

Book Review: Discorrelated Images

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Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Maloney, M 2021, 'Book Review: Discorrelated Images', Thesis Eleven, vol. 167, no. 1, pp. 134-136.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/07255136211059232>

DOI 10.1177/07255136211059232

ISSN 0725-5136

ESSN 1461-7455

Publisher: SAGE Publications

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Book review

Shane Denson

Discorrelated Images

(Duke University Press, 2020)

Reviewed by: Marcus Maloney, *Coventry University, UK*

Speaking at 2004's Cannes Film Festival in honour of the 20th anniversary of his iconic 1994 film, *Pulp Fiction*, outspoken director, Quentin Tarantino, remarked of the increasing shift towards digital modes of filmmaking and delivery, 'As far as I'm concerned, digital projection is the death of cinema... The fact that most films aren't presented in 35mm means that *the world is lost*' (emphasis added). Interpreted at the time as a typically nostalgic defence of old Hollywood from a self-styled obsessive given to brash, hyperbolic public statements, I was reminded of this Tarantino quote, and particularly the enigmatic second half, while reading Shane Denson's *Discorrelated Images*. As an early career media sociologist writing this review in 2021, I have always wondered what it might have been like to read the first edition of, say, Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), or Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society* (1992) – that is, before such texts became widely recognised as the important works they are. Reading Denson's dense and ambitious book is as close as I have yet come to achieving that feeling.

It is impossible in this review context to do full justice to, or even adequately summarise, the expansive, multifaceted thesis Denson lays out in *Discorrelated Images* – but I will try. In short, Denson argues that digital image technologies, and the narrative media derived from them (including video games, understood here, more or less, as interactive narratological extensions of film), represent a complete departure from, and total erasure of, the conventional relationship between subject, image and object that defines analogue filmmaking. In place of this vanishing relationship, in which images and image-making tools predictably act as mediators between 'the who and the what' of subjects and objects, digital images are, quite literally, 'autonomous, quasi-living images' with procedural agencies all their own. As products of computational processes constantly being rendered on the fly, they are always becoming, never complete – and 'discorrelated' in the sense of no longer relating easily and subordinately to ourselves, and the world as we have understood it. All of this ultimately leads to Denson's most dramatic contention: digital forms of imagery and storytelling both elicit, and bear witness to, a transformation of human subjectivity in which, presaging a post-Anthropocene, we no longer reside at the centre of things.

Discorrelated Images is structured in two parts, broadly offered to the reader as, first, an outline of the central theory, followed by a series of applications. I say 'broadly' here because Denson offers a multitude of applications throughout the book, and he never really

stops building his theory. The three chapters comprising Part I move from, and ultimately beyond, the 'post-cinema' perspective established in Denson's own preceding work (including with Julia Leyda), and, for example, Steven Shaviro's *Post Cinematic Affect* (2010) and Francesco Casetti's *The Lumière Galaxy: 7 Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (2015). Here, Denson successfully manages to pay due respect to the key insights of others, and position his new work accordingly, while nonetheless arguing that preceding work in the post-cinema mode has not gone far enough, or even properly articulated the core distinguishing dynamic at play in digital imagery and image-making. As a sociologist, rather than film studies academic, I must admit to not being entirely familiar with each and every author and their respective work Denson cites in making his case, but his discussions of each seemed to strike that difficult but requisite (when proposing a new theoretical approach) balance between respectful acknowledgement and necessary critique.

Part II is similarly comprised of three chapters, though the third, in which Denson explores the apocalyptic post-Anthropocene vision inherent in digital modes of production and delivery, also acts as a quasi-conclusion to the book itself. Of especial note (for me, at least) is the first of these chapters which orbits around a close reading of one scene in Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), the belated sequel to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). The scene in question depicts a sex act between the male protagonist, K, and an amalgam of his female holographic AI partner, Joi, indeterminately transposed onto a sex worker hired to 'lend Joi a tangible body' – a sort of sci-fi swingers-style effort to 'spice up' the couple's relationship facsimile. Denson's use of this rightly lauded scene, as dual reflection of 'our changing media landscape and the uncertain relations that it generates between human life and perception... and the spatiotemporal situations created by digital images' is sophisticated, and compelling. The scene weaves in and out of the chapter – just when you think Denson has abandoned it in favour of broader conceptual territory, there it is again, duly anchoring things. This might be unfair but, as a huge fan of both Scott's original film and Villeneuve's 21st century update, I did find myself craving some comparative work from Denson, particularly given his own analogue-to-digital epoch-shifting contention. Indeed, having only relatively recently read the Philip K. Dick novel on which Scott's film was based, I was struck by how material and mechanical, how *non-digital*, both tellings are, and how Joi is very much the distinguishing factor in Villeneuve's update.

Denson displays an impressive scope of knowledge – a necessity, given the scope of his argument – across the technical, theoretical and interpretative aspects of his subject matter, moving effortlessly from detailed outlines of algorithmic and computational processes to more traditional, and beautifully drawn, narrative/representational analyses. However, the true strength of *Discorrelated Images* lies in Denson's ability to make such dramatic claims about the role of technology in reshaping human subjectivity without ever veering into crude techno-determinism, or media-effects-style moral panic. If I were to raise one (very subjective) objection to the book, it is only in the general tendency of theoretical

work like this to articulate things in the most circuitous, full stop-wary manner possible. Case in point, the following passage which, for this reader, had precisely the same disorienting effect as the Michael Bay films the author critiques on the preceding page:

Affecting us on a molecular, subperceptual level of microtemporal embodiment but imbricating us in an expansive, diffuse network of nebulous agencies and transactions, the post-cinematic *dispositif* operates by metabolizing subject-object relations, transforming and re-creating them by setting us and our affective machines in novel relations to one another and to the larger emergent flows of bits, bodies, and other material units of exchange.

Thankfully, passages like this are not too common and, admittedly, I too would probably be given to occasional moments of rhetorical self-love were I even half as good a writer as Denson otherwise is. Beyond this minor criticism, *Discorrelated Images* is highly recommended to any reader with an interest in contemporary social and media theory, and particularly those of us seeking to make systematic sense of important yet opaque processes of socio-technological change.