The neuro-image: a Deleuzian film-philosophy of digital screen culture

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The neuro-image: a Deleuzian film-philosophy of digital screen culture, by Patricia Pisters, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012, 370 pp., £25.50, ISBN 978-0-8047-8136-7

'Madness is like gravity', says the Joker, played by Heath Ledger, in Christopher Nolan's 2008 Batman movie, *The Dark Knight*. 'All it needs is a little push.' The syntax is slightly skewed, but the sentiment resonates in these postmodern times, when cinema, television, and other screen-reliant media surround us with such a huge quantity and variety of images that our spatial and temporal moorings can seem shaky and unreliable if not illusory or downright delusional. Media scholar Patricia Pisters quotes the Joker's remark (305) in *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture*, linking it with Gilles Deleuze's contention that new scientific knowledge has brought a new fragility to our 'lived relationship with the brain', turning the brain into 'our problem or our illness, our passion, rather than our mastery, our solution or decision' (Deleuze 1989, 211–212; quoted in Pisters 37–38).

Taking the Joker and Deleuze literally, Pisters argues that fragility, illness, and passion are key symptoms of the contemporary madness that Deleuze and Félix Guattari label 'schizophrenia', most notably in their books *Anti-Oedipus* (1985) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), both of which are subtitled *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Exploring this madness via the clinical-critical concept of schizoanalysis, Pisters follows Deleuze and Guattari in defining it as a neurological disease, a source of existential disorientation and perplexity, and a wellspring of affective phenomena ranging from hyperconnectivity to catatonia. Given the ubiquity of 'schizoelements' in contemporary society, Pisters maintains, analysts of twenty-first-century screen culture must go beyond the two-part paradigm of movement-image and time-image, which Deleuze identifies as the dominant structuring modes of pre-1940s and post-1940s cinema, respectively. Today, according to Pisters, this model must be augmented with the new paradigm of the neuro-image, geared to the ways in which matter and mind, body and brain, actual and virtual incessantly shape one another as they slide along a perceptual spectrum marked by the 'absolute internalism of … hallucinations' at one end and the 'absolute externalism of cosmic space' at the other. The movies of our epoch display 'brain-worlds, brain-cities, architectures of the mind', she concludes. 'We no longer look through characters' eyes; we experience their minds' (306). Herein lie empowerments and pitfalls that film-philosophy must help us probe and understand.

Now as in the past, Pisters is a cogent theorist and a lucid writer. Drawing on recent research in neurobiology and cognitive psychology as well as her own thinking about currently prevalent topics in cinema studies and film-philosophy, she builds a case for the neuro-image that is usually persuasive and sometimes dazzling. Along the way she offers focused observations about Deleuzian film theory and schizoanalysis, commenting on essential aspects of Henri Bergson's work as well. Referring to Deleuze's occasional tactic of reading Bergson against

the Bergsonian grain, for instance, she shows how this contrarian maneuver helped Deleuze comprehend the brain–screen assemblage; by defining cinema's effect not as 'the illusion of reality' but rather as 'the reality of illusion' (133–134), she explains, Deleuze finessed the difference between static images (immobile frames in divided space) and moving images (mobile images in continuous time) that loomed as a potential rift between Deleuzian and Bergsonian thought. Pisters' summation of Deleuze's four commentaries on Bergson is exemplary (although her treatment of his three syntheses of time is less consistently clear).

The Neuro-Image has a three-part structure, with many cross-references and interconnections, plus extensive use of selected films as examples and cases in point. Underlying much of the discussion is Pisters' fundamental understanding of perception as neither an external affair (what I perceive is outside me in the world) nor an internal affair (what I perceive is inside me in my mind) but rather an activity of 'the brain–screen as situated both inside and outside the brain' in a 'dialethic' rapport (80), serving as a sort of membrane or interface that allows the brain to shape the information on the screen and the screen to forge new links, connections, and affiliations – real changes, not metaphorical ones – in the brain.

