FILM-PHILOSOPHY CONFERENCE
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Towards the end of *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, it seems somewhat surprising that George Lakoff and Mark Johnson should, after several hundred pages of cognitive science and its potential effects on linguistics and analytic philosophy, invoke the work of Michel Foucault with regard to their project. And yet, Foucault it is whose name appears in their argument. The Frenchman has, they say, been their forerunner in arguing throughout his works that

> we are greatly constrained in the way we can think. The cognitive unconscious is a principal locus of power in the Foucaultian sense, power over how we can think and how we can conceive of the world. Our unconscious conceptual systems, which structure the cognitive unconscious, can limit how we can think and guarantee that we could not possibly have the kind of autonomy that Kant ascribed to us.[1]

Now, although Lakoff and Johnson's work perhaps sits uneasily within many philosophers' definitions of what philosophy is, or, perhaps better, what philosophy is supposed to do, their work at the very least points to an attempt to find common ground between philosophy and cognitive science.

What is interesting, though, is that in doing this Lakoff and Johnson come briefly to validate "continental" philosophy, as embodied here in the work of Michel

Foucault. That is, rather than simply finding common ground for cognitive science and philosophy in its "analytic" mode, they also find common ground for these two *and* analytic philosophy's "other," the "continental" work of Foucault et al. — a "philosophy" that some philosophers prefer to term "theory" so as to avoid confusion between the supposedly rigorous, analytic work that they do and the ostensibly more speculative work of Foucault and his ilk.

At the risk of over-generalising, a reason for continental philosophy to seem speculative is because it accepts — by virtue of too much exposure to psychoanalysis? — the importance of the unconscious in human behaviour and, indeed, in human understanding. Since the unconscious is, well, unconscious, you have to speculate about it since it is invisible and/or inaccessible. Conversely, analytic philosophy, in insisting that there should be no speculation but instead the application of rigorous analytical methods, by and large is forced to, or simply does, exclude the unconscious from thought, which in turn leads to a system that excludes the body in favour of an autonomous mind of the kind ascribed above by Lakoff and Johnson to Kantian philosophy.

Lakoff and Johnson's self-imposed task, then, has been to show that one cannot do without the unconscious at any level of human behaviour, including what we take to be our highest abilities, including rational conscious analysis. Even Kant's philosophy is unwittingly built upon the kind of spatial and temporal metaphors that humans derive from their physical/embodied existence in the world. Every which way we look at it, Lakoff and Johnson seem to say, we cannot escape the fact that we have bodies and without them there is no rational consciousness. Language? Embodied. Logic? Embodied. Philosophy? Embodied!

The reason for this foray into the work of Lakoff and Johnson is because a common discussion at the fourth annual Film-Philosophy Conference seemed to be the perennial question of whether film can "do" philosophy. And in considering the

various views put forward in answer to this question, it seems apparent that the answer depends on what you believe philosophy is, or what it is supposed to do.

Now, let us make no bones about it. The Film-Philosophy Conference of 2011 seemed predominantly to be an enclave for film scholars whose "philosophical" bent is continental to say the least, and "analytics" like Gregory Currie, who gave an important keynote address, seemed somewhat outnumbered. As such, one might presuppose (almost certainly unfairly) that the majority of attendees would argue for film's ability to "do" philosophy: after Deleuze and others, film offers up to us new concepts that encourage us to think (for ourselves), and original thought, together with the creation of concepts, is a/the fundament of philosophy.

However, others might continue to see philosophy as a purely rational exercise in proving the correctness of certain axioms, a view seemingly shared at this conference by Veronika Reichl[2] and Igal Bursztyn,[3] among others. As such, philosophy relies upon language and while film might feature human figures that speak in language, film itself is not a language. Currie himself has argued that cinema is not and cannot be a language, predominantly because it cannot *mean* in the same way that language means: film is always ambiguous or reliant upon the context of a particular image (that context being the other images that precede and follow it, as well as the techniques used to link those images together, such as fades, dissolves, and cuts) in order for a meaning to emerge. A word, meanwhile, has an *acontextual* meaning.[4] Table means table regardless of the words that surround it, while the "meaning" of a close-up only really comes into being when we understand why it is there through the other images that surround it.

