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The Fantastic Redemption of Reality

> Film renders visible what we did not, or perhaps even could not, see before its advent. …We literally redeem this world from its dormant state, its state of virtual nonexistence, by endeavoring to experience it through the camera. …The cinema can be defined as a medium particularly equipped to promote *the redemption of physical reality*.
>
> Siegfried Kracauer, *Film Theory: The Redemption of Physical Reality*

> Paradoxically, with the aid of fakery, special effects, model work, and mechanical devices, certain SF film images *redeem portions of the physical world* from the relative obscurity which their dimensions impose upon them.
>
> Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space*

One of the standard criticisms of postmodernity invokes the banalization or proliferation of the real into an endless series of images suffering from what Terry Smith calls "enervation."[1] The development of new digital technologies has been held accountable for a certain flattening or hollowing out of the real, a "deflation of space" (Sobchack, *Screening Space* 255), a growing indifferentiation between phenomena, the reduction of everything to a simulacrum. Under the spreading influence of Bergsonism, this process has been characterized as the spatialization of time: the postmodern, so the argument goes, is dominated by spatial paradigms at the expense of time as duration. Film theory has been following suit in this pessimistic view of postmodernity, with the genre of science fiction cinema becoming the site where the various critiques of postmodernity have come together. Vivian Sobchack warns us of the unsettling trend toward the dissolution of subjectivity, replaced in SF films by the terminal identity constituted in front of the computer terminal, as well as of the flattening of space, exemplified in a shift from a deep, penetrable space to a flat, electronic space. Although SF films may seem to embody everything that, according to critics of postmodernity, is wrong with visual culture today, with cinema in particular, a careful examination of the idea of cinematic realism, elaborated by Balázs, Bazin and Kracauer, will reveal that the

fantastic object comes closest to carrying out what Kracauer calls “the redemption of physical reality.”

In his Introduction to *French Film Theory and Criticism* Richard Abel hints at a historical link between science fiction and realism. In the section entitled “The Emergence of Photogénie” he traces the origins of the theory of cinematic realism to the shift of attention in film studies, during the war years, “from action and narration to description and representation...from temporal progression to spatial composition or mise-en-scène”(107). Abel attributes this new fascination with description and mise-en-scène to the dominant view of cinema at that time as a means to knowledge, as an instrument of scientific discovery and experimentation. A series of questions emerge: How does the SF film figure in the idea of photogénie? What is the ontology of the fantastic image? What is the relation of SF film to Kracauer’s ‘camera-reality’? These questions call for two parallel trajectories of investigation: not only does the fantastic object need to be evaluated in terms of its camera-reality--this part of the analysis will, therefore, consider SF cinema in relation to photogénie, mise-en-scène, the ‘inner life’ of things, their spatial and temporal determinations, the suppression of subjectivity, the technical properties specific to the SF genre (special effects) and, finally, the role of speech--but it is also necessary to examine the criteria for establishing camera-reality itself. In other words, it will be impossible to bypass a sort of meta-analysis of the implicit criteria underlying the major criterion (camera-reality) itself.

The reader of Siegfried Kracauer’s *Theory of Film* is bound to be perplexed by the obvious incongruity between the book’s subtitle--*The Redemption of Physical Reality*--and the title of chapter three, which examines the specific features of the cinematic medium: “The Establishment of Physical Existence.” Although Kracauer considers his work a defense of cinematic realism, it is a realism concerned not with the simple representation or recording of reality but rather with the “establishment” or invention of reality. Physical existence is not given but has to be “established”: “The hunting ground of the motion picture camera is in principle unlimited; it is the external world expanding in all directions. Yet there are certain subjects within that world which may be termed ‘cinematic’ because they seem to exert a peculiar attraction on the medium”(41).[2] These “cinematic subjects”--Kracauer designates them with the general term “camera-reality”--are not rendered cinematic by the camera; rather, certain portions of reality are already cinematic: reality is made of “subjects” which, by virtue of being “cinematic,” are more real or “photogenic” than other “subjects.” A strange inversion

underlies this logic: reality does not ontologically precede the medium (cinema); rather, the medium is constituted by certain parts of reality and then turns back on itself, as it were, to represent the rest of reality (the less cinematic subjects). Put differently, some parts of reality *constitute the medium of cinema* (these are "cinematic subjects") while other parts of reality can only be *represented by that medium*. The intriguing aspect of this understanding of representation is the unusual juxtaposition of medium and representation, the notion that certain privileged parts of reality are not objects of representation but constitute the medium of representation as such. Rather than revealing or representing reality, the camera determines the nature of the real. Appropriately, Kracauer's book offers a systematic (systematic in intention though not necessarily in execution) classification of the various characteristics of the real, the assumption being that the real is already known and only needs to be categorized. It is not that the real is cinematic; rather, the cinematic *is* the real. Therefore, whatever qualities Kracauer ascribes to camera-reality--indeterminacy, endlessness, transitoriness, etc.--are assumed, from the very beginning, to be constitutive of reality as well.

Early French film theorists--Jean Epstein, Colette, Emile Vuillermoz, Jean Cocteau, Louis Delluc, René Clair, Blaise Cendrars, Antonin Artaud, Fernand Léger (and later André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer)--put forward the argument that the power of cinema lies in its ability to make us see what normally goes unseen: "I deduce the cinematographic revolution is *to make us see everything that has been merely noticed*. …The mere fact of projection of the image already defines the object which becomes spectacle"(Léger in Abel 273). Hence, the importance of the close-up:

> Any huge close-up reveals new and unsuspected formations of matter; skin textures are reminiscent of aerial photographs, eyes turn into lakes or volcanic craters. Such images blow up our environment in a double sense: they enlarge it literally; and in doing so, they blast the prison of conventional reality, opening up expanses which we have explored at best in dreams before. (Kracauer 48)

Although the first part of this statement points to the importance of recognition--an object must be alienated in order to be recognized--the second part suggests the self-sufficiency of images, which need not originate in our waking life but can just as well be born from the imagination. Then what is the difference between an object that we have failed to notice in our waking life and which the camera makes us see, on one hand, and an object that we have never seen (although we might have imagined it) but which the camera makes present? In other words, what is the difference between an object that is there,

although we don't 'see' it unless it is foregrounded, and an object that is not there but that we 'see' through its cinematic representation? To what extent is the real object real if we fail to notice it unless it is represented i.e., alienated? If realism in cinema presupposes this process of alienation, if alienation is essential to the establishment of the real, then an object that is already alienated is more real than an object that depends on the medium of cinema to alienate it.[3] The fantastic object is precisely such an already alienated object: its physical reality has been suspended from the very beginning, it refers only to itself, it is already strange, alien. Insofar as the task of cinematic realism is the transformation of conventional reality, the fantastic object meets the demands of camera-reality more easily, or to a greater degree, than the real object.[4]

Many theorists have noted the influence of phenomenology on Bazin's theory of cinematic realism. Mary Alemany-Galway devotes an entire chapter to this subject in her book *A Postmodern Cinema: The Voice of the Other in Canadian Film.* While it is true that Bazin "sees the film medium (because of its ability to mechanically reproduce the object/reality) as being capable of duplicating the phenomenological bracketing of human perceptions and allowing the unreflected reality to emerge" (48-49), Alemany-Galway fails to articulate the true nature of this phenomenological bracketing: what is 'bracketed' in this act of reduction is not merely our subjective preconceptions about physical phenomena but also their very existence. This is the paradoxical result of Husserl's phenomenological reduction: after the reduction has been carried out, no distinction remains between a real object and an imaginary one.[5]

When we are faced with a fantastic object--for example, the time traveler in *Dune*, the alien in *Alien,* or the gravity drive in *Event Horizon*--its sheer materiality is the first thing we notice. The heightened presence and materiality of the new is also constitutive of the fantastic. Perhaps this explains the relative rarity of close-ups in SF films. The function of the close-up in realistic cinema is to isolate a thing from its context in order to intensify our perception of it. The things making up the mise-en-scène in SF films—e.g. the room in which James Cole is interrogated by the scientists, in *12 Monkeys*—do not need to be isolated from the general background in order for their fantastic nature to be made visible. The underground scenes in this film are almost exclusively shot in medium and long shots because the objects filmed are already defamiliarized. The fantastic object preserves the indeterminacy of meaning that Kracauer deems essential to cinematic realism. More precisely, the fantastic object does not have *multiple significations* but rather remains *visually indeterminate*. In the

beginning of David Lynch's *Dune*, Paul of the House of Atreides (Kyle MacLachlan) fights another member of the House. Both opponents wield fantastic-looking, transparent objects that resemble shields. It is impossible to tell if the shields are made of glass, of pure energy, or of something else. Although their function is more or less clear, the fantastic shields remain visually indeterminate.

