CINEMA OF SIMULATION:

HYPEREAL HOLLYWOOD IN THE LONG 1990S

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This "glitch" in the reality of the film's dramatic action is similar to the "glitch" of déjà vu that indicates a program bug in *The Matrix*; it is an error in the warp of perceived reality that indicates the illusory quality of what we had taken to be reality. In *The Matrix*, however, the false reality of the computer program is a veil concealing the "true" reality of earth as it actually exists, whereas in *JFK*, we are in the hyperreal condition in which the warped reality of the discrepant montage is the only reality available to the audience. (78)

If explaining the concept of hyperreality entails the task of deconstructing the naive idea of an underlying reality, perhaps the best way to approach the cinema that deals with our hyperreal condition is to start with a movie "based on real events". Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), discussed in one of the shortest chapters of Randy Laist's *Cinema of Simulation: Hyperreal Hollywood in the Long 1990s*, is therefore an adequate entry point to the main argument of this book. As Laist argues, "more so than any particular theory about who shot JFK, the thesis of Stone's film is that reality itself has been assassinated, under circumstances that we can only reconstruct out of a montage of images that are ambivalently real and/or unreal — fragments of a hyperreal mediascape" (74).

Besides all kinds of evidence supporting this thesis — the absence of Kennedy as a character, the "proliferation of hypothetical scenarios" (75) and of clues that do not point to a coherent theory, Stone's disconcerting montage, or even the presence of a media landscape in which "what we see on television is not the complete reality, but only a single fragment of an infinite array of possible perspectives on the televised event" (76) — we have none other that Jean Baudrillard as the ultimate authority who, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, published a decade before the movie, "described the Kennedy assassination as an important moment in the hyperrealization of the modern world. […] More than just a political assassination, November 22, 1963 was the date of an ontological

assassination" (74).

That we had to wait until the "long 90s", "the 'lost decade' between 11/9 and 9/11" (3), to have that ontological assassination rendered and commodified in Hollywood cinema is also a crucial presupposition of this book. The previous decade, as stated in Robin Wood's *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan… and Beyond* (2003), marked the culmination (both as the zenith and the ending) of a "triumphalist celebration of America within a Cold War narrative" (1), portrayed in visual media by "hard bodies" such as Stallone's characters Rocky or Rambo. A few hints of this postmodern turn could already be experienced in some science fiction movies such as Michael Crichton's *Westworld* (1973), as early as 1973, and particularly the blockbuster trilogy *Back to the Future* (respectively 1985, 1989, and 1990, discussed in the first chapter), but it was in the 90s that those became almost omnipresent.

Science fiction, along with a few seemingly mainstream narratives that carry science-fictional or fantastic motives, as is the case of *The Truman Show* (1998), may be the most obvious genre to portray this rarefaction of "reality," but the book is far from being merely a collection of chapter-essays on SF Hollywood cinema. Actually, the split is quite even between chapters that delve into close readings of more predictable films such as the *Alien* tetralogy (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997), *Total Recall* (1990), *The Matrix* (1999) or the oneiric *Fight Club* (1999), and realistic or historically inspired dramas such as *Titanic* (1997) or *Schindler's List* (1993). And, to complicate even further this entanglement between reality and fiction,[1] between verisimilitude and implausible narrative predicaments, there is even a chapter based on the fact that "the Clinton-era cinema is populated by numerous examples of Clinton-esque presidents who negotiate the ontological crisis of the collapse of the private/public binary [and] reflect and enable the president's conversion into a locus of virtuality and a personification of the implosion of private and public space in the postmodern hyperscape" (85).

The "long 90s" were thus, as the author argues, the time in which Baudrillard's prophecies became ever-present, with all of us "stranded without hope of escape in a time and place that is immanently simulacral" (130). The previous words, though they could be a "quick and dirty" synopsis of the French essayist's work, are actually about the movie that he "disowned […] as a representation of his thinking" (129), *The Matrix*. Randy Laist however redeems its relevance as a key work to understand not only the decade and its cinema *within Baudrillard's theoretical framework*, but also how that would change two years

after, with the attacks of 9/11. It is not so much that the movie's characters are living in a hyperreal world — "As Baudrillard himself explains in an interview, 'the real nuisance in this movie is that the brand-new problem of the simulation is mistaken with the very classic problem of the illusion, already mentioned by Plato'" (129) — but rather the deliberate option of the directors to portray that world of illusion, the Matrix, as "a simulated replica of 1999" (129), the year the film was released, thus acting as a mirror to our own (hyper)reality in which we "do in fact make a cameo appearance" (133) but from which we cannot be liberated by taking a red pill, as there is "no real world to wake up to" (132).[2]

And by the time we woke up, no liberation seemed to be at hand. That is why the author claims that the subsequent movies of the trilogy almost belong to a different genre: "*The Matrix*'s two sequels, however, are distinctly post-9/11 movies. […] They are fraught with history and consequence in deference to the rebooting of reality that the terrorist attack and the subsequent War on Terror had come to represent. […] The sequels shift their focus away from the computer world and toward the 'real' world of the rebel city of Zion" (131).

