

CONFERENCE ROUND-UP SUMMER 2012:

POWERS OF THE FALSE (INSTITUT FRANÇAIS, LONDON, 18-19 MAY),
 SCSMI CONFERENCE (SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE/NYU, NEW YORK, 13-
 16 JUN.), *FILM-GAME-EMOTION-BRAIN* (UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM, 14-
 21 JUL.), AND FILM-PHILOSOPHY CONFERENCE (QUEEN MARY –
 UNIVERSITY OF LONDON/KING’S COLLEGE LONDON/KINGSTON
 UNIVERSITY, 12-14 SEPT.)

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My previous conference reports for *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image* have both offered up reasons for why cognitive scientists, analytic philosophers and film theorists/philosophers influenced by continental thought should take each other more seriously.¹ Or rather, if the rifts between these strands of thought have in fact been very serious for those affirming and perhaps even creating them, then it is perhaps about time to start bringing these strands of thought together, to see how the rifts are also bridges.

The four conferences (or more accurately, the two conferences, one symposium and one summer school) that I attended in the summer of 2012 would seem to affirm that this *rapprochement* is slowly beginning to happen — and it is tracing the strands of this process across these four events that is my intention with this round-up. Naturally, to do this will by definition exclude summaries of many excellent papers that were delivered and discussions that were had at all four events, at which I similarly missed (owing to the nature of parallel panel sessions) many excellent contributions and interventions. As such, I can and perhaps must simply admit that this round-up is a *partial* review of the four events in question – and that my tracing a thread of (the need for) connection between the various, still disparate,

approaches to film studies is a reflection of my own outlook and biases, rather than an impartial consideration of the state of play in contemporary film studies.

Indeed, I am deliberately ploughing a minor furrow here, by which I mean that I am picking up on and gathering together shreds of evidence for this (perceived need for) rapprochement between approaches, and all for the sake not of reflecting the current climate in film studies, but for the sake of indicating the direction in which film studies might — and the direction in which I think it should — go. Fortunately, I am not alone in this endeavour, in that the Film-Game-Emotion-Brain summer school in Amsterdam was designed precisely to bring together film scholars, neuroscientists, psychologists, computer scientists, filmmakers, gaming scholars and more, in the hope of building bridges towards potential research projects.

What is more I have recently read works by scholars that try to bring together the various strands of film studies that we might characterise as being film theory / film-philosophy (typically a “continental” approach to film, especially a Deleuzian one) and cognitive film theory (which shares ground with a more “analytic” or empirical approach to film and the philosophy of film). To name but three, these include monographs by John Mullarkey,² Robert Sinnerbrink³ and Patricia Pisters⁴ — all of whom took part in one of the events considered here.

With some substantial organisational and published support behind me, then, I must hold my hands up and say that I present my biased / partial review of these four events for political reasons, as well as for what I hope are more rigorously intellectual reasons. Indeed, perhaps the very point that I wish to make is that rigorously intellectual work cannot ignore politics — and that it is the injection of politics into otherwise rigorous intellectual work, and the injection of rigour into political discussion that I wish to push for here.

What do I mean by this distinction between politics and intellectual rigour? Perhaps a useful way to explain this distinction would be to look at the discussion

that took place following my own paper at the SCSMI Conference. In my paper, I had proposed how the appearance of women in Hollywood cinema by and large conforms to the norms of beauty determined by numerous psychological studies into what constitutes a beautiful female: near-symmetrical and youthful faces, preferably with blond hair and big breasts.⁵ I then argued that many of these studies are skewed to favour young, white and heterosexual males, and that they attempt to offer as empirical and timeless a conception of female beauty that in fact is historically contingent and constructed. While Torben Grodal responded by saying that men are hard-wired to find women with these traits attractive, Cynthia Freeland, Karen Pearlman, Sheena Rogers and Rikke Schubart, among others, responded with vigour, seemingly in favour of the need to understand female beauty not as being timeless, but as being indeed constructed. In other words, if when we consider beauty and sex we quickly find that psychological studies carry flaws, in that they unthinkingly represent the dominant, patriarchal outlook on society, and that cinema not only reflects this dominant, patriarchal outlook but arguably also feeds back into it by reinforcing it (of course young straight males will find buxom, young blondes attractive, because those are the traits that have been upheld as attractive in countless films, TV shows and magazines since their birth), then the intellectually rigorous work of psychologists needs more consciously to bear political issues in mind if it does not want simply to reinforce the dominant, patriarchal position. As Freeland, Pearlman, Rogers and Schubart themselves remarked, this might also apply to a society like SCSMI (the Study for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image), since rarely do female academics at this (otherwise male-dominated) conference gather, let alone discuss matters of sex and gender. In short, if much of the opposition over the last two or more decades to pioneering political (feminist) critiques of cinema by the likes of Laura Mulvey⁶ has been as a result of the perceived lack of intellectual (empirical) rigour in their methodological

