Chapter 3
Cultural Cognition in History

Merlin Donald’s summary of our cognitive evolution underlines the fact that human cultures cannot simply sit atop our evolutionary success as a species and operate in ways that are unconstrained by nature. All symbolic cultures must accommodate our episodic and mimetic pasts, a cognitive substrate that constitutes most of what I have been calling general and social cognition. These modes of cognition might also be termed our “human nature.” Nonetheless, the evident diversity of cultural behaviors across the world makes it clear that individuals and societies have enormous flexibility with regard to how they will shape their cultures to work within our evolutionary heritage. This chapter elaborates a general notion of theatregoing as a cultural model. Theatregoing includes such diverse cultural practices as places for performance, casting conventions, the use of metaphorical language in dialogue, theatre as a forum for cultural ethics, differing norms of narrative construction, and the evolution of dramatic genres. All of these cultural practices, in turn, shape audience engagement. While my focus will be on cultural-historical practices and their relation to the dynamics of cognition, I will not lose sight of the constraints imposed on all cultures by our evolutionary past.

Cultural Models and Historical Change

Among the anthropologists who have explored cultures from a cognitive point of view, Bradd Shore’s ideas are generally consonant with the approaches of Edelman, Lakoff, Fauconnier, McNeill, and Donald. Shore acknowledges that conceptual universals constitute the primitive building blocks of all cultures. His *Culture in Mind* emphasizes
our species’ cognitive dependence on both natural and cultural environments throughout our lives. Regarding culture, the mind/brain is neither “hard-wired” for certain cultural responses nor is it a “blank slate” or passive recorder that facilitates the direct transmission of individual and social experiences into memory. Rather, what Shore calls “the ecological brain” both enables and constrains perceptions and practices, leading enculturated humans to a range of cultural-historical possibilities.¹

People find their ways into the cognitive paths of culture by extending and specifying the conceptual universals that they acquired in infancy. Local cultural experiences and languages move universal primitives such as “containment” and “source-path-goal” into a web of blends, image schemas, and metaphors that constitute the cognitive level of all historical cultures.² Shakespeare’s audience could understand the Globe Theatre as a “wooden O,” so named by the Chorus in Henry V, for example, because the concept of containment in their minds allowed them to think about the wooden Globe as having an inside, an outside, and a boundary between them, just like the letter “O.” Globe spectators could use their mental concept to map the architecture of the theatre onto a letter in the English alphabet. They adopted a universal primitive—the concept of containment—for local cultural use. As infants learn a culture, just as when they are learning a language, they gradually narrow the deployment of their universal concepts to enable them to specify concrete meanings. Infants are initially open to learning all languages, but as they begin to link specific sounds to certain meanings they have a more difficult time associating those sounds with other meanings in other languages. Just as we can learn another language throughout most of our lives, however, we can also come to know the ways of other cultures.

Historical cultures narrow and shape nearly all of the aspects of cognition and emotion discussed in the first two chapters of this book. Attention may be a species-level attribute of human consciousness, but culture helps people to learn what to pay attention to. Potentially, spectators have an enormous range of actor/characters to choose from, but their culture will always single out some blends as more appropriate and significant than others. Cultural languages will instruct spectators about what to call the nouns that denote the basic-level concepts of auditoriums, scenery, and costumes. In terms of social cognition, empathy will lead many in the audience to experience primitive emotions together, but culture will restrain and channel the expression of these emotions in public. What kinds of