

# VERNON W. CISNEY

## *Research Statement*

### **Themes and Questions**

My research is driven by questions concerning subjectivity and its relations to agency, ontology, political activism, life, and art. More specifically, my work engages with questions concerning the nature of philosophical thinking and its ethical and political impacts on subjectivity, with the meaning of identity and its relation to conceptions of difference, and with questions related to the constitution of agency. Finally, my work concerns the extent to which the transformative power of art generally – and specific arts such as film and literature, which explore and distort the limits of time and meaning – provide possibilities for philosophical thinking and political engagement. These questions matter to me because they cross the boundaries of metaphysics, religion, ethics, politics, science, and the arts, addressing persistent and inescapable problems about the world and our relations to it and to each other. My research draws inspiration from the entire history of Western philosophy, with particular emphasis on phenomenology and contemporary French philosophy.

### **Dissertation and Related Research**

My doctoral dissertation explores the distinction between Derrida's notion of 'différance' and Deleuze's concept of 'difference in itself', examining the way each project constitutes a new approach to the conditions of thought and identity. The dissertation engages with the question of difference and identity through thinkers as diverse as Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Scotus, and Hume, giving particular emphasis to French philosophers, Derrida and Deleuze, who signify two disparate trajectories of contemporary continental philosophy. Where other scholars have located differences between the two in terms of their understandings of systems or of the transcendence-immanence relation, I argue that the key distinction between the two philosophers is in their treatment of the ontological concept of difference. Both philosophers attempt to formulate non-dialectical conceptions of difference: prior to and as the basis of identity, rather than as an empirical relation between two independently existing identities. But where Derrida understands difference in terms of a fundamental break, absence, lack, or irreducible negation, Deleuze articulates a difference that is purely expressive, relational, and affirmative. Using their engagements with figures such as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, I argue that Derrida offers a 'negative differential ontology', rooted in his understanding of 'the trace,' which is only ever a mark of other, absent traces. Deleuze, on the contrary, offers a 'positive differential ontology' – a philosophy of becoming based upon relationality and intensity rather than negativity – that rejects any reliance upon traditional conceptions of substance. This manuscript is now in the final stages of revision – with new sections on gender in both thinkers – and is due for publication with Edinburgh University Press in 2018.

### **Other Recent and Current Research**

My first monograph, *Derrida's Voice and Phenomenon: An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide*, was published by Edinburgh University Press in July 2014, and recently received a strong review in the *Notre Dame Philosophical Review*. More than a commentary, the introduction of the book examines the French reception of phenomenology – its transmutations into existentialism and structuralism – and how this influenced Derrida's early formulations of deconstruction. Then the body of the text outlines the major arguments of Derrida's 1967 *Voice and Phenomenon*, while the final chapter draws connections between *Voice and Phenomenon* and Derrida's later ethical, political, and religious work. It thus contextualizes *Voice and Phenomenon* within the trajectory of Derrida's thought, serving as an introduction to Derrida's overall project, and to twentieth-century Continental philosophy.

My interests in the nature of thought and its relation to time have spurred a growing body of work in the philosophy of film. One of the fruits of this research is my edited volume on Terrence Malick's film, *The Tree of Life*, recently released with Northwestern University Press in June 2016. In addition to co-editing the volume and co-authoring the introduction, I also contributed an essay, arguing that the distinction offered in the film's opening, between the ways of nature and grace, ultimately collapses in the film into a singular, affirmative view of life. The book brings together twelve new pieces by leading scholars in contemporary philosophy of film, and includes the republication of Malick's introduction to

his translation of Heidegger's *Vom Wesen des Grundes*, which has been out of print for decades. Another publication related to philosophy of film is my 2013 paper for *Film and Philosophy*, where I coin the term 'schizosign' to understand Scorsese's film *Shutter Island*.

I am currently engaged in a number of other projects related to the philosophy of film. One is titled, "The Philosopher and the Tramp: Chaplin in Deleuze's Cinematic Taxonomy," arguing that Deleuze offers an illuminating account of Chaplin's resistance to automation and mechanization, while reciprocally, Chaplin's art helps develop a key aspect of Deleuze's catalog of cinematic signs. This paper has received an enthusiastic 'revise and resubmit' from *Film and Philosophy*. Another paper currently in progress is titled, "I am Jack's Suppressed Complementarity: A Taoist Look at Gender in Fincher's *Fight Club*," in which I use *yin yang* philosophy from Taoist thought to argue, contrary to appearances and against the vast majority of scholarship surrounding the film, that *Fight Club* does not in fact celebrate masculinist violence, but offers a nuanced analysis of gender as a fluid combination of active and passive forces. The *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* has expressed an interest in publishing this paper, and I recently delivered a variation of this paper at the Faith, Film and Philosophy Seminar at Gonzaga University in October 2016.

