

# Film analysis

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## CINEMA AS SURROGATE REALITY – REPRESENTATION, SUBSTITUTION, ARTIFICIAL AND VIRTUAL IN THE AESTHETICS OF CINEMA

**Abstract.** From the earliest forms of artistic expression and from the first philosophical debates, the relationship between body and its representations was a constant preoccupation for theoretical discussions. Be it the “tomb for the soul”, as it was for Plato, a mechanism governed by Reason and obeying the rules of the Reason, as it was for Descartes, or, as in the case of the phenomenology of the body, who equates the body with a mirror of the surrounding world, the Western intellectual world has debated the relationship between body and the reality of the world, or between the bodily existence of the world and the (un)Real. One fundamental question that derives from this debate is that of the relationship between humans and non-human beings (mechanical, artificial or imagined) in cinema. Using the correlation from Čapek’s work, who is the “slave” and who is the “master” in this relationship between the represented and the representation, and how does this centuries old debate can be transformed into cinematic art and the theory of cinema? The fundamental question becomes, in terms of cinema theory, what is “real” and what is “illusion” in movies? In this article the basis for interpretation are three movies considered to be self-reflexive and directly addressing the nature of cinema: *Solaris* by Andrej Tarkovsky, *Artificial Intelligence* by Steven Spielberg, and *Surrogates*, by Jonathan Mostow.

**Key words.** Cinematography, representation, surrogates, simulacra, illusion, reality-effect, virtual reality

From the very beginning many cinematographers have questioned the nature of their art, the foundations of their technology and the values of their craft. Do movies represent slices of life, windows of the real, or are these forms of human expression only fantasies? This problem is as old as philosophy and the debate around and about the essence of representation. It is placed at the very core of the discussions on the essence of art. Plato was one of the first (and the most important) philosophers to address this separation between simulations and essences in the world of representations. In his classical book on political organization, *The Republic*, in the famous passage from the tenth book of this work, he recounts a now classical narrative – a group of people, secluded into a cave, are allowed to see only parts of reality. This narrow understanding and perception of the visible forms is being subjected to a double reference, a double source of representation – one is given

by the shapes generated by the fire in this cave, while the other is dependent on the source of light given by the Sun. The cinematic indication is explicit although indirect and unintended – the shadows on the wall of the Platonic Cave are double folded projections, “real” projections and „illusionary” projections, and they are functioning in a similar way the cinematic apparatus does.

Cinema technology is projecting images on the white screen, into the darkness of the theater, and the viewers are limited to the “fire” of the machine, while the other “reality” is generated outside, by the Sun. While in the darkness, the spectators are trapped in the same way the captives in Plato’s cavern, they are victims of partial perception. Their only source of light is not the Sun, but the false light of the fire, of the cinematic machines. Here the allegory is obvious, since the shadow-painting Plato talks about is very similar to the shadowy experience of the cinematic representations. Plato’s Cave is, of course, a critique of the perceptual abilities of human beings, with reference to visual arts – the philosopher’s contention is that, if we believe our senses, then nonsense can take the place of reason. Only coming out of the cave we can realize the effect of perceptual illusions and fantasies on us. Being a late art, cinema is subjected to the same logic. Only exiting “the Cave” where the theatrical representation takes place, we understand the illusionary nature of the entire cinematic experience.

One of the earliest critiques of cinema came from a very similar standing point –

it was Maxim Gorky, who, after seeing the movies of the Lumière brothers, defined this new technology as “a kingdom of shadows”. From the notes of Gorky it becomes obvious that the questions above mentioned, and some of the answers, have remained the same, as they were for Plato centuries ago. What is the relationship between cinema and representation, what is the relationship between the artificial human bodies viewed on the screen and the actual human body perceiving the images? Or, returning to the basic question, what is “real” and what is “illusion” in cinematic representation? For in Gorky’s notes on early cinema we find this comparison – the images on the screen are not life “but its shadows”, are not real motion, “but endless specter”. Defining cinema representation as specters has already profound negative connotations, but Gorky goes further and says that “this mute, grey life finally begins to disturb and depress you... You are forgetting where you are. Strange imaginings invade your mind and your consciousness begins to wane and grow dim... This cinematic ghost became more and more similar to reality” (Gorky, 1999). So, it is a shadow that becomes more real by the time we keep watching it.

The problem of realism in cinematic economy has long been debated – cinema is supposed to be, in the classical view, based on a technology which creates a “slice of reality”. It was one of the first theoreticians of cinema, Hugo Münsterberg, who in his book entitled *Photoplay: A Psychological Study* develops the contrary opinion (Münsterberg, 1916).

