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New Grand Narratives—The Metaphysical Worldview of *Avatar* and *Cloud Atlas*

Josef Früchtl

Abstract
Referring to the films *Avatar* (2009) and *Cloud Atlas* (2012), the author will demonstrate that a new era of metaphysical holism follows Postmodernism. These films celebrate a resurrection of the flesh with 3-D technology and a reincarnation of souls with the aesthetic technique of morphing. However apocalyptic their visions of the future might be, and however much they might seem to worship technical megalomania, they are also and again conveying a resounding ethical message and a taste of Utopia.

Key Words
cultural theory, film, holism, metaphysics, Postmodernism

1. Post-Postmodernism

We remember it well. It all started in 1979 with a text entitled, *La condition postmoderne*, written by Jean-François Lyotard. It was this text that gave Postmodernism an ambiguous status that it has never really been able to since shake off, a status somewhere between a buzzword and a concept. As a concept, it appears as a linguistically expressed unit for a plurality of phenomena. As a buzzword, it expresses no more than a general humming or murmuring and, for precisely this reason, is able to function falsely as a universal key to all manner of doors. As Lyotard mentioned in the first lines of his text, the word was already in use in the late 1970s, having crystallized in the American literary criticism of the late 1950s and gained tentative popularity within the context of 1970s architecture. As a criterion to distinguish between Modernism and Postmodernism, Lyotard introduced the term "grand narrative" or "meta-narrative." Accordingly, whereas Modernism primarily draws upon three of these grand narratives, "dialectics of spirit," "hermeneutics of meaning," and "emancipation of the rational or working subject," Postmodernism distances itself from these legitimation strategies. Lyotard also noted here, however, that this definition of Postmodernism is only viable when "simplifying to the extreme."[1]

For more than two decades, Postmodernism has defined the cultural discussion as a concept and a buzzword. Hardly anyone would disagree that the above-mentioned grand narratives have, indeed, lost their powers of legitimation or, at least, had their powers weakened. Yet, at the same time, neither would they disagree that, on the one hand, new grand narratives have replaced the old and, on the other hand, certain meta-narratives have never ceased to have an impact in the cause of classical metaphysics. At this point we need only to remind ourselves of the latest manifestations in the to-and-fro of philosophical theory, "New Realism" and "Speculative Materialism," patently intended in the Post-

Postmodernist generation to satisfy a need to return to something concrete, something real, even a thing-in-itself amongst all the endless symbolic chains of signs. In the English-speaking world, in other words, the analytical philosophy of the present, metaphysics is also hugely popular as a response to questions with a maximum degree of generalization.[2] In addition, it was inevitable that Postmodernism had to establish itself as a meta-narrative if it was going to be successful. As Lyotard himself says, its emphasis on the plurality of types of discourse or, to quote Wittgenstein, "language games," takes its lead from the "general rule" or meta-narrative: "let us play...and let us play in peace."[3]

New grand narratives are also emerging in the areas of literature and film. If, as I shall do in the following, one restricts oneself to film, then here it is true that cinema experts and film critics have never really felt at ease with the term "Postmodernism." While in Germany the discussion has been riddled with corresponding "aversions," in the U.S. the opposite has been the case. There, *film studies* have been dominated by Postmodern thinking to such an extent that it "tends to hinder the precise examination of cinematic objects rather than promote it."[4]

Since the mid-1990s, however, the situation has changed conspicuously. Postmodernism is out. Instead, focus is once more on the whole, with totality reinstated as an honorable term. And this has also meant the unforeseen return of metaphysics with proclaimed "postmetaphysical thinking" and worldviews influenced by popular philosophy.[5] I would like to speak about this phenomenon with the aid of two fairly recent films, *Avatar* (2009) and *Cloud Atlas* (2012). If general conclusions were permissible, a new era of metaphysical holism could be proclaimed. And even at the level of cinematic theorization, religious-metaphysical claims can still be heard. For cinema is celebrating a resurrection of the flesh with 3-D technology and a reincarnation of souls with the aesthetic technique of morphing. However apocalyptic its visions of the future might be, and however much it might seem to worship technical megalomania, it is also and again conveying a resounding ethical message and a taste of Utopia.

2. Avatar and the resurrection of the flesh

Digital technology has perfected cinema into what it was intended to be from the outset: an imagination realization machine. The latest outstanding example of this is *Avatar*. Its plot is quickly related.

Jake Sully, a former U.S. soldier, is on his way to a planet bearing the allusive name "Pandora," well known to us from Greek mythology. He is undertaking this mission in the place of his twin brother, a scientist who has died. Since the two brothers share the same genes, the one brother can seemingly take over from the other brother. This metaphor is misplaced, however, because Jake has been paralyzed from the hips down and confined to a wheelchair since his wartime deployment. His brother had been working for a concern (the RDA) that went to Pandora to mine a sought-after raw material with the ironically telling name of *unobtainium*, in other words, something beyond reach. The planet is similar to Earth but the indigenous

humanoid species, the so-called Na'vi, phenotypically a blue-skinned cross between a predatory cat and a human being, and the plants, trees and animals are all much larger. Also, their habitat is as dense as a tropical rainforest, and just a few minutes in its atmosphere is enough to poison human beings not wearing oxygen masks.

The team of scientists is on a mission to make contact with the indigenous people and persuade them to leave their home so that the RDA will be free to exploit the raw material. In order to make this contact, artificial Na'vi bodies have been created, so-called *avatars*, that can be controlled as soon as they are matched to a human brain. Scientists then have power over the thought transfer process. The real human body is placed in a kind of sarcophagus while its personal identity is transferred to one of these artificial bodies.[6] For Jake, this is a liberating experience because he can now feel his legs again, run around as much as he likes and, standing upright, dig his toes into the soft soil.

