



Review: Eyal Peretz (2007)
Becoming Visionary:
Brian De Palma's Cinematic Education of the Senses.
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In *Becoming Visionary* Eyal Peretz has produced a highly focused attempt to link philosophy and film. The focus is upon a production process that for Peretz is presented in film and traditionally neglected or avoided by philosophy. He argues that 'It is the Platonic manner of raising these questions and responding to them that has most famously dominated the West's philosophical and theoretical determination of the essence of the image' (Peretz 2007, 3). This approach means that we do not get a general account of how philosophy and film share similar concerns and methods. Instead the mechanisms of thought and cinema, their ways of raising and responding to questions, are explored. Peretz shows that it is in how both practices work, not how they are understood or situated, that they relate. However, I would argue that the survey of philosophy given by Peretz is too narrow to relate philosophy fully to film. His work on film is admirably deep but the role philosophy plays in this book is limited.

The book begins with an introduction entitled 'The Realm of the Senses and the Vision of the Beyond – Toward a New Thinking of the Image'. The task Peretz sets himself here is to locate the mechanisms of philosophy that raise and respond to questions in a

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non-Platonic manner. These are questions raised by the image or by the image playing its full role in thought. Peretz charts the thinking of the image in the history of philosophy. He argues that the image invokes thought's immanent limit and that it has been inadequately analysed under the influence of Plato. An alternative is located in the Heideggerian tradition because it is seen to be closer to capturing the real problematic of the image. It moves closer to how philosophy and film both really work or how they are productive through images that are not modelled upon objects.

Peretz is here beginning the book with something that haunts philosophy as much as film: the productive element or genesis of both practices. He argues that Plato failed to think the image because he reduced it to something that lacked the completeness of an ideal and non-sensible object. He therefore did not seek to make the incompleteness of images productive but to make them inferior to an original object. This very much sets the scene for Peretz's history of philosophy. After Plato philosophy was limited by its concern to find the complete objects beyond the realm of the senses. Ideal objects are projected beyond the sensible world in order to remove the enigma of what is 'beyond the world' (11). Peretz argues that it is the interpretation given to this 'beyond' that is fundamental to the practice and possibilities of philosophy:

Any thinking that is philosophical, that is, any thinking seeking to stay true to the fundamental insight at the heart of the philosophical project, has to take as its guide, I suggest, this Platonic discovery of a dimension of excess beyond the realm of the senses. (10)

The re-interpretation of the 'beyond' that Peretz seeks in philosophy is one that makes it into the immanent enigma or mystery that opens the world up to the production of sense.

A concern I want to raise here is with the 'beyond the world' which for Peretz is immanent to the world and to worldly practices like thought and film making. In *Becoming Visionary* this immanent excess is always related to a human world and a human situation. In the Coda to the book Peretz tells us what he has been working towards: 'an essential haunting at the heart of the human' (158). He emphasises 'the strangeness of the human voice, particularly in its limit condition as scream' (ibid.). This strangeness must not resemble what it produces – i.e. meaningful sounds – because otherwise it is not a mechanism of complete openness to the production of sense. Why then does Peretz already relate it to the human, as its privileged site, and so make it closed to the non-

human or inhuman? A further concern is that in rejecting the projection of ideal objects beyond images Peretz goes on to assume the necessity of a subjective solution. This is a solution to the problem that images cannot be equated with copies of ideal objects. He focuses upon human subjectivity and makes it the site of a haunting that is meant to be unrecognisable in its strangeness and horror. Peretz's history of philosophy moves from an alleged failure of Platonism to a reading of the Heideggerian tradition in philosophy. He talks very much about a world and its beyond, making this seem to be a human world where human organs of sense are operating and humans operate technological machines (144). The situation is one where humans seek to make sense of their world and have their understanding challenged by crises where meaning is lost.

This is to neglect Bergson's concern in *Matter and Memory* to show that images are located between subject and object. Bergson puts the image between subject and object in order to account for them both such that 'Here, in the midst of all the images, there is a certain image which I term my body...' (Bergson 1991, 48). For Bergson images do not affirm subjectivity over the closure and fixity of a realm of ideal objects. They present another solution to the problem of the image, one that seeks to include and account for the dynamisms of subjectivity and objectivity. Thus images do not refer us to the production of sense, as they do for Peretz, but to the production of images that are neither subject nor object and neither material nor immaterial. One of the strengths of Bergson's strategy is that it seeks to include different dimensions of the world in its account.