That is, in opposition to the common belief that art, and especially film, was an imitation of nature, Münsterberg emphasized the degree to which all artistic presentations include unrealistic effects. The uniqueness and aesthetic promise of film he ascribed to the medium's exemplary power to reconstruct the real by imagining it not as it is in itself, but as it would be if it conformed to the faculties of the human mind. That approach was characteristic of an idealist philosophy, and it underlies the power of movies to evoke emotional reactions that may sometimes be stronger and deeper than any we can get in the "real" world.

At the other end of this theoretical argument was André Bazin who, as early as 1945, in his essay about the "Ontology of the Photographic Image", compared photographs to mummies and relics, understood as objects that exhibit a "transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction" (Bazin, 1967). For him cinema is fundamentally a photographic technology, thus fundamentally a "realistic" means of expression. For Bazin a „total" cinema would be that of absolute realism, and in his essay entitled "The Myth of Total Cinema", Bazin claimed that prior to any of the inventions of the early film pioneers, the cinematic medium existed as an ideal object in people's imagination, and it will continue to gain ground until becoming a "perfect" form of realism. These theoretical approaches to the language of cinema helped reduce the criticisms and the negative descriptions about the nature of cinema and

its relationship towards reality, it was Bazin's essay on the evolution of film language that remained seminal in this respect. His definition of the role reality plays in cinema representation was based on the belief that the new art of cinema was fundamentally an art of the real, generated by the photographic nature of the movies (Bazin, 1967).

Still, one of the key questions that needed to be addressed when discussing cinema practices was determined by the understanding of the notions of illusion and that of cinematic fantasy. Although movies are fundamentally imaginary constructs, created by reproductive technologies, cinematic illusion has been increasingly used in moviemaking, thus opening the way to a new wave of criticizing.

Some of the most important discussions on the nature of cinema came from the phenomenological approach. Phenomenology, as a method, is based on interpreting phenomena as visible manifestations and their link to human knowledge. The relationship between presence and absence of the real and the way images become manifestations of reality remains fundamental for phenomenological theory. Exporting some of phenomenology's key concepts lead to addressing some important questions: *can cinema actually be an expression of reality?* Can cinema provide an experience so close to reality as Bazin said, or is it only on appearance. Here the main problem comes from the fact that cinematic images generate a close

relationship between what is represented and what is actually present. As the „father” of phenomenology, Henri Bergson, in his study entitled „Creative Evolution”, had stressed the limitations of the ‘cinematographic’ mechanism on our ordinary knowledge, phenomenological approach to movies accepted the suggestion that the cinematographic technologies produce only the illusion of movement, being composed in fact of separate and unconnected ‘instants’, put together for the use and intent of the moviemaker. Thus any experience of cinematic nature happens in the area that is previously known from personal experience, it is dependent on an intentionality previously existent. It was Maurice Merleau-Ponty who expressed the importance of personal experience of the bodies of the others (as they are perceived) and the experiences of the phenomenological subject, who perceives other bodies as being seen. With perception at the center of any form of experiencing “the real”, we are becoming a part of the perceiving action, where an invisible understanding of the visible world is taking place, in the “chiasm” of perception. For Ponty (1964) the film does not mean anything by itself, it is relevant only in the process of experiencing it.

It was another phenomenologist, Giles Deleuze, who took this argument and took it further when he affirmed that “the brain is in the screen”, thus making an explicit connection between the ability of cinema to put images into significance, and the physiological mechanism that allows the

representation to take place in the brain (in an interview published in *Cahiers du cinema*, 380, February 1986: 25-32). In this phenomenological perspective consciousness is intentionality, and intentionality is directly linked to our way of perceiving the reality.

Another critical approach to cinema’s relationship with reality came from the Marxist critique of moviemaking. For the Marxist point of view, the cinematic production is based on a well constructed machinery of illusion, where the mechanical reproduction of reality generates the alienation of the viewers from the realities seen on the screen. For some theorists, like Jean-Louis Baudry, it is the entire history of cinema as a history of the desire of human beings to construct „simulation machines”, technologies capable of offering the subject perceptions which are actually fake representations, mistaken for authentic perceptions (Baudry, 1986). This criticisms stem from an ideological argumentation put forward in the theory of cinema by Siegfried Kracauer. His theory, subtitled “The Redemption of Physical Reality”, is based on the fact that all forms of representation developed by modernity were generating a dominion of “simulations” (Kracauer, 1997). For Kracauer, the real cinema prefers “nature in the raw”, but it is recurrently coerced into theatricality (he often uses *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* as an example of this anti-cinematic pressure). Kracauer conceives a perspective on film as representation of the material world, a

form of registering reality on the canvas of film.

