



**Invasion
of the
body snatchers**

(1956)



Immanent Attack: An Existential Take on The *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* Films

Juneko J. Robinson

The classic, original 1956 version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* begins with swirling storm clouds and anxious, threatening orchestral music as the credits appear and inform us that the following presentation is in Superscope. In a scene reminiscent of a noir thriller, the film's opening reveals a police car racing through rain-slicked streets at nighttime and pulling up at an "emergency hospital." A civilian disembarks and as he enters to confer with the on-staff physician, we hear an evidently agitated man ranting, "Will you let me go, while there's still time?!" (As we shall see, the element of time is a recurring motif in this series). The new arrival is an on-call psychiatrist, contacted by the emergency

ward physician on duty. As he opens the door, a crazed, disheveled man rushes into our view. It is Dr. Miles Bennell, the hero and protagonist of the story. Upon being pacified by the psychiatrist, the crazed man begins his story.

In voice-over, Bennell tells us that the horror began when he was called home from a medical conference the previous Thursday. Upon returning home, Bennell's nurse informs him that there have been a huge number of desperate patients waiting for him--some for the last two weeks--for ailments they are unwilling to disclose either to her or to the on-call doctor. As they head to the office, Bennell and his nurse encounter the first visible sign that all is not quite right in this quiet, picturesque little town: as they drive down the road, they are forced to swerve in order to avoid hitting little Jimmy Grimaldi, who is frantically trying to escape from his mother. Pulling over, Bennell gives chase, but Jimmy eludes him. Jimmy's mother explains to Bennell that the boy doesn't want to go school, and as they are talking Miles notices that the formerly prosperous Grimaldi vegetable stand is closed. "Joe been sick?", he asks. "No," Mrs. Grimaldi says, "we gave the stand up--too much work." This troubles him, because when he last saw the stand a month ago it was "the cleanest, busiest stand on the road."

Later, upon his arrival at the office, Miles and his nurse are greeted with six canceled appointments and a visit from Bennell's former flame, Becky Driscoll. Fresh from a Reno divorce and several years abroad, Becky says she feels "almost like a stranger in my own country." Their meeting is warm and flirtatious. However, Becky soon reveals that she is worried about her cousin Wilma, who seems to be convinced that her Uncle Ira is not really her uncle. Miles agrees to stop by to check



on her and to make a referral to the town psychiatrist. Afterwards, Miles is visited by little Jimmy Grimaldi, literally dragged in by his grandmother, and shrieking that his mother isn't his mother. Administering a sedative, Miles sends Jimmy home to his grandma's. When he finally meets with Cousin Wilma, everything seems fine except for her strange and unsettling conviction that her uncle is an imposter.⁵ Wilma

tells Miles that "there's something missing" with old Uncle Ira. "There's no emotion, only the pretense of it." That special look in his eyes, which was once reserved only for her, is now gone. Miles tries to comfort her, assuring her that it's more difficult to go crazy than she might think; however, he does tell her that once she thinks about how crazy her accusations are, "then you'll know that the trouble is inside you."

they are met by Jack. As they speak, Belicec's wife Teddy anxiously races out of the house. They are cagey about revealing what the real matter is, instead preferring to let Bennell form his own professional opinion. Entering the rumpus room, they stand by the bar, Belicec indicating a pool table swathed in complete darkness. He tells Bennell to turn the light on over the pool table. Immediately, the music crescendos; brass blaring with the intensity and monotony of a fast

swinging lamp cord becomes still, Becky moves in closer and is abruptly startled by the cacophonous chiming of a cuckoo clock, an omen that soon madness will ensue, that time-as measured by human concerns-is winding down.

We witness in the opening scenes of this story, thus, how the familiar, comfortable environs of small-town America have become the setting for an ambiguous threat that cloaks itself in mundane everydayness. In Bennell's own



Like the consummate professional, the good doctor temporarily shelves his misgivings about Wilma and at dusk takes Becky to dinner at a new, formerly popular but now empty, supper club. While dancing and awaiting their pre-supper martinis, the two are interrupted by a phone call. His old friend Jack Belicec is in some trouble and in immediate need of a doctor. Pulling up the darkened driveway of the Belicecs,

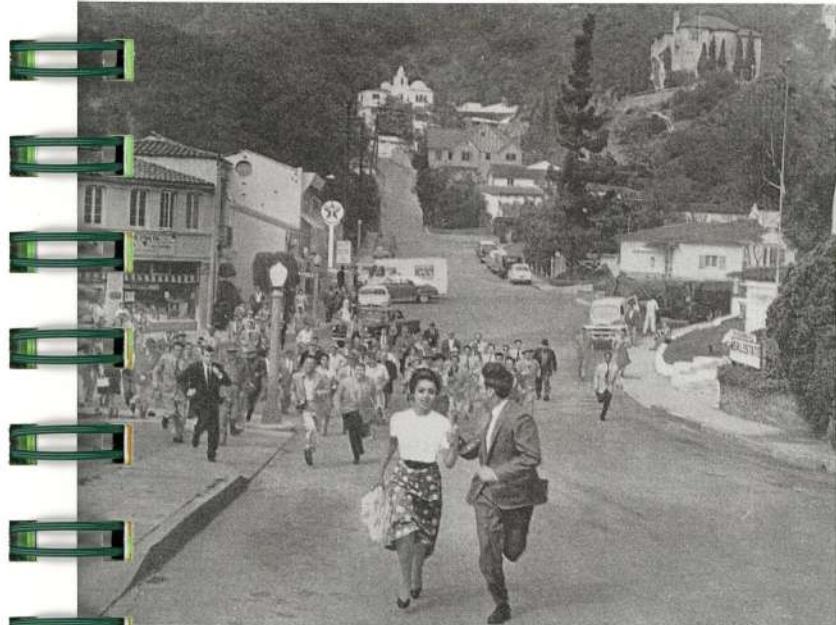
approaching car horn. A glistening, wet, white-sheathed, human-like figure is clearly visible on the pool table. The glare from the lamp casts deep shadows on the adjacent wall as Bennell intently examines the body lying on the table. These shadows will become prominent throughout the remainder of the film in marked contrast to the sunny, daylight-inspired optimism of the first twenty minutes of the film. As the wildly

hometown, among the familiar faces of the townspeople, in the rumpus room of his friend's familiar house, the invasion has begun. Superficially, everything looks the same as what it once was, and yet there is something amiss and out of joint. Familiar, friendly faces have become sinister, not due to any external transformation, but due to some sort of internal, unseen change. It is this cloak of familiarity

that makes the underlying threat so terrifying and frightening. The alien invaders are taking advantage of everything and everyone that we trust, gaining our confidence even as they destroy our souls. They infiltrate our world covertly, siphoning the individual life force of our loved ones in order to make them into instruments or tools for the occupation of Earth. The rest of the film documents the spread of this invasion as alien pods take over and attempt to destroy the human race, absorbing individuals one by one, and replacing them with shell-like, emotionless imitations of their former selves.

As mentioned earlier, previous interpretations of the original film have typically centered on the threat of oppressive conformity manifested under communism and McCarthyism.⁶ However, such observations don't explain why it is that such crushing conformity is so fearful to begin with. Part of what makes the specter of conformity

so personally threatening to us in the *Invasion Of the Body Snatchers* series is that it is couched in familiar, almost seductive terms that acknowledge our secret yearning for order, simplicity, and contentment, but which also causes us deep suspicion. We yearn for the camaraderie of the crowd and to lose ourselves in something larger than ourselves, but we simultaneously fear such engulfment because the consummation of such a merger would require that we lose our identities and become something very different from who we are now. The loss of personal freedom that is necessarily implicated by such absorption into the crowd would require destruction of that which distinguishes us as individuals. As sociologist William H. Whyte wrote in *The Organization Man*, "It is all very well to say one should belong ... But how much? Where is the line between cooperation and surrender?"⁷

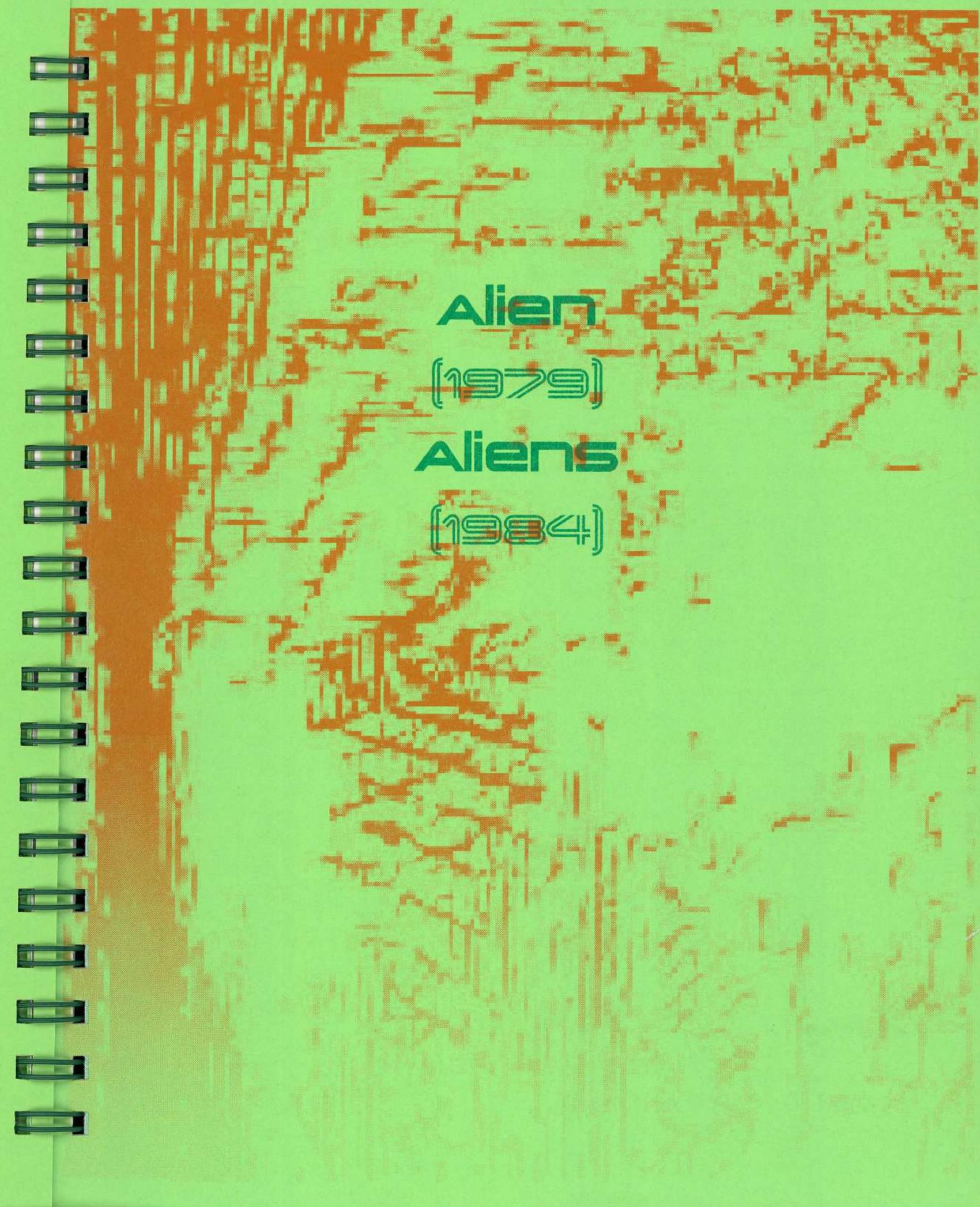


According to Stephen King, from the perspective of Jack Finney, the story's original author, the worst thing about the pods is that they have absolutely no sense of aesthetics: in the novel, they are neglectful and let the town run down.⁸ In the original film version, the Grimaldis close their vegetable stand because it's "too much work." This explanation is subtly disturbing and significant because it is an indication that the pods simply do not care, either in the Heideggerian sense, or in the more commonly recognized sense. These aliens have no ambitions or pretensions; their intentionality is limited to a biological imperative. Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out that the reason why we have historically considered battles and skyscrapers such great feats is because they are taken as evidence of the human ability to transcend nature.⁹ But, in the absence of human caring, reflection, and meaning-conferring activity, art, literature, and civilization as we know it would

cease to exist. In such a world, war and conflict would come to an end, but the cost would simply be too high. It would be a world without war, not because we had rationally chosen to transcend our barbaric nature, but because we had surrendered to the imperatives of our animal (or in this case, plant-like) nature, thereby making war irrelevant insofar as there would no longer be any ideological or other typically human motivations or attitudes that are made possible by care.

It is against the backdrop of such existentialist concerns that the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* unfolds. But there are also social and historical issues to take into account. Although one would not know it to look at the television programming of that decade now, the 1950s were a time of tremendous, often threatening, social change. As Roger Eberwein has pointed out, the original version of *Body Snatchers* was released the very year in which Southern schools were being forcibly desegregated on the heels of the Supreme Court decision outlawing "separate but equal" education.¹⁰ If the Red Scare was not enough, school desegregation unleashed a formidable sense of being inundated by an alien threat. According to Eberwein, the language used in the popular press to describe these forces of social change drew on metaphors of disease and contagion, of cure and illness.¹¹ At a time when public esteem for medical professionals was extraordinarily high, the impotence of the protagonists in the original film is noteworthy in the

face of the turmoil associated with desegregation. According to Eberwein, this is not to say that there is some "previously undiscovered allegory about racism" to be discovered in the film "but, rather, to suggest that we ought to remember that the film entered a dialogue ... of considerable tension."¹² That dialogue was characterized by a fear of engulfment and forced transformation at the hands both of communists and civil rights activists pressing for desegregation. Later, successive versions of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* would similarly emerge within their own particular cultural and historical contexts, providing interesting insights into the manner in which more elemental, existential fears and hopes become historically manifest.



Blood Relations: Feminist Theory Meets the Uncanny Alien Bug Mother

Lynda Zwinger

This essay addresses the troubling and uncanny figure of Mother in feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory, literary criticism, and real life. Readings of feminist literary criticism and the films *Alien* and *Aliens* explore the liminality of Mother and consequences for feminist thought and practice of the persistent narrative modes sentimental and the gothic) locatable in all of these discourses on/of Motherhood.

"Not bad, for a human." -Bis¹

This essay is part of a project which interrogates the place of women a Woman in the production of gothic narratives. From Monk Lewis "Mother" Radcliffe to Herman Melville and Sigmund Freud to Flann O'Connor and any number of films

inhabiting the darkling castles of the ubiquitous multiplex, a preoccupation with the uncanny and the Mother body perpetuates, transforms, and animates the gothic mode's narrative in nations.² Euro-american culture has invested, since the Neolithic Godde wars,³ an enormous amount of continuous cultural work in taming, bind dividing Mother.

A significant part of that work involves attempts to tame power of the mother by insisting on a border between representations of nurturing mother necessary to the middle-class bourgeois dominant cult and the transgressive power maternity might achieve if left to its own (supposed) desires. And like all borders, this one is constantly threatened permeability, liminality, ambiguity.⁴

The work of establishing and reinforcing categories to protect us against ambiguity and anomaly is never done, nor is the pleasure of contemplating (ostensibly) safely contained fictional ambiguity and anomaly ever exhausted. Ridley Scott's 1979 movie *Alien* offers us the supreme shiver of horror: a mother so gothic she will collude with evil capitalists and aliens in the murder of her children.

Zwinger, Lynda. "Blood Relations: Feminist Theory Meets the Uncanny Alien Bug Mother." *Hypatia*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1992, pp. 74-90. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3809999>.

The gothic castle in this text is an interstellar trading vessel; the ship's computer (caretaker, supervisor) is called "Mother." Mother's children, the crew, spend their time squabbling, whining, shirking work, goofing around, bickering about their shares of the profits. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Mother and her children are at cross-purposes-uncanny, deadly, terrifying cross-purposes.

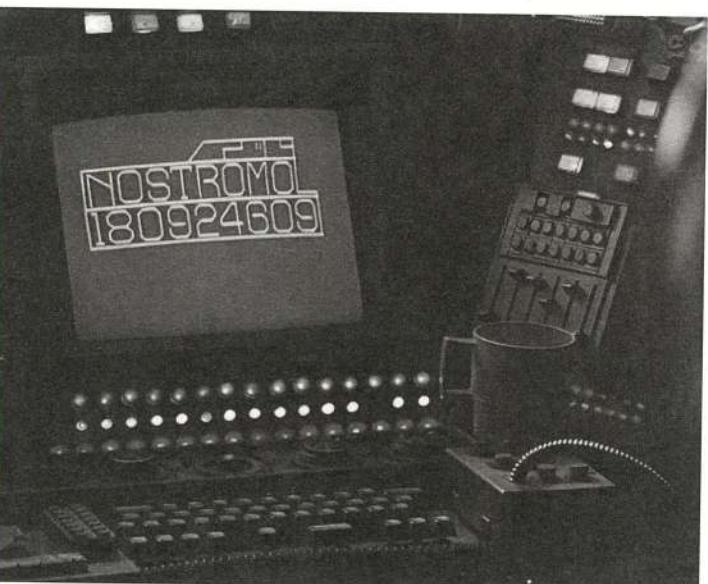
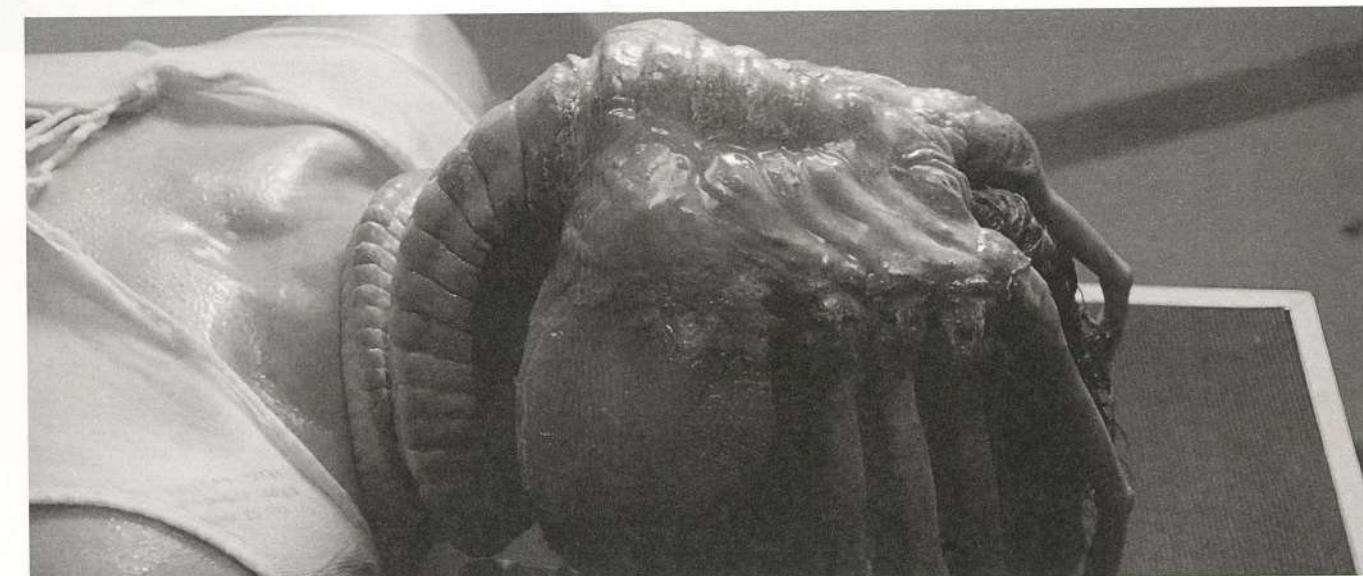
After Mother wakes the crew, and before the ill-fated shuttlecraft (the Nostromo) gets clear of its line to the mother ship (the line is called the "umbilicus") to set out on its alleged rescue mission, Captain Dallas taps out on the bridge's computer keyboard: "What's the story Mother?" The story Mother tells turns out to be a sentimental fiction designed to enable an entirely different agenda.⁵ The real story is utterly monstrous: the Company has decided to use the human crew as whatever kind of fodder it takes to bring back a truly appalling organism for the corporate biological warfare division. (The "fodder" role turns out to be that of portable womb.)

Mother's (real) story is aided and abetted by one of the crew, her truest child: Ash turns out to be an android, his uncanny hybrid mechanical-organic status horribly and suddenly revealed in a battle-to-the-death with Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver, who reprises the character in James Cameron's 1986 *Aliens*) who has by now wormed the Nostromo's true mission out of Mother.

Ash is not only closest to Mother in his uncanniness,⁶ he is also, I think, the most abject object in the film (a tough competition, admittedly): during his "death" scene, he gushes and spurts and oozes blood and guts and electronic components of an entirely unacceptable milky color; he also occupies, incidentally, the place of the undead for a moment, when his severed head is reattached long enough for a final, horribly mobile sneer at the mere humans and their chances of survival.

The mission is well-nigh accomplished before Ash "dies." A mysterious "thing" has merged horribly with-and/or invaded and penetrated-crew member Kane's face. Kane's subsequent status is for a time uncanny and ambiguous: he is not quite alive and not quite dead; he is the creature's ...what? Victim? Lover?

Spouse? Food? Mother? The "thing," which embraces his head with long, bony, knuckled, fingerlike appendages and completely covers his face with its, uh, body, looks something like female genitalia (at least it does when Ash has it splayed out in an examining dish). But it also has a tubal/phallic appendage inserted deep into Kane's throat.



But Mother, betraying both technological and cinematic convention, continues her doomsday count. When she realizes that Mother won't back down, Ripley shrieks in terror, anguish, and frustration: "Mother! You Bitch! Goddammit!" Ripley's epithets (like "bitch," "goddam"), an instance of what Edmund Leach has called "animal abuse" (Leach 1964, 28) imply that Mother is no June Cleaver; she belongs (like the Alien) to an ambiguous, possibly unplumbable category. The mother Ripley thought was there operates by a set of rules (she is, after all, an operating system); the Mother who/which turns out to be there does not.