My argument here is not that either conception of philosophy is right or wrong, but a basis for the difference between the two seems to be that the former accepts the role of the unconscious in thought while the latter does not. That is, if for the "continentalist" philosophy is original thought and the creation of new concepts,

then consciousness must always in this model be brushing up against its dark other, the unconscious, in order for novelty to emerge into consciousness at all. Meanwhile, the latter may well accept that there is an unconscious part of the mind, but it is entirely inaccessible, indeed inadmissible in thought, which remains the realm of the conscious mind alone.

What work by Lakoff and Johnson and other pioneers of the cognitive trend seems to suggest, though, is that the boundary between conscious and unconscious thought is necessarily blurred, not least because so many of our conscious thoughts are based unthinkingly upon the way in which we orient ourselves bodily and experientially in the world.

It may be here that we are not just dealing with different definitions of philosophy but, more particularly, with different definitions of the unconscious. Again without wishing to overgeneralise, the "analytic" philosopher sees the unconscious as never-to-be-made conscious, and for beneficial reasons, since if ever we did, for example, have consciously to control our heartbeat and body temperature, then we would probably perish rather rapidly because our body is simply better at doing that kind of stuff than our mind is. Meanwhile, the "continental" philosopher might term unconscious simply that which is "unthinking" in our behaviour (for example, an uncritical enjoyment of action films) — and that to make us think critically about such things is "a good thing."

Given the prominent role that the brain plays in homeostasis, however, it might yet prove hard to separate the unconscious from the unthinking in as clear-cut a manner as all that; the body does not "look after itself" without input from the brain, and the mind is not separate from the body. If we cannot tell where one ends and the other begins, perhaps this is because they are on a(n indivisible?) continuum.

If the boundary between mind and body has been (definitively?) blurred by the cognitive turn, then, so too has the boundary between mind, body and world, because our bodies are distinctly *in* (or with) the world. In other words, the continuum does not end at the body, but instead we have a world-body-mind continuum the beginning and ending of which it is similarly hard for us to recognise/assign.

It is perhaps for this reason, then, that many papers at the 2011 Film-Philosophy Conference took in phenomenological approaches to cinema as part of their outlook. For, if the world forms part of a continuum with body and mind, then cinema, being in the world, forms not just part of that continuum, but cinema, bearing such a close resemblance to that world, may in fact form an important part of that continuum. That is, what unthinkingly we see in the world may be viewed unthinkingly because films show but do not encourage us analytically to contemplate such things, and what we rethink, or analyse in the world may be as a result of film's ability to show that which unthinkingly we normally observe in a manner that brings us to thought.

In the opening keynote address, for example, Lucy Bolton[5] provided an engaging phenomenology of women's laughter, which took in many examples from a wide variety of films, exploring how laughter can function as an indicator of various characteristics (a giggle can signify immaturity, a cackle can signify a threat, etc.). The talk focused in particular on the ability for laughter to forge communities, as per Marleen Gorris' film, *De Stilte rond Christine M. (A Question of Silence*, 1982), in which a group of previously unconnected women spontaneously group together to murder the male owner of a women's fashion boutique. Charged with murder, the women, together with a female psychiatrist who pronounces the women sane, and various other women present in court as witnesses to the trial, begin to laugh when a male prosecutor suggests that the crime had nothing to do with the sex of the

perpetrators, nor the sex of the victim, nor the victim's job. All of the women laugh hysterically before being dismissed from court. In Bolton's eyes, this is evidence of laughter signifying that which language cannot express, an expression of thoughts and feelings that defy the male-dominated dialogue of the Law — which can then feed back into the audience watching the film. Here, then, is a "rationalization" of an irrational phenomenon, the bringing into conscious thought of an aspect of cinema perhaps too often viewed unthinkingly. And in a world in which gendered male rationality holds power, laughter is, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri suggest, a vital means of joyful resistance.[6]

The phenomenological approach then extended into other papers, not least through discussions of Martin Heidegger. In an instructive panel on film-phenomenology, Kate Ince[7] looked at feminist phenomenology in the films of Agnès Varda, arguing that Varda's emphasis on embodiment suggests an "enworldedness" that might, similar to Bolton's take on female laughter, have feminist political potential. Meanwhile, Heidegger featured prominently in presentations by Farhad Sulliman Khoyratty[8] and Suzie Mei Gorodi.[9]