Whether this new century, along with its cinema, can better be defined by the idea of a "return of the real" — a dreadful return, it goes without saying — or if it is rather an exacerbation of hyperreality, *Cinema of Simulation* is inconclusive, perhaps seemingly incoherent. In the chapter on *The Matrix* we are reminded of the "historical-cultural turning point in the popular imagination" brought about by the terrorist attacks beginning in 2001, but in another point, while discussing *The Truman Show*, the author suggests that the TV program that is the title of the movie "appears simultaneously prescient and primitive. […] The twenty-first century Truman would […] have perfect freedom of mobility, but […] the gradient of freedom and entrapment that inspired his dreams of travel would have flattened out into transvalued indifference." (150) In other words, in our contemporary world hyperreality may be reaching new heights, perhaps — we could add — as stratospheric as the amount of sovereign debts.

As a reader, I was expecting a more articulate answer, or at least some deeper intuition concerning the early twenty-first century cinema, post-9/11, that replaced the "long 1990s", in the chapter on *Star Wars*' prequels — because this derivative trilogy also spans the subsequent years — but instead that chapter only deals with *The Phantom Menace*, i. e., Episode I, and mostly on the prevalence of CGI and on the fact that "a

prequel takes place in a kind of narratological shadow of its original [and] can never escape the narratological pull of the future story that has already taken place" (196). Or, being the case that Randy Laist's book is a collection of nearly autonomous essays — a few of which previously published — a wrapping-up final "epilogue" was expected. The closing paragraphs in the ending chapter, although illuminating in the sense that they confirm that "the heyday of hyperreal exuberance that characterizes the popular cinema of the 1990s has run its course by 2002" (240) and was followed by movies with "a narrative atmosphere characterized by moral obscurity, random violence, and irreversible consequences" (240), also at the same time alert that "it is equally necessary to realize that many of the issues that defined the first decade of the twenty-first century — terrorism, globalization, and cybercommunications — have their origins in the final decade of the twentieth" (240). Thus, "the popular meme that 9/11 represents a return of the real may be dangerously misleading, giving us a false sense of groundedness when in fact we still inhabit a cultural condition in which fiction and reality continue to play mirror games with one another" (241). There remains, however, the feeling that the issue, while obviously complex enough to call for a comprehensive research and a future book, could be just slightly more developed; i.e., whether as the root cause or merely as a sign of things to come but already on their way, 9/11, if anything, plunged us deeper into an abyss of simulated *casus belli*, imperial boosting and, ultimately, the irruption of long-repressed fears (the credit crisis and the multiple recessive aftershocks still withstanding, surveillance scandals, offshore information leaks, etc.), all of which also came to feed Hollywood's imagery.

That does not devalue in the least sense the pertinence of the book and the relevance of its proposals. If any, its weakest feature paradoxically derives from its strongest asset: being so dependent on Baudrillard's conceptual framework that other key authors and concepts, either to confirm or to contrast with the grounding tenets of Laist's thesis (Jonathan Crary, Donna Haraway, Slavoj Žižek,…), are sparsely and barely invoked throughout its running pages. To use a cinematic metaphor, Baudrillard steals the show while others just make cameo appearances, a handicap that is particularly noticeable in the chapter on *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998),[3] which could benefit from a more vigorous borrowing from Paul Virilio's reflections on war and cinema. Nevertheless, *Cinema of Simulation* is already a fundamental book for anyone who wishes to grasp the aesthetics of Hollywood cinema during that odd decade that began in November 1989

and ended in September 2001, understanding it against the backdrop of a wider cultural background and with the help of the powerful theoretical concepts of "hyperreality" and "simulation."

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1. Which also justifies, according to the author, the proliferation of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays during the decade: "the cinematic Shakespeare boom of the 1990s is of a piece with the trend represented by classics […] such as *JFK*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *The Matrix* that variously dramatize the postmodern condition as one in which 'stage' and 'world' collapse into each other" (180).

2. A similar but even more "in your face" approach, the author argues, can be found in Steven Spielberg's adaptation of *Jurassic Park*, so much that there he finds a deliberate confluence between the entertainment park within the diegesis and the movie as a hyperbole of Hollywood's entertainment industry: "the logo for the park - the profile silhouette of a T-Rex skeleton - is also the logo for the movie. The result is that […] there has never been a movie that included such extensive product-placement for itself" (156-157); i. e., "rather than adapting Crichton's novel, Spielberg's movie acts as a reconstruction of Hammonds' theme park. The only difference is that, rather than constructing his monsters out of genetic code, Spielberg uses computer code" (155).

3. And also *Titanic*, less relevant for our claim.