Pisters looks into 'neuroscreens' in the book's first section. Here she uses concepts gleaned from neurobiology to replace the earlier film-theoretical notion of 'machines of the visible' with the idea of 'machines of the invisible' that proliferate throughout the social sphere, enter the swirling pandemonium of fictional-virtual minds, and deepen our awareness of 'affective and ethical powers of the false' by engaging with 'dynamic mysteries' (97) of world, brain, and screen. In the second section she turns to 'neurophilosophy', reducing her emphasis on neuroscience and peering more intently at ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic properties that distinguish the neuro-image from its movement- and time-predecessors. The last section, on 'neuropolitics', looks at transnational cinemas, archival film, and related issues from a political angle, arguing (among other things) that today's novel technologies allow the riotous ubiquity of hypermodern screens to wage 'psychological warfare' upon us, oversaturating us with spectacular images that disconnect us from reality while also producing – simultaneously and paradoxically – political and ethical affects that enable us to contest the scary 'schizo-Gesamtkunstwerk' (273) in new and creative ways.

The Neuro-Image also addresses the charge that Deleuzian philosophy has exercised a negligible or even negative influence on political and postcolonial theory, especially when it comes to the ideological fragmentation endemic to postmodern society. Critics such as Stephan Sanders and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak say that these areas are poorly addressed by such concepts as the nomadic, the minoritarian, and the asubjective. Pisters acknowledges that Deleuze's ideas are 'difficult to accommodate within institutionalized postcolonial frameworks of political representation and the critique of ideology'. However, she musters a reasonable degree of evidence in Deleuze's defense, saying that he contributes to

political theory by insisting on the reality of the virtual as an immanent force that
is intimately connected to the actual, that 'has to be taken into account in *this*
world', and that operates, through art, 'first and foremost on the (invisible)
creation of new percepts, and thoughts that are at the basis of any (political)
change' (248, 245). Pisters' argument is more complicated than this, and
although I find it less than wholly persuasive, it has me thinking along new lines
about Deleuze's politics.

My hesitations about *The Neuro-Image* have less to do with Pisters' reasoning
than with certain presumptions and assumptions that underpin it. Some pesky
ones are connected to the phrase 'seeds of thought', which crops up in an
introductory section on methodology. The specific films discussed in various
chapters, Pisters explains, are not mere illustrations but 'actual seeds of thought:
important encounters that create new brain circuits (new perceptions, new
feelings, new thoughts) and that connect to or resonate with philosophical
reflections and scientific findings' (18). I find this problematic in at least two
ways. For one, it places too much weight on films that aren't always substantial
enough to bear the burden. Pisters analyzes the opening sequence of David
Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), for instance, in an effort to show 'how exactly the
brain and the (film) screen can work as a meeting place for art, science, and
philosophy'. In this sequence we 'quite literally [move] into characters' brain
spaces', she says. Once we are there, we experience 'the feel of a ride from the
amygdala to the frontal lobes ... in which different parts and chambers of the
ride are correct in their neurological detail', thanks to the magic of nested
imaging, a digital technique 'used to simulate the complexity of actual brain
dynamics' in a 'fractal' manner that captures the 'rhizomatic structure of the
brain', which Deleuze and Guattari take as 'the guiding principle of their entire
philosophy' (14–16). Leaving aside the question of why Fincher and company
would invest so heavily in anatomical accuracy when visceral impact on the
viewer is clearly the sequence's main goal, one wonders how a group of
Hollywood techies came to possess such a high degree of neurobiological
erudition, even if they did consult with brain scientists.

A more serious problem lies in the contention that films become seeds of
thought by virtue of brain–screen interactions that 'create new brain circuits'. To
support this notion Pisters invokes the 'mirror neurons' that have become a
favorite prop for neurobiology buffs since they were discovered around 30 years
ago. When primate A sees primate B do something, these specialized brain cells
behave as if primate A were actually doing the thing instead of just watching. For
the 'mirror' parts of the cerebral apparatus, Pisters writes, 'there is no difference
between seeing someone or something in reality or seeing someone on film'. For
her this proves Deleuze's point that 'images are not representations and that they
affect us directly'. She goes on to claim that there is 'specific compatibility
between our knowledge of mirror neurons and Deleuze's taxonomy of images in
his cinema books' (30–31), and that the physical spaces (synapses) between
neurotransmitters and receptors (axons and dendrites) bear out Deleuze's

conception of the brain as a discontinuous, probabilistic organ rather than a fully integrated, mechanistic one.

