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From the digitization of culture to digital culture

Avatar = Pinocchio 2.0 or “The end of the Society of the Spectacle”

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Abstract

The article analyses the concept that deems the film *Avatar* part of a shared and objective imaginary, and an allegory for the struggle between good and evil. Alongside this analysis, there is a review of recent films in the history of cinema that have handled these issues, analogising the avatar as a reinvention of Pinocchio for the electronic age. Likewise, there is analysis of the new participatory experience for audiences provided by 3D technology, and of the new virtual reality through platforms such as Second Life.

Keywords

avatar, cinema, 3D, virtual reality, Pinocchio

Avatar = Pinotxo 2.0 o «La fi de la societat de l'espectacle»

Resum

A partir de la pel·lícula *Avatar*, s'analitza el concepte que titula la pel·lícula com a part d'un imaginari objectiu i compartit i com una forma al·legòrica de la lluita del bé contra el mal. A aquesta anàlisi se li suma un repàs de les pel·lícules més recents de la història del cinema que tracten aquesta dimensió i es fa una analogia de l'avatar com el Pinotxo reinventat per a l'era electrònica. Alhora, s'analitza la nova experiència participativa del públic davant de la tecnologia 3D i d'una nova realitat virtual, amb plataformes com *Second Life*.

Paraules clau

avatar, cinema, 3D, realitat virtual, Pinotxo

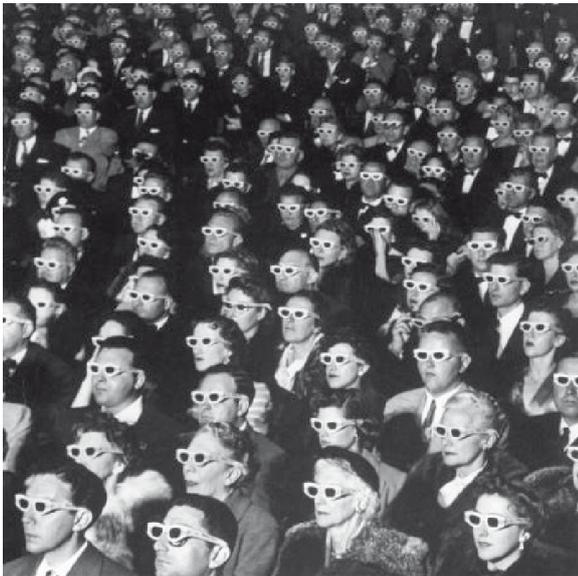


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I can still recall –not without irony– those images of cinemagoers of the 1950s entranced by the first 3D films, with those white glasses, and I also remember that, at the time, it was thought that there was no future for 3D technology as it was considered a mere passing fad. Today, *Avatar* may represent a new generation of films. 3D is no longer just a fad, but rather a cultural necessity for the new "Society of the Spectacle", which is also defined as the society of participation.

Image 1. 1950's 3D broadcasting



In your face cinema

3D in films is no longer just a casual occurrence, just another special effect. It is a new and powerful indicator of a move away from the classical perspective. Virtual reality is one of the clearest –or perhaps most banal– ways of creating sensory experiences in our neo-Baroque epoch. We, too, are carrying out "*le dérèglement de tous les sens*" ['the derangement of all the senses']. The magic lantern of illusions, instead of allowing me to see the show from the outside, pulls me into the scene, or even surrounds me with it. I go there, in the literal sense of going to a place, enter inside of it and, if I cannot go, it is the show that comes to me and penetrates me.

3D and virtual reality turns the viewpoint around, because the user enters into the show. In all virtual worlds, the user is the content and also the target of the entire performance. I am in the sights of the projectile that comes right up to my face, as the 3D object disappears at the point of contact.

Avatar is simply a kind of passageway through the television tunnel. Hans Magnus Enzensberger has noted that a television

show is a kind of collective meditation: television itself is a calming object, a Buddhist experience. It hypnotises you, it consumes your being. If this is the case (and it probably is), the fact that we are increasing interaction with the screen, and have been ever since the invention of the remote control, is changing things –or rather inverting them. Interaction has already become a kind of penetration into the things with which you are interacting. The television screen (and any other screen) offers the viewer's pupils an inverted iris. It is said that the cells of the iris are brain cells removed to the outside world. A connected screen is equivalent to an iris connected to a global data processing system and, therefore, to a brain. In the internet, the inverted iris is faithfully connected to a brain, that of the network, and to that of its users. The screen is nothing more than a passageway. In his prophetic film *The Icicle Thief* (Italy, 1989), Maurizio Nichetti puts his leading character, a television director, inside the television set itself. In *Avatar*, we go as far as submerging ourselves in the other side of the television. We are in tune with the *mantra*, and therefore we are in Paradise.

