

Our culture has become too complex to understand things in disciplinary isolation

An Interview with Patricia Pisters in the [Newsletter](#) of SMART Cognitive Science, 10 May 2016.

“I grew up in a small village in the South of the Netherlands: there was no cinema, only a library. So I grew up just reading; I went to the library with my father every Friday night. The libraries had these nice big boxes with all these cards, and I just loved ‘playing library’. At home I made every book we had – we did not have a lot of books – into library books with pockets in the inside of the cover containing return cards. I really loved that, and I also liked to play teacher: I wanted to be either a librarian or a teacher. So after high school, I first started doing a vocational teacher training course in Nijmegen, because I wanted to become a French-English teacher. But then when I was in Paris for the first time, I realized that I wanted to really learn the French language, have access to the wealth of books written in French, and I stopped the teacher training course. I went to study in Paris, which is where I discovered cinema. Then I came to Amsterdam, first to work, and then to study. I studied French and also Film Studies, a free doctorate – within this degree it was possible to compose your own program. I went back to France to do my DEA (*Diplôme des études approfondies*), which is comparable to a research master. In the meantime, the department film and television studies was established in Amsterdam, and professor Elsaesser who set up the program asked me to come and work there. That is how I started to teach, even before I started my PhD; then it was just natural to do also a PhD. So I had some detours: it is through French, and French literature and cinema that I ended up in the department of media studies.”

“Together with some others, I have a research group on *Neuroaesthetics and Neurocultures*. Our aim is to build bridges between neuroscience, the humanities and the arts. It seems that everybody is interested in the brain, but the brain is so many things for different people. Within our group we always had the idea that we do not want to be just on the side of critical neuroscience, which is a branch of humanities that is very wary of the explosion and the power of neuroscience. Being critical is good, and it should be done, but this is not the only possible approach. We think that there are other ways: collaboration, learning from one another, combining efforts, looking at the same problem from different sides. This is really our mission statement. We have had a reading group for several years, there are several PhDs working on neuroscientific topics such as neuroliterature, media, art and brain models, neurophilosophy and neurofeminism and I am working on film and neuroscience. Recently, we wanted to bring this all together, so we organized a symposium [Worlding the Brain](#). The idea of the conference was to look at the interplay of the world and the brain, in many different ways. Discourse and science about the brain, is always connected to a bigger world, to technological inventions, to the way the world operates, to social structures, to art; things never happen in isolation. We therefore wanted to put the world in the brain and the brain in connection to the world. We had keynotes from neurobiology, from the humanities

and from anthropology; all of them had an interest in the brain, the arts and the world. For the workshops we also had contributions from many different fields. We had to invite the neuroscientists a bit more actively, because it is really a different kind of environment for them, but we were happy that many showed an interest and join us. It was no problem at all to recruit artists; several artists came to us because they work with brain related topics, like perception, epilepsy, or memory. And then of course we had our own humanities network that participated. For me the conference was successful because it was the first time in the ten years that I have been trying to make these connections that we had really multi-disciplinary panels. It was strange at times: everybody had to adapt to a different vocabulary, but at a certain point the dots started to connect, dialogues opened. We want to give the conference a follow up next year and see whether we can make it a network, such that the conference could be held also somewhere else in the future.”

“One of the reasons that I co-organized this conference is because if I want to set up a new research, I really want to make it an multi- or interdisciplinary research. I think that we have arrived at stage where our culture has become so complex that nobody can really find out things in and of themselves in isolated fields of study; well, in any case I am the kind of researcher who likes a holistic approach that needs many different fields to get a fuller understanding. In 2012 I wrote the book *The Neuro-Image*, in which I look at neuroscience work and translate it into film philosophy. I now would like to go further and challenge myself. I am very interested in a collaboration with psychiatrists on topics related to madness or psychosis, and the relation to media, art and our contemporary world.”

“In my work, I always move between two different poles. On the one hand I want to understand how our brain processes images and sounds, especially with respect to the power of images in changing our perception and consciousness. This is where neuroscience comes in. On the other side of the spectrum is the political power that images have in the world. Just think of images on the internet right now: all kinds of groups, whether it is ISIS or Hamas or any kind of political group use images, and they are very powerful. In *The Neuro-Image* I also have a political part, where I look at the Iraq war films. These films are not only symptomatic for what happens in the world, they are also ways of processing what happens, and they are a political player themselves. Films have an agency, because they can make people move, or think something, but they also have a power of working through traumatic experiences. So you can see how closely this political part is connected to what happens in our brain. This is an example of why I think that wording the brain is so important: for me they always work together.”

