understand that all systems are organized as sets of binaries – *signifiant* / signifier and *signifié* /signified; or agree that even the unconscious is structured like a language. After Foucault, we are all accommodated with the idea that discourse can be extended to a great number of social constructs, and the inherent power hidden in the discourse creates subjugation, marginality, subalternity etc.; or discourse alone exists, and discourse refers only to other discourse - there is no such thing as an outside-of-the-text. These theoretical propositions had an endemic spread among intellectual communities.

This "obsessive linguicity" (Patai, Coral 21) of post-Saussurean origin was acclaimed but also vigorously resisted and negated. We all learned about the epistemic impasse in which the linguistic-textual paradigm is found in the ecumenic postmodernist age. The '80s were the climax of an exponential contestation of the formalized approaches to literature. Something was definitely missing – and the formalized methods of textual investigations were repudiated not only for the excessive idiosyncratic technicality, but for their antihumanism. Humans were expelled from the text. The author is dead, the reader is not an individual, but an ideal projection. The emancipated reader was asked to be a mind without a body or a soul, and the emotional identification was a barbaric blasphemy. Even old-school theorists raised their voices in front of these irritating exaggerations.

> The abolition of aesthetics, the blurring of the distinction between poetry and critical prose, the rejection of the very ideal of correct interpretation in favor of misreading, the denial to all literature of any reference to reality are all symptoms of a profound *malaise*. If literature has nothing to say about our minds and the cosmos, about love and death, about humanity in other times and other countries, literature loses its meaning. [...] I reject the theories of some structuralists and poststructuralists who advocate *the abolition of man* (whatever they may mean), who are content with the presumed *prison house of language* and claim the complete systematization of all literature. (Wellek 50)

So, in the 90's all (still empiric) readers were eager to see the literary theory reconnected to the wider (and more humane?) spheres of history, philosophy, sociology or psychology, just to name a few. It was time for a new intellectual turn. Confronted with complex multi-disciplinary and transdisciplinary needs of the XXIst century, a new metalanguage emerged, envisaging terms with symbolic credit such as *emotion* and *sentiment*. For so many years, sense prevailed sensibility. Emotions and sentiments were the penumbra of

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[3] These theoretical directions should not be understood as a mere chronology, but as a palimpsest; as Cunningham puts it, "Marx is Foucauldianized. Freud is indeed Lacaniazed. The formalizings of old New Criticism get more forcefully reinstated as Structuralism. The *biographical fallacy* of the New Critics reappears more extremely as Barthes' *Death of the Author*. Russian Formalism feeds, in a real sense, into deconstruction, but more intensely" (Cunningham 38).

reason, with little intellectual prestige. So, when reputed neuroscientists as Antonio Damasio revealed *Descartes' error*, bluntly saying that emotions and sentiments play a central role in our life and they are as cognitive as other perceptions (Damasio 11), the ideas were seen as a paradigmatic rupture. But they are not – the emerging cognitive paradigm is a space of coalescence, with interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary goals. It convokes the social sciences, 100 years of psychoanalysis, centuries of philosophy, linguistics, but also the recent discoveries in evolutionary biology, genetics, physics, neurology or artificial intelligence. I dare say that **the cognitive paradigm** may create the scientific *Weltanschauung* ideology and praxis of the XXIst century.

The cognitive paradigm includes a plurality of irreducible concepts and scientific procedures. My paper refers to some iconic books and authors – among them, Gilles Fauconnier, Mark Turner and Antonio Damasio.

A book that shifted the focus from reason to emotion is *The Way We Think. Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. The authors – Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner – are equally famous among university scholars. Fauconnier became known with his book, *Mental Spaces: Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Language* (*Espaces mentaux*, 1984: Paris, Editions de Minuit), translated into English in 1994. Mark Turner co-authored (with George Lakoff) *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, then infused the cognitive ideas into social sciences (and literary theory), in *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (1991)*, Cognitive Dimensions of Social Science: The Way We Think About Politics, Economics, Law, and Society* (1997), *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity* (2006). He is also an active instigator behind one of most influential online platforms of intellectual debates, www. edge.org.

Fauconnier and Turner focus on what they call *conceptual blending*, a mental process with a decisive role in the way we live and think. Almost invisibly to consciousness, conceptual blending choreographs vast networks of meaning, framing our worlds. The two neuroscientists underline that this is an unnoticed, "silent" phenomenon in present-day life.