Out working in the forest, Jake manages to lose contact with the scientific team. A Na'vi warrior and daughter of the Na'vi chieftain, Neytiri, could easily kill him but decides not to at the last minute when she notices a divine sign from nature, a kind of plankton hovering through the air in the shape of a small, transparent, fluorescent jellyfish. After some hesitation, the Na'vi decide to accept the stranger into their circle and get to know him and his species better. For the same reason, the human beings also decide that Jake should seize this opportunity. The military, which calls the Na'vi "blue monkeys" (an allusion to the musical film *The Wizard of Oz* from 1939), is particularly interested in spying on the indigenous population and learning more about it. Thus Jake becomes an agent, officially for the scientists, but unofficially for the military.

He learns the language of the Na'vi and participates in their rituals. He learns to shoot with a bow and arrow, to ride horses and, finally, and the high point of his socialization process and also a stereoscopic visual climax for the audience, to tame a flying lizard and take it on hunting trips through the skies. He and Neytiri become a couple. But the situation escalates when the RDA and the military ultimately opt for violence and crush the Na'vi habitat with their bombastic arsenal of firearms. This is the deciding moment, also for Jake. He defects, and becomes the leader of a successful resistance movement. In the end, only one step remains to be taken, and that is to leave behind his human body for good and lose himself completely in his artificial body, his avatar. He manages this step as well and becomes a Na'vi.

So much for the story. Viewed with the detachment of cultural scientific analysis, it is not difficult to identify narrative patterns intertwined with Western, but not only Western, culture. Firstly, we have the pattern of integration in or, with a more critical accent, colonization of cultures, popularly known as the so-called Pocahontas motif. Pocahontas, the daughter of an Indian chief, is said to have acted in the early seventeenth century as a mediator between the Indians of Virginia and the English colonists. According to one legend started by the colonists themselves, she saved the life of an English captain she had fallen in love with when her tribe tried to kill him.[7] In cinema, the Pocahontas motif is constantly being

rejuvenated. In the past twenty years, there has been a Walt Disney animation of the story (1995) and, as an intellectual counterpart, a film adaptation by the philosopher amongst film directors (or, in Heideggerian terms, the poet-philosopher), Terrence Malick (*The New World*, 2005). Kevin Kostner used the same motif in *Dances With Wolves* (1990). Against this background, a cinema critic writing about *Avatar* was therefore justified in mocking, "Here's the basic story in one sentence: *Dances With Wolves* on another planet, and the Indians win."[8]

The Pocahontas story is interwoven with a narrative pattern that is no less significant, that of the white savior. Accordingly, indigenous peoples (in other words, colonial victims) need a man of white race in order to be victorious in their battles against this very race. Thus, they have the choice between two types of cultural imperialism, cruel or benevolent, but they will never be more than supporting actors in the bid for white self-admiration.[9] In *Avatar*, Jake rises to become the leader of all the native tribes at the precise moment when he manages what no one has managed since the days of yore, namely to ride on an enormous flying lizard. The gender perspective throws a conciliatory light on the white male hero, however. Our saviour is a Catholic one, so to speak, in that without the woman by his side, he would be nothing.[10]

The most obvious narrative pattern in *Avatar*, however, is that of the artificial human being. This pattern, to recall Lyotard, can be analyzed as the intersection of three grand narratives in Western culture: Christian religion, the natural sciences, and bourgeois anthropology.[11] Tales of artificial human beings are attractive in our culture because the creation of such a being simultaneously has the appeal of the divinely forbidden, is a project of scientific self-assurance, and allows the male sex to dream about self-creation. This pattern is omnipresent in the films of James Cameron, the director of *Avatar*. His admiration and interest are entirely geared towards what non-human creatures are capable of, whether they be cyborgs (*The Terminator*, 1984 and 1991), aliens (*Aliens*, 1986) or, now, avatars. Formulated another way, the films reveal a lasting desire "to leave the flesh of *Homo sapiens* behind for something stronger and tougher."[12]

In *Avatar*, anti- and trans-humanistic desire shows itself in different ways. For example, the colors of the human world are fairly monotonous grays and blues, whereas the Na'vi world is resplendent. At the plot level, the human being dies at the moment he reawakens as a humanoid creature, an anthropoid. On his birthday, Jake goes to the tree of souls, the holiest place for the Na'vi, a kind of lofty weeping willow whose branch-like formations shine like light-conducting cables. The tree grants access to that divine power of nature that the Na'vi call "Eywa." In a ceremony accompanied by prayer, singing, and rhythmic body movements, Jake's human body is laid out next to his avatar. The fine roots of the mossy soil wrap around his body like fine hairs. Glowing plankton floats down once more: the seeds from the tree of souls. Guided by the camera, we slowly approach the face of the avatar until it fills the screen. Its eyes open. The new Jake is born. The film ends as it began, with an awakening. While it is disappointing at the beginning when the semi-paralyzed man was dreaming he

could fly, this is not the case with the final awakening. Jake had good reasons for his decision to renounce the old Adam.

