# 'Crows' vs. 'Avatar,' or: 3D vs. Total-Dimension Immersion

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**Abstract.** 3D film's explicit new space depth arguably provides both an enhanced realistic quality to the image and a wealth of more acute visual and haptic sensations (a 'montage of attractions') to the increasingly involved spectator. But David Cronenberg's related ironic remark that "cinema as such *is* from the outset a 'special effect'" should warn us against the geometrical naiveté of such assumptions, within a Cartesian ocularcentric tradition for long overcome by Merleau-Ponty's embodiment of perception and Deleuze's notion of the self-consistency of the artistic sensation and space. Indeed, '2D' traditional cinema already provides the accomplished "fourth wall effect," enclosing the beholder behind his back within a space that no longer belongs to the screen (nor to 'reality') as such, and therefore is no longer 'illusorily' two-dimensional. This kind of totally absorbing, 'dream-like' space, metaphorical for both painting and cinema, is illustrated by the episode *Crows* in Kurosawa's *Dreams* (1990). Such a space requires the actual effacement of the empirical status of spectator, screen, and film as separate dimensions, and it is precisely the 3D characteristic unfolding of *merely frontal* space layers (and film events) *out* of the screen *towards* us (and sometimes *above* the heads of the spectators before us) that reinstalls at the core of the film-viewing phenomenon a regressive struggle with reality and with different degrees of realism, originally overcome by film since the Lumière's *Arrival of a Train at Ciotat* (*L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de la Ciotat*, 1896) seminal demonstration. Through an analysis of crucial aspects in *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) and the recent *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (Werner Herzog, 2010), both dealing with historical and ontological *deepening* processes of 'going inside,' we shall try to show how the formal and technically advanced component of those 3D-depth films impairs, on the contrary, their apparent conceptual purpose on the level of contents, and we will assume, drawing on Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, that this technological mistake is due to a lack of recognition of the nature of perception and sensation in relation to space and human experience.

**Keywords:** 3D film experience, Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams*, James Cameron's *Avatar*, realism.

# 1. Beyond the Ideological Content: On Form as Ideology

Concerning James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), the polemical reading of the title of this paper (indicated by the adverb "vs") is disputing and denying from the outset the 3D numerical pretention to graphically render the 'unaccountable' wholeness of 'real' space. In fact, Merleau-Ponty's *single* whole dimension he calls 'profondeur' (Merleau-Ponty 1960), corresponding not to a spectatorial subject/object external interface, but to the 'always-already' structure of being-*in*-the-world, is not gradually gathered together by adding yet another 'dimension' (or by explicitly featuring the visual effect of illusory depth created by an adequate 2D perspectivism), and 'three-dimensional' could be the kind of space cube displayed in front of me in the movie theatre, but not *the space where I am*. Indeed, '3D' is not just a somewhat misleading banner summarizing a complex cinematographical processing of digital HDI, motion & performance capture techniques (and stage – significantly called 'The Volume') and digital 3D Cameron/Pace Fusion Camera System, but actually a perfectly accurate fetish formula focusing on the central visual and symbolic issue of the film (3D space functioning as *our* avatar into Pandora's world with as much (fictional) success as Jake's into becoming a 'real' Na'vi) and marketing for a technical exploit meant to ideologically capture in advance also the audience's willingness 'to be a part of it' – namely, of a prodigious stereometric space both (contradictorily) exhibiting itself as such (as stereometric, not as real) before my eyes *and* 'involving' (yet without actually *embracing*) me in it when its irresistibly high 'reality rate' supposedly dissolves itself into 'reality' proper.

What I am implying here is that the acclaimed unprecedented 'realistic-immersive' qualities of '3D' are mostly a matter of enticing promotion discourse turning into a generalized public cliché only to be then naively reaffirmed by the single spectator *at speech level* without any real grounding in actual filmic experience; in fact, in overt contradiction with it, and utterly equivocated about the nature of filmic space and film experience.

'3D' is thus not the label for a more subtle set of phenomena, but an adequate description of the bulk of the commodity we're being (extra-)charged for. It works as an ideological device, summoning us up to identify and to partake in a glorious new age transcultural deep ecological neuro-spiritual posthuman journey of (and the unavoidable battle for) rebirth of ourselves as expanded 3D Na'vi-like spectators, while grossly omitting the (falsely) advertised means to accomplish the assigned mission; moreover, this very medium interposing itself self-obstructively as the main obstacle leading to failure. Its full ideological depth

reveals itself, however, in the fact that this failure remains unacknowledged and is even substituted by a *verbal* claim of success.

