



Adriano D'Aloia

Neurofilmology of the Moving Image: Gravity and Vertigo in Contemporary Cinema

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In the conclusion of a 1964 seminal essay, Christian Metz argued that, up to that point, there were four ways to approach cinema: film criticism, film history, film theory and filmology.¹ The latter two were distinct mainly because at that time 'theory' was widely practiced within the film institution, i.e. by filmmakers and critics. Otherwise, filmology was practiced outside of any film institution by scholars and researchers from different academic disciplines. The label *filmologie* brought together studies in aesthetics, psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, and included speculative as well as empirical contributions, which often shared a particular interest in the effects of moving images. Indeed, one of the main focuses of the filmological approach was the receptivity and the sense-making abilities of the viewer's mind, understood in relation to its cultural and biological aspects.

After Metz, film theory acquired methodological rigour and partly moved from the film institution to the academic one.² At the same time, and for many different reasons, the term 'filmology' was progressively abandoned, and part of the filmological project merged within that of film theory. Thus, at the origins of film studies, concepts and results from French filmology became part of the then emerging semio-psychoanalytic paradigm. In other respects,

the focus on psychological processes and the interest in empirical studies that characterized filmology were subsequently included in what was sometimes called the 'post-theoretical' approach, which disregarded dominant theoretical paradigms and tended to dismiss its fundamental concepts and procedures.³

In sum, the new millennium inherited a film theory that was torn between two seemingly incompatible models. The dialogue between theoretical frames, which was necessary in order to address and understand contemporary society, was prevented for a quite some time.

This brief, simplified premise serves to highlight how references to filmology today do not imply a nostalgic attitude or vintage quirk, rather they express the desire to recover an existing research paradigm to overstep the divergences and emphasize the points of contact between different approaches. In fact, to recall the filmological framework is a way of looking forward by harking back to a notable tradition that preceded the above-mentioned theoretical split.

The disciplines that help us to understand the impact of film on its viewer have evolved today, together with filmic experiences and theoretical sensibilities. Therefore, a new filmology unavoidably takes into account new trends in

cognitive science, phenomenological aesthetics, or philosophy of the mind, and generally all of those disciplines that have benefited from the recent epistemological breakthrough made possible by neuroscience towards the comprehension of the human mind.

A few years ago, Adriano D'Aloia and Ruggero Eugeni proposed a new frame of study labelled as 'neurofilmology',⁴ aiming to an informed understanding of the viewer's experience and the effectiveness of film form, in order to update the agenda of film studies to include the state of art of cognitive science and in particular of neuroscientific knowledge, in both their theoretical and empirical aspects. Among other things, this attitude sought to offer a partially alternative research frame to the existing empirical ones,⁵ though the main goal was to hold different approaches together, by integrating different theoretical backgrounds and analytical tools, and with a renewed attention to the 'continental' tradition of film studies. In a neurofilmological framework, the variety of approaches collected was seen as creating values and a strength rather than as irreconcilable divides.

Neurofilmology of the Moving Image, the latest book by Adriano D'Aloia, follows this spirit by bringing together phenomenological and cognitivist perspectives within the theoretical framework of the embodied and enactive cognition, with a special attention to the embodied simulation hypothesis.⁶ One of the main purposes of the book is to offer a 'thick comprehension' of cinematic effectiveness, going beyond the usual disembodied notion of gaze, and considering the vision within the bodily and multisensory complexity of filmic experience. To do this, D'Aloia also employs more traditional approaches, which constitute a sort of genealogy: from late 19th century aesthetic theory to the phenomenological tradition, from Gestalt to Ecological Psychology, and of course from early film theory to classic filmology.

The subtitle, *Gravity and Vertigo in Contemporary Cinema*, indicates the direction

in which the book develops its framework. Indeed, the book is focused on the mechanisms of *tension* in mainstream cinema, especially in recent decades: an experientially intense cinema which addresses particularly the viewer's body, and whose major challenge is to put in motion a seated and motionless spectator, drawing on 'filmic motifs' such as acrobatics, falls, impacts, overturnings, and drifts in order to play with the sense of loss and recovery of body weight and balance.

Each of the book's central chapters discusses a particular figure — from violent impact on the ground to a more ethereal drift in the void — while the concluding chapter links up with the introduction to propose a framework for the study of the tensive experience evoked by contemporary film style. To explain how cinema engages the spectator's body in an experience of distant immersion and 'modulated continuity', D'Aloia analyses excerpts from films such as *The Dark Knight* (C. Nolan, 2008), *The Walk* (R. Zemeckis, 2015), *The Happening* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2008), *Alice in Wonderland* (T. Burton, 2010), *Gravity* (A. Cuarón, 2013), not forgetting the lesson of great classics such as *Trapeze* (C. Reed, 1956) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (S. Kubrick, 1968).

Neurofilmology of the Moving Image is a major book, and not only because it reinforces and relaunches embodied cognition film theory. It is also important for its 'ecological' sensibility, which makes it relevant from the point of view of an incipient *elemental approach* to film analysis. In this book the element is the air, but the author has also worked elsewhere on 'enwaterment', and this promising perspective can be valuable for a new comprehension of the role of cinematic elemental features in the viewer's immersive experience.

I would only add, to conclude, that D'Aloia is also a very good writer, capable of making tangible the sense of the filmic experience he describes. This is why this book is recommended, for the value both of the scholarly approach it presents

and the journey through images, spaces and acrobatics it offers to the reader.

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Notes

¹ Christian Metz, 'The Cinema: Language or Language System, in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. by Michael Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 90.

² See Francesco Casetti, *Theories of Cinema, 1945-1995* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1999), 89-93.

³ *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. by David Bordwell, Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

⁴ *Neurofilmology. Audiovisual Studies and the Challenge of Neuroscience*, ed. by Adriano D'Aloia and Ruggero Eugeni, *Cinéma & Cie.*, 22-23 (Spring/Fall 2014).

⁵ See e.g. *Psychocinematics: Exploring Cognition at the Movies*, ed. by Arthur P. Shimamura (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶ See Vittorio Gallese, Michele Guerra, *The Empathic Screen: Cinema and Neuroscience* [2015] (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).