

ANTHONY McCOSKER

deleuze and the new camera consciousness

PATRICIA PISTERS

*The Matrix of Visual Culture: Working With
Deleuze in Film Theory*

Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, 2003

ISBN 0-8047-4028-3

RRP \$24.95 (pb)

Having recently seen the third film of *The Matrix* series, I have been wondering about the potential of film narratives to reveal the place of technology and images in our everyday life. But despite the thrilling potential for cybernetic power and aesthetic stylisation that a digital version of the world opens up, narratives that present the world as a simulacrum of itself in which we are all trapped, as *The Matrix* does, are bound to be disappointing on some level. In her book on Gilles Deleuze and film theory, Patricia Pisters plays on *The Matrix*'s frenetic portrayal of two worlds—real and virtual—in which characters struggle to overcome the prison of an imposed virtual matrix. This seems to provide an ideal starting point for a book about visual culture offering an insight into the role of images and visual technology in our everyday life. But Pisters laments the film's inability to measure up to a 'new camera consciousness' conceptualised by Deleuze in his *Cinema* books and in his work with Félix Guattari.

The distinction between real and virtual proposed in *The Matrix* remains a powerful image for film theory. However, for Pisters, working with Deleuze in film theory is about moving beyond the 'representational' thinking that maintains this distinction and imposes an essential distance between a spectator and a cinematic object. This challenge 'entails leaving behind the model of the eye, which traditionally has been the most important model for perceiving, conceiving, imagining, and judging representation and difference'. (7) In making this shift, Pisters's book can be situated as part

of a belated, but burgeoning, application of the ideas of Deleuze in film theory and visual culture outside of France. The book's strength is in its ability to establish a bridge between the philosophical concepts created by Deleuze and Guattari, and film theory, and in its ability to provide a vivid account of how to move beyond representation in the study of visual culture.

'Working with' Deleuze, for Pisters, is about bringing to film theory a philosophy of immanence. Immanence lies at the heart of Deleuze's broader philosophical project, but in the context of visual culture refers to the plane on which the dissolution of the distinction between the virtual and the actual takes place. While *The Matrix* and traditional film theory maintain this distinction as inherent to the workings of the apparatus (or matrix), Deleuze, following Bergson, equates images with the materiality of life. As Pisters puts it, 'images are there; they do not represent some other-worldliness but constantly shape the world and its subjects'. (3) The starting point for re-thinking visual culture, therefore, lies in the notion that images do not represent a world to a subject, but are inherent to life, actively shaping the world and its subjects.

A central aim of Pisters's book is to demonstrate the usefulness of Deleuze to film theory, as a challenge or alternative to traditional psychoanalytic approaches that are finding a revival in relation to the work of Slavoj Žižek. Pisters occasionally defers to the continuing relevance of the psychoanalytical model, but nonetheless puts Deleuze's ideas to work in a way that clearly challenges the very foundations upon

which the psychoanalytic model operates in film theory. Taking this step involves a level of risk. However, 'leaving the "safe" territory of representation therefore entails the adventure of multiplicities and new thoughts, affects and percepts'. (7) In taking leave of traditional film theory, Pisters works with Deleuze to produce a series of 'experiments' with a wide range of mostly European and American cinema, and extends her discussion into the realm of music video, sound and dance music. Each of the chapters moves through an array of films accessible to contemporary film audiences, in a way that sheds new light on the usefulness of Deleuze for understanding the matrix of visual culture that infuses ever more deeply into the fabric of daily life.

The first chapter provides an introduction to the 'new camera consciousness' that defines one of the book's central aims in re-examining the 'status of cinema and the cinematographic apparatus'. (15) To explore the Deleuzian notion of 'the universe as cinema in itself, a metacinema', (15) Pisters compares *Peeping Tom* and *Strange Days* as two 'metafilms' that attempt to imagine the cinematographic apparatus. Widely discussed as a film that recounts the phallogentric nature of classic Hollywood cinema, *Peeping Tom* has provided a framework for psychoanalytic discussion of the violence of cinematic voyeurism. In Pisters's re-reading of the two films, '*Strange Days* demonstrates how the cinematographic apparatus of *Peeping Tom* has become only one aspect of contemporary image culture and that the apparatus has changed'. (43) Pisters posits *Strange Days* as

a 'meta film' that tells us in what ways the brain has literally become the screen and how this necessitates an immanent conception of the image'. (44)

After establishing Deleuze's approach to images as an alternative model of the cinematographic apparatus, Pisters gives a more specific account of the way aspects of subjectivity are constructed on the plane of images. Chapter 2 is about the place of the body in subjectivity when the hierarchy of image and body is dismantled, and where 'image is no longer a representation of matter but is matter'. (46) A genre that has viscerally explored the nature of the material body and subjectivity is the horror film. Pisters compares Barbara Creed's psychoanalytic account of the body and its abjections in horror films such as *The Exorcist* and *Carrie* with a Deleuzian approach derived in part from the work of Carol Clover. Clover demonstrates the ability of body horror in such films to 'allow for cross-gender identifications', providing 'an important tool for rezoning the borders of the subject', introducing multiplicity and processes of 'becoming'. (54)