framework (psychoanalysis is not empirical), then there is also room to recall that the political infuses, and must be recognised and critiqued in, studies that otherwise take themselves to be intellectually rigorous.

The key issue to bring into this conference round-up, then, is how one accounts for *difference*. Psychological studies are undoubtedly of great value to society, and psychological/cognitive studies of cinema certainly help us enormously in understanding what happens in our brains and to our bodies when we watch movies. Nonetheless, psychological studies in general and cognitive film studies more locally run the risk of naturalising mean responses to the world and to film. But this comes at the expense of difference. Anomalous responses are on the whole ignored, even though it is anomalous figures like Phineas Gage who perhaps have taught us most about our brains. Furthermore, what one defines as statistically relevant is itself a political issue, since to study only the mean risks rendering abnormal those who do not fit the mean. Daniel Barratt's paper at SCSMI perhaps makes this most clear. Barratt argued that there is emerging in studies strong evidence for the role that cultural difference plays in cognition — that Asian peoples might perceive the same things as Europeans and North Americans, but that there is an emphasis among Asian perceivers on the relations between things in addition to/instead of an emphasis on those things themselves, as per European and North American perceivers.⁷ Given the fact that Asians, Europeans and North Americans have the same genetic make-up, this difference is not one of biology, but one of culture. In other words, difference here is not simply a matter of race, but a matter of politics; or rather, race and difference are political issues — but politics here is not simply a question of cultural differences entirely separated from the body; instead, politics feeds back into and affects the body in such a way that biology and culture are intimately bound together. It is not a rift between culture and biology that is required for a fuller understanding of the

human, and of the human in and in relation to cinema, but a bridge between culture and biology.

If there are differences between humans according to race and culture, and if these differences affect our bodies, perhaps even our biologies, as biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling has suggested in the context of bone development,⁸ and if humans have a common ancestor such that they became different rather than always having been different, then difference is something that is produced. Indeed, the production of difference is perhaps the founding principle of evolution itself, for even if humans suffer the illusion that evolution is anything other than a slow, slow process, and even if there can be very rapid changes in certain sets of conditions, evolution is nonetheless ongoing and constant; it does not stop. By this rationale, it perhaps comes as no surprise that there is an increasing interest among film scholars in artistic creation and creativity more generally — since art might from the perspective of evolution as difference be understood as the culturally normalised and consciously institutionalised creation of difference itself (art not as evolutionarily useful, but art as a means of making evolution sensible). That is, artistic creation is perhaps the meeting ground itself for intellectual rigour and politics, in that empirical studies cannot alone account for art since it ignores the spiritual dimension therein, but nor simply can politics account for art, since this is to disregard the precision and repeatability of certain techniques and the use of mechanical technology that is foremost visible in film production.

To this end, it does not seem surprising that Damian Sutton came up with a tentative philosophy of production during his keynote at Film-Philosophy,⁹ while there was a significant presence of artists, particularly artist-filmmakers, at *Powers of the False*, Film-Philosophy and SCSMI. Steven Eastwood, Charlotte Ginsborg, William Greaves, Anna Lucas, Carol Morley, Ben Rivers, and Philip Wardell all presented work at the former, with Ken McMullen and Ken Jacobs offering keynote

addresses at Film-Philosophy and SCSMI respectively.¹⁰ And while a filmmaker like Wardell might have expressed some hesitation in talking about his methods and processes of creation, all three conferences, particularly *Powers of the False*, seemed on the whole to welcome the opportunity for scholars and artists to meet and to discuss the act of creation, which I am characterising here as the creation of difference.