The objective imaginary world

Although *Avatar* is not, in itself, interactive in terms of cinematographic projection, it nevertheless represents a paradoxical role model and the possibility of viewer experience. The first question one should ask is how 3D effects change the viewer's position. Although we ourselves do not move, we are inside a scene rather than just in front of it, and the scene changes around our body. The resulting experience is not, therefore, merely visual but also tactile. We are asked to physically feel the changes in cinematographic space. This tactile aspect is inherent in films but, in general, unappreciated. The impact of the image and, particularly, cinematographic movement causes a slight muscular reaction that helps us understand what we have seen. This impact is greater in violent or horror films, where the body's reaction, although strong, is completely predictable. With *Avatar*, this physical aspect of the show can no longer be denied.

3D is tactile: it boosts proprioception and amplifies all sensorial sensations. To orient yourself in 3D, you have to move. In contrast, in the classical perspective, the viewpoint is blocked. In virtual reality and 3D, space is manipulated like a musical instrument. The entire body is affected. Modulations of the gap between the world and myself or between two or more persons can be of different types. However, like all forms of interactivity, they are variations on touch. Furthermore, at the hands of 3D, this gap makes the relationship with the film itself an intimate one. Our society no longer wishes to merely see a show: it wants to enter into it.



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Image 2. Photo from the film *Avatar*



The viewer wants to participate, and this changes the nature of his role. Projecting ourselves into an imaginary context is something we already do when we read. This choice is made available to the reader's mind. In his mind, the reader can project himself like a homunculus into the scene of a play, or simply contemplate the content of his imagination from an internal viewpoint. His own mind creates his projection, that is, his avatar. In *Second Life*, my avatar is a computer-assisted projection of myself into an external environment, and is therefore an objective projection. The user can choose between looking at the virtual world from his or her own viewpoint or looking at himself as content, as part of the scene. The digital avatar is outside of our body, on a screen. It forms part of an objective, shared imaginary world. *Avatar* offers a hybrid between the experience of virtual reality and that of 2D cinema.

In any other film, the relationship between the viewer and the characters is similar to that between a reader and the characters of a book. In *Avatar*, the relationship is a hybrid one, since it brings together an active role, similar to that of *Second Life*, with one typical of the mental strategies dedicated to fiction. *Avatar* also offers an even more complex identification experience.

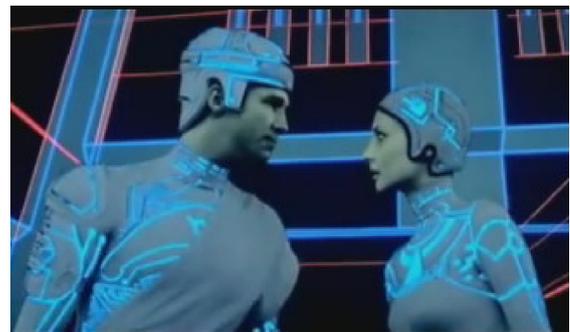
When we read a book or see a film, we can project ourselves into the different characters. But when it comes to interacting with the virtual world, we only project ourselves into our character (into our avatar). The film *Avatar* asks us to identify with Jake's ideology, with his avatar. The character is adorned with symbolic, psychological and social elements and even technological properties. The film offers a drama of identity in our era of electronic reproduction.

Pinocchio 2.0

Avatar is but the latest in many images of our initiation into the digital matrix and of our consequent rebirth. In fact, *Avatar* is itself an avatar of Pinocchio, reinvented by the digital era. Jake becomes an electronic puppet and emerges from a growing series of visions: from *Tron*, *Total Recall*, *The Lawnmower Man*, *Blade*

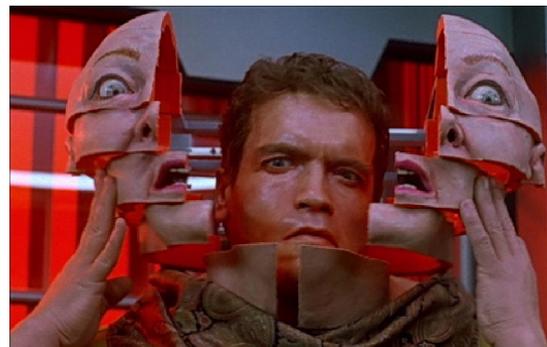
Runner, *The Matrix* (albeit in a slightly different way), *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, US, 2002), *I, Robot* (Alex Proyas, US, 2004) and *Being John Malkovich*.

