

Cognition, Pharmacology, and Fiction in a Society of Control
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Accompanied by the decline of postmodernism, the neoliberalization of finance, and the “control society” predicted by Gilles Deleuze is the rise of cognitive sciences as a dominant mode of cultural authority. Since the so-called “decade of the brain,” the cognitive sciences have not only advanced their own fields, but have also transformed other fields, such as literary studies. This paper will examine the relationship between authoritative knowledge about the human brain and pharmacology insofar as it is dealt with in contemporary fiction.

The talk will survey novels published since the 1980s that incorporate discourses from pharmacology and cognitive neuroscience, exploring drugs/medications usually within the context of biomedicine, often through field-specific concepts. While fiction has explored drugs since the nineteenth century, recent works take seriously the science behind ‘normal’ human cognition in unprecedented ways.

Some questions that will be addressed are the following: Are these newer novels, with greater attention to human cognition, different from what critics have called ‘drug dystopia’? From the hedonistic experimentations of counterculture? What is the added purchase of representing the science of drug action? How do substances, and the pharmacological discourses attached to them, function in various types of fiction? In what ways do pharmacological products – which can adapt the individual in a de-individuating but oftentimes health-producing way – symbolize “control”?