Furthermore, philosopher Alva Noë provided a keynote at SCSMI on precisely this topic. Noë asked how neuroscience can account for art, and the basic principle of his argument seemed to be as follows: art, from the perspective of the audience member (if we are talking about film), is about working out what a brain can do. Noë received a lukewarm reception from the SCSMI crowd, but I think that he is arguably correct — and I should like to explain why. Noë's suggestion is that a work of art makes us think (or feel) something that we have never felt before. If art is a journey into the new — if it is the creation of difference, in that everything new must by definition be different from what preceded it, since otherwise it would not be new at all — then on the neurological level, art induces new connections between neurons in the brain. In effect, art is a bit like learning. For if, after Donald Hebb, we accept that what fires together wires together in the brain, and if we accept that there is a neurological basis for thought, as Gerald M. Edelman and Giulio Tononi have argued,¹¹ then new thoughts, which are the basis of learning, are linked with new neural connections. Art, then, involves for the audience member new thoughts and sensations, it is a learning experience, it is perhaps the experience of learning what our brains — and by extension our bodies — can do.

Part of the lukewarm reception to Noë's proposal might be found in the fact that cognitive film studies is about how we understand films based upon conventions and the recognition of that with which we are already familiar. In other words, novelty and learning are not concepts that are commonplace in cognitive

film theory. That said, Noë was speaking specifically of art — and so it may be that films that we understand and enjoy because familiar are no less pleasurable, but that they do not constitute, according to Noë’s definition, art. I am not concerned here with whether Noë’s definition of art is right or wrong; but when crossed with film and film studies, this definition of art brings to the fore key issues regarding not what film can potentially do as an aesthetic form, but what it does as a cultural force. For, if young men find buxom blondes attractive as a result in part of exposure to them as paragons of attraction in films, then not only might cinema itself become standardised via lines of production as a result of a risk-averse industry that wants neither to try nor to induce anything new, but instead to recycle only the tried and tested, then so, too, might the range of thoughts and feelings that human audience members have in response to cinema become limited, controlled, and antithetical to art as Noë understands it. It is not that cinema is or even can be homogeneous; but if only a certain type of film — put bluntly, mainstream narrative cinema — is allowed to prosper, not least because psychological studies of cinema suggest that it is the “most pleasurable” (by which they mean the most effective at maintaining our attention — and perhaps also at shortening our attention, and thus our patience, both in response to alternative modes of cinema and in response to the non-cinematic world in general), then the world will be poorer for the loss of difference. Indeed, the loss, or at the very least the delimiting, of difference would run antithetical to evolution, and therefore to nature itself. Perhaps, then, it is worth taking seriously Noë’s definition of art — that difference is at its core — rather than to dismiss it out of hand, for this might be an issue of political, and thus biological, urgency.

Although most SCSMI members would not read his work, Noë’s approach here would also chime with Film-Philosophy keynote Bernard Stiegler’s take on the role that cinema has in the world as a means of outsourcing, but also of homogenising,

memory; for Stiegler, who sees himself as conducting critique in the mould of the Frankfurt School and its successors, the critique of cinema is truly a matter of political urgency.¹²

The *rapprochement* between artists and academics might be seen in the proliferation of the essay-film, as well as studies into it, since the combination of forms, film and essay, demonstrates that what either form can do has not been exhausted, nor has the potential of the essay-film to show us what our brains can do. The essay-film, specifically the Spanish/Spanish-transnational essay-film, received coverage in particular at Film-Philosophy from Belén Vidal¹³ and Steven Marsh.¹⁴ Furthermore, the essay-film, in challenging what both film and the essay can do, allows us to bring forward more forcefully the thrust of the *Powers of the False* symposium as a whole. For if difference is the bedrock of art as it is of existence, and if difference is created, as opposed to existing *a priori*, then art and existence are both journeys into the new, into that which does not yet exist. That which does not yet exist, by virtue of its non-existence, cannot be said to be true; instead, it is false. And so while we understand truth as pertaining to the existent, and therefore to repetition and habit, truth in this sense fails to capture the power of the false, of that which lies at the heart of any truth that comes into being. Perhaps it is natural that the documentary, under the umbrella of which the essay-film typically lies, should be the main object of analysis, then, for this symposium. For, the documentary's claims to truth have for a long time been challenged not just by theorists of the documentary as a form, but by documentary makers themselves — as the analysis of various films that blur the boundary between documentary and fiction would attest.¹⁵ Even documentary, then, would seemingly attest a world of difference, a world in which difference is the key to life.