“I think it is important to collaborate a lot with partners outside of academia as well.. Our department has collaborations with the Eye, and with the Institute of Sound and Vision. It is also important to establish collaborations between art schools and the university in the fields of artistic research, which is currently emerging, partly in relation to the National Science Agenda I think this is an interesting development: here too, we can sense that there is an urgency to look from many different perspectives, and bring together the different types of knowledge from different fields. There is definitely a move from the art world to science and philosophy, and I want to stimulate this. But I think that we also have to move the other way around: science also has to move into the direction of the arts. This is why I have started

to make video work, not as an artist, but as another research tool to explore new ways of expressing thought. Two years ago I learned editing, because I feel there is a need for different languages than only the written paper. We have to look at different ways of presenting our work, especially for our students, because the world has changed so dramatically. Our old patterns do not work anymore: my students find it much harder to read, so assigning big heaps of articles every week that have to be processed in presentations and papers is not the only way anymore that we can deal with getting knowledge across. I am experimenting with trying out all kinds of different assignments, to try out different kinds of engagement with the material. For me, the natural thing is to go to an audiovisual medium, because that is what I have been working with all my life. So I started experimenting with this, both in my own research and in teaching. I don't want to abolish the academic article, the book or libraries, obviously, but think it is very important to have different skill sets and try to find ways of translating our academic ways of thinking into a different medium. Also, it gives you a lot of energy to go to new grounds: it is very refreshing and it opens new doors. Based on the very few things I did, I was invited to come to London to go to a video graphics workshop, where academics are coupled to professional video makers."

"I think my view on doing research is really undergoing changes right now. I think we have to move, also in academia. I am an academic, but I also want to look at what the creative side of me can add to the academic side, and the other way around. I want to do that in my own research, but also in collaboration with others. The first step I made was this interdisciplinary leap, when I started for the first time to read neuroscientific literature and write a paper about it. I remember the moment that I sent the article to some of the neuroscientists that I had referred to, and my heart was really pounding. Right now there is a second leap, where I am really moving into this practice-based research. I think this leap is even bigger, because if you go to a different field you are still working in the same structure of reading and writing, but changing your tools also affects your method."

"Deleuze is a very important philosopher for me. He wrote two books on cinema as a philosopher, *The Movement-Image* and *The Time-Image*. These books are really film philosophies; he draws out the concepts of the films. He is not talking about the film from a discourse outside film; he moves into the films and looks at the philosophical concepts. He looks at the concept of time for instance, and how we can see within film and the history of film how our conception of time has changed. He analyses how film and our visual culture have played an important role in constructing different ways of feeling and experiencing time. Deleuze's philosophy is it is always connected to the world, and that is very attractive to me. When these books came out, Deleuze gave an interview in *Cahiers du cinéma* in the early 1980s, where he said: 'The brain is the screen'. That is an enigma, and it is something that nobody said at that time. Film was a language, and it was analyzed according to structuralist elements or according to ideology. And then there was somebody who said that there are concepts in film, about time and movement, about affect and memory, about the world, and that it is the brain that is the screen. That was really something new. Deleuze also said in the 80s already that there was a very interesting field emerging: neurobiology. He did look at it a lot himself, because it was still an emerging field, but he saw that there were interesting things happening in neurobiology, and that it might help our understanding of ourselves, the world, the

image, and how they all connect. This thought of his I just took literally: this is where the book *The Neuro-Image* originated from. It happens very often with his books there is just one sentence that inspires five years of research. I think that is also the power of interesting thoughts: they offer a lot to explore further, they make you think for yourself. . That is why for me philosophy is really important: I could not work with only film. But I could also not work without film: philosophy in itself is too abstract for me. I need to connect it back immediately to something I see or experience in the world.”

“My free time I spend with my family and with friends. I do not have so much free time, but I think it is important to sometimes take some time off, to get a little bit of distance. I like to cook, so if I have time I like to make dinner for r groups of friends or colleagues. I also like to go out for a movie, because I can combine work and pleasure. I always look at a film naively at first; usually I know immediately when I want to write about something, because then I feel that there is much more going on, that has to be researched. But this comes after the first naïve look.”

“What I like so much about academic world is that you have in principle much freedom to be curious and obtain knowledge and insights. It’s worthwhile fighting to keep that freedom, because it is in unexpected places that you find new things. It is really important to keep an open mind and open spaces for thought, dialogue and experimentation. Also with regard to the distribution of research money, because we cannot even predict what we need in five years. We need to have that flexibility and openness to move and to also seize opportunities that come along.”

Patricia Pisters is professor of Media Studies (with specialization in Film Studies) at the University of Amsterdam. Since 2015 she is director of research of ASCA (Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis) of the Faculty of Humanities. Her research and teaching focuses on film-philosophy, especially in conjunction with neuroscience and on political implications of contemporary transnational screen culture and media ecologies. She also writes and lectures about classical film authors and Dutch film culture.

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Patricia Pisters • Turfdraagsterpad 9 • 1012 XT Amsterdam • Tel.:
+31 (0)20 525 4593 • Email: [p\[dot\]pisters\[at\]uva\[dot\]nl](mailto:p[pisters@uva.nl])
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