A similar (and parallel) disavowal takes place at the content's level: namely, the refuse to acknowledge the racist undercurrent of the "White Messiah fable" – pointed out both by David Brooks and Slavoj Žižek – at the heart of the apparently irreproachable eco-ethno-political agenda of Cameron's blockbuster, as well as its collusion with a general military-industrial-entertainment complex expressing the white/human supremacy status – equalling the military, the movie-making, the scientific, and the heroic-messianic vehicles and attitudes – according to the analyses of Žižek and Thomas Elsaesser, here broadly referred to without entering in further details. My thesis is that the unconscious semantic core of the film consists of the magical interconfirmation, taking place between the form and the content levels (and suggesting a magical equivalence between the fictional technology – the *avatar* device – and the technology of fiction – the *3D* device), of the same basic impulse of becoming the very substance of fantasy: *Jake Sully,* transporting himself into his vehicle, until ultimately becoming it, through the canonical phases of incarnation, death, and resurrection (post-technologically Christianizing its Hindu matrix, and thus indulging in a full New Age cinematic boasting); *us*, being transported by the corporification of space layers and boxes until ultimately vanishing into the fiction of a '3D' reality (which coincides with the far distant, yet so eminently reachable, world of Pandora – thus inverting the relation that for Benjamin defines the *aura*).

The self-denying character of these twin moves is already inscribed into their very constitution: because Jake 'becomes one of them,' his (human, all too human) role as the central hero and the destinal savior tends to go unnoticed (both to the average Western moviegoer and, according to Žižek and Elsaesser, to a wealth of anti-capitalist fighters spanning from President Evo Morales to the Dongria Kondh people in India or the Palestinians, in no way bothered to identify themselves with the sage primitivism of these much too Hollywoodesque constructed Na'vi: and if, according to Elsaesser, Cameron's and Hollywood's new film game does consist of allegorically self-reflecting its own several and contradictory conditions of possibility, using a shrewdly balanced double-bind control in order to surmount sheer contradiction, then, the result is not merely "[…] a reflexive doubled parable of the communication circuit that Hollywood seeks with its global audiences, where a studio's films are its avatars, 'leading' spectators while ideologically seeming to act on their behalf" (Elsaesser 2011). As Elsaesser himself recognizes, Hollywood does not try for a moment to conceal that it is making good use of its

most vernacular recipes to enlist worldwide potentially hostile audiences: but by honestly *staging* (in order to not having to *show*) this very circuit of idealized native people and ethnocentric/anthropocentric narrative leadership, 'the industry' manages to keep the whole operation unknown to its subjects, in a sort of magic circuit between film as myth and film as rite: we (mythically) identify with the Na'vi *in the film* because we have already accepted to be structurally identified *by* the film ritual *as* its Na'vi (by merely massively assembling to watch it), and we accept it *so that* we may go to Pandora (through the 3D amazing 'star' gate, in itself another Hero – a Hero of geometry) and identify with them – 'following the leader,' the white hero made blue and thus apparently redeeming himself from his intrusive redemptive quality in the very moment of its superhuman (or humanly transhuman) consummation. What is more human, nowadays, more Deleuzian and delightfully 'no-longer-merely-human,' than becoming the Other? Hollywood knows this better than its enemies do.

I am arguing here that the secret core that warrants the success of the double-bind operation Elsaesser is pointing out, lies in fact at a deeper formal level: if it is the blue tribe that captures the political identification drive of the colonized peoples on Earth watching this soft-toxic Hollywood product, their *empowerment* fantasy directly originates in the partaking on the thrilling '3D joint venture' (a simple 2D identification not being sufficient to ensure the very particular sort of *heightened cult* an Evo Morales or the Dongria Kondh were expressing, facing a *unique* object: something special must have been occurring at the same time, different from some sort of a newly enhanced and fully consequent *Dances With Wolves*: and that is not the simple Na'vi saga, but the immediately *materialized* saga of a *3D* Na'vi and a *3D* Pandora). But since McLuhan we are well aware of how much form and medium are the primary message and entail their own semantic content: namely, 3D as an escaping vehicle into the fantasy-world of a non-human tribe. Human tribes, as human, will feel attracted both by the non-human character of the Na'vi and by their humanizing and modelling role; at the same time, they will strongly surmise the central place they now find themselves occupying in the dialectical redefinition of humanness and humanity by its internal and external Others, whereby they both internally *redefine* the dominant white paradigm and expose themselves to the appeal of *being* externally *redefined* in their anthropocentrism by the archetypal fantasy of 'another Mankind' (to which the shared condition of banishment renders them all the more sensitive).

In other words, the Palestinians etc. can in the first place *afford* to identify themselves with the Na'vi thanks to the formal *3D empowerment*, but this will