This choice in *Avatar* has been criticized as an escape from reality that is typical of its time. Whereas its cinematic role model, *The Wizard of Oz*, has its main figure learn that "there's no place like home," Jake learns that his previous home is a world in demise. He learns that *this* reality is *dispensable*,[13] and that what human beings call reality is only one of several possible options. The ontology for which *Avatar* pleads is physical-materialistic and holistic. Here, the philosophy of posthumanism and the Christian theology of resurrection undergo a surprising cross-connection. Their message is that of the *posthumanistic resurrection of the flesh.* Accordingly, the old Adam is not to be saved. Salvation does not lie in the decay of the body and the continued existence of the soul either, however. Far more, salvation is to be found in a new, different body. Here, a posthumanistic legacy of Christian theology continues to have an effect, a legacy that ranges from Nietzsche's doctrine of the *Übermensch* and Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism" to Althusser's (Marxist-structuralistic) and Foucault's (poststructuralistic) antihumanism to Deleuze's vision of a new vitalism and the variants of so-called New Materialism.[14] To this extent, Cameron's *Avatar* provides the updated version of Luca Signorelli's mural from the Cathedral of Orvieto. Its resurrection is, quite literally, one of the body, but it is no longer one which belongs to the realm of humanity.

Admittedly, the resurrection of the flesh does not only take place on the cinema screen. It is also performed in the cinema or at home in the living room. All that one requires is a pair of those dark plastic glasses that represent the modest technical counterpart to stereoscopic recording technology. 3-D glasses are, of course, an easily available prosthesis, only one small and amusing step along the path towards a new, further developed human being that one day will be technologically transformed. But our fascination with this (newer, technically perfected) 3-D cinema is about the *intensity*, in other words, the *degree of reality* of this heightened cinema experience.[15] To this extent, this new type of cinema can be viewed without exaggeration as a precursor to anthropological transformation. The cinematic experience, indeed experience at all, is impossible without immersion. 3-D cinema, specifically the one recently enhanced, perfects this experience. As long as we are unable to immerse ourselves in a new body, we instead immerse ourselves in an artificially created world with the aid of glasses.[16]

The second aspect of the ontology found in *Avatar* is that of natural philosophical and metaphysical *holism*. For the Na'vi, nature is namely an inspirited totality, with the tree of souls being its most visible symbol. It functions like an organic storage platform where information and memories can be up- and downloaded. It even facilitates communication with the dead. For scientists from the terrestrial world this sounds fantastic, in both senses of the word, as unreal as it is magnificent, as crazy as it is wonderful. In the words of the team leader (played by Sigourney Weaver with the same resolute manner familiar from the *Aliens* films), "There is some kind of electrochemical communication between the roots of

the trees, like the synapses between neurons … That's more connections than the human brain … It's a network – a global network." The idea that there could be a planet with nature organized analogously to the human brain, that (in apparent ethical generalization) nature could be organized like the human brain at all—this is an idea that, understandably, fascinates the realm of science.[17] And philosophy, not only that of so-called posthumanism in this case, but also of rationalism, at least in the variation associated with Spinoza. His general metaphysical theory, as we know, was that reality does not, as claimed by Descartes, consist of two substances (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*, ultimately held together by a third substance, namely God) but of a single, infinite substance, which Spinoza calls "deus sive natura." His metaphysical monism is the philosophical role model for the holistic worldview in *Avatar,* even if the ecology and New Age movements from the 1970s are more obvious.

A philosophical differentiation must certainly be made between *monism* and *holism.* Spinoza is usually viewed as representing monism but in more recent decades his most influential interpreter, Gilles Deleuze, was able to reinstate it philosophically. This was partly because he forcefully reinterpreted the monistic principle according to a theory of difference, reading Spinoza through the eyes of Nietzsche, so to speak. Being is "univocal," meaning it is the same for all differences or modalities, "but these modalities are not the same."[18] The term that, according to Deleuze and also for Spinoza, is central to dissolving this paradoxical relationship, , is that of 'expression.'[19] Substance is namely expressed in its attributes, thought, and extension, and the attributes are, in turn, expressed in the modes dependent on them. Each mode or, in other words, each individual appearance of a physical-extended or mental kind, has both attributes. Each matter, for example, a tree or a stone, thus has a spiritual side. Everything is inspirited. However, since we are limited in our intellectuality, we cannot perceive this panpsychism. Deleuze does not hesitate in declaring the rationalist Spinoza a representative of "transcendental empiricism" or, in other words, of a philosophy that replaces a being identifiable in statements with a being of associations, conjunctions, and relations, that is, "thinking with *et* not *est*," whereby in this context the irony lies in the fact that almost only "Englishmen and Americans" think that way.[20] In this sense, Deleuze represents a *hypothetical holism* on the philosophical basis of an *imaginary* coupling of Spinoza and Nietzsche, a holism which then celebrates itself in the coupling orgies of the *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), in the philosophical concept of the "rhizome" (1976) and a "body without organs."[21]

For Deleuze, holism is therefore a hypothetically conceived, paradoxical synthesis of monism and pluralism.[22] By this he means a metaphysical and natural philosophical principle, according to which organic and an organic nature are not deemed to be a mechanistically explicable realm of isolated bodies and things but internally, with their own composite parts, and externally, with the environment, interacting forms of being.[23] In the case of *Avatar*, this principle naturally presents itself in a popularized form, we are talking about a mainstream Hollywood film, after all, and not an academic book from Oxford or Paris,but that does not mean we cannot

take it seriously.

3. Cloud Atlas and the reincarnation of the souls

Holism is also the philosophical-metaphysical theme of *Cloud Atlas*. However, it is finer, more rhizomatic, so to speak. *Cloud Atlas* is not science fiction but a multi-genre film that also has a science fiction part. It includes six different parts in total each with its own genre: a seafaring adventure film set against the political background of the slave trade in the mid-nineteenth century; a love story and artistic drama set in the mid-1930s; a political thriller involving atomic energy set in the 1970s; a comedy about a publisher locked up in an old people's home set in present-day Great Britain; a science fiction film set in (neo) Seoul in the twenty-second century; and, finally, a fantasy film set another two hundred years later, which brings together a high-tech civilization and an archaic life form. The crucial question is obviously how all of these parts can be linked in some way to create a unity out of multiplicity.

