CHAPTER ONE

Understanding and Dispositions

This book is meant to be a contribution to the psychology of film. (Tan, 1996, p. ix)

The phenomenal world of humans is indeed remarkably rich and complex. It involves the understanding and the experience of the world around us, including sensation, perception, thought, and emotion. The phenomenal is the common-sense appearance of the world ("in here"), and it is the *Lebenswelt* (living world) on which we base our actions and behavior. To use the computer metaphor, the phenomenal world becomes the interface to the environment around us, structuring and directing behavior. As we receive response and feedback from the physical, social, and cultural habitat, the phenomenal transforms and adapts; thus enters a continuous loop among phenomenal–behavior–response–phenomenal. The phenomenal world is not the same thing to all individuals, but large parts of it are shared globally or locally.

The following list gives examples of the phenomenal:

- In the external world, colors exist only as light frequencies, but in the phenomenal world we see colors.
- In the phenomenal world, we perceive and categorize entities called objects that have certain properties, such as color, weight, and position. We can create new objects (artifacts), and we develop habits with objects, in addition to attaching a symbolic–emotional meaning to them.
- In the phenomenal world, things not only exist: Things *happen*. Billiard balls collide, plants grow, prices are raised, people lose their jobs, children beat up their siblings, and friends become sad once in a while. Most of us do not treat these events as random and whimsical, but rather we construct causal relations between them and other events. Causality is one of the most fundamental parameters of the phenomenal world.

- In the phenomenal world, we make clear distinctions between living and nonliving matter, between agents and things. Agents have personality and character and are driven by emotions, perceptions, and intentions. We use specialized communicatory, social, and moral codes in our interaction with agents. In the phenomenal world, we entertain social stereotypes, which we project on people based on their surface appearance (skin color, face and bodily appearance, gender, clothing).
- In the phenomenal world, we experience events and social situations that can be said to be coherent routines and habitual activities that involve a temporal chain of events, standard roles to be played as well as specialized activities often involving props or artifacts. Examples include dining at restaurants, going to bed, having breakfast, and visiting the doctor. Retelling and making sense of our day at night often invoke situations of this kind.
- In the phenomenal world, we have complex social relations with other people, for example, family relations, partners, relatives, friends, business contacts, doctors, and priests. Such relations are important experiential hubs around which the lives of many people circle.
- Cultural, religious, and personal rituals are important in the phenomenal world to give sense and meaning to the world and to provide formalized social interactions.
- Narratives and fictional worlds are key phenomenal entities that are created by others (novelists, filmmakers, game producers, porno producers) or ourselves through play, toys, and games of make-believe. We enter such fictional worlds, and they affect our experience and behavior in short- and long-term perspectives.
- Many narratives purportedly deal with actual events and characters of historic, national, and religious natures. Shared "grand narratives" occupy a key position in people's lives.
- Emotions are mechanisms by which we relate to and make meaningful the world around us. Emotions are experiences that regulate and synchronize our behavior with others.

Thus the phenomenal world is the world we perceive, experience, feel, desire, think about, talk about, and have attitudes about; it comprises the things with which we live and through which we live. The phenomenal world is multilayered and multifaceted, involving an intricate system of bodies, minds, culture, artifacts, history, social processes, and individual experiences. There is no reason to believe that natural systems of atoms, nuclear particles, molecules, cells, or macrocosmos are more complex than human systems. It is the task of the humanities and the social sciences to explain how this system emerges (from behavior, bodies, and culture)

and transforms and affects behavior, as well as to describe the mechanisms by which it operates. In academia, there are now at least four broad approaches to describe the phenomenal world of humans.

In philosophy – until recently the only systematic investigation of the phenomenal – metaphysics and epistemology are concerned with the relation between the phenomenal and the objective, observer-independent, external world "out there." Do the entities in the phenomenal world have their equivalents in this *Ding-an-sich* (object in itself) world? Do objects continue to exist even if we do not perceive them? If so, do they have the same properties as phenomenal objects? Are there actual causes in the world, and do they have the same features as phenomenal causes? Do mental states, such as intentions and emotions, exist in our *Ding-an-sich* reality? Do these phenomena exist independent of human observers, or are they abstract frameworks and conceptualizations of our constructive capacities? If we are looking for a justification for knowledge and scientific inquiry, these questions need answers.