In addition, last year I initiated, proposed, and organized a conference series named the 'Gettysburg College Philosophy and Film Seminar', out of which I am launching a scholarly journal. The GCPFS is an interdisciplinary seminar bringing together twelve professional scholars over two days to present research dedicated to a particular film, director, theorist, or theme. It also includes a Gettysburg College student panel discussion dedicated to a sub-theme within the broader theme of the conference; a public keynote address; and a public screening of a thematically relevant film. It thus harmoniously blends rigorous scholarly research with active student participation and community involvement. The first GCPFS (2016) was titled 'The Thought of Terrence Malick' and it was such an overwhelming success that I invited two Gettysburg College students to co-edit with me a *festschrift* from the conference, titled *The Thought of Terrence Malick*. The title of the most recent GCPFS was 'Cinema and the Thought of Gender', and its success far surpassed that of the inaugural session. One of the most exciting results of this conference is that I am currently partnering with the Faith, Film, and Philosophy Seminar at Gonzaga University, to launch what will become a biannual, peer-reviewed, scholarly journal dedicated to the intersections of film and philosophy. I will be delighted to bring future sessions of the seminar, as well as the journal, with me wherever I am ultimately employed.

I am also interested in political and ethical questions regarding subjectivity, life, and freedom. I recently co-edited a volume titled *Between Foucault and Derrida*, just released with Edinburgh University Press. This volume is significant in that, not only does it combine in one text all the major articles surrounding the famous 'cogito' debate between Foucault and Derrida, but it also includes a number of newly published pieces by leading scholars in continental philosophy. I also recently co-edited and co-authored the introduction to a volume titled, *Biopower: Foucault and Beyond*, released with the University of Chicago Press in December 2015. This unique volume explores Foucault's claim in *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* that Euro-American political structures in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries shifted from a primarily *deductive* model of 'sovereignty', to an *intensifying* model of 'biopower'. It combines previously published pieces with many new articles, on topics as diverse as race theory, sexuality studies, feminist thought, medicine, statistics, economic theory, and the Arab Uprisings.

Another recent project related to political and ethical concerns is my paper, published in April 2014 in *Foucault Studies*, in which I argue for a Deleuzian conception of freedom and political engagement rooted in his understanding of the 'thought of the outside.' Framing Deleuze's critique of what he calls the 'dogmatic image of thought,' I argue that thinking, for Deleuze, is inherently political. This question of freedom and agency has become increasingly important to my work. In Fall 2014, I conducted independent research with a student on Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. This fruitful collaboration resulted in a professional publication for the student, and it also primed multiple questions for my own research, drawing my thinking into the area of gender theory. One relevant project is a paper currently underway, titled "The Production of a Thousand Sexes: On the Significance of 'Becoming-Woman' in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*." This paper engages with feminist critiques of Deleuze and Guattari in examining the concept of 'becoming' as it relates to sexual difference in the concept of 'becoming-woman' in *A Thousand Plateaus*. I argue that feminist critics are correct in their assessments that the concept treats 'woman' as a transitional concept, but that this is because Deleuze and

Guattari are ultimately pointing towards an ontological field consisting of a multiplicity of gender expressions, making the concept more conducive to transgender studies than feminist theory.

### **Future Research**

I am currently in the initial stages of a number of major projects. The first, following on my research on the ‘becoming-woman’ paper, is an edited collection titled *Deleuze and Transgender Studies*. Besides editing the volume, I will be co-authoring the introduction with Susan Stryker, a leading voice in contemporary transgender studies. The volume brings together an impressive cadre of Deleuze scholars, trans scholars, and trans-identifying scholars, writing on a wide array of topics ranging from gender identity in children, to prison studies, to the films of Jack Smith. It will be part of Edinburgh University Press’s *Deleuze Connections* series, and has the enthusiastic support of the series editors.

In addition, I am in the initial stages of my next monograph, for which Bloomsbury Publishing has expressed strong support. This book, *Literature After Deleuze*, will explore Deleuze’s understanding of ‘sense’ as it relates to language, and in particular to literary language. The book will consist of four major sections. The first will explore in a theoretical way Deleuze’s approach to language in and after *The Logic of Sense*, and I am in the initial stages of a paper on Deleuze’s rejection of metaphor that will be apropos to this section. The second section will explore Deleuze’s engagements with literary figures, focusing particularly on figures often neglected in much of the secondary scholarship, like Virginia Woolf, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Herman Melville. The third section will utilize Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of Kafka – particularly the notion of minor literature – to analyze key literary subversions of ‘major’ texts. Some examples include Coetzee’s *Foe* and Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Finally, the fourth section will offer analyses of literature *after Deleuze*, through such authors as Cormac McCarthy, Margaret Atwood, Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, Roberto Bolaño, and Thomas Pynchon.

The research for this volume will provide me with multiple offshoots, such as independent projects on Pynchon and madness, DeLillo and technology, and McCarthy and language. But the most substantive project to come out of this research will be the *Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest*, for which Cambridge University Press has expressed interest. This volume will bring together Wallace scholars from both literature and philosophy, and will include essays on consumption, death, gender, the image, freedom, logic and language, and the role of substance abuse in the novel.