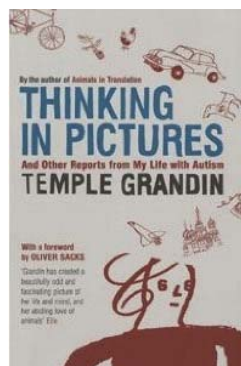


On Temple Grandin's Picture Theory: Thinking, in Pictures

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According to the animal scientist Temple Grandin, the success of her work in animal husbandry – which has resulted in ameliorating the conditions many farm animals endure – stems from the fact that she thinks like an animal, that is, she thinks in images. This is not her human way of thinking about images, but a way of thinking in pictures, a picture theory, that, she also claims, allows her to empathise with animals in a manner that might not be open to neuro-typicals like the rest of ‘us’. In this short presentation, I’d like to add a speculative corollary to Grandin's claim, namely that when we empathise with moving pictures (films), we do so as animals. The power of cinema is clearly immense, and many theories – psychological and philosophical – have been offered to explain its immersive effects on us, Freudian, Cavellian, Cognitivist, and so on. But, what if the answer was as simple as this: the power of the cinematic image is purely the power of the animal that we (always) are when we think in images? Like Pavlovian dogs responding to the dinner-bell, we salivate in front of the screen, to the image-stimuli agitating our senses, almost as though we are in the presence of their ‘referents’. These reactions are not any the less for being the animal-thinking-in-us, however, nor are they either base or inhuman: they might actually be an indication of a very powerful form of thinking. To paraphrase an oft-cited line of dialogue from the film biography of Temple Grandin herself, such animal thinking in pictures is ‘not less, but different’.



Temple Grandin (2010) is an American film based on the life of the pioneering animal scientist.¹ The success of her work in the humane treatment of farm animals arises, she says, from the fact that she thinks like an animal thinks – namely in pictures – and as a consequence she can optimize the design of numerous facilities (farm yards, holding pens, even abattoirs) so that the animals who come and go through them are not needlessly discomforted. Her book, *Thinking in Pictures* (first edition 1995), argues that her own, non-linguistic thinking in pictures allows her to empathise with animals, with their world-view.² Specifically, this means seeing and taking note of the smallest and most exact details that animals can find distracting and upsetting: odd, glimmering reflections, moving patterns of sunlight coming through windows, unusual coloured objects positioned at eye-level, and so on. She sees what most of us miss, she sees in close-ups, like a movie camera.

All the same, we might want to ask whether Grandin really has represented what occurs in her mind accurately? In other words:

1. *Can* she do so (or, indeed, *can any of us*)?
2. Even if she can represent her mental processes to herself, it remains questionable whether she can also communicate that representation accurately. I ask this not only on account of her disability, but also on account of an inaccessibility of mind to which we are all (arguably) subject.
3. How does she picture logical relations? How can she or anyone visualise the logical differences between, for example, conjunction, negation, exclusive disjunction, inclusive disjunction, conditionals, and so on?

Perhaps this last question is an intractable one, and not one of which Grandin's theory is not particularly liable. Yet the beginnings of an answer may come from looking at another, cognate set of questions, beginning with this one: *What can we make of the*

¹ *Temple Grandin*, Mick Jackson, USA 2010.

² Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, and other reports from my life with autism, second ed. (Bloomsbury 2005).

thinking that occurs in pictures, that is, in films, in moving pictures? That is:

4. How do the images of Grandin's biographical film itself, *Temple Grandin*, measure up as an alternative type of thinking? Might it be more convincing, and thoughtful, than even the thesis of her own book, *Thinking in Pictures*, given that the latter comes to us in words?
5. Moreover, does this film offer us the opportunity to think (in moving pictures) about cinema itself as an animal mode of communication – the animal that may be thinking in pictures inside of us when we are ‘at the pictures’?