It might be objected that Peretz is justifiably focusing upon certain philosophers in depth. One of the strengths of *Becoming Visionary* is that it often avoids generalisations so as to see how the mechanisms of thought and film work rather than trying to understand them in advance. Equally, it would be wrong to suggest that work on philosophy and film should always follow the path Deleuze followed in using Bergson to think about film. However, philosophy has come up with conceptions of the image as neither objective nor subjective. Whether or not Bergson is used as the source of this thinking of the image Peretz's account needs to register this significant alternative within philosophy. This would be to acknowledge the richness of philosophy in its thinking of the image. Peretz also needs to deal with the orientation of his thought towards the subjective, human and immaterial. These qualities are affirmed in order to escape a Platonic realm of ideal objects projected beyond this world. Yet if, as Peretz argues, the limit or excess is immanent to this

world it must relate to, and relate, all of the world's dimensions. It must include the human and the non- or in-human, the material and the immaterial, the subject and the object. We are left wondering at times what the limit is immanent to. If it is immanent to the production of human subjectivity alone then these other dimensions of the world are transcended by what gives them their sense for the human subject.

My concern here is that philosophy is not brought fully into play. Peretz writes of the productive limit that:

This beyond is inscribed as the heart of the artistic image as a black blindness immanent to the being of the human, and the human subject is, we might say, nothing but this configuration of the beyond in the inside. The *image* is that which *shows us* this beyond that is part of our world, that which makes our eye experience its own internal blindness as the dimension of futurity (and of an immemorial past), and as such, the image is, to use Deleuze's crucial formation, a time-image. (14-15)

A concern here is that Deleuze's philosophy is being attached to a thinking of the human. The way Deleuze's thought works is to carry out a critique of things like the very notion of the human. That is why he talks about individuation and about singularities that are pre-individual (Deleuze 2004, 223). This is also a problem when Peretz writes that Deleuze was concerned with 'the logic, or the generalised rules, governing the ways in which things and the world make sense for us, as well as trying to understand what making sense and not making sense actually mean' (48). For Deleuze there are processes of individuation that are also involved in accounting for the 'us' that Peretz refers to. Peretz rightly shows how film can take philosophy further but here it seems that philosophy needs to be more involved. Philosophy needs to raise problems of accounting for material production to add to those of accounting for the production of sense that Peretz is focusing upon. Deleuze seeks to provide a material account of 'us' which must be related to an immaterial account of our human sense of the world. If Deleuze's thought is to be brought into play it needs to speak for itself rather than be assigned a role in thought that takes for granted the human situation.

A concern that follows from those I have been raising is with time and what philosophy has to say about it. Peretz does not elaborate a philosophy of time, it is not part of his survey of philosophy, but he does very effectively explore cinematic presentations of time. He thus emphasises cases of time at work in the cinematic frame but does not

engage with time as a whole or across these cases. It is perhaps a role of philosophy to draw out ever further the inhuman dimensions of time as a whole. Peretz concerns himself throughout the book with how the enigmatic and excessive 'beyond' is able to overcome spatial organisation, to disorientate the human subject. At one point he calls it '...a primordial moment, an absolute past, before and in excess of any actuality' (139). The question of how these moments relate in this 'absolute past' is not explored and so the inhuman dimensions of time do not come into play. It might be objected that film itself has a lot to say about time as a whole, something we see for example in *Sans Soleil* (Chris Marker, 1982). There are indeed many different sources for thinking about the role of time that would seem to question some of the co-ordinates of Peretz's philosophical position in this book. Deleuze claims to use Bergson's philosophy of time in his *Cinema* books and even claims to find a notion of 'time out of joint' in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (Deleuze 1998, 27-29). At one point in his analysis of De Palma's films Peretz refers to Marcel Proust and his presentation of time in *In Search of Lost Time*. He argues that Proust invokes involuntary memory and yet limits this memory 'to an individual having to have experienced the event as factuality in the first place' (77). According to this reading, Proustian involuntary memory does not come 'as if out of nowhere, and out of context' (ibid.). Yet it can be argued that the Proustian past moment or essence resembles no actual moment and relies solely on temporal mechanisms. I would argue that for Proust the involuntary memory of Combray resembles nothing about the actual place. It comes from 'nowhere' in its every incarnation (Willatt 2008, 441-443). This is indeed how Deleuze reads Proust in his book *Proust and Signs* and how he uses him to develop a philosophy of time (Deleuze 2000, 16-17). I would argue that how time is thought, both in philosophy and film, is more significant than Peretz seems to allow.