> It might seem strange that the systematicity and intricacy of some of our most basic and common mental abilities could go unrecognized for so long. Perhaps the forming of these important mechanisms early in life makes them invisible to consciousness. Even more interestingly, it may be apart of the evolutionary adaptiveness of these mechanisms that they should be invisible to consciousness, just as the backstage labor involved in putting on a play works best if it is unnoticed. (Fauconnier, Turner 18)

The two polemized with Noam Chomsky (whose name needs no glosses) or Steve Mithen,[4] two of the researchers that proposed a biological or neurological *big bang* to

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[4] Steve Mithen is the author of *The Singing Neanderthals: the Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006. For Mithen, the earliest anatomically modern human beings already have language, but it takes another hundred thousand years to get art, religion, science etc. this change in behaviour is triggered by an exceptional , singular change in the highly-adaptive human brain.

explain the birth of language; Fauconnier and Turner (together with Steven Pinker[5] or Paul Bloom[6]) accredited another point of view, proposing a gradualist story to explain the birth of language, and then the development of superior cognitive manifestations, such as art, religion, science. The emergence and the continuous transformation of blending capacity played a key-role in the process. The visible products of this powerful cognitive capacity (*i.e. conceptual blending*) are all social and external – art, religion, language, tool use.

> There is every reason to think that once the capacity is achieved and the cultural products started to appear, they reinforced each other. Language assisted social interaction, social interaction assisted the elaboration of tool use, as the tree of culture put forward these exceptional new products. Language and art became part of religion, religion part of art, language part of the technology of tools, all intertwined. Certainly this is the picture we see when we look at human beings today. (Fauconnier and Turner 186)

A great diversity of meaning construction – such as categorizations, analogies, scientific notions, grammatical constructions – seems to be avatars of conceptual blending. But the most striking fruit of this amazing capacity could be the construction of unreal. Logicians and semioticians (Hintikka, Pavel, Eco *et alii*) have explained to us how we design *possible worlds*: we *imagine* things, states of affairs, spaces or individuals endowed with attributes, we convert the "real" objects into mental images, and into linguistic signifiers. We counterfeit "reality" not only when we write literature, but also when lie, pretend, imitate, consider alternatives, simulate, make models and propose hypotheses.[7] For a (mentally) normal healthy adult, the cognitive capacity to operate on the unreal is as natural as breathing.

The possible worlds – artistic or not – have a fascinating power to create, maintain and disrupt illusion. Paul Bloom reiterated the idea in his recent book:

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[5] Steven Pinker, author of <u>How the Mind Works</u> (1997), <u>The Stuff of Thought</u> (2007), and <u>The Better Angels of Our Nature</u> (2011), is reputed for his computational theory of mind.

[6] Paul Bloom is the reputed cognitive psychologist and the author of *How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

[7] The two authors discussed maybe the most powerful case of counterfactuality: the fundamental deduction technique *reductio ad absurdum*. "In *reductio ad absurdum*, we seek to prove the falsity of a proposition P within the system. The network is explicitly constructed by blending two inputs. The first is built up from our settled knowledge of a consistent mathematical system. In that input we activate some facts and deduction procedures from the mathematical system and the certainty that it is noncontradictory. In the other input, we have the same facts, but also the proposition P, considered as true. In the blend, we have P from one space, the currently activated facts from both spaces, and the deduction procedures, and P, and recruit as we go along any potentially helpful new facts that we choose to activate from the settled system of mathematics linked to the first input. We seek to develop in the blend the contradiction as emergent structure. If a contradiction emerges, we know that the blend is counterfactual with respect to the settled input, which is independently known not to be self-contradictory. Since the only difference between the blend and the settled input is the truth-status of P, we conclude that P is not true in the settled input" (Fauconnier, Turner 233).