It is obvious from this brief review of the theoretical perspectives on cinema that the relationship between reality and illusion in the field of vision remains problematic, and it grew even more problematic when the new technologies allowed the breaching of the frontiers between the two.

### **Short history of virtual humanity – how it influenced images and cinematic representation**

The long documented human drive for machines and technology was defined as „technophilia” and this technophilia easily and quickly became a part of the visual culture of modernity, once mechanical reproduction took its place in the evolution of contemporary culture. Humanity grew more and more dependent on technology and the recent developments of technologies have made humanity even more reliant on machines.

Since the first human automaton was described by Descartes and latter, when the theory behind it was developed by La Mettrie in 1748 – when the former chief medical officer of the French army published the book *L' Homme Machine (Man a Machine)*, the possibility of developing a purely mechanical, living being, was constantly discussed and toyed with. For in La Mettrie's book there is a clear connection between humans and automatons, since all beings function according to the same mechanical, physical, and chemical laws. And even if

humans are more complex machines, they are still machines in every aspect. Using a Cartesian metaphor, La Mettrie supports the concept the human beings as clocks that wind their own springs (La Mettrie, 1961), thus the apparition of machine autonomy in our culture was perfectly possible.

It was only in the 20th Century when Cyberman (Cybernetic man-model) was developed by Chrysler Corporation, in order to be used as modeling human activity in and around a car (Blakeley 1980), when the “extension of man”, as McLuhan proposed the term, became a reality. Suggesting the concept of technology as a manifestation of humanity became a fact of life, not only of technology, because more such creatures followed. Combiman (Computerized bio-mechanical man-model) was designed to test how a human can reach objects in a cockpit (Evans 1976), Boeman was designed in 1969 by the Boeing Corporation (Dooley 1982), then Buford was developed at Rockwell International in Downey, California, to find how a model could be positioned by the operator (Dooley 1982)<sup>1</sup>.

Soon cinema followed this trend taking place in the industrial world. Movies like *Ghostbusters* (1984), revolutioned the industry by creating a new type of

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1 All references here are from *New Advances in Virtual Humans: Artificial Intelligence Environment*, eds. Nadia Magnenat-Thalman, Lakhmi C Jain, Nikhil Ichalkaranje, Springer Verlag, Berlin, 2008.

character, mechanical robots who were operated as if it were a part of the action, with a high level of reality to it. Later, in *The Terminator* (1983) cinema confronted viewers with a fully developed android, moving and interacting with humans in a very much realistic way. This led to further developments, as it happened when a peak in virtual humanity was obtained in movie production. In the trilogy *Lord of the Rings* (2001), Weta developed an innovative technique that allowed the creation of a totally virtual creature, the Gollum. Gollum's coming into existence showed that the boundaries of reality and illusion became extremely slim.

At the same time, virtual reality technologies developed, while the first equipment that allowed the experiencing of a photorealistic, real-time environment was GE's Aerospace "visionics", later NASA – Ames creating the Virtual Interface Environment Workstation (VIEW) and then the creation of the online virtual community took hold. The invention of Philip Rosedale, called *Second Life*, completed this trend in 1999. 'Second Life' and 'The Sims' (one of the first a simulation computer game, created by game designer Will Wright and published by Maxis in 2000) were among the most successful PC games, offering a similar format, that allowed the player to interact with artificial life forms and to experience them as if they were real. This was, as Edward Castronova has put it, the beginning of an era of *exodus to the virtual world*, a transfer of humanity into virtual reality with the help of the technologies

of reality simulation and of entertainment (Castronova, 2007).

### **Modernity – the distancing of bodies and the proximity of representations**

First there was Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in modern literature, but it was with Karel Čapek's creation of the term "robot" (which came from a word invented by Čapek himself with his 'rossumovi univerzální roboti' – meaning to work for somebody else, word that gave the word *robot* to most of modern languages), that the machines as absolute others entered the stage of visual representations. It is relevant that in the work of Čapek robots are represented as the oppressed working class, who rebel against their human masters and finally exterminate them (Čapek, 1923). For in Čapek's world, the robot is fundamentally a proletarian artifact, an expression of the exploited servants who exist only to serve a master. While it is an expression of an ideology intrinsic to capitalism, at the end of the book there is a fundamental twist – the robots become human themselves. We witness a new humanity who wants and succeeds to substitute an incapable (albeit authentic) humanity, who wants to replace its original and claim their stake as "real" subjects. Even at the purest ethical level robots are described (and accepted) as machines that stand in place of humans, be it in difficult environments – avoiding human loss and human pain is one of the key ethical arguments in favor of using robots – or in the context of replacing the weak bodies



of human beings, as it happens in hard labor environments.