in turn be the cause of an 'overidentification' with a cosmic fantasy which will again dissolve its critical function as a role model. Through the corruptive overempowerment contained within the empowerment, Hollywood ultimately wins back to the Western technological will to power the very populations it seemed to be instigating to rebel against it. Insidiously establishing the primary identification not with the *represented* Na'vi, but with the human and white *representation apparatus* ultimately mobilised to actually *produce* them, Cameron is urging his riotous tribes/target audiences to engage primarily with the cinematic machine that creates the spectacular simulacrum of reality (the 3D fake-hyperreal) and through it with what remains of the blue tribe as its by-product (the 'bon sauvage' Western fiction generating here a second degree *filmic avatar*), candidly advertising in the very title of the film that its deal is with *all sorts of* 'avatars' – i.e., with human-technologically *produced* 'legitimate Na'vi'… as well as with *humanly* produced dream-work sci-fi Na'vi fables, offered by Hollywood's agenda to its obedient consumers. The transference of the empowerment focus from content to form, from the blue tribe to the exhilarating 3D human power over reality ('technically reproducible' as it is the case with any simple Na'vi) entails the voiding of the Na'vi substance, in fact turning the film into a gigantic insufflation of the *avatar* device proper to a Western fabrication of dreams to be sold to the world, at a gambit's cost. The piece is exchanged for a better position on the world's chessboard: the Na'vi pawns are offered as allies to the world's 'tribes' in order to secure to the West the 'transcendental' domain over the territory, wherein the Pandora inmates have been constructed from the outset as the vanishing puppets they in fact turn out to be (self-reflectively, the in-universe mirrors the cinematic contrivance that produced the Na'vi entity as such out of a 'skinny' digitalization of optical effects, so that *all* the Na'vi are indeed genuine avatars and, their blue colour, a mere white projection. The cutting-edge technology actually used to produce the film parallels the one displayed in its fictional universe, and Sam Worthington animates from within his filmic avatar much in the same way Jake Sully dresses his, in either case feeling or acting through another body).

The fundamental mechanism of meaning developing in *Avatar* could be outlined as follows:

1. Form (the 3D displaying) deeply symbolizes and performs content, providing our real selves with a powerful avatar to enter the filmic realm; conversely, narrative meaning (Jake Sully's half and full avatar transferences) illuminates back the ultimate sense of its formal, meta-narrative framing;

2. The 'unobtainium' deadlock [the name of the material being mined in Pandora and a term designating a perfect theoretical solution impossible to apply] notoriously affecting the results at both the formal and the material levels of the film (which, like the military-industrial corporation mining in Pandora, is trying to obtain unobtainium to the industrial-entertainment corporation of movie-making in an era of audiences crisis) remains persistently denied in the ideological consciousness of the public: the obvious shortcomings and countereffects of the celebrated 3D upgrade in conveying the fusion of real and fictional spaces are replaced by the affirmativity of a self-fulfilling discourse about (hyper)reality-like immersive experience; and, on the other hand, the global Na'vi cult from the part of indistinctly Western and non-Western, American, non-American, and anti-American publics masks the obvious technological construction and digital forging, and the ethno-culturally and ideologically aberrant idealized projection of this recycled Pocahontas extra-planetarian tribe of most excellent deep-ecological postmodern tree-webbed savages. These are the product of a profoundly ethnocentric, patronizing (mis)representation of 'the Other' (hence, so utterly, and yet canonically Other; which also is, in patent cognitive dissonance, the strict opposite to the technological culture which thus invents its cinematic pre-industrial, untouched profile);

3. Far from being the effect of some misinterpretation from our part, this is a two-levelled delusion system originally embedded in the very structure of the film. Does it work similarly in the 2D and the 3D versions? Is the 3D actual perceptual effect and conceptual fetish responsible for a radical reinforcement of our ethno-political empathy with the 'Na'vi's way of life,' strong enough to make us disregard the ideological outrage encapsulated therein? In the face of the massive box office world record, the answer is *yes*, and the answer includes not only our sympathetic condescendence of Occidentals, but also the more odd manifestations of identification with the Alpha Centauri blue tribe on the part of other more earthly tribes in our planet, out of an acknowledged affinity, as described by Elsaesser. The first case could be explained in terms of an incomplete critical stand as regarding the unconscious pervasiveness of ideology, failing to recognize the traditional ethnocentric representation of the Other as a subsidiary partner of the white male protagonist; while embracing the right cause at a superficial political level, and thus failing to perceive that everybody and everything in the film behaves according to the same invasive, avataresque pattern adopted by the quintessential villain Colonel Quaritch, alias the Capitalist military-industrial complex in person – from the troops to the scientists (respectively strip-mining

and data-mining the planet [in Elsaesser's terms], not in opposition to each other but in a complementary, symbiotic relation), from the redemptive hero to Cameron's redemptive gesture towards the movie's historical crisis through the avatar/3D reciprocal devices. In this case, ideology comes out not diminished, but reinforced through this simulation of a progressive view, a mere gambit to keep its true basis intact.[1]

The second case is trickier: why the Heaven would "young Palestinians […] begin to dress up like the blue creatures, in order to protest?" (Elsaesser 2011). Certainly not because they are young, besides being Palestinians, nor while waiting for a (waited) Jewish Messiah who would convert to their cause and spirit, fight back his own evil government and marry their beauty queen (and without whom, according to the myth, the Palestinian tribe will be unable, by its own efforts alone, to overcome servitude – liberation thus amounting, symbolically, to an implicit confession and acceptance of minority status and ultimate mythical dependency), but due to a reason also operating in the previous case, a reason that appears here in reverse form: the 3D factor.

