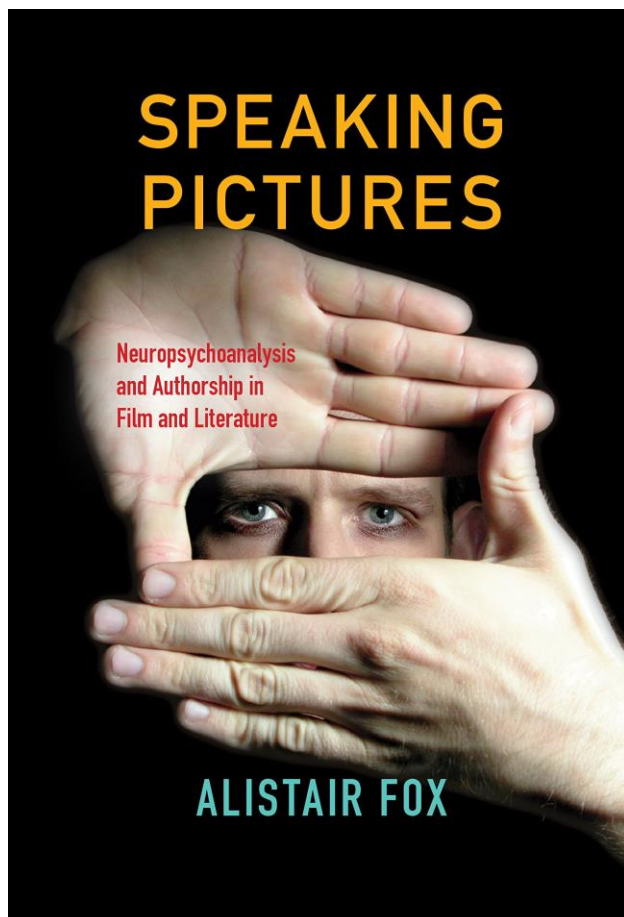


Attempting to Resurrect the Author through Neuropsychanalysis

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BOOK REVIEW

Alistair Fox. 2016. *Speaking Pictures: Neuropsychanalysis and Authorship in Film and Literature*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 310 pages.

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Alistair Fox's starting premise is why do authors feel the *need* to invent imaginary fictions, and why do film viewers and book readers consider them so attractive and consume them so *relentlessly*? (page 1). My emphasis upon Fox's own two words reinforces an element of compulsion that exists in all fiction and that is responsible for its long lasting practice: "Throughout history, men and women have felt a need to represent their experience in images and to arrange those images in patterns that tell stories" (page 1). Although Fox does not put

it in those precise terms, the fact that he attributes greater importance to images than words justifies not only the use of neuropsychanalysis as his preferred theoretical tool, but also the many examples he draws from films and, more importantly, film directors' *oeuvres* (whereas the examples he picks from literature are only isolated cases). As Christopher Bollas, quoted by Fox on page 51, claims: "The image, worth a thousand words, is an unconscious organization."

According to Fox, what lies at the core of the impulse for "imaginative invention" is authorship. This blunt observation may induce readers of this review to think that stories are born of a need experienced by authors to just be authors, whereas, in fact, there is no immediate solipsistic connotation to this impetus. What Fox essentially means is that it is necessary to restore the creation (and reception) of fiction to its human form, via the agency of the author (page 111). Meaning does not lie solely in the text or in the decoding activity of the reader/viewer. In order for meaning to exist, an author selects and shapes content that is placed in the text in a fashion likeable enough for the "respondent," as Fox calls the reader/viewer (page 160), to feel attracted towards it in the first place. Creation is a means of self-expression and self-experience, as well as perception and self-knowledge. An author's creations are the joint product of instinct and conscious awareness (page 49) that, overall, have a cathartic effect.

However, it can be said that the production of a fictional work generates *two* creations,

which can be partially coincident, or not. Fox argues that the respondents build their own meaning by "metabolizing" the sense already immanent in the work (page 160). In other words, there is an intersubjective relationship between creator and respondent, in which attention, goals, and affective states are shared. This "affective attunement" between creator and respondent depends on what is inscribed in the text, but also on a mental configuration on the part of the respondent: the existence of "mirror neurons" in his or her brain. These particular neurons build a bridge between the minds of two people, allowing for the sharing of actions or emotions, even if one person is entirely fictional, as is the case with characters. The respondent reinterprets what he or she sees according to what he or she would do in the same instance, with the proviso that the first person must be acting (in order to entail a certain like-mindedness and agency). Therefore, emotional attunement between creator and respondent is mediated by fictional characters, which represent aspects of the biographical life of the author, but also incorporates biographical elements of the respondent's life. The outcome is a form of reception that is "actively re-creative" (page 174).

According to Fox, there are five fictional resources available to the creator (and to the respondent) for the production of imaginative invention. (1) Through mental associations produced by certain images, the process of fictional representation brings up unconscious aspects contained in the mind ("visualization"); (2) the iconic, poetic and evocative power of symbols enables the presentation of the author's emotional and

experiential life in a sensual way ("symbolization"); (3) the condensation of meaning involved in the metaphorical process results in a more complex associative involvement and calls upon several senses ("metaphor"); (4) the use of devices that engage the senses intensely – such as movement, time, force, space, and intention – highlight implicit relationships of which authors are unaware (what the psychiatrist Daniel Stern calls "vitality affects"); (5) some features are used recurrently, revealing their probably unconscious importance for the author ("evocative objects").

