# The (Imaginary) Man of (Hollywood) Cinema
## An Encounter with Edgar Morin

The point of departure for the following considerations about the media relationship between humans and cinema is an image, or more precisely: the cover image of the German edition of Edgar Morin's book on film, *The Cinema, or The Imaginary Man*.[1] In this picture, a still from Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée* (1950), we see a man in limbo. This man simultaneously appears incomplete and duplicated. On the one hand, he is not shown in his entirety (only his upper body can be seen); on the other hand, we see both this partial view and its reflection, or in other words, its duplicate. Interestingly, however, the image is upside down. Already here, a demanding visual arrangement appears: an inversion, an altered perspective. One can only see the correct orientation of the photo when the book is turned on its side. It thus becomes clear that the man is lying on the ground, on a sandy surface, at water's edge. His reflection, hazy and unclear, appears on the water's surface.

There are several possible explanations. Could it be that the book has to do with the way human beings relate to cinema as a type of reflexive self-observation? Ultimately, "as a distinctive focus of film theory, the look into the mirror […] can be traced back to the earliest days of moving pictures."[2] Cinema would thus be a medium of self-reflection, a type of image that would enable human beings to (mis)recognize themselves. If we look at the image more closely, however, we then notice that the man is not at all looking at his reflection in the water but somewhere else. Human beings viewing themselves, therefore, does not seem to be the primary theme of the book. Perhaps

1 See Edgar Morin, *Der Mensch und das Kino: Eine anthropologische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1958).

2 Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 65.

more interesting is the makeup of the reflected image, the reflection itself. What kind of an image is it anyway? As an image in the water, it is moving around and its contours are unclear. Unlike the image in a static mirror facing someone directly, this reflection is uneven and subject to change. By looking even more closely, we can see, for example, that the image is not only unclear but also made coarser by the drops on the water's surface. The light is not evenly but, rather, unevenly reflected. As a result, the contours are not sharply defined but blurry. The fluid image, therefore, is similar to a reflection but has a different quality.

Nevertheless, this cover image is still a static image. It is not a filmic image, but a film still; it can therefore announce or invoke something filmic, but it is still something quite different. Morin himself pointed out the difference between the photographic and the filmic image. When opening the book, one finds the following hint from Morin: "The photo cannot dissociate its image from its paper or cardboard material backing. The image projected on the screen is dematerialized, impalpable, fleeting."[3] It is this quality of intangibility, ephemerality—and furthermore, fluidity—that will be of interest in the following considerations. Thereby, it is crucial to recognize that the transformations and conversions that the filmic image gains from detaching itself from the fixed nature of static photography are tied to movements in space and time. This is precisely what the new nature of cinema consists of, according to Morin:

> Time has acquired the movable nature of space and space the transformative powers of time. The double transmutation of cinematic time and space has produced a kind of unique symbiotic dimension, where time is incorporated in space, where space is incorporated in time, where 'space moves, changes, turns, dissolves, and recrystallizes,' and where time 'becomes a dimension of space.' […] Space-time, such is the total and unique dimension of a *fluid universe*.[4]

The genuine basis of cinematography exists within this fluidity; the fluid constitutes the medium-specificity of cinema. Cinematography, according to Morin, with reference to Jean Epstein, "represented the universe as a perpetual, mobile continuity, more fluid and agile than directly sensible

3 Edgar Morin, *The Cinema, or The Imaginary Man. An Essay in Sociological Anthropology*, trans. Lorraine Mortimer (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005), 35.

