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FILM-PHILOSOPHY

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Review: Patricia Pisters (2003)  
*The Matrix of Visual Culture:  
Working with Deleuze in Film Theory*  
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**D.H. Fleming**  
University of St Andrews

Since the original publication of his cinema books in the 1980s and their later translation into English (*Cinema 1* in 1986 and *Cinema 2* in 1989) the work of Gilles Deleuze has offered academics and scholars fresh and invigorating thought paradigms for imagining and working with cinema. The millennium brought renewed academic interest in Deleuzian conceptualisations and a new wave of study has emerged that increasingly incorporates and adapts his theories far beyond their original scope. Indeed, Deleuze's ideas influence much modern academic work, and besides a growing number of conferences and seminars dedicated to the study of his ideas, there also appear an ever growing number of journals and collected papers that incorporate and reference his

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work. Gregory Flaxman's edited collection *The Brain Is the Screen* (2000) is one example of note singled out here. Recent monographs often strive to clarify Deleuze's notoriously dense and complex style and make it more accessible to a wider readership, with an early pioneer of this trend being found in D.N. Rodowick's seminal work *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (1997). Other scholars increasingly incorporate Deleuze's work in a variety of new ways, invoking his ideas for describing such diverse concepts as 'haptic' modes of embodied vision within intercultural cinema (Laura Marks' *The Skin of the Film* [2000]), and describing 'affective' cinema in horror genres (Anna Powell *Deleuze and Horror Film* [2005]). More recently the work of Deleuze has been adapted and reconceptualised (hybridised if you will) for understanding issues of time, space, and national identity within contemporary cinema (David Martin-Jones *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* [2006]), and completely reworked in order to describe cinema as an organic thinking intelligence in its own capacity (Daniel Frampton *Filmosophy* [2006]).

The work of Deleuze therefore continues to offer fresh perspectives and paradigms for understanding and analysing film, and within *The Matrix of Visual Culture* (2003), Patricia Pisters demonstrates how it is possible to work with Deleuze's ideas and concepts with reference to contemporary film theory. The book proves of particular interest and value as Pisters strives to make Deleuze's concepts more productive through applying them to a wide range of audiovisual images, and examines a diverse range of cinematic texts drawn from different spheres of filmic production and national or artistic traditions. Unusually Pisters further strives to make no hierarchical distinctions between art films and the images of popular culture, and so examines an exciting array of texts that range from modern Disney cartoons through to African political third cinema. Pisters primarily utilises Deleuzian theories to investigate new forms of metacinematic consciousness and nonpersonal forms of individuation hoping to demonstrate what these 'different modes make [it] possible to see, think, and feel' (16). To clarify these differences for the reader, Pisters returns throughout to a comparison with more traditional and familiar psychoanalytic analyses of

film, which helps illustrate the significant divergences between the two applications and avoids any evaluation or privileging of either model.

*The Matrix of Visual Culture* departs from the work of Deleuze himself, and that of previous scholars like Steven Shaviro (*The Cinematic Body* [1993]), and predicts the future, pluralistic and comparative works of scholars such as Powell. The alternative model offered by Deleuze moves away from a model of a mind/body split and of images as representations which are only accessible to a disembodied eye/'I', proposing instead a rhizomatically structured model of the brain and conceptualising cinema as a form of event. Pisters here elaborates on the implications of the Cartesian position, in which the eye is important for collecting all the impressions which are unified by an a priori 'I' which synthesises all experiences. This subject finds itself before and beyond perception and experience and is necessarily transcendental. Contrasting this position Pisters 'puts Deleuze to work' (223) throughout the book, and in a lively investigation attempts to demonstrate that cinema is instead part of the world itself rather than just a reflection of it. In addition, Pisters also has a second agenda within this book, to find answers to the pragmatic question of how to work with Deleuze in analysing specific expressions of contemporary popular media culture, an increasingly popular trend amongst contemporary Deleuzian scholars and theorists.