Victor Schklovsky's idea of estrangement or defamiliarization might be considered an appendix to Kracauer's materialist aesthetics but it also casts it in a completely different light. If realism depends on estrangement, the stranger a thing is, the more its materiality or sheer existence is foregrounded. Indeed, realism has two aspects: the redemption of physical reality, of things that we have grown accustomed to not noticing until they are defamiliarized and appear to us as if for the first time and, on the other hand, the redemption of the experience of the new. Despite Kracauer's intentions, his materialist aesthetic is actually an aesthetic of the fantastic inasmuch as it is precisely in the fantastic object that the desire for an absolutely autonomous, self-signifying object is fulfilled. Autonomy and self-signification (or a-signification) are made possible by the already defamiliarized nature of the fantastic object. Unlike the ephemeral, indeterminate reality which Kracauer believes it is the task of cinema to render present, the fantastic thing has attained, from the very beginning, the pure visibility that the real thing will achieve only after having been defamiliarized/depsychologized. It is namely in the genres of Science Fiction and Fantasy that cinema lives up to the goal of realism as formulated by Kracauer. The fantastic creatures and machines inhabiting the worlds of fantasy and SF cinema resist the need to signify. For example, even when the functions of certain machines on board of a spaceship are explained to the viewer, the fantastic appearance of these objects outweighs any rational explanation of their purpose. The viewer does not care to know how all the machines function; if an explanation is proffered, it is accepted but not dwelled upon. All the viewer wants is to be surprised, intrigued, mystified by the strangeness of the mise-en-scène. This is true of a SF classic like *Metropolis* as well as of more recent SF films like *Alien*, in which the machines and screens on board of the ship Nostromo stand out simply by virtue of their fantastic appearance. When one of the characters in *Event Horizon* walks through a tunnel connecting two compartments of the spaceship Event Horizon, the ship's maker, Dr.Weir, explains the nature and purpose of the tunnel; however, the sheer strangeness of the tunnel made of blinking lights in strange symmetrical patterns pushes this rational explanation to the background, preserving the indeterminate nature of the image. Kracauer's version of realism demands the

presentation of the *existential density* of things, which, paradoxically, is their sheer visibility or, rather, a *surfeit of visibility*. The fantastic object acquires such existential density precisely by being visually overdetermined.

Kracauer fails to ask the following question: Where does the movement of alienation or defamiliarization stop? Does the camera extract its object from the world, make us see it as if for the first time, and then return it to the same world? Or does the movement stop at the second stage, at the moment when we see the thing in itself? Clearly, if the object is to be seen, it must not be dropped back into the undifferentiated flow of material phenomena, which covered it up in the first place. What Kracauer should have concluded from his examination of camera-reality is that a thing is perceived in itself, as a material thing, when it is disconnected from the network of things in which it is embroiled from the very beginning, when it is transformed into an image, "a spectacle," to use Fernand Léger's word. To see that which has been merely noticed means to see it as an image. The paradoxical significance of Kracauer's project of redeeming physical reality is this: *the materiality and concreteness of things is redeemed when they are transformed into images*. Only an image possesses the absolute autonomy and self-sufficiency that are the marks of photogénie; before it becomes an image, a thing cannot be photogenic because it is always immersed in a network of other things. Here one discovers the natural advantage of the fantastic over the real in attaining photogénie. Since photogénie demands the breaking of a thing's connections to other things, the isolation of the thing from its context, the harder it is to point out a thing's connections to other things, the more photogenic it is. The more unrecognizable and strange the thing, the more photogenic it is. Insofar as a fantastic object has severed its connections to other objects to a greater degree than a real object, a fantastic object is more photogenic than a real one.

Perhaps the most significant way in which Epstein's idea of photogénie can be traced in contemporary SF cinema is through his analysis of what he calls "the new machine aesthetic" ("The Senses I (b)" in Abel 244). This analysis, curiously enough, is filtered through the Bergsonian theory of perception elaborated in *Matter and Memory* and *The Creative Mind*.[6] Perception, argues Bergson, cuts out portions of reality; it proceeds by a process of selection or abstraction, and it is always practically motivated. Glossing over Bergson's theory, Epstein observes that cinema doubles this process of selection or abstraction:

> The senses, of course, present us only with symbols of reality: uniform, proportionate, elective metaphors. …To see is to idealize, abstract and extract, read and select, transform. On the screen we are seeing what the cinema has already seen once: a double transformation. …A choice within a choice, reflection of a reflection. …My eye presents me with an idea of a form; the film stock also contains an idea of a form, an idea established independently of my awareness, an idea without awareness…and from the screen I get an idea of an idea, my eye's idea is extracted from the camera's. …The Bell and Howell is a metal brain. …The Bell and Howell is an artist. …A sensibility can at last be bought, available for purchase commercially and subject to import duties like coffee… (Epstein in Abel 245)

The nonhuman sensibility that results from this double act of selection or abstraction has been carried to its logical conclusion by the development of CGI effects, particularly in SF cinema. The SF cinema of special effects is the kind of film that Antonin Artaud dreamed about in 1927,

> a film with purely visual situations, whose drama would come from a shock designed for the eyes, a shock drawn out…from the very substance of our vision and not from psychological circumlocutions of a discursive nature which are merely the visual equivalent of a text. It is not a question of finding in visual language an equivalent for written language, of which the visual language would merely be a translation, but rather of *revealing the very essence of language*… ("Cinema and Reality" in Abel 411, my italics)

The golden mean that Artaud situates between the two extremes of narrative or psychological cinema and pure or abstract cinema does not seek to record reality—although Artaud's article is entitled "Cinema and Reality"—but to reveal "the very essence of language": the essence of reality is not 'hidden' within reality but lies in the internal structure or order (the language) of the representation. Realistic cinema reveals the essence of the representation, not the essence of the thing represented: "Images are born, are derived from one another purely as images…create worlds which ask nothing of anyone or anything. But out of this pure play of appearances, out of this…transubstantiation of elements is born an inorganic language that moves the mind by osmosis and without any kind of transposition in words"(Artaud 412).

Kracauer's critique of fantasy (and by extension of SF cinema) is based on the assumption that anything staged is uncinematic. However, even as he explains in great detail why fantasy is uncinematic, Kracauer suggests that the perfection of the technical properties of the medium, on which fantasy relies, is capable of rendering fantasy cinematic. This becomes most clear in the short discussion of monsters in fantasy films:

> Introduced as a valid film theme, they plainly fall under…cinematic staginess. *Yet they may be staged and manipulated so skillfully that they merge with their real-life environment and evoke the illusion of being virtually real*. …Their possible verisimilitude, which is a tribute paid to camera-realism, after all brings them back into the orbit of the cinema. (87, my italics)

Kracauer, then, posits a direct connection between the development of special effects and cinematic realism. Provided special effects are so sophisticated that the reality they create is virtually indistinguishable from the physical world, fantasy may be considered part of camera-reality. Provided the real and the fantastic are indistinguishable on the screen, the fantastic is cinematic (92) i.e., so long as the fantastic is not represented *as* fantastic but as part of ordinary reality, it is included in camera-reality. Bazin reaches a similar conclusion: "But realism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice. …That is why it would be absurd to resist every new technical development aiming to add to the realism of cinema, namely sound, color, stereoscopy. … Some measure of reality must always be sacrificed in the effort of achieving it" (*What Is Cinema? vol. 2* 30).[7] Bazin suggests that there are two "realities": our reality (which needs to be sacrificed in some measure) and cinematic reality (which is "achieved" through the sacrifice of the first reality). The fantastic, then, is not a quality of the object but rather a quality of the representation. *An object is not fantastic as such; rather, a representation that fails to convince us of its realism is fantastic*. Camera-reality is established by the specific conventions of a genre.

Critics of SF films point out that special effects are used in SF cinema not to strengthen the film's verisimilitude but rather to produce a kind of "pure sensation"(Stam, "The Question of Realism: Introduction" 228), "immers[ing] the spectator in a Heraclitian flux of images and sounds registered on the pulse rather than through purely cognitive processes"(228):

> The new digital imaging technologies…simultaneously heighten the possibilities of mimeticism while also undermining faith in the mimesis… Who can say that technical innovations such as Dolby Sound provide more 'faithful' renditions of sound? Rather, it seems that Dolby increases the visceral impact of sound without the spectator taking it literally as 'something that happened'. (227-228)[8]

