Patricia Pisters: *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture*, Stanford University Press, California, 2012, 370 pp.

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The neuro-image, according to Patricia Pisters, is the successor to Deleuze's time-image, which for him succeeded the movement-image, the proviso being that all these forms of the image are not mutually exclusive. The temporal disjunctions and spatial dislocations of the time-image expressed the modern (Western) world's traumatic encounters with war and genocide. The neuro-image expresses the twenty-first century condition of the 'proliferation of screens, data, and information of contemporary globalised media culture' (197). Rather than acting as prostheses of memory, these screens somewhat replace it with seemingly infinite databanks whose recombinant logic echoes the synaptic processes of the 'circuits and linkages of the brain' (3). This is one aspect of the neuro-image. The other is characterised by the delirious linkage of images enabled by the schizoid brain functioning of film protagonists, characters, such as Arthur Edens (Tom Wilkinson) in *Michael Clayton* (Tony Gilroy, USA, 2007) or Evan Treborn (Ashton Kutcher) in *The Butterfly Effect* (Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber, USA/Canada, 2004), whose neurological brain disorders create 'the reality of illusions' (12) in a world in which human minds are conduits for powers beyond their control. Pisters says that this delirium cinema, which she elaborates referring to films as diverse as *The Prestige* (Christopher Nolan, USA/UK, 2006), *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, France/Poland/USA, 2006) and *π/Pi* (Darren Aronofsky, USA, 1998), calls for schizoanalytical methods to read a symptomatology that resists and fits with the schizophrenic logic of capitalism.

The book is divided into three parts: Neuroscreens: Principles of the Brain; Neurophilosophy: Turning Madness into Metaphysics; Neuropolitics: Transnational Screen Connections; each part overlapping with the others in an interdisciplinary adventure with neuroscience, film and cultural theory, and philosophy, one methodological approach predominating in each section. Part One brings neuroscience together with a post-Deleuzian film-philosophy that takes off from Deleuze's maxim that 'the brain is the screen' (3). Pisters sometimes takes this quite literally, her use of neuroscientific research creating a tendency to make claims about neuro-spectatorship which reduce fantasy and subjectivity to automatic brain functioning. That experiments using fMRI scanning as well as the theory of mirror neurons provide evidence that the same parts of the brain are activated by the

viewing of actions onscreen and the viewing of actions in the 'real' world does not, I would maintain, mean that there is a one-to-one correspondence between them. More productive is her use of Robert Pepperell's 'dialethic' account of the interrelation of brain and screen in which the screen is perceived '"in here" and "out there" at the same time' (27). In this approach, world and mind are neither distinct nor unified but simultaneously distinct and unified, the screen being perceived neither entirely in the mind, a position neurologists call internalist, nor as being completely on a continuum with the world, the externalist position. The introduction of mind here opens up the question of consciousness and this is one of the problems in the early part of the book. Consciousness is considered a Hard Problem by neuroscientists – how does the brain enable the mind? – the Easy Problem being the mapping of specific functions of the brain. This bias in neuroscience leads Pisters to equate the brain with consciousness, an approach backed up by a misleading quotation from Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (2005): 'The world has become memory, being a superimposition of ages and lobes, but the brain itself has become consciousness, continuation of ages, creation or growth of ever new lobes, re-creation of matter' (144). For all his wonderful inspirational ideas, Deleuze's unqualified wildness is easy to spot when read in parentheses and there are many such quotations in this book.

Although I remain sceptical about the brain being centred in this way and about the use of scientific experiment to prove a theory of film spectatorship, Pisters' notion of the neuro-image is a good motif with which to think through aspects of contemporary cinematic production. She makes a very good case for it being a development of the time-image, the difference being that the neuro-image is much more vertiginous, its circuits traversing interiority and exteriority to continuously reorder new versions of old stories. This is exemplified in Pisters' analysis of lesser known Alain Resnais films such as *Je t'aime, Je t'aime* (France, 1968), in which the protagonist Claude (Claude Rich) is hooked up to a machine like a giant brain that repeatedly sends him back in time, each time playing out a different version of his relationship with his girlfriend Catrine (Olga Georges-Picot), for whose death he may have been responsible. The temporal linkages and reorderings in the film correlate to the way in which the brain processes memory, in that each telling of our past changes it in some way, in turn becoming the version of events we take off from in the next telling. Although the ending of this, and of many of the other films Pisters looks at, is dark, the neuro-image is a strangely positive phenomenon in that its linkage of different points in the past with different futures that in turn generate new presents suggests that we can somehow control our destiny. Pisters' analysis of the TV series *Lost* (J.J. Abrams/Jeffrey Lieber/Damon Lindelof, USA, 2004-2010) exemplifies this. Purposely going against Deleuze's disinterest in narrative, the neuro-image is very

