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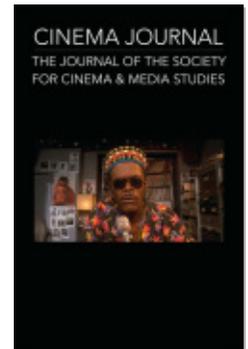
The Desiring-Image: Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema by Nick Davis (review)

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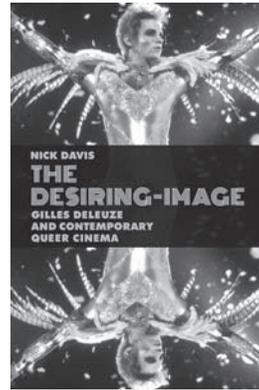
worth reaching for.⁹ That is the struggle that the new queer cinema, as a movement, memorializes. This book is not *about* that movement: it *is* that movement. *

9 Ibid., 41.

The Desiring-Image: Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema

by Nick Davis. Oxford University Press.
2013. \$88.11 hardcover; \$28.45 paper. 338 pages

reviewed by SCOTT C. RICHMOND



The *Desiring-Image* is not the first book to investigate the cinema's articulation of desire in a Deleuzian idiom, but it is almost surely the most ambitious. Davis proposes the desiring-image as the sequel to Deleuze's time-image. Recall that for Deleuze, the movement-image gives way after the trauma of the Second World War to the time-image: a cinema of duration and temporal accumulation in which time is figured directly and often irrationally, without reference to the movement and causality that organize the prewar movement-image. Davis's central claim is that, in much the same way, in the late 1980s and in the wake of the AIDS crisis, the time-image dissolves in favor of the desiring-image, in which cinema figures desire as a productive force, not necessarily or paradigmatically localized in particular subjects or organized particularly around sex or sexuality. Not to put too fine a point on it, Davis offers up *The Desiring-Image* as a sort of third volume following Deleuze's *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*.¹

Such theoretical ambition is a welcome rarity in recent film studies publishing. Thankfully, it is matched by Davis's evident theoretical acumen. But *The Desiring-Image* is only sort of a sequel: unlike the *Cinema* books, it is marvelously lucid and carefully explanatory. *The Desiring-Image*

1 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). *The Desiring-Image* is also not the first attempt at a "sequel" to Deleuze's cinema books. See Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

will serve as an excellent and accessible primer (or review) of Deleuze's film theory for audiences well beyond Deleuze specialists. (It may even set the stage for a reluctant seduction of Deleuze skeptics such as myself.) Crucially, it is not, however, only that. Where much Deleuze-inspired work in film studies merely repeats the same reified concept-objects from the *Cinema* books by turns, ignoring the broader context of Deleuze's (and Deleuze and Guattari's) philosophy and falling into what Kara Keeling has memorably called "Deleuzobabble," *The Desiring-Image* aspires to the oft-neglected Deleuzian charge to create new concepts.² The real rarity of *The Desiring-Image* lies not so much in the quantity of its ambition but in its quality: this is an unabashedly *creative* book, both in its aspirations and in many of its particulars.

The Desiring-Image is by turns elating and exhausting. At its best, the book follows through on its Deleuzian promise to create new concepts. Its method for doing so is to explore and expand the combinatory possibilities opened up by the intersection of three fields: film theory, queer theory, and Deleuzian philosophy. As Davis points out, these fields have really only ever come together two at a time.³ *The Desiring-Image* seeks to work each against both of the others. The value of such a methodological proposal does not lie in their intersection as such (although this promiscuous rapprochement between weirdly disparate fields is timely). In Davis's hands, these intersections enable the real achievement of the book: the reinvention of "new queer cinema" as the desiring-image.