What's more important is that the very concept of "body", based on a modern (read Cartesian) concept – our bodies are "external objects" that we can control and command – is replaced by another form of Otherness, the robotic body. And if the (natural) bodies are mechanisms, and other mechanical devices can imitate the actions and functions of our corporeal manifestations, they must obey us in the same way our natural bodies do.

But his obedience could not and cannot be respected. When John Perry Barlow proclaimed his "declaration of independence" for the "new civilization of Mind", it became a proclamation of a world where identities become fluid and the "real" beings are those who leave their bodies behind (Barlow, 1996), and modernity reached its final stage. If we accept that modernity is fundamentally based on a delocalization of the humans, as Giddens suggested, from the time and space of the pre-modern towards a modern life that is founded on the lack of face-to-face connection between individuals, this separation of bodily connection, the appearance of the new, robotic, bodies and the distancing produced by the machines, provide a view on the complexity induced in the ages old debate on what is real and what is artificial (Giddens, 1991).

We are witnessing the human user connection with the computer system, and, while the computers become more interactive – at some point the computers

being the only machines we can establish this level of „intimacy" with – the humans become simple „peripherals" of the machines, since we are reduced to the passivity of our homes. Due to all these technologies we, as humans, have become "saturated selves", according to Kenneth Gergen's argument. We moved into the virtual world and accepted this generalized, „consensual" hallucination, as presented by William Gibson in his famous "Necromancer".

Following these lines of arguments, I would suggest that there is a central change in contemporary societies, and that movies became structures of *representation, means of imaginary production and of reality construction* that integrate some of these changes in technologies. By cinema we experience new ways of emotional life that are separated from reality.

It was Gregory Currie, in his seminal book on the relationship between image, mind and cinematic representation (Currie, 1995) who has addressed several important issues in this subject matter. Using some notions from cognitive psychology, he defined perception as "mental simulation". From this standing point, Currie explains how cinema uses perception and its relationship to reality in order to create internal movement (that is emotions) by means of external movement (that is the illusion of action).

Adding to this line of thinking the impact of the new technologies, since cinema has integrated some of the most important characteristics of the new

philosophies of the cyber-world (be it cyberspace, or cyberface) – immersion, interaction and transformation of the self are now integral part our experience of reality and artificiality. Reality is more an more experienced as an „arcade game” and with the emergence of new technologies, like biomechatronics (and we should not forget that prosthetics have been from the very start an integral part of cinema culture and production), the frontiers between humanity, the mechanical, the illusionary and the real have all but dissipated.

So the question is now if cinema operates with real representations or with secondary representations, ones that the viewers and spectators perceive as being “real”, and the consequences became more complex. For example, in movies like *Forrest Gump* (1994), the main actor, Tom Hanks, is actually meeting President John F. Kennedy (handshakes and smiles are mutually exchanged), and the character is represented at the site of several historical (and real) events as a participant. This leads to a very profound change in the nature of cinematic reality, as Sherry Turkle explained in *Life on the Screen*, the spectators in the new technological “reality”, even if they aren’t actors, start playing with the masks of reality (Turkle, 1995). We are all wearing these masks every day (as avatars or fake identities in virtual games), we are “extended and blended” with computers, and the representations of the computer and on the screen are present as a form of expressing our own selves. In this sense, we have become protean creatures, with

very loose margins of identity, washed by the mixing of computers, virtual beings and representations, that used to be illusionary, and are now a part of reality.

There are numerous movies dealing with the problems above mentioned in the history of cinema. *Bicentennial Man* (1999) follows the path opened by Isaac Asimov and his rules of robotics and expands on the question of robot identity, while *The Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003) was built around similar concepts, reality and illusion induced by machines, which lead to new forms of manifesting humanity in the virtual environment thus generated.