The original novel by David Mitchell answers this question relatively simply. It tells the six stories one after the other but each one only halfway through, adding the second halves in a reverse chronology. It thus begins with the story from 1848, stops halfway through, jumps to the story from 1936, stops again and so on through the remaining stories. Chronologically, the zenith is the last story from 2321. This one is told in both its halves, all the way through to the end, before the other stories are then also each told to the end in reverse order.[24] Beyond this formal structure, it also employs internal references. Persons from one story play a role in the next. A diary or some love letters from one story are found in another. Each of the protagonists in the six stories also has a birthmark that looks like a comet, an almost blatant symbol of reincarnation, an idea that runs through both the novel and the film.

Also blatant are some linking epigrams, such as: "Our lives are not our own. From womb to tomb, we are bound to others. Past and present. And by each crime and every kindness, we birth our future." Holism thus receives a social, historical and, beyond these, political accent when replying to the defeatist prognosis, "No matter what you do it will never amount to anything more than a single drop in a limitless ocean," both rhetorically and tellingly: "What is an ocean but a multitude of drops?"

The situation becomes far more complicated in the film because here the construction is not a relatively small number of chapters. Instead, the film breaks down the different sections to such an extent that a schematic, fixed structure is no longer recognizable. There are still the six stories and cross-references between the six, but in the film the *kaleidoscopic* principle wrapping the stories around an axis of symmetry is no longer realized tangibly but in a purely *aesthetic* manner and, as a result, infinitely more sophistically. The many shattered pieces, both smaller and larger fragments, emerge in a moving, symmetrical, kaleidoscopic pattern that achieves its own equilibrium. To use a different comparison, we are reminded of Piet Mondrian's compositions with their coloured rectangular forms. The symmetry that is present in the film is

therefore, in more precise terms, the imaginary result of a rhythmic and dynamic order. The most obvious comparison, however, is with Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie Woogie" (1942/43), for *Cloud Atlas* is enormously musical in its construction. There is an admirable amount of sensitivity to rhythm and momentum in the film, almost as if the makers, primarily Tom Tykwer, wished to make a cineastic reference to the "girl with kaleidoscope eyes" from the song by the Beatles, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds."[25]

A short version of this constructional principle is provided by the film's opening sequence. An old man is sitting by a fire under a night sky of stars or the Milky Way. It is Zachry (Tom Hanks), a goatherd and simple man, in 2321. He tells of the first time he and the Devil, whom he colloquially calls "old Georgie," met "eye to eye." The narrating voice changes. It is now that of a young man, a traveller in the South Pacific in 1849. Chronologically we have therefore jumped from the last to the first story. For the first time, this young man meets the doctor who will later give him poison instead of medicine in order to get at his money. This doctor is also played by Tom Hanks. The linking of the two scenes suggests that this doctor from 1849 is the Devil of whom the goatherd will speak or spoke to in 2321.

Since the doctor and the goatherd, the Devil and his adversary, are played by the same person, it is hard to know what to make of these associations. At the precise moment when the doctor looks into the young man's eyes, the film cuts to the 1970s and the story of a young reporter (Halle Berry) who has uncovered an atomic energy scandal and put her own life in danger. This is chronologically the third story. But before it can develop any further, a male narrator can be heard once again and we are transported, carried by background music and the tapping keys of a typewriter, into another story, that of an aging publisher (Jim Broadbent) in Great Britain, in 2012, who is busy writing his memoirs in this scene. This means we are already at the end of his story, story number 4.

We then go back in time again, this time to the 1930s. The name of the man we have just heard the reporter utter, Sixsmith, is now uttered by a young man, a composer, who has just written him a letter, a suicide note. On the desk in front of him there are music scores headed, "The Cloud Atlas Symphony" and "The Cloud Atlas Sextet." The young man is about to shoot himself. The story leading up to this suicide will be presented to the viewers later on. This story, number 2, has therefore also begun at its end. At the moment when the young man releases the safety catch on his revolver, a (dividing) cut and a (linking) clicking sound transport us into the next story, story no. 5. Handcuffs are being placed around the wrists of a young woman dressed entirely in white and sitting opposite a man dressed in black. An interrogation. We find ourselves in Neo-Seoul in the twenty-second century.

The film then runs through all the stories one more time in a relatively rapid, albeit different sequence (stories 3 and 4, then 1, 5 and 2). Before the young composer takes his own life, an abrupt cut takes us to the meta-level of the film. The title, "Cloud Atlas," appears. Now the briefly introduced and intertangled narratives can unfold.

Cloud Atlas plays quite openly with the idea of reincarnation, familiar to us from the Hindu and Buddhist religions and philosophies.[26] But I would like to stress here that it is only *playing*. Looking at the individual stories, it is certainly possible to establish that their characters are "one-dimensional," the moral of the story "crude" and that the "overly complicated plot puzzle" is intended to draw a veil over this deficit.[27] Particularly with a view to the technical art form of cinema, one can add that, once again, all we have here is the "exhibition" of a cinema that "'morphs' ideas through pictures and actions" but results only in a half-baked mixture of esotericism, Sunday school and semi-digested nuggets of philosophy."[28] Nevertheless, *Cloud Atlas* also provides unadulterated evidence of that old Aristotelian thesis constantly being updated by philosophers, namely that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. For it contains very much not only parts, but also and especially relationships among them.