In opposition to Stam's critique of the visceral impact of special effects films, Tom Gunning's essay "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde" juxtaposes early cinema, which Gunning calls "exhibitionist" with later, mostly

narrative cinema, which he calls " voyeuristic." The realism of early cinema lies precisely in "its freedom from the creation of a diegesis, its accent on direct stimulation"(Gunning 232). Gunning notes the connection between early exhibitionist cinema and the cinema of special effects that returns to the tricks and displays in which cinema originated (for example, in the Méliés tradition). Kracauer, Bazin, and Deleuze[9] argue that images in cinema should not signify anything other than themselves, that they should resist interpretation, that they should be in a certain sense flat, perceived not only cognitively but rather on a more immediate level. Deleuze devotes the entire second volume of *Cinema* to the pure optical and sound image, which is precisely a kind of image that affects is viscerally, not cognitively, an image that expresses duration (duration is the experience of an *embodied* subject). In that case, is Robert Stam right in considering flat (digital) images unrealistic and insisting that images should not affect us in a purely visceral way, that cinema should not be pure sensation? Sobchack supports Stam's argument. The distinction she draws in "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic 'Presence'" between the photographic, the cinematic, and the electronic (71) clearly privileges the lived reality of the cinematic at the expense of the dangerous flattening of space-time brought about by the electronic. Wheras space in earlier SF films "was semantically inscribed as 'deep' and time as accelerating and 'urgent'"(*SS* 226), later SF films flatten space-time, substituting simulated space-time for real space-time. However, Sobchack remains unaware that this flattening can be interpreted in two different ways: either as the triumph of the simulacrum over the real or as the triumph of realism, the redemption of physical reality from the deep time and space associated with subjectivity. Sobchack does not pursue the question whether the deflation of space-time marks the loss of the real or rather a return to the real before it is carved out by psychological (deep) space-time. Like Kracauer, she fails to recognize that the redemption of physical reality from subjectivity actually *demands* the deconstruction of deep space and duration ('deep' time). In this sense, the deflation of space-time is a step toward a greater realism in cinema.[10]

The history of SF cinema, according to Sobchack, is marked by an important shift in the understanding of space and time. In contrast to SF films of the 1950s, in later SF films "'[t]ime [i]s decelerated….Today's SF film evidences a structural and visual willingness to linger on 'random' details, tales a certain pleasure…in holding the moment to sensually engage its surfaces, to embrace its material collections as 'happenings' and

collage"(Sobchack, *SS* 228). The deep space of the earlier SF films is now replaced by a shallow space:

> A space perceived and represented as superficial and shallow…does not conceal things, it displays them. …[T]he new electronic space is no longer lived and represented as 'deep' and three-dimensional. …The new electronic space we live and figure cannot be invaded. It is open only to 'pervasion'—a condition of kinetic accommodation and dispersal associated with the experience and representations of television, video games, and computer terminals. (229)

The two concepts used here to distinguish between the earlier and later SF films—invasion and pervasion—suggest a different kind of subjectivity. 'Invasion' presupposes a hierarchy of subjects and objects, a phenomenal world that offers itself to a penetrating subjectivity, which acts upon it. This kind of cinema corresponds to what Deleuze calls the cinema of the movement-image. 'Pervasion', on the other hand, does not grant the subject a privileged position. In electronic space, subjectivity is dispersed and constituted only temporarily and incidentally in front of computer terminals and video/TV screens. What Sobchack decries as the flattening or hollowing out of space is, in fact, the condition for a realistic cinematic representation, insofar as to argue that space is shallow, that it displays things rather than concealing them, is to suggest that things are presented as self-sufficient phenomena that need not be unconcealed, interpreted, and thus reified by a probing subjectivity. The end of deep space is also the end of space as context: "Fragmented into discrete and contained units by both microchips and strobe lights, space has lost much of its contextual function as the ground for the continuities of time, movement, and event. Space is now more often a 'text' than a context"(*SS* 231-232). Thus, *Blade Runner*'s cluttered mise-en-scène is a character in its own right:

> The 'excess scenography' of *Blade Runner*…is more than mere background. …An abundance of things to look at serves to inflate the value of the space that contains them, and emphasizes a particular kind of density and texture. This visualization of contemporary spatial experience eroticizes and fetishizes material culture, spatializing it as multidimensional and sensuous 'clutter'. (262)

Sobchack herself characterizes the excessive accumulation of things in films like *Blade Runner* as the ultimate materialization ("sensuous visualization") of space:

> In them [SF films], those values of dimension and texture, density and complexity associated with the older 'depth models' of realism and modernism have been preserved but reformulated. That is, they have been brought literally to the surface and made concretely visible. They have, in the most superficial—if paradoxically profound—way been completely *materialized*. (266)

The transformation of space from 'contextual' to 'textual', the increasing visibility of the space to the extent that it acquires a certain existential thickness, is precisely what Kracauer has in mind when discussing the importance of foregrounding the materiality of phenomena. The fetish is, in fact, the point in the life of a thing at which it is most material, sensuous, real. What Sobchack interprets as the cluttered space of multinational capitalist space, a symptom of the obsession with material products, with the sheer accumulation of things, could therefore be seen, by way of Kracauer, as "the redemption of physical reality." The retrofuture of *Blade Runner* might seem, at first glance, to be complicit with the processes of commodification or reification characteristic of late capitalism. However, by drawing attention to the sheer materiality of this world, the film's excessive scenography reverses the process of reification: the excessive materiality of the setting defamiliarizes it and allows it to be expressive in itself. Thus, reification works in the interest of a materialist aesthetics.

There has been a general disagreement about the status of SF décor. Realists like Kracauer and Balázs contrast film's "naturalness" with theatre's "staged" or decorative mise-en-scène: "[A]ll stylized scenery is unsatisfactory in a film"(Balázs 106). Balázs, however, fails to realize that the word "stylized" is meaningful only in the framework of mimesis, where it signifies the unsatisfactory attempt to produce a faithful copy of something that exists in reality. It is difficult to reproduce in the studio an object with whose natural appearance we are familiar: the copy will always fall short of the original. It is precisely this gap between original and copy that the term "stylized" refers to. However, in the absence of an original in the real world, no model created in the studio can be accused of being "stylized" simply because "stylized" makes sense only as the other side of "natural." A fantastic object created and shot in the studio cannot be "stylized": any discussion of its authenticity or truthfulness is absolutely meaningless.

Furthermore, the fantastic décor of SF films is never merely a background for the unfolding action: "Le décor des films fantastiques est de nature architecturale. …Il est aussi constitué ou agrémenté d'objects don't la fonction est rarement purement décorative et qui participent d'une stratégie de mise en condition du spectateur"(Menegaldo 129). Fantastic objects in cinema affect us by their sheer presence. Their unfamiliar, strange appearance enhances their materiality, infusing them with a kind of inner life:

> L'objet est fantastique au cinéma notamment par sa présence méme, mais aussi par son immobilité qui semble trompeuse, factice. Le jeu fantastique consiste à faire bouger ces objets inertes, à les investir d'un regard, d'une intériorité, d'une profondeur et d'une volonté, à leur

> conférer une autonomie d'autant plus angoissante que ces objets sont des miroirs de notre être, nous renvoient à nos propres fantasmes idenititaires que le cinema sait si bien représenter. (Menegaldo 143)

Some film critics claim that film objects lacking a specific narrative function--for example, the objects making up the iconography of a particular genre—are reduced into symbols or stereotypes. This is the argument Penny Starfield puts forward in her analysis of American films of the sixties and the seventies. She begins with Roland Barthes' distinction between two categories of object functions: "The function proper is an action, such as the purchase of a gun, that necessitates a correlate (using the gun)…and this is what Jean Epstein refers to as the 'logic of images' whereby an object, such as an umbrella, that the camera focuses on must at a later stage take part in the denouement" (Barthes qtd. in Starfield 259-260). The other class of functions is "that of indices which relate to traits of character and setting and whose meaning generally becomes apparent at a higher level"(260). Starfield characterizes the second class of objects as symbols, as belonging to a genre iconography, as parts of a film's "frozen décor"(260). Although Starfield's examples are drawn from thrillers, film noirs, and gangster films, her analysis implicitly extends to all genres. Sobchack's chapter on the iconography of SF cinema, however, demonstrates the fluidity of the SF film genre, whose potential icons are never exhausted in a consistent cluster of meanings. Sobchack's analysis focuses on the image of the spaceship in SF cinema; however, I will take another object that figures prominently in the SF genre: the screen (the computer screen, the TV or video screen, etc.) [11]

Is the screen part of the "frozen décor" of SF films, a symbol, or is it rather a "thing" (in Epstein's sense of the word) that never acquires a stable meaning? In other words, is the screen in SF cinema contextual (decorative) or textual (material, photogenic)? Garrett Stewart offers a rather pessimistic analysis of the image of the screen in SF cinema. Stewart reads the proliferation of screens in SF films as a "negative abyme"(197), an internal reflection. The screen within the screen "is one kind of cinematic synecdoche: the rectangular part standing in…for the enclosing whole"(220). The screen as an "enfolded negation" is "a regress ingredient to the very genre of science fiction on-screen"(198). In the trope of the screen "science fiction film [has] always glimpsed the dystopian shadow of its medium eclipse as a privileged representational system"(222). The proliferation of screens in SF cinema (a result of the constantly evolving digital technologies) marks, indirectly, the end of realism, the point at which

> being absent has passed from a condition of mediation to a virtual fact of life in the new simulated world of absent being. As before, only more so, the photogrammatic medium of sci fi cinema keeps pace by putting into marked narrative recess the signs of its own ontological as well as technological supersession. In the future that is now, the photographic image is held hostage to a pervasive cultural nostalgia for the very bodies its chemistry used to embalm. (223)

However, Kracauer's notion of a "stage interlude" provides a different perspective on the screen as a potential genre icon. From his point of view, the representation of a screen or multiple screens in cinema would fall under the category of "stage interludes," along with theatrical productions. Such representations within representations, he argues, enhance the realism of the film by foregrounding the representational nature of the internal representation: "Accordingly, the more stylized a cut-in theatrical production number [and I add, a TV or computer screen], the better does it lend itself to serving as a foil to camera reality"(Kracauer 73).