Yet, for the argument here, I chose three movies that I would propose as a basis for interpretation: they are *Solaris* (*Solyaris*, 1972) by Andrey Tarkovsky, *Artificial Intelligence* (*Artificial Intelligence: AI*, 2001), by Steven Spielberg, and *Surrogates* (2009) by Jonathan Mostow. In choosing these movies, I took into consideration mainly the level of self-reflexivity on the nature of cinema – they are important because of the problematic about cinema’s own nature. Analyzing the connotations of these three movies it will become clearer how the modifications in perceiving ourselves in correlation to the technological changes influenced our view of reality and artificiality.

### **Replacing simulacra with surrogates**

Jean Baudrillard uses the term of simulacrum with reference to reality as becoming hyper-reality, that is being more realistic than reality itself. But the Baudrillardian terms, simulacra and si-



mulations, cannot operate in the context of the new developments, since the objective of cinema is not to provide images that convey artificiality. Cinema is not a simulation of reality, it is a representation of the real with the methods of the real, but in the absence of the materiality. In experiencing cinema, we know that what we see is an illusion, yet we accept this illusion only as long as it is connected to reality and it emanates authenticity. Cinema is „a fake with strong relations to the real”, and in this sense it cannot be described as a simulacrum of reality, but rather a surrogate of reality.

The cinema is founded on “the reality effect” (this is why film seems so real) – yet this comes from perceptive mechanisms, determined by the human physiology, that can be manipulated. Psychological verisimilitude overcomes the difference between “true” and “false” in cinema, as long as the connection between reality and illusion is well hidden. The answer for this type of questioning was provided also by Baudrillard, when he developed the consequences of simulations on the contemporary world. The only problem is that for Baudrillard, images, in their relationship to objects, go through a series of transformations and this process is an evolutionary one. The image starts by being a reflection of reality, then it becomes a perversion of reality, goes through the phase of being the absence of reality and then, at the end, it becomes a simulacrum – that is it has no more connections to reality. At

its utmost phase, the image becomes more than the reality represented, it enters hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 1994). If we avoid the deterministic aspect of Baudrillard’s logic, we can keep the implicit relationship between the objects represented and their representations. It is in the production structure of capitalism, based on imitations, fakes and illusions, that cinema plays an important role. Yet in the case of cinematic representation the simulacra cover only part of the complexity of this relationship, since simulacra are defined by Baudrillard as simple copies that do not have any original, they are images without object, but cinema is using now simulations that are deeply rooted in their original (like motion-tracking technologies).

I think the concept of surrogates is more relevant for our discussion, since the surrogate keeps intact the relationship with its reference and this link stays intact, it even becomes necessary to the functioning of the substitute, since the surrogate cannot function without its „real” object. As it is in the semiotic theory of cinema - in the deepest semiotic sense – we need to resolve the problems of the conventional nature of moviemaking, because movies are specific type of “signs”. The classical definition of signs states that a sign is “something which stands to somebody for something else in some respect or capacity”. It is here that the profound semiotic dimension of the surrogate is to be found, since, in the definition Peirce gave to the sign, the sign-functions of the surrogates are

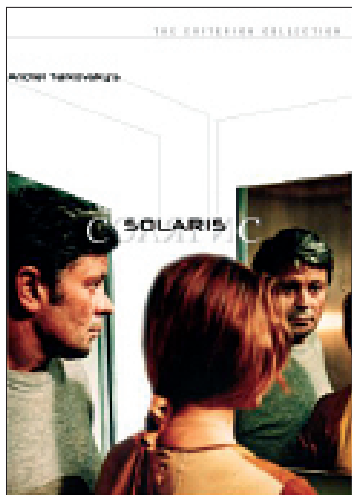
perfect, both at the iconic, the symbolic and indexical level. References can be established by pictorial similarity or identity between the represented and the representations (in this sense surrogates function as icons), they are conventions (they work as symbols), or they operate by resemblance (that is they are indexes). Cinema is a surrogate reality because it functions as a representation of the object which is based on a mutual agreement between the object and the viewing subject and has a perfect resemblance that needs to keep its connections with the represented.

The title of Jean Renoir's movie, *La Grande Illusion* can be used as a reference to this very nature of cinema: cinema is an excellent presence, an almost perfect reality, still it is a great fantasy that comes out of an almost palpable realism. The camera "registers" the phenomena of the living, but its effects on the viewer exceeds those of "simple", direct perception. And it is in this very characteristic that was criticized from the very beginning, that is the nature of cinema as a shadow of the real, where the "grand illusion" of cinema comes into place. As Arnheim argued it, cinema's illusion is partial, due to the double dependence, on the real and on the artificial (Arnheim, 2006). The famous entrance of the train in the Ciotat railway station, that has allegedly moved people to the point that the viewers really believed that the train is going to crush them, presents the same characteristic. The illusion cinema generates is based on codes and technological abilities – so

it has indexical power – but with these technological abilities cinema is fundamentally dependent on the ability of an actor to presents us with an illusion an emotions – and this is symbolic power – and finally, it is the fact that cinema constructs a secondary reality, an icon of the Reality, which we believe and accept as being both real and illusionary, gives movies their most important trait.