> Our main leisure activity is, by a long shot, participating in experiences that we know are not real. When we are free to do whatever we want, we retreat to the imagination—to worlds created by others, as with books, movies, video games, and television (...), or to worlds we ourselves create, as when daydreaming and fantasizing. [...] This is a strange way for an animal to spend its days. [...] One solution to this puzzle is that the pleasures of the imagination exist because they hijack mental systems that have evolved for real-world pleasure. We enjoy imaginative experiences because at some level we don't distinguish them from real ones. The emotions triggered by fiction are very real. When Charles Dickens wrote about the death of Little Nell in the 1840s, people wept—and I'm sure that the death of characters in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series led to similar tears. (After her final book was published, Rowling appeared in interviews and told about the letters she got, not all of them from children, begging her to spare the lives of beloved characters such as Hagrid, Hermione, Ron, and, of course, Harry Potter himself.) (Bloom 35)

Another *distinguo* seems opportune: counterfactual scenarios (or possible worlds) are assembled mentally not by taking full representations of the world and making some changes. Literature is *not* life - disfigured or contorted. A possible world is the result of a complex process of successive compression and decompression of a potentially non-finite number of mental spaces.

Mental space is a seminal concept coined by Fauconnier in 1984. A mental space is a small conceptual packet constructed as we think and talk, consisting of elements and relations activated simultaneously as a single integrated unit, and structured by frames and cognitive models. In our working memory, mental spaces are interconnected, can be modified dynamically as thought and discourse unfold, and can be used generally to model dynamic mappings in thought and language.[8]

We may imagine our minds as blenders processing mental spaces. When reading literature, for example, we convoke and blend two or more mental spaces or, in other words, cognitive schemata; we confront our representation of the world with the one designed by the author, compare the actual world with the fictional construction, negotiate versions of meaning, we accept or reject the counterfactual "truth". In his own terms, Steven Pinker expressed the same idea:

> The computer scientist Jerry Hobbs has tried to reverse-engineer the fictional narrative in an essay he was tempted to call "Will Robots Ever Have Literature?" Novels, he concluded, work like experiments. The author places a fictitious character in a hypothetical situation in an otherwise real world where ordinary facts and laws hold, and allows the reader to explore the consequences. We can imagine that there was a person in Dublin named Leopold Bloom with the personality, family, and occupation that James Joyce attributed to him, but we would object if we were suddenly to learn that the British sovereign at the time was not King Edward but Queen Edwina. Even in science fiction, we are asked to suspend belief in a few laws of physics, say to get the heroes to the next galaxy, but the

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[8] The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio pointed out that words are not different from other neurobiological elements. They are attached to networks, become activated, are connected to other networks etc.

> events should otherwise unfold according to lawful causes and effects. A surreal story like Kafka's *Metamorphosis* begins with one counterfactual premise—a man can turn into an insect—and plays out the consequences in a world where everything else is the same. The hero retains his human consciousness, and we follow him as he makes his way and people react to him as real people would react to a giant insect. Only in fiction that is *about* logic and reality, such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* can any strange thing happen. (Pinker 542)

But do not haste to draw the conclusion that conceptual blending is a cold, algorithmic process involving only reason. The binary logic - mind vs. body, sense vs. sensibility, thought vs. instinct - should be overcome and integrated in a transdisciplinary logic of *tertium datur*. The rational mechanisms are not situated in an autarchic and autocratic part of our mind, separated by emotions. It is as if we had separate neural systems for rational thinking and emotions, which is a nonsense. Empirically, we always feel that emotion and sentiments are never exiled from our mental life. But our cultural superego tells us that we cannot give credit to our sensibility; we are educated to trust reason, not instinct. That is why some people are even horrified by the idea that a certain feeling depends on the activity of some specific neural systems interacting with a number of organs. Paradoxically, we should be delighted to understand the extraordinarily complex mechanisms that make the emotions and sentiments possible. If we accept that sensibility *is* sense, or, in other words, if we set the premise that emotions and sentiments are cognition, a new theoretical horizon is opened in front of us.

The new way of thinking convergent with the evolutionary epistemology aims to resolve the contradiction between theory and practice now besetting literary theory and to offer solutions to the impasse. Emotional identification would be a cognitive imperative, if we accept that we share not only patterns of thought, but also innate models of emotional reactions. Emotion would mediate knowledge: we naturally subject our explanations of the world to emotional tests, sometimes correcting and changing beliefs that are not supported by our intuition. One may ask if we are not thrown back into subjectivism – after centuries of scientific data undistorted by emotion or personal bias. But the answer is "no"; human cognition is not (only) logically designed and engineered, but it comprises a broad array of states, feelings, acts, moods. This new humanism may reconnect the theoretical approaches to human life – it may embody mind.