Comparing older SF films to more recent ones, one cannot help but notice not only the proliferation of screens but also the increasing size of such screens within the screen. In older SF films—for example, in *Star Trek: The Voyage Home*—the screens are relegated to the background, their purpose being to register any technical problems: whenever something goes wrong with the spaceship's control deck, the images on the screens become unstable and barely readable. Even if some of the computer monitors are fairly big, they remain in the background, the main action unfolding in front of them. Occasionally, due to poor reception, the images of human faces projected on them disintegrate into stripes of light, bits of visual data: they begin to resemble abstract expressionist paintings. On the other hand, the screens in the more recent *Event Horizon* are flatter and more dynamic. Instead of two or three screens appearing next to each other, there are multiple screens superimposed on each other, constantly zooming in and out, only to be displaced by other screens. In *Minority Report*, the screens are so big that they naturally act as surrogate walls. The smooth screens emitting seductive advertising messages, addressed personally to John Anderton, *surround* him (rather than remaining in the background) as he walks down an arcade. These screens are not there to be looked at; they are no longer particular objects with specific functions (as opposed to the little primitive monitor in the first episode of *Alien,* which the crew uses to monitor the movement of people outside the spaceship, the human being reduced to a tiny dot moving across the screen) because due to their omnipresence and the perfect quality of the images projected on them they have become, in a certain sense, disembodied. Generally

speaking, the smaller the screen in SF cinema and the poorer the quality of the images projected on it, the more likely it is that the screen's function is merely representative. Smaller screens are usually embedded in a control deck as opposed to *Minority Report*'s big screens which stand alone, as if floating in space.

Not only do screens tend to increase in sheer size as one passes from older to more contemporary SF films; they also assume an increasingly independent existence, almost indistinguishable from that of a character and are, sometimes, shown communicating with the characters. The first episode of the *Alien* saga opens with a sequence of long shots of the empty hallways of the spaceship Nostromo. The camera lingers on the mise-en-scène from which human beings are conspicuously absent (they are asleep in their futuristic beds). This attention to establishing the setting is characteristic of the SF genre: precisely because the setting in the film is fantastic, the filmmaker is forced to represent it in more detail than a more familiar, 'natural' setting, in order to make it believable. In contrast to ordinary objects from everyday life, whose insignificance needs to be staged—they need to be dematerialized first, rendered abstractly significant, before they can regain some of their lost materiality--the various machines and devices on board of Nostromo, their function undisclosed, possess a certain materiality and self-sufficiency from the very beginning. The camera then focuses on a human being sitting in front of the control deck, completely immobile. The computer screen across from the human being lights up and we see the reflection of the blinking data on the man's helmet. As the streaming data is superimposed on the invisible human face, the computer screen appears more animated than the face.[12] Like the enormous, super-light advertising screens in *Minority Report*, this screen has surpassed its use-function: its main function is not necessarily to be read i.e., its significance is not mediated through the subject.[13] The human being facing the screen is reduced to just another screen reflecting the computer screen instead of interpreting the information on it.[14] Occasionally, a small computer screen fills up the whole (film or video) screen. Beautiful, suffused with a bluish glow, emitting incomprehensible data—numbers, computer graphics, words—it emits a kind of general 'significance' that is left undeciphered, unspecified. Similar to *Alien*, the eye-ball shaped monitor covered with multiple screens and placed close to James Cole, in *12 Monkeys*, is used for surveillance rather than representation purposes. Several zoom lenses are placed in front of the scientists' images on the screen, distorting their faces, enlarging an eye here, a mouth there.

These screens, however, appear obsolete in comparison with the screen in *Minority Report* insofar as they still represent, very schematically, *physical movement* (the spaceship's trajectory through space, the movements of the crew). John Anderton's screen, on the other hand, represents *mental movement*—the pre-cogs' pre-visions—which, appropriately, takes the form of superimposed, unedited images. Whereas screens in earlier SF films tend to provide *abstract representations of concrete physical movements in space*, screens in later SF films often offer *concrete records of abstract 'things' such as thoughts and memories*.

SF cinema of special effects problematizes Deleuze's distinction between the cinema of the movement-image and the cinema of the time-image. Glossing over Deleuze's distinction between the two, Robert Stam explains that "[w]hile the movement-image involves the exploration of physical space, the time-image conveys the mental processes of memory, dream, and the imaginary. The narratively shaped action image gives way to a dispersive, aleatory cinema of 'optical-sound situation'" (*Film Theory: An Introduction* 261). On one hand, SF cinema belongs to the cinema of the movement-image insofar as it is still driven by narrative. However, as we saw, in some recent SF films the exploration of physical space is subordinated to the spatial representation of mental processes (embodied memories in *Event Horizon* and *Solaris*, digitally manipulated mental images in *Minority Report*). Moreover, the increasing use of special effects in SF cinema creates precisely the kind of "optical-sound situations" Deleuze attributes to certain modernist works. Special effects sequences affect the viewer on a purely visual level and constitute the new technological sublime.

The deflation of space in SF cinema is accompanied by an increasing self-externalization of the subject. In *Screening Space* Sobchack cites *Brainstorm* and *Dreamscape*—here I add *Minority Report* and *Strange Days*—as examples of the end of subjectivity as interiority. The end of psychologism in SF cinema Sobchack still laments—what used to be privileged, sacrosanct personal visions, memories, images are now externalized, recorded, and re-recorded—is precisely the accomplishment of the kind of realism envisioned by Kracauer or Deleuze. Not only are things left to (re)present themselves, but subjectivity itself is treated as cinematically equivalent to a thing. The mediation of subjectivity through technology—for example, the recording of the pre-cogs' pre-visions on a holosphere and their subsequent digitization and manipulation on a screen, in *Minority Report*—is one of the ways in which subjectivity loses its privileged place and becomes just another image-whatever or moment-whatever, to use Deleuze's

terms. The deflation of space is the deflation of subjective space/deep space. The mediation of interiority is part of this deflation. The "superficial beings without 'psyche'" (*SS* 256) that emerge in SF cinema and that Sobchack points to as examples of a more general process of deflation (deflation of space, time, character) in this genre, need not be considered an obstacle for cinematic realism. On the contrary, this new kind of subjectivity speaks to the idea of "affectless subjects" and 'shimmering objects" (Moore 120) central to the materialist aesthetics of Kracauer, Bazin, and Deleuze.

Sobchack analyzes *Tron* as an example of the deflation of space, which leads to the creation of a "hyperspace," a two-dimensional space that "signifies a replication and clarification of the cinematographic image, an objectification of its vision accomplished from a space with no atmosphere, no respiration, no experience of depth or gravity"(256). The enhanced visibility of the space, the extreme clarification of detail to which she draws attention, is also observed in more contemporary SF films, such as *Event Horizon* or, more generally, in those exterior shots of a spaceship gliding through space that present in crisp images the most minute details of the ship's surface. Sobchack asserts that the privileging of electronic space over cinematographic space in films like *Tron* is actually a conservative, nostalgic move, an attempt to contain the new technology and preserve its ontological difference from indexical, cinematographic representation: "Thus, this different kind of representation and degree of abstraction…points to the less schematized 'realism' of cinematographic representation…"(SS 261). However, the development of CGI effects today has allowed this electronic space to become more and more integrated with traditional, indexical cinematographic space. Is this "the end of 'realism' and the 'death' of the cinematographic image" (*SS* 261) as Sobchack prophesies? Could it be that the virtual camera creates the most realistic images if by realism is understood not the production of a copy of the real but the production of an image that signifies only itself, absolutely self-sufficient and self-referential? Kracauer's idea of the redemption of physical reality in cinema, if followed to its logical conclusion, leads precisely to the hyperimage created by a virtual camera: the virtual image/thing is not an extension of subjectivity, does not signify something other than itself. The virtual image is the most material thing precisely because all connections to its production (to subjectivity) have been cut off. It is the product of a machine (a computer). Its materiality or self-sufficiency is due namely to its immateriality, its disconnectedness from other images/things. The transition from a phenomenon to a virtual thing/image is marked by the same shift from context to text (the disappearance of ground as such) that

accompanies the deflation of space theorized by Sobchack. A virtual image might be even more realistic than a traditional cinematographic image because the virtual camera does not conceal things but makes everything always already visible. When the inner life of things in cinema was revealed by special camera movements (e.g., the camera would linger on things, represent them in a close-up, or foreground them by refusing to focus on the subject)[15] these camera movements still retained a vestigial subjectivity insofar as the things' inner life had to be unconcealed and thus inevitably subjectivized. In contrast, things created with a virtual camera are always already exposed. From this point of view, Kracauer's realist aesthetics appears as a disguised theory of the hyperreal. Only in the hyperreal are phenomena redeemed from subjectivity: they are most material when they are devoid of inner life.