Indeed, *Temple Grandin* does appear to offer an animal model of thought: it is highly graphical, using diagrams and various unorthodox visual techniques (from black and white flash inserts to various digital and optical special effects) in order to heighten the pictorial aspect of the film. Now, various models of film thinking (and even film philosophizing) have been proposed by a number of film theorists and film-philosophers alike, be they illustrative (film translating verbal thoughts into images) or native (films thinking – and communicating – through its indigenous audio-visual medium). I have examined many of these models in my book, *Philosophy and the Moving Image: Refractions of Reality* (2010), especially those purporting that film thinks in its own way (for instance, Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze). This incredible claim, leads, of course, to further questions as regards the logic of such a juxtaposition, or montage: can this ever approximate the logic of precise thought, of analysis? The challenges facing such a thinking in images, indeed the challenge for both montage (the relations between images) and cinematography (the relations within images) can be pictured thus: what is the visual difference between ‘This and that’ versus ‘This or that’ versus ‘This not that’ versus ‘If this, then that’. In other words, as we already asked: hoe can one visualise the difference between conjunction, disjunction, negation, or conditionals? One image simply following another does not seem to be able to capture these precise differences.

Temple Grandin (the film), however, does at least start to offer an answer to these latter

questions - a theory of precise thought *as selection* ('seeing details') that the film philosopher Stanley Cavell has, for one, argued should be seen as a form of cinematic thinking (thought here being understood as *choice* – why this 'close up' now, why this zoom, and so on?). As Cavell explains:

What I wanted to capture by saying that film is inherently self-reflexive is simply the significance of the fact that what you're given in film is a view of a place or a person or an object that is from one place rather than any other, at this time and not another, for this interval rather than another, in this light and with this texture and not others, and so on. Choice – thought, reflection – is on the surface.³

This reflexivity is, therefore, also a *kind of thinking*. The details, the close-ups (literal and figurative) of how things appear indicates the presence of a mind, a thought. But can detail or specificity distinguish between conjunction and negation, for example? Surely something more needs to be said here.

And, indeed, there is another, more radical answer to be found as regards such specificity, this time coming out of the film-philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. To see this, it should firstly be noted that Temple Grandin's autism was diagnosed as 'childhood schizophrenia' in the 1950s, and it is precisely the schizoid condition that Deleuze (working with Félix Guattari) believes gives rise to the 'schizo-thinking' of conjunction ('and...and...'). Indeed, in his own sole-authored work, Deleuze often depicts philosophical atomism as akin to a kind of autism, and even to a Humean constant conjunctionism. The world of the atomist is

a world in which terms are veritable atoms and relations veritable external passages;
a world in which the conjunction "and" dethrones the interiority of the verb "is".⁴

And, hence, it is also one where

the tree imposes the verb "to be", [...] the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, "and...and...and...". This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb "to be".⁵

So perhaps these constant conjunctions – 'and, and, and' – the piling up of detail after detail, is already and *unapologetically* the right and *logical* picture-thinking of the world. The thinking of

³ Stanley Cavell, 'What Becomes of Thinking on Film', in Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough eds., *Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema after Wittgenstein and Cavell* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005), pp.167-209: p.189.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, (Zone Books, 2001) p.38.

⁵ Gilles and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Athlone Press, 1987), p.27.

the schizo-atomist-autist-Humean doesn't need negation or disjunction (this *is not* that) for such bivalent, dichotomous relations are not real. The verb 'is', and the logical connectors built upon it, *will not find their pictorial equivalent* because a *processual* reality does not have one either. Schizophrenics, autistics, animals, and cinema goers know this.

Such claims as this, bold as they are, also open up various avenues for research into the nature of cinema's images, be it the nature of the close up and background, of the dissolve, of inter-cutting, of the tracking shot, of multi-screen, of fade outs, and even of high- and low-definition images (and their materiality as such). All of these merit investigating for what kinds of logic they might embody that is all the more precise because it is indefinite.

The potency of the (film) image, then, marks the point of its indiscernibility with film itself as *animal thinking*: the representational power of cinema is purely the power of the animal that we (always) are when we think in images. The capacity film has to make us see and think differently is less about its representations and more about its materiality as an animal mode of thought. Linda Williams has famously written of the three body genres of cinema that most obviously disturb our flesh (melodrama, horror, pornography) and, certainly, when we let the image arouse our tears, screams, and genitalia, we do seem to approximate that little Pavlovian dog getting over-excited by stimuli.⁶ Yet these responses need not only be understood as blind impulses, but also as, at least potentially, potent forms of imaged-based thought.

⁶ See Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', in *Film Quarterly* Vol. 44:4 (Summer 1991).