The main thrust and value of the book's first section lies in Pisters' comparative readings of metacinematic films through 'a transcendental Cartesian/Kantian/Lacanian tradition, which is represented by Žižek, and an immanent Spinozian/Bergsonian/(Nietzschean) tradition, which is elaborated by Deleuze' (21). Thus, beginning with the familiar work of Hitchcock (*Rear Window* [1954] and *Vertigo* [1958]) Pisters demonstrates what these different conceptualisations make it possible, or impossible, for spectators to see, think, and feel when watching each film. Pisters manages to demonstrate the ramifications of each paradigm upon the cinematic subject, who in both models is predominantly defined by desire, but with desire being conceived of differently in each instance. By succinctly clarifying these differences the book helpfully outlines how, in a Freudian and Lacanian tradition, the subject's desire

is based on lack, with the character necessarily being a guilty subject and cogito desiring enjoyment and '*jouissance*, which has its impossible origin in the Real' (19). After examining the ramifications of this perspective on the Hitchcock films Pisters then considers the same film/characters through a Deleuzian/Spinozian paradigm. Here desire is based on making new and rewarding compositions and accordingly the subject is 'not a fixed and transcendently controlled entity but an immanent singular body whose borders of selfhood (or subjectivity) are challenged in time and by time' (20). This subject is further articulated by various 'becomings' based on a positive desire to make new enriching connections and changes. Pisters then refreshes and updates the debate by shifting her attention onto more modern meta-cinematic films, including *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995), which she uses to demonstrate and illuminate some of the more complex Deleuzian notions regarding a new age of perception. *Strange Days* is used in this manner to illustrate how Bergson's futuristic insights have actually come true, and that we now inhabit a metacinematic universe where a 'new camera consciousness has entered our perception' (16). Analysing the film and its removal of the distancing camera and projector leads to a clearer understanding of the direct physical involvement of body and brain within the metacinematic universe and the collapsing boundary between self and other, perceiver and perceived. These direct perceptions, Pisters clarifies, force us to think differently about images that are no longer representations and asks us to understand them through a Bergsonian paradigm where 'matter, body, and brain are the image' (26). By engaging with the overloaded visual style of this particular film, Pisters manages to demonstrate with clear and concise examples how a Deleuzian body-without-organs (BwO) - which challenges the boundaries of the self same organism - is ultimately placed upon the plane of immanence, the plane of images.

Following the logic of these investigations and developing them over a series of other chapters, Pisters also elaborates upon 'Material Aspects of Subjectivity' by engaging with, and offering an alternative view of the classic mind/body split of Western philosophy. The value and aim of this investigation is to situate the body on the plane of immanence, and elaborate upon this

complex philosophical idea and axiomatic notion inherent to Bergson and Deleuze's work. Here Pisters works through one of the most confusing notions for non-Deleuzian scholars and asks, if the image is no longer a *representation* of matter but is matter, what then is perception? In helping readers to grasp this, Pisters engages with examples of horror cinema, a genre Deleuze somewhat brushed over within his own cinema books, and focuses upon the abject and the monstrosities of the 'flesh': the most obvious and overt sign of the physical body. Starting with contemporary cinema's recurrent and increasingly more explicit fascination with flesh (particularly within gore and splatter films) Pisters examines four films from the 1970s and 1980s where flesh occupies a central place and demonstrates a narrative preoccupation with the body and its nature. Turning to Deleuze's different categories of image types to help explain and describe the material and temporal aspects of subjectivity, Pisters offers an invaluable introduction to these different notions and grounds them in comprehensible cinematic examples. Perhaps the strongest and most compelling reading and elaboration picks up on Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* (1973) and examines the film in terms of temporal aspects of subjectivity within time-image cinema; itself one of the most difficult and complicated examples of a Deleuzian image type. Pisters here describes how the film is defined in terms of, and floats between, what is actual and what is virtual, between past and present, between real and lyrical fantasy. The major strength of the reading lies in its drawing attention to how the film achieves these effects through various cinematic means, including a heautonomous use of sound which functions to interconnect and overlap different sheets of time and create interstices. The subjects of this film are also investigated and contrasted to more conventional characters of action-image cinema, and are found to be depicted differently, as wanderers, not knowing any more how to act and react, and so open up to the virtual, to time, dream, and hallucination. This series of readings demonstrates the fundamental differences between the movement-image and time-image modes of cinema and help the reader to come to grips with these radical aesthetic paradigms. The hard segmental lines of *Touki Bouki* are also investigated and outlined in terms of the colonial past, but even here for Pisters

this is not divided into clear oppositions and so the world itself appears out of joint. By examining four films which predominantly employ different image types Pisters is able to clearly demonstrate how 'The action-image produces action and actual bodies, which has an effect of excitement; the relation image calls for interpretation of the metaphors that are displayed and produces symbolic meat; the affection-image works directly on our sensitivity, in this case on (our) passive and sad affects... [and] the time-image produces a subjectivity in time' (75). In this way Pisters produces a clear and concise introduction to the key image concepts through eclectic in-depth textual analysis.