The inflation of the spatial value of things results in "a material overload that exceeds visual grasp and gives everything, everyone, and every activity a certain non-hierarchical equivalence"(*SS* 271). *Blade Runner*'s "excessive scenographic materiality"(279) is accompanied, argues Sobchack (following Fredrick Jameson), by a deflation of the temporal value of things. Instead of a continuous flow of events through time, organized by a clear cause-effect relationships, SF films reduce events to "an experience of pure *material* Signifiers…a series of pure and *unrelated presents* in time"(Jameson qtd. in Sobchack 72). This breakdown of the temporal logic of events, however, speaks to Kracauer's and Bazin's defense of the episodic structure of neo-realist films. The breaking down of events into smaller and smaller constitutive parts--the increasingly episodic nature of a film--operates under a spatial rather than a temporal logic, insofar as it turns events into things, into "'punctual event-objects'" (*SS* 280). The episodic nature of an event signals its spatialization, its isolation from the flow of narrative time. The more an event is represented as self-sufficient, temporally uncontextualizable, the more thing-like it becomes. It's not that temporality is done away with completely; rather, the episode is a specific type of temporality that best fulfills the requirements of a materialist aesthetics. The redemption of physical reality from subjectivity/temporality and the creation of what Deleuze calls "pure optical images" demands the privileging of the spatial determination of things. The substitution of temporal logic with an "episodic/spatial logic" (*SS* 280) results in a kind of "literalism" (281), a kind of cinematic structure that relies on "the motivation of things"(280) rather than on plot motivation. Although Kracauer envisions the redemption of physical reality as an inflation of the temporal rather than the spatial value of things, as a revelation of the

individual duration of things, in reality a thing's temporal value is more easily cooptable by subjectivity. To represent a thing according to its own duration is an euphemism: a thing's duration can be represented only as it is refracted through our own duration. To take Bergson's famous example, waiting for the sugar cube to dissolve measures only our own duration, our own waiting. In contrast, the sheer visibility of things (machines, devices, gadgets of all sorts) in the complex interior space of a spaceship, enhanced by their undefined function, "distract the eye from locating itself in the fixed position from which the conception of personal movement, depth, and interiority (or subjectivity) becomes possible" (*SS* 270). *If the objective of Kracauer's materialist aesthetics is to liberate the phenomenal world from subjectivity, this is best accomplished by deflating the temporal value of things and inflating their spatial value.* Bergson argues in *Matter and Memory* that what distinguishes mind from matter is the mind's capacity for memory. Thus, to represent things on their own terms rather than as mere extensions of subjectivity, to avoid reducing phenomena to a series of significations, film must purposefully ignore their temporal value. The "material present-ness" (*SS* 273) of things in cinema depends on their absence from time, history, memory. The widespread critique of "the postmodern spatialization of time into something(s) visible" (274) is, therefore, not justified from the point of view of realism. Interiority is, before everything else, the experience of time as internal. The liberation of things from interiority demands the purposeful exteriorization or spatialization of internal time (duration). An example of a literal spatialization or materialization of time is the gravity drive in *Event Horizon*, a device which opens the gateway that folds space-time. One of the characters pierces the black hole with his hand, bringing back tangible particles of concentrated space-time into the present. As a result, the immaterial—the crew members' individual memories--is materialized. The spatialization of time into something visible is simply the other side of the objectification of subjectivity, the deflation of inner subjective life. When the past, the present, and the future are conflated—spatialized or visualized, for example represented on a screen as in the scene in *12 Monkeys* in which Cole is sitting in a chair, high up in the air, facing a gigantic eye-ball covered with TV monitors—the interior life of the subject no longer determines the life of things: they are no longer signified as memories, hopes or fears, but as themselves.

In fact, Kracauer himself draws attention to the significant distinction between photography and memory: "[Proust] drives home this point by comparing the photographer with the witness, the observer, the stranger. …They may perceive anything

because nothing they see is pregnant with memories that would captivate them and thus limit their vision. …Photography, Proust has it, is the product of complete alienation"(14-15). To achieve realism, cinema must represent things independently of subjective (temporal) experiences. There is a world of difference between the flow of Proustian time and the representation of time travel in SF films like *Back to the Future*, *The Time Machine*, *12 Monkeys*, *Minority Report*, *Event Horizon*, *The Man Who Fell to Earth, Star Trek: The Voyage Home*. I will focus on *Minority Report* and Proust's novel. (The analogy between a novel and a film stands thanks to the widely recognized cinematic nature of Proust's writing.) In Proust's novel (as well as in its film adaptation *Le Temps Retrouvé*) travel into the past is represented as a strictly subjective, intimate, sensorial experience. As Marcel tastes the Madeleine, his senses transport him into a series of flashbacks, not necessarily arranged by date. His body is not represented as going through a portal that leads into the past. Time travel 'takes place' directly through the senses, without the body itself being represented as traveling through time. In the other films mentioned, however, travel between different worlds (between the past, the present, and the future as well as between other alternate realities) tends to be objectified, represented visually or, as Sobchack would argue, time in these films becomes more and more spatialized into something visible. In *Back to the Future* and *The Time Machine*, the protagonist's body is literally transported through different times in a special vehicle. The past, the present, and the future are represented as co-existing on the same spatial plane, travel between them reduced to a mere movement through space (hence the importance of the time machine's speed). In *12 Monkeys* James Cole's naked body, strapped inside a transparent but primitive cocoon-like vessel, with cables hanging from it (reminiscent of the coffin-like container in which Frankenstein is 'born'), is pushed through a mysterious portal, on the other side of which lies the past. His voyage through time is spatially represented in a superfast sequence of abstract luminous patterns shooting fast across the screen to signify the passing of dozens of years. In *Event Horizon*, Justin is devoured by the black hole inside the gravity drive in the center of the spaceship. The time portal is represented as super-tangible: when another crew member pulls Justin back from the black hole, Justin brings back with him particles of time, represented visually as drops of extremely thick, liquid-like substance. Both in *Star Trek: The Voyage Home* and in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, time travel is suggested through an acrobatics sequence, in which an anonymous body is flung about in space. In *Minority Report*, the spatialization of time achieves its climax. The pre-cogs' pre-visions are projected on a holosphere and saved in

digital files, which are then projected on a big, transparent screen and manipulated by John Anderton's data gloves. Time is no longer an internal, subjective experience; it is literally at the subject's fingertips. It is an image but a tangible one. The most interior part of subjectivity—mental imagery—is objectified, materialized. Later in the film, the protagonist selects from a collection of digital files, in which his memories of his dead son and his wife are preserved in the form of holographic images. The image of his son steps down from a big screen and shimmers in a digital, fantastic three-dimensionality in the middle of the room. John Anderton's memory of his wife, induced by a mysterious drug he inhales, glides through the room, a digital image that is both three-dimensional and flat: when she stands in profile in front of the camera, her face loses its depth and becomes a flat line of light.

The sophisticated technospace in contemporary SF cinema is marked by the appearance of increasingly immaterial, transparent objects, such as the almost invisible computer screens in *Minority Report* and *The Matrix Reloaded* (the screens on Zion's control flight deck). The screen in *Minority Report* possesses one curious quality. All computer monitors and video game screens that have populated SF cinema, despite their different function, size, and visual appearance, have had this in common: they have been three-dimensional things. When a character is shown facing the camera, looking at a screen, it is only normal that we see the back of the screen. The screen functions as a support for the image displayed upon its surface. This is not the case with the big, slightly concave screen upon which John Anderton orchestrates the interpretation of the images supplied by the pre-cogs ("scrubbing the image for evidence").[16] The transparent screen does not have a front side and a back side: the images displayed on the screen are facing us, the viewers, at the same time as they are facing the character looking at them. Although Anderton stands across from us, what he sees on the screen is not different from what we see on the screen. Since the screen has no reverse side, it no longer functions as a surface or a background on which the images are displayed. The screen has disappeared as a screen: the image is the screen, the screen is the image. This is only appropriate since the images on the screen do not simply *represent* the pre-cogs' thoughts; they *are* these thoughts. This shot of the screen marks the vanishing of point of view (of subjectivity) that is supposed to fix it in space. An object has, in principle, many different sides and angles from which it can be viewed. As Balázs points out, "[t]here is nothing more subjective than the objective"(90). However, the screen in *Minority Report* is represented as purely objective: it precludes any subjective point of view as its front

coincides with its back. Anderton's look is not stopped by the screen before him: his look passes freely through the barely visible screen. Although the director still relies on the traditional three-point shot of continuity editing—a shot of the character, a shot of what he is looking at (the screen), and back to the character for a reaction shot—the self-transparency of the screen has already compromised this relationship between the subject and the object (the screen). Any notion of interiority is precluded by this flattening of the character's gaze on the screen. The human gaze becomes just another image on the screen, or, rather, a screen. Because of the screen's transparency, characters standing behind it appear on the screen, next to the images of people Anderton manipulates on the screen, so that it becomes difficult to distinguish between the images of people and the people looking at those images.