### **Dealing with secondary reality in Tarkovsky's *Solaris***

In purely technological terms, cinematic experience is nothing but a witnessing of a mechanical representation, a viewing of a copy of second-degree, or an artifice of the real. Is it the interaction – the fact that we are witnessing – or is it just the fact that it becomes a part of our imagination – the fact that we believe it – which makes cinema such a powerful tool of expression? As in the case of the ex-wife of the main character Chris Kelvin (played by Donatas Banionis), who comes to life, for Kelvin the bodily manifestation of Hari seems to be only an expression of the imagination, and not a real person. Being human or inhuman is not resolved by acting like a human and behaving like a human. The surreal atmosphere that Tarkovsky creates in his movie is designed to support the framework of referentiality to what is cinema. Cinema, as it is in the movie, with the coming to life induced by the solar energies of the planet the crew is trapped, re-creates seemingly real images of real people, and this belief makes us accept



film as an artistic form. Our problem is similar to that of Kelvin – what we see is a copy, or is it a visual manifestation of life itself? This is valid not only in the virtual reality environments of today, it is deeply embedded in the functioning of the medium itself. Representing natural life by means of photographic technologies can be criticized, but this cannot surpass the contradiction that lies in the very nature of the cinematographic apparatus. Cinema as a means of creating the imagination, uses reality for its inspiration – in the same way the manifestation of Hari is actually a bodily form of the deceased – but constructs another reality, autonomous and self-sufficient. Film reflects reality, but it is not reality itself that cinema continues to manifest, it is the surface of objects and of beings, an illusion of these material forms, but one that needs them to come to life.

In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky's book about the nature of his art, he compares the project of cinema with that of

literature, inasmuch as it is an instrument designed to bring memories to life. What is the nature of these memories is less clear, but we can use Raymond Bellour's definition of cinema, as an installation apparatus (or *dispositif*, in the French terminology) that significantly alters the meaning of its content (Bellour, 1999), it is an in-between imaginary space. Cinema can construct memories, yet these memories are unsatisfactory, they do not convey the total feel of reality. Dreams and disappointments – this is, as Tarkovsky described it, the key theme in *Solaris* – are at the very core of the aesthetics of cinema (Tarkovsky, 1987). Entering the screening room, we enter a dream world and, as Kelvin accepts at some point to interact (even sexually) with the substitute of his wife, that very experience is producing disappointment – the replica is never good enough, not because it does not provide the necessary emotions, but because it always reminds us of its artificial nature. It would always be a "creation" of a form that we do not understand (since we don't part take in its production), one that we interact with, but we do not consider as "real".

Another important turn in this discussion on the essence of cinema regarding is the Tarkovskian approach of the rebirth of artificial life. As Hari in *Solaris*, always coming back to life, unable to die and unable to become fully accepted, life on the screen is never human enough for us to overcome its nature of "apparition". It is an ideal representation of a feeble form, one that we discard (as Kelvin does with

the first apparition of Hari), or we use for sheer enjoyment. One key problem in the theory of cinema is that of identification and of identity, between the viewer and the viewed, between the actors and the characters and so on. It is also the fundamental question for Tarkovsky in *Solaris* – if the body is the temple of the soul, and if we can trans-mutate our souls into other bodies, then those bodies become holy temples at their turn? What happens with the “real” desires and emotions one transferred in another body (and this can be also understood as a question significance of transfer from the characters on the screen to the viewer)? These are important problems that Tarkovsky addresses in his own way – the poetic cinema as a way to relating with reality that has crossed over the cause-effect logic.

Last but not least, the dialogue between cinematographers is fundamental to understanding cinema. While Tarkovsky was working on *Solaris*, Kubrick was finishing his masterpiece, 2001. *A Space Odyssey* (1968), and this dialogue over time and through other movies would continue with Spielberg’s creation of a Kubrick project *A.I.*, a project started by Kubrick in 1979 and finished by Spielberg in 2001.