I will now turn to Peretz's analyses of De Palma's films. The title of the Coda to the book suggests that Peretz wants to conclude with: 'A Paradoxical Happy Ending; or, The Idea of a Future' (157ff). Through strangeness and horror in De Palma's films a happy future is envisaged. This ending is to be the new practice or practical synthesis developed from De Palma's cinematic techniques. His films are shown to be highly original contributions to cinema on the basis of how they work; their mechanisms for expanding the practices of human beings through their immanent limit. The future comes from visionary powers that De Palma seeks to uncover in his films. Problems are staged that have haunted philosophy

for centuries in order to open onto this haunting limit as the productive limit of all practice. It is a practical synthesis based on a vision of how everything works and relates. Peretz emphasises how De Palma breaks down frames which are organised as worlds where everything makes sense and action is possible for human beings. He stages the incompleteness of the frame by introducing its immanent beyond or haunting limit. In his analysis of the film *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976) we have the break-down of a space of action. There is a volleyball game and human bodies and organs are co-ordinated and organised by this frame or space. What happens in this frame is used to show how De Palma opens space to time in order to exhaust all action and creates a sense of haunting and unease. In passages like the following the mechanisms of De Palma's film-making are powerfully portrayed:

For the movement into which the viewer is swept and by which is overwhelmed, the movement of the game in which one necessarily becomes an involved participant, is one of destabilization and decentring, of a loss of sovereignty, and thus of the collapse of this space. (34)

We get to see how De Palma does not make profound statements in his narratives or speeches but in how the film works. However, in uncovering this depth to De Palma's work Peretz continues his emphasis on the immaterial. He argues that when De Palma uses the flow of blood we find not 'a simple physical event' but 'an event of sense and language' (33). This means that language is opened; it meets what it cannot explain or makes sense of and so is exposed to its productive limit. This is productive for language because it is a mechanism for accounting for new and different meanings. Yet again we ask why this flow of blood must be an immaterial sense event and not also a productive state of matter. This leaves out philosophical and cinematic questions about how matter works and what it can do. Peretz writes of how 'a body is not a body unless it is also an exposure to something that is not of the order of the body, and that is movement' (36). This needs to be explained because the role and value of matter is at stake. There is a sense in which we are escaping matter because it is not capable of accounting for itself or adding anything original to the world. When Peretz writes above of what is 'not of the order of the body' it is unclear what he means. It could be argued that disorganised matter is not of the order of an organic body. This would then function as the limit of organised matter and provide a material account of its continuing re-organisation and openness to the future. If Peretz wants to

escape the immobile in order to think the movement of production would this necessarily exclude matter? A mountain range is only relatively immobile from a human perspective but from the inhuman perspective of time as a whole it is in movement. Since Peretz emphasises the human situation and avoids direct engagement with the inhuman proportions of time as a whole it seems as if matter is not fully engaged with here.

In chapter two Peretz's analysis of *The Fury* (Brian De Palma, 1978) uncovers a process of fragmentation that expands what is possible in a frame. This is effected by the immanent outside or 'beyond' of the frame. Yet this fragmentation is limited insofar as organs, as fragmented, always double specific human organs. Thus while organs may relate in unpredictable and horrific ways, insofar as they are fragmented, they always return to the situation of an organised human body or human organism. There is then a double life of every organ, providing a mechanism for the production of sense, but this involves the projection of the ideal organisation of the human body. It is the human that is doubled and through this doubling the human is extended, never becoming anything else through its relations with the inhuman or nonhuman. Peretz writes of how in *The Fury* Gillian, a visionary with psychic powers, sees 'as if out of time' (68). However, what is seen is:

A primary and primordial image of humanity, as if the opening of vision, in a discovery of a white screen, occurs as an image of a detached, we might say decapitated, bleeding head whose eyes do not return one's gaze, something that cannot be assigned a period, that is, is not located and framed in a specific time and space... (68)

Time is again limited to the human situation as its privileged site. In his analysis of *Blow Out* (Brian De Palma, 1981) in chapter three Peretz writes of how 'The Viewer is split into a heart, a mouth, an ear, and an eye' (100). Something happens between the series of sights and sounds that differentiates them because it is their common limit. One wonders if this could be taken further if it were not the human that is always the destination of the temporal processes so effectively brought out in this analysis of De Palma's films.

A notable theme of the book is summed up in its subtitle as a 'Cinematic Education of the Senses'. This education presupposes, I would argue, a human and subjective setting. Yet as a mechanism of both film and philosophy it is more than this. We are shown in De Palma's films a 'lesson of exhaustion' (45). As we saw, this appears in the analysis of *Carrie*

to concern the exhaustion of a space of action, its loss of meaning that haunts its occupants. The body's own limit disrupts its orientation and abilities in space through its exhaustion in time. This education is summed up by Peretz when he writes of 'the possibility of relating to the facts in different contexts and different situations, beyond the actual time and "contextual" circumstances in which they took place' (75). Can this education be said to involve learning from the material and from the nonhuman and inhuman? If the role of time were expanded so that it includes and relates all these elements, as moments in time, this would take us beyond human subjectivity. The new community that Peretz envisions at the end of chapter three is described as 'a fragmented community of touch' (154). Yet this visionary touch, which is the common limit of all humanity, refers to an immaterial and human set of relations rather than opening onto a wider domain. The humanism of this conception, a common striving that film can activate, seems to follow from the emphases put in place in the introduction to the book.

Despite the concerns I am raising I do not want to appear to be claiming that this book is a failure. The mechanisms uncovered in De Palma's films stand alone and are capable of being even more productive if they undergo a more grounded encounter with philosophy. Something that stands out is a concern with how the limit or 'beyond' can become covered over in practice. In his analysis of *Blow Out* Peretz shows how the film can lead us to believe that we have nothing to worry about because the organisation of the frame is complete: 'we become nothing but the perfect reflection of what we see, fully instituted and manipulated, with no gaps left by the film' (111). The film gives us the impression of mastery and shows how this can become a habit of thought. This provides a fuller picture of film as not simply liberating but producing illusions and accounting for our lack of vision as well as expanding it. The analysis of *Blow Out* shows how the mechanisms presented in the film shape the action and dialogue. The desire for closure in its different forms drives the actions of different characters but these are accounted for by a common and immanent limit. In his analysis of all the films Peretz is very effective at showing how the haunting element is disguised as something personal, intentional, conscious or meaningful.

To conclude I want to stress that what this book achieves is of great importance. It shows that any comparison of film and philosophy requires an effective focus to be productive. Peretz achieves an admirable depth in his analysis of De Palmas films but

needs to acknowledge the narrowness of the history of philosophy he presents and brings into play. The value of his insights can only be deepened if philosophy is drawn upon further in order to relate cinematic mechanisms to philosophical ones. The relations of the human and in- or non-human, material and immaterial, subjective and objective, may be expanded in this way. In his analysis of *The Fury* in chapter 2 Peretz analyses the fragmentation that is a power of the visionary and writes

It is thus that we can also say that the figures of the witness to an enigma and of the transmitter of a force of fragmentation are figures that had no place, would have been considered freaks – in the history of philosophy. (81)

I would argue that these freaks of philosophy are present in the history of philosophy. I referred to Deleuze's uncovering of a 'time out of joint' in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and here we could say we have a freakish Kant who certainly does not fit into the tradition of philosophy that Peretz seeks to overcome. Philosophy does indeed have a lot to learn from film but there is a risk at times in the book of making it sound like philosophy can only seek to catch up with film. However, it is in showing how films work and how philosophy works, despite his limited engagement with philosophy in the book, that Peretz suggests new ways in which the two disciplines can relate more productively. It is not in what they mean to us but in what they do to us that their relation can be deepened. Peretz thus brings philosophy and film closer to their common limit.

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