4 Ibid., 64.

continuity."[5] In other words, it makes something visible and perceptible which would otherwise not be seen or perceived. This particular capability can be traced back to the inception of cinema. Morin stresses: "The Lumière cinematograph already imbued with a certain soul everything at the limit of materiality, visibility, and palpability, precisely at the border of a nature that is fluid, frothy, nebulous, gaseous, or aqueous."[6]

In the early years of cinema, there was smoke, clouds, and waves. What fascinated the film viewers were the living images of life in motion. The most famous example, the primal scene of cinema, is *L'arrivée d'un Train en Gare de La Ciotat* (1896). Here, the new way of viewing does not solely consist of a realistic observation of a scene from everyday life. Rather, it is the continuity and processuality of the movement, its fluidity, that makes the image a moving image. This becomes apparent in the change of proportions (the train approaches from far in the background into the foreground) but also in the diffusion of differences, as well as in the destabilizations of any possibility of differentiation. It is unclear where exactly the motion begins and ends, because, as a continuous image uninterrupted by editing and not split up by any visible marks, the image does not reveal any defined points in time but, rather, the lapsing of time, its continuous being. In the process, options for spatial orientation are also not fixed as static subdivisions but presented as blurry transitions. Thus, smoke from the locomotive causes the background of the picture to seem malleable rather than flat, so that the horizon gradually fades into the undefinable distance.

In actuality, the Lumières repeatedly set in motion the same spatiotemporal fluidity that speaks from this primordial image. A further example, similar in structure and effect, is *Montagnes russes sur l'eau* (1896). Here, too, an object comes at us from the background, it changes in size as it moves through the picture, and distinct possibilities of differentiation are challenged by the mobility of the water, waves, fountains, and splashes. Furthermore, it is of note that the waterslide's direction of movement, unlike with the train in *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, is confronted by its opposite. While a boat filled with passengers on the left side of the picture slips down into the lake, another boat without passengers goes up the water ramp to the right. The movement seems to have something incomplete about it; it not only happens fluidly but

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 65.

also in a circle. The boats seamlessly glide through the picture: forward and backward, toward the viewer and then away from him.

The Lumières, however, experimented not only with the movement within the image but also with the movement of the image. Another film, *Panorama du Grand Canal Pris d'un Bateau* (1896) illustrates this. As one of the first tracking shots in film history, this miniature shows what it means to set not only the object of the recording, but also the recording device itself, in motion. Here, the camera itself, affixed to the boat, glides through the space—its standpoint fluidly changes and thereby transforms the viewer's movement within the space. In doing this, the camera not only passes by static objects (the buildings and façades, which are visually mobilized by this) but it also captures movements in the picture (such as other boats passing by, which pass by the camera-boat in the opposite direction). To come back to Morin's remark, cinema extends its fluid capabilities to all objects and movements: the small becomes big, the motionless becomes mobile—and vice versa. "Thus things, objects, nature, under the combined influence of rhythm, time, fluidity, camera movement, magnifications, games of shadow and light, gain a new quality."[7]

Yet the human subjects in front of the camera do not remain unaffected by this. They are affected by what cinema does and is—and both as the humans in cinema and the humans of cinema. For Morin, the crucial aspect remains the fact that the human subject in a film does not take on a privileged position as an overriding entity from which everything else can be derived. Like everything that passes through cinema, the human figure also takes on a specific cinematographic form. People in film are not made up of flesh and blood but, rather, light and shadows. In this way, they are similar to everything else around them in a film. The filmic human subject therefore does not preside over this fluid universe but is assimilated into it. Morin writes: "The fluid universe of film supposes unceasing reciprocal transfers between the microcosm man and the macrocosm. Alternately substituting an object for a person is one of the most common processes in the cinema; film derives its most effective results from precisely such transfers."[8] Just as the buildings in *Panorama du Grand Canal Pris d'un Bateau* seem to look at us with their eye-like windows, just as the architecture "plays" along in the film, and as life

7 Ibid., 66.

8 Ibid., 70.

is breathed into its façades, as objects retain a humanlike presence, the human subject can also become a thing. Cinema has even created its own genre-specific scope for these similarities. Comedy, for example, is extensively concerned with the interchangeability of humans and things,[9] and slapstick can certainly be considered one of the earliest cinematographic forms reflecting on this interchangeable relationship.

The example that Morin cites in *The Cinema, or The Imaginary Man* is, however, a different one—*Way Down East* (1920), a melodrama by David Wark Griffith. Morin is not interested in the way in which the human subject (here, Lillian Gish as the film's protagonist) sets the plot in motion. Instead, he observes the way filmic elements and filmic human beings exist in a relationship of mutual correspondence, how they are mutually constituted: "On a drifting sheet of ice, Lillian Gish, an abandoned girl, is swept along […]. Thus the heroine becomes a thing adrift. The thaw becomes an actor."[10] It is clear here that film is ascribed the unique ability to shift the focus from the autonomous human subject and toward the world of things. Gish and the ice floe seem to become one: they are one and the same object, carried away by the torrent. The foundations of Hollywood, then, are not built on man as the nucleus of each narrative, at least not as a cohesive or overriding entity. In early narrative cinema, we can instead detect an interrelationship of exchange: humans stand in relation to others, to other things or humans, to movements, shapes, and elements. The human subject cannot be seen as a peculiarity, nor can he or she be considered as an individual entity.

If we are speaking here of the fact that the human subject of film also stands in relation to other humans, we are already one step ahead. In particular, there are moments where this relation becomes especially noticeable, where it is reconsidered and attention is called to it. One can especially observe those aspects that have always applied to the relationship between human beings and cinema in a film's moments of reflection. Films emphasizing this relationship not only include its core characteristics but make them deliberate and recognizable. The next example, the product of a notable focal point in Hollywood, will illustrate this. But to do this, one must uncover a deeper layer of argumentation from Morin's book on cinema: the relationship between the humans *on* the screen and those *in front of* the screen, or in other

9 Cf. Christiane Voss, "Der dionysische Schalter: Zur generischen Anthropomedialität des Humors," *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 1 (2013): 119–120.

10 Morin, *The Cinema*, 71.

words, between character and viewer. Here again, fluidity will play a major role.

But first the example: Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). This film contains a prelude that starts with the film's ending, one that interweaves life with death and delves into cinema itself. A murder has occurred in Hollywood. Police cars and news trucks speed down Sunset Boulevard to get to the crime scene, a lavish mansion. Once they arrive, the crowd rushes into the backyard, where the coroner is inspecting the body. A dead man is floating in the pool. Shifting from stasis (a motionless body) to movement (a swimming body), the figure floats within fluidity. The scenery provided to the audience could not be blurrier. This applies both to the audio track and to the visuals. On the audio level, a film-human breaks out of the unity of illusion constancy and addresses the viewer/listener. The dead man in the pool is Joe Gillis, the film's protagonist, who comments on what has happened: "But before you hear it all distorted and blown out of proportion, before those Hollywood columnists get their hands on it, maybe you'd like to hear the facts, the whole truth." By using the personal pronoun "you," the voice directly addresses the people in the audience and draws them into the filmic space; they are not distant from the events onscreen but become part of them.

But what kind of voice is speaking here? It is neither the voice of an external narrator (ultimately the person speaking is part of the narrative ensemble, in other words, integrated into the narrative), nor is it the voice of a person in the plot (since the character it belongs to is no longer living, but dead). The voice is thus neither diegetic nor extradiegetic; it hovers between presence and absence. We hear, but do not see, the character speaking. A little while later, we see the character and hear him speaking, but we do not see the process of speaking. The character is onscreen, but the voice is offscreen. Christian Metz has pointed out this strange hovering in the in-between in the context of his discussion of filmic enunciation. He makes reference to the communicative situation between film and film viewer, which is always being renegotiated in the act of enunciation:

> A free agent by its very nature, the sound-off aspires toward the enunciative target that may be more or less close to the spectator-listener. In this way an autonomous layer of meaning, explicit or confused, is formed, which comes to double the story from time to time, to comment on it, to punctuate, contradict, and explain it, as well as to muddle it. As a result, this marginal layer

> of sound obliges the spectator who wants access to the diegesis to make an always somewhat surprising stop at the semantic *tollbooth*.[11]

We can expand on and complete this observation by considering the visual level of our example. Here, too, we are dealing with a vague in-between, with an oscillating motion that visualizes the image-being of the film-human. A figure is floating in the water. Other figures are bent over looking at it. Here, "the contours not only blur together in the scene, but the actual film image itself seems to liquify in the cross-fade from the pool and be set in motion in its materiality."[12] Everything that we see is subjected to the wavelike motions and to the light breaking through it. This applies to both the oblique sunlight shining through and to the artificial flashing lights of the cameras. Although these light sources are part of the diegetic world they are nevertheless capable of evoking something different, namely the filmic apparatus itself, which is achieved by *Sunset Boulevard*'s mode of narration, both in theme and motif. After all, the film repeatedly addresses and reinforces the specifically filmic relationship between reality and staging. There do not seem to be any "real" people who exist independent of their being an image.

This does not only apply to the level of narrative (Hollywood making references to itself and thereby reflecting (on) itself) but also to the level of reception and, therefore, the relation between the film's actors and viewers. We are thus dealing with two currents that come together in the light of the projection beam: there are no films without the people who watch them. Edgar Morin points out:

> The mind of the spectator performs tremendous, nonstop work, without which a film would be nothing but a Brownian movement on the screen, or at the most a fluttering of twenty-four images per second. Starting from this whirl of lights, two dynamism, two systems of participation, that of the screen and that of the spectator, are exchanged, flow into one another, complete each other and join in a single dynamism. […] The participation that creates the film is created by it.[13]

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11 Christian Metz, *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film*, trans. Cormak Deane (New York: Columbia University Press 2016), 45.

12 Franziska Heller, *Filmästhetik des Fluiden: Strömungen des Erzählens von Vigo bis Tarkowskij, von Huston bis Cameron* (Munich: Fink, 2010), 250.

13 Morin, *The Cinema*, 201.

The man of cinema, according to Morin, is neither truly real nor purely imaginary; he is always both at the same time. When a human being watches a film, his humanness is wholly focused on this cinema-specific watching—he is then more of a cinema-man than a purely real human. And when a human being appears as an image onscreen, this existence is then imaginary but also not completely detached from the real human, whose photochemically produced image is projected onscreen in cinema. Lorenz Engell has pointed out this connection: "A humanness that is no longer truly real and a humanness that is not yet completely imaginary meet halfway, and it is the visual faculty that binds them together. Morin calls this the typical 'semi-imaginary man' of cinema."[14] In *Sunset Boulevard*, this relation comes to the fore, since this film is an example of the way cinema makes images that allow the relationship between viewing and projected humans to unfold in the process of becoming an image. "The film thus observes that which cinema, of which it is a part, itself achieves; the 'semi-imaginary man' is a vision of film from cinema itself."[15]

But this vision is not the rule. Rather, it is a highly conspicuous pictorial construction, far more conspicuous than most of the other images of human beings that Hollywood has produced. This is, also and especially so, because it arose from a turning point in cinematic history, one at which Hollywood cinema was beginning to consider its own history and foundations. In the 1950s, Hollywood experienced one of its largest shocks since its inception, a pervasive crisis that was essentially connected to competition with a different audiovisual medium. Television had found its way into people's homes and created totally new images there—images that caused cinema to look at its own images in newt ways. In times of crisis, Hollywood cinema tends to develop a particular sense of reflection, especially at moments when the faculty of seeing itself looks back at onto itself. Two further examples will be mentioned here—as opportunities to explore the compatibility of Morin's thoughts on cinema beyond the time period of their own development.

The first example is a part of New Hollywood and is even generally considered its starting point: Mike Nichols' *The Graduate* (1967). At a time when the old studio system was in the process of disintegration, film aesthetic experiments that left behind tried and tested, familiar techniques became possible in Hollywood, experiments that aimed to expand and elaborate on the limits

14 Lorenz Engell, "Solange es Menschen gibt: Kinematographische Anthropologie," *Münchener Film-Vorlesungen*, (Konstanz: UVK, 2010), 71.

15 Ibid., 73.

of what could be depicted and narrated onscreen. New Hollywood cinema is concerned with formal breaks in characterization as well as in attempts to redesign the acting, or even non-acting, human subject. This includes Benjamin Braddock, the aimless protagonist of *The Graduate*. However, here it is not so much his status as an antihero that comes out but, rather, the moment at which the character's subjectivity transforms into something else, a type of liquification of perception. The fluid once again comes into play.

On the occasion of his college graduation, a transition from one life into another, Benjamin Braddock receives a special present from his parents: diving equipment, complete with a neoprene suit, flippers, diving goggles, and a harpoon. This underwater gear is meant to be presented to him at a garden party at Benjamin's parents' house. At the party, his father announces his son's entrance as a kind of special attraction: "A feature attraction that will be one of the most astounding events ever to take place in this particular backyard!" Benjamin's helpless pleas to remove himself from this painful performance are barely audible during this announcement because they resonate from a space outside of the picture. As soon as Benjamin leaves this outer space, or in other words, walks from offscreen onscreen, he is presented as both human and non-human at the same time. Sealed up in the diving suit he appears as something foreign, enclosed in an artificial casing, which reorganizes both his outside as well as his modes of articulation. For example, his movements are transformed by the flippers (walking on dry land with them is difficult and clumsy), but furthermore also his perceptions. The film illustrates this transformation when it switches to a subjective viewpoint. The image now consists of the oval cutout of the goggles; the sound is completely enveloped by the deep breathing sounds coming from the diving gear. Ben is thus separated not only from view but also from outside sounds. This is followed by a leap into another space—the space of the pool, the world of water.

From a space of the secure, the structured, something transforms into the vague, the blurry. Suddenly, every possibility of spatial orientation has disappeared. Suddenly, there are no reliable relationships anymore, no coordinates that structure the field of vision. One could turn the picture any which way: where above and below, left and right, are now, is no longer discernible, all relations become blurred. As a result, viewers lose their footing, since the pool's water space makes any stable positioning impossible. Diving into the water undermines a clear view of the events. It is primarily the reflections of light that cause a constant visual restlessness and bring about various conditions of the visible. Furthermore, the moment of submersion is

complemented throughout by the glimpses under water and through the water's surface, which makes the liquification of perception discernable. Gilles Deleuze has pointed out the fact that cinema found in water "the promise or implication of another state of perception: a more than human perception, a perception not tailored to solids, which no longer had the solid as object, as condition, as milieu. A more delicate and vaster perception."[16] In the process, the liquification of perception, the fluidity of seeing, shows its specifically cinematographic achievement by drawing the eye away from stable or defined forms. Rather, the fluid universe of film probes the dissolution of stabilization in order to thereby make another type of perception available to its viewers.

What is remarkable about the example of *The Graduate* is that the moment of diving, as well as the process of a transformation of perception initiated with and by it, is made part of the picture, indeed itself begins to move within the picture. This moment is in some places bound to a character's subjective perspective but then detaches itself from it again. Thus, even more so than in *Sunset Boulevard*, a fluid transition between the outside view and the disengagement from it takes place; that which frames the coherent whole is itself called into question here. It stands to reason that this process of dunking should be connected to a changing perceptive disposition, one that cinema has cultivated as its dream since its beginnings: that of immersion. Here there is already an etymological connection between immersion and the scene in question, since the Latin word *immersio* refers to the process of diving into a liquid. What Edgar Morin introduces as the "fluid universe" of cinema and describes as its specific characteristic (both on the level of the relationships of elements in the images as well as on the level of the relationship between humans onscreen and in front of the screen) can be drawn out further in the form of a question directed toward the changing media conditions of cinema. In any case, Morin himself anticipates this by addressing the vision of "*the total cinema*"[17]—a cinema, therefore, that is augmented, and expanded in order to exceed its own perception-specific boundaries. In doing so, he mentions the introduction of sound, color, widescreen—and also stereoscopy.[18] Put more precisely, he hints at the latter rather than discussing it broadly,

16 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 80.

17 Morin, *The Cinema*, 41.

18 Cf. ibid., 139–140.

but it at least interests him to the extent that he ascribes it a unique potential for future development: "Our most elementary requirements […] are the luxuries of yesterday."[19] Therefore, what appears at first as a gimmicky addition or a luxurious attachment at the moment of its emergence, together with the viewer's changing experiences in perception, becomes an integrative, indeed necessary, component of filmic experience. Could it be, then, that Morin's brief reference to spatial immersion in cinema has since been redeemed, that the emergence of the image from its frame is also reshaping the constitution of the man of cinema (or more precisely: the semi-imaginary man of cinema)?

There are several clues for this process of reshaping when regarding stereoscopy in the context of the development of digital 3D technology. Thomas Elsaesser suggests considering current 3D cinema as an indication of the profound transformation of visual perception: "Hence, what is being promoted with 3-D is not a special effect as special effect but as the new default value of digital vision, presuming a layered, material, yet also mobile and pliable space. […] As the default value of postpictorial spatial vision and in-depth sensation in the digital age, 3-D would be retooling the semantics of embodied perception."[20] The digital 3D film *Life of Pi* (Ang Lee, 2012) will serve here as an example of an expanded fluid universe. In this film, the swimming pool and the sea are not simply motifs of the moving, reflecting water; here, they become the space of immersion that spills over the edges of the screen and are thereby capable of pulling us all the more deeply into its undertow. Ang Lee's maritime adventure suspends all limitations and points of orientation, not only in terms of left and right but also in terms of forwards and backwards, above and below. The reflections of the water in the sky and the sky in the water are voluminous cross-fades and relief-like reflections simultaneously: both appear to be not transparent surfaces but, rather, their own dimensions of spatial diffusion. Furthermore, the experience of time also becomes fluid: it is no longer chronologically organized or aligned strictly in a linear way. One does not necessarily follow the other and is no longer its prerequisite or precondition. The coherence-building consistency knows no final termination; it borders have become permeable and, therefore, open for diverse currents to flow through. Ultimately, this blurring of fixed opposites extends to every

19 Ibid., 142.

20 Thomas Elsaesser, "The 'Return' of 3-D: On Some of the Logics and Genealogies of the Image in the Twenty-First Century," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (2013): 240.

entity in the film, to its characters and objects. In *Life of Pi*, a live-action actor fights with a virtual tiger. Thus, we have a digitally generated tiger as the representative of a species without reference, a ghostlike creature that exists completely detached from the indexicality of photographic images—yet still interacts with them.

Digital images, therefore, do in fact have a lot to do with liquification—to the extent that one can even call them images, as Lorenz Engell reminds us:

> Digital images can no longer be described in terms of presence, absence, or representation. While photography must be thought of as always built upon the image, the plane, or the frame, and film as built upon shots and editing, one must now think of the digital image as a crystallized image of fluidity, in the sense of an uninterrupted stream that constantly transforms an image. […] The structures of visual data already bear the prerequisite and concurrent mark of their could-be-different-ness. This is exactly why the term 'image' here, with digital seeing or with visual data, is misleading. Consequently, the digital image can also no longer be described in terms of the image but only in those of a liquified interval.[21]

In digital images, there is no longer anything contiguous, coherent, or complete; there are only fluid transitions. Perhaps they are, to ultimately go back to Morin, the new fluid universe; perhaps their wavelike movements make up our need for the image today. And perhaps this is the reason why they lead us back to our own humanness. "It is in fact," according to Morin, "because it is an anthropological mirror that cinema necessarily reflects practical and imaginary realities, that is, the needs, communications, and problems of the human individuality of its century."[22] We still always have cinema, and we still always need cinema. For it is not only the place that offers us a reflection of ourselves. Rather, it is the place where seeing sees itself. To conceive of this seeing as something fluid, something moving and changing within itself, and to further understand our imaginative capabilities not as something clearly fixed, but as something blurry in its transitions—this is what cinema can teach us.

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21 Lorenz Engell, *Ausfahrt nach Babylon: Essais und Vorträge zur Kritik der Medienkultur* (Weimar: VDG, 2000), 204–205.

22 Morin, *The Cinema*, 212.