Usefully, other aspects of subjectivity and different image types are also examined elsewhere, with Pisters turning her attention to a cinema of bodies which raises questions of ethics in relation to violence, and offers new ways to conceive of violence by utilising a Deleuzian toolbox. This is predominantly achieved through examining assemblages and the rhizomatic network associated with this concept, and through introducing a Nietzschean and Spinozian conception of the body and ethics. Again complex philosophy is plainly elaborated and Pisters outlines how a subject attempts to create as many joyful encounters and connections as possible in order to increase its power to act and live, with violence in this model being borne from bad encounters that have the affect of sadness: which then leads to hate and anger. Pisters further outlines how 'violence often is associated with impulses and drives' (87) and relates this to impulse-images which she clarifies through Deleuze who argues that impulses and drives can be viewed as political options for navigating certain dead-ends and blockages to reach joyful passions instead. Descriptions and examples of impulse-images are introduced, concretised in cinematic examples, and outlined as situated between the affection-image and the action-image, being full of symptoms and fetishes. By grounding these complex notions in modern and popular examples of cinema such as *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) and *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) Pisters opens up Deleuzian ideas to a wider audience and grants valuable insight into how his concepts can be more fruitfully adapted and applied to commercial cinema. Examining notions of schizophrenia in contemporary Hollywood and the 'nouvelle violence' Pisters

reads the bodily bouts between Tyler and the narrator within *Fight Club* as literal attacks on the beauty and glamour of consumption culture, and the film is outlined as an example of action-image body cinema which is also simultaneously a cinema of the brain; with an internally folded character narrating the events in free indirect style. The schizophrenic dimension of the film is interpreted through the violence directed towards symbols of capitalism (which for Deleuze is itself a schizophrenic system that produces its own antiproduction), and through the narrator who produces his own counterimage which he fights to produce a class of violence. This investigation proves of particular interest as violence is sketched as a political option on the line of flight, and Fincher's film is finally found, like *Pulp Fiction*, to present images 'that play with the status of the movement-image that become 'contaminated' with characteristics of the time-image' (104). Pisters similarly treats *Pulp Fiction* to an in-depth analysis which helps draw attention to the differences between brain and body cinema and elaborates these differences for the reader.

The final three chapters of the book are arranged into an interesting subset which probes various different notions of 'becoming' - one of the major axiomatic notions outlined within *A Thousand Plateaus* and related to the BwO - and examines and clarifies what these various different lines of flight are and entail. The subset begins with an examination of becoming-woman, the first step in all becomings, and thereafter follows on logically and sequentially through chapters and sections investigating becoming -child, -animal, -music, -molecular, and (eventually) -imperceptible. This section works again to ground complex Deleuzian notions in cinematic examples that are immediately comprehensible for newcomers to these ideas. The set is inaugurated through examining the attempt to do more than simply critique and transgress established and segmented hard molar lines. Pisters states that every becoming 'is a process and an attempt to think differently, to see or feel something new in experience by entering into a zone of proximity with somebody or something else' (106). Becoming-woman is outlined as the basis for total critique and described as a procedure that allows one to live freely. Pisters interestingly adopts the conceptual personae/aesthetic figure of Alice in Wonderland as the ideal

subject who can aptly demonstrate this movement into an alternative universe where things are measured differently, and uses her as an illustrative and archetypal guide through the universe of becoming-woman. The Alice persona is examined in a series of different incarnations that stretch from Carroll's original Alice through to the cyborg Alices of the contemporary cinematic age. Thus, new technologies are described and outlined in terms of their ability to change our perceptions and pull us into different conceptual universes, with cinema being one such example which can alter human perception. In this way the imbrication of human and technology is introduced to help demonstrate and illustrate new paradigms for understanding and redefining the borders and boundaries of the body.