In the case of *Cloud Atlas*, these relationships are governed by an aesthetic, kaleidoscopic principle that is directed not at the six stories themselves but at individual scenes from them. It is a film of *scenic groupings* on the basis of a *morphing* technique. Links between scenes are accordingly produced through a third, interspersed image or, more generally, a common visual or acoustic element. This might be a voiceover, a musical theme, a sound (such as the clicking of a revolver or of handcuffs), a sound combined with two different, yet similar images (you can, for example, see and hear a hand knocking at a wooden door, which then opens onto a different story), or finally, the playing of different roles by one and the same actor or actress, even across different sexes and races. Last, but not least, the film, like the novel, is characterized by an ironic undertone. The devout earnestness with which some figures propound tenets from the broad reservoir of metaphysical-religious holism is thwarted by other figures uttering statements such as, "far too hippie-druggy-new age."[29] At the end it even becomes clear that the film has also been a bedtime story for children, as we, the viewers, are shown that old Zachry has been telling his story not only to us but also to a group of children gathered around him.

4. Cultural diagnosis and hypothesis game

At the beginning of this essay I included a reminder about the postmodern theory of the demise of grand narratives. By way of contrast, films like *Avatar* and *Cloud Atlas*, and at this point it is also imperative to include *The Tree of Life* by Terrence Malick (2011), no longer display the slightest bashfulness in unfolding their stories against a background of grand narrative theories.[30] In cultural diagnostic terms, these films are therefore certainly significant. They help us to name, or at least find one name for, the age succeeding Postmodernism.

For *Cloud Atlas*, however, the status of grand narrative theory can be relativized. The ironic particles embedded in the film and its aesthetic constructional principle, which can be described using the terms kaleidoscope and morphing, mean that it can be linked to a master of Postmodernist thought and writing, namely Jacques Derrida. His program, metaphysics, the idea of the one replaced by pluralistic dissolution, bringing forth several simultaneous texts through interpretation and

style of writing, finds a worthy cineastic successor in *Cloud Atlas*. To this extent *Cloud Atlas* is perhaps a Post-Postmodern film in the best sense, Postmodern in its structure, but Post-Postmodern in its grand metaphysical narrative. Independent from this, however, it demonstrates that *metaphysical holism* can be justified provisionally and, with relish, *aesthetically*. Of course in science, and especially in philosophy, we must not forget that even an obscure, completely contra-intuitive view can, in time, prove to be a fruitful hypothesis. The hypothesis of metaphysical holism can therefore continue to hope for empirical reinforcement.[31]

In the interim, this hypothesis can receive support in the aesthetic context. Metaphysical holism is here dependent on a *semantic* holism, however. Semantics jumps in, so to speak, as a justificatory authority in metaphysical matters. It can only bring this justification, of course, in an analogizing sense. (In a symbolic system A is to B what C is to D in a metaphysical system). In the context of aesthetics, semantics can emerge as a justificatory authority because here it presents itself *as* a holistic system. In a work of art (a holistic-semantic system), or a film claiming to be highly aesthetic, such as *Cloud Atlas*, it can then appear *as if* "being" were only another word for "connectedness," to such an extent that evidence for this semblance is acknowledged to exist. We enjoy ourselves in aesthetic play with a hypothesis. To put it slightly differently, if, as in the case of nature or the universe, we find ourselves facing a phenomenon to which we attribute not only relative and thus scientifically calculable greatness or power but also absolute, incomparable greatness or power, then, in Kant's terminology, we can call this "sublime," in Schleiermacher's, "God" or, in Tugendhat's, something that can only be experienced "mystically."[32] Mysticism, religion, and aesthetics compete with each other for metaphysical supremacy and it seems clear to me which of the three we, as the grandchildren of Modernism, should give precedence to.[33]

Avatar, in contrast, shows no trace of this aesthetic holism. Instead of aesthetic construction, the film relies on, first, technological invention, namely 3-D cinema, and, secondly, on an ambiguous narrative, equally dowdy and renewable. The technologically perfected cinema of immersion becomes an *ethical model* for our relationship with nature. It opens up a perspective on nature as a para-intelligent hyperorganism, networking itself according to the pattern of neuronal structures, and thus interfaces an ethics of affiliation, a *mimetically-communicative ethics*. Behind this is, of course, a *technological utopia.* The same technology that until now has destroyed nature exploitatively and stripped it of its ability to symbolize a supernatural order could make way for a more subtle, more sophisticated, unimaginably "more intelligent" technology.

Nobody familiar with the factual, detached, clarifying and enlightening power of reasonable thought will claim that the way of life of the native-Americans or African tribes could provide a social model for the future. But this way of life does have an anamnetic and maybe even heuristic value in that it reminds us that what we call nature, or life, or reality, or being, could actually be structured in a different way from what

we have assumed to date. What at first appears to be theoretical nonsense or provocation can, in fact, lead anywhere, we just do not know where. Compared to all the supersized, roaring, clattering machines and stomping steel robots (in which military masculinity can have a field day) this equally trivial and evident allegory of destructive technology in *Avatar* allows us once more to visualize that it is easy to prefer the refined, filigree, and more sophisticated technology of the so-called primitives. Lyotard's postmodernism and its corresponding concept of an avant-garde art of the sublime was anti-utopian. In contrast, the new holistic worldview returns to an ethical and implicitly utopian core: everything *ought* to be connected and interactive!

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Endnotes

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[1] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. xxiii & xxiv.

