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Niche explorers: a situated account of creativity in dance and literature

Artistic creativity has often been associated with mysterious or vaguely formulated concepts such as “talent”, “intuition”, “inspiration” or “geniality”. A common view is that creativity possesses an unaccountable element of subjectivity and cannot be understood. Differently, psychological approaches to creativity have investigated personality traits, cognitive abilities, emotional dispositions and the relation between “creative individuals” and social institutions. Those approaches are consistent with internalist paradigms in cognitive science that regard cognition as the processing of internal, discrete and intentional units of information and in which the role of context and external tools is secondary. In opposition to such paradigms, Situated and Embodied Cognitive Science has questioned the legitimacy of skin and skull to serve as criteria for the demarcation of the boundaries between mind and the world. This approach stresses that the capacities of mind are shaped by non-biological tools for thinking and that decisive stages of cognitive processing can happen externally to the brain.

We approach creativity not as an “ability” of individual minds, but as opportunities for niche construction through the exploitation of cognitive artifacts (Clark, 2006). In our description, artistic cognitive niches represent established ways to exploit available cognitive artifacts through high order semiotic dynamics, such as in the notions of poetic function of language (Jakobson & Pomorska, 1988), or artworks as dichotomous artifacts (Pepperell, 2015). Artistic cognitive niches embed opportunities for cultural evolution, in a process of niche construction which involves the transformation of “problem spaces” (Simon, 1999).

We exemplify our perspective with well-known cases in poetry and theatrical dance. In dance, for instance, external artifacts constrain the dancers’ and choreographers’ actions in different levels. Techniques, presentation spaces, composition methods, softwares, dance shoes and many other resources, function as boundaries for creating choreographic pieces. Our approach is supported by examples in dance history. In each of them, the introduction of artifacts changed not only how to make dance, but also the very concept of dance, opening opportunities for the exploration of new niches.

References

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