Our (and, for that matter, the Palestinian's, etc.) first allegiance is to the 3D myth (even before the identification with the blue tribe/white saviour one). The greedy dominance of this vantage point takes possession of filmic space like any other techno-industrial conqueror of foreign territory: it relays to us (the conquered conquerors) the secret pleasure felt in disposing of (and apparently magnifying, enhancing, and paying homage to) the space of Pandora's seven wonders. Ours

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1    And, as inevitably as with any other big, big production… let's peep into this page of the director's signed confession: "Q. Have you gotten any criticism that the film might be perceived as anti-American?
A. It's something that I've anticipated the possibility of because people will misinterpret things in certain ways. You can almost count on people misinterpreting things. The film is definitely not anti-American. It's not anti-human either. My perception of the film is that the Na'vi represent that sort of aspirational part of ourselves that wants to be better, that wants to respect nature" (Murphy 2009). *Q.e.d. Of course* the film is not and could not be anti-American, *of course* it had to be interpreted as politically correct (that is, as anti-American), *of course* audiences are worldwide anti-American, *of course* the film subministers to them the American way of being so (the poison and the antidote): namely by *crossing* (literally: that's what the *avatar* fetiche is all about) the cult of *our* paraplegic (anti-)hero and the cult of the *Other* (as "a part of ourselves," *of course*). And, *of course*, who's against nature? Unfortunately, the film is not about respecting nature, but about the myth of respecting nature: it is about History. Nature is the bait. Anticipating and accomodating opposed views under one single perspective has been the politics of Western painting since the Renaissance. 3D geometry goes one step further in this direction: hypercubic space is keen on integrating overt contradiction. "Access for all" means that ideology no longer veils: it complexifies.

is Quaritch's and Cameron's will to power (and Sully's power to will). We are empowered, all right: in our case, through this empowerment we identify with ourselves; the Palestinians seemingly identify with the aggressor, whose power they (being only too human, not enlightened Na'vi) secretly admire and overtly envy: power over reality and power over nature, in the first place: human power.

This primordial identification, prior to any other, provides the regressive Procust's bed to any subsequent progressive identification: the identification with the power over space is the *a priori* to any identification with the space of things itself – with territories, habitats, places, planets; the identification with the power over nature ('it's not just the same old boring nature, now, it's a 3D brand new nature,' in fact a genuine hyperreal upgrade); the identification with the power over the Na'vi (exerted by us, empowered occidental Na'vi, or by them, empowered Indians, Chinese, or Aboriginal Na'vi) gives us (them) the confidence to identify with their/our plea for freedom and dignity, and with a common aspiration to sublime wisdom.

The question remains, though, whether there is a real power to rely upon, or merely the phantomatic will to do it, the self-delusional ideological concept of what 3D space is meant to be and would in fact consist of were it not the formula for a typical *nonobtainium* (the Cameron's cousin of Hitchcock's MacGuffin), something that would be perfect if only it would exist; or rather: if only it could be real, in the strong sense: if reality could really be like that. But real space is not '3D' – nor even 'three-dimensional.' Notwithstanding a choir of appraisals, where we can surprisingly meet the voice of an authority such as Thomas Elsaesser, what a rough phenomenological description of standard 3D space would point out is that such a forcible construct would hardly be able to involve me, to "invade my body" (Elsaesser 2011) and to provoke an exquisite immersive experience: in fact, it begins and ends quite graphically in front of me, keeping folding and unfolding its stereoscopic layers and boxes at variable telescopic distance rates and inscribing itself as an object (as a reified ostensive dimension) within my space, which it partially overlaps and with which it disputes and divides scope and range, the physical real space of the movie theatre where I am. Unlike the invisible, non-thematic pure dimension which space is, 3D displays itself as a limited frontal object-space I almost could touch as a soap bubble or a visual toy, but could certainly not merge with (if for no other reason, because of its telescopic instability, a sort of virtuoso peacock fan-tail – an instability not just due to the humorous choices of the Stereographer concerning the Convergence Control, "the amount of 3D in any given shot," but due to the objective "Depth Budget,"

the budgetary estimate established beforehand for the whole production). 3D delineates and draws itself as a self-represented space of strengthened iconic spatiality: a lethal overdose of artificialism (space, *plus* notorious spatiality indexes) that destroys any hope for 'reality.'

But the last thing the moviegoer longs for is precisely that some kind of technically improved cinema will come to match reality and the sense of reality. And here we come upon the crucial point at the opening of the whole discussion. The two related aspects generally stressed by 3D devotees are barely compatible: namely, 3D's ability to transpose the spectator inside the palpable film reality, the dream of entering and physically belonging to this new kind of proliferous onscreen/'around the screen' image; and the ability to convert that reality (specifically [the] filmic [sense of] reality/space/realm/world) into [a] real [sense of] reality – assuming 3D spatial architecture to qualitatively coincide with it, and expecting the Negative Parallax effect (the invasion of real space by a protruding fictional filmic 3D space) to ensure the connective overlap that will allow us to trespass the film's forbidden threshold while at the same time accessing a realm of fully established real, 'solid' 3D space; the proof of its genuineness consisting of its materializing all over the place alongside the very extension of perpendicular space available before me over the front rows of the movie theatre, where there is plenty of room just waiting to be filled by this sheer filmic flood, floating in a sort of ectoplasmic ecstasy up to my nose.