If I have been arguing that difference is the key to life and to cinema, in that different films can help us to have different, new thoughts, and that repetition

delimits thought in that it leads to the homogenisation of films, with the homogenisation of films itself leading to homogenous responses to films, which in turn potentially delimits thought (or certainly does not help to realise cinema's potential to induce new thought), then a second central issue at play here is time. From the scientific perspective, time is based upon repetition, in particular the repeated oscillations of a quartz crystal that we use to measure chronometric time. However, an understanding of time as being based upon repetition runs counter to the conception of difference as being uniquely new (i.e., it is not a repetition of anything) and of newness/novelty being the fundamental experience of the world and of art/cinema within that world. In other words, if chronometry runs counter to the creation of difference, it in some ways runs counter to the experience of time itself. We have two different conceptions of time that are at loggerheads with each other. It is possible that cognitive film studies will only be able to make further progress when it accounts not just for the fact that time is based not upon repetition but upon difference, but also for the fact that there are surely different times, or different experiences of time, co-existing in the world. In other words, if we must accept difference in the realm of subjectivities and bodies, we must also accept it in the realm of temporality. I am sure that new, enormous breakthroughs in thought and understanding will follow the politicisation of rigorous time, as rigorous time has led to vast changes in the makeup of a world based upon difference.

Furthermore, if I am aligning homogenisation of time via chronometry with the homogenisation of art via cinema and its imperative to arouse ever greater levels of attention and thus to delimit our opportunity and perhaps also our capacity for thought, then an ethical dimension enters here into the debate. Not only was this ethical dimension manifested in these conferences/events in the form of papers that considered the overlooked of society,¹⁶ but also via films, such as Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011).¹⁷ However, I shall stick to Noël Carroll's keynote at SCSMI to

draw out what I mean. In his consideration of William Wyler's *The Big Country* (1958), Carroll argued that films can offer to us moral lessons regarding how to act in the world and towards others. However, discussion following Carroll's talk suggested that morality belongs to the realm of repetition and homogenisation, while ethics belongs to the realm of difference. Films may moralise, and we may use films as examples for how to conduct ourselves in our daily lives; nonetheless, the ethical response is not to follow examples in terms of how to act, or to repeat, but to *choose* how to act, to lead a life of difference, perhaps to be different.¹⁸

Now, it is of course important to bear in mind that difference can be an illusion. Francesco Casetti's excellent keynote at Film-Philosophy reminded us that the very idea of film as philosophy in fact has been around for a lot longer than typically we give it credit, with philosophers of cinema emerging as early as the 1910s in Italy.¹⁹ In other words, in drawing the dichotomy between difference and repetition as I have done so far, I must not overlook the relationship (the bridge) as well as the difference (the rift) between these two terms, which themselves arguably feed back into each other in a mutually reaffirming way.

Nonetheless, I hope here to have elucidated the ways in which the as-yet-slow but slowly accelerating *rapprochement* of "continental" film theory and a more analytic/cognitive approach to film centres upon a deeper consideration of the issue of difference, in terms of politics, culture, biology, spectatorship, creativity, time and ethics. I hope to have shown the challenges that each — broadly speaking — poses to the other, as well as the opportunities that each has of enriching the other and, therefore, ultimately our understanding of cinema and perhaps the world in general.

All that remains, then, is to praise the organisers of the *Powers of the False* Symposium (Steven Eastwood, Catherine Wheatley), the SCSMI Conference 2012 (Richard Allen, Malcolm Turvey), *Film-Game-Emotion-Brain* (Maarten de Rijke,

Sennay Ghebreab, Ed S. Tan), and the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012 (Lucy Bolton, Sarah Cooper, John Mullarkey, Catherine Wheatley again). They have each organised stimulating events that bring academic research and discourse alive, allowing it to evolve through the presentation and the creation of new ideas in a forum of friendly if serious academic exchange.