The phenomenal is also a topic within the philosophy of consciousness (Churchland, 1988), which investigates how conscious experiences (in philosophy called *qualia*) emerge. Are such phenomenal entities products of neurons or do they arise because of the functional architecture of our minds and bodies? The philosophy of aesthetics discusses the ontological status of fictional experiences (Walton, 1990) and describes the functions of art and aesthetic experiences.

A second approach to the phenomenal is through culture. The introduction of culture – with its artifacts, tools, technology, rituals, images, and words – has been acknowledged as one of the key mechanisms by which our species started to develop a rich phenomenal world (Cole, 1996:146ff). Cultural artifacts such as knives, spears, fire, telephones, restaurants, computers, and moving imagery instigate new ways of thinking about the world, new practices, and new phenomenal worlds that did not exist before. Collectively and in interaction with those artifacts, members of a culture develop practices, conventions, norms, and codes (this is true of tangible artifacts as well as more ephemeral artifacts, such as spoken words or moving imagery). Several strands within cultural studies, history, and cultural psychology investigate how the introduction of new technology, artifacts, and instruments is appropriated by a culture and how it changes its members' (phenomenal) view of the world (the plough, writing technology, the printing press, the camera, the car, the airplane, space technology, or, more recently, gene technology). Within the humanities – for example, in cinema studies – there are research traditions that focus on how individual works of art, music, film, or literature create not only temporary phenomenal experiences, but also change the

cultural climate. A film (or a genre of films), for instance, might introduce a new theme, style, or convention that transforms the way in which critics, authors, and audience understand literature and the rest of the world.

Other cultural approaches investigate to what extent phenomenal worlds are shared among members of a group. Because cultural artifacts are mass distributed, these new phenomenal worlds become shared by many individuals, synchronizing or homogenizing thought and behavior within a group or culture. On what level and to what extent are phenomenal worlds shared universally, culturally, or socially? Is there a panhuman unity? In what ways do cultures, nations, and social groups differ in terms of the phenomenal? And how can one phenomenal world be understood by and translated to another? These are research questions within anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, and cultural psychology.

From a communication point of view, shared phenomenal worlds enable personal and mass communication. On the other hand, cultural homogenization and culture's ability to synchronize individual minds threaten to lessen cultural variation. The ways in which cultural practices create a hegemony in the distribution of phenomenal worlds, promoting one phenomenal world at the expense of others, have been the focus of much recent cultural and critical theory. In these research traditions, "marginalized voices," minorities, and nonofficial cultural practices have been brought to the fore to counter the dominant phenomenal world of a culture. Critical investigations of mass media are particularly crucial in this respect, as mass-media technology boosts the cultural homogenization process in scope as well as in speed.[1]

Third, we may describe the phenomenal within a Darwinian perspective. The phenomenal world did not emerge in a day. It was developed through phylogenetic and cultural history. Evolutionary theories argue that this development was not completely ad hoc and random, but that contents of the phenomenal world adapted to features in our habitat. Our experiences of objects, space, and causes are relevant in an environment in which it is critical for us to perceive and manipulate objects, navigate in space, and understand (mechanical) causal relations between events. The highly social skills of humans must have provided a great advantage in a complex social environment (Byrne & Whiten, 1988; Whiten, 1991). The ways in which we categorize, evaluate, predict the behavior of, and morally judge other people lay the groundwork for decisions about whether to exchange greetings, converse, socialize, impress, flirt, enter partnership, trust, or even marry and have children (Barkow, Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). Positive emotions of empathy and social bonding seem to promote social cooperation, and thus they have a strong survival value

(Grodal, 1997:94). The ability to initiate fantasies and games of make-believe enables us to simulate events and situations in our minds before we play them out for real in the social world. Such a faculty of mind performs useful functions in the life of humans and must reasonably have had great evolutionary value.

Moreover, if we accept that biology and genetics are put to work within this evolutionary framework, we may even expect to see some of the "successful" phenomenal entities and mental capacities encoded and hard-wired into our genetic structure, making the ontogenetic development of these phenomenal abilities more or less automatic and less dependent on stimuli from the environment. Because these processes are extremely slow, we can expect that the "evolved structure of the human mind is adapted to the way of life of Pleistocene hunter–gatherers, and not to our modern circumstances" (Cosmides, Tooby & Barkow, 1992:5).