The promise of new queer cinema was always an anti-identitarian aesthetics of cinematic desire. In B. Ruby Rich's sense of the term, starting in the early 1990s, films such as *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1991) and *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991) offered up figurations of people and their desires, which departed, sometimes radically, from the easily understood and reified identity categories of "gay" or "lesbian."⁴ Nevertheless, much of the scholarship around new queer cinema has redounded to a fairly conservative and identitarian project of canon formation, legislating inclusion or exclusion on the basis of who is fashioning representations of whom. Davis is able to show, convincingly, that the desiring-image is a name for a qualitatively new formation of desire arising in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which traverses not only "new queer" classics but also such unlikely candidates as David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988) and *Naked Lunch* (1991)—unlikely because of Cronenberg's heterosexuality and the films' apparent lack of interest in gay or lesbian sex. One of the most significant contributions of *The Desiring-Image* is a marked expansion of how we can think about new queer cinema, comprising not a body of films but articulating a field of anti-identitarian cinematic desire. That is to say, the book does not merely add new films to an existing canon but shifts the rubric of what will count as new queer cinema in a direction that is at once more rigorous and more capacious. Perhaps most significant for queer cinema studies, Davis demonstrates that not only the body but also the spirit

2 Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 5.

3 Nick Davis, *The Desiring-Image: Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

4 B. Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema," *Sight and Sound*, September 2, 1992, 30–34.

of new queer cinema holds decisive importance for film theory writ large, far beyond its largely (and unfortunately) identity-based articulations at the level of canon, disciplinary institutions, and conceptual archive. New queer cinema is, in the emphatic Deleuzian sense, a *minor* cinema.

As a consequence of this, Davis has produced a serious and thoroughgoing book of contemporary film theory—concerned explicitly with historicizing and conceptualizing our present moment—which does not reproduce the unfortunate yet fashionable habit of fetishizing “the digital.” This is refreshing, indeed.⁵ If nothing else, Deleuze’s *Cinema* books offer a theoretical idiom for a productive indifference to the particulars of the technological infrastructure of the cinema. In a delightfully perverse move, Davis has, rather, produced a compelling contemporary account of the cinema in which *desire* is the central theoretical term. (Aren’t we supposed to be over desire by now? That’s *so* 1983.) But there’s no psychoanalysis here: it’s the anti-Oedipus that guides Davis, and new queer cinema appears as an explosion of films that produce new forms of desire, disorganizing or dismantling the Oedipal machinery of classic Hollywood as well as “1970s film theory”—or, better yet, gleefully indifferent to them. Davis is not the only creator here: the queer minor films of the past two decades themselves are concerned with creating, producing, and inventing new desires and the often evanescent forms of community, which can, at least for a while, condense around these new desiring-productions.

Davis articulates these new forms of desiring through sustained readings of six films: *Dead Ringers*, *Naked Lunch*, *The Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunye, 1996), *Brother to Brother* (Rodney Evans, 2004), *Beau travail* (Claire Denis, 1999), and *Velvet Goldmine* (Todd Haynes, 1998). He also offers a discussion of John Cameron Mitchell’s *Shortbus* (2006) as a coda to his reading of *Naked Lunch*. These readings are all compelling and inventive, if at times overly exhaustive. In every chapter, I was convinced of his claims and their ramifications long before his reading was complete. At times, Davis seems to get bogged down in the details of the films, losing sight of the broader context and import of the book’s project. The more schematic view of new queer cinema and the various permutations of the desiring-image that open his chapter on *Brother to Brother* are a welcome interruption to the primary labor of close reading, opening as they do the scope of discussion back out to the broader stakes Davis presents in his masterful introduction. That said, Davis really is an impressive reader of films, unusually precise and entertaining as he presents the textual, visual, and desiring economies of these films lucidly.

All of this is both tremendously exciting and forcefully convincing, and *The Desiring-Image* makes this new thinking possible. It perhaps seems ungenerous to ask more from a book. And yet I have to note that Davis does not always follow through on his creative charge. At times it feels rather more like he is working dutifully through a Deleuzian algebra problem: there are four types of crystal images in *Cinema 2*, and therefore, there must be four types of queer crystal images.⁶ The issue is not so much reliance

5 This is in marked contrast to other recent Deleuzian takes on film theory, for example, Pisters’s *Neuro-Image*, or Steven Shaviro’s *Post-Cinematic Affect* (New York: Zero Books, 2011).