The former of these involved a fascinating overview of cinema in Mauritius, which then posited the Mauritian Muslim context as grounds for viewing the "fallen" (and Muslim) courtesan films of Bollywood cinema "against the grain," as it were. That is, the Mauritian context of viewing Bollywood films featuring "fallen" Muslim courtesans, such as Amiran (Rekha) in Muzaffar Ali's *Umrao Jaan* (1981), brings about a sense of the courtesan as "present-at-hand," wherein the "typical" meaning (or her being "ready-to-hand") is subverted and she is considered for what she is, and can be conceptualised anew rather than read through pre-existing paradigms.

Gorodi, meanwhile, looked at Gary Hill's video *Blind Spot* (2003), in which a man secretly caught on camera leaving his house comes to realise that he is being

filmed and so offers to the camera "the bird" (or what legal scholar Ira P. Robbins refers to as *digitus impudicus*[10]). Starting out as a strobing flicker film, in that every frame of action is matched by a darkened frame, the film quickly slows such that each frame becomes increasingly drawn out, and for each duration of a frame's stillness, an equal duration of blackness is added. In a manner akin to Khoyratty's paper, Gorodi argued that this confrontation with stillness and darkness (in which we become uncertain as to whether each new onset of darkness signals the end of the film or not), makes us "see," or "reveals," the encounter with the film. That is, we do not just watch *Blind Spot* as we do a narrative film — a guy comes out of a doorway, spots that he is being filmed and offers his middle finger in anger. Instead we have an (embodied) encounter with the film that demands thought.

Finally, it was the phenomenological tradition that informed the approach to genre offered by Havi Carel and Greg Tuck in their plenary discussion.[11] In their consideration of genre and style, Carel and Tuck took the concept of *Stiftung*, or institution, as elaborated in the works of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to argue that "genres are not simply different narrative modes, but self-reflexive manifestations of the inherent creative potential of instituted forms." That is, genre is dynamic in that films always are arising that expand or modify a genre's tenets, even if a genre has at its core several key and constant-seeming features, as per *Stiftung*.

The ramifications of the embodied mind can also be seen in the turn towards animals as a subject of research. If human minds are embodied and human bodies are enworlded, then what precisely is the difference between humans and animals? The plenary panel presented by André Dias,[12] Catherine Wheatley[13] and John Mullarkey[14] all looked at animals and/in film in their own way: Dias considered Frederick Wiseman's *Primate* (1974) as an example of a film in which the images, featuring human experimentation on a gibbon, are more powerful/philosophical

than any verbal consideration of the images can be; Wheatley looked at the way in which "animal thinking" has long been considered a part of theological considerations, which in turn are beginning to find their way into continental philosophy; and Mullarkey looked at the work of animal scientist Temple Grandin to argue that humans have complex responses to phenomena that are not just Pavlovian/physical, nor uniquely intellectual, but somewhere between or combining both of these: affective thoughts, which are "all the more potent because they are imagistic." In other words, all three papers in the panel in their own way sought to suggest that not only might we have more in common with animals than we think, but that images can also induce modes of thought that combine both the "animal" and the "higher" functions of human thought.

This logic of questioning the boundary between human and non-human and between human and world also informed the illuminating talk given by Felicity Colman on Henri Bergson and cinema.[15] Taking as her point of initiation a startling sequence featuring penguins irrationally walking not to water but across the Antarctic and to their doom in Werner Herzog's *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007), Colman offered up an intriguing account of the role of Bergson in Gilles Deleuze's writings on cinema, before looking at how the evolution of cinema has "altered the terms of perceptual reality."