Of course, changes in the sociocultural environment affect the phenomenal world a great deal faster than do changes in the physical–perceptual environment. Thus, to use the words of cultural psychology, "[a]t some point in evolutionary history, an ability to adapt to cultural changes must have become much more critical than a genetic/biological ability to adapt to changes in the physical/natural habitat, since the former transforms so much faster than the latter" (Cole, 1996:163). In a sense, then, culture takes on a greater responsibility in the creation of the phenomenal. However, rather than creating wholly new realms of the phenomenal, cultural artifacts and cultural practices build upon existing evolutionary-developed mental capacities, "exploiting" them to generate culturally diverse realms of meaning.[2] Culture also provides a fundamental infrastructure to uphold, maintain, and stimulate phenomenal entities, for example, through cultural practices, artifacts, and written and image-based communication.

Finally, we may approach the phenomenal from the perspective of the *mental* mechanisms by which the phenomenal emerge in the mind or psyche of the individual. This is the *psychological* approach, investigating physiological, perceptual, cognitive, and emotional processes involved in the creation of the phenomenal. What knowledge, assumptions, and hypotheses about the world are used, and how are these mental structures organized? What cues and stimuli from the "outside" are pertinent to the mind? How do we create a *meaningful* experience of our environment? Once created, how do phenomenal entities provide the basis for action and behavior?

Scholars and researchers need not take all of these perspectives into account in their descriptions of phenomenal entities. What they do need to acknowledge, however, is that they are all needed in an integrated and full account. They all investigate the different evolutionary, mental,

cultural, social, and historical systems that enable complex phenomenal worlds to emerge and thrive so successfully in and around humans. Whereas the natural sciences describe natural systems of particles, molecules, cells, and stars, the humanities and the social sciences investigate human–sociocultural systems. Acknowledging that philosophy, psychology, sociology, cultural studies, communication studies, anthropology, and Darwinism are all in the same boat, however, is not to say that all of them can be reduced to one. The existence of each is called for because each describes separate levels of the phenomenal. For instance, although individual mental states form the basis of the phenomenal, sociological and communication-based frameworks are needed to describe the effects of many people sharing the same phenomenal worlds and how those phenomenal worlds are propagated in a social setting. The psychological and the social are different levels of description, each with its own properties and relationships. This is not too dissimilar from the natural sciences. Although genes and cells ultimately are made up of quantum particles, a biological description cannot be reduced to physics, as the biological level has its own properties and laws.

Unlike the natural sciences, however, the disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences have achieved little conceptual integration (Cosmides et al., 1992:4). Whereas terminology, theories, and methodology of physics, chemistry, biology, and the engineering sciences are compatible, few researchers in the humanities and the social sciences make much effort to understand other academic approaches; they fail to adjust their theories to comply with the insights of the neighboring field. If we want to achieve the fullest description of the phenomenal and the human systems that have brought it into existence, scholars and researchers have a responsibility to integrate their – now rather disparate – frameworks. This book is an effort in this direction. Although the focus is on psychology and mental processes, historic, cultural, and communicational perspectives are integrated into the theories and descriptions. This ecumenical ambition is essential to keep in mind as we now move on to a closer description of psychology and a psychological theory of cinema.

Psychology: Understanding and Dispositions

Compared with cinema studies, the academic discipline of psychology is a giant and includes a number of subfields. Social psychology is concerned with our understanding of other people and multiparticipant situations. Personality psychology studies abstract traits of people, for example, introversion, extroversion, and agreeableness, and develops the criteria for measuring such features. Cognitive psychologists investigate perception, memory, thought, knowledge, and problem solving. Developmental

psychology investigates how mental capacities and processes are transformed during life, in particular during childhood and adolescence. Clinical psychologists study and treat pathological and deviant psychological processes and behavior. Industrial or organizational psychologists deal with the physical and the social aspects of people's work environments and how they affect work output. Evolutionary psychologists are interested in studying the evolved structure of the mind and how human mental capacities differ from or overlap those of animals. Neuropsychology looks into the relation between the mental sphere and its neurological basis. Cultural psychology investigates how behavior and thought processes are affected by cultural artifacts, technology, and language. Environmental psychology examines the interrelationship between environments and human behavior. In short, psychologists are all over the place.