Image 3. Photo from the film *Tron*



Tron (Steven Lisberger, US, 1982) portrays a kind of "pre-avatar" stage: the characters enter into the avatars, or are dressed as them, to put it another way. This was the first kind of hybridisation between man and machine. The fusion is complete because the character's being penetrates the technological extension.

Image 4 and 5. Photos from the film *Total Recall*





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In *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, US, 1990) a machine, combined with a drug, provides a hallucinatory projection into a different universe. Said projection seems to be the *mise en scène* of a device similar to that related to reading: an individual conscience imagines a fiction. However, it is even more like the mechanisms of a dream, because the leading character lives the projection as if it were truly real.

Image 6. Photo from the film *The Lawnmower Man*



In *The Lawnmower Man*, (Brett Leonard, US, 1992) the leading character is transformed, by means of his avatar, from a mentally-handicapped simpleton into a super-intelligent but evil genius; a strangely negative reflection by Brett Leonard on the arrival of the virtual era. It can be said that, in general, films have presented a negative image of technology (cf. *Avatar* itself).

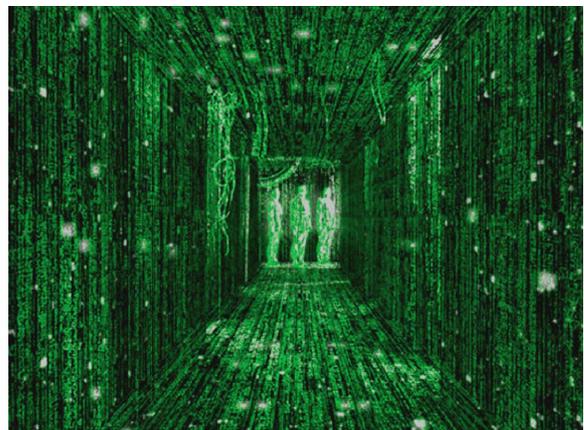
Image 7. Photo from *Blade Runner*



In *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, US, 1982), the machine, or replicant, is a robot with a kind of soul, who demands his own freedom and independence from his creator. A replicant is not an avatar of anyone in particular –being more along the lines of HAL, the talking computer of *2001: A space odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, US/GB, 1968)– but could be regarded as one of the most powerful examples of the technical projection of the human being, in the mythical tradition of the *golem*.

The technological avatar may come from two novels: William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1982) and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992). In *Snow Crash*, users' avatars are to be found in the Metaverse, a prefiguration of Second Life ten years before its actual appearance (2003). The avatar of Gibson's novel is more complex. It is called a *rider* and is clearly separate from its user, as its purpose is to carry out dangerous operations in uninhabitable places. The new figure emerges from the avatar's ability to convey feelings and even emotions via the Matrix. Thus an avatar is half man and half machine, material and virtual, illusion and reality, without the two aspects becoming confused. The expression "jacking into the Matrix" (as well as the film of 1999) has their origin in Gibson's imaginary world.

Image 8. Photo from the film *The Matrix*



The characters of *The Matrix* (Larry Wachowski, Andy Wachowski, US, 1999), *Total Recall* and *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, US/Canada, 1999) all have the same difficulty in distinguishing between what is virtual and what is real. In reality, they are the avatars of Don Quixote. This difficulty also confuses the viewer. *eXistenZ* is particularly frustrating, as you never know what is really happening, even at the end of the film, when all the characters are once again in the place they were at in the beginning. All point of reference is lost: this is truly a case where existence precedes essence! Additionally, *eXistenZ*, like many more Cronenberg films, shows us the complete union between