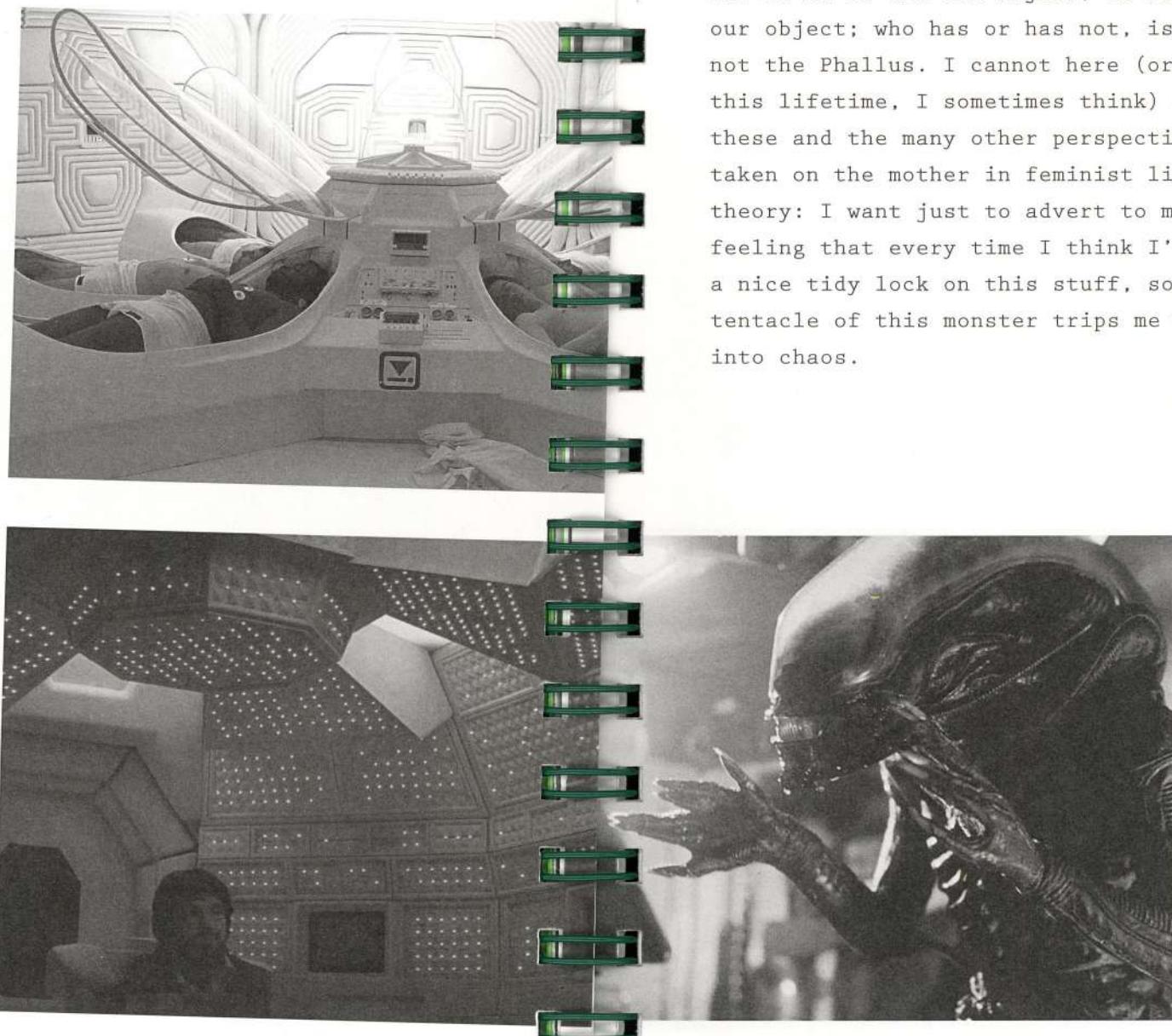
Mother's betrayal could be explained away, extra-diegetically, as a technical malfunction, but all "her" other evil acts are intentional, all following a logic based on the Company's scheme to use the kids to incubate specimens for its biological research division. And yet how can a machine uncannily exceed its programming?⁷ As mother and as machine, Mother is in horrific excess of her ostensible functions.

Should we bother worrying about this? After all, Ripley wins. But just as James Cameron's 1986 version of Ripley will not meet our desire for unambiguously feminist mother-heroes, Scott's Mother is not merely the Company's girl. If "bitch" and "goddam" reinstall the human/animal overlap undergirding the category "Mother," so the final closeup of Ripley and Jones the cat evokes a similar grey area. We're left wondering if the cat's been

impregnated (as we will in Aliens about Newt, another little one rescued by Ripley from the grip of the Alien). The carefully composed image of the virgin warrior woman settling down for a long winter's nap with her pet may make us muse about the precise extent to which Ripley (any woman) is really Mother's daughter-with her "unnatural" affinity for loyalties which make a mess of species, gender, and ethical boundaries.

"We're in some real pretty shit now, man!" -Hudson

Mother is a problem. She's been figured, refigured, configured, disfigured as (and the following list is partial, incomplete, fragmentary-the usual feminine mess): who we must think back through; who we want to/don't want to/can't/won't be; who is locked up in the attic; who seduces every body-really, first, and always; who we must and will (and possibly can't altogether) abject; who is or is not the object, an object, our object; who has or has not, is or is not the Phallus. I cannot here (or in this lifetime, I sometimes think) review these and the many other perspectives taken on the mother in feminist literary theory: I want just to advert to my own feeling that every time I think I've got a nice tidy lock on this stuff, some tentacle of this monster trips me back into chaos.



The monster trope comes easily, "naturally." Unsurprisingly, feminist literary critical discourse, like the other narrative discourses discussed herein, is populated by monsters. Jane Gallop, for example, notes that they are frequent figures in feminist discourse. She calls attention to the opening sentence of the Editors' Preface of the first feminist issue of Yale French Studies: "This is a very unusual issue of Yale French Studies, in that its guest editor is a seven headed monster from Dartmouth." Gallop notes the feminist re-vision in this gesture: "The editors are saying: Look, we are horrifying, we are monstrous, we are inhumanly ugly. This turns out to be an ironic way of saying: Look, we are 'very unusual,' we are beautiful, we are extraordinary" (Gallop 1989, 13). That the monster persistently lurks near mother in feminist theory is nicely borne out in another Gallop review essay, this one on Garner, Kahane, and Sprengnether's The (M)Other Tongue; here, Gallop calls the hybrid concept Mother-Other "the monstrous word" (Gallop 1987, 317), and a revealing typographical error both "monstrous" and "an alien within the mother tongue" (ibid., 328).

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blade RUNNER

(1982)

Blade Runner and Cyberpunk Visions of Humanity

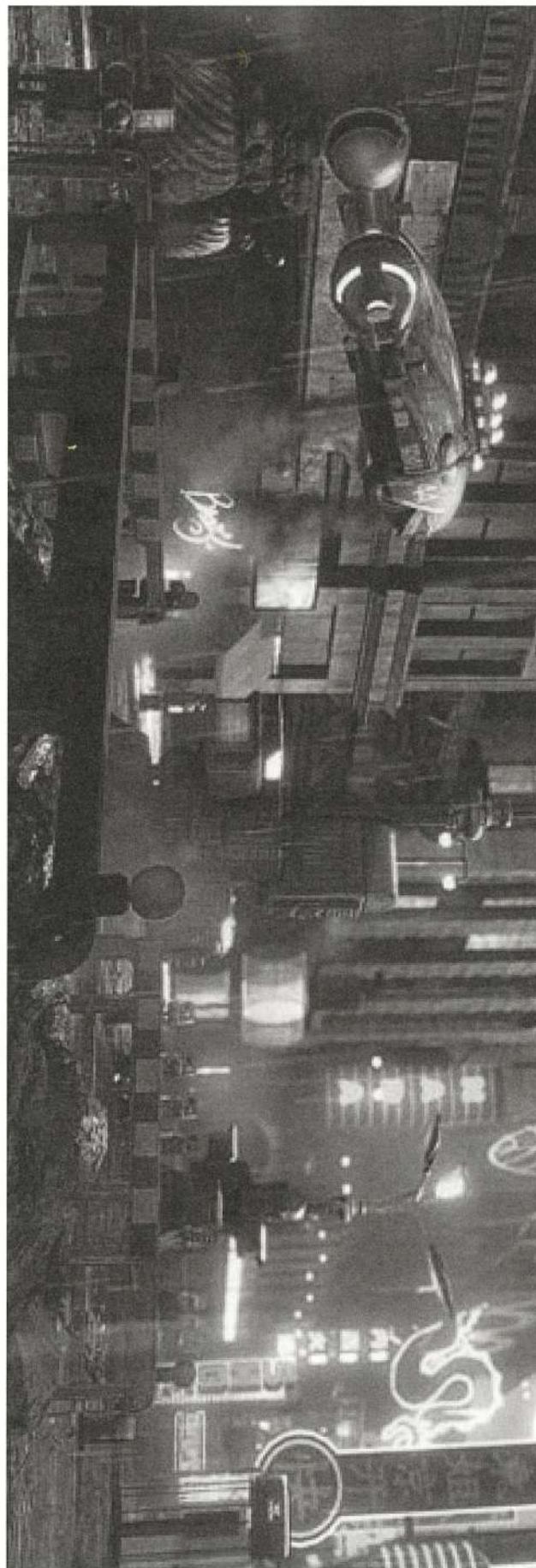
By W.A Senior

Ridley Scott's popular 1982 film *Blade Runner*, which was adapted from Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, appeared just before William Gibson's quintessential cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* was published in 1984, and the two share enough features that one might well retroactively call *Blade Runner* the first truly cyberpunk film. Future urban nightmares form their settings; huge financial conglomerates usurp the powers of government; technology, Japanese influence, and a bouillabaisse of postmodern history and culture permeate each; while the Frankensteinian theme of man crafting himself and experimenting with new forms provides both the conflict and the philosophical dialectic that run through the film and through cyberpunk fiction and lead to their mutual central questions: What does it mean to be human? What are the boundaries of humanity? How human or humane are humans? When android/replicants and humans meet, how can one tell them apart? How human are replicants, androids, or genetically designed wo/men?

Blade Runner, like most cyberpunk fiction, establishes no apodictic criteria for humanity. Rather, it insinuates a wide range of constantly metamorphosing humanities from the regressive street rats to the superhuman replicants: "Eventually all the boundaries are blurred between master and slave, hunter and hunted, hero and villain, the animate and the inanimate, the human and the nonhuman" (Francavilla 8). The terms "cyberpunk" and "Neuromancer" are portmanteau words which alloy human concepts to mechanical ones, as perhaps do "Blade" and "Runner." In Bruce Sterling's Mechanist and Shapers stories, men dispute the future of mankind and divide into two opposing groups, one committed to improving and developing man through technology and merger with machines, the other devoted to genetic and psychological evolution. In Dan Simmons' Hyperion novels, the Outers redesign themselves into a myriad of forms, that imitate animal and plant life combined with human form. Even the computer-generated gods of William Gibson's Sprawl novels are primarily human emanations, software personalities and powers born of human thought and feeling, demi-urges of the chip. Other prominent venues are the genetic tinkering in Rudy Rucker's work, the "vastening" of Frederick Pohl's Heechee series whereby a human becomes a computer analog, Neil Stephenson's related *Snow Crash* with its Metaverse, and of course the earlier work by Philip K. Dick, especially in novels such as *Ubik* where human perception, or reality, is controlled by software.. In each case mankind begins to change and develop,

to evolve in a sense, under his own control, and the age old question of what it means to be human takes on added dimensions and complications.

As Scott Bukatman phrases it, "Cyberpunk, and the science fiction of terminal identity, returns the human (and its fate) to the center stage of the postmodern drama" (60). Norman Spinrad called the cyberpunk authors "neuromantics"; part of his reference addresses the "radical technological change which provides the opportunity for human beings to positively change the 'perceptual and psychic definitions of what it means to be human'" (Mead 350). Bruce Sterling comments that one of the central images of cyberpunk fiction is the prosthesis through which flesh and technology meet and meld to produce a different vision of humanity (Tatsumi 26). In *Blade Runner* are elements mirrored in the later cyberpunk fictions of Sterling, Rucker, John Shirley, Gibson and others. Because "cyberpunk" itself is an amorphous term and covers a broad array of ideas, a one-to-one correspondence of elements with *Blade Runner* does not exist; where the two connect most closely is in the presentation of an ever-adapting humanity and the factors which promote such evolution.



A major factor in the cyberpunk environment is the futuristic and hostile world through which characters move and which often has the effect of unfocusing humanity because of the need for change. The comfort and sentimentality of middle class 20th century life and the attendant myth of science as panacea give way to a minatory and increasingly technological existence in which science figures as both savior (the Golden Age of sci-fi) and besetting demon (New Wave technophobia). The retro-fitted buildings of *Blade Runner*'s sets image the Sprawl of Gibson's novels, where one building or site is cannibalized so that parts can be added onto another, or the constant accretion in space arcologies where necessity or convenience demands constant additions onto already existing structures. In the streets and alleyways of *Blade Runner* lurk a dispossessed and increasingly ignored underclass that lives by cunning and wit in a social Darwinism gone mad. Even within apparently sanctioned spaces, the environment can be hostile. When Batty and Leon visit the eyeball designer Chew working on eyes in his sub-zero lab, he is wearing a space suit and cannot tolerate the atmosphere when it is removed; when Leon rips his suit open, he is threatening Chew with death by exposure in his own workplace. Outside rain pours down constantly; the skies are covered by smoke, smog, the gaseous effluvia rising from this terrestrial Pandemonium where factories seem volcanoes spewing up ash across the city. As Scott Bukatman and Giuliana Bruno both comment, the muted sepia lighting and the chiaroscuro effect of the movie's cinematography

fade everything together, obscuring certainty and insinuating visually the film's investigation of what it means to be a human. Nothing is distinct; all is smoky, blurred, shadowy so that the street scenes depict crowds with scarcely any individual characteristics, people hiding their features to avoid the corrosive elements and blending into a large amorphous mass. The characters move beneath huge neon signs and building-size simulacra of Oriental models on massive skyscrapers with external media screens. Surrounding and towering above the streets, these video advertisements dwarf everything and render the average person insignificant; however, at the same time the juxtaposition of the "normal" person with the gargantuan figures offers an expanded view of humankind, perhaps with a subtle allusion to replicants, who themselves seem greater than "human."



- human or replicant - shows any remorse for the various deaths (10), but this is incorrect: when Deckard kills Zohra, the scene is attended by slow, melancholy music and his own regrets and unhappiness. He is dismayed by shooting a woman in the back and by the plight of the replicants, which mirrors his own victimization by a police force that hunted him out and forced him into actions he does not wish to take. And so he laments the whole matter for himself, "for her [Zohra], for Rachel."

Another issue raised by the photos is that of memory, recall of the past, for continuity of memory defines the individual. Sterling's *Artificial Kid* manufactures memories. In Dick's *Ubik*, no one can be sure whose thoughts or experiences are whose. In *Neuromancer*, the AI Wintermute implants memories into Corto; Case tries to recapture the sensations of cyberspace through drugs; the Dixie Ratline is nothing but a RAM construct of memory. The characters of *Blade Runner* are similarly bounded by memory. One of Deckard's first comments is a recollection of his ex-wife; Rachel confronts him with both photos and memories, which he tells her are someone else's. Batty's Keatsian discourse as he dies catalogs his most treasured experiences. Leon's explosion during the retina test results from a question about his mother. In this issue lies one nexus of cyberpunk fiction, for memory is shared by people and computers, individually and symbiotically. An AI is "human" in part because of its ability to remember. Gibson, in fact, points out that he considers a computer simply a

metaphor for the brain, so memory too becomes a common denominator in the exploding concept of "humanity."



In addition to their quest for more life, the need for present love and security, as the pictures also testify, drives the replicants. Rachel comes to Deckard in a frightened panic and looks to him for help, just as Batty seems to regard Leon as a younger, slow-witted brother and Pris as lover. The beginning of Deckard's affair with Rachel demonstrates both her urgent passion and his own need for love and comfort, a denial of the label of "cold fish" his ex-wife (if she actually existed) pinned to him. Moreover, the situations, behaviors, reactions, and needs of the replicants parallel or exceed in intensity those of the few humans in the film. Leonard Heldreth cites Pauline Kael's severe criticism of Batty as "so overscaled it's Wagnerian," but points out that "the emotional intensity, the animal exuberance" (52) provide a balance and a contrast to Deckard and the other "humans." In fact, because they are so

aware of their five year existence, the replicants live with an intensity and *joie de vivre* that the genetic humans lack almost entirely. Both of the police, Gaff and Bryant, seem to be cold fish themselves, highly pragmatic and disassociated men. Tyrell, the Frankensteinian father of the replicants destroyed by his own triumph, is a caricature of the inhuman scientist obsessed with progress. On one hand, the replicants' journey to discover who conceived them is an Oedipal journey (Bruno 71). On another mythic level, Tyrell is a remote and distant deity to them; he seems ironically to have no feeling for their tribulations and even applies the Achilles proposition to Batty, explaining that he burns more brightly for having the shorter life, a state and statement, for all their truth, that offer little consolation. Tyrell even calls him the Prodigal Son, tying him into yet another human myth and archetype and confirming his "humanity." Even the chess game, in which the creation surpasses the creator, forwards the paradigm: to Tyrell it is an academic exercise; for Batty the checkmate operates as and prefigures his revenge as he reciprocally cuts short Tyrell's lifespan...



By contrast to Bryant and Tyrell, Deckard and the replicants are round characters with many personal attributes, both strengths and weaknesses. In Roy Batty combat programming and calculated brutality contradict an otherwise compassionate and sensitive nature. He quotes poetry at various times for emotional effect; he seems to treasure Pris and Leon and is both angered and saddened by Zohra's death and the piecemeal destruction of his community; while dying, he rhapsodizes lyrically about the marvelous things he has seen in his life. The others display similar reactions and emotions, but Rachel has been designed to be the most perfect imitation: To simulate implies actually producing in oneself some of the characteristics of what one wants to simulate. It is a matter of internalizing the signs or the systems to the point where there is no difference between "false" and "true," "real" and imaginary." Rachel is the most perfect replicant because she does not know if she is one or not. To say that she simulates her symptoms, her sexuality, her memory is to say that she realizes, experiences them (Bruno 68).

She and Deckard exhibit reflexive stereotypical responses to stress. When being examined by Deckard, Rachel asks to smoke; he, upon returning to his apartment, immediately pours himself a drink in order to relax. After the battles with Zohra and Leon, Deckard turns to Rachel and says, "Shakes? Me too," and then offers her a drink. His anxiety about her is matched by Batty's for Pris, two warriors protecting their women[...]

right in with his companions and later attempts to hide herself among them: until her death.

In *Trillion Year Spree* Brian Aldiss criticizes *Blade Runner* for its deviations from Phillip K. Dick's rich novel, upon which the film is loosely based, and laments the movie's reliance on Hollywood's hard-boiled detective tradition. He further attacks the film for what he calls its reduction of the complex story line and moral problems: "Gone were Rick Deckard's marital problems and his fears about his own authenticity. Gone was the whole question of human worth as something not to be measured in simple IQ terms" (335).⁶ Yet Aldiss' complaints, while they may have pinpointed some of the film's flaws, ignore its intent. Scott's revision of the original is not meant to be literally true to the original because at its heart is the question of what constitutes humanity. Is humanity a measure of quantity or of quality? Is it form or is it content? In fact, "the larger question of the film... is the ability of the state to define the human and to destroy those who fall outside the definition" (Kerman 23).

Neuromancer spawned an entire movement within the science fiction canon and a generation of devotees, while *Blade Runner* has had no imitators, only cousins such as *Mad Max*, perhaps because it cuts too closely and asks too many unpleasant questions about class structure, the figure of the alien within us, racism, power, the ethics of genetic sciences, and so on. Ultimately, *Blade*

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Laputa: castle in the sky

(1986)

The City Ascends: *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* as Critical Utopia

Anthony Lioi

"Our most important task at the present moment is to build castles in the sky."

-Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopia* (1922)

"Utopia has been discredited; it is necessary to rehabilitate it. Utopia is never realized and yet it is indispensable to stimulate change."

-Henri Lefebvre, *Conversation* (1991)

[...] In *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, Miyazaki imagines a flying city in which nature and high technology live together in peace, a peace shattered by human violence. Though critics have made the connection between *Laputa* and *Gulliver's Travels*, the immediate source for a science-island in the sky, few have connected Swift's misanthropy with Miyazaki's plot. While the Swiftean city parodies early modern scientists as literally above the cares of everyday life, Miyazaki's version - a city that rains atomic fire from the sky - takes aim at the political will to dominate through technological superiority.

Though Laputa was lost to history after its first inhabitants abandoned it, the protagonists rediscover the city as an ecological utopia, where first and second nature live in harmony until the return of humanity. In place of the American pastoral idea of the good land shattered by technology, *Laputa* critiques human dominion as violent, brutish, and short. In contrast with Luddite philosophies, which see technology itself as the agent of environmental apocalypse, Miyazaki asserts the benevolence of artificial intelligence in the absence of human violence. This violence is partially overcome by the actions of the heroes, who destroy the military capacity of the city, only to see it rise even farther above the earth as a sign that humans are not ready to inhabit the good Green place. Therefore, *Laputa* is a critical ecotopia that preserves the possibility of the utopian environment while taking contemporary culture to task as insufficiently ethical.

[I]n the stock contrast between city and country each had been assumed to occupy a more or less fixed location in space: the country here, the city there. But in 1844 the sound of a train in the Concord woods implies a radical change in the conventional pattern. Now the great world is invading the land, transforming the sensory texture of rural life - the way it looks and sounds - and threatening, in fact, to impose a new and more complex dominion over it... the distinctive attribute of the new order is its technological power, a power that does not remain confined to the traditional boundaries of the city. (Marx 108)

From this perspective, it is the country that has invaded the city in Laputa; or, more radically, the most powerful city is the one most permeated by the might of the country. This makes Laputa seem archaic, a product of a Golden Age when nature and civilization were not opposed, but also futuristic, a flying city powered by a giant crystal made of the same material as Sheeta's pendant. This "Levistone" is Janus-faced, just like the central tree: it is the source of the city's ability to fly, and of its vast destructive capacity. It is cosmic power, or *ki*, at its most basic, capable of wonders and horrors depending on the wielder. It is the basis of utopia and dystopia, and these polities incarnate in two competing royal lines, represented by Sheeta and her rival, Muska, whose goal is to reassert Laputa's identity as the ultimate empire.

In the absence of human inhabitants, however, Laputa has become something unprecedented: a place where artificial intelligence has become the companion and guardian of the environment. The incident that makes this clear occurs right after Pazu and Sheeta manage to land their glider on one of the outer rings of the city. A giant robot, of the type that liberated Sheeta from Muska's clutches by force, approaches the glider as Pazu tries to ward it off, fearing an attack. Instead, the robot gently lifts the glider and puts it aside, revealing a bird's nest underneath, which Miyazaki renders in close-up, so the point is not lost:

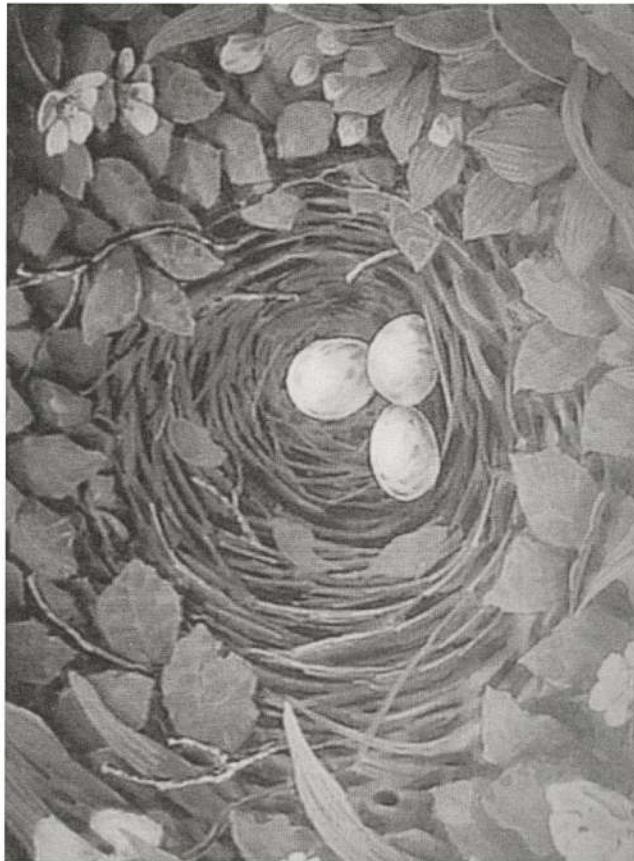


Figure 2: The Bird's Nest on Laputa.