## 2. Van Gogh as a Chinese Painter, or Kurosawa as a Phenomenologist: the Meeting Point of East and West

The paradox of a geometrically constructed space of representation apparently aiming at the utmost realistic fidelity to the objective reality of the world, but in fact *overrepresenting* it by submitting the object to the constitutive powers of the subject and thus substituting a worldview for the world and the domain of the subject for the realm of the objects, is nothing new in History; in fact it corresponds ("as symbolical form," in Panofsky's sense) to the founding gesture of Modernity, the invention of perspective in Renaissance oil painting. To reproduce accurately the most perfect likeness to the visible and to its objects actually means, and implies, reconstructing them within the framework of a forged representational device – 'the visual pyramid,' – in whose dimensional terms they are then presented as stabilized projections, rather than as they manifest themselves in actual perception: the digitally generated world of

Pandora, projected onto the naked walls of the performance-capture stage, and the 'avatar of the avatar' provided by the 'e-motion capture' system, are but the last step in a long lineage of this re-foundation of (technologically controlled and dominated) reality by the modern Cartesian and Kantian Subject. The Dongria Kondh just fail to acknowledge the Copernican revolution taking place in (and as) *Avatar*, the transcendental determination of the Na'vi by Hollywood, of the thing represented by the pure (Western, American) conditions of the (budgetary, and techno geek) possibility of its (on-screen) representation. Indeed, in the digital era, representation is itself that which is represented, and Pandora's pure nature is pure technology.

Are we nevertheless allowed into such a paradise? Alas, no: contrarily to what might be expected from cinema as the contemporary antidote to the ancient expulsion, again we are expelled. Interposing between us and itself, we now find this sort of spacing design as the direct heir to the former visual pyramid, but somehow in reversed form (its depth-structure oriented not only 'from the screen onwards,' but also towards us) and conspicuously self-conscious as a solid block at whose outside gates we are left (and literally pointed out as if shown to our seats in the movie theatre by the fingers of the film itself), instead of simply becoming 'the world viewed.'

That seems to be the price to be paid for the powers of knowledge, not only mythically, but also technically, and Merleau-Ponty famously challenged the dominant Cartesian epistemology, which he critically depicted as a '*vision de survol*,' the kind of 'distinct and clear' view a Subject can take of the world from above it – indeed, totalizing it before him from the outside. But this was precisely already the case with the perspective system, positioning itself as a forerunner three centuries before Descartes: the eye draws back and retires from the place of the spectacle (moreover, it withdraws from its own bodily rooting) until it manages to unify under a single vantage point and according to a single dominant space axis the totality of the visible – that is, of its own perception and of the world. Proceeding in this manner, perspective doesn't do justice neither to the objects of perception nor to natural perception itself, because it separates what in reality remains originally deeply intertwined, to the point of their vanishing as such: 'subject' and 'object.' Perspective is not truer to the subject's actual mode of perception than it is to the object's mode of being: it does not amount to an imposition on the part of the subject's perception upon the natural world, but on the part of a self-constructed pure subject upon its own natural perception and upon the natural world *at once*. On the contrary, not only do we perceive the

world *in* the world – and not from the outside, – but in an originary condition of non-separateness: and that is what the 'in-the-world' existential structure means, in the particular 'bodily and perceptual turn' this Heideggerian notion acquires in its Merleau-Pontyan reception.

Classical Chinese landscape painting (conceived of as a spiritual method), which preceded western landscape genre by several centuries, offers a strong and most instructive contrast to this later. Its is not the kind of space that will be boasting its invasive and engulfing powers over the spectator, as in *Avatar*, where, incidentally, it establishes a sort of ideological visual rhyme and undoubtedly a common epistemological-political pattern with the para-avatar fighting robot that Colonel Quaritch dons in the battlefield, figuring the mechanical and electronic prosthetic expansion of his imperialist musculature and brain; nor will it be displaying its infinity (up to the meeting point of the converging parallel lines) for the monocular eye to behold and to master, as occurs with the laws of perspective in western painting. Rather, it aims at reinforcing the true state of a reciprocal inherence of the painter/beholder in the natural landscape and of the external world in the interior of man, mutually expressing the shared balance of the cosmic organizing principles of the polar interplay of oppositions, exchanges, and ultimate union, at its different levels: 'water and mountain,' earth and heaven/sky, emptiness and fullness, yin and yang. Strikingly at odds with the western way of taking preemptively possession of the territory (a priori space is also a welcomed condition of possibility of military strategy, and Cameron plays the transcendental ally to Quaritch – and to Sully, the redemptor – in the enterprise of conquering Pandora, of making it *our space*), Chinese painting achieves this through the importance given to *emptiness*, mostly (in)consisting of clouds and mists and the sky, beyond mere vacant spaces, and in fact pervading all the substantial elements of the world. In other words, it stresses the dimension that allows things to become and to be, and to dispose themselves throughout space – therefore inviting the painter to do the same, and (as in the paradigmatic Marguerite Yourcenar's tale of the painter Wang Fô) to enter the painting, to stroll around and eventually to abide in it. But the deep implicated meaning of the practice of the double perspective – the one prescribing that a natural being, or a house, should be rendered as if viewed at the same time from a distance, from close range and from within – is that the painter must have occupied the same double stance (in front/inside) he is now being invited to spouse in relation to the tableau, while primarily perceiving nature. Because in the same way as the double perspective is structuring both the aesthetic perception and