NOTES

1. See William Brown, "Cognitive Deleuze: Conference Report on SCSMI Conference (Roanoke, Virginia, 2-5 June 2010) and Deleuze Studies Conference (Amsterdam, 12-14 July 2010)," *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image* 1 (2010): 134-42, <http://cjpml.ipl.pt/1-cognitive-deleuze>, and "Conference Report on Film-Philosophy Conference (Liverpool John Moores University, 6-8 July 2011)," *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image* 2 (2011): 218-29, <http://cjpml.ipl.pt/2-brown>.
2. John Mullarkey, *Philosophy and the Moving Image: Refractions of Reality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
3. Robert Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images* (London: Continuum, 2011).
4. Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
5. Brown, "The Face of Hollywood: Beauty, Goodness and Social Feedback," paper delivered at the SCSMI Conference 2012, Sarah Lawrence College, 15 Jun. 2012.
6. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16:3 (1975): 6-18.
7. Daniel Barratt, "The Geography of Film Viewing: What Are the Implications of Cultural-Cognitive Differences for Cognitive Film Theory?," paper presented at the SCSMI Conference 2012, Sarah Lawrence College, 15 Jun. 2012.
8. See Anne Fausto-Sterling, "Bare Bones of Sex: Part I," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30:2 (2005): 1491-528.
9. Damian Sutton, "The Diagrammatic and the "real that is yet to come": Is a Philosophy of Production Studies Possible?," paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, King's College London, 14 Sept. 2012.
10. See Ken McMullen, "Thoughts on the Making of *An Organisation of Dreams*," paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, Queen Mary – University of London, 12 Sept. 2012.
11. See Gerald M. Edelman and Giulio Tononi, *Consciousness: How Matter Becomes Imagination* (London: Penguin, 2001), 120-34.
12. Bernard Stiegler, "About an Organology of Dreams – after *An Organisation of Dreams*," paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, Queen Mary – University of London, 12 Sept. 2012.
13. Belén Vidal, "Asynchrony and the Cinephilic Quotation: Notes on the New Essay Film from Spain," paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, King's College London, 13 Sept. 2012.
14. Steven Marsh, "Turns and Returns, *Envois/Renvois*: The Postal Effect in Recent Spanish Filmmaking," paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, King's College London, 13 Sept. 2012.
15. See, *inter alia*, from the *Powers of the False* symposium, Institut français, London: Anna Backman Rogers, "The Creative Powers of the False: The Case of the Maysles Brothers' *Grey Gardens*," 18 May 2012; Brown, "A Rejection of the True/False Binarism, or There Is Only Performance," 18 May 2012; Trent Griffiths, "Who Told the First Lie?: Beyond Judgment in *Forbidden Lie\$*," 18 May 2012; Markos Hadjioannou, "Animating Reality: *Waltz with Bashir*," 18 May 2012; Matt Holtmeier, "Catfish and the Crystal-Documentary: Powers of the False and Fabulation in Series," 19 May 2012; and Joseph Watson, "*Paradise Lost* and the Ethics of Investigation: The Documented Case of the West Memphis Three," 19 May 2012. Evan Davis also made a similar argument without using the term "powers of the false" in "Disrupting the Real: A (Re)definition of Fake Documentary," paper delivered at the SCSMI Conference 2012, Sarah Lawrence College, 13 Jun. 2012.
16. See in particular Patricia Braz, "The Power of the False in Pedro Costa's *In Vanda's Room*," paper delivered at the *Powers of the False* Symposium, Institut français, London, 19 May 2012, and António M. da Silva, "Because They are Too Dirty!: Abjection and the Films of Contemporary Brazilian

and Portuguese Filmmakers Cláudio Assis and João Pedro Rodrigues,” paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, King’s College London, 13 Sept. 2012 — both of whom, coincidentally, approached ethics via the concept of abjection in relation to Portuguese cinema.

17. Richard Rushton, “A Cinema Against Ethics: *Melancholia*,” paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, King’s College London, 13 Sept. 2012.

18. For more along these lines, see Brown, “Good Art ≠ Moral Art,” *Society of Cognitive Studies for the Moving Image Forum*, 23 Jun. 2012, <http://scsmi-online.org/forum/good-art-≠-moral-art>.

19. Francesco Casetti, “Philosophical Issues in Early Film Theory,” paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, King’s College London, 13 Sept. 2012.