But what are the definitions of emotions and sentiments within the boundaries of the cognitivist theories? Here are some oft-cited excerpts from Antonio Damasio:

> [E]motion is the combination of a mental evaluative process, simple or complex, with dispositional responses to that process, mostly toward the body proper, resulting in an emotional body state, but also toward the brain itself (neurotransmitter nuclei in the brain stem), resulting in additional mental changes. (Damasio 139)[9]

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[9] Damasio separates *primary* or *universal emotions* (e.g. happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust etc.) from *secondary* or *social emotions* (e.g. embarrassment, jealously, guilt, pride etc.), and *background emotions* (e.g. well-being or malaise, calm or tension etc.). For further details, see Damasio, Antonio. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotions in the Making of Consciousness*.

"Feeling" is the experience of those changes:

> A feeling about a particular object is based on the subjectivity of the perception of the object, the perception of the body state it engenders, and the perception of modified style and efficiency of the thought process as all of the above happens. (Damasio 148).

In another groundbreaking book, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotions in the Making of Consciousness*, Antonio Damasio distinguishes three layers of bodily (and mind) reactions. The first layer is *emotion*, the second layer (a first-order nonconscious representation) is *feeling the emotion*, and the third layer (a second-order conscious representation) is *feeling the feeling of an emotion* (Damasio 2003). If *emotions* are only transient changes of the organism specifically caused by objects, *feeling the emotions* and *feeling / knowing that we have the feeling of emotions* require complicated neural patterns and a sense of the self. "Real" worlds are made of "real" objects. Possible worlds – the ones born in our brain, our fictitious children – consist of dematerialized, disembodied images of the objects. The juxtaposed images form "the movie in the brain", which is in fact a process of blending mental patterns involving rhetorical mechanisms such as transfer, secondary elaboration etc.

> I regard the problem of consciousness as a combination of two intimately related problems. The first is the problem of understanding how the brain inside the human organism engenders the mental patterns we call, for lack of a better term, the images of an object. By *object* I mean entities as diverse as a person, a place, a melody, a toothache, a state of bliss; by *image* I mean a mental pattern in any of the sensory modalities, e.g., a sound image, a tactile image, the image of a state of well-being. Such images convey aspects of the physical characteristics of the object and they may also convey the reaction of like and dislike one may have for an object, the plans one may formulate for it, or the web of relationships of that object among other objects. (Damasio 2003: 282)

We may conclude that our emotional life is formed by complicated patterns of chemical and neural responses. Emotions and sentiments and their reflection in conscience are *about* the life of an organism, its body to be precise, and their role is to assist the organism in maintaining life. They cannot be conceived as contrary to reason, or as second rate entities because they depend on the same neural devices and mechanisms as reason.

The implications of these striking definitions are important. For instance, we may see that the specific empathy text-reader (or what we call *identification*) by means of emotions and sentiments falls under similar organizing principles as in intellectual consumption of a text. We may construct patterns of artistic empathy (with various actors of the text) using a network of emotional markers – we shall call them, linking emotions and sentiments with the aesthetic value, *aisthetic markers*.[10] *Nota bene*: in a mental space constructed in language, the organization of signifiers does not denote anything at all, for there is no given object except for the signifier itself. In the same way, the aisthetic markers institute an organization of signifiers which do not serve to designate a signified emotion or sentiment,

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[10] In the spiritual tradition, *aisthesis* means cognition by means of sensibility.

but instead designate instructions for the production of the signified emotion or sentiment. Not the content of emotion is important, but the way it is instrumented in language.

It is of utmost importance to develop another innovatory idea: if we put emotions and sentiments in a sociocultural context, they should be understood not as mere contents, but as symbolic codes. The terms *emotion* and sentiments do not refer to some individual feeling (for no literary content relates to contingent reality as such), but to codes, which are, as we have already said, ideal models of emotions. Each and every generation and cultural community has its own archive of symbolic systems and codes, serving as universal access keys to human hearts. The primary function of codes is to communicate characters' feelings and make them comprehensible; the secondary one, more important, is to instruct the reader *how* to feel (or how to re-product the signified feeling). The code is a heuristic tool with descriptive and prospective functions: the code covers all the individual literary manifestations of emotions and sentiments and teaches the reader to decipher the aisthetic markers. Captive in his emotional *Zeitgeist*, each reader compares his semantic encyclopaedia with the semantics of love, hate, lust, disgust, *plaisir*, attraction etc. imbricated in a literary text; if the encyclopaedia in use is insufficient, the literary text supplies information to model and educate the reader.[11] The literary text acts like a sort of User Guide meant to instruct the reader, mediates catharsis and offers him alternative emotional valves.