the artistic work itself (accounting for the 'awkward' aspect of objects, distance, and space in most oriental art), it also lends its structure to natural perception and to the ontophenomenological modality of the presence of nature, i.e., the world (Cheng 1991, 92–105). It should be noticed that Cheng is writing one year after Kurosawa's *Dreams*. Here is his final synthesis: "The movement of moving away in space is in fact a circular movement in space that returns and, through the reversal of perspective and look, eventually transforms the relation between subject and object. (The subject projecting itself gradually outwards; and the exterior becoming the internal landscape of the subject)" (Cheng 1991, 105).[2]

The one self-reflective work of art (i.e., self-theorizing both as film and in its intermedial relation to painting), offering an unparalleled illustration both of this Far Eastern tradition and of contemporary Continental phenomenological and postphenomenological theory (lets say, of Merleau-Ponty's interlace structure of the 'chair' and of Deleuze's plane of immanence) is the film episode *Crows*, the fifth in Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams*. At first, the Japanese visitor indulges in the trivial dual form of perception, having a glimpse of the several paintings hanging on the wall in front of him. How are we to interpret the metalepsis that follows, when the planes of the beholder and of the painting overcome their initial separateness ('transcendence') and he finds himself within the general plane of consistency of van Gogh's world (encompassing this latter's being-in the natural setting and his general plane of pictorial composition, as well as the complex process of reciprocal exchange between the two)? Certainly not in a literal sense (either magical or 'happening only in dreams'), and neither as a mere metaphor, since the point is not a fictional one, but the very transcending of the distinction between 'reality' and 'fiction' – such a transcending amounting precisely to pure immanence. What (Kurosawa's) 'van Gogh' says to his unexpected guest about the reciprocal bodily assimilation gradually taking place between the painter and the landscape[3] (different from a mere distantial visual operation) also gives a

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2　　　"Le mouvement d'éloignement dans l'espace est en fait un mouvement circulaire qui revient et qui, par le renversement de la perspective et du regard, transforme finalement la relation du sujet et de l'object. (Le sujet se projetant, par degré, au dehors; et le dehors devenant le paysage intérieur du sujet.)" (My translation, J. M. M.)

3　　　The passage reads as follows: "[van Gogh] Why aren't you painting? To me this scene is beyond belief. A scene that looks like a painting does not make a painting. But [I] if you take the time and look closely, all the nature has its own beauty. And when that natural beauty is there, [II] I just loose myself in it. And then, as if it's in a dream, [III] the scene just paints itself for me. Yes, [IV] I consume this natural setting, I devour it completely and hold it. And when I'm through, [V] the painting paints itself for me completely. But it's so difficult to hold it inside!
[Japanese] – Then, what do you do?

good description of what is just happening to that latter as he 'enters the frame' and somehow turns his vision into the visibility of the things themselves – a visibility conveyed by, and as, the painting.

It also happens to correspond to the phenomenological description of the standard film-viewing experience, namely, the disappearance into the 'non-thematic' both of real space (the movie theatre, the world, our seat, ourselves) and of the fictional topos, the (on-)screen. A painting is not hanging on the wall, a film is not on, or 'in' the screen – for there are no longer such things as 'a screen,' 'a wall.' The painting, the film constitute their own self-consistent world (but non-thematic as such). Coleridge's suspension of disbelief is still a partial formula: what is really suspended is the very awareness of the difference between belief and disbelief, reality and fiction. What collapses, then, is the measurable spatial distance and distinction between the subject and the object. The moviegoer is no longer watching the film, nor is he co-present in it (the artifice Kurosawa was nonetheless constrained to use): he is rather 'in a state of film.' And he is *in* that space, rather than surrounded by it (which on the other hand fails to be the case with 3D, in spite of what the false advertising campaigns wilfully keep repeating). Precisely in the same way in which Heidegger explains the sense