Sobchack describes the new subjectivity in SF cinema as a "decentered subjectivity objectified in space" and contrasts it with the modernist "centered subject constructed in time" (*SS* 282). This shift has been interpreted as a loss of cinematic realism and a move towards hyperrealism. But is this really the case? Has not the new subjectivity objectified in the technological wonders of the SF film transformed the SF film into a poetic medium? In "Art as Technique" Schklovsky argues that the essence of poetry (the poetic in general) is indirection.[17] Instead of calling a thing by its proper name, the thing should be represented indirectly, by analogy with other similar things or even with parts of other similar things. The impersonal is poetic, a subjective experience without a subject. In SF films the image of the spaceship attains this level of poetry. The spaceship is a thing that, by virtue of its sheer size and magnificence—the camera repeatedly shows us the smooth surface of the ship as it flies through space, aglow in the dark—becomes alive.

Even if those who consider the SF genre unrealistic grant that the aesthetics of SF cinema is a materialist one, that those films attain their own kind of poetry by objectifying subjectivity in the new technological sublime, they might still object that the iconography of the genre deprives it of the indeterminacy that Kracauer and other realists deem essential to camera reality. There is a strong connection between the inflated spatial value of things in SF film (not only in films like *Blade Runner*, but also in film sequences that represent the interior of a spaceship filled with devices and machines of all shapes and sizes whose functions are never made explicit, such as the spaceship Nostromo in *Alien* or Event Horizon in the movie by the same title) and, on the other hand, certain aspects of cinematic representation privileged by Kracauer—indeterminacy,

indefiniteness, non-hierarchical relationship between things and between instants in time. Sobchack convincingly demonstrates that in comparison with other genres, such as the gangster film or the western, the SF genre is unfixed with relation to time and place, which guarantees it a greater indeterminacy and independence from stereotypes (*SS* 66). Indeterminacy, one of the central criteria of cinematic realism for Kracauer, is preserved in SF cinema: thanks to the indeterminacy of time and place, "there is no *consistent* cluster of meanings"(68) around any of the potential icons of the SF genre (the spaceship, the robot, etc.). Because the action in SF films takes place in imaginary times and places, and because these films are inhabited by fantastic devices, creatures, and machines, the governing technique in SF films is that of evasion (Schmerl 110). However, evasion ought not to be confused with the "logic of ellipsis," which Bazin associates with films falling short of realism. The art of ellipsis, he claims, operates according to a rational principle: "Ellipsis is a narrative process; it is logical in nature and so it is abstract as well; it presupposes analysis and choice; it organizes the facts in accord with the general dramatic direction to which it forces them to submit" (Bazin, *"What is Cinema?"* vol .2, 81). Bazin's famous analysis of the scene of the maid waking up, in de Sica's *Umberto D.*, is predicated on the assumption that to represent everything, to refrain from assigning more dramatic significance to certain moments or objects over others, produces a realistic cinematic representation.[18]

The reason both Bazin and Kracauer are critical of montage is that it breaks the natural duration of an event into smaller events; it works according to the logic of ellipsis: an action is broken down into its constituent parts and then reassembled and rendered continuous again through matches on action and eyeline matches, the 180 degree rule, etc. The images are not significant in themselves but acquire significance through their juxtaposition with other images to achieve a singular, predetermined effect. Bazin offers his analysis of the scene of the maid waking up as proof that cinema does not have to rely on oversignification. The whole sequence, which in another film would have taken only a few seconds, is here extended and divided into a series of shorter events, none of which is presented as more significant than the rest. Bazin's point is that the film owes its realism to scenes like this rather than to the effects of montage. However, one could argue that the division of an event into smaller and smaller events is a kind of internal montage, montage *within* the shot.

Bazin's analysis exemplifies a line of thought that originated in the writings of French theorists between the wars. For instance, in "The Modern Art: A New Art, the

Cinema" Blaise Cendrars finds drama in the most insignificant object or event: "We understand that the real has no other meaning. Since everything is rhythm, word, life. Focus the lens on a hand, an eye, an ear, and the drama is outlined, expands on a ground of unexpected mystery"(Cendrars in Abel 182-183). However, what these writers understand as the absence of drama is, in fact, only a matter of its redistribution: instead of a hierarchy of events and objects of different dramatic import, now all objects are deemed potentially dramatic. The purportedly insignificant, prosaic gestures and things that make up the maid scene in *Umberto D.* are actually suffused with 'the poetry of everyday life', an abstract sort of significance, which brings them back to the level of signification they were supposed to transcend. Meaning eclipses itself: everything is equally meaningful/meaningless.[19]

This is not the effect of SF cinema's technique of evasion, however. While SF cinema evades a coherent, rational explanation of the specific functions of various objects and machines, or of the fantastic nature of various planets and alien creatures, it never empties these objects of any significance nor does it render them super-significant. The object in SF cinema is granted the highest level of autonomy and materiality, without reducing it to an abstract symbol, precisely because the truthfulness of its existence is "bracketed out" from the very beginning. Its meaning is determined neither by place nor by time. The fantastic, improbable film object of SF cinema is the most self-referential and self-signifying object there is.[20]

As I pointed out, SF films are filled with increasingly light, immaterial things, such as the transparent screen in *Minority Report*. The lighter the screen, the more immaterial the objects whose images are projected on the screen. However, any such 'loss of matter' in one part of the SF mise-en-scène is recuperated by an 'excess of matter' in another part of the mise-en-scène: nothing is lost. In fact, many contemporary SF films have a surprisingly primitive or extra-material aspect, mixing highly polished, exceedingly light and transparent decor, on one hand, with more primitive-looking elements of the mise-en-scène, on the other hand. In *Minority Report* this regressive (primitive, non-SF) tendency is observed in the protagonist's surprisingly unfuturistic *manual* manipulation of images. Although time/memory is stored digitally, access to it is gained through the most 'primitive' and material of the senses, the sense of touch. At the same time, even though Anderton is touching the images, his touch remains distanced from itself: he merely points the censor gloves at the images, twisting his hand in the right direction so as to zoom in or zoom out, rather than doing the most natural thing:

moving his entire body closer to the screen. He is only *metaphorically* touching the images. Equally strange and 'regressive' is Anderton's drug-addiction. Given memory's new digital format, one expects personal memories to be available at any time i.e., there should be no reason why Anderton would get addicted to them. Finally, there is the contrast between the technologically advanced way of recording and manipulating the pre-cogs' pre-visions, on one hand, and the primitive machine that engraves the names of the murderer and the victim on two wooden balls, on the other hand. In *The Matrix Reloaded*, one is struck by the incongruity between the superlight, transparent screens through which the landing of spaceships on Zion is controlled, and the primitive appearance of Zion from a technological point of view. Instead of being super-schematized, abstract, and light, Zion's decor evokes visions of the Industrial Revolution. In every shot of Zion we see cables hanging from the ceiling, different machines whose inner workings are exposed to anyone's gaze. The whole place has the appearance of something turned inside out, a huge mechanical monster with its intestines (cables, levers, etc.) hanging out of its open belly.[21] Thus, the absolute invisibility of the 'big' machine, which is also the main, though absent, protagonist in the film--the matrix--is juxtaposed with the excessive visibility of the immediate mise-en-scène.

The same regressive tendency operates in film sequences revealing the structure and inner workings of spaceships. In *Alien* and *Event Horizon*, there are sequences showing characters repairing parts of the ship. The viewer is continuously struck by the incongruity between the stunning exterior shots of the ship majestically gliding through space (usually the virtual camera is positioned under the ship as it passes above it, to strengthen the pure sensation of its enormity and power; almost never do we see a high-angle, long shot of the ship from above since that would diminish its grandeur) and, on the other hand, the close-ups of its ordinary-looking, mechanic parts. The spaceship straddles the line separating the sublime (by virtue of its sheer size) from the overfamiliar (by virtue of the meticulous representation of its mechanical make-up).

It is precisely through their increasing immateriality that screens in SF films have become alienated from their use-function as means of representation and transformed into 'things'. The connection between the process of alienation on one hand, and its result—the thing's indeterminate meaning—on the other hand, is less than self-evident, however. To alienate the object of cinematic representation is to cut it off from its usual context, from all involuntary associations and memories piled up upon it. At the same time, however, Kracauer endows cinema with the power to act as a sort of surrogate

involuntary memory that reveals the "'psychophysical correspondences'" between us and the physical world. *Thus, while alienation isolates the object from precisely such psychophysical correspondences, the object's indeterminacy is guaranteed only as a result of its participation in such psychophysical correspondences.* Objects must not signify anything other than their own existence but, at the same time, they must be allusive i.e., they must be integrated into our psychic life: "Their cinematic quality lies precisely in their allusiveness, which enables them to yield all their psychological correspondences"(71). The "suggestive indeterminacy"(71) of objects Kracauer professes to privilege is dependent upon the objects' psychological correspondences.