The robot is the guardian, not the destroyer, of the Laputan environment, which Pazu and Sheeta discover to be a lush combination of bucolic fields, deep lakes, temperate forest, and an architecture that evokes classical, medieval, and Renaissance Europe. As they follow the robot deeper into the city, Pazu and Sheeta experience the reverse of the normal transition from pastoral landscape to metropolis: the closer they get to the central tree, the more intense the intertwining of nature and culture becomes, until they stand in front of a monumental stone marker for the founders of Laputa that is embedded in the even more monumental tree trunk. It is here that the robot offers an astonished Sheeta a gesture of fealty in the form of a flower:

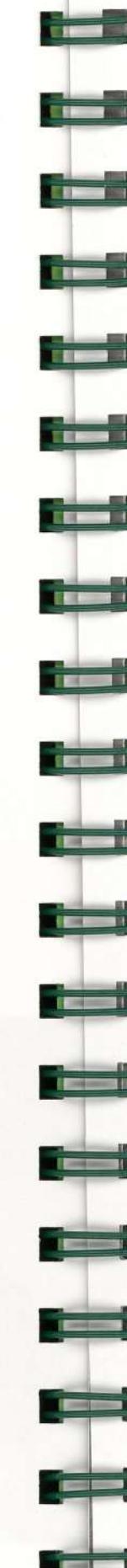
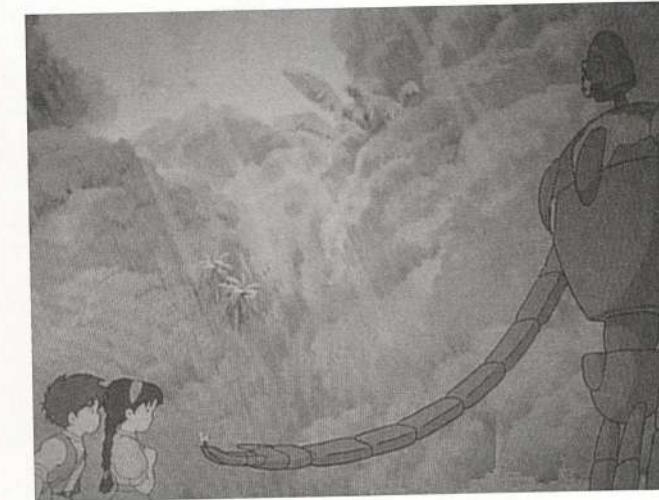


Figure 3: Princess Sheeta Receives a Gesture of Fealty.



The juxtaposition of the delicate flower held in a giant metal hand, offered in deference to a diminutive human, reinforces the earlier image of overwhelming physical power preserving delicate beauty. Though this is surprising in the context of Anglophone science fiction, in which giant robots symbolize the destructive power of the post-atomic age, it is also surprising given the audience's earlier encounters with the same style of robot inside *Laputa* itself. Here, for instance, is an image of a newly awakened robot breaking out of Muska's stronghold:

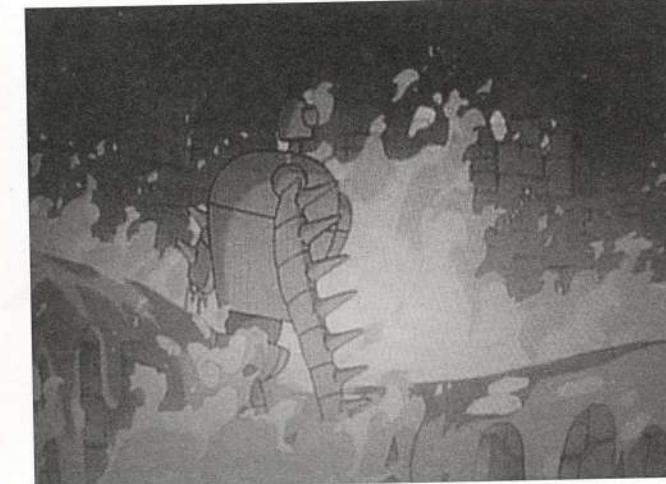


Figure 5: A Robot Breaking Out of Muska's Stronghold.

are saved, Laputa survives the destruction of its weapons platform. What is revealed underneath the stone of the lower hemisphere is the root-ball of the tree, with the great Levistone shining at its center:



Figure 10: Laputa after the Destruction of the Atomic Weapon.

As the heroes escape, the city ascends rather than hiding again in a field of clouds. The destruction of the weapons platform demonstrates that violence is not the heart of the city, that the city survives the end of its imperial identity. This suggests that ecotopia can be separated from dystopia, that modernity can be healed of its colonial nature. Free of its burden, the city rises even higher above the earth with its tree and urban core intact. If humans were able to stay there, to inhabit Laputa in peace, there would be a purely utopian ending. However, the destruction of the weapon leaves no human behind. As she and Pazu fly away, Sheeta turns back to see the guardian robot and its animals resume their lives as if nothing has happened.

This is the last we see of the Laputan habitat before the city ascends out of sight. Ecotopia is preserved, but not for humanity. Rather than restoring the Laputan royal house to its former glory, Sheeta repeats the diaspora of the first Laputans to the ground, and appears happy to do so. Her friends regret the loss of the treasures Laputa contained, but are pleased to be reunited, and begin to plan the next adventure. Pazu, whose father claimed to have encountered Laputa years before, restores his family honor. They are all flying in the end - a classic Miyazaki emblem of joy - but they fly away from the city, and it flies away from them to assume an orbit above Japan, as we see in the closing credits. Ecotopia lives on, but not for us.

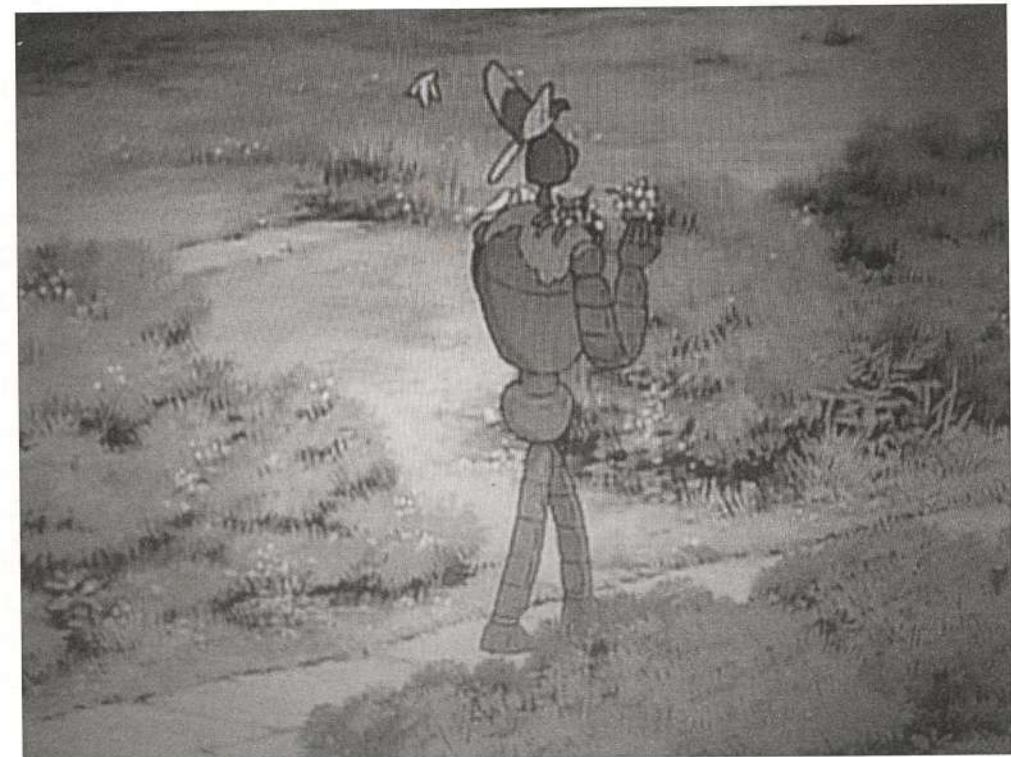


Figure 11: The Robot Goes about Its Business.

Technology is what separates humans from communion with the wild, what makes us more unnatural and unethical. If Miyazaki shares the critique of empire with Green anarchism, he questions the assumption that technology is imperialist by nature. By asserting the independence of technology from the flaws in human character, *Laputa* implies that ecotopia is linked to a spiritual metamorphosis that will lead to cultural transformation. The robot is as much an icon as St. Francis, in the literal sense: an image that, when contemplated, leads to spiritual progress. In his willingness to entertain the idea of an alliance between technosphere and biosphere beyond the flaws in human character, Miyazaki is, unexpectedly, an ally of Donna Haraway's cyborg philosophy, though he might be surprised to know it.⁶

[...]If one were serious about using anime to move the global middle class to think and live differently, his work would be a logical point of departure. For this reason, we must return to the end of *Laputa*, when the city ascends, taking ecotopia with it, and reconsider an earlier claim that its world is not for us. In fact, because the city takes up a watchful position above Japan in the end credits, the audience is prompted to contemplate its possible return, the idea that the city is not for us yet, because we are not sufficiently advanced, ethically, as a species. There is a proleptic aspect to *Laputa* as ecotopia; the city is a foretaste of something greater to come, the carrier of an eschatological promise. Prolepsis is a prominent feature of utopia as a

genre, but the combination of transformed community and blessed dwelling place resonates with many of the grand traditions of imperial peoples... This general compatibility of ecopian thinking with larger traditions of world-transformation leads to the questions of the requirements posed by *Laputa* itself. The film asks its global audience to consider the following: that empire is an inherently destructive form of civilization; that sustainable civilizations must renounce warfare as a way of life; that the renunciation of war permits an alliance of first and second nature, artificial intelligence and other creatures; that artificial intelligence in community with other creatures may be more rather than less harmonious than humanity by itself; and that urban cultures engaged in such an alliance are not the antithesis of nature, but may be based on the powers of stone, wind, and forest. Sheeta's decision to risk the destruction of her heritage in the face of empire is a sign that such an ethical turn is possible. Her youth, and the unresolved marriage plot with Pazu, need not be taken as an indication of the proper audience for the film; rather, they represent the condition of the audience relative to the ethical turn. *Laputa* is not a Neverland in which children are invited to stay children forever, but a challenge to follow its children into adulthood, a condition in which empires repent, take responsibility for planetary flourishing, and invite ecotopia to come down to earth.⁷

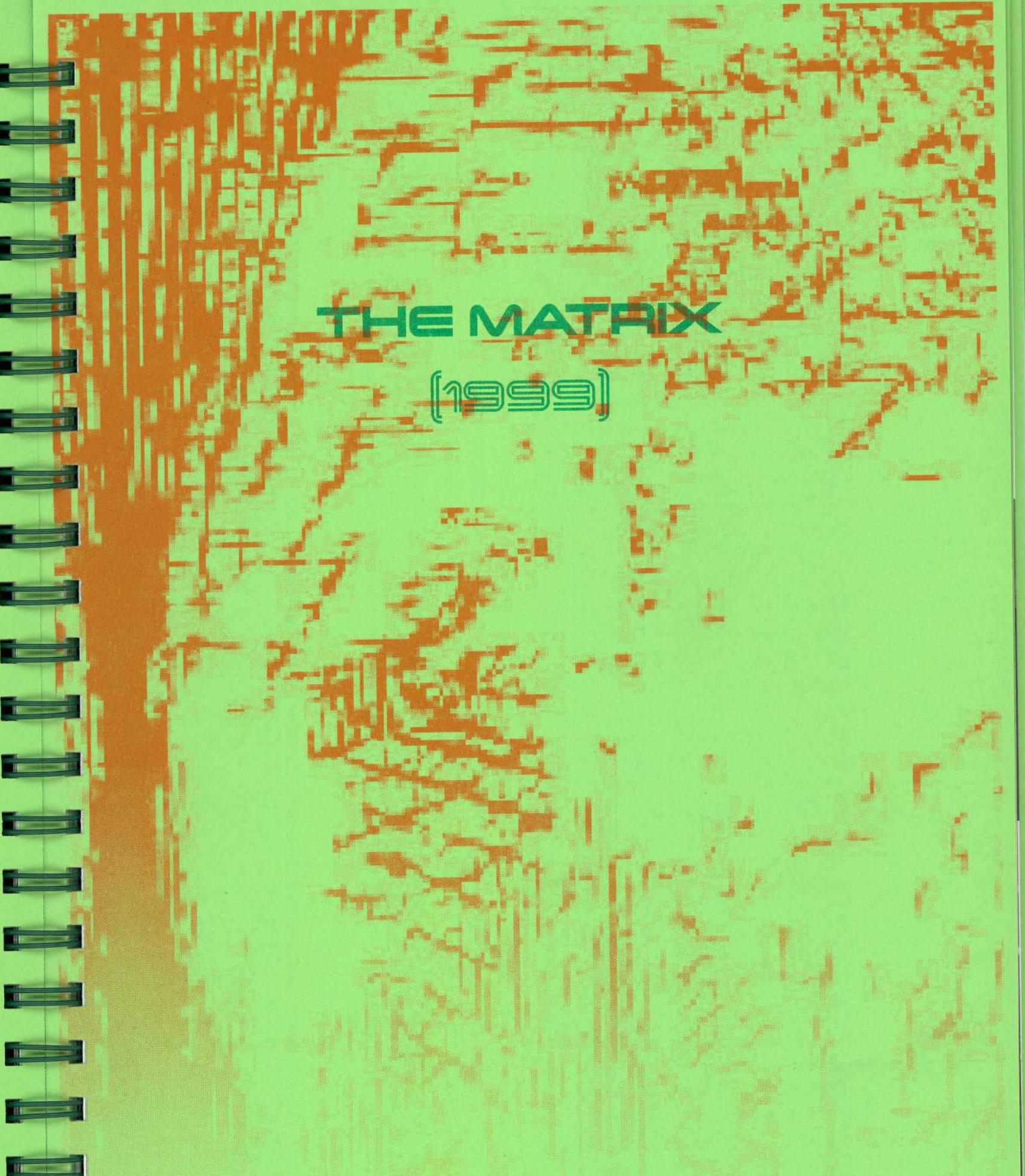
Footnotes

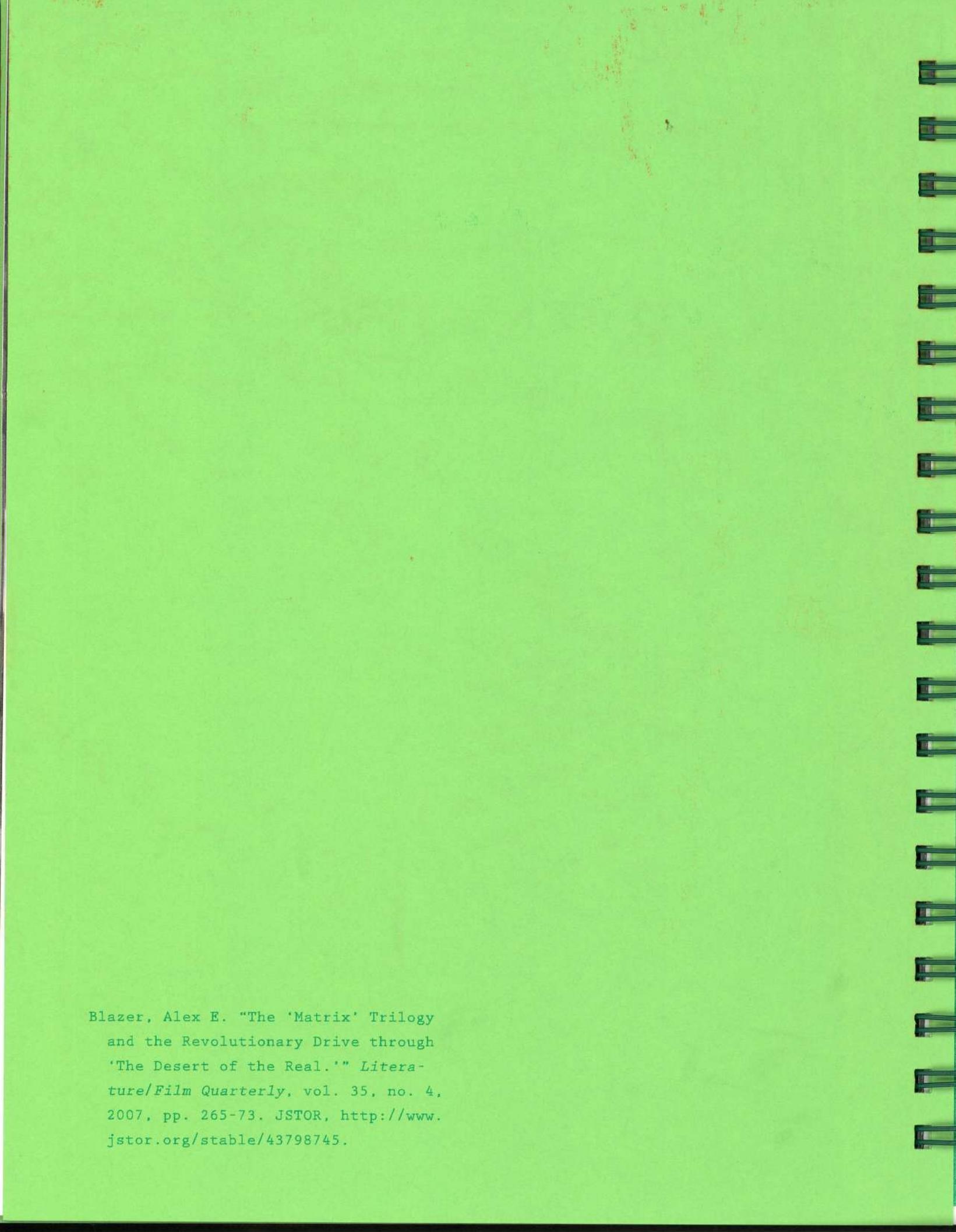
- 1 See the reviews at Metacritic.com. Accessed August 11, 2009.
- 2 See especially the yellow reviews at Metacritic.com. Accessed July 29, 2009.
- 3 In his classic analysis of the origins of Western environmental crisis, the historian Lynn White, Jr., holds up Francis as "the greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history" and the "patron saint for ecologists" because of his doctrine of the equality of creatures. See Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. 1-13. In 1979, John Paul II granted White's wish and declared Francis the patron saint of ecology.
- 4 See Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound To Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. New York: Basic Books, 1990. 188-201
- 5 See Henry Jenkins, *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2006 and Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- 6 See Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- 7 The ideas in this essay were developed at a panel on anime hosted by the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association; a panel on anime at the Society for Utopian Studies; and at a



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The “Matrix” Trilogy and the Revolutionary Drive through “The Desert of the Real”

Alex E. Blazer

Reviewers, critics, and audiences alike were stunned by visual and philosophical imagination rendered in *The Matrix* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999). Consequently, *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) was one of the most highly anticipated sequels of 2003. *Reloaded* did not live up to the hype; it frustrated many an audiences' desires. *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003) frankly left audiences disappointed. Many argued that the final installments lost the metaphysical and romantic insights of the original. The trilogy starts with a bang but ends with a whimper. The transcendental vision that we viewers vicariously receive through the mind-bending experiences of Neo, Trinity, and Morpheus 's journey down the rabbit hole in *The Matrix* are not only eclipsed but effaced by the drive through “the desert of the real” in *Revolutions*. Our insight was blinded and our hope was emptied; and that is precisely the subversive point of the

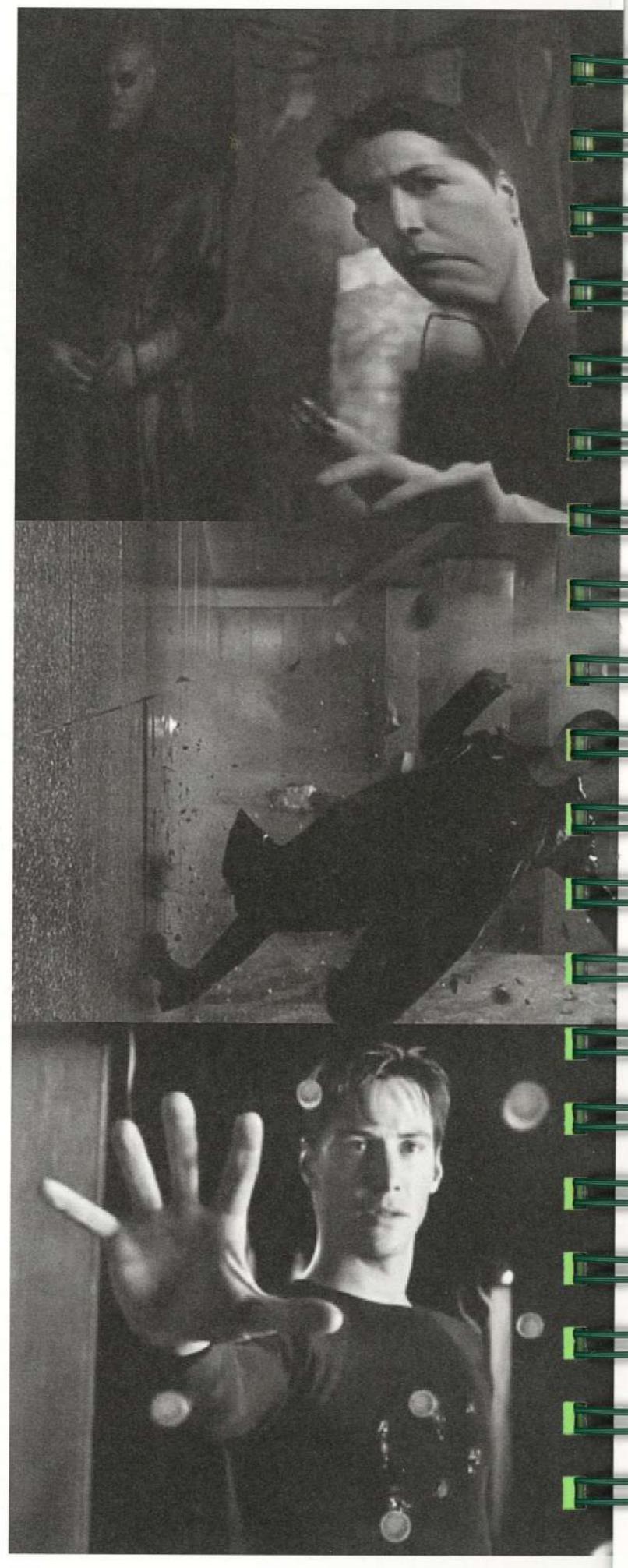
trilogy. The sequels fail to recapture the spirit of the first film because they surpass it. Although a great film, *The Matrix* by itself is psychologically naive. Considered as part of a trilogy, each succeeding film supersedes the previous in a dialectic that drives in circles around “the desert of the real,” subsequently hollowing out the heroic pleasures of salvation and sustained chase scenes in the first two films. To understand the true nature of the imaginary world of *The Matrix*, that film must be viewed alongside the worlds of *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*. I assert that although the trilogy may disappoint our desire for satisfactory conclusion, it does not deviate from its philosophical trajectory of existential psychoanalysis. Instead, it appropriately carries itself through the three realms of psyche corresponding to psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan 's topology of Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. First, I will show how *The Matrix* has been critically mined for its themes regarding the relationship between the Lacanian Symbolic and Real; and then I will argue how, as part of the trilogy, the film should rather be conceived as the Imaginary step toward the Symbolic *Reloaded* and Real *Revolutions*.