6 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 68–97.

on Deleuze's conceptual and analytical terms (since, indeed, the algebra problem really does seem to work out), but rather that for those of us not already convinced of the value or vitality of Deleuzian film philosophy, such working through is not sufficiently motivated. In his conclusion, Davis writes, "Gilles Deleuze has been the perfect guide and his books the perfect apparatus in diving for these pearls because he has a consistent, articulated philosophy of film, and a related conception of desire as well, each of which flexes in response to what it encounters."⁷ This conclusion, however, was never seriously in doubt for Davis, and it really is foregone that Deleuze is *perfect* here. I find myself rather wondering whether and where he might not be perfect, and whether new queer cinema may break, productively, Deleuze's conceptual consistency rather than merely flexing it. Is the desiring-image really *new*, a line of flight? Or must its desiring-productions always be dutifully reterritorialized into the consistent, and therefore predictable, conceptual topography of Deleuze's philosophy?

Despite Davis's evident ambition to create new concepts adequate to new queer cinema and its desiring-image, the nitty-gritty of that project often still hews too closely to the *Cinema* books for those of us not already on the inside. This is why, perhaps predictably, I found moments of *The Desiring-Image* tough going. I mean this not exactly as a criticism—at least, not of Davis in particular. My failure to find myself excited or to have my interest captivated by Deleuze is, at the end of the day, my problem and not his. Moreover, I find myself feeling similarly excluded, and find myself wondering much the same thing, reading much Deleuzian film theory. Davis does much better on this account than most: he is clearly aware of the danger here, even if he cannot always avoid it. Readers not initiated into Deleuze will find Davis's careful and thorough explanations lucid, and readers already on the inside of Deleuzian philosophy will discover a creative and ambitious new direction in Deleuzian film theory. (This book will teach exceptionally well in graduate seminars of many different kinds.)

To put this otherwise, *The Desiring-Image* is at its best where it departs from Deleuze—and indeed, it does so. The promise of the book to use film theory and queer theory to productively interfere with Deleuze's philosophy provides the framework for, and force behind, these departures. Perhaps this is why Davis's chapter on Claire Denis's *Beau travail* is the most satisfying, since *Beau travail* poses the question of audience reception; it was marketed as a "gay" film, apparently on the scopophilic basis of the naked flesh of soldiers rather than any ostensibly gay content. Deleuze is ill equipped to answer such questions, ignoring, as he does, any context of reception, viewing, or spectatorship, and so Davis is forced to take more distance from Deleuze. Likewise, Davis's reading of *Velvet Goldmine* in terms of Walter Benjamin's "theses" on the philosophy of history is brilliant and promising—if not, ultimately, developed enough to offer a real departure from Deleuze's schemes. A dialectical image is not quite the same thing as a sheet of time meeting a peak of present, and Davis too quickly assimilates one to the other. Throughout *The Desiring-Image*, there is never a real risk that Deleuze might not give us the right answer for a particular problem. While at the ground level, Davis is always careful to gloss Deleuzian terminology in ways that are often more clearly

7 Davis, *Desiring-Image*, 249.

accessible than Deleuze's source material, the high-level conceptual architecture of the project ensures that the context never really expands beyond a field organized by the *Cinema* books. Perhaps this is a necessary condition for *The Desiring-Image*, but I found myself wishing, in more or less pointed ways throughout the book, that the theoretical vocabulary were more expansive.

I want to close this review with a question *The Desiring-Image* raises but does not quite ask, at least not as sharply as it could: the relation between queer desire and capitalism. Steven Shaviro argues in *Post-Cinematic Affect* that the rise of media that deal in impersonal affective flows tracks—and offers a diagram for—the disastrously deterritorializing flows of finance capital.⁸ New queer cinema, in this light, comes to seem uncomfortably close to the logic of intensive finance capitalism. Davis does discuss the relation between desire and money in his chapter on *Beau travail*, and he acknowledges Deleuze and Guattari's claim for the “co-constitution of desire and capital,” but he keeps this connection relatively contained.⁹ He does not quite allow himself to wonder whether the novel forms of desiring that new queer cinema invents and rejoices in may in fact be insuperably connected to or conditioned by other forms of deterritorialization we might feel less sanguine about: the very necessity, and constancy, of novel desiring under the regime of capital.