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[van Gogh] – [VI] I work, I slave, I drive myself like a locomotive!"
I numerate the successive stages in the process of painting; it will be noticed that the actual application of paint on the canvas only begins at stage VI, which by no means entails a separation between perception and action, rather, emphasizes the fact that aesthetical perception is already invested by the artistic operation. Kurosawa's scenery including natural landscape vividly 'retouched' in van Gogh's fashion, offers the visual equivalent to the concepts expressed. A whole gamut of reciprocal overlapping features of nature and culture, subject and object, and of Deleuzian processes of becoming is displayed all over this ten minutes long masterpiece of Modernist artwork about the artwork and offers a significant counterpart to the avataresque tour de force, rooting instead that phenomenon deeply in natural and aesthetical (and specifically cinematographical) perception rather than in VR-like technology (the avatar/3D/motion-capture complex) ideologically reverberated in Pandora's New Age 'spiritualized nature,' with all its neuro-connexions between the Na'vi and the ikran (flying dragons) ultimately regulated by the bio-neuro-cybernetics of the Tree of Souls. The Cartesian leitmotiv at stake in the 3D controversy reappears as the mind/body duality, presupposed in the cases of the (unequal) avatar transference and of the (unequal) ikran symbiosis (two double-bind features responsible for generously fuelling drama and intrigue), always doubled by its own characteristic hierarchical structure: and so, subduing the ikran culminates in becoming a toruk makto, the mighty [< 'makto,' its avatar-word] rider – that is, the master – of the toruk, much in the same way as playing the avatar game will culminate in becoming the Na'vi supreme hero, and once again the duality of a mind's eye outside a totalized and dominated world (the perspective/Cartesian paradigm) translates into the vertical axis of masterhood, fulfilling and profusely illustrating the double meaning of the expression '*vision de survol*.'

of the *pre*position 'in:' we are in the world, not because as a matter of fact we are evidently surrounded by it (as a separate entity objectively placed within a physical-geometrical extensive space, like inside a container), but we can be surrounded by the world only insofar as we are *in* (not *inside*) it, in an ontological kind of proximity previous to any sort of particular relationship, be it 'frontal,' or 'distant,' or 'practical,' or 'immersive,' or 'contemplative.'

## 3. The Cinema of *Sensing*

This paper comes to an end at the very point where it should start developing the fundamental phenomenological approach which constitutes the implied point of view in what precedes. Let me briefly indicate the core of the question and telegraphically add two final polemizing remarks.

Avoiding any falling back into a philosophy of the conscience, it was the major contribution of Merleau-Ponty since *Phénoménologie de la perception* to reformulate Heidegger's *Daseinsanalyse* in terms of the perceptive body (later, 'the flesh') in its phenomenological constitutive involvement with the world. In fact, in the case of cinema (and of painting, and of nature, according to Kurosawa) it is not visibility as such that catches and captures the spectator (not just her eye, but his whole being), but *vision*, *insofar* it carries the body – and is carried by it: "Before being an objective spectacle the quality is acknowledged by a type of behaviour that intentionally aims at its essence, and that is the reason why from the moment my body adopts the attitude of the blue I obtain a quasi-presence of the blue"[4] (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 245). Which was the whole point in *Avatar*, except that it is with my body that I perform such a Deleuzian 'inhuman' *devenir*, not as a god-like transmigratory *res cogitans*, as Cameron himself in a *Time Magazine* interview claims: "– What is an avatar, anyway? – It's an incarnation of one of the Hindu gods taking a flesh form. In this film what that means is that the *human* technology in the future is capable of *injecting a human's intelligence into a remotely located body*, a biological body" (Winters Keegan 2007) (my underscores). And it is such a body agency that also accounts for the similar experience of reading a book or listening to music: we become the symphony, or the world of the book, and if it is with our lungs that the fictional characters breath (when the typed page gives way to a world), as Sartre puts it in a very fine

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4    "Ainsi avant d'être un spectacle objectif la qualité se laisse reconnaître par un type de comportement qui la vise dans son essence et c'est pourquoi dès que mon corps adopte l'attitude du bleu j'obtiens une quasi-présence du bleu" (My translation, J. M. M.).

analysis which emulates Kurosawa's silent philosophy (Sartre 1947), that just means we are already there, breathing with theirs.

In the abovementioned line, Merleau-Ponty is implying four crucial aspects: that the blue is not a mere visual quality objectively present at hand, but a dimension requiring a way of being and caught up in a dynamic relationship with it; that it is not primarily an ocular event, but a bodily one; and that the perceiving body implies a moving body, in fact, that body is fundamentally movement, before being cognition. The key-aspect is however the fourth: the non-thematic level corresponding to such an anticipative bodily behaviour towards (or 'fleshly' involvement with) the blue colour and according to it. These four aspects outline and condense some of the recurrent features in Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception*, where he is building an entire theory of phenomenological constitution around the notion of the virtual projection of a motor body unto the world at the infraconscious level of 'sensing'[5] (characteristically independent of the instance of the subject). In short, it is through the ecstatic nature of the virtual movement of the sensitive-kinesthetic body that the spatial horizon is secured and access to the things in the world is gained. This network of movements is not to be understood as a mimetic internal recapitulation taking place 'inside' the body, nor as its actual projection unto the exterior, rather as a virtual abiding of the perceptive body among the virtual givenness of the world, and of things; and it is only because the body sets itself in a disposition attuned to other beings and open to their ways of making themselves present there – it is only because the body so to say enacts the behaviour of the (pre-'objective') sensible, that it may encounter things at that radical level of originary givenness that converts perception into the primary ontological condition from whose irrecusable and saturated condition everything else and every theoretical consideration concerning reality stems. A legion of micro-avataresque embodiments take thus place at the most fundamental level, where the body will be sensing the bodily qualities of everything in an overlap of flesh(es) evolving in an overlap of 'body-space' and 'world-space' (as opposed as it could be to the 'partes extra partes' Cartesian 3D kind of space[6]).