1. THE MATRIX IS NEITHER SYMBOLIC NOR REAL BUT IMAGINARY

The *Matrix* introduces us to the realm of the Lacanian Imaginary, but not without imaginary conceptions of the Symbolic and Real. What captured the hearts of general audiences and the minds of academic critics was the film's

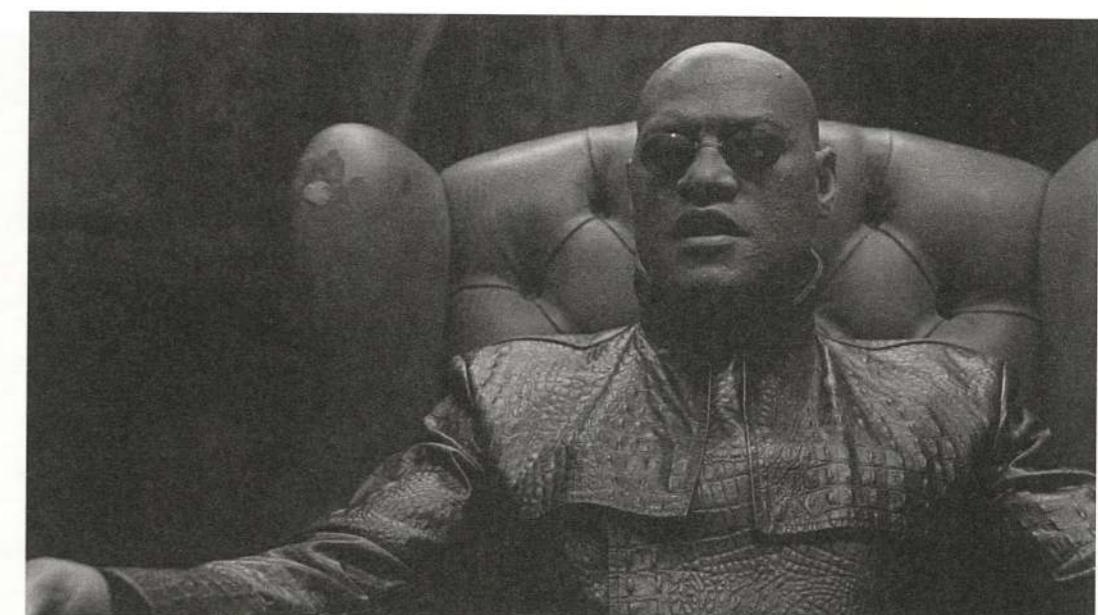
literalized conceit that the world we live in exists only in our heads. In The Language of the Self Lacan lays the groundwork for understanding how existence can be viewed as symbolic rather than objective.

Real world action is tied to ideological action, but the two are stretched out of syncopation as our culture becomes more concerned with the ever-expanding bureaucracies of rhetoric and internet works of language. Words lose their reference to reality and symbolic thought supersedes direct action. The reliance on the Symbolic affects our psyches. In Seminar XI Lacan proposes that our innermost being is an effect of language: "The unconscious is constituted by the effects of speech on the subject, it is the dimension in which the subject is determined in the development of the effects of speech, consequently the unconscious is structured like a language" (149). The Matrix realizes such a psychoanalytic philosophy of symbolically constituted subjectivity in celluloid. The film follows Mr. Thomas Anderson as he grows steadily more worried that the world he thought was Real is in fact a game; perhaps in his wildest dreams he even imagined it to be what it is, a Symbolic construct. By day, Mr. Anderson puts on the guise of the game and leads the life of a conformable corporate computer programmer; however, by night, he defies the system as a criminal computer hacker and dealer of illegal experience simulations who goes by the cyberspace name of Neo, the new one.



When Neo learns from an anonymous hacker that "The Matrix has you," he seeks out uber-hacker Morpheus with the hopes that Morpheus can answer the question which haunts his dreams, "What is the Matrix?" In his heart of hearts, Neo feels that the conventional world is a facade, a veil covering an enigma. His paranoia proves reasonable as Morpheus explains the reality of the Matrix:

MORPHEUS. Let me tell you why you are here. You have come because you know



something. What you know you can't explain but you feel it. You've felt it your whole life, felt that something is wrong with the world. You don't know what, but it's there like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad. It is this feeling that brought you to me. Do you know what I'm talking about?

NEO. The Matrix?

MORPHEUS. Do you want to know what it

is? The Matrix is everywhere, it's all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out your window or on your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes.

It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

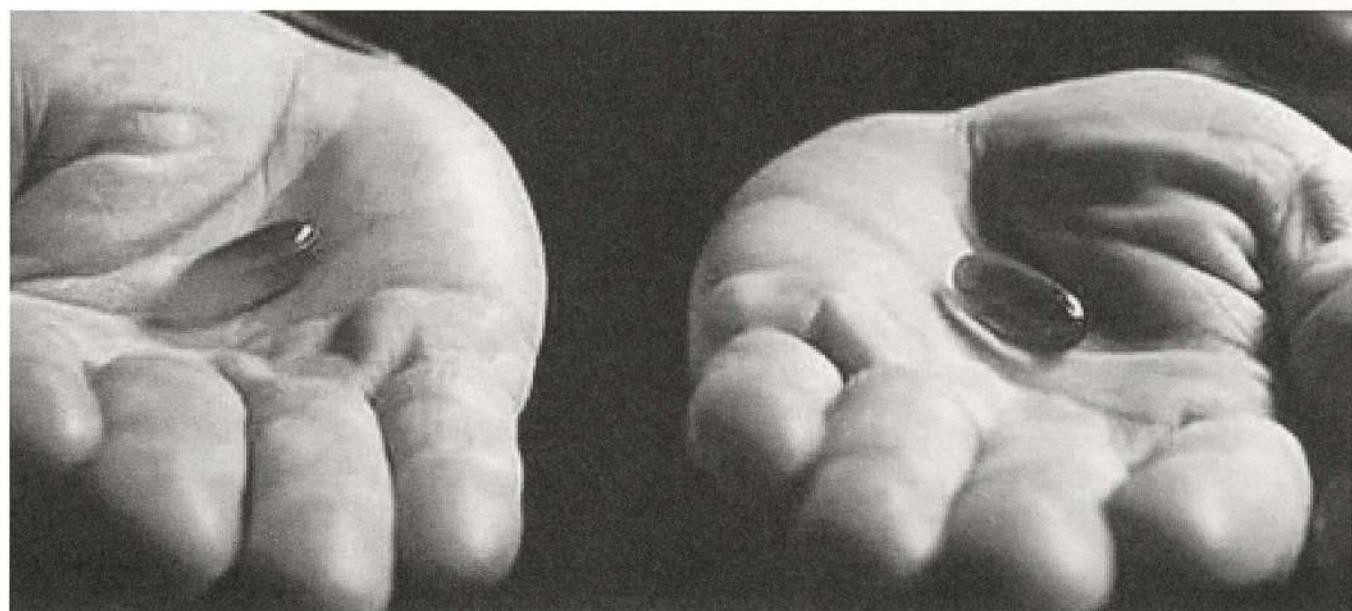
NEO. What truth?

MORPHEUS. That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into

bondage, kept inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste, or touch. A prison for your mind.

What Neo thinks is Real is merely a symbolic construct, a virtual reality designed by what used to be our civilization's machines for the purpose of pacifying the human mind as the human body is harvested as a battery to run the machines. The film physically realizes the Real,

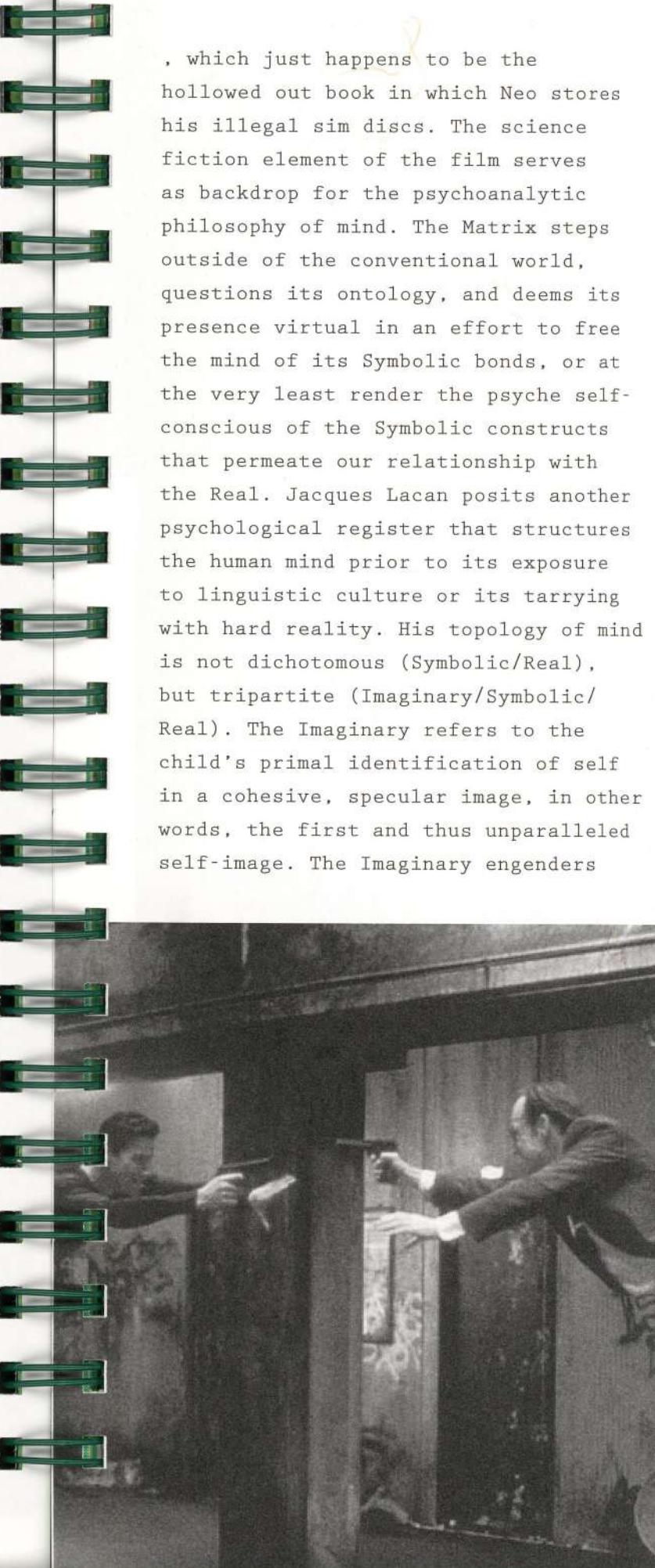
a psychological realm that Jacques Lacan defines as "too transparent, too concrete," "what resists symbolisation absolutely" (Seminar I 66-67), and "that which is excised from the primordial symbolization" (*Écrits* 324). Once Neo swallows the red pill, he becomes immersed in the sticky self-reflection that not only defies the illusion but also breaks the bonds of his Symbolically constructed reality; quite literally, a solid mirror turns viscous and envelops his psychological



presence while the machines in turn expel his bodily presence from their electricity farm: Neo is expelled from the Symbolic Matrix into the Real world, whose Zionist inhabitants actively resist the virtual order. Once Neo's mind is disconnected from the Matrix and his body is ejected from the pod, his psyche is forced to acclimate to the Real, in the film's case, a world in which the artificially intelligent machines that served as the apex of

human thinking have ironically overrun civilization, enslaved humanity, and sent the only free minds into hiding underground, literally, underneath the earth. Being unplugged from the Matrix and forced to be free in the Real world is trying, as Morpheus attests to Neo: "I feel that I owe you an apology. There is a rule that we do not free a mind once it reaches a certain age. It is dangerous. They have trouble letting go. Their mind turns against them. I've seen it happen." Deprived of Symbolic

security, the Real floods the psyche. This cut through the Symbolic chain of signification and submersion in a Real realm that underlies everything we thought we knew is precisely that which provides such stimulation to postmodern critics. The Matrix plays on cultural theorists' concerns that postmodern culture has lost contact with tangible reality because it surfs a sea of signifiers, as exemplified by Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations*



, which just happens to be the hollowed out book in which Neo stores his illegal sim discs. The science fiction element of the film serves as backdrop for the psychoanalytic philosophy of mind. The Matrix steps outside of the conventional world, questions its ontology, and deems its presence virtual in an effort to free the mind of its Symbolic bonds, or at the very least render the psyche self-conscious of the Symbolic constructs that permeate our relationship with the Real. Jacques Lacan posits another psychological register that structures the human mind prior to its exposure to linguistic culture or its tarrying with hard reality. His topology of mind is not dichotomous (Symbolic/Real), but tripartite (Imaginary/Symbolic/Real). The Imaginary refers to the child's primal identification of self in a cohesive, specular image, in other words, the first and thus unparalleled self-image. The Imaginary engenders

one's aboriginal feeling of ontological essence over against the bureaucratic existence within the Symbolic and the sublime submersion of self by the Real:

Imaginary here refers - in the first instance, to the subject's relation to its formative identifications, which is the true meaning of the term "image" in analysis - secondly, to the relation of the subject to the real whose characteristic is that of being illusory, which is the facet of the imaginary most often highlighted. (Seminar I, 116)

In other words, prior to becoming disillusioned of our sense of self by the riddles of Symbolic queries and ruined by the contingency of the Real world, we all felt whole, unique, and one. The original Matrix plays into this primitive state as it enthralls its audience to identify with Neo, who journeys on a quest into his very unconsciousness. Although virtual reality plays a major role in the Symbolic/Real binary of the film, dream work constitutes The Matrix's deeper method. The Matrix itself controls its subjects by plugging their dream life into its grid, such that Neo inquires, "You ever have the feeling that you're not sure if you're awake or still dreaming?" Morpheus offers Neo the chance to follow his dreams: "You take the red pill and you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes." Soon, Neo learns from his trip down the hole that he is the most important whole; he is the One. The first film is less about the

Symbolic Matrix having Neo than it is about Neo entering the dream life of his fundamental fantasy, an archetypal being of oneness and the savior of humanity, which he can never consciously admit because the supposedly Real world has robbed him of his uniqueness:

NEO. Why? So I can hear some old lady tell me, what? That I'm this guy that everybody's been waiting for? The one that's supposed to save the world? Come on. How do I respond to that? I can't. It's ridiculous. I mean who am I? I'm nobody, I'm just a guy. What did I do, Morpheus? Why me

MORPHEUS. Faith is beyond the reach of whys and why nots. These things are not a matter of cause and effect, Neo. I do not believe things with my mind. I believe them with my heart. In my gut.

Just as Morpheus teaches Neo to have faith in himself, the film captivates its audience with an imaginary screen dream preaching us to tear down the facade of existence and revel in the authenticity of unadulterated, authentic being. The warm heart conquers cold logic and the trusty gut overcomes gritty reality. Although on first viewing, and particularly when screening the film without the context of the final two installments of the trilogy, it would appear that the Matrix corresponds to the Symbolic Order, the language and culture of patriarchal authority that constructs, determines, and codes human existence as if we were simply cogs (or batteries) in a machine. Agent Smith is the representative



programmatic enforcer, the superego voice of authority that would punish the nonbelievers who question or challenge the law of the land (or mind); the Matrix actually equates with the Imaginary, the realm of primary image and unconscious imagination. Morpheus guides Neo and the viewer into the underworld of our unconscious mind; the Nebuchadnezzar is the dream vessel, dreams being regressive pathways back to the primary images of being when we were at one with the mother-world. And this vessel takes Neo to the "old lady" that Neo mentioned, who is in fact the Oracle, the mother of the Matrix who verifies his transcendental status. We like to imagine that there really is an alienating matrix that controls us so that we can escape our present predicament and journey back to a state of authentic identity if someone offers us the red pill.



SERAPH, (nods.)

NEO. How do they work?

SERAPH. The code is hidden in tumblers. One position opens a lock. Another position opens one of these doors.

Neo learns from the Oracle that she herself is a program, just like the Architect.

NEO. If I had to guess, I'd say you're a program from the machine world. So is he.

THE ORACLE. So far, so good.

NEO. But if that's true, that can mean you are a part of this system, another kind of control.

Thus, Neo's goal, as is the psycho-philosophical motivation of the film, is to chase down the transcendental meaning behind the Matrix and reverse the trilogy's initial hierarchy. By confronting the father (the Architect) in an attempt to acquire his masterful knowledge of the system, the Matrix will no longer have Neo, but rather Neo will have the Matrix.

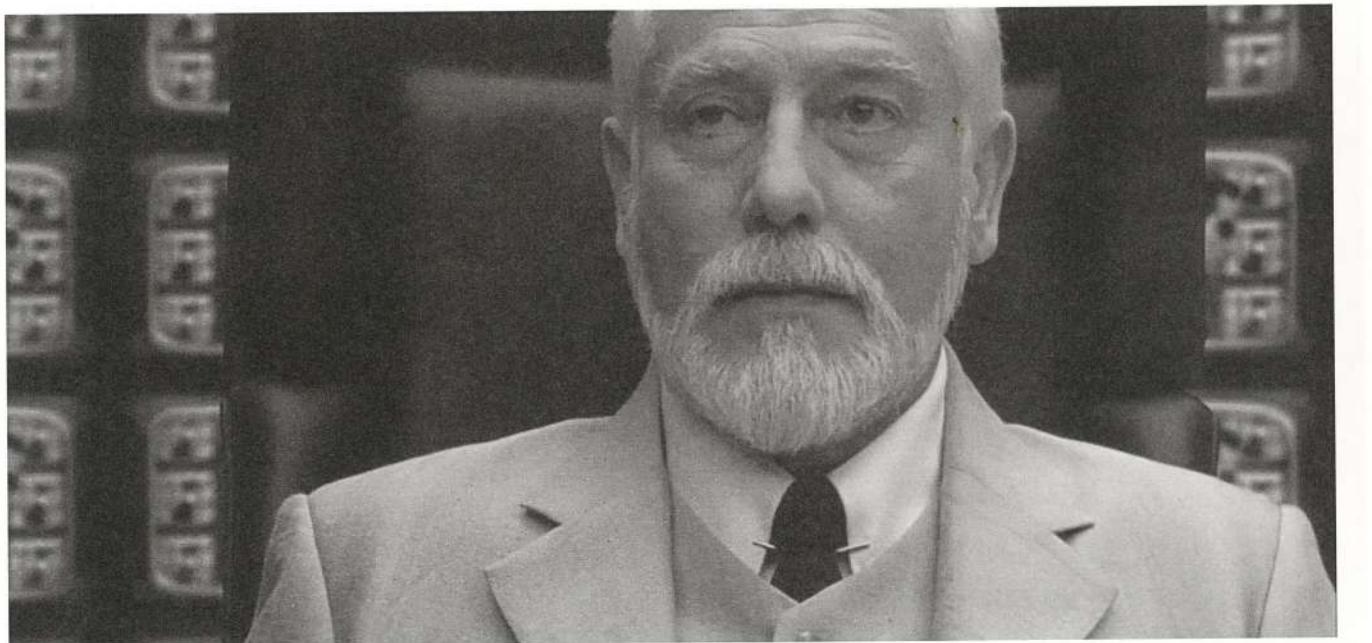
When he finally confronts the Architect, who looks a lot like Sigmund Freud, with the question, "Why am I here?" Neo learns

Your life is the sum of a remainder of an unbalanced equation inherent to the programming of the Matrix. You are the eventuality of an anomaly, which, despite my sincerest

2. THE MATRIX RELOADED IS SYMBOLIC

The Matrix Reloaded traverses the Symbolic register. While the first film establishes Neo as the messiah, the second film fully integrates the Imaginary One into the Symbolic Matrix. Now that he recognizes that he is the One, doing as Link suggests, "his Superman thang," Neo needs to understand how to master the Matrix: "I wish I knew what I was supposed to do." In the first film, the mother of the Matrix, the Oracle, prophesied Neo's unique distinction; hence, in the second film, Neo must seek out the father of the Matrix, the Architect, in order to fully compute his role as savior. The mother imagines the child's particularity within the universe while the father ushers the child into the symbolic world. On the surface, the middle movie is one long chase, with the highway scene at the center. However, on a deeper level, the film represents the chase for the key to meaning, the master signifier that will unlock the doors to perception, to God and metaphysics. In order to gain access to the master of the Matrix, Neo must master the key codes of the world; he must journey behind and beneath the Symbolic virtual reality.

NEO. These are back doors, aren't they? Programmer access.



efforts, I have been unable to eliminate from what is otherwise a harmony of mathematical precision. While it remains a burden assiduously avoided, it is not unexpected, and thus not beyond a measure of control. Which has led you, inexorably, here.

Neo's Imaginary status has fully entered into the Symbolic realm, for he discovers that he is unique and not unique: he comes from a succession of aberrant saviors. As Imaginary superhero in the first film, he represented salvation for others within the Matrix; as Symbolic savior in the second film, he must rescue, if not redeem, the Matrix itself since "The function of the One is now to return to the Source, allowing a temporary dissemination of the code you carry, reinserting the prime program," otherwise the system will crash, killing all the people in it. This raises many questions (for instance, the contradictory nature of Neo's messianic status) and necessitates that the third film answers the call.

Although inspired by the pure good of the imaginary demand for ontology and teleology, for first and final causes, The Matrix Reloaded in fact weds the dual Symbolic desires of the chase for meaning and mastery of discourse. Moreover, the film blends the formulaic codes of action genre movies

with psycho-philosophical inquiry. It gives its return audience what it most desires, enthralling action tied to Imaginary identification, while nonetheless frustrating and subverting those desires: the highway chase is much too long and the Architect's answers cryptically inconclusive if not altogether mind-boggling and confounding. This middle movie represents Lacanian desire within the Symbolic at its purest: Reloaded is the metonymy of desire that will never achieve satisfaction because it can only chase down the highway of special effects, the great chain of signifiers that no longer JJtSSf reference a signified reality. At the end of the

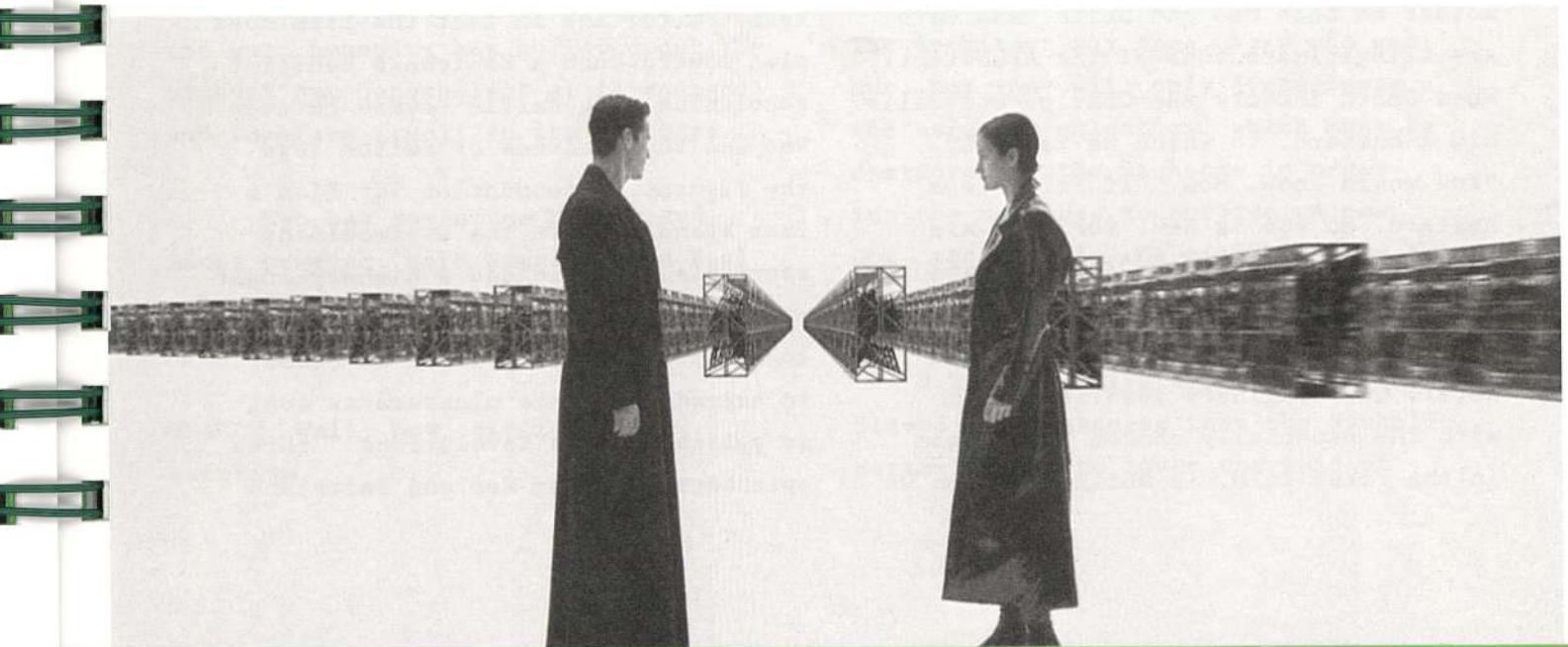
film, the audience is left wanting more - they want the hero to save the world and they want to know what it all means. That desire. Because it can only redirect the chase for mea significance. The Matrix Revolution is predestined to disappoint.