Incidentally, we might say that a similar logic of animals and enworldedness seemed to inform Richard Ashrowan's talk on alchemical transformation and the filmic process,[16] as well as his film/moving image installation, *Alchemist* (2010), which also played as part of the conference. In that film, we see performance artists and latter day shaman "becoming" with the landscape that surrounds them in the film, as untranslated Latin texts regarding alchemy are read — but not explained. Rather than a "rational"/linguistic relation, then, the film seemed to want to connect with viewers on a more physical level — involving the sort of "haptic"

imagery that Kathleen Scott also explored in relation to Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) during the conference.[17]

Perhaps it was also a sense of being in the world that informed David Martin-Jones' final plenary session on Deleuze's cinema books and how their applicability to contemporary filmmaking depends upon our ability to study and to analyse films in the context of their production and distribution histories, as well as in terms of our understanding the stories that they tell. Recapping and expanding upon work from his illuminating *Deleuze and World Cinemas*,[18] Martin-Jones looked at Nelson Pereira dos Santos' *Como era gostoso o meu francês* (*How Tasty was my Little Frenchman*, 1971), a film that tells the story of a Frenchman taken captive by the Tupinambá tribe in Brazil in 1594 and "raised" to be eaten in a cannibal ceremony.[19] Martin-Jones argued that a reading of the film must take into account Latin American discourses (and not just continental philosophy), as well as global developments that have helped to make clear the Eurocentric nature of Deleuze's approach to cinema.

Sadly, to make explicit reference to the above is to overlook other presentations on a wide variety of topics by established and up-and-coming scholars, the pick of which might include Sarah Forgacs' discussion of Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999) and its relationship to the body,[20] David H. Fleming's expansive consideration of the cyberstar,[21] Carly Lane's discussion of risk in Andrea Arnold's *Red Road* (2006),[22] and talks on Deleuze and cinema by Matthew Holtmeier (on Deleuze and hodology[23]), by Richard Rushton (on Deleuze and politics[24]), and by Dennis Rothermel (Deleuze and cinematic thinking[25]). This, in turn, is to overlook many of the talks that I could not attend — a hazard of any contemporary conference of notable size and in which panels run in parallel.

However, in relation to summarising the conference itself, I would like to end by mentioning Gregory Currie's challenging keynote on film images and

representation.[26] Currie argued convincingly that images are not objective, but that what film depicts is objective (which is not to say real). Point of view shots are perhaps an anomaly, but Currie foreclosed this contention by saying that these are objective renderings of how a character sees the objective world. In other words, according to Currie, point of view is not "on the screen" but rather "in the mind of the viewer." To support Currie's case, cognitive research suggests that 'untrained' spectators seem to have trouble "understanding" point of view shots more than they do understanding, say, shot-reverse shot sequences.[27] If this is the case, the shot itself does not have "point of view-ness," and is not therefore subjective, but whatever subjectivity the shot supposedly portrays is the "invention" of the spectator.

However, Currie's argument seemed to have trouble dealing with emotions when the issue was raised by Sarah Dillon. That is to say, if I see a shot of a sad person, I see an objective shot of a sad person, but it is not just in me, the viewer, that this sadness resides. The sadness is also the subjective state of the person I am seeing. In other words, cinema might be able to convey to us not just objective, but also subjective states.

This is no true criticism of Currie, who makes a compelling case, who should be lauded for pursuing the issue (not least in the face of a "continental"-friendly crowd), and who might, for example, find some support from research into mirror neurons.[28] The mirror neuron system, which is the capacity for neurons in the brain of an observing human to fire that are the same as those of the observed conspecifics carrying out certain similar tasks and/or conveying similar emotions, might suggest that the emotion is not, or at least not simply, a subjective state.

I shall be interested to see if/what Currie does publish with regard to this debate, not least because this will allow me better to understand what he meant, in contrast to my imperfect understanding of his case in the arena of live discussion. But as it stands it seems to me that at least one thing is missing from his argument,

whichever way we look at it. If a shot in cinema can convey a subjective state, and if the understanding of subjective states is therefore not uniquely in the mind of the spectator, then the spectator is always only in relation to the image — which in turn means that the spectator is enworlded. And if mirror neurons in part did explain our ability to feel emotions based upon not subjective but purely objective phenomena (the appearance of the other human in the image that we are observing), then the functioning of mirror neurons still suggests a relationship with the image, as well as with the human in the image, a form of intersubjectivity that similarly extends into a sense of enworldedness (and embodiment if we accept that mirror neurons fire unconsciously and yet affect our conscious interpretation of/response to the image of the sad person).

