

## **Research Article**

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## **Mediascape's Drifter**

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**Abstract:** Today, mediascapes (see Appadurai) play a predominant role in the construction of modes of human existence. How do they determine our agency? How do they form screens for our emotions, how do they build non-negligible spaces in which our dramas play out? Do they support us or, on the contrary, do they limit us? I pose these questions in relation to *Holy Motors* (2012), a film by the French director Leos Carax. His film presents man's postmodern condition as well as state of the art nowadays. The hero of *Holy Motors* is the absolute actor, a set of his avatars, the postmodern Proteus doomed to live and experience repeatedly a parody of "all the same." My thesis is that mediascapes only seem to strengthen our agency. They offer us a plural existence and an easy ability to enlarge the borders between illusion and reality, but in fact, they make us part of a system of the urban "desiring machine," they make our identities and our bodies into a sort of spectacle directed by external forces.

Keywords: fiction, virtual world, Holy Motors, Carax

Alternative "worlds" have always constituted the human *psyche*. It has also been proven dramatically, time after time, that the inhabitants of these worlds have never shared a common fate. This diversity of the psychical worlds we live in is not only a matter of historical fate; somebody's good or bad luck, nor their position in social reality. It is also a matter of a free personal choice. To the Stoics, our skull's prison also guaranteed our personal freedom; it constituted our "inner citadel" (Berlin 181). Furthermore, we have always lived in a cloud of our phantasies, which, as the Shakespearean Hamlet put it, made us "kings of an infinitive space." What made up the alternative fictional worlds was the degree of the historical, political and cultural situatedness of their individual inhabitants. In what ways did the alternative worlds of yesteryear differ from those of today? What were they equipped with? Today's multiple imagined "worlds" are promoted and conjured up by the media. The ubiquity of the media in our everyday cultural *milieu* makes the term *mediascape* relevant as a characteristic feature of our everyday environment. In a time of globalisation, when the worlds of politics, images and commodities are totally mixed up, *mediascapes* form landscapes of images, information, and narratives:

"Mediascapes," whether produced by private or state interests, tend to be image-centred, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places. These scripts can and do get disaggregated into a complex set of metaphors by which people live (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) as they help to constitute narratives of the "other" and proto-narratives of possible lives, fantasies, which could become prologomena to the desire for acquisition and movement. (Appadurai 299)

At the same time, mediascapes create infrastructure for those images and narratives (which need to be recognised and enhanced here). They bring together the space of the factual and the virtual. They form a *milieu* in which we are born, live, work and die. The credit for drawing attention to the term *mediascape* must go to Arjun Appadurai, cited above. He used it for the first time in an essay cited here and then

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popularised it in his book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (1996). Since then the word *mediascape* has taken off. Besides *mediascapes*, Appadurai has distinguished some other "scapes": *ethnoscapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes*, and *ideoscapes*, which he has identified as our virtual/real ecosystems. The ubiquity and proliferation of these "-scapes" are determined by supranational capitalism and globalisation:

An important fact of the world we live in today is that many persons on the globe live in such imagined "worlds" and not just imagined communities, and thus are able to contest and sometimes even subvert the 'imagined worlds' of the official mind and the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them. The suffix -scape also allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes, shapes which characterise international capital as deeply as they do international clothing styles. (Appadurai 297)

*Mediascapes* constitute a *semiosphere*, but they provide more than an outer space of representations. For example, in today's art world *mediascapes* are linked with the artist's body and mind. As David Joselit has put it, "mediascapes are characterized by the simultaneous occupation of virtual and physical space," therefore they create "a new terrain [where] aesthetic practices [...] are being transformed into strategies that confuse document with fiction" (2), the real and factual with the fictive and imaginary. Joselit, labels such artistic practices *navigating art* and he mentions here "earth/land art" or "site specific art," where "landscape becomes a mediascape whose contours and topography (as any Web surfer knows) are as unpredictable—even sublime—as an unmapped canyon in Utah" (3). He also refers to Matthew Barney's films, known as *The Cremaster Cycle*, in which "the body becomes an avatar, a presence beyond or beneath the threshold of identity that, like a sentient cursor, projects agency and mobility into a virtual world" (5).