3. THE MATRIX REVOLUTIONS IS REAL

The Matrix Revolutions crashes us off the adrenaline-fueled highway chase of desire for symbolic mastery and drives us directly into the realm of the Real battle for Zion. While a pursuit within virtual reality constitutes the midpoint of Reloaded , an impossible battle for the human species comprises the focus of Revolutions. For Neo, the film begins in Limbo, where he is "trapped between this world and the machine world" in a train station called Mobil (antonymic anagram of Limbo) Ave.; and I would like to suggest that, for us, the film ends in Limbo because the Real is the purgatory of ineffable and indefinable action that underlies and underscores the Symbolic quest for final, transcendent meaning.

In The Matrix Neo fulfilled our imagination's deepest de-sire: his mastery of virtual reality crowned him the chosen One. In Reloaded he chased down the key to the program, thus accomplishing our desire to unlock the code of transcendent meaning behind the symbolic. In Revolutions Neo becomes able to control the Real world sentinels without being jacked into the Matrix; he does not need to physically plug into the Matrix, for his Real mind tarries with the Symbolic world of the machines and their virtual reality. The Oracle explains, "The power of the One extends beyond this world. It reaches from here all the way back to where it came from." Neo's power has spread from the Imaginary into the Symbolic and finally emerges in the Real. The terminal world of Revolutions is neither a visionary game nor a philosophical pursuit; it constitutes the onslaught of the Real. However, before we can appreciate this we must first separate out the Symbolic cover from the Real undergirding of the film.

At first glimpse, we are led to



believe that this Real moves toward balance and harmony. If Neo is Christ, Smith is the anti-Christ. As the Oracle further explicates: "He is you. Your opposite, your negative, the result of the equation trying to balance itself out." Just as Neo first establishes power within the Matrix and subsequently gains control over the real-world sentinels from outside the Matrix, from the space of the Real, Agent Smith multiplies himself like a virus within the Matrix, taking over humans and programs alike, and then gains control of the mind of a real-world Zionist, from the space of the Symbolic. The two opposing forces bring balance to the equation by canceling each other out. Such erasure does bring harmony to the Matrix; however, it also evacuates their unique identities: they become nothing more than positive and negative poles. Moreover, just as Smith multiplies exponentially, we learn that Neo is just the latest version of the previous seven supposed "the Ones" designed to bring harmony to the Matrix. The paradoxical reality of the situation is that Neo is no less a programmatic copy than Smith. They are filial codes. The Oracle is mother to both Neo and Smith, and both are illegitimate sons of the Architect. When Smith infects the Oracle, she calls him a bastard, to which he replies, "You would know, Mom." If Smith is a bastard, so too is Neo, for both are born of the Matrix (the illegitimate sense of the term) and both seek to destroy it (the malefic sense of the term). Our Imaginary identification with the especially chosen Neo, begun in the first film, is nullified when we

learn that he is not the one who will revolutionize the Matrix but is instead simply another variable among many within a greater formulaic architecture. The Symbolic severs the Imaginary from unitary ontology and places it in a multifarious field of meaning, while, as we will soon see below, the Real disillusioned the Imaginary by annihilating the possibility of

transcendental meaning. The Real of Revolutions preserves the Symbolic Matrix but depopulates our investment in it. Consequently, in the final film, we are left with a conflict between Symbolic and Real: The Matrix seeks to envelop the real world while the real world strives to undercut the Matrix.

Although we no longer identify with Neo due to the shifting and expanding levels of prophetic code in the final film, we nonetheless assume (because we have been programmed to by the Matrix's narrative structure) that the revolution will play itself out in a final battle between man and machine, between the One and the Other, between Symbolic and Real, Neo and Agent Smith; and in fact the film does plot toward such a Manichean conflict resolution. The battle royale between Neo and the hundreds of Smiths lays the figurative foundation for Zion's last stand against the overwhelming sentinels. If Reloaded's highway chase - if not the whole film - is impossibly long, deferring completion in order to extend the tense pleasure as long as possible, then Revolutions' three epic battles among Neo and Smith and



Zion and the sentinels are impossibly true, as all hope is evacuated by the ever-multiplying, never-stopping Smith and the ever-advancing, never-ending swarms of sentinels that rip through man and loading dock alike. Humanity's numbers are limited; the machines are infinite. Zion faces an impossible battle as immeasurable hordes of machines comprise a deadly mathematical sublime. Revolutions shifts from the desire to overthrow the machines to the need to simply survive, sans prophecy and philosophy, the machines. Neo makes a deal with the Source, the real world Machine-God: destroy Smith to save the Real world human city of Zion. The film theorizes two paradoxes. First, the Real world battle for Zion suggests that humans in reality can never defeat the overwhelming swarms of machines; they require a savior to jack into the Symbolic Matrix, the virtual reality machine from which they are struggling to free themselves: the human Real requires the Symbolic machine to exist, even if the Symbolic seeks to destroy the Real. Second, Neo defeating Smith in the disintegrating Matrix ironically preserves the Matrix; after all is said and done, the Matrix still has you, the One: humanity has hollowed out the virtual but nonetheless still engages and immerses itself in its envelope.

Neo has saved the Matrix and Zion; however, both Symbolic and Real salvation are tentative.

ORACLE. Well, now, ain't this a surprise.

ARCHITECT. You've played a very dangerous game.

ORACLE. Change always is.

ARCHITECT. Just how long do you think this peace is going to last?

ORACLE. As long as it can. (Architect starts walking away.) What about the others?

ARCHITECT. What others?

ORACLE. The ones that want out.

ARCHITECT. Obviously, they will be freed.

ORACLE. I have your word?

ARCHITECT. What do you think I am? Human?

Peace has broken out and the One has died. But the peace will not last for both sides need to destroy the other: the human mind struggles to free itself from the virtual prison of the Matrix and the machines cannot exist without enslaved human batteries. The Architect may free those who want out, but they will only disseminate the urge for salvation, which must be destroyed by the machines in order for the machines to survive. A new One, technically the eighth One in the succession of anomalies will be born and this war will break out again.

In his analysis of The Matrix, Slavoj Žižek asserts that the Symbolic Matrix exists to cover the void of

The Matrix Revolutions. Dir Andy and Larry
Wachowski. Warner Bros, 2003

Zizek, Slavoj. "The Matrix: Or, The Two
Sides of Perversion." *The Matrix and Phi-
losophy: Welcome to the Desert of the
Real*. Ed. William Irwin. Chicago: Open
Court, 2002. 240-66.

A+ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCE
(2001)

Mirroring Cultural Fear, Anxiety and Dystopia in American Cinematography: The Movie A.I.

Cringuta Irina Pelea

THE FILM'S PLOT AND SETTING

The film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, directed by Steven Spielberg based on Brian Aldiss' short story "Supertoys Last All Summer Long" and on a script initially conceived by Stanley Kubrick, unfolds a futuristic narrative developing in a not-too-distant future of an overcrowded world regulated by population control and legal sanctions for pregnancy. Drastic and chaotic climate changes have already taken place: Many coastal cities such as Manhattan have already been flooded because of the melting polar ice caps, as a direct effect of greenhouse gases. In this context, conveying the

hopelessness of the human fate, humanity is struggling with fewer and fewer resources.

From here begins the story of David (Haley Joel Osment), an advanced-generation robot boy designed for the purpose of replacing Martin, the son of Monica (Frances O'Connor) and Henry Swinton (Sam Robards), a child who has fallen gravely ill and is cryogenically preserved until a cure for his condition is discovered. Therefore, the sole purpose of David's purchase is "as an equally elegiac replacement, as she mourns the probable death of her terminally ill son, Martin" (Dillon, 2006) and to fill an emotional gap in the life of these two grieving parents, longing for their ill son, who is in a comatose state with a very slim chance of complete recovery. However, not long after Martin's miraculous awakening, a rivalry between brothers is born: Alongside countless devious and mischievous tricks, Martin's cruelest act of malice and calculated sadism towards David was to ask his mother to read them *The Adventures of Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi.



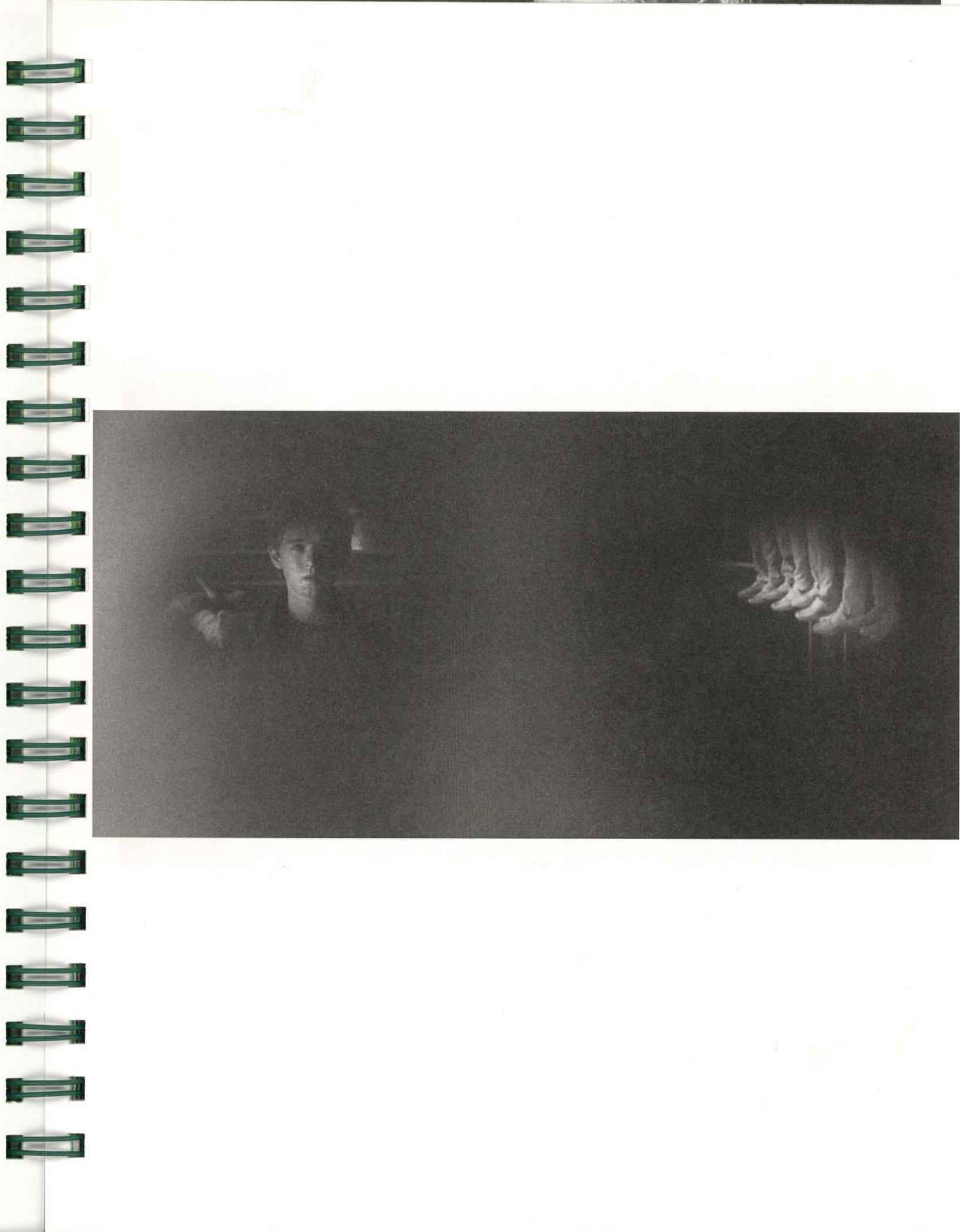
Irina Pelea, Cringuta. "Mirroring Cultural Fear, Anxiety and Dystopia in American Cinematography: The Movie A.I. (2001)." *Research Gate*, Dec. 2022, www.researchgate.net/publication/366503784_Mirroring_Cultural_Fear_Anxiety_and_Dystopia_in_American_Cinematography_The_Movie_AI_2001. Accessed 18 Apr. 2024.

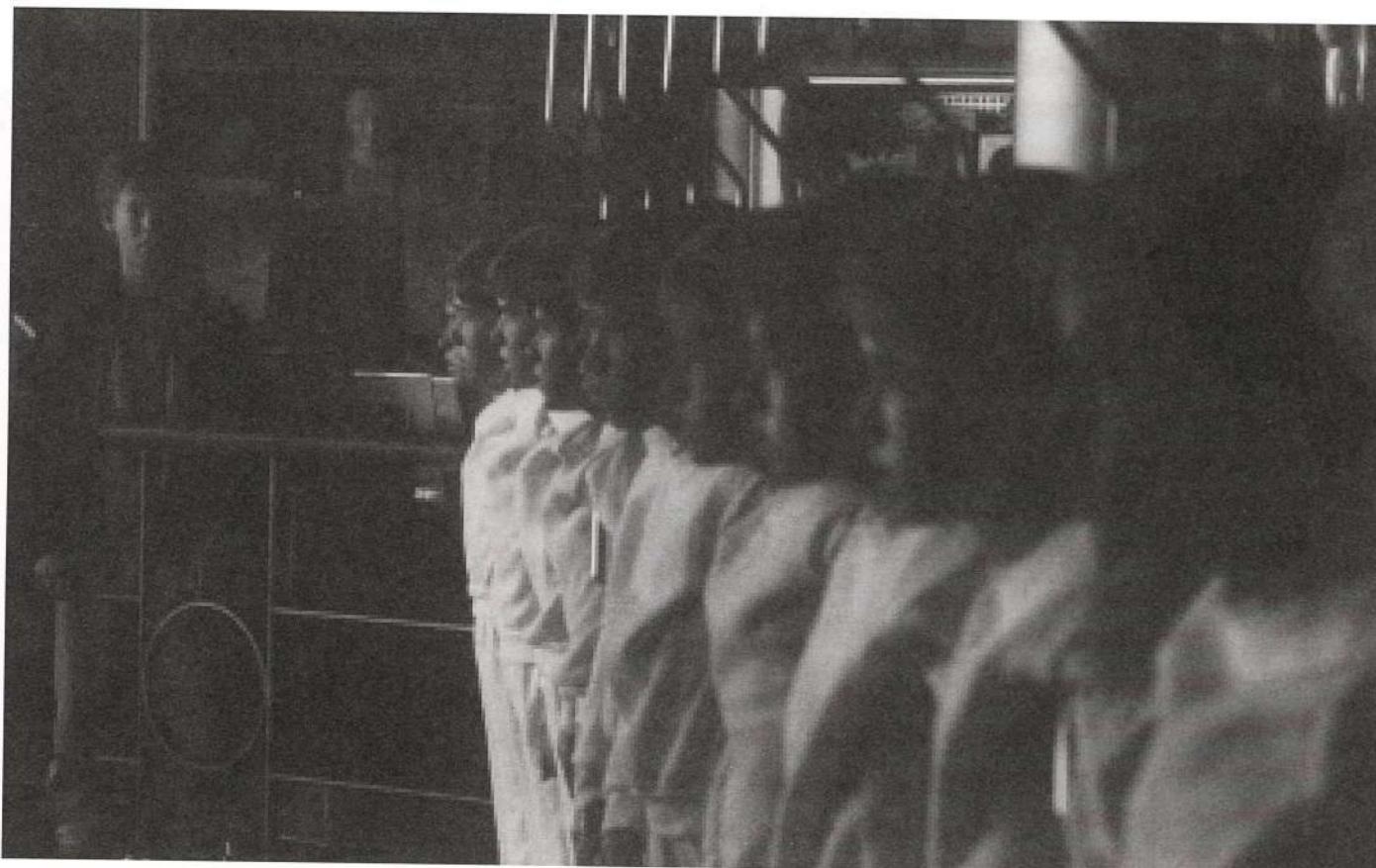
From the moment David listens to this story, he will desperately wish to find the "Blue Fairy," to ask her to make him a real boy, just as she did with the wooden Pinocchio. This narrative moment, in particular the magical transformation of Pinocchio into a real boy, becomes probably the most essential leitmotif of David's almost never-ending quest for maternal love - the robot child assumes that when he finds the Blue Fairy and convinces her to metamorphose him into a real child, he will undoubtedly be rewarded with Monica's affection. She abandons him and Teddy - an intelligent toy bear discarded by a bored Martin - in the forest and tells him never to come back but to run away.

David begins his search for the Blue Fairy to make him human. Accompanied by Teddy, he finds hundreds of mutilated Mechas hiding in the forest, looking for spare parts in a dump. Here he also meets Gigolo Joe (Jude Law), a "lover Mecha" who is on the run after being framed for the murder of one of his former Orga clients. Scrap dealers capture David, Teddy, Gigolo Joe, and many other Mechas and bring them to the Flesh Fair: A Celebration of Life, but after escaping destruction by Orgas and running away from the fair, David, Teddy and Gigolo Joe head to Rouge City, the city of sex and entertainment, where Joe takes David to Dr. Know, a kind of virtual encyclopedia, to ask about the Blue Fairy. David ardently continues his search for the Blue Fairy, and finds his way to "the lost city in the sea at the end of the world," a Manhattan mostly submerged under water.

During his meeting with Professor Hobby, David has an existential crisis of despair, as he discovers he is only one unit from a long chain of hundreds of replicas, hundreds of robot children manufactured by Hobby's company. He thought he was unique, but finding out that his creator manufactured hundreds of his kind, modeled after his dead son, throws him into a state of shock and leads him to throw himself from the top of the building in angst-ridden resignation. Surprisingly, at the bottom of the ocean he finds the Blue Fairy statue, and after remaining imprisoned underwater, he will pray ardently and devoutly in front of the statue, representing a metaphoric icon for the Virgin Mary, until his batteries run out.

Fast forward 2,000 years, and we witness humanity's extinction. David wakes up surrounded by spindly and harmless robotic beings, very similar to the image of translucently metallic aliens in popular culture. For these highly advanced robots, David will represent the last trace of humankind, and they will play the role of the Blue Fairy by granting him his wish: one day to experience maternal love. When their day ends, Monica goes to sleep forever, but David's devotion will finally be rewarded, and he will hear her saying: "I love you, David." This is the final epic moment when David lies down and dies with his mom in pure bliss and happiness, as he feels and acknowledges his human nature because he has loved and been loved as well.



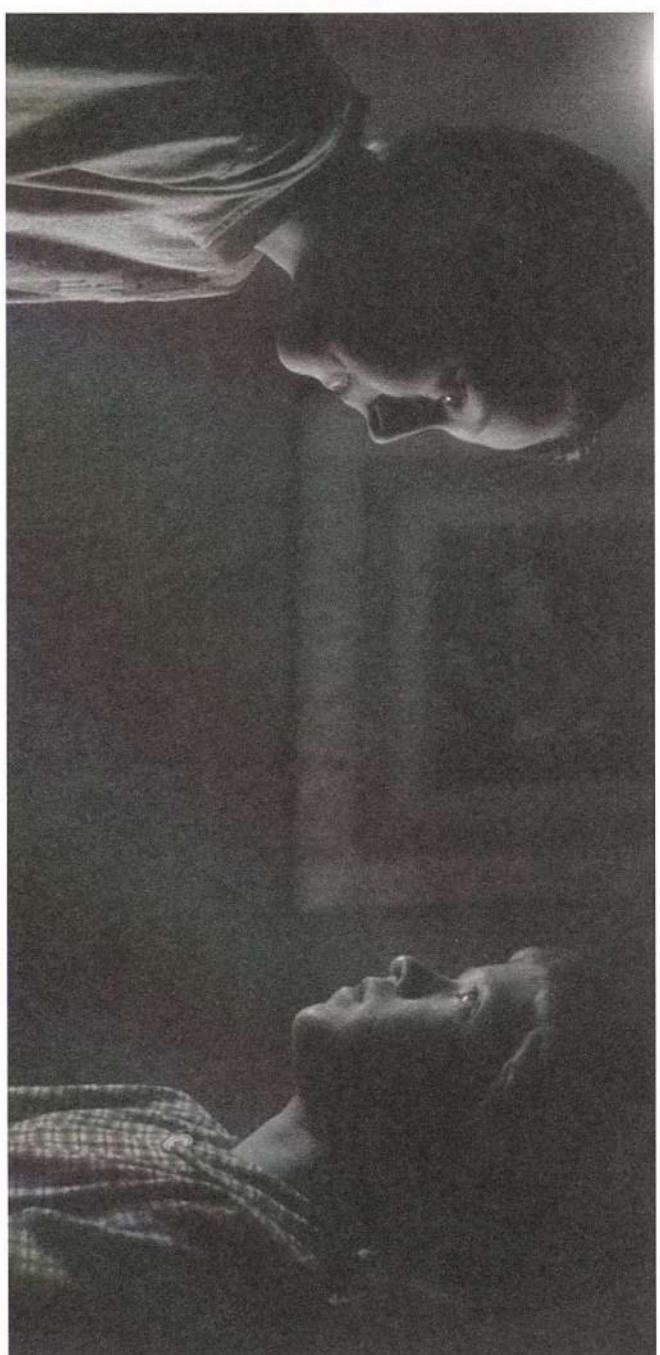


THE UNCANNY VALLEY" AS A METAPHOR
OF CULTURAL FEAR IN THE MOVIE *A.I.*
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (2001)

The present-day human faces an era imprinted by ongoing, frozen or arising political conflicts, accelerated globalization, alarming environmental deterioration, and carcinogenic transformation of natural resources, while continuously struggling to maintain their identity and human values (Torres, 2002). Within this general global context, the emergence and rapid development of the robotic industry has influenced global, national and regional film narratives as well. As a general note, the presence of robots and androids in the American film industry is frequently interpreted as tracking a vast range of cultural, religious, political, economic, historical and genetically deep-rooted fears and anxieties of contemporary Western society (Schofield & LeRoy, 2019; Szollosy, 2015).

As stated previously, one can notice an "ambivalence of feelings towards robots [which] is not only to be found in literary and cinematographical fiction, but also pervades the present-day philosophical debates on the ethics of robotics, and in particular in the debate on war robots" (Di Nucci & Santoni de Sio, 2013). Usually, American robot movies tend to reconstruct fear and anxiety within a social and cultural framework by prioritizing the occidental perception of robots as being a potential threat to humans and their prosperous future (Geraci,

2007). As Isabella Hermann also pointed out, films such as the one directed by Steven Spielberg, depicting the challenges of "omnipotent AI systems exercising total control over humans" reflect our intrinsic "fear of impotence and helplessness of the individual in the face of superordinate structures" (Hermann, 2021).



This longstanding and undying Western attitude of rejection or at least anxiety, which has been accurately reflected in Western/American movies in particular, can be explained through Masahiro Mori's theory "bukimi no tani," translated as "the uncanny valley" or more literally "the valley of eeriness," published in 1970 in the journal Energy. In his two-page essay, Mori's central idea was that "the more social robots (as opposed to industrial robots) are designed to appear 100 percent humanlike, the more they will appear less human, strange, unlikeable and in some cases horrific, resulting from some technological glitch in either their appearance or movement, thus causing a fearful sense of the 'uncanny,' in the way a corpse, or worse yet, a zombie causes a sense of uncanny strangeness or emotional recoiling" (Borody, 2013).