Neuropsychanalysis is, in Fox's opinion, the best theoretical field to study the workings of the brain in the double creation of fictions, in that it conjoins conscious and unconscious inventive materials. The former reside in the "explicit memory" and are activated under autobiographical form, which is to say that the contents of one's life directly provide the fictional material. The latter are stored in the "implicit memory" and can only be accessed through dreams, fantasies and obsessions that recur in the author's *oeuvre* under the form of certain formal structures, leitmotifs and *topoi*. One way or the other, it is the author's existential make-up that provides the material for fictions.

Fox uses input from psychoanalysis and from the neurosciences. He dismisses most of Freud's theory, but retains the notion of "figurability," i.e. the capacity of the brain to convert a feeling into a symbolic equivalent that can be visualized (page 46), and the mechanisms of metaphoric condensation and metonymical displacement (pages 98-99).

The latter aspects actually form, in Fox's view, the basis of four strategies available for the author to deal with usually unwanted feelings (pages 101-106): "projective identification" (feelings are relocated into other feelings, belonging to the characters); "introjective identification" (the author creates a character endowed with traits that correct defects or supply missing attributes); "splitting" (allocation of the author's psychic traits to several characters instead of one); and "reversal" (allocation of traits to characters who belong to another sex or social class than the author).

Whereas Freud contemplated the unconscious materials as manifestations of repressed desires, current psychoanalysts address homeostasis instead, i.e., the search for and maintenance of a stable psychic balance. In this respect, as Fox claims, "fictive representation is useful" (page 4). Among its benefits, which Fox lists, there is the discarding of unwanted impulses. The neurosciences are also considered particularly valuable, since they deal with the emotions in their relation to the conscious brain, whereas in Fox's opinion, the cognitive sciences are more concerned with the rational brain than the emotions. It is in this context that Fox turns to Jaak Panksepp's theory of the seven great emotional systems, which explain the reactions of all mammals, including fictional characters: SEEKING, FEAR, RAGE, LUST, CARE, PANIC/GRIEF, and PLAY.

However, the *study* of imaginative creation is somewhat more contentious than the process of the inventive production itself. Despite the innovative approach adopted and the clear

advantage of choosing a scientific field that evaluates conscious and unconscious thought, as well as the affects (especially the emotions), ultimately the theory advanced by Fox does not constitute an answer to his own premise. Not only are the neurosciences in need of further development, but, paradoxically, the complexity of the human brain might forever prevent its complete apprehension by humans.

In drawing parallels between certain biographical aspects of an author's life and his or her work, Fox is not far from doing the type of decoding that Freud called "dreamwork," only here the Oedipal complex is substituted for the "attachment disturbance," according to which some given actions are the "emotional legacy of relationships," especially when these involve dysfunctional families, or absent or lost parents (page 122). As a consequence, the author is as much *interpreted* as are his or her works, as it becomes obvious when Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* enables Fox to draw conclusions on the Bard's life. Fox, whose expert analytical abilities are put to good use in the interpretation of François Truffaut's film *Jules et Jim* and François Ozon's *oeuvre* in general, among other literary works, are somewhat speculative due to the material chosen: the authors' sense of familial deprivation/excessive parental control and (homo)sexual life. Fox posits that every work of art has "visual polysemia," by which he refers to a double meaning, consisting of a literal storyline underneath which lurks "a fantasmatic scenario" (page 12). This is strangely close to Freud's relationship of

manifest to latent meaning, linked to the existence of repressed content.

The conscious process, as addressed by Fox, is as questionable as the conscious part of the imaginative creation. The sources indicated by Fox on page 113 – authors' (auto)biographies, meta-commentaries (e.g. in some DVD editions), and interviews – are anything but scientific. The combination of conscious and unconscious thinking is, likewise, questionable in relation to film genres, despite their "pre-established configurations" of an aesthetic and sociocultural nature, which provides information akin to an author's biography (page 129). On the one hand, authorship is diluted in genre films, since they have to correspond to certain expectations. For instance, Panksepp's system PLAY is, unsurprisingly, dominant in comedies, just as PANIC/GRIEF prevails in horror movies. On the other hand, sources of information for genre films tend to be commercially driven. Fox himself follows the genre categorization provided by such industrial sites as IMDb (USA) and Allociné (France). His view of the thriller and action movie blockbusters as being a direct result of the traumatic effect of 9/11 on the American people (pages 66-67) is somewhat contrived and can be contradicted by many examples, of which the film *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988) is but one.

Ultimately, it is not possible *to know* why authors (and readers/viewers) *feel* the need to invent imaginative fictions. If they consciously tell us why, we may have grounds to dismiss their observations as part of an

elaborate and constructed discourse; if they do not know themselves, we may need to psychoanalyze them in order to decode their unconscious processes, which we may be scientifically ill-equipped to do. Nevertheless, in reinstating the author's agency, in calling forth the analytical impetus devoid of any culturally ideological basis (such as those present in Grand Theory), and in valuing the triad author-text-reader/viewer Fox pursues a very interesting avenue into the reflection on the embodied *experience* of fiction, which does not require a definitive conclusion.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Fátima Chinita is an Associate Professor at the Theatre and Film School of the Lisbon Polytechnic Institute in Portugal, where she teaches Film Studies, Film Narrative and Film Production. She has a PhD in Artistic Studies, BA's both in Literature and in Cinema, and an MA in Communication Sciences. She is the author of the book *The (In)visible Spectator: Reflexivity from the Film Viewer's Perspective in David Lynch's INLAND EMPIRE* [published in Portuguese]. She is currently on leave, doing a research on Intermediality and Inter-arts in Labcom.IFP of University of Beira Interior, in Portugal, and the IMS – Intermediality and Multimodality Centre of the University of Linnaeus, in Sweden. The research is supported by FCT (SFRH/BDP/113196/2015).