Being a book about film and psychology, this study does not do justice to the whole field. Neither do I concentrate on one psychological subfield. In contrast to psychoanalytical cinema studies, which draws on one small, marginalized segment of psychology, the framework developed in this book is broad, involving traditions in the center of and on the margin of academia psychology. Psychology, according to most handbooks, is the systematic study of *behavior* and *mental processes* – and their interaction. Mental processes involve perception, comprehension, interpretation, evaluation, judgment, inference making, and emotion. From an individual perspective, these are the processes by which the phenomenal world emerges in our consciousness. Thus, preceding the phenomenal world is a complex and multilayered web of processes that take cues from the physical, social, and cultural environment, but also transform, add to, and make richer those cues. Mental processes enable the leap from the transcendental, observer-independent *Ding-an-sich* reality to the internal phenomenal world that we know and are able to handle. Mental processes ultimately are operations by which the individual mind infuses *meaningfulness* and *coherence* into a fragmented and nonmeaningful objective world, generating holistic chunks of phenomenal entities (e.g., objects, events, intentions, and causes). In the subsequent text, *understanding* is the general term for these processes, reflecting a striving for meaningfulness on all levels of process (see Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987). Understanding is an ongoing interaction between an organism and its environment:

> Understanding does not consist of merely after-the-fact reflections on prior experiences; it is, more fundamentally, the way (or means by which) we have those experiences in the first place. It is the way the world presents itself to us. And this is the result of the massive complex of culture, language, history, and bodily mechanisms that blend to make our world what it is. . . . Our subsequent propositional reflections on our experience are made possible by this more basic mode of understanding. (Johnson, 1987:104)

Understanding is the process by which we come to "have a world," forming the basis for our physical, cultural, social, and ethical behavior in the world. Although understanding connotes "cold" processes (perception, cognition), it is deeply involved in the "hot" processes of emotions and feelings.

Understanding, however, does not operate in a void. It is enabled, constrained, and guided by *mental structures*. The idea of mental structures is not new. Both Kant and Hume, for instance, postulated some mediating *schemas* or *categories* between the phenomenal and the observer-independent world (in the domains of space, time, and causality). Areas of psychology have picked up and developed the concept of mental structures to explain why mental processes and our understanding of the world have such a stability and regularity as they do and why the phenomenal world in many cases seems to be different from the "real world." Mental structures can be seen as patterns or mediators, transforming, enhancing, enriching, and generalizing the incoming stimuli to generate the phenomenal world.

Within psychology, mental structures have been described and investigated on many levels. Our system of visual perception, for instance, is able to infer a three-dimensional (3D) object in the phenomenal realm from a two-dimensional (2D) retina projection of objects at the back of the eye. Although seemingly without effort, this remarkable task is performed with the guidance of perceptual expectations held by the visual system. A straight line in two dimensions, for instance, could in 3D space be interpreted as a straight line, but also as a circle seen from the side, a wiggly curve from the side, or a square from the side. To bring 3D coherence to and untangle input such as this, it is believed that the vision system operates according to forty or so rules or perceptual assumptions, specifying how to interpret incoming stimuli and how to reach stable 3D solutions to a 2D array (Hoffman, 1998). The visual illusions generated by artists and psychologists exploit such assumptions, often leading the observer to apply oppositional rules to the same information. In establishing stable worlds of objects and space, our systems for vision, hearing, and touch rely on a number of such perceptual assumptions.[3]

More complex mental structures are often referred to as models, theories, hypotheses, common-sense knowledge, or background knowledge. These are more or less systematic conglomerates of beliefs (not necessarily conscious) that are causally, temporally, or otherwise linked with one another. These mental structures form the basis for the ways in which everyday reasoning is performed in everyday life. Some of them may be more foundational, whereas others are quite domain specific. Everyday logical reasoning, for instance, is a foundational capability that is applied

to many domains in life. The ways in which peoples' everyday deductions, inductions, syllogisms, and other forms of conclusions differ from those of formal logic have been considered in cognitive psychology (e.g., Evans, Newstead & Byrne, 1993). Johnson's (1987) *image schemas*, which are thought structures that emerge from our embodied interaction with a gravitational environment, are also foundational in this sense. They bring organization to experience in many different domains.