In this regard, the movie A.I. (2001) accurately fits the cultural and social framework described above, by playing the role of a lens on the beliefs, ideas, cultural understandings, and the subtle tensions that singularize American society. On one hand, 20th-century technology frightens us with dehumanization and the imminence of extinction, but on the other, it fascinates us with "salvation" and the promise of a happy and facile life (Hoffman & Kurzenberger, 2008; Mokyr et al., 2015)

Moving on to our analysis, the film under discussion displays a particular conglomeration of narrative strategies that mediate American national traumas,

anxieties, fears on multiple allegorical and semantic levels (Naremore, 2005). The narration with an aura of fairy tale and myth (Heffernan, 2018) depicts a dark and nihilistic world, a futuristic dystopia in which the human species has destroyed itself through global warming. Nevertheless, this self-destruction is perceived not as a sudden extermination or as being due to a transcendental event, but as a gradual process of continuous planetary alterations to which the rapacity of humans has indubitably made a direct contribution.

DYSTOPIC SPACE AND TIME OF FEAR

The opening narration plunges the audience into a dark, cold future, and it reveals a highly pessimistic and dystopian atmosphere by describing the work of nature in response to humanity's nefarious exploitation:

Those were the years after the ice caps had melted because of the greenhouse gases, and the oceans had risen to drown so many cities along all the shorelines of the world. Amsterdam. Venice. New York. Forever lost. Millions of people were displaced, climate became chaotic. Hundreds of millions of people starved in poorer countries. Elsewhere, a high degree of prosperity survived when most governments in the developed world introduced legal sanctions to strictly license pregnancies, which was why robots, who were never hungry and who did not consume resources beyond those of their first manufacture, were so essential an economic link in the chain

mail of society. (Spielberg, 2001.
00:01:12-00:02:01)

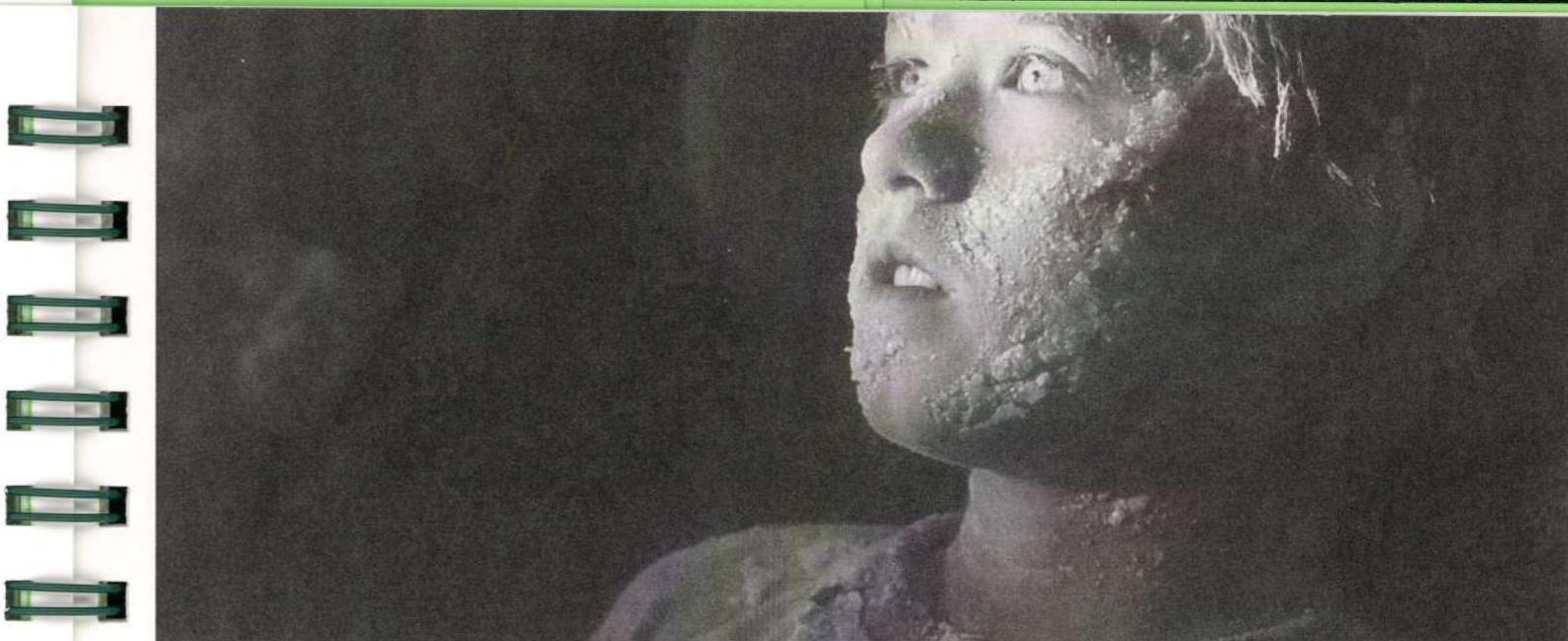
As Marina Fedosik also notices, the viewer can recognize here the popular narrative theme of humanity's apocalypse, given that "the film therefore does not allow for the revision of the symbolic order but associates its destruction with the end of humanity - a post-oedipal apocalypse" that "leaves the world to cyborgs" (Fedosik, 2018; Haraway, 1991). Furthermore, this narrative approach connects to what the literary theorist Peter Brooks characterizes in *Reading for the Plot* as an inherent human need for "an explanatory narrative that seeks its authority in a return to origins and the tracing of a coherent story forward from origin to present" (Brooks, 1985). Thus, "only the end can finally determine meaning" (Brooks, 1985).

Within this critical context, the opening image of the film narrative turns into a metaphor for the defeat of humanity in its "war of domination" over

Mother Nature. Therefore, the

apocalyptic narrative trope (Achouche, 2022) is encrypted from the first lines, to highlight what is probably America's worst fear and vulnerability.

Therefore, the particular temporal and spatial setting connects the perpetual American cinematographic obsession with apocalyptic imminence (Hamonic, 2017) and the punishment of humanity. These main topics should be interpreted within the social, political and historical background of the last two decades (2000-2020), which have been marked by intense social fears (Kuška, 2011), chronic and contagious anxieties, simultaneously with the peaking rise of technology in everyday life. "Characterized by disjointed narratives, a dark view of the human condition, images of chaos and random violence, death of the hero, emphasis on technique over content, and dystopic views of the future," the movie can easily fit the



criteria of postmodern cinema (Boggs & Pollard, 2001). Considering these aspects, the world as it is depicted here, populated by aggressive Mechas, does nothing but confirm the typical Western technophobia and is more likely to be interpreted as "a consequence of the revision to human reproductive and affective practices" (Fedosik, 2018).

One should also notice that the locus of this global climatic catastrophe is none other than Western modernity, a direct consequence of perpetuating the Western or, more specifically, the American alarmist rhetoric of the apocalyptic tale in popular culture (Foust & O'Shannon Murphy, 2009). Furthermore, the dynamic mix of post-apocalyptic narratives that are deeply rooted in American culture, otherwise supported by the Judeo-Christian and Evangelical Christian traditions of eschatological belief, represents another element that contributed significantly to this placement (Hummel, 2020). For instance, "in the Old Testament the major eschatological narrative is Noah's Ark in the Book of Genesis" (Harris, 2016); similarly, "the Book of Revelation is, in fact, a post-apocalyptic text, which depicts in immense detail the world that emerges after the apocalypse; including the holy city of New Jerusalem, where there is no sun and no moon, but simply God's light (Revelation 21:10-22:6)" (Harris, 2016).

This never-ending apocalyptic obsession reveals a pathological narcissism that conceals our wish for immortality as individuals and

as a race, given that apocalypticism has always been ingrained into the archetypal psyche of any human society or civilization up to the present day (Perrulli, 2005). It becomes easy to connect this narcissistic obsession and quest for immortality with the omnipresent fear of death (Perrulli, 2005). In other words, the idea of death is a universally repressed fear that lies at the root of so much of what we create, define, imagine, hypothesize, believe and dream. The fear of death is always present to us in its manifestations, which have been influenced by the forces of narcissism, heroism, and repression - all of which have creatively shifted throughout culture and history. (Perrulli, 2005)

Given all these considerations, the movie in question is set in this particular Western spatial and temporal context abounding in general anxiety and fear of the masses, while addressing several widely recognized culturally specific American public fears (Gergan et al., 2018), and probably the best-known one is the terror induced by the possibility of an apocalypse leading to the extermination of humanity. Nevertheless, all these fears are emotionally and culturally driven, and their rationality is controversial, as they are more likely to represent a cultural, psychological and social multilayered response to the American public agenda (Cowan, 2011; Hörfeldt, 2018; Myers, 2001).

Therefore, the vividly painted first scenes reveal a deep-rooted and very

well-hidden anxiety about present-day Western society as a whole, environmental protection, individual freedom and safety, government control, social collapse, destruction of the nuclear family, mistrust of authority structures, viral outbreak, terrorism, and humans' increasing disconnectedness from their inner self and from spirituality on a general level (Cowan, 2011). What challenges the idea that it is possible for a "better" human society to be reborn out of the ashes is this image of global catastrophe, describing humanity as devoid of love, empathy, respect, and loyalty to people and relationships. Therefore, it is implicitly presented as not being worth saving anymore.

CULTURALIZING THE FEAR IN THE HUMAN-ROBOT RELATION

The movie, with its explicit philosophical richness, represents a subtle yet complex semantic negotiation of the power dynamics between humans and robots. As a science fiction film, the cinematographic production represents an accurate match to the characterization provided by the editor Steven M. Sanders in *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film* (2008), according to whom science fiction films "provide a medium through which questions about personal identity, moral agency, artificial consciousness and other categories of experience can be addressed" (Sanders, 2008). The viewer steps into the midst of a society where the greedy human dictatorship prevails and people have already lost every trace of humanity, mercy, or

kindness, and the only reason to create robots is to help with physical labors or, at the most, to cure the depressive voidness in humans' lives.

As Bill Nichols states, "every [science fiction] film is a documentary. These films give tangible expression to our wishes and dreams, our nightmares and dreads. They make the stuff of imagination concrete - visible and audible. They give a sense of what we wish, or fear, reality itself might become" (Nichols, 2017). Similarly, the fear experienced by the human characters becomes real, tangible, and concrete, while it connects to the following narrative patterns. First, aggressive robotization as it is depicted in the film reveals humans' attempt to assume the divine role of the creator, a behavior prone to be severely punished in the proximate future, as the opening scene has shown. Second, the portrayal of human nature displays another fearful and very pessimistic premonition about how humans' personality will evolve in the proximate future.

From this point on, two major religious themes appear in the film narrative: "humans playing God" and "humans created in the image of God" (Thomas 124). The first one "suggests that a clear demarcation exists between the roles of God and humans and that there are areas of life where God rules, where God is in charge, and where humans ought not to enter" and "evokes an omnipotent God who is the Creator of all and who commands all" (Shannon, 1998). The second religious theme approaches the human as

"the created co-creator" (Hefner, 1989), meaning that humans "become participants with God in the continuous evolving of both nature and history," and "share a joint responsibility" towards the divine creation.

While most of the human characters in the movie are hateful, self-absorbed, egotistical, and even cruel or sadistic towards robots, the androids display a much higher amount of empathy and kindness than their human partners are capable of showing (Loren, 2008), up until the point that viewers might even sympathize with the androids suffering from human cruelty. As a curious fact, the human characters feel anxiety and a degree of fear towards the robots, while human viewers undoubtedly feel merciful. We might draw the conclusion that what one should fear is not robots, but human characters who become soulless and mechanical.

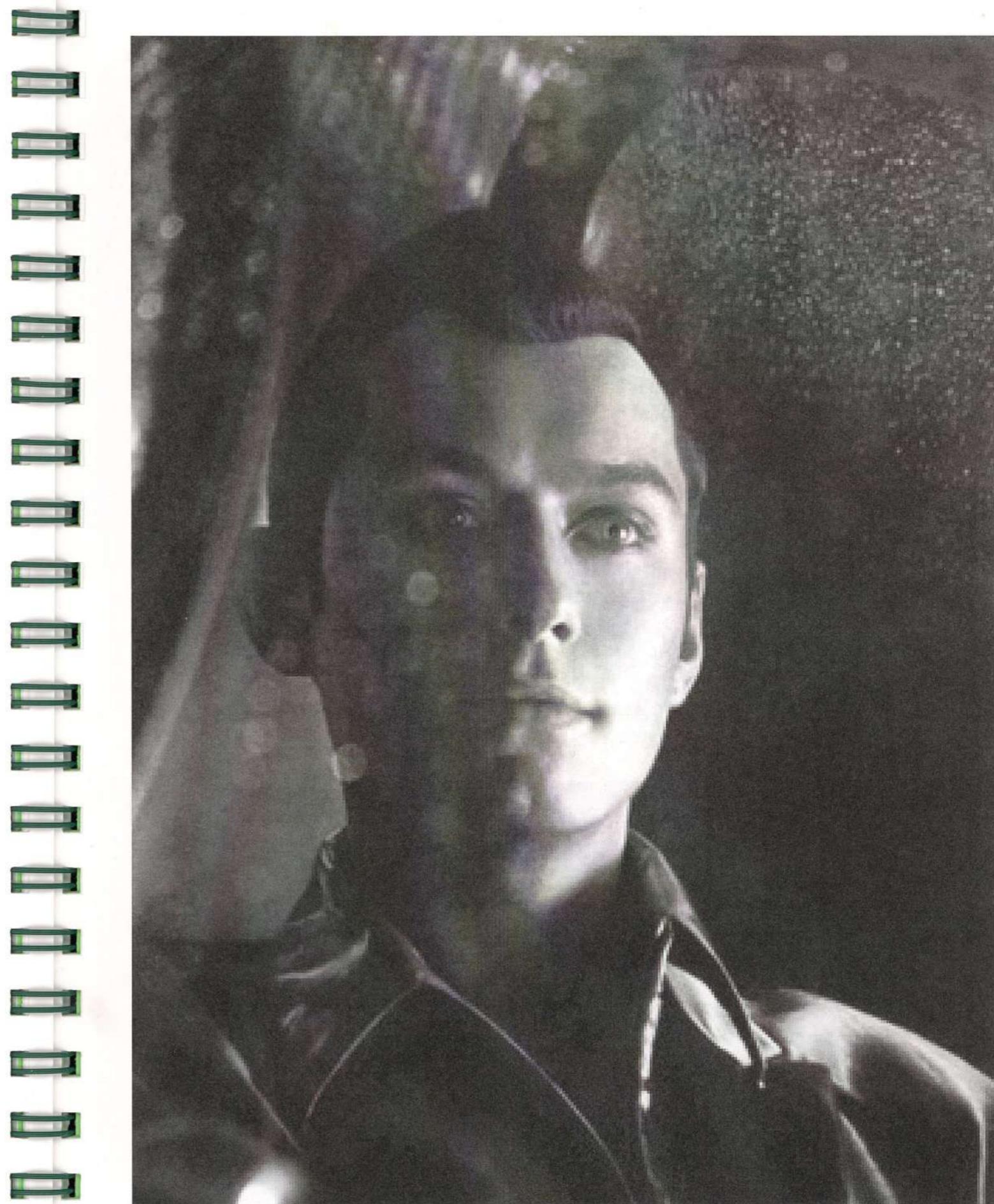
Thus, the robots are presented as struggling to create a new social foundation that gives birth to a radically different society built on a set of values that considers Humanity and Mercy to mean kindness, respect, devotion, mutual sympathy, support, and equality. Metaphorically speaking, these robots, especially David, become a mimetic counterpart to the ideal human being, and in this situation the viewer has no other option but simultaneously to feel fear and allure in the presence of these robots capable of love and sacrifice.

In the context of the burgeoning

industry of robotics and artificial intelligence, the robot characters could be interpreted as iconic symbols depicting consumerism and capitalism, produced at the intersection of drastic environmental change and accelerated globalization (Higbie, 2012). Through their existence, they expose and warn about the aggravation of extreme disparities between the socially perceived class division of the rich and the poor, and master and slave, or - in this case - Mecha and Orga, which represent the deliberate binaries of good and evil.

Therefore, with its underlying human greediness, callousness, and degradation, the film tackles the concept of human fear from multiple perspectives, and it is more likely to be a story about human beings and the decadence of the human race than one about robots and their impact on our lives and social condition. From this perspective, the narrative is conveyed as a philosophical exploration of what it means to be "human" in the real sense of the word and to respond to universal human values.

The Mechas mark the mortality and ephemeral substance of the human race, more specifically, our fear of aging, disease and, above all, the fear of death, given that this is a "primary human impulse." American society has evolved being taught to "attach fearful meanings to death and death-related situations" (Leming & Dickinson, 2011), and this fear of death can be connected with the prevailing individuality, as



type experienced in the United States" (Leming & Dickinson, 2011).

Another significant type of fear that is ingrained into the viewer's consciousness, and thus corresponds to the film's scenario, is the public mistrust of authority structures and corporations. The theme of the corporation that abuses the public's trust is by far not new, and it is highly suggestive for the viewer's world. The next type of fear is that of race and otherness. For the human characters, the robot represents "the other," but the viewer tends to feel a more significant emotional distance from the human figures than from the robots (Szollosy, 2015). Despite the advantages

of technological progress, Americans in particular still feel wary of this advancement of science, which makes them consider the option that one day this progress will start to take over their lives completely. From this perspective, the film's message draws an alarm signal over people's proximate alienation and the aggravating disconnection from human interaction (Mokyr et al., 2015).

Finally, one should note that the film explores the fear of the collapse of society and its structures of order, social and moral values, competition between humans and robots, and as a whole, humanity's civilization heritage. For instance, David himself becomes symbolic of the rapidly changing social sphere wherein the traditional family faces a conflictual and problematic evolution without precedent: The adoption of a child robot is an event that forces the viewer to contemplate it, without offering any simple solution. Within this context, the Mecha becomes a powerful cinematic allegory, as it encompasses a wide range of social, historical and political meanings such as slavery, racism, turbulent racial tensions, exploited labor, authority versus independence, human rights versus robot rights, capitalism and consumerism. Moreover, there is an overarching theme of Western-specific robophobia and lack of control, associated with the fear of losing control of human society in favor of robots or being reduced to nothing, with no civil rights or social status (Sandberg, n.d.). The robots' portrayal accurately reflects the human struggle in operating with a proper distinction

between Insider/Outsider and the fear of letting in and exploring the unknown.

From this perspective, we conclude that this film reflects particularly Americans' anxiety towards the human-robot relationship, attachment, and companionship, and invites viewers to reflection by questioning the extent to which the robots of the future will be capable of providing similarly human love, kinship, and intimacy to humans. Hence, the robot characters become containers for our fears about all our dark and animalistic impulses, such as those involving domination, control, violence, conquest, or desire for immortality. Nevertheless, the fear inflicted by the android-human character relationship, simultaneously with the continuous power and dialogue negotiation of both sides, probably represents the most consistent proof of how xenophobia, racism, and technophobia intertwine in the film's scenario.

The film narrative alludes to the

idea that some robots, such as these Mechas, might present excellent qualities to be considered as viable alternatives to humans, thus making us consider outweighing the advantages and the potential risks associated with this significant social, cultural and biological conversion of human relationships as configured in this alternative dystopic universe. Although the script distances itself to some extent from the obsessive leitmotif of the malevolent robot or cyborg that exterminates humanity, the final narrative sequences embody America's worst fear, which is the invasion from within, meaning that the robots created by humans survived their creators and took control over what was once the peak of human civilization. Therefore, it is suggested that the much applauded technological evolution of today will one day become the tomb of humanity, which has fallen prey to the tempting promise of a comfortable life surrounded by slave robots.

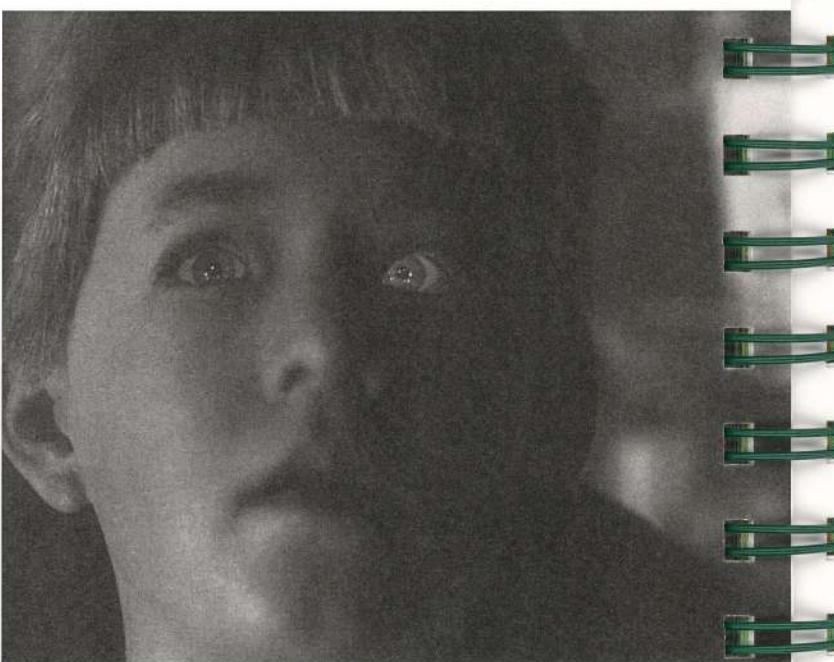


On one hand, most of the robots in the movie transcend the limitations imposed on them by their human creators and detach themselves from the stereotypical image of androids highly mediatized by American popular culture: In other words, they surpass their initial condition of being automatic and homogenous machines, stripped of emotions, passion, identity, uniqueness, spirit and, above all, soul (Fedosik, 2018). On the other hand, the image of human characters who lack dignity, morality, and spirituality, having an insatiable appetite for power and control, consumed by primal impulses, is one projected to inspire fear and anxiety in the viewer (Bernstein, n.d.).

DAVID: ANDROID OR POST-HUMAN?

From the beginning, the main character was envisioned as the first child Mecha: "a perfect child caught in a freeze-frame; always loving, never ill, never changing," but we should ask ourselves if, by the end of the movie, he becomes something more than a disposable, replaceable commodity. "David is 11 years old. He weighs 60 pounds. He is 4 feet, 6 inches tall. He has brown hair. His love is real. But he is not" (*A.I. Artificial Intelligence* tagline). The dichotomic placement of David as an android child or a potential post-human within this alternative futuristic universe where humanity has already perished, should be interpreted in light of several significant theories that will help the present analysis in connecting this character's identity

with the concept of (Western) "cultural fear." From the perspective of



theological theories, David's creation represents the quintessence of the human defying and redefining the divine while assuming the creator's role (Foerst, 2009). In the 20th-century context, where technology becomes the new religion and the border between the progress of Artificial Intelligence and the divine is blurred, the much-promised technological Eden remains surrounded by the fear of dehumanization and extinction, which never stray far from the mind (Tsuria, 2021).

Furthermore, David's emergence and development as the central character also addresses Cartesian philosophy, and more specific concepts such as the mind-body issue, personal identity, and the struggles one feels, just like American cyborg movies of the 1990s. In her study "Descartes Goes to Hollywood: Mind, Body and Gender in

Contemporary Cyborg Cinema," Samantha Holland points out that "the cyborg film is particularly interesting when considering the relationship between the Cartesian (Cartesian-influenced) dualisms of traditional philosophy and those dualisms of gender that, arguably, underlie and inform such a conceptual division" (Holland, 1995).

Finally, other theorists that have tackled the link between art, science, and philosophy, and question the human identity in a post-contemporary era, are Deborah Knight and George McKnight, in their chapter "What Is It to Be Human? *Blade Runner* and *Dark City*." *Blade Runner*, just like *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, studies the problematics and quintessence of human identity, and in both movies humanity becomes the ultimate goal, as a symptom of technological advancements and the public's increasing awareness and anxiety towards artificial intelligence (Knight & McKnight, 2008). From this standpoint, one could easily read David, with his kindness and other excellent human-like qualities, as being an ambassador of post-humanity, carrying on the cultural, social and historical legacy of the already extinct human race.