This may also bring into focus an issue in Davis's periodization. Deleuze places the Second World War as the traumatic break between the movement-image and the time-image. Compared with this (and indeed, this is a problem for any theory of what comes after the time-image), the AIDS crisis may seem an inadequate historical explanation for a shift of the proportions Davis is tracing. The desiring-image may seem like a happy, if ambivalent, queer phenomenon when aligned with the radical politics of ACT UP and the other forms of queer inventiveness that arose (of necessity) in the wake of AIDS. At the same time, a more economic-materialist explanation might also emphasize that the desiring-image arises at the same time as neoliberalism and its dissolution of the postwar restraints on capital. Perhaps this is why the desiring-image then appears as a primarily American phenomenon: it is here where deterritorializing flows have been unleashed in their least mediated form. By contrast, Davis's disposition appears rather optimistic: his emphasis is on the fact that new forms of desiring may make for less damaged or damaging forms of living. Indeed.

And yet, as Davis points out, in the closing moments of *Velvet Goldmine*, striking British coal miners are presented as interpolated within a queer community of people listening to Jack Fairy's rendition of “2HB.” This acknowledgment of Margaret Thatcher's neoliberalization at the end of the film might lead us to ask, rather, if the film understands its queer potentials to be the other side of the economic shifts that began in the 1980s and that have only accelerated since then. If the desiring-image is queer, it may also be, at its heart, neoliberal.¹⁰

8 Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, 2–6 and passim.

9 Davis, *The Desiring-Image*, 218.

10 Here I am thinking of the as-yet-unpublished work by Damon Young on the liberal sexual subject, for example, in “The Political Theory of the Orgasm, or, *Shortbus* and the Pleasures of Liberalism” (lecture, University of Michigan, April 9, 2012).

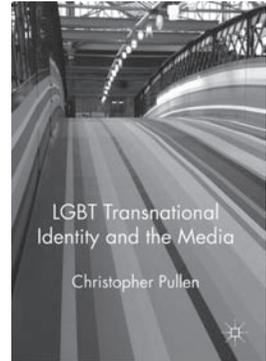
Now, I don't mean to suggest that Davis ought to have claimed this. Rather, I want to emphasize that even if he doesn't take this path, his book makes thinking this conjunction possible, and in new and more robust ways. To the extent that *The Desiring-Image* not only invents its own new concept but also allows for new thinking beyond its project, it is a riotously successful book on its own, or any, terms. *

LGBT Transnational Identity and the Media

edited by Christopher Pullen. Palgrave Macmillan. 2012. \$95.00 hardcover; \$72.00 Kindle. 336 pages

reviewed by MARGARET RHEE

From Vito Russo's groundbreaking 1981 *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality at the Movies* to *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) by José Esteban Muñoz, and more recently Mary Gray's 2009 book *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, scholarly studies on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) and queer representations provide critical sites of intervention for identity, praxis, and theory.¹ As a consequence of and despite the mainstream media's fraught and frayed portrayals of same-sex sexuality and nonnormative gender expressions, these works and others illuminate the rich, fertile, and growing scholarly contributions to understanding the stakes of queer visibility. However, much of the research has been US-focused, and the anthology *LGBT Transnational Identity and the Media* offers a critical intervention. Edited by UK-based scholar Christopher Pullen, *LGBT Transnational Identity* provides unique contributions from a refreshing list of twenty academic scholars largely based outside of the United States. More specifically, the anthology offers a compelling framework that decenters the West in our understandings of "LGBT identity" and media. As Pullen argues in his introduction, "This book considers the potential of LGBT transnational identity, exhibited through varying media forms, challenging the notion



1 Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality at the Movies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Mary Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).