Domain-specific everyday knowledge structures have been investigated in a number of fields. Hume (1739), Piaget (1954), and White (1995) have argued that children and adults acquire and use *theories of causality* when they establish causality in the mechanical world. Such models of causality often overlap with and are creatively expanded into common-sense or *folk theories* of physics and chemistry (Gentner & Stevens, 1983; McCloskey, 1983).

When giving causes of human behavior, on the other hand, people often ascribe these causes to intentions, emotions, sensations, perceptions, or beliefs. The methods by which such mental states are given causal status and how people reason around these are thought to rely on complex and often culturally specific models of folk psychology (FP) (Dennett, 1987, 1991b; Lakoff & Kövecses, 1987; Omdahl, 1995; Roseman, Antoniou & Jose, 1996; van den Broek, Bauer & Bourg, 1997; White, 1995; Whiten, 1991; Chapter 4 of this book).

Environmental psychology is concerned with how people acquire mental models of a given environment (a room, a building, a city, a landscape) and make use of such *mental maps* in navigation (Weatherford, 1985).

Another field of inquiry has been human interaction with mechanical and technical systems such as computers, copying machines, home heating systems (Kempton, 1986), VHS recorders, and cars. In trying to understand and interact with a system, users develop *mental models* about how the system works, often drawing on mental models from other domains (e.g., the desktop metaphor of computer interfaces). To design systems that trigger appropriate mental models and interaction patterns, system developers and designers need to know how mental models are structured and used.

In the social realm, people entertain a number of common-sense knowledge structures. In addition to making use of folk-psychology to attribute mental states to others, we ascribe personality traits to them (Andersen & Klatzky, 1987). We may, for instance, make sense of John's tendency to be late by referring to "his carelessness." People seem to have consistent and shared models about traits and how to apply them to behavior (see Chapter 4, the section on the Psychology of Recognition and Alignment, and Cantor & Mischel, 1979). Traits give us handy ways to summarize and

abstract complex chains of behaviors, as well as to create first impressions of new acquaintances. In addition, people categorize others through *social roles* and *stereotypes*. We have cultural knowledge about *occupancy roles* (e.g., police, waiters, officers, farmers, and programmers), *family roles* (e.g., mother, father, daughter, and cousin), and *situation roles* (e.g., lecturer–student, buyer–seller, waiter–restaurant guest, and master–slave). People in different cultures hold complex assumptions and theories about how such social roles should be acted out, which affects not only how other people's behavior is perceived, but also how to behave in everyday life (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995:39; Taylor & Crocker, 1981:91). In addition, *social stereotypes* are idealized and simplified assumptions of groups of people along the lines of ethnicity, religion, political convictions, gender, handicap, profession, physiognomy, and social class (Augoustinous & Walker, 1995:207; Ruble & Stangor, 1986). In Western society, for instance, women are considered to be emotional, bachelors are held to be macho and interested in sexual conquests, and the stereotypical Japanese person is industrious, polite, and clever. In cultural studies, social stereotypes are often described on a representational level, that is, how stereotypes are represented in and circulated by public discourse such as newspapers, film, literature, and computer games. However, social stereotypes are also represented in the minds of the individuals in a given culture and operate in their understanding of the world (and in their generation of discourse – see, e.g., Holland & Skinner, 1987). Like all social roles, stereotypes are often tightly linked to external marks, clearly discernible and salient: skin color, hair color, body size, man or woman, clothing, and age (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995:39ff). In first-encounter categorizations of another person, this "visuality" acts as a trigger of stereotype expectations. In contrast to traits and occupancy roles, stereotypes often involve moral judgments that may lead to acts of social injustice (Tan, 1996:168). Many social stereotypes act as objectified knowledge in collective and social life.

Event schemas are mental structures that contain (often culturally specific) expectations about social situations, such as dining at restaurants, going for a bus ride, going to a soccer game, having a birthday party, having breakfast, courting, and changing diapers (Abbott, Black & Smith, 1985; Bower, Black & Turner, 1979; Cole, 1996:187ff; den Uyl & van Oostendorp, 1980; Graesser, Gordon, and Sawyer, 1979; Mandler, 1984; Schank & Abelson, 1977; Taylor & Crocker, 1981; van den Broek et al., 1997).

Event schemas are the knowledge structures that enable people to appraise the basic nature of a situation and act in a socially appropriate manner. They hold expectations not only about social roles to be played, but also about typical locale, typical instruments and props, typical conditions