[2] "On New Realism and Speculative Materialism" cf. Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism. Essays and Lectures* (Winchester, UK/Washington, USA, 2010); Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, eds., *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, (Melbourne, 2011); Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude. Essais sur la nécessité de la contingence* (Paris, 2006); Markus Gabriel, *Warum es die Welt nicht gibt* (Berlin, 2013); Mauricio Ferraris, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo* (Roma) 2012; on English-speaking philosophy of the present cf. Ronald Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Harvard University Press, 2011); Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford University Press, 2012); finally, I would like to include the religious-philosophical works of Richard Swinburne, as well as Robert Nozick's *Philosophical Explanations* (Harvard University Press, 1981).

[3] Jean-Francois Lyotard, in discussion with Jean-Pierre Dubost, the sentence could also be translated as: "Let *them* play … and let us play in peace."

[4] Andreas Rost, "Einleitendes zu den vielfältigen Erscheinungsformen postmoderner Geister", in Andreas Rost & Mike Sandbothe, eds., *Die Filmgespenster der Postmoderne* (Frankfurt/M.) 1998, p. 11 (translations SLK); on research literature cf. p. 9, comment 2; cf. also the contribution by David Bordwell, "Postmoderne und Filmkritik: Bemerkungen zu einigen endemische Schwierigkeiten", pp. 29-39, esp. p. 31.

[5] For example, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical* Essays, (MIT Press, 1994), esp. Ch. I., Habermas describes as metaphysical that period of thought that extends historically from Plato to Hegel, and that systematically incorporates the following three aspects: identity (reference of all-ness to one-ness), doctrine of ideas (equality of being and thinking) and the soteriological significance of a theoretical-philosophical lifestyle (strong concept of theory).

[6] A similar idea was presented in 1999 in the film *Matrix*, in which directors Andy and Lana Wachowksi revolutionized the science fiction genre with new camera techniques and visual effects.

[7] Klaus Theweleit interprets this legend, like those of Medea and Cleopatra, as an ideological expression of conquering. By reshaping it as a love story, the act of violence is suppressed and thus romanticized as a legend, as a collective myth (cf. Klaus Theweleit, *Pocahontas 1. Pocahontas in Wonderland. Shakespeare on Tour* (Frankfurt/M., 1999); *Pocahontas 2. Buch der Königstöchter. Von Göttermännern und Menschenfrauen. Mythenbildung, vorhomerisch, amerikanisch* (Frankfurt/M., 2013).

[8] Jeffrey Weiss, "Politics and Religion on Pandora: Why *Avatar* is crummy allegory," in: *Politics Daily*. www.politicsdaily.com/2009/12/21.

[9] David Brooks, "The Messiah Complex," *The New York Times* (January 7, 2010).

[10] Neytiri starts off by calling Jake a "baby," disturbing the animals of the jungle and the entire natural world with his wild carryings-on. She takes him under her wing, reluctantly at first but then lovingly, adopting him like a replacement mother in order to bring him up in her world. Ultimately she saves his life twice, in the avatar world and in the human world. In his avatar body she keeps him safe from certain death in the final showdown with the (stereotypically) brutal Marines colonel. And she saves him in his human body, as the man in the transmission sarcophagus, by putting an oxygen mask over his face. In this scene, she sees him in his human form, in other words, his physical helplessness, for the first time. It is a touching scene in which she, two and a half meters tall, rocks him in her arms like a mother with an infant. In both the old and the new life, the woman is the savior of the male hero.

[11] Cf. Josef Früchtl, *The Impertinent Self. A Heroic History of Modernity*, transl. by Sarah L. Kirkby (Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 195.

[12] Daniel Mendelsohn, "The Wizard," in *The New York Review* (March 25, 2010), p. 12.

[13] Mendelsohn, "The Wizard", *loc.cit.*, p. 13. The message imparted by *The Wizard of Oz* in the friendly tones of a musical is currently closer, albeit in an utterly sober form, to that imparted by *Gravity*, the 2013 film by Alfonso Cuarón, which one year later was to receive Oscars in seven different categories, including, quite rightly, best visual effects and best camera work. This film ends with the return of an astronaut

from a space odyssey. At last she is able to stand on Earth on her own two feet again. Earth, the place where we as human beings belong, not space, which is a black, infinite hole filled with junk on an aimless trajectory. *Avatar* is different: Jake also delightedly digs his long strong toes into the earthy soil on his first excursion as an avatar, but it is the soil of Pandora, and they are the toes of an artificial body that he is later to accept forever. He, too, has found the earth he wishes to call home.

[14] On posthumanism, cf. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (The University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modernity: Crossings, Energetics, and Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 2001), *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010); Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding How Matter Comes to Matter," in *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Spring 2003); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," in Coole and Frost, eds., *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1-43.

As I see it, in Catholic theology there are at least two major opposing traditions,: that which can be traced back to Augustine and, leaning on the Greek-Platonic dualism of body and soul, grasps resurrection as the restitution of the body; and that which can be traced back to Thomas Aquinas ("anima forma corporis" / "the soul is the form of the human body"), according to which "just as the soul is on the one hand defined by matter, so on the other the body is defined by the soul: body, and certainly the identical body, is what the soul builds as its physical-corporeal expression." (Josef Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, *Eschatologie – Tod und ewiges Leben, Kleine katholische Dogmatik*. Vol. IX, (Regensburg, 1977), p. 126, cf. also 125; our own translation). "The substance of man, the person, remains" / "Das Wesentliche des Menschen, die Person, bleibt" (Josef Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum, Vorlesungen über das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis*, (München, 1977), 3rd edition, p. 262, cf. also 259; our own translation).