Holy Motors, a film by Leos Carax presented at the Cannes Film Festival in 2012, seems to be a very good example of how these strategies work, as well as a kind of commentary on the phenomenon of the mediascape, in which fictive and imaginary intertwine with real and factual. It can be said that Carax's film tells the story of one day in the life of the inhabitant of a Parisian mediascape, a certain "Monsieur Oscar," He shows up once as "Alex"—Alex Oscar is an anagram of Leos Carax, the nom de cinéma of Alexandre Dupont (Thompson 26). In the first scene, we see a "Sleeper," played by Carax himself, leaving his bedroom. Maybe he is a dreamer who has woken up still inside his dream? After a while, he enters a large dark cinema hall. Is he dreaming the same dream as the sleepy cinema audience that we see in the opening scene of the film? The film consists of ten episodes (apart from the prologue and epilogue) in which Denis Lavant as Oscar embodies eleven different protagonists. So we have Lavant-Oscar as a well-respected man leaving his gorgeous home in a white limo; next as an old female beggar on a Parisian bridge; then a ninja performing a frenetic ballet in the hall of an anonymous office centre; "M[onsieur] Merde"—a monster from the Parisian sewer system; the weary father of a teenage girl; a mobster who is murdering his double from the Parisian underworld; then a terrorist who is killing a banker (the respected gentleman we saw in the first episode?); a noble old uncle on his death-bed; a lover from a musical; and finally—the husband of an apewoman and father of her monkey daughter. He is driven to all his assignments in a limo. Its chauffeuse, Céline (Edith Scob), is a mature woman dressed in an impeccable white suit. She is also a person who takes charge of the situation, a version of Harvey Keitel's character in Pulp Fiction. The limo is also a changing-room in which Oscar is preparing to play the roles of his avatars. Those who have not seen the film, or who need to refresh their memory, can get an idea of Carax's filmic phantasmagoria by watching the trailer at the Internet Movie Database.1

Cinema has always made dreams of teleportation, and of changing identities, come true. *Holy Motors* can thus be taken as an adventurous journey into the art of cinema, an art of "image-movement," that is more capable of touching reality in its motion and metamorphosis than any other artistic medium (see Deleuze). A principle that cinema has inherited from literature is: the hero is an action. And in French cinematic language "Moteur!" means "Action!" as Leos Carax pointed out in an interview given at the Wroclaw Film Festival in Poland in 2012. The luxurious limos, "motors," set the life of Oscar in motion. When we see a large car park with limos in the last scene of the film, we can presume from the final scene

<sup>1</sup> http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2076220

of the film that they are not only for transporting Oscar to the site of the action. What if we are all like him? The limos stand for agency. They are human-like creatures: in the last scene, we witness them chatting before they fall asleep. These multifunctional media connected to humans form an infrastructure of human desire, and its agency is the agency of Deleuzian "machines désirantes" [desiring machines], the agency of the intensities embodied and produced by them (see Deleuze/Guattari 7-50). Humans are merely a part of their environment seen as a technologically advanced machine.