### ***Building „the illusion effect” – Spielberg’s Artificial Intelligence***

For certain filmmakers, and this is especially the case of Steven Spielberg, using computer simulation in order to generate reality has been a problem linked



to their fundamental understanding of cinematography (Jackson, 2007). This illusion is what enchants us with moviemaking. We need to be witnesses and observers of the real, yet we seem to extract pleasure from this type of relationship. The effect illusion has on the viewers is what the spectators search in certain movies. Nonetheless, this is a double binding relationship.

For cinema the role of technology is central as is for David, the robot boy in *A.I.* (Spielberg, 2001), who goes through the same ontological problem. He needs to know whether what he experiences is real or it is only a projection, a false memory. The questioning of personal identity (and not that of another being, as was the case with *Solaris*) is developed by a boy who is “unreally real” – David, the main character in *A.I.* goes through the same problem as Pinocchio did before him. He wants to become “a real boy”, and the only person who could do this is “the blue fairy”. After a long quest, that leads him from disappointment to illusion, when he first meets the Fairy he actually sees an artificial art object, an illusion, an image of what he thinks

to be real, and he perceives this artificial (non existing) being as Real. The moment when the artificially created David is able to construct an emotional relationship with an entity that is not “material”, he becomes human. It is the same for us, few words can express the depth of this connotation, since it is an expression of our own dependence on images. Our own experiences in the visual field are challenged by the belief in the existence of the objects that we see, object that do not exist, and still we believe in their ability to influence us. David is in the same time the object and the subject of every cinematic experience. He is “real” and in the same time he is artificially constructed. And this fundamental ambivalence cannot be overcome by sheer reason.

Another important element in *A.I.* is the treatment of “machine anxiety”, an anxiety we all have with respect to cinema (being a machine technology). In January 1983, one of the issues of “Time” magazine conveyed the general techno-anxiety on its main cover – instead of a portrait with the “Man of the Year,” Time presented the portrait of the “Machine of the Year,” which was the desktop computer. Hubert Dreyfus’ book *Mind over Machine* is exemplary for proposing one of the most negative views on the life of the artificial intelligence. Machines, Dreyfus argued, are fundamentally opposed to metaphysical thought, thus they face the impossibility to replicate human thinking.

Returning to our comparison with the nature of moviemaking, if cinema is

a medium of artificiality, how can cinema surpass the inherent relationship between the Real and the Artificial? One possible answer is to be found in the movie *A.I.*, which was based on a story by Brian Aldiss “Supertoys last All Summer Long” and its distinctions between “Mechas” and “Orgas”. At the very core of the movie is the desire of the machines of becoming human – as with David in Spielberg’s approach to the subject matter – and android boy discovers a world of complex robot-human interaction – that is how we emotionally connect with non-humans. This emotional connecting happens in cinema also, images that are artificial, generate deep and “real” feelings into the viewers. As any artificial image, David needs to become something real. And the essence of cinema participation is similar, we desire to be a part of the imaginary world of cinema, yet we don’t have access to the deep levels of illusion, and still we “feel” for what is happening in front of our eyes. It is exciting and in the same time it is troublesome. Our satisfaction always finishes with the ending of the stream of images that comes from the screen, as David, we are alive in this artificial world of cinema only as long as the projection continues, as long as we accept the convention. These properties of cinematic meaning production are based on assumptions fundamentally linked to any subjective experience. Projecting images on the screen is equal to projecting images on the screen of the brain and, as in the case of the artificial boy, we never know which images are



“true” and which are “constructions”, false memories.

As in the brain of an android, we „see” through a machine, a machine of vision that transfers reality back to us. Cinema remains fundamentally an artificial world, “an impossible imaginary” and “an impossible dream”. It is a fake memory, one that will come back over and over, even if we were not a part of that reality and even if we did not really lived all those experiences. As is in Spielberg’s movie, the question coming back recurrently is what is real, what is life, and how to obtain reality even in the midst of artificiality.

### **Surrogates and the experience of reality without presence**

As noted before, we can say the images in cinema lack *substance*, they are void of object consistency, but they are not separated from the reality they refer to. The concept of surrogates, developed by the philosopher Paul Weiss (Weiss, 2002), offer a better theoretical background for the phenomenological perspectivism. Our experiences are not just what we “see”, but are made of a dynamics of actuality and ideality. The two coexist and get their unity in the field of the existence.