[15] Since 2006, digital recording and playback technology have facilitated a significantly improved immersion effect; prior to that, the 3-D effect was often experienced as irritating and thus almost the opposite of immersive.

[16] *Avatar* goes beyond this, aiming at a technologically perfected picture of cinema itself. The *crossing-over* of the main male character stands not only for an anthropological utopia, but also for a cineastic one. Accordingly, the cinema of the future is that of digital perfection, no longer having to react to the contingencies of the set, indisposed actors, erratic lighting conditions, and so forth. The cinema of the future is, seen in terms of aesthetic production, a cinema of absolute control and, it must be said, a frequently successful, production of realism from absolute artificiality.

An impressive example of this is *Life of Pi* (Ang Lee, 2012). And we can also add, of course, from the Lacanian perspective of Zizek, that not even this cinema will manage to conquer "the

real" and enable us to forget the corresponding traumatic wound (cf. Jeffrey Sconce, in: http://ludicdespair.blogspot.nl/2010/01/avatard.html). One thing, at least, is obvious in the case of *Avatar*, and that is that the formal absolute claim to control of this cinema contradicts the uncontrollability of holistically perceived being.

[17] In plant biology there has long been a discussion about whether terms like "intelligence" or "behavior" can be applied to plants. Stefano Mancuso, Director of the International Laboratory for Plant Neurobiology in Florence, answers this question in the affirmative (and is attacked for it by colleagues, sometimes vehemently). He is, at least, able to explain plausibly why it is difficult to find terms other than anthropomorphic ones. Roots in the ground grow towards sources of nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorus, or potassium. What is the basis for this if not a type of decision? Mancuso also examines whether plants exhibit a sensorium enabling them to perceive sounds. Various experiments have been performed, such as one demonstrating that the roots of corn plants, when hung in water, will choose to grow towards sounds transmitted (between 200 and 300 Hertz) from a certain direction. (However, the claim that plants prefer classical music to rock music, as maintained by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird in the 1970s, is now believed to be nonsense.) What, additionally, makes plants highly interesting in the age of the internet is the fact that they have no "command center" at their disposal (cf. interview with Stefano Mancuso, in *NRC Handelsblad* v. 15.11.2014).

In philosophy, it was really only a question of time until, after animals, plants were also rescued from their lowly status compared to human beings and attributed moral respect, or even rights. Michael Marder: *Plant Thinking. A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (Columbia University Press, 2013) recently completed this step very decidedly. He adheres to the tradition of the *pensiore debole* of Gianni Vattimo, that of deconstructivism, and, setting the tone for both traditions, of Heidegger. From this standpoint, he speaks of a "vegetal existentiality, referring to the time, freedom, and wisdom of plants" (p. 90). Following the deconstruction model, Marder attempts to demonstrate that, and how a privileged concept (such as that of the human being) is persecuted by the very thing it excludes. The apparently lowest form of life, plant life, proves itself to be the condition governing the viability of the so-called highest form, the human form. Marder's philosophy of the vegetal also has, however, a clear political, anticapitalist orientation, aimed against the complex of agricultural science and industry.

Other members of the *critical plant studies* circle are Matthew Hall who wrote *Plants as Persons. A Philosophical Botany* (SUNY Press, 2011); and Richard Doyle who wrote *Darwin's Pharmacy. Sex, Plants, and the Evolution of the Noosphere* (University of Washington Press, 2011). The following book has just been published in the Netherlands: Th.C.W. Oudemans, *Plantaardig. Vegetatieve filosofie*, in *samenwerking met N.G.J. Peeters* (Zeist, 2014). Although the book does not present itself as intending to popularize, it is written very plainly, with little conceptual complexity. Darwin, "the greatest naturalist of all time" (*de grootste naturalist aller tijden*, p. 12) is quite

clearly its inspiration. For Oudeman, terms such as "decision," "intelligence," etc., reminiscent of Kant's restriction of teleology to a subjective principle of our thinking, have, on the one hand, an "as-if meaning" (*alsof-betekenis*, p. 9); on the other hand, the human within plants is to be more than just a reflection principle.

[18] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, transl. by Paul Patton (Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 35. On the reception of Spinoza in French and English-language analytical philosophy since the 1960s, cf. Michael Hampe / Ursula Renz / Robert Schnepf, "Einleitung: Spinozas *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrate*," in Michael Hampe / Robert Schnepf (ed.), *Baruch de Spinoza. Ethik* (Berlin 2006), p. 11.

[19] Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza and the Problem of Expression in Philosophy* (French or., 1968).

[20] Gilles Deleuze, *Dialoge*, mit Claire Parnet, trans. by Bernd Schwibs (Frankfurt/M. 1980), pp. 63-64 (my translation).

[21] For Deleuze hypotheses are formed, as they frequently are in other sciences, through imagination.

[22] Biologist and natural philosopher Adolf Meyer-Abich characterized holism in the same way, albeit with the attribute "dialectical" instead of "paradoxical," cf. his *Naturphilosophie auf neuen Wegen* (Stuttgart, 1948), p. 377.

[23] As a methodical approach, holism is addressed in biology: organisms are deemed to be not isolated, but interacting natural bodies. In the social sciences holism gives social totalities (structures, laws) primacy over acting individuals. In theory of science holism means, amongst other things, the epistemic hypothesis that theories can only be justified as a whole, not in their individual assertions. Similarly, in philosophical semantics holism refers to the hypothesis that language is used to establish the meaning of individual linguistic units (words or sentences). Formulated another way: that the meaning of a sentence depends on its relationship to other sentences in the same language.

