Culture and Thought: A Psychological Introduction by Michael Cole, Sylvia Scribner (review)

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His 'best bet' by the brain is modified by additional external inputs towards, presumably, arriving at an even 'better bet'. But this begs the question of what *form* the 'best bet' takes. To say, as he does, that '. . . the pattern of neural activity represents the object and to the brain *is* the object' (his italics) seems close to the formulation of Gestalt psychologists that he rejects. Even though he makes the point that no internal 'picture' is involved in the brain, he nevertheless seems to imply that the brain is observing some kind of informational entity that is separate from itself. The fact that he does not define what he means by external input or information in the book leaves a great gap in his analysis of vision.

Much of the difficulty in the psychology of visual perception seems to arise from the question as to whether the retinal image is a picture of *any* kind. The idea that an image on the retina is basic to visual art work is implicit in his chapter entitled Art and Reality and it is here that many artists will probably feel misgivings. He discusses pictorial art mainly in terms of painters making representations of their retinal images, or rather of their brain's interpretations of these retinal images, since the sizes and shapes of the retinal images are modified in the brain by the phenomenon of size constancy (interpretations of the size of objects as they vary in distance from the eye).

Most painters are not primarily concerned with depictions in perspective but with expressing their experiences of reality, of which perspective may be one aspect. The idea that the brain considers successive hypotheses of the appearance of external reality from discrete inputs to arrive at 'the best bet' places an emphasis on the importance of perspective. The history of painting does not reflect this emphasis. Painters are concerned mainly with the deriving of *meaning* from the portrayal of selected aspects of the visible external world. It is the possibility to invent new combinations of aspects drawn from the real environment that provides one of the mainsprings of artistic activity. The perspective aspect, as described in the book, is a Western phenomenon and a very small part of world art history.

It is perhaps inevitable that in a small book of a popular-science type there would be a concentration on the approach to understanding vision favoured by the author. The addition of several qualifying phrases in the second edition of the book indicates that his interpretation of certain data is not shared by some researchers. The reader would do well, therefore, to bear in mind that there are competing hypotheses of visual perception to take into account.

Culture and Thought: A Psychological Introduction. Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner. Wiley, New York and Chichester, England, 1974. 227 pp., illus. £5.15. Reviewed by **Jan B. Deregowski***

This is a highly readable book on cross-cultural studies, an area of psychology that in recent years has grown in size, but that is not in itself new. The main concern of the book's eight chapters is with cultural differences in psychological processes involving language, perception, learning, thinking and memory. The term 'cultural' is used rather loosely, since in most of the studies considered the postulated cultural effects are confounded with possible genetic factors. One can adopt a variety of attitudes to such confounding. One can, irrationally, regard culture as obviously a dominant factor or one can regard the phenomena described as being of great interest because they show us something of the rich variety of human experience, even if their origin is not well defined. Alternatively, one may, as is often done in the arts, regard the psychological processes involved as of secondary importance and be primarily concerned with the results of such processes, results that to a psychologist may appear to be mere epiphenomena. One certainly cannot dismiss the findings and ideas discussed as trivial or uninteresting.

The readers of *Leonardo*, one presumes, would be most interested in the chapter on Culture and Perception. I shall therefore review this chapter in some detail, especially as it can be taken as a fair sample of the manner in which the authors treat other matters.

The chapter begins with a thumbnail sketch of the history of the studies of the subject and then the authors turn to the topic much discussed since Hudson's observation that persons in certain cultures find it difficult to interpret Western-style pictures. They report their own findings on this difficulty among the Kpelle of Liberia. They reproduce two of the pictures used, but, unfortunately, they do not discuss the matter in sufficient detail to enable a reader even to guess at the source of the Kpelle's difficulties. They describe the torturous way in which the rules of perspective of Western painting were arrived at and seek in this an explanation of the Kpelle's difficulties. 'The various cues in paintings and photographs which we take for granted took centuries to develop; it requires some measure of experience on the part of an individual before three dimensional perception of pictures becomes natural'. The validity of such an analogy is not unquestionable. Indeed, the authors question it implicitly themselves when a page further on they suggest that even *minimal* exposure to pictures is likely to affect the perception of pictures. (This indeed may be the case. If it is, one wonders how this transfer of experience from the 3-dimensional world to pictures takes place. Presumably, it does so via those characteristics and elements that are common to both. If so, what is responsible for the Kpelle's failure to comprehend remarkably simple pictures?) Several pages report on more recent experimental work on picture perception, mostly, it seems, carried out in various parts of Africa.

A section on the perception of visual illusions treats those that have fascinated psychologists and psychologising anthropologists since the days of the Cambridge expedition to the Torres Straits and those of a more recent investigator, the Ames window.

Perception, attention and attribute preference are also briefly discussed, as is the problem of cognitive styles. The latter issue has an enormous literature and it would be impossible to do it justice in but a few pages, which in this kind of book is all that is available. The authors chose to base their discussion on the work of Berry, Dawson and Wober. I question this selection and the somewhat uncritical acceptance of Wober's findings, lacking, as they do, a proper control group.

This selection of findings and the arguments presented make an interesting introductory text that, by its very nature, neither presents a full nor a definitive survey of the subject. A reader familiar with more ethnocentric studies of psychology will probably find the book more illuminating than a reader for whom this is the first introduction to the subject. Those readers of *Leonardo* whose prime interests lie in the arts may be disappointed by the lack of consideration of those modes of artistic expression (sculpture, music) in which those African peoples, whose perception the authors discuss, are reputed to excel.

Behaviour and Perception in Strange Environments. Helen E. Ross. Allen & Unwin, London, 1974. 171 pp., illus. £3.95. Reviewed by **R. W. Pickford****

This is in many ways a refreshing and delightful book. As a happy antidote to the usual streams of hypothetico-deductive scientific researches that issue from psychological laboratories, it is an excursion under water, up high mountains and down snow fields. The author has brought her knowledge of psychology into relation with her practical experiences in deep sea diving, mountaineering,

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