The truth is that even the writings of Jean Epstein, the writer to whom Kracauer alludes most often, are not entirely free from psychologism: "And a close-up of a revolver is no longer a revolver; it is the revolver character, in other words the impulse toward or remorse for crime, failure, or suicide. …It has a temperament, habits, memories, a will, a soul" (Epstein, "On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*" in Abel 317). The gun's materiality and indeterminacy are simply the crossing point of different psychological responses to the gun or of a long history of genre conventions (those of the Western). The physiognomy of things the camera is supposed to reveal is not, as one might expect, their own physiognomy but ours. "How is the countryside turned into a landscape?"(96) Balázs asks, and he answers:

> The countryside has only a topography, which is a thing that can be exactly reproduced on a military map. But the landscape expresses a mood, which is not merely objectively given; it needs the co-operation of subjective factors before it can come into existence. The phrase is 'the mood of the landscape' but there is no mood save that of some human being. …It is as though the countryside were suddenly lifting its veil and showing its face… (96-97)

The 'face' the countryside shows when the camera lifts the veil is a human face: "The 'soul of nature' is our own soul which the cameraman picks out of the objective shapes of the countryside"(97). Although Balázs will argue, later in the book, that the cameraman should not project his humanity into the object but find it there, the fact remains that the self-sufficient beauty of the countryside is revealed only when man "permeate[s] nature with his own humanity"(97). Balázs' realism rests on this paradox of the self-sufficient human physiognomy of things. The irony is that he criticizes avant-garde films for failing to do that which Kracauer sees as the unique aspect of cinema, which elevates cinema above the other arts: avant-garde film fails to absorb its material. The abstract film,

claims Balázs, is the most subjective kind of film for "it has not absorbed the object"(175) and presents objects as completely isolated and self-sufficient, signifying only themselves. Curiously enough, Balázs uses the same word that summarizes Kracauer's theory of cinematic realism (a word that Sobchack, too, uses in her analysis of SF cinema): *redemption*. And like Kracauer, Balázs cannot free the term of its anthropocentric connotations. Balázs challenges abstract films on the grounds that "[t]here [is] nothing here of the *redemption* of the chaotic material of life by forcing it into shape at the cost of a struggle…"(182 my italics). "Redemption" here means the redemption of things from their sheer materiality, their 'humanization'. Like Balázs, Kracauer finds things in cinema evocative only insofar as they are part of a mental continuum: "[Films] *point beyond the physical world* to the extent that the shots or the combinations of shots from which they are built carry multiple meanings"(Kracauer 71, my italics). Even the "flow of life", the central concept in Kracauer's theory that is meant to capture the transience, endlessness, and indeterminacy of the real world (one wonders to what extent Kracauer's concept of 'the flow of life' is indebted to Bergson's idea of the 'elan vital') is not the purely material world but its reflection in the mind: "The concept 'flow of life', then, covers the stream of material situations and happenings with all that they intimate in terms of emotions, values, thoughts"(71).

So far I have argued that SF cinema lives up to the demands of cinematic realism thanks to the photogénie of the fantastic object, its enhanced materiality (a result of the inflation of its spatial value and a deflation of its temporal value), and thanks also to the sophisticated technical aspect of the SF genre (special effects). There is yet another aspect of camera-reality to which SF films remain faithful: the paucity of dialogue. The emphasis on speech, writes Kracauer, "opens up the region of discursive reasoning, enabling the medium to impart the turns and twists of sophisticated thought, all those rational and poetic communications which do not depend on pictorialization to be grasped and appreciated"(104). Sobchack devotes an entire chapter to this subject, arguing that there is a proportional relationship between "small talk" and "big images" on one hand, and "big talk" and "small images" on the other hand (*SS* 151). The sheer magnificence of the images in SF films demands a paucity of dialogue.[22] In this respect, SF cinema adheres to Kracauer's demand that the images in a film must have an undeniable precedence over words. The more opaque the language used in a SF film, the closer it is to poetry. SF cinema is full of incomprehensible technical jargon that the audience barely understands, mainly because it is not meant to be understood so much as

to be heard as pure sound: the descriptions of a spaceship's inner workings or the commands the spaceship's captain gives to the rest of the crew are not meant to communicate meaning as much as contribute to the general fantastic mood. Inasmuch as in SF films the visuals outweigh in significance the narrative, one could say that SF films are anti-dramatic or that they are based on a peculiar kind of drama, which develops not out of the narrative but out of the visual display for which the narrative is usually just the occasion. The drama is in the images and in the sounds accompanying them—in the sound of the blinking lights of the computer monitors, the sound of spaceships shooting through space at incredible speeds, the sound of alert alarms when something goes wrong on board of the ship, the sound of aliens attacking humans. Such material sounds—sounds that communicate but do so nonverbally—are more essential to SF films than are the sounds of human dialogue.

Characters in SF cinema usually find themselves in extreme situations, in which speech plays only a secondary role. What communication does take place tends to remain on the material rather than the signifying level of language: characters communicate in an abbreviated, technical jargon which is not necessarily explained and which is, therefore, experienced by the viewer as sound rather than as meaning. In this way SF films remain faithful to Kracauer's principle that "the spoken word is most cinematic if the messages it conveys elude our grasp"(107). Since action occupies a central place in SF films, characters exchange bits and pieces of language that summarize the crisis situation they are in; they speak in sentence fragments, in isolated words rather than in complete sentences flowing in an orderly, rational stream of significations. A good example of the alienation of words from their significations, which results in a greater emphasis on their material qualities, are those typical SF sequences in which some external force interferes with the control of the spaceship and the characters engage in a rapid exchange of inscrutable commands designed to take back the control over the spaceship.

This materialization of language in SF cinema goes hand in hand with an emphasis, equally cinematic according to Kracauer, on bodily presence. SF characters are rarely endowed with a very complex inner life; their struggles are, as a rule, externalized, which explains the greater emphasis on their bodies and the space they occupy. As speech is deemphasized, bodily movements acquire a primary significance. Even if there are specific psychological reasons for the SF protagonist's struggle, they are always subordinated to his or her external struggle (with monsters, machines, other humans, aliens, etc.). In this respect, SF films also meet another of Kracauer's requirements: they

do not concentrate on human interactions; instead, their mise-en-scène includes other, nonhuman characters (e.g., the spaceship Event Horizon, rather than a human being, is the main protagonist in the film by the same title).

Having examined the degree to which SF cinema meets the demands of cinematic realism as espoused by proponents of realism such as Kracauer and Bazin, it is necessary to recall that Kracauer's own understanding of realism does not concern only the indexical relationship between film and reality but also, and perhaps to a greater degree, cinema's power to reveal the ideological nature of reality. In the last chapter of his book, he praises cinema for "the reflection of happenings which would petrify us were we to encounter them in real life" (305) and for its power to "pierce the fabric of conventions"(308). The classical realist film is, paradoxically, most likely to conceal reality by trying "to efface all traces of the 'work of the film', making it pass for natural" (Stam 143). A film that prides itself on being unstaged and on representing reality as internally continuous and coherent is far more ideologically suspect than a film that openly defies the need to represent reality (the SF film). In this respect, certain styles of filming that have been privileged by neo-realism or by the time-image cinema of Deleuze—such as the long take—are further from reality than the disparaged element of montage. Reality is not seamless and continuous and the attempt to represent it as such—through long takes--under the pretext of staying faithful to it, is suspect.[23] The same holds true of another privileged element: deep focus cinematography. As Sobchack's analysis of contemporary SF cinema makes clear, there has been an important shift in our experience and understanding of space. To the deflation of space in postmodernity corresponds a shallow cinematography that compresses the temporal life of film objects into an intensified spatiality. The increasing emphasis on the materiality or pure presence of objects in SF cinema contributes to a greater degree of realism as it prevents film objects from being assimilated by the subject's inner life/temporality. From this point of view, Deleuze's concept of realism (influenced by his reading of Bergson) no longer as "a mimetic, analogical adequation between sign and referent, but rather [as] the sensate feel of time, [as] the intuition of lived duration"(Stam 259) fails to live up to the demands of a materialist aesthetics since *the spiritual life of objects consists not in their duration (which is always experienced subjectively) but rather in their intense presence in space.* The more excessive the scenography of a film, the more animated the objects on the screen are with their own "inner life" rather than functioning only as décor. The more excessive the décor—and this is generally the rule in SF cinema—the less decorative it is.