Chapter 3 explores the micro-politics that produce 'lines of flight' through the violence of films such as *I Can't Sleep*, *Brothers* and *La Haine*. Pisters also provides an account of the 'nouvelle violence' of popular Hollywood films through *Natural Born Killers*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Strange Days* and *Fight Club*. This is a useful discussion because despite its significance to public anxiety and debate about film and spectatorship, violence is an issue rarely addressed directly by film theory. For Pisters, violence is

born out of 'bad encounters' that have the affect of sadness and is also 'a way of getting rid of the object that causes sad passions'. (87) In the films discussed in this chapter, the politics of violence can be posited as inherent to the body's 'striving to exist'. The force and materiality of violence provide rich images and transformations, 'lines of flight' that mobilise 'actions, sensations, and thoughts on an individual scale', to provide 'a more collective level of political cinema and the creation of a people'. (77)

This micro-politics of film is pursued by Pisters throughout the final three chapters of the book through the notion of 'becoming'. In this sense the book moves toward a rethinking of subjectivity and visual culture that, along with Deleuze's formal categories of cinematic images, allows film theory to move beyond representation and the dualism of subject and screen. As Pisters puts it:

The mobile self is individual but related, traversed by multiplicities, changing in time and informed by a camera consciousness. It lives and continuously constitutes itself in the matrix of visual culture that is its plane of immanence, where the virtual and actual, memory and the present constantly exchange forces. (224)

The forces of transformation that characterise becoming can be destructive or empowering. They play out the lines of flight that break open molar narratives and structures that constrain and limit subjectivity. In her account of becoming-woman in Chapter 4, Pisters attempts to establish a feminist film theory that

departs from the psychoanalytical trajectory initiated by Laura Mulvey. C.S. Lewis's figure of Alice is taken as a dominant image in contemporary cinema and as a 'conceptual persona' that Pisters uses to explore the world of becoming-woman. It is at the molecular level, in relation to the molar, segmental forces, that acts of becoming-woman take place for Deleuze. As in Pisters's account of cinematic violence, the body is important as a staging point for the lines of flight that characterise her use of the concept 'becoming-woman'. Following Deleuze's reasoning Pisters argues that:

Becoming-woman is basically a question of the body: the body that is stolen in order to give it a fixed organization of the organs. Because it is first of all the body of the girl (Alice is seven years and six months old) that is stolen, it is also through her body that it has to be regained. (111)

Pisters reads Deleuze's ideas through Donna Haraway's cyborg manifesto, which she sees as an important aspect of a world that is becoming increasingly driven by molecular becomings of all forms. Some of the best analysis in the book bears out these ideas through the heroines of Lars Von Trier's Goldenheart trilogy: *Breaking the Waves*, *The Idiots* and *Dancer in the Dark*. Each of these films illustrates the potential and the risks of the process of becoming, where pathos drives the three heroines toward their catastrophic escape from the molar forces (such as law, religion, medicine, capitalism) that have imprisoned them. For Selma in *Dancer in the Dark*, this process involves the flight into music:

'In singing, one can become, for instance, child, bird, insect or sea'. (138) Selma 'creates a refrain, she hears music, she becomes-music; and she opens up a new world, a new territory that is much safer and much vaster than the small town she lives in, even though it features the same people'. (138–9)

In Chapter 5, Pisters continues her focus on becoming, exploring the logic of sensations and affects through the process of becoming-animal. Drawing on Deleuze's writing on the painting of Francis Bacon, Pisters examines the ways in which becoming 'creates new sensitivities'. (148) The negotiation of human and childhood in animal-world sagas such as *The Jungle Book*, or in the sea world of *The Little Mermaid*, for example, provide the backdrop for an account of the 'wild child' and the possibilities for moving closer to the world of affects, a logic of sensory experience and the body. Film theory could easily retain the Oedipal structures of the psychoanalytic approach in discussing cinematic forms of the Little Red Riding Hood narrative. However, Pisters focuses on the active affects and forces evident in the way various characters 'become wolf' in films such as *The Company of Wolves* and *Wolf*. It is Seth Bruner in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* that offers the clearest image of the strengths and risks of the molecular flight into the affectively enhanced world of the insect. Seth's transformation and his loss of control in the process of becoming fly underlie both the power and the risks of such molecular lines of flight, an issue that Pisters returns to and emphasises throughout the book.

Chapter 6 pursues the issue of music in more detail and describes what Pisters calls the '(de)territorialising forces of the sound machine'. (175) This is one of the book's most significant contributions in that it ties film and image to a broader visual and audio culture by locating its effects as equally in sound, music and image. This chapter touches on the role of dance music, DJs and raves in the 'deterritorialising' processes of molecular becoming. A concept of multiple, positive and deterritorialised subjectivity is also central here in the sense that 'in performing and listening to music, certain identities are being formed'. (175) Through films such as *The Conversation*, *Little Mermaid* and *The Shawshank Redemption*, Pisters argues that 'an important aspect of music is its power to create territories and, by the same token, its power to deterritorialize'. (188) In fact she demonstrates in this chapter that 'sound has much stronger capacities to (de)territorialize than sight'. (188) Ending with the 'sound machine' that accompanies the visual images of cinema, Pisters puts into effect the break with the scopic model of traditional film theory in a way that brings to life Deleuze's concepts for a new approach to what is being more broadly termed visual culture.

ANTHONY McCOSKER currently teaches in the cultural studies program at the University of Melbourne. He has recently completed a PhD at the University of Newcastle on pain, screen violence and spectatorship, and has had articles published in *Continuum* and *Metro*.