Pisters continues to offer valuable insight and illumination into other ideas of becoming by arguing that imagination is a 'transformative force that propels multiple, heterogeneous 'becomings' or repositioning of the subject' (142) and investigates the consequences of these ideas upon the logic and sensations of becoming-animal. These unusual Deleuzian notions are again clarified and elaborated through the use of popular and familiar filmic examples including analyses of *The Company of Wolves* (Neil Jordan, 1984) and *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986). An original investigation into old myths and stories also ensues, which engages with the relationship between humankind and animals, and how traditional (binary) modes of thinking led to the association of these in-between monsters (i.e. werewolves) with abjection or attempted to interpret them as simple metaphors and allegories for certain human behaviours and traits. The notion of becoming-child before becoming-animal is introduced wherein the 'child' is outlined as a classical Spinozist. 'For children, every experience is new. Maybe it is for that reason that children have a conception of the world that is closer to the idea of becoming-animal' (151). Pisters introduces cases of real wild-children and examines the conditions of their becoming before returning to cinematic analysis via *The Jungle Book* (Zoltan Korda, 1942) in order to explore notions of the wild child and the use of affection-images (achieved here through the use of cinematic colour). Pisters concludes from her observations that in all the cultural legends, myths, and

narratives encountered, it is clear that the basic assumptions remain the same: becoming-animal is considered a monstrous activity unless a child is involved in it. This signal chapter works to clarify and contextualise complicated ideas and offers the reader an abundance of concrete cinematic examples of these unusual phenomena.

Also of great interest is a section which follows the lines of flight to their natural ends and examines the '(De)Territorialising Forces of the Sound Machine' and engages with the notion that 'Deterritorialising forces allow music and sound to become great lines of flight' (188). Music is also discussed in Deleuzian terms of the refrain (the proper content) which allows the creation of a stable centre within the enormous black hole of chaos. The illuminating example of a child singing in the dark to comfort itself is offered by way of example and is related to the use of affective music within cinema to calm the audience and demonstrate the power and effect music can have. In our modern age, the notion of the refrain is understood to be in a direct relation with molecularised forces, and Pisters works to contextualise and demonstrate this idea. Music is discussed in terms of molecularising sound matter, and becomes capable of harnessing nonsonorous forces such as Duration and Intensity. Using *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) to demonstrate how a territorial conception of sound might work, Pisters once again engages complex Deleuzian concepts with popular cinema. Here, sound is shown to gain prominence and independence over the image and indicates a new paradigm for cinema: the film adequately demonstrating that 'what is in a man's mind influences what he sees and even more what he hears' (193). Pisters also examines examples of cinema where sound is similarly elevated or related to different forms of becoming, including becoming-music, becoming-molecular, and eventually becoming-imperceptible. Observing and analysing these various lines of flight leads Pisters to conclude becoming-music is one of the most molecularising ways of deterritorialising, but simultaneously an avenue for creating "transcendental' mobile selves and collective identities' (215).

This highly recommended book engages with complex Deleuzian theories and applies them to various examples of popular and art cinema. Its

main strengths undoubtedly lie in the clear and concise manner in which the book compares and contrasts classical psychological approaches with the radically divergent Deleuzian paradigm, whilst striving to clarify and concretise these philosophical and theoretical notions within familiar examples of cinema. Although this form of exercise can also be found in the work of other writers such as Powell, the clarity and depth of Pisters' work serves to set it apart. Through reading single cinematic texts through both models and returning to them throughout the entire book, Pisters manages to illustrate the possible beneficial uses and applications of these divergent approaches, and clearly illustrates for the reader what can be seen, felt, and understood when using these respective approaches. Further - by relating Deleuzian concepts to modern and popular forms of cinema including film's like *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999) and *The Big Blue* (Luc Besson, 1988) - Pisters manages to anticipate the (need for) future monographs by scholars such as Martin-Jones and Frampton who help bring Deleuze to new generations of film scholars. Even though this book cannot offer as in-depth and thorough a Deleuzian investigation into horror cinema, nor as comprehensive an examination into third cinema as Powell and Marks are able to achieve in their respective book-length monographs, Pisters does manage to offer an invaluable springboard into these key areas of interest and arms the reader with an indispensable knowledge of key terms and concepts required for these further forays.

Finally, other appealing aspects of the book lie in its well supplemented 'Toolbox' of Deleuzian terms and image types, a glossary to *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*, detailed chapter notes, in-depth filmography, extensive bibliography and guide to secondary sources and further readings related to this ever-growing field of interest. The book will interest those already familiar with Deleuzian concepts and interested in new ways of applying his work to contemporary film, whilst also being of great use to readers yet to be introduced to this 'beautiful stranger' (Kennedy 2000, 1).

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