The story is well-known. In the wake of Wimsatt & Beardsley’s attack on the intentional and the affective fallacy, it became suspect to judge literature by the author’s intentions or the reader’s emotional response. In this view, author’s intentions or ‘neither available nor desirable’ as a touchstone for literary criticism, since ‘(c)ritical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle’, as Wimsatt & Beardsley put it. Nor are the reader’s feelings an adequate criterion for sound literary criticism. Often, though, the exact nature and context of Wimsatt & Beardsley’s claims (for example their interest in judgement rather than interpretation) are conveniently ignored. In that way, they could be turned into straw men by anyone who wanted to defend the literary study of authorship and affect.

Today, the scholarly communis opinio is almost the opposite of the straw-men position: emotions are considered as an inextricable part of literary reading and criticism, and the biographical background and creative activity of the author are seen as valid research objects for a better understanding of the literary work. And so the author returns with a vengeance, as can be seen in literary sociology, discourse analysis, (auto) biography studies, and cognitive cultural studies. The question then arises what is gained and what is lost in this return to authorship and affect.

Alistair Fox’s Speaking Pictures. Neuropsychoanalysis and Authorship in Film and Literature is a distinct intervention in this field. The book develops a neuropsychoanalytical theory of fictive representation from the perspective mainly of the author. Building on a range of literary and cinematic examples, it aims to redress the balance between the cognitive and the cultural, the cognitive and the emotional, the production side and the reception side. While performing this balancing act, it combines psychoanalysis with neurocognitive science and integrates elements of reception theory and cultural studies. The twelve chapters alternate between the history of ideas, the introduction of a new synthesis, and in-depth interpretations of literary works and films.

It is worth while taking a close look at the general argumentation Fox carefully expounds throughout the book. We can distinguish three main interwoven arguments with which he intervenes in current debates in cultural studies. The first one is an argument in favor of authorship (including the auteur of a film) as a legitimate object of study. The meaning as well as the value of a work of art, Fox intimates, can be grasped by looking into the personal fantasy which informs it. One could (and I certainly would) object that such fantasies...
cannot be detected, because the author’s desires and fears are unavailable to us. However, Fox argues against the well-known objection that intentions are not traceable. Not only are they detectable by the scholar who examines images, motifs, and structures, they are also intuitively taken in by readers or viewers in a process of emotional attunement. Readers or viewers affectively respond to the author’s affects incorporated in the work. Rather than explaining this process in purely psychoanalytic or phenomenological terms, Fox employs neurocognitive evidence alongside Freudian notions to substantiate his claims.

In neurological terms, the act of reading or viewing activates so-called mirror neurons, which imply the mental replication of experiences encoded in the work. Fox, however, assumes that the experiences involved go beyond the rudimentary perceptual and sensorimotor mirrorings discovered by Vittorio Gallese and the concomitant phenomenological experiences Gallese discussed elsewhere. They extend to the patterns of attachment and detachment which are installed in early childhood. Author and reader/viewer are joined in an intersubjective exchange through the affective positions inscribed in the work, e.g. a longing for emotional care by a mother figure. In fact, Fox considers the relationship between the subject and the work of art as analogous to that between child and mother.

This brings me to the second argumentative thread: a plea for neuropsychoanalysis. In the first, eighth and ninth chapter, Fox sketches a history of approaches to fictive representation from the perspective of production and reception. Of particular importance for the book’s own framework are the psychoanalytic and the cognitive tradition. While valuing the Freudian legacy Fox also criticizes Freudian psychoanalytic criticism for its focus on repression and defense mechanisms. In this logic, literary works comprise materials from the unconscious which are displaced, condensed, and reversed by the author to ward him or her off from psychological threats.