David's status within his human family reasserts his post-human condition by the exhibition of all the ideal human traits. In this space and time of palpable violence, where having blood relations is frequently considered a condition sine qua non for earning a family's love, David's adoption by a

human family was prone to fail from the beginning. Despite his inherent android nature, the android child paradoxically displays a pure, naïve, uncorrupted and millennial loving devotion towards his absent, frivolous, selfish and weak adoptive mother, who failed ever to show him any sign of affection (Bernstein, n.d.). The same devotion grafts both invincibility and acute vulnerability onto his personality and destiny. Through his unfailing love, David as an artificial creation challenges and, one might say, even shames human conceptions of mutual love and raises questions

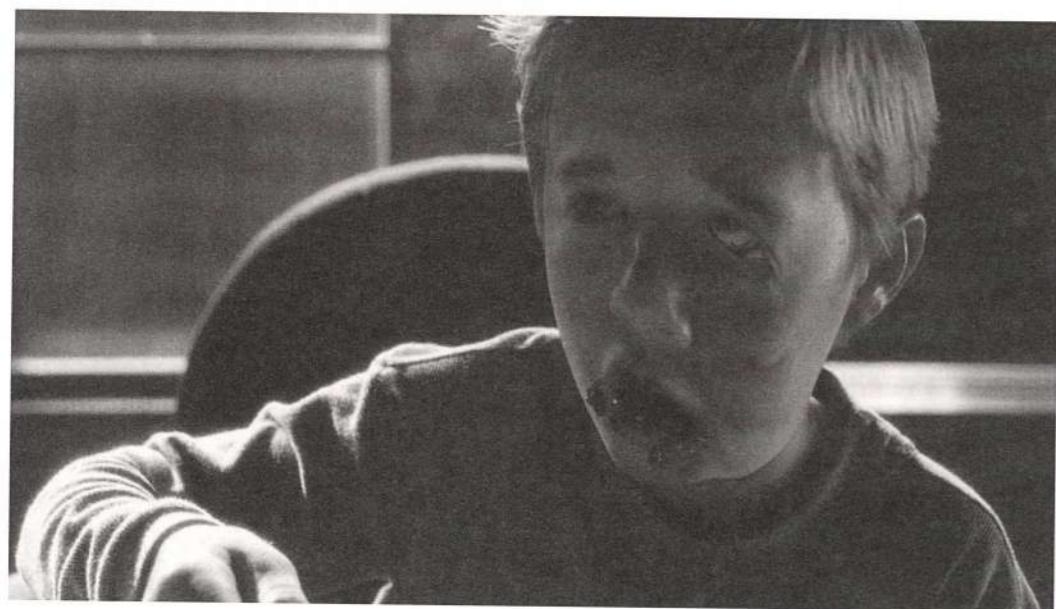


about humans' level of consciousness. The faithful adoration of this robot child remains unfailing throughout more than 2,000 years, and what adds a tragic dimension to his portrait is his fidelity that remains untamed by the passage of time, in contradiction with humans' superficiality. David's odyssey into the world of Mechas and humans that both reject him, uncovers a universe in which the border between machines and

humans is both vast and profoundly thin, and displays in a very subtle manner humans' fear of the unknown.

The evolution of his character reimagines the Pinocchio narrative: Despite being a creation of the Mecha Corporation, made of wires, transistors, circuits, and covered with human-like skin, his only dream is to become "a real boy," because in this way he will earn the love of Monica, his human mother (Heffernan, 2018). Therefore, for him the love of his adoptive mother represents a sufficient condition to validate his existence in this universe exploring the emotional conflict induced by establishing adoptive relationships between a robot and a human (Fedosik, 2018).

David's relationship with his human brother, Martin, reveals another significant dimension of his status within his human family and how this robot child embodies "the culturalized fear of the other and the Western-



specific robophobia." Unlike him, Martin, his so-called brother, personifies the stereotypical image of "the brat" and fails to show Monica the same kind of devotion as David does (Dillon, 2006). Despite his superficiality and sadism, he is the one that Monica will choose. Is it maybe because he is "real" and David is not? In this context, a significant aspect to ponder is what can be considered real and what cannot. According to the human characters' perception, David is not "real." A relevant example is Monica's repetitive statements such as the following: "Good. I mean, Henry, did you see his face? He's, he's so real. But he's not..." Thus, the android child is condemned to a life of helpless devotion to his selfish, weak, mercurial human mother Monica, and doomed to a tragic end of disposal, abandonment, and destruction (Achouche, 2022). During his initiatory journey, David has no doubts whatsoever that he will be able to find the Blue Fairy, who will turn him into a "real boy."

In a bittersweet ending, whereas science succeeds in curing Martin, his stepbrother, "the substitute artificial child" will outlive them all, making the film constructed on "several temporal disjunctions - of past and present, of gain and loss" which cannot be "harmoniously reconciled" (Dillon, 2006). Although David was initially a complex Mecha whose status was considered inferior to that of a human being and whose identity was reducible to physical and chemical characteristics, by the end of his spiritual and adventurous journey, he achieves the identity of the ideal human being, through his pure love and unfailing devotion (Manninen & Manninen, 2016). Therefore, David's transformation imposes a philosophical debate on the issue of consciousness, the mind-body relation, and the concept of human identity. From this perspective, the film's narrative line suggests that a highly sophisticated robot can achieve human identity as well: David is the one who becomes a genuine human person, through faith and love.

From here on, we can connect David's persona to the theories of transhumanism, more specifically the "non-human person" and criteria for "personhood" (Locke, 2013). According to John Locke's theory of personal identity, the concept of a person suggests that consciousness should be seen as the key to personhood, not to humanness. Thus, one's awareness of one's own emotions, thoughts, and physical body is quintessential in

rooting one's identity in time. As a summary:

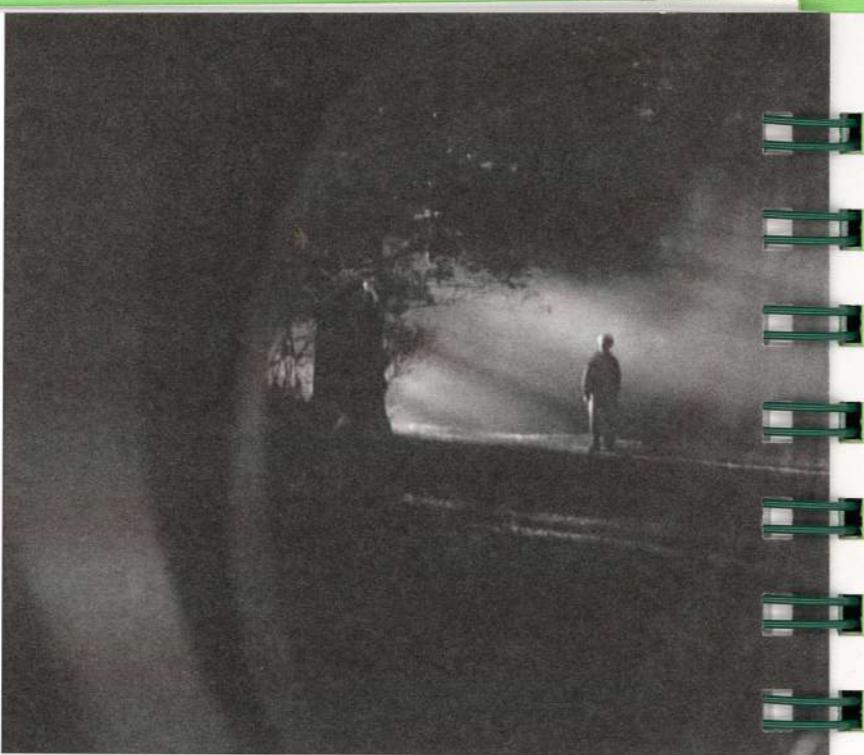
1. A person cannot be a substance, because we never experience the substance; the underlying substance is irrelevant.
2. Consciousness is the experience which creates personal identity.
3. A "man" is a creature (whose identity consists, like a tree, of its life), but a "person" is a particular type of consciousness.
4. A person has the properties of being conscious, self-aware and rational.
5. Consciousness covers current mental states, awareness of our own bodies, and awareness of the past.
6. "Person" is a forensic term, involving praise and blame, and a capacity to obey laws. (Locke, 2013)

Taking this theoretical perspective into consideration, another challenging and difficult question arises: Is David a person, a human, or maybe a post-human? Professor Hobby designed David as an exact duplicate of his dead child, who was the original David. Despite being used by Monica as no more than a substitute for her comatose son, David has loved her blindly and unconditionally, and his only fear is that of not being loved by Monica. This appeals to the fear of cloning and, mostly, being replaced, given that the context of cloning in American cinematography alternates between horror and ambivalence, and sometimes hope (O'Riordan, 2008). Even before the release of *A.I.*, "human cloning has been traditionally embedded in film through a set of images and stories dealing with

horror, abjection, monstrosity and the uncanny" (O'Riordan, 2008). Although David is not a human clone in the proper meaning of the word, he becomes a "visual signifier for cloning," as the twin of Professor Hobby's late son (O'Riordan, 2008).

The Flesh Fair narrative scene stands out by the way it outlines the human-robot dichotomy, simultaneously incorporating the utmost hate and also fear towards the world of Mechas. At this event, which ironically promotes itself as "a celebration of life," David witnesses the sadistic destruction of other Mechas for the mere amusement of humans, as a cruel and technophobic demonstration of humans' overwhelming victory over robots, which are nevertheless considered to be a denigration of human dignity, and waits for his turn. Therefore, their destruction becomes nothing else but "the demolition of artificiality."

The pivotal scene of the Flesh Fair becomes a vortex of extreme violence and supremacist brutality, as it alludes explicitly to historical atrocities now incorporated into humans' ancestral memory: slavery and the lynching of slaves, Soviet labor camps and gulags, the Holocaust and the persecution of Jews, or the secular abuses of the Inquisition (Heffernan, 2018). The lynching mass of people, who ironically are white, consider Mecha, and David as well, a form of denigrating human dignity, and in their vision, destroying robots becomes a demolition of artificiality, based on the so-called superiority of the human race.



This spectacle of lynching has the performative dimension of a supremacist ritual, where the humans have the chance to bond and to assert the prerogative of their species' superiority, while the androids become icons of abjection and targets of hate. Humans' lust for violence is antithetic with David's innocence and the defenseless state of the machines that have to obey unconditionally. David succeeds in winning the crowd's mercy by begging them to believe that he is "real."

This robot child was exploited by his creators for global fame and recognition, mistrusted and ignored by his adoptive father, never loved and

abandoned by his foster mother,

frequently tormented and bullied by his brother and his friends, continuously hunted and almost destroyed by humans.

Ironically, the past, present, and

future are inextricably linked to David, who becomes an ambiguous representative of humanity, the living memory of the human race and everlasting proof of their genial yet at the same time malefic creativity. David's so-called happy ending represents nothing else than a disguise for the tragic extinction of the human race, which exposes the meaningless and thinness of scientific progress and cultural and social evolution.

After completing the destructive cycle 2,000 years later, with the help of alien lookalike robots, David comforts himself with a cloned copy of Monica, in an awake-for-one-day-only resurrection. The robots surrounding David before his final day are now designed and built by other artificial intelligence forms; thus, they bear minimal resemblance to the long-gone, vanished human figures. Their last lines hint at the occurrence of an apocalyptic Armageddon and reveal the dark and nihilistic fate of humanity, which has finally exterminated itself, leaving the Earth a dead world. They continue by telling him: "You are so important to us. You are unique in all the world." These are the words David has longed to hear from the moment the Imprinting Protocol code-sequence of love was activated: that he is unique, irreplaceable; thus, he deserves to be loved (Achouche, 2022). But the robot created for David on that particular day was not real, as one of them tried to explain to him. It was merely a genetic copy of his mother. However, David, with his fierce devotion, continues to hope. This one-day reward becomes sufficient

for David, who happily dies near the clone of his adoptive human mother, Monica. More likely, this is nothing else but a pseudo-happy and sentimental ending for a character obsessed with the image of a lost loved one, now settling for a soon-to-expire technological simulacrum of his lost mother (Achouche, 2022; Gordon, 2008).

What even highly advanced robots could not create, despite their technological progress, was the essence of life. What they gave David, despite their good intentions, was a kind and white lie; in other words, a comforting illusion. Ironically, these sentient robots envy humans for "their spirit" and look upon this lost race as "the key to the meaning of existence," as the film's narrator relates: "Human beings had created a million explanations of the meaning of existence, in art, in poetry, in mathematical formulas. [...] Certainly human beings must be the key to the meaning of existence" (Spielberg, 2001, 02:08:23-02:08:35). Their idealized vision of humanity's unique and unbeatable genius represents a blunt and shocking antithesis to David's experience with the vanity and selfish nature of the humans he has met. The final scene represents an act of tragedy and one of liberation in pure bliss, a metaphor of cathartic redemption for both the protagonist and the viewer simultaneously. Overlapping the happy fairy tale of David with the tragic mythical self-destruction of humans suggests how often the viewer tends to myopically and obsessively focus on a trivial oedipal love story while the

world around is dying without any chance of salvation.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the movie in question portrays the typical Western cultural fear of one's mortality and the irrevocable extermination of the human race, it also invites the audience to question, debate, and understand the concepts of "personhood," "creation," "reality," "love and other values" in humanist terms, as a dialogue about the relationship between the organic and the mechanical, versus the "inorganic" and the "spiritual."

On a side note, the film acknowledges David as the catalyst of the storyline, but not the source of the tragedy. Thus, what draws attention to the film is not the existence of David, the robot child, but the situations he creates in this environment of impending chaos and total collapse of human society and way of life. It becomes nearly impossible for the viewer not to place themselves into that scenario and to corroborate their fears through this American cinematic production.

The movie's spatial and temporal placement becomes very easy to associate with the audience's surroundings, which are fraught with economic, political and social turmoil, marked by a vast number of disasters that lead to profound and complex social emotions. Hence, the concept of "cultural fear" per se can explain the increasing presence of robots in contemporary popular culture.

which represents nothing more than an intricate response given by American mainstream culture, reflecting the current climate marked by millennial fears and modern social anxieties.

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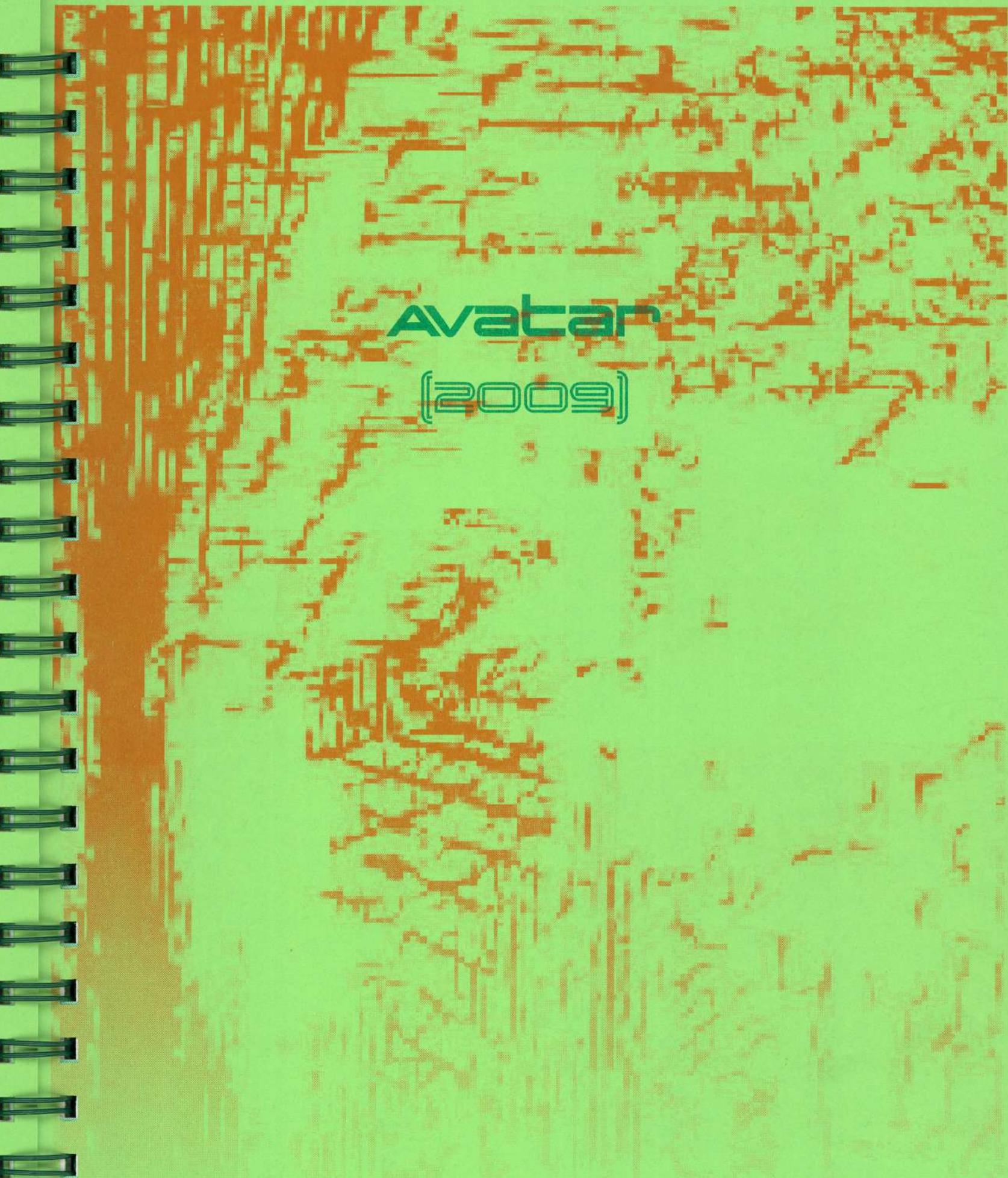
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Avatar and the Movements of Neocolonial Sentimental Cinema

Kyla Schuller

Modes of literature, art, and film animate the body and acculturate its movements. Sentimentalism, an Enlightenment epistemology and aesthetic mode that remains a viable form in commercial cinema, makes the audience's embodied connection with the characters onscreen central to the pleasure of viewing. In the present moment, something is often dismissively called "sentimental" when its flagrant and seemingly feminized indulgence in emotion appears rather more cliché than heartfelt. Sentimental approaches to knowledge production position self-reflective feelings as the individual's most reliable indicator of truth. As an aesthetic mode, sentimental texts seek to elicit emotional and physiological feelings in audiences that mirror those of the characters, most famously in the form of melodrama's shared tears.¹ Yet while sentimentality in cinema serves as a particularly useful resource for thinking about how images move the

viewer's body, all modes create patterns of sensory and motor response. Building on Kara Keeling's notion of cinematic "common sense," a set of habituated sensorimotor movements and collective images shared by contemporary consumers of film, I suggest that modes function as a political organization of the senses.² Modes train sensorimotor responses in the context of specific social relations such that they function as a political organization of affective response.

In this essay, I turn to James Cameron's blockbuster film *Avatar* (2009) to explore how and to what ends contemporary sentimental cinema moves the bodies of its subjects and audience.³ The highest-grossing film yet released, *Avatar* combines the emotional intensity of a tearjerker with the suspense and stimulation of a violent action film.

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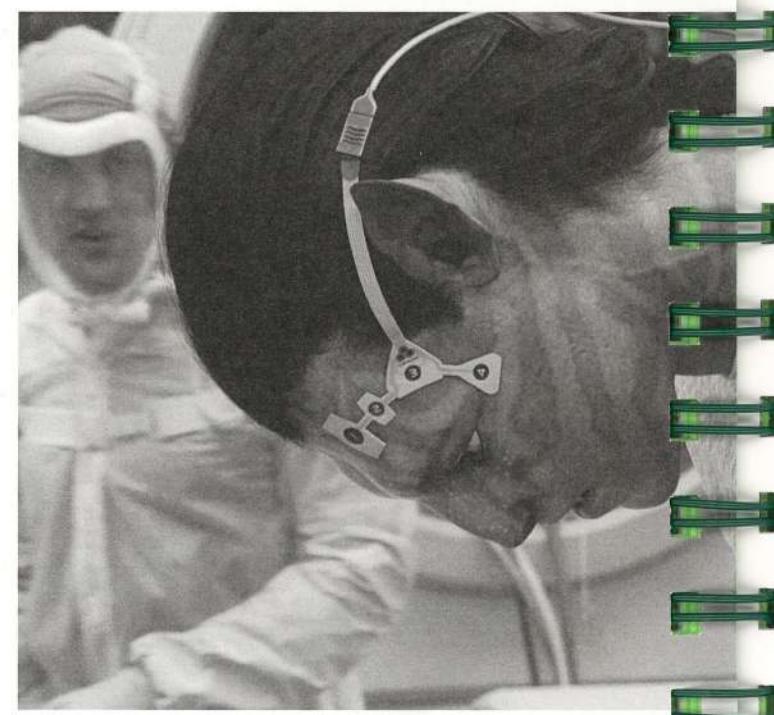


This familiar and profitable combination of sensation and sentiment provokes us to consider how the pleasure of predictable cinema consists of the emotional satisfaction not only of met expectations but also of performing a habitual repertoire of physical sensations.⁴ The synchronic “pulse beats and sobs” of the bodies of viewer and actor in sentimental texts transpire through the exercise of sympathy, an imaginative projection into the hearts, minds, and bodies of another.⁵ Typically in U.S. nineteenth- and twentieth-century iterations of the mode, the objects of sympathy have been marginalized by the social processes of race, class, and/or disability. The viewer thus simultaneously experiences the relief of an emotional catharsis, the munificence of an affective rescue, and the gratification of a newfound position of status vis-à-vis the abject position of the object of viewer sympathy.⁶ I examine how Cameron marshals existing patterns of sensory-emotional movement typical of the sentimental mode while also adapting the form to contemporary political and technological conditions. Synchronously moving the bodies of characters and viewers on the level of content, production, and reception, Cameron creates a neoliberal iteration of sentimentalism that markets sensory stimulations, emotional movements, and affective responses. Through both plot and 3-D formal composition, *Avatar* extends the sentimental premise that the modern subject can animate the bodies of racial and sexual Others through imagining to feel and move as

their bodies do. While generations of liberal reformers have argued that the experience of shared feeling elicited by sentimental texts produces a powerful affective bond that can be harnessed into social change, recent work in feminist criticism underscores the degree to which sentimentalism depends on asymmetrical power relations.⁷ *Avatar* brings into stark relief the degree to which sentimentalism stimulates the sensation of the audiences’ own responsive, sympathetic body through dismissing the sovereignty of movement of the “savage.”