If, as per Lakoff and Johnson's reading of Foucault, we are "greatly constrained in the way that we think," not least by our bodies, then stretching our minds is no meagre pastime — and Currie certainly encouraged us to do this. However, if our bodies constrain our thoughts, then perhaps it is also by putting our bodies to the test and finding out what they can do, not least what they can do in relation to/with the world and the technologies, including cinema, that surround us, that we can reach original thought. A mind-body parallelism would suggest that to stretch the body is to stretch the mind. Perhaps in bringing the "analytic" and the "continental" into debate, the fourth Film-Philosophy Conference, brilliantly organised by David Sorfa of Liverpool John Moores University and his team, will have helped us move towards a more holistic understanding of both film and philosophy.

NOTES

1. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 537.

2. Veronika Reichl, "Theoretical Thinking through Animated Film" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 6 July 2011).

3. Igal Bursztyn, "Applying Philosophy to Cinema: Spinoza and Maimonides" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 6 July 2011).

4. See Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

5. Lucy Bolton, "Giggling Girls and Cackling Crones: A Phenomenology of Women's Laughter" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 6 July 2011).

6. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Common Wealth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009) 382-383.

7. Kate Ince, "Feminist Phenomenology and the Film-World of Agnès Varda" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 8 July 2011).

8. Farhad Sulliman Khoyratty, "The "Fallen" Bollywood Courtesan: Temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) in the Being-in-the-World of the Mauritian Muslim" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 8 July 2011).

9. Suzie Mei Gorodi, "Questions Concerning Film Encounter" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 8 July 2011).

10. Ira P. Robbins, "*Digitus Impudicus*: The Middle Finger and the Law," *UC Davis Law Review*, 41 (2004):1403-1485.

11. Havi Carel and Greg Tuck, "Genre, Style and *Stiftung*: Letting the Right Ones In" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 6 July 2011).

12. André Dias, "Autopsy "in Vivo": Biopolitical Features Regarding Wiseman's *Primate*" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 7 July 2011).

13. Catherine Wheatley, ""A righteous man regards the life of his beast": Film, Faith and Fauna in Philip Groning's *Into Great Silence* (2005)" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 7 July 2011).

14. John Mullarkey, "Cinema: The Animals that Therefore We Are (On Temple Grandin's *Thinking in Pictures*)" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 7 July 2011).

15. Felicity Colman, "Notes on Cinematographic Evolution" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 7 July 2011).

16. Richard Ashrowan, "Coniunctio, Separatio, Putrefacto: Alchemical Transformation and the Filmic Process" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 6 July 2011).

17. Kathleen Scott, ""Freud is dead, isn't he?": A Haptic Reading of *Antichrist*" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 7 July 2011).

18. David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze and World Cinemas* (London: Continuum, 2011).

19. David Martin-Jones, "How Tasty are Deleuze's *Cinema* Books?" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 8 July 2011).

20. Sarah Forgacs, "Rewriting the Body, Reclaiming the Feminine: Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999)" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 7 July 2011).

21. David H. Fleming, "The "Method" Meets Animation: On Carbon Actors, Digital Performance and Transforming Identities in *Black Swan* (2010)" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 7 July 2011).

22. Carly Lane, "Thriving by Casualties: Risk and Redemption in *Red Road*" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 8 July 2011).

23. Matthew Holtmeier, "The Modern Political Cinema: Pre-Hodological Space as a Cinematic Ethics" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 8 July 2011).

24. Richard Rushton, "Deleuze and Cinema, Deleuze and Politics" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 8 July 2011).

25. Dennis Rothermel, "How Deleuze Thinks About Cinema" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 7 July 2011).

26. Gregory Currie, "What Do Film Images Represent?" (paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Film-Philosophy Conference, Liverpool, UK, 7 July 2011).

27. See Stephan Schwan and Sermin Ildirar, "Watching film for the first time: How adult viewers interpret perceptual discontinuities in film," *Psychological Science* 21-7 (2010): 970-976.

28. See, e.g., Vittorio Gallese, "The 'Shared Manifold' Hypothesis: From Mirror Neurons to Empathy," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8:5-7 (2000): 33-50.