These are provocative ideas, and they are also rash ideas. Pisters sets up parallels between the materiality of the brain and the metaphysics of the mind, regarding them as mutually illuminating ways of conceptualizing thought, imagination, and art. However, many scientific theorists forcefully state that a great gulf yawns between brain and mind – a gulf as broad as the ontological gap between neurobiological activity and actual consciousness or thought, which science has not even begun to illuminate. Francis Collins, a leader of America's new brain-mapping project, is just one of the specialists who point out that scientists are starting to grasp highly localized brain phenomena and major whole-brain phenomena, but that the huge range of functions between those extremes is so much terra incognita, and will remain so at least until new nanotechnologies are invented.

Deleuze surely overstates the implications of the synapse, moreover. While he is obviously right that the brain is riddled with 'micro-fissures', he describes them as 'random mechanisms' that produce a 'semi-fortuitous cerebral space' and an 'uncertain system'. I admit that my own brain seems more random and uncertain with every passing year, but it's hard to imagine how books would get written or movies made if brain functions were as haphazard as Deleuze implies. All of which shores up my ongoing suspicion that philosophers and physical scientists make uneasy bed partners.

Notwithstanding my hesitations about such matters, I recommend *The Neuro-Image* to everyone interested in Deleuzian film theory. Judging by the films she discusses, Pisters is no less an auteurist than Deleuze, but she is better at delving into popular cinema, gleaning insights even from mediocrities on the order of Nolan's *The Prestige* and Neil Burger's *The Illusionist*, two 2006 releases discussed in connection with her ideas about perception, reality, and the 'free indirect relationship between word and brain' (82).

At times Pisters looks outside cinema as well – something she should do more often, since I see no reason to think that screen-centric media change our neural circuitry any more powerfully than do excellent works of music, architecture, and other traditional arts. In a rich chapter on surveillance screens and the powers of affect, she examines a 2004 performance work by artist Jill Magid called *Evidence Locker*. Magid spent a month in Liverpool making a quasi-movie with images from the city's 242 public surveillance cameras, building a close relationship with security authorities and writing her daily access requests in the style of love letters. This fascinating project is a genuine 'seed of thought' for Pisters, and if I'm slightly skeptical about Magid's determination to tease out the 'intimate, aesthetic, and affective dimensions of the surveillance apparatus' (99–100), it's only because I'm reminded of an old comic strip where a new kid arrives at school, giving a five-digit number as his name and explaining that his parents named him after their zip code. Asked if this was their way of

protesting the dehumanizing tide of modern life, he says no, this was their way of giving in.

Deleuze never gave in, and while Pisters' new book would benefit from more nuanced and judicious language in spots, I commend her intellectual derring-do in expanding the Deleuzian dyad of movement-image and time-image with an innovative new meta-image paradigm. Its grounding in the particularities of twenty-first-century screen practice makes it a timely intervention, and I suspect that Deleuze would have welcomed it.

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Where film meets philosophy: Godard, Resnais, and experiments in cinematic thinking, by Hunter Vaughan, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013, 244 pp., £20.50 (paperback), ISBN 978-0231161336

The resurgence of phenomenological approaches within film studies, begun by Vivian Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye* (1992) and furthered in works such as Malin Wahlberg's *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology* (2008) and Jenny Chamarette's *Phenomenology and the Future of Film* (2012), finds a welcome addition in Hunter Vaughan's *Where Film Meets Philosophy*. Vaughan's methodology seeks to reconcile Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception with Gilles Deleuze's semiotic approach. In doing so he borrows heavily from 1970s film theory yet eschews what he sees as its psychoanalytic and ideological errors, as well as the errors of the 'film as perceptual body' approach taken by scholars such as Sobchack. For Vaughan, cinema does not 'perceive', much less 'think' of its own accord, but instead offers a challenge to preconceived notions of how *we* might be said to perceive and