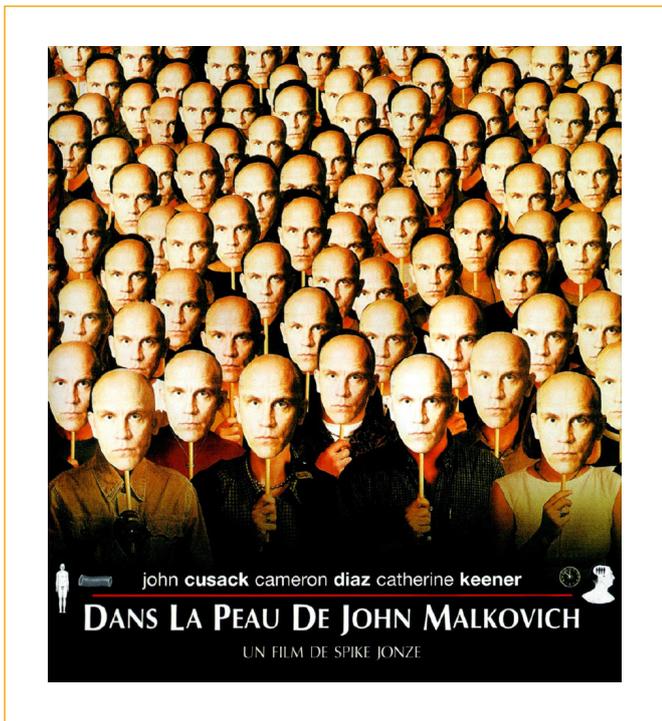
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man and machine. To play the game of *eXistenZ*, players must first connect its interface to their spines. They must mainline the electronic input. Similarly, but in an organic rather than electronic connection, in *Avatar*, your tail must connect with your partner's hair (a discreetly erotic connotation) to transmit energy and information.

Like in *Total Recall*, the user directly downloads a virtual world into their memory. This is possibly a prefiguration of the technologies of the future.

Image 9. Poster from the film *Being John Malkovich*



In *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, GB/US), the user takes over the point of view of another person. The actor John Malkovich allows someone else to occupy his mind and body, albeit for only a limited period of time. Transforming a person into an avatar, a case of possession, is another important variation on the theme of uncertain identity.

In this case, the clear forerunner is Pinocchio, because the puppet is also pulling the strings. In fact, avatars of Pinocchio are found in today's films, or rather some part of him can be found in the different postmodern productions. The idea of the whale is found in the matrix of *The Matrix*, the puppet in *Being John Malkovich*, the lies in *eXistenZ*, the tempting dream world in *Total Recall*, and so on. The power of this old Italian myth is due to the fact that Pinocchio arises from the anguish of an agricultural society invaded by mechanisation and industrialisation. Pinocchio is the true image of a mechanical man who attempts to recover his own humanity beyond the machine, passing through all the

challenges of a maturing child before reaching adulthood, and this is the same challenge faced by electronic man. In *The Matrix*, the digital whale has swallowed everyone, but only some are prepared to fight their way out and once again become real people.

All avatars represent different projections of ideas of future humanity into electronic simulations. All are digital creatures, creatures the product of a technical dream. Many of them feel the desire to escape from the limitations of the organic body. This can be easily understood in the case of the paraplegic Jake. McLuhan spoke of our tendency towards "angelism", a feature of our times, where everything, and often our own material body, can be translated into numerical data. And there are so many "angels" in *Avatar*!

A magical world

We live in a neo-medieval world, yet one which is technologically magical. Avatars are the new interfaces and the iPhone is the magic wand. Oddly, in the Harry Potter stories, good and evil alike live in a world of magic. Or, put another way, the unreal world contains within it a dark and sinister magical world. In *Avatar*, good lives in the world of magic, whilst evil is to be found in the "real" one. This gives rise to implications for the current public perception of life in general. The man on the street has an extremely poor opinion of society in general, something that *Avatar* expresses with crystal clarity.

Finally, I think that it is important to consider the extraordinary worldwide success of *Avatar* in today's world. It is true that it benefits from 3D technology, but it is none the less true that this technology would not, by itself, affect half the viewers of this film. Rather, there is an odd neo-romanticism in the confluence between technology, dematerialisation and nature. All the world's cultures can identify with the story's different tribes. All can suffer from military violence at the service of private, criminal interests. All can doubt the value of hard technology. But the soft virtual world seems to be a proper, balanced way out, far removed from the current socio-political miasma. In fact, the ancient biblical exegesis is perfectly applicable to this film. *Avatar* is a kind of anagogic parable of the struggle between good and evil. Avatars (in all their forms, not only those of the film's characters) are allegories: they possess attributes and powers like in the mediaeval allegories. They can be transformed by the power of magic, can fly and teleport. As in mediaeval allegories, they have missions to comply with to obtain an anagogic order of eternal life. And pure hearts can secure the final victory and win back Paradise Lost.



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He has been decorated by the Government of France with the order of "Les Palmes académiques". Member of the Club of Rome since 1995. He's the author of: *Understanding* 1984 (UNESCO, 1984), *McLuhan e la metamorfosi dell'uomo* (Bulzoni, 1984), *The Skin of Culture* (Somerville Press, 1995), *Connected Intelligence* (Somerville, 1997), *The Architecture of Intelligence* (Denmark, 2000).

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