Another role of the surrogates was elaborated by Gibson (Gibson, 1954), who used the term projective surrogate, as a special category of the more general concept of surrogates. For Gibson a surrogate is defined by the presence of as a stimulus generated by another individual or an event not at present affecting the sense organs of the percei-



ving individual (Gibson, 1954: 5–6). For him surrogates can be divided into two groups, the conventional surrogates and the nonconventional ones. The nonconventional surrogates can also be subdivided in projective or replicative surrogates, these being characterized by possibility of the surrogate becoming actual.

Jonathan Mostow (who directed *Terminator 3*) developed in the movie *Surrogates* (2009) this possibility of the surrogate, in generating also a profoundly cinematic connotation – between the “actual” human beings and their mechanical doubles. The main subject of the movie is to present what it means “to experience the world through a machine”, and although the aesthetic qualities of the production are doubtful, its relevance to the discussion about the nature of cinema remains intact. *Surrogates*, based on the graphic novels written by Robert Venditti and Brett Wendele, answers a key question – what is our relationship to reality in a world where media and



technologies take more and more a substitution role for our perceptions.

The human beings live in a universe that uses perfect substitutes in order to alienate themselves from “reality” (with its painful consequences). A human being totally dependent on machines interact with other human beings only by their mechanical (highly computerized) substitutes, by surrogates. As Venditti admitted, the inspiration source of the story comes from the fact that contemporary man is more dependent than ever on the computer, and than many of our (Venditti interview, 2010) fellow men live more in the virtual reality than in the actual one. The surrogates are media platforms on steroids, and even police work is done by intermediaries, as is the case of FBI agent Tom Greer (played by Bruce Willis) who is called on duty for investigating the killing of two surrogates, a first in the world of robotic replacement of people. Of course, in the end of Mostow’s movie, the weaknesses of humans is preferable to the perfection of the machines.

Because surrogates are “humanoid” beings, remotely controlled by a “driver”, who is in a state of semi-dreaming, the surrogates need to transmit information to the “driver” in a similar way the reality shows broadcast and feed images into our living rooms. And here is one of the most important issues regarding cinema and its ever changing nature. One of the concepts in contemporary technology that influences cinema is telepresence. Simply put, telepresence is the presence

of the human beings on a location, without being physically there. This is one of the keys – cinema is fundamentally a telepresence instrument, it transports us into a realm that we do not experience in a deep bodily fashion, while providing us with the emotional experience that follows.

Similar to Myron Krueger’s experiments remote presence (like Krueger’s *Videoplace*), telepresence brings up a fundamental problem in cinema, that is authenticity. *Surrogates*, the movie, begins with this theatrical convention embedded – we witness the presence of a famous actor (Bruce Willis) apparently wearing a toupee and acting in a very boyish manner, and by the end of the action we realize that the artificiality and the lack of authenticity is given by the story. The character we see in action is not Tom Greer, but a surrogate, a perfectly functioning substitute. One level of interpretation comes from the fact that cinema’s fundamental illusionistic instrument of generating significance is the actor. Here the actor is a performer in the sense that it becomes a substitute, an imperfect one, yet capable of generating empathy towards a person, a human being that does not exist (or is only a replica of a historical figure). The questioning remains the same, how “real” are our bodies in the cinematographic space, and how do we accept the “humanity” and the authenticity of humans that are acting and behaving not naturally, but deeply coded? These virtual characters on the screen are integrated in our perception

as real beings only when authenticity is profoundly linked with reality.

One deeper step into this discussion must go back to the way the substitute was defined, from the Greek tradition of art theory and later, as indicated in the Lacanian psychoanalysis. Gombrich pointed out the role of the substitutes in the naturalistic tradition of Oriental (Egyptian) and Western (Greek and Roman) art theory. A horse in a picture is a substitute of a real horse, and not an imitation of its external shape (Gombrich, 1963). We have the same reasoning with Lacan, for whom the phallus functions as a substitute, because it is not a reference to the actual sexual organ (Lacan, 1998), but a function of the substitution taking place at the symbolic level. Here we can identify the modes of experiencing cinema as an illusionistic effort – we believe the make-believe, because they

are not only *imitations* or *representations*, the moving images that we see on the screen are artificially there, that is they are only apparently there, but we treat them as functions of the reality.

This connection of the appearance and the actuality makes even movies that often depict non-existing characters or are using the illusionary appearance of beings that are no longer present to become complete representations of the real. Representing and misrepresenting these are the two fundamental movements in moviemaking – because cinema is founded on a technique of capturing reality, that is the photographic dimension, we receive the movie images as if they are essentially realistic and in the presence of movies we are „suspending our disbelief” – as in the case of surrogates – we take artificiality for reality, and the other way around.

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