Focusing on the centrality of movement to sentimental dynamics helps clarify the role of movement in affective responses and emotional relations. In what follows, I explore how sentimentalism functions as a key rhetoric of movement, one intertwined with the logic of racialization and colonialism, by briefly addressing the nineteenth-century heyday of sentimental popular culture in the United States. In this period, to be racialized was to lack the capacity for progressive movement, to be permanently incapable of moving forward through time. I turn to *Avatar* to explore the politics of sentimental movement as it persists in the twenty-first century, analyzing how movement, both physical and emotional, becomes a resource for the protagonist as well as for Cameron himself. On the level of plot, the film tracks Jake Sully as he transitions from a paralyzed

ex-marine, whose body problematically symbolizes the degenerate state of this dystopian future world, to someone who moves and feels as a Na’Vi, whose resistance to modernity now serves an important resource for colonists fleeing a forward and destructive march of time. I also examine the film’s production and reception, showing how Cameron’s computergenerated imagery (CGI) team isolated the movements that comprise emotion and thereby created new ways to incorporate viewers and actors in the embodied dynamics of sentiment and the sensory pleasures of late capitalism. In this juxtaposition of two moments in the history of popular sentimentality, *Avatar* revisits the nineteenth-century motif of the savage to suggest a new kind of twenty-first-century sentimental fantasy in which the overcivilized subject occupies the virile body and vital movements of the savage, availing





movement, the biopolitics of twenty-first-century sentimentalism captures a middle-class fear that time has been moving too fast, ushering in an epoch of overcivilization in which modernity becomes toxic to the bodies of its seemingly rightful inheritors. In contrast, the bodies of the Na'Vis—characterized in the film as noble savages innocent of the corrupting influences of modernity—cannot move forward through time and thus retain a vital force in this dystopian future by virtue of their ahistoricity. Avatar's imaging technology creates new ways to incorporate viewers and actors in the embodied dynamics of sentimental projection and the sensory pleasures of late capitalism. Particularly in its 3-D versions, including Dolby 3-D, RealD, and IMAX (the film was also released in a standard 2D version), Avatar enacts the sentimental dynamic in which the audience experiences sensory

movements that are similar to those of the protagonists. The viewer not only watches Sully don the perceptual apparatus of the Na'Vis; through the 3-D lenses, the viewer too is offered an avatar body, roaming through a world in which 70 percent consists entirely of CGI.²² Due to the millions of dollars that cinemas have invested in installing 3-D technology—and indeed Avatar was instrumental in getting theaters to invest in new digital projection systems—the viewer also experiences a new sensory capacity of depth, texture, illumination, and movement as the eyes take in two overlapped images instead of the traditional single image of the screen. The viewer functionally has a new set of eyes, however nausea-inducing the 3-D goggles might be for some. When Sully first awakens in his avatar body, he immediately enlivens it with the risk-taking movements and quick responses of a trained fighter. Rejecting the medical team's command to "take it nice and slow" and perform a series of "sensorimotor reflex tests" before rising from the gurney, Jake wiggles his toes, rolls his ankles, and jumps into wobbly but decisive action. In this sequence, an early point-of-view shot of his hands rising up to meet his eyes encourages the viewer to identify with his joy over this new body's motion. The scene's only close-up shots focus our attention on Sully's newly vital limbs, revealing his supple feet peeling off the ground in a gleeful sprint and digging into the soft ground, dirt streaming between his toes. Sully's virile love of movement compels him to pursue his own pleasure-



oriented sensory-reflex tests despite the scientists' threat of immediate sedation, and we see him rapturously explore each of his five new sensory faculties.

As Sully learns to live in the dynamic forest, leaves coddle his body, plants burst in colorful light, and luminescent flying creatures spiral away from him in 3-D CGI, rendering new image patterns that immerse the viewer in new sensory experience. Immersion in Sully's gradual abilities to navigate the utterly dynamic and radiant Pandoran landscape are awash in the verdant hues of blue and green, which stands in sharp contrast to the muted gray militarybureaucratic palate of the RDA compound, and provides much of the film's pleasure. As Deborah Levitt has argued, "Where older 3-D films tended to achieve their most striking affects in projectiles—objects moving

toward the spectators—Avatar uses its 3-D to create the experience of moving into and navigating through an ornately rendered deep-space cinema. . . . The film is thus as much about the spectator's training regimen as it is about Jake's."²³ Extensive use of a handheld and consistently moving camera, rapid widening of the frame, tracking shots, quick vertical ascents, vertiginous downward shots during flying scenes, rapid cuts between overhead shots and point-of-view shots, and other techniques surprise the eye and attempt to render palpable the freedom of movement felt by Sully and Neytiri, the daughter of the Na'Vi leaders as well as Sully's teacher and romantic interest. The underwater setting of the first sequel, currently scheduled for a 2015 release, will similarly enable Cameron to capitalize on the viewers' joy of experiencing a new kind of sensory faculty alongside weightless movement.

Notes

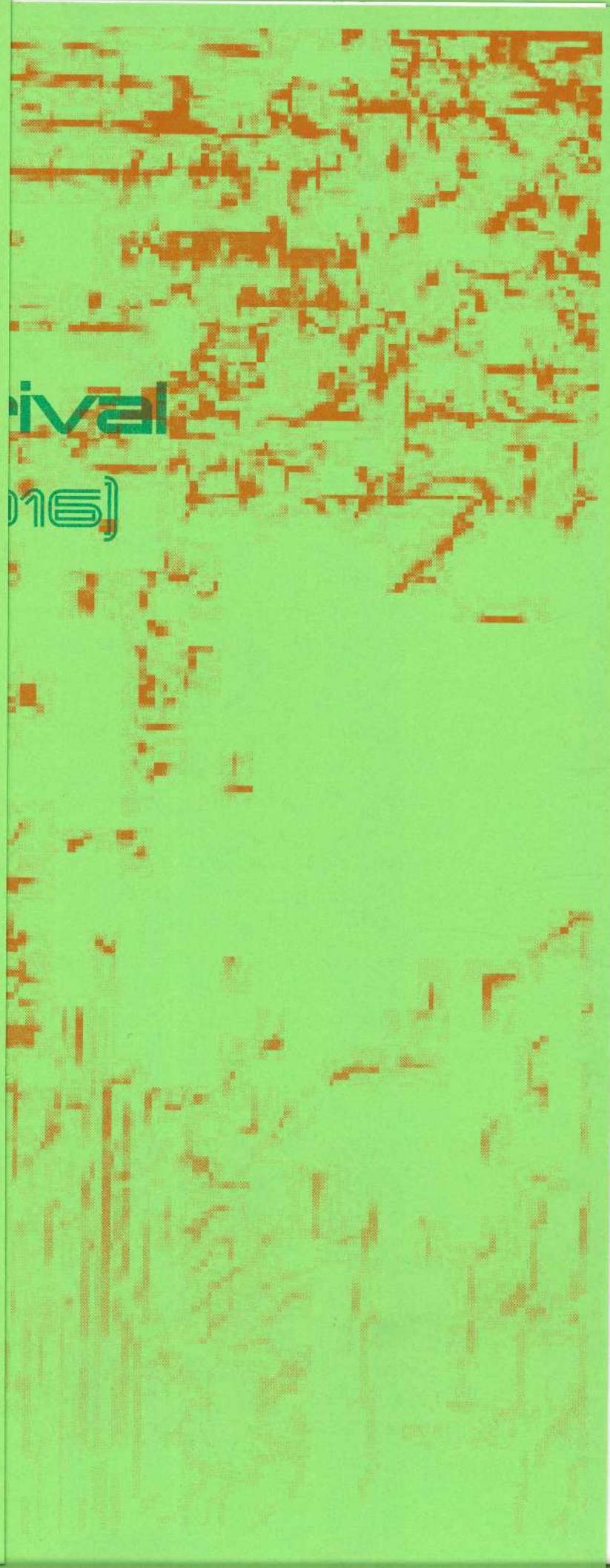
Much of the pleasure of writing lies in the pleasure of thinking with others, and I am deeply grateful to the many colleagues who helped this essay reach its final form, especially Genevieve Yue, James Leo Cahill, Marta Zarzycka, Bettina Papenburg, Nick Gaskill, Sarah Blackwood, Karen Weingarten, Lauren Klein, and the students of NoISE 2012 at Utrecht University.

1 For a rigorous explanation of sentimentalism as a mode or "disposition," including the role of self-reflexivity in sentimental texts from the eighteenth century to Frank Capra films, see James Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). On the notion of shared tears in melodrama, see Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 2-13.

2 Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 14-15.

3 *Avatar*, directed by James Cameron (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009; DVD, 2010).

4 On the interdependence of the sentimental and sensational modes in the context of mid-nineteenth-century popular culture, see Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 28-31.

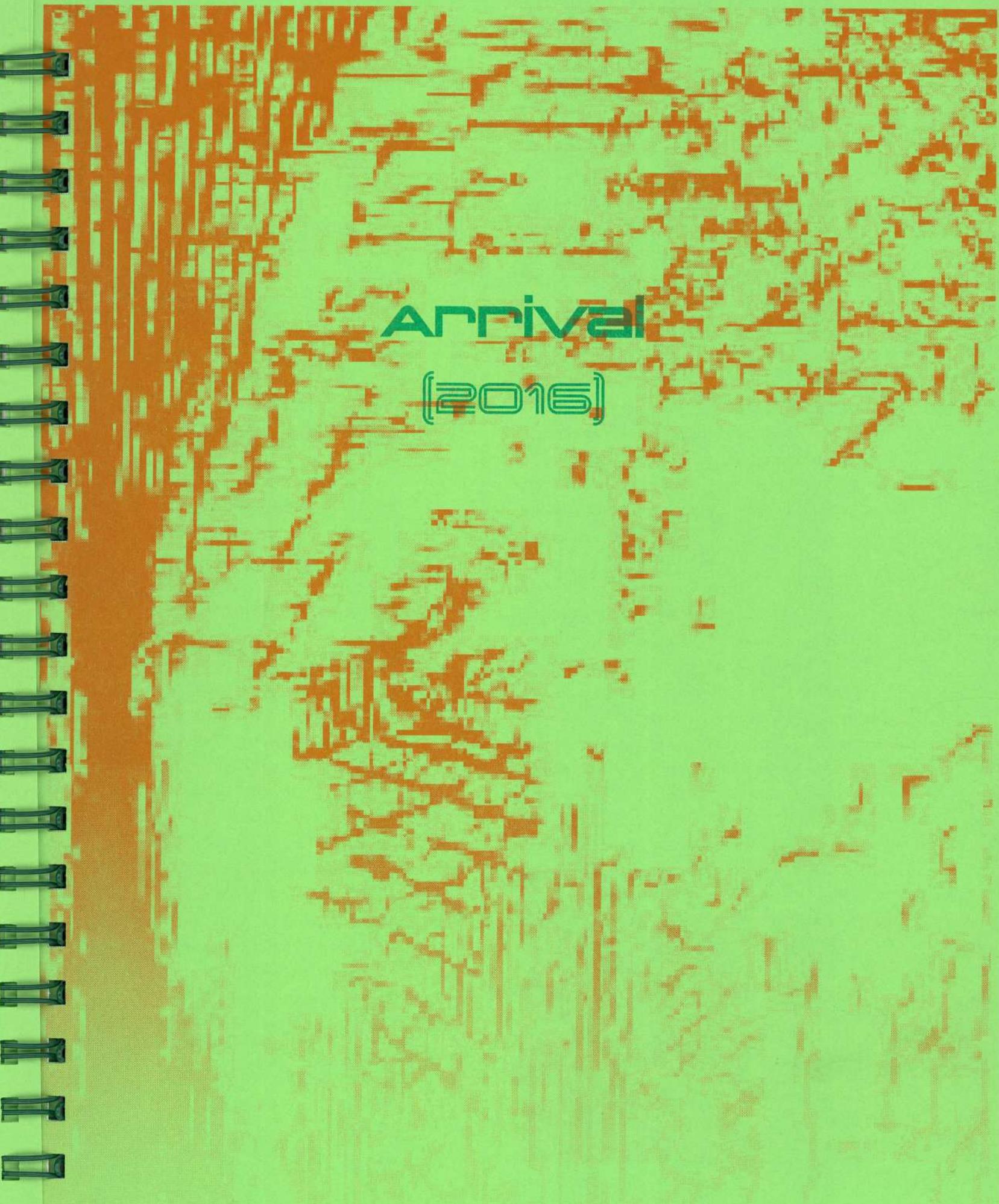


37 "Avatar: Motion Capture Mirrors Emotions."

38 On the history of immersion in mass spectacle, see Laurent Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2001); Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siecle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013). Regarding Avatar's box office figures, see "Avatar, 2009," LATimes.com, www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/movies/la-box-office-billiondollar-avatar-20120502,0,4668885.photo.

39 Rebecca Boyle, "James Cameron Heads for Mariana Trench to Film Avatar Sequel and Capture X Prize Simultaneously," *Popular Science*, September 17, 2010, www.popsci.com/science/article/2010-09/james-cameron-seeks-worlds-toughest-subhoping-film-avatar-sequel-and-capture-x-prize.

40 Alexei Barrionuevo, "Tribes of Amazon Find an Ally Out of 'Avatar,'" *New York Times*, April 10, 2010, A1.



To Love and Not to Smother; Aliens, Love and Reproduction

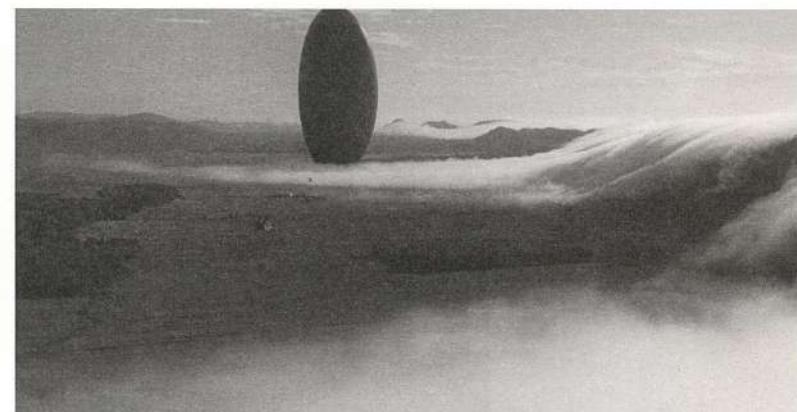
Maaike Hommes

TALKING TO THE OTHER

[...] Shortly after the opening sequence we meet Louise Banks, a prominent linguist. When alien ships arrive on earth, an army official named colonel Weber shows up in her office, asking her to translate a squeaking and rumbling sound from an MP3-player. A shocked Dr. Banks realizes that this is Alien language. She stutters and asks "how many?" "How many what?" The colonel responds. "How many [she pauses] speaking?" "Two", he says. [00.12.34] As Dr. Banks is trying to come up with a framework with which to understand Alien-communication, colonel Weber wants quick answers, and asks her how she would approach translating it. When she answers that she would need to see them and interact with them, the colonel sees that as a sign that she is trying to get a glance at the aliens, and he won't allow such tourism to his serious business.

When she cannot help him on the spot, the colonel threatens to approach another linguist. As he walks out of her office, Dr. Banks calls after the colonel and asks him whether he will approach Prof. Denvers from Berkely next. When it turns out he is: "before you commit to him, ask him the Sanskrit word for war, and its translation." [00.14.05] In what appears to be the same night, colonel Weber lands on dr. Banks' lawn with a helicopter. As she opens the door he says "Gavisti. He says it means an argument. What do you say it means?" "A desire for more cows". Dr. Banks responds [00.14.50]. With this, she is hired to translate Alien-language.

Where the Berkeley professor merely translated Gavisti's sign, Dr. Banks's is a motivational translation: desire for more is what usually leads to war. She approaches the word as a signifier in the symbolic structure of a language. In the helicopter, the interplay between different positions and their respective languages continues. Louise Banks meets Ian Donnelly, a theoretical physicist who has read her book and challenges her by saying that the cornerstone



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to civilization is not language but science. He continues his introduction by stating he has set up a list of questions for the aliens, starting with binary sequences. "How about we just talk to them before we start throwing math problems at them?" [00.17.19] Again, Dr. Banks' approach to language is one of dialogue. For communication to exist, an affective reality must be shared. That is what she sets out to teach the men who cannot deal with aliens [...] where the male character flaunts his binary knowledge, the female lead advocates contextual knowledge.

In her 2017 reading of *Arrival* titled "Girl Power: Back to the Future of Feminist Science Fiction with Into the Forest and *Arrival*", Sophie Mayer considers *Arrival* a 'not unsatisfying comeback' of girl power in science fiction, but comments on the ending as gender normative [...] the feminized character is the one to propagate love, and the viewer is left to assume the implicit masculine perspective, who needs to be taught that love works



in mysterious ways. However [...] the male-female dichotomy results in the eventual sacrifice of reproductive love with the loss of Louise's daughter; a sacrifice which is at the core of the movie. Before we get there, I shall first review the movie's references to communication and its prerequisites in the face of the alien other.

IMMERSION AND CONTAINMENT

In the opening sequence, we are presented with many references to circularity, and learn that Louise had a daughter, who died at the age of about eighteen. After this sequence, we learn that aliens have landed on earth, but have yet to learn how these events are connected. They will be through the process introduced in the movie as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, mentioned in the movie by Louise's colleague Ian Donnelly. This theory, which held general acceptance in real-life psychology until the 1970s, states that language either determines or constitutively influences the way you think, or that intuition



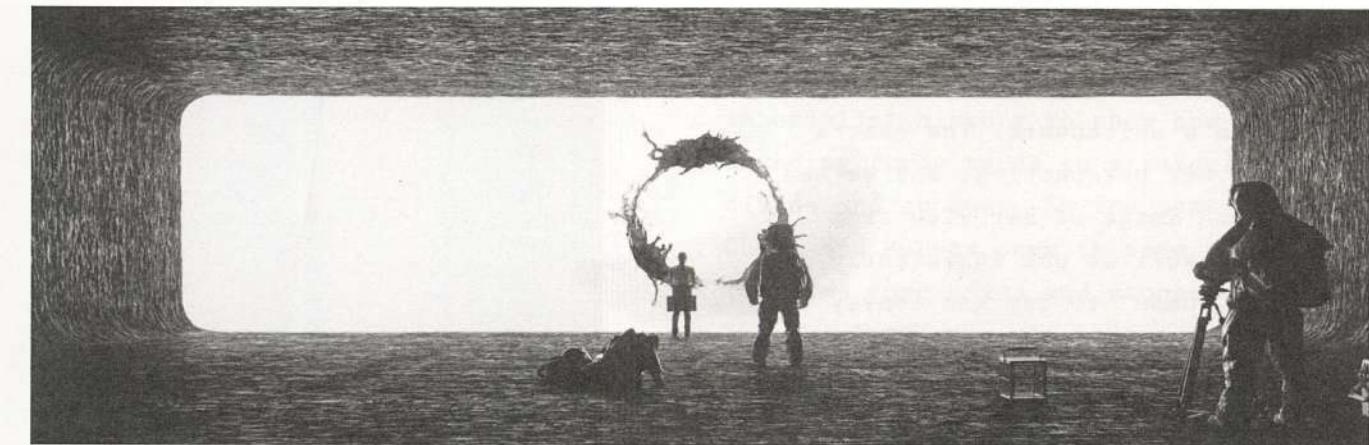
is shaped by language.⁴ In *Arrival*, the aliens possess a non-linear relation to time, and when Louise learns to communicate with them, her experience of temporality changes accordingly. When Louise starts to make progress in the alien language, Ian asks her whether she dreams in their language, for he has read that if you immerse yourself in another language "you can actually rewire your brain". This immersion in the other shall occur quite literally later on in the movie, as a miniature version of the alien's oblong main vessel appears, in which Louise is able

to communicate freely.

Throughout *Arrival*, the idea is presented that openness and vulnerability are a necessary prerequisite for communication in the face of otherness. Where in real-life linguistics, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has served to celebrate linguistic diversity, as it would enable a wider range of solutions to many different problems (Skerret 332), in *Arrival*, the consequences for Louise's immersion are stained with fear of contamination by too much otherness, and it is hinted

at to be the cause of the loss of her daughter.

As Louise and Ian enter the facility that has been set up around the alien's landing space, the war of positions between different types of thinking continues. Seven UFO's have landed on different places on earth and Colonel Weber is clear on their priorities: "what do they want, where are they from?" [00.17.05]. Inside the alien's vessel, which they call 'the Shell', there is a chamber which is filled with oxygen for two hours, allowing



contact with the aliens. After that, the oxygen is drained from the room, and it takes eighteen hours for it to return. This fact is immediately interpreted differently by the various characters/positions involved. The CIA agent notes how the aliens could suffocate them if they want to, Ian the physicist thinks it is an interesting fact, the colonel needs answers as soon as possible, and Louise Banks seems to think it is a way in which the aliens apparently try to find a space for communication.

to completely access their experience of time, transcending notions of presence, future and past. Dwelling in all three together, she knows how things will turn out, and uses this insight to stop an attack that could possibly destroy the world. The alien did not try to divide and conquer, but deliberately divided the message into twelve parts to force the different worldly powers to work together. Love arrived, but it is Louise who pays the price for her radical openness. When the puzzle pieces fit together, the viewer is now able to connect the opening sequence to the landing of the aliens that brought with them a circular understanding of time. To end with the beginning, we shall now look at these scenes more closely.



CROSSING OF LOVE

As violins play a long slow tone, halt, and move onto the next, the camera shows a view from a house close to a lake. "I used to think this was the beginning of your story", a woman's voice narrates. After a pause she continues. "Memory is a strange thing. It doesn't work like I thought it did. We are so bound by time, by its order." The image shifts to a lighter view and we see a woman doting on her baby. The violins continue their

sad tones, and the baby lies still and does not move. Someone, presumably dad, picks up the baby. The woman laughs, and cries "come back to me". She repeats those words three times. [00.00.00 - 00.02.30]

Next, the voice-over says "I remember moments in the middle" and we see a girl saying "I love you", followed by the same older girl, saying "I hate you!" The image shifts to a hospital hallway, where a frightened woman bursts out in tears after she receives news from a doctor. "Then this was the end" the voice-over says. The woman cries as she covers what we now believe is her daughter's body under a white sheet. She is aged about 18 years old and lies dead in the hospital bed, without hair. Again, the woman stutters the three words: come back to me. Then she walks away from the scene in a circular hospital hallway in a shot that seems to have no end. As the screen turns black, the voice-over states: "But now I'm not so sure I believe in beginnings and endings." [00.03.10 - 00.04.00]

Then, at the end of the movie, after the aliens leave earth, Ian and Louise linger at the military site that is about to be cleared out. In what is a sudden romantic gesture, Ian looks at her and says: "I have my head tilted up against the stars as long as I can remember. You know what surprised me most? It wasn't meeting them, it was meeting you." [01.48.40] As Louise now knows the future but is only just realizing so, she takes him in her arms and looks away. Flashbacks and



flashforwards reveal that they get together, live in the house at the lake and get a baby. As we know from the beginning, the baby dies, something that Louise is now realizing. Thinking back of the many references to contamination, it seems as though Louise was infected with too much alien. The cause of her daughter's death is referred to as a "rare disease" that was unstoppable [01.34.50]. The image of the daughter in the hospital, without hair, cites the treatment of cancer: of something growing inside her that couldn't be stopped. The disease is inevitably bound up, from beginning to end with Louise's opening up to the alien. It is their lingering presence, beyond the human experience of time, "despite knowing where the journey ends" she "embraces it all and welcomes every moment of it" [01.45.00]. She tried to simply enjoy the moments in the middle, to love and not to smother, and embrace the consequences.

Louise's immersion into the alien mimics the idea that in love, the self is touched. [...] In *Arrival*, love follows an ambivalent route. As in the opening sequence the 'I love you' is followed by 'I hate you', a counter-tendency exists in love.⁵ The movement travels beyond the self, and something is lost, or broken, en éclats, as Nancy writes. "something of the self is definitively lost [...] in the act of loving." (96). The break is not always painful, bloody or tragic, but it leaves a trace nevertheless. For Nancy, the trace is not only a broken one, but, what also arrives in love (pardon the pun), is joy.



"To joy is not a fulfillment, and it is not even an event. Nonetheless, it happens, it arrives - and it arrives as it departs, it arrives in departing and it departs in the arrival, in the same beat of the heart (106). "

Knowing that her daughter will die young before she is even born, Louise's love carries the charge of a break from the beginning. One that arrives, cuts across her, and arrives as it departs. Her love shall have to experience joy without fulfilment, it can never rest but will be, in Nancy's lyric turn of phrase, "serenity without rest" (106). "It is to be cut across without even being able to hold onto what 'to joy' makes happen" (*ibid*). Knowing this all, the film ends with a whispered "yes".

What cuts across, for Nancy, is the singular being. In the last part of his essay on love, that consists of a dialogue with Heidegger and Levinas, he returns to love as the 'heart of being'. Love is no ontological necessity (Levinas) and being-with (Heidegger) only takes place at the occurrence of being (105), where Nancy frames the crossing of the other as being constitutive of the occurrence. Absolute