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5    The author uses the verbal infinitive ("le sentir") as corresponding to a motor-synesthetic gestalt whole, rather than the traditional concept of 'sensation' misleadingly pointing at an atomic and specific element in the composition of perception. Being itself a gestalt whole, though, perception is not partible (into sensations); yet, being an 'originary phenomenon,' it is notwithstanding an articulated (not mediated!) one (namely, by 'sensing'). Its explanation is the formidable task that is motivating the title.

6    Another worth-quoting dictum from the same interview: "– *Avatar* will be in 3-D. Why did you choose that format? – It's immersive. It wraps the movie around you.

We find, perhaps unsurprisingly, at the bottom of natural perception exactly the same specious structure that is generally assumed to be distinctive of the exquisitely elaborated aesthetic experience: an unfolded body situated 'between here and there,' simultaneously occupying its place and projecting itself unto the background of the visible, sensing itself and the other beings ("loosing itself in nature/devouring it," in a visceral reciprocal engulfment, so van Gogh utters), inescapably bound to its "*sentant senti*" condition. *Voilà* the 'double perspective' in Chinese painting, and also the ubiquity of the Japanese visitor (Kurosawa's avatar…), who has to remain standing in the museum room in order to be able to *project* himself *elsewhere*, that is, 'not *here*' (in a tension between the reciprocally defining 'here' and 'not' which restablishes the *aura* formula).

First remark: it is possible that Deleuze's (drawing on Vertov's and abundantly drawn upon by Shaviro's) distinction between technical, 'inhuman' perception and natural perception, essentially defining the technical cinematic image against Bazin's theory of the 'intensification' of natural perception, might be only partially true. The mechanical apparatus is perhaps producing a new kind of perception (and of worldhood), but that does not exclude that this brand new type is at the same time conveying and recasting, not certainly unqualified or trivial 'natural perception,' but the non-thematic, virtual aspect involved in it. The cinematic moving image does certainly reveal some of the symptoms of the perceptual level of 'sensing,' and it is only to blame the anti-phenomenological temper of Deleuze if he fails to acknowledge that beneath the borderline dividing natural and mechanical perception, there exists the borderline distinguishing natural perception and its own (rather unnatural…) non-thematic anticipative structure. And just as Deleuze's cinema offers through mechanical mediation to an unwilling Bergson the pure image that should be 'extracted' from its decay in the natural image, so too it could come to realize that the 'kino-eye' does not indeed 'intensify' an originary potency,[7] but that it does provide an actualization

It's not necessarily just for kids' films either. It works in a dramatic sense because it gives you a heightened sense of reality." (Winters Keegan 2007.) A brief commentary: indeed, it becomes 'immersive' in the exact proportion in which we (are allowed to) forget about the 3D effect. We are not *surrounded* by the film: this is plainly a false statement (already more than a pre-production 2007 wishfull thinking). As for the sense of reality, 3D and digital technology produce the same petitive kind of self-delusion as Renaissance perspective does: it 'gives the sense,' *and the pattern* of reality that we are supposed to sense. An image in the obscurity of the vanishing theatre compares magically with itself, not with reality; curiously enough, neither do colour movies give us a sense of heightened reality, nor do black and white films fail to. They *are* 'reality,' and so were even the silent movies.

7   As regards the Deleuzian pair virtual/actual, there is nothing to fear from Merleau-

of the virtual stratum of 'natural perception,' and that probably both phrases are saying the same.

Second remark: Vivian Sobchack's diagram combining all the possible functions of the viewer's and of the film's *explicit* perceptions does not seem to take in enough consideration the non-thematic quality of them both, beside the non-thematic (and decidedly non-intentional) matrix of typical Merleau-Pontyan perception in general.

The day in which an accomplished 3D film will consist of a 360º hologram, we'll finally have nowhere to go inside the Pandora box and nothing to do but to stay en garde… in the face of – as Cameron will undoubtedly put it – 'reality:' "ce mauvais film," in Deleuze's word.

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Ponty's notion of the originary: 'l'être sauvage' does not pre-define anything, nor is it in itself defined. Perception is immediately a sort of open stylization, or boundless virtuality. That should easily meet Deleuze's requests.

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