much on the side of storytelling, but storytelling as premised on computational models of coding in which mind-boggling numbers of linkages can be made between narratological elements. *Lost* epitomises a twenty-first century narrative in which a large number of characters generate a whole range of different perspectives coagulating around an event – in this case a plane crash – and which weaves an ever-expanding set of fantastical connections that spin off from these perspectives in the attempt to give meaning to a world that has itself become stranger than fiction. Rather than critiquing fiction, as a modernist aesthetic was wont to do, cognitive capitalism (a term used to describe the conditions of labour in which surplus value is extracted from mental functioning – and added to the extraction of value from physical labour by industrial capitalism) seems to warrant the generation of ever more mythic fabrications, as in *Lost* and in films such as *Avatar* (James Cameron, USA, 2009), which Pisters also discusses.

Pisters is in her element when she leaves the banality of neuroscience behind and delves into philosophers such as Henri Bergson and David Hume, uniting Bergson's vitalistic metaphysics of intuition and duration with Hume's sceptical empiricism to make a case for a metaphysical scepticism, i.e. the necessity of belief in the face of scientific doubt (156). Her film-philosophical approach, while ultimately narrative based, is underpinned by a reading of Deleuze's three syntheses of time in *Difference and Repetition* (2004). Relying somewhat on a complex secondary text by James Williams (2003), in which he articulates the complexification of these three syntheses, Pisters interprets them in a manner more familiar from Deleuze's *Cinema* books, i.e. there are presents that pass, pasts that are preserved and futures that are generated by the eruption of the pure past (difference) into the present. There is a slight contradiction here in that the neuro-image does not seem to be the kind of production that can allow for the eruption of difference, which she links to Nietzsche's desire for that which might escape coding. The picture of the neuro-image that circulates in this book is a fully decodable one – at least on a narrative level, much like the way in which neuroscience links brain signals and actions.

The cinematic neuro-image seems to me to be tailor made for adapting neoliberal subjects to the speculative logic of cognitive capitalism's economic ideology, hence the resurgence of conspiracy theories and science fiction narratives as guides to meaning in a world that is too large and uncanny to be understood. It is almost as if our globalised world has returned full circle to the condition of prehistoric man who is thought to have invented stories or myths to enable him to survive in a mysterious world. An important tenet of Deleuze's *Cinema* books, which Pisters mentions, was that, the world having become like a bad film, we need a cinema that would enable us to believe again in the world. In the twenty-first century, the modernist distinction between good and bad films is

overridden by an overarching technosphere of affects and intensities and ever expanding virtual worlds in which scale and time are in continuous transmogrification.

The political stakes involved in this becomes apparent in the final part of the book in which Pisters looks at the micropolitical aspects of the neuro-image. In a cogent analysis of the actualities in which Gillo Pontecorvo's film *La battaglia di Algeri/The Battle of Algiers* (Italy/Algeria, 1966) finds itself, Pisters exposes the worrying hyperhistoricity of the neuro-image. At one time a political consciousness-raising fiction film based on real events, the film now circulates in archival networks in which it has been viewed as training material by revolutionary groups and terrorist organisations as well as used as a tactical lesson for American military operations in Baghdad. On the one hand, Pisters celebrates the film as an open text, but, on the other hand, she asks the rhetorical and crucial question of whether in the exponential growth of our audiovisual archive we are in danger of betraying history (234). This could have been a book in itself. Looking at Iraq War films such as *Redacted* (Brian De Palma, USA/Canada, 2007) as well as the circulation of the Abu Ghraib images, Pisters explicates the dichotomy of contemporary media culture in its capacity to desensitise us to images of war and atrocity as well as creating simulations that put us in an affective relationship to these events. But what can we do with this proximity?

Pisters refers to Deleuze's admission that while 'philosophy and art have very limited direct political power' (244) they throw us into guerrilla warfare with ourselves and this is where micropolitics begins. Pisters dialogues with Elia Suleiman's films to demonstrate this, Suleiman's approach of inserting personal imaginative openings and linkages into the historical weight of history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict being viewed as a way of escaping the limits of identity. Rich as this analysis is, Pisters' thesis ultimately needs more thorough distinctions to be made between the brain and the mind and to how exactly these are situated in relation to the notion of 'screen', which seems sometimes to be a floating concept. Mental agency is not simply a component in a conspiracy or schizo-narrative, but entails more complex motives and desires that trouble the vast networks of contemporary screen media. Or so we might hope.

Bibliography

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