SF cinema adheres to the demands of realism not only on the level of filmic objects—by foregrounding their materiality and autonomy, their freedom from the function of expressing subjective states of mind—but also on the meta-level of the image itself. The materiality of SF cinema is that of objects and their images alike. Not only is the object in SF cinema depsychologized but the image in "post-cinema" (the cinema of CGI effects) becomes de-ontologized: "Digital imaging also leads to the de-ontologization of the Bazinian image. …The image is no longer a copy but rather acquires its own life and dynamism…"(Stam, *Film Theory* 319). The increasing use of digital images in SF cinema reflects a shift in the balance between the two complementary functions of realism as explained by Kracauer himself: the revelation of reality and the liberation of film objects from signification (or, put differently, the truth value of cinematic representation) on one hand, and its autonomy/materiality, on the other hand. With the introduction of CGI effects, SF cinema tipped the balance in favor of the second aspect of cinematic realism. In SF cinema the filmic object becomes doubly alienated: from the necessity of expressing a subjective state of mind as well as from any traces of human labor in its production. Both the thing (e.g., a spaceship) and its representation (the image of the spaceship created with the help of CGI technology) are alienated, autonomous phenomena. By severing its connection to human labor, the image, too, has become thing-like.

It is necessary to reconsider Kracauer's understanding of "realism." Perhaps realism does not presuppose the terminal neutralization of signification for the sake of a purely indexical relation to phenomena, but rather involves the rendering of phenomena indeterminate and indefinite, random and episodic. At different points in the book, Kracauer takes issue with symbolism, surrealism, and the Soviet school of montage because, in one way or another, they all render the phenomenal world symbolic: they oversignify. Kracauer's realism, then, should be approached not as an attack on signification but rather as a warning against oversignification. Realism is defined in negative terms: it is a kind of self-restraint the filmmaker must exercise in the face of oversignification. Realism is possible only as 'a step back' from oversignication. The attempt to be realistic is always circumscribed by the always already present danger of symbolism or montage. The task of cinema is not to strip phenomena from signification but rather to render their signification indeterminate.

Notes

[1] Terry Smith's Introduction to *Impossible Presence* is informed by a quite different understanding of the photogenic: the photogenic does not stand for 'the inner life of things' as captured by the film camera but rather marks the obsession with images that characterizes the postmodern age, "an age which can only see itself as a picture, as if it were an image substituting itself for its own loss of being"(Smith 8). Nevertheless, Smith attempts to see the potential positive side of this "impossible presence," arguing that the image in postmodernity oscillates between viscerality and enervation and that this persistent impossibility of presence constitutes the real today. See particularly 1-39.

[2] Robert Stam, however, tries to free Kracauer's work from its accepted interpretation as a naïve defense of realism. See the section entitled "The Phenomenology of Realism" (72-83) for a discussion of Bazin's and Kracauer's phenomenological theories of cinematic realism.

[3] In "The Imaginary Signifier" Christian Metz draws attention to "the supplementary degree of absence" (424) in cinema (as opposed to theatre): "The cinematic signifier lends itself the better to fiction in that it is itself fictive and 'absent'. …[C]inematic fiction is rather experienced as the quasi-real presence of that unreal itself"(Metz 426).

[4] In contrast, Julius Kagarlitski asserts that the realism of SF lies not so much in the fantastic objects and machines with which it is filled but rather in the internal coherence of a realistic fantasy governed by a single fantastic premise. Thus, between Jules Verne's "fantasy of 'objects'" (34) and Wells' fantasy based on the principle of a single premise, he privileges the latter for "[t]echnology grows old; magic does not" (39). The realism of SF is assured when an image cannot be reduced to a symbol or a thing but preserves a polyvalence of meaning. From this point of view, the fantastic object as a purely material thing is a throwback to an earlier phase in the development of science fiction. Rudolf Schmerl makes a similar point when he argues that the distinguishing mark of the best SF is its fantastic premise rather than fantastic objects, monsters, and machines which are "simply the necessary magic, different in degree but not in kind from Aladdin's lamp or fire-breathing dragons"(Schmerl, "Fantasy as Technique" 110).

[5] Curiously enough, in one of the later chapters in the book the author quotes Robbe-Grillet on his connection to Husserlian phenomenology without, however, noting the obvious conclusion to be drawn from Robbe-Grillet's statements--namely, that included in the idea of "free Variation" is the existence or reality of the object of phenomenological reduction.

[6] All references to Bergson in Abel's Introduction are rather misleading, although it is difficult to tell whether the misinterpretation of the relationship between early French criticism and Bergsonsim should be attributed to Abel or to the early French writers themselves, who often refer to Bergson's writings, especially to *Creative Evolution*. Contrary to what Abel suggests, Bergson was, in fact, critical of cinema, which he found guilty of spatializing time (cinema's notion of time as a bastardized version of duration reduced to a sequence of images) and interrupting the continuity of the material world of images (see *Matter and Memory*).

[7] See Aumont 108-114 for a discussion of realism as just another style with its own conventions. The effect of realism is produced intertextually rather than through a faithful imitation of reality. Realism "owes more to discourse than to the real, hence, it is an effect of the corpus"(Aumont 117).

[8] Yet this is exactly the kind of cinema Artaud was imagining, a cinema that "would operate almost intuitively on the brain"(Artaud in Abel 411).

[9] Robert Stam points out some of the connections between Bazin, Kracauer and Deleuze (the importance of Bergsonian durée, the notion of contingency, etc.) in the section entitled "Just in Time: The Impact of Deleuze" in *Film Theory: An Introduction* 256-262.

[10] See “Epilogue: After the Subject” in Silvio Gaggi’s *From Text to Hypertext: Decentering the Subject in Fiction, Film, the Visual Arts, and Electronic Media* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 141-152. Gaggi discusses the possibility (in fact, the necessity) of a nonhuman relation to the self, our “responsibility to an ‘origin’ that is not yet a ‘subject’”(148). If the subject needs to be deconstructed to reveal the ideological underpinnings of its constitution, then the flattening of space-time can be regarded as a return to a kind of proto-space/time (depsychologized space-time).

[11] Sobchack brings up Fredrick Jameson’s claim that earlier SF films that make use of the new media technologies remain on the level of representing this technology—filling up the screen with computer screens and the screens of video games, but do not really explore the transformations made possible by this technology: these films are “more about the process of reproduction” (SS 79). See Fredric Jameson “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” *New Left Review*, No.146 (July-August): 53:94. As a result of the constantly increasing sophistication of CGI effects, the processes of reproduction or representation are no longer merely the subject matter of contemporary SF films.

[12] Interestingly, the alien in this film—and in many other SF films—is represented as a slimy creature, which stands out against the dark, machinic background of the spaceship and its crew. The alien, in other words, is characterized by a certain surplus of life: it is disgusting because it appears too alive, too organic. Its materiality is due to its fantastic nature which, in turn, consists in its surplus of life.

[13] Even if a human being does interpret the data on the screen, the SF idiom used in this interpretation preserves the data’s opacity, preventing it from remaining simply a message.

[14] Similar to HAL, the paranoid computer in *Space Odyssey 2001*, this computer has a name--“Mother”--and a particular personality.

[15] For instance, Bresson’s tendency to ‘behead’ his subjects cinematically i.e., to shoot them from the head down or from the waist down, purposefully avoiding their face which functions as a proper name, the face embodying what is most human in us. See, for example, *Lancelot de Lac*.

[16] This is also true of the other screens in the film: the little, pocket-size screens/files that store the record of past pre-crimes as well as the screen of the videophone through which Anderton communicates with his boss, Lamar.

[17] Schklovsky, Victor. “Art as Technique” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays.* Trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965. 3-24.

[18] As Robert Stam has observed, there is “an interesting tension in Bazin between the mimetic megalomania of the desire for a total simulacrum of life, and the quiet, self-effacing modesty of his stylistic preferences [his bias for neorealist films]”(Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* 75).

[19] Bazin praises the scene of the maid waking up for representing duration. His implicit bias against action-packed thrillers rests on the assumption that they fail to represent duration. Compare, however, the scene from *Umberto D.* with any of the scenes in *Alien* in which Ripley is running from the alien. The camera moves very fast and obviously these scenes drive the narrative forward. Nevertheless, the suspense that distinguishes this scene from the one in the neo-realist film represents Ripley’s subjective experience of time as she runs for her life. It is not that the neo-realist scene shows us the maid’s life *despite* the fact that nothing is happening; rather, it shows us precisely *that* nothing is happening. The suspense scenes in *Alien* are as good a representation of duration as the scene representing the maid’s subjective experience of routine or repetition in *Umberto D.*

[20] Samuel Delany makes a similar point with respect to SF literature. The most essential aspect of SF literature, he argues, is not its content but the materiality (poetry) of its language: "[A]ny serious discussion of speculative fiction must first stay away from the distracting concept of sf content and examine precisely what sort of word-beast sits before us"(145).

[21] This intentional primitivism seems to be particularly characteristic of *dystopic* SF films such as *Brazil*, *12 Monkeys*, *The Matrix.*

[22] The paucity of human dialogue is compensated by the 'speech' of computer screens. Different screens emit sounds of different intensity, duration, and pitch.

[23] See Jacques Aumont's *Aesthetics of Film* (52-67) for a critique of Bazin's obsession with continuity and rejection of montage. Bazin, and Deleuze after him, seem to think that only the continuous is ambiguous, whereas the breaking of the flow of life into segments (montage) assigns specific meanings to those segments.

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