It has been said that literature is mimetic to life. Paradoxically, the opposite could also be true: life is mimetic to literature. Literature (generally, art) is a repertoire of actions, gestures, thoughts, feelings, behavioral patterns, cognitive schemata in each and every epoch. Herein lies the unique relationship between "reality", the literary text and the reader (seen as an interpretive community). The literary text is a common ground, an intersection space where models of "reality" blend, where the emotional codes of different times, spaces, communities or individual are convoked and mediated. If emotions and sentiments are the core of our inner life, if it is still true that literature arises from our socioemotional background (among others), literature would be huge apparatus of codifying and

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[11] When defining the process of communication, Iser invokes the theoretical ideas of Abraham Moles: "The basic process of communication between a sender and a recipient (…) consists (…) of the following: taking recognizable signs from the repertoire of the sender, putting them together, and transmitting them along a channel of communication; the recipient then has to identify the signs received with those which he has stored in his own repertoire. Ideas can only be communicated in so far as both repertoires have elements in common (…). But to the extent to which such a process takes place within systems equipped, like human intelligence, with memory and statistical perception, the observation of (…) similar sins gradually alters the recipient's repertoire and leads ultimately to a complete fusion with that of the sender (…). Thus acts of communication, in their totality, assume a cumulative character through their continued influence on the repertoire of the recipient (…). Those semantemes transmitted most frequently by the sender gradually insert themselves into the recipient's repertoire and change it. This is the stimulus of social and cultural circulation. (Moles, apud Iser 50)

Iser reinforces the idea that the repertoires of the text as sender and the reader as recipient will also overlap, and the common elements are an essential precondition for the "circulation." However, literary communication differs from other forms of communication in that those elements of the sender's repertoire which are familiar to the reader through their application in real-life situations, lose their validity when transplanted into the literary text. And it is precisely this loss of validity which leads to the communication of something new. (Iser 51)

recodifying feelings. The fictional entities (or, if we are allowed to use loose equivalents, the possible worlds, or the mental spaces) could be the outlet for blended feelings, bringing to light new potentialities of human affection. Literature gives us a mandate to examine, feel and feel that we feel the emotions and sentiments of others for a better understanding of our affective experiences.

The interpretive potential of these theoretical postulations is enormous. For instance, we may take a narrative text and locate not the events that form the plot, but the emotional moves of the characters. Our aim would be to conceive, to imagine, *to feel* (by mandate) the plurality of (cultural, social, psychological, political, epistemic, artistic etc.) codes blended in an emotional situation, rather than describing a chain of emotions and sentiments; it is important, as Roland Barthes used to say, to show departures of meaning, not arrivals. For each affective event, we shall observe the meanings to which that event gives rise.

If we follow these routes and combine (or shall I say, blend?) theoretical notions or ideas delivered by the cognitive paradigm, we could rethink all the methodological procedures, strategies and techniques on neurophysical bases. And it is undeniable that the metatheoretical list of the XXIst century will contain two (new? / old?) items: *emotion* and *sentiment*.

Instead of conclusions

The pioneering concepts of Pinker, Damasio, Turner, Fauconnier, Lakoff *et alii* are the landmarks of an early map for future initiatives. It is now clear that in the mid-1990s the cognitive multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary strategies, methods and techniques coalesced as an identifiable paradigm. Since then, this field of ideas and concepts has been broadened; now, the research nomenclature contains new disciplines such as cognitive poetics,[12] cognitive stylistics, or cognitive cultural studies.

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[12] For further information, see the Tsur, Reuven. *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics*. Amsterdam: North-Holland, 2002; Stockwell, Peter. *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. London / New York: Routledge, 2002; *Introduction to Cultural Studies*. Ed. by Lisa Zunshine). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.

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