[24] The novel follows the pattern 1.1 – 2.1 – 3.1 – 4.1 – 5.1 – 6 – 5.2 – 4.2 – 3.2 – 2.2 – 1.2.

[25] Tykwer loves making films according to their music, rather than the usual way of composing the music around a finished film. Dietmar Dath describes David Mitchell's novel as a linking of "six individual stories thrown kaleidoscopically around a common axis of symmetry" ("Im Sturmwind der Unwirklichkeit," faz.net 30.10.2012, my translation). The *Lexikon des Internationalen Films* describes *Cloud Atlas* as "fabulating kaleidoscope" (http://www.zweitausendeins.de/filmlexikon, my translation).

[26] Both the film and the book leave it open, however, whether or not reincarnation is tied to an immortal soul. Buddhism teaches something akin to continuing mental processes. Accordingly, the deeds of one human being are responsible for the creation of another human being (or animal or demon) but without any of the (identity of the) one person entering into the next person (cf. Perry Schmidt-Leukel (ed.), *Die Idee der Reinkarnation in Ost und West* (Munich, 1996).

[27] Lida Bach, "Im Wolkenkuckucksheim," in: filmrezension.de, 20.10.2012 (http://www.filmrezension.de/filme/cloud_atlas.shtml); our own translation. – A successful counterexample to *Cloud Atlas* which could be mentioned in this context (characters, plot, moral of the story) is Robert Altman's masterpiece *Short Cuts* (1993).

[28] Georg Seeßlen, "Surück in die Sukunft?," ZEIT 10.12.2012; our own translation.

[29] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (London, 2014; 1st ed. 2004), p. 373.

[30] In *The Tree of Life* we find the aesthetic-religious-mystic variant of metaphysical holism. In psychoanalytical terms, it is certainly possible to ennoble the film as a "work of mourning" and to extol it with an unavoidable Biblical undertone as an aesthetic "requiem for a prodigal son" and a prodigal brother (Verena Lueken, "Requiem für einen verlorenen Sohn," in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* from 15 June 2011; my translation). For it is the memories of a man called Jack (Sean Penn), the oldest son of the O'Brien family living in Texas in the 1950s, which structure the film, thus giving it a non-chronological narrative structure that includes sequences from different periods of his life. Nearly everything we see as viewers are from the perspective of the twelve-year-old Jack, who is still a child, yet is saying farewell to his childhood with all the brutality of his onsetting puberty. In his later life, not a day goes by when he does not think of the death of his younger brother (patently in the Vietnam War). It is his reminiscent-romanticizing vantage point that turns his grieving mother into an angelic creature, and it is his fearful, even hateful, vantage point, which turns his father, who is incapable of grieving, into a tyrant. But Malick embeds this work of mourning between two long sequences locating the singular story (of the O'Brien family) within a broader context: on the one hand, fantastic images of the emergence of the cosmos and of life, accompanied by choral music and whispering existential questions; on the other hand, brilliantly lit images that oscillate indistinguishably between a dream and a heavenly afterlife. In this embracing construction, Malick expresses his holistic conviction that every human being carries the whole history of the universe within him and onwards, shaping it in the process. A work of mourning must, accordingly, expand in time over the entire past and future. This is the metaphysical foundation holding *The Tree of Life* together. There is also, however, a very basic reason for this cosmological and dreamlike-religious clutching. Namely, that the film would not work without it. Without the dimension of shimmering transcendency, the family story would simply be too flimsy.

[31] Cosmology, quantum physics, and neurobiology are currently the most significant scientific hopes in this context. In cosmology, as the physical theory of the universe (of its origins, its development and its structure), "the most exhilarating" discovery would probably have to be that the world is *causa sui*, the cause of itself (Jim Holt, *Why Does the World Exist? One Man's Quest for the Big Answer* (London 2013), p. 34), a possibility considered in philosophy by Spinoza

and taken up sympathetically (and humorously) by Einstein: "I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists" (cited in Holt, *ibid.*); cf. here in more detail Michel Paty, "Einstein and Spinoza", in, Marjorie Grene, Debra Neils,eds., *Spinoza and the Sciences* (Dordrecht, 1986), pp. 267-302).

Regarding quantum physics, its attraction for philosophers is as understandable as it is unfortunate. They are not immune to "fashionable nonsense" (cf. Alan Sokal & Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense. Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York, 1998). Nevertheless, over the last four decades quantum physics has made us sit up and take particular notice of its research into the phenomenon of "nonlocality," that is the "entanglement" or "correlation" of particles. Accordingly, touching one of two objects at a large spatial distance from one another (atoms, photons and other elementary particles), for example, taking a measurement of one of them, will cause both to react. Following the theory of gravitation, according to which all objects attract dependent on their mass and distance, quantum physics thus again introduces a kind of remote effect. But the cause is no longer explainable "locally." That means it no longer impacts continually in space and time, 'bit by bit.' It is no longer possible to grasp objects as two localizable parts independent of each other, and talk is therefore now of "quantum holism" (cf. Nicolas Gisin, *Quantum Chance: Nonlocality, Teleportation, and Other Quantum* (Heidelberg: Marvels, 2014)).

[32] Ernst Tugendhat, *Egozentrizität und Mystik. Eine anthropologische Studie* (Munich, 2006), p. 118.

[33] In contrast, an aesthetic work like *The Tree of Life*, as I would like to comment once again, aims at the trinity of dimensions. To this extent, it is not a Post-Postmodern, but a Pre-modern film.

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