Fox seeks to counter this limitative and speculative approach in two ways, firstly by using object-relations theory and secondly by taking the neurocognitive turn. Object-relations theory sees fictive representation not as defense but as ‘an instrument of self-repair’, a way to remedy disrupted attachment patterns. In that view, the work of art is an object mediating between subject and reality, and at the same time contains all kinds of objects invested with personal affects. In Fox’s readings, concepts of Christopher Bollas, John Bowlby, Daniel Stern, and Charles Mauron’s psychocritique are integrated into the model to elucidate how an image becomes ‘an unconscious organization’, as Bollas calls it. In Jane Campion’s films, about which Fox published a previous monograph, settings carry strong symbolic overtones. The water in The Piano and Top of the Lake evoke the ‘temptation to suicide’, to give one of Fox’s many illuminating examples. Another example are the many ‘obsessive metaphors’ in François Ozon’s movies, which Fox discusses in some detail.

Also, Fox emphatically prefers psychoanalytic views which prove to be consistent with neurological findings. Apart from the already mentioned mirror neurons, the theory of emotional systems developed by the neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp guides Fox in his analyses. In this particular blend of Panksepp’s views and a psychoanalytic framework, he follows the footsteps of Norman Holland in Literature and the Brain. Both Holland and Fox hypothesize that the systems of LUST, PANIC/GRIEF, FEAR, RAGE, PLAY, SEEK, and CARE regulate the production and reception of fiction and film. So, for example, the film genre of comedy trades on the affective system of PLAY whereas the thriller genre is logically connected to the FEAR system. Individual authors too respond to a particular emotional imbalance when shaping their fiction.

The third main point in Fox’s argumentation pertains precisely to the role of emotions. Structuralist, poststructuralist, and (first-generation) cognitive approaches have shrugged off affective motivation and
emotions. By contrast, *Speaking Pictures* argues that emotions, and to a lesser extent embodiment, are a key to understanding why and how fiction is created. Whether it is the blockbuster movies after 9/11 which respond to a society’s anxiety and offer a ‘fantasmatic enactment of revenge’, or François Truffaut’s movies staging ambiguous emotions toward the figure of the mother, works of fiction are consoling configurations of affects.

The three argumentative threads are brought together in a theory of fictive representation (though it should be mentioned that the two thorny concepts themselves, ‘fictive’ and ‘representation’, are not theorized). The ultimate goal of fictive representation is to bring into consciousness complex emotional experiences, to make them representable in order to achieve ‘a degree of emotional homeostasis’, and ‘to enable a processing of emotional content through the creation of fantasy’. For this purpose, the author selects motifs, objects, and images in which emotional content is externalized and transformed. He or she also draws upon genres and intertexts – which is the topic of chapter seven – as implicit models for complex emotional experiences. The readers or viewers, then, intuitively grasp the author’s intentions through the metaphors and structures of the work and adopt them for their own psychic needs. In chapters 10 and 11, Fox demonstrates this transference in a probing analysis of how an author/auteur adapts existing materials: Truffaut’s adaptation of *Jules et Jim* and Shakespeare’s reworking of the legend of Amleth.

The issues Fox is discussing are very complex and he should be credited for the skilful and compelling way he sets up the argumentation. The result of his inquiry is a more comprehensive model, which recognizes the role of personal fantasy, affects, and autobiographical memories, without neglecting neurological evidence and cultural constraints. In that respect, he fills a gap in the cognitive study of authorship. Whereas scholars such as Mary Thomas Crane and Patrick Colm Hogan have examined the cognitive procedures of authors and Norman Holland has studied the dynamics of reader response from a neuropsychoanalytic perspective, Fox shows how the Freudian unconscious can be coupled with cognitive concepts to study authorship.

On the downside, Fox assumes that there is a direct and smooth channel of communication between author and reader through which unconscious content is transferred. Intersubjective attunement is presented as a natural and automatic process, whereas a lot of conventions and competence are involved in readers’ and viewers’ responses. He also seems to take authors’ stated motives (e.g. in interviews) at face value as reliable and sufficient evidence. He ignores the extent to which authors’ discourse is co-determined by its context and considers their deeper intentions as both ‘available’ and ‘desirable’ sources. Finally, Fox’s theory can give rise to a law-like motivation of interpretations, which is ultimately immune to verification or criticism. To be sure, neurocognitive evidence supports Fox’s theoretical claims, but in the implementation of the theory, one cannot avoid speculation. In that way, the theory can become a misleading excuse for readings that in itself are compelling and valuable.

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