One can take Carax's film as a store where the *mediascape* is the true protagonist and a force directing Oscar. The film's *mediascape* is the city of Paris, a true *machine désirante*, both charming and horrifying at the same time. In Episode Nine we find an alluring Parisian nocturnal landscape in a scene shot on the roof terrace of the department store La Samaritaine. As critics have suggested, Carax's Paris has much in common with the Paris full of mysterious events that we know from Paysan de Paris (1926) by Louis Aragon, Nadja (1928) by André Breton or Les dernières nuits de Paris (1928) by Philippe Soupault. I would also add Nicolas-Edme Restif de la Bretonne's Les Nuits de Paris (1788) especially, and Eugène Sue, with his famous Les Mystères de Paris (1842). In Carax's film the fantasmatic space of the Paris mediascape is complemented by the futuristic *hi-tech*. This has its own venerable provenance too, such as Jean-Luc Godard, among others: nocturnal scenes in Alphaville (1965) were shot in Paris. In Episode Two, Oscar acts like an acrobat and then fights with a cyber-monster. I mentioned a strict connection of "bodily" and "technological" elements as being characteristic of the *mediascape*, and so it is in this episode: to get into the building Oscar has to put a hair from his nose under a scanner. He wears a costume covered in white sensors: "the scene with Oscar gasping and sweating heavily reveals the vulnerable underbelly of computer technology: in spite of its sophistication it still depends on the work of human muscles" (Murczyńska). The above-mentioned simultaneous presence of virtual and physical/biological factors is a significant dimension for the mediascape and can stand as an example here: the human creatures and the mediascape they form a kind of machine-like organism. Then his body is transformed: he becomes a phallic cybermonster copulating with a man-eating woman, an iconic figure reminiscent of those from the imaginary worlds of Swiss surrealist H. R. Giger (who did the design work Ridley Scott's Alien), or of James Cameron's interplanetary lovers from Avatar. In that episode—to repeat the words of David Joselit, commenting on Matthew Barney's films—"the body becomes an avatar, a presence beyond or beneath the threshold of identity that, like a sentient cursor, projects into a virtual world" (3).

Moreover, "he's like a worker specialising in motion capture. Not unlike Chaplin in *Modern Times*—except that the man is no longer caught up in the cogs of a machine but in the threads of an invisible web," we read in the *Cannes Dossier* for "*Holy Motors*" (14). Carax's film is often reviewed as an anthology of cinematic allusions and citations.

But can we really say that Oscar is an action? Does he project agency and mobility into the world? The limo is only seemingly at his disposal. Rather, he is its "content," a carried passenger. He says that he is doing all he does "for the beauty of the act." Yet the beauty of the act, as he admits, is "in the eye of the beholder." Then he adds immediately: "And if there's no more beholder?" What if all of us are only actors in someone else's show; what if we are involved in a game we cannot control? And who is the man from the headquarters, "the Man with the Birthmark" in the limo at the end of Episode Six? Is he Céline's boss? Or is he a special envoy to/from a sinister resort, a master who directs and controls a role-playing game which Oscar and other people are playing? Maybe the headquarters represent a driving force of the mediascape as an "imagined world" that is part of the framework of the "new global cultural economy" (Appadurai 296)? In the final scene, the limos in the car park complain about their miserable future. "Before long we will be thrown into the garbage! We are going to be... inadequate. A man no longer needs visible machines." Today, they are just yet more obsolete hardware, pretending to be *chic*, but in reality, the "Holy Motors" Company is holy junkyard! This is the sad truth. They are sacred ("holy") only as a disguise; instead, they are a pathetic substitute for the real *sacrum*, unnamed and hidden in a cyber landscape. This real *sacrum* seems to be the figure of the unconscious of the *mediascape*. It is worth remembering that the film starts with the scene of the sleepy movie audience. In a moment a hero, awoken from his dream, will wander through the hall. Offstage we hear a foghorn roaring and the cries of seagulls. In the next scene, the hero is leaving his home, which looks a bit like a submarine. All of this together –a dream, foghorn, home-submarinesuggests the emergence of the hero's world from the sea of the unconscious. Does the unconscious have real agency, the true energy of the alternative worlds/scapes that makeup Carax's Paris? This seems to be an optimistic reading. And what if the Parisian *machine désirante* is managed from an e-cloud programmed by an unknown agent, or is simply is a sort of computer game played on your personal computer—a game that should be replaced by a new one? And