The Same Anew, or:
Telling and Showing in the Literary Presentation of Cognitive Processes
(Working Title)

Dirk Vanderbeke (Jena)

In Richard Power's novel *The Echo Maker*, the neuroscientist Gerald Weber realizes at one point that „his attempt to popularize that science had somehow gone wrong". And one may well ask whether this does not also include some self-referential doubt about the novel itself which over long passages reads like a fictionalization of the works of Oliver Sacks, Antonio Damasio or V.S. Ramachandran. In his review of McEwan's *Saturday*, Christopher Taylor criticizes the depiction of the scientist as being too absorbed in the parameters of his work, and ultimately the "neurosurgeon orders fish neurosurgically" (LRB, 27:5, 3 March 2005). Similarly, Powers has his neurologist take a shower neuroscientifically: "He felt his shoulders relax, but he did not place too much faith in the feeling. The cortex's body maps were fluid at best, and easily dismantled."

Over the last decade, several novels have dealt with neuroscientific topics – Martin Amis's *Yellow Dog* or McEwan's *Enduring Love* could be added to those already named. Bur one cannot help the notion that the presentation of fictionalized case studies falls short of the potentials the novel may bring to the understanding of cognitive phenomena.

In my paper I want to probe whether novels dealing with aspects of cognition also employ devices that play on the reader's mind in the process of reading. Our mental faculties produce a smooth experience, filling in gaps (e.g. the blind spot) and homogenizing disjunctive sensorial data (e.g. filtering out unpleasant or distracting noise). Similar processes are at work when we read and from select and occasionally contradictory information create complete environments, coherent characters and believable stories. However, there are the moments when the "wilful suspension of disbelief", itself a complex cognitive performance, is disrupted and the reader is made aware of the internal processes of construction involved in reading. As in the neurosciences, we may learn most about the way our minds work when they do not work, or can be made not to work, in the expected ways. I want to suggest that such meta-narrative devices may contribute to our understanding of cognition and the mental mapping of the world, and that literary studies, in particular reader response theory, may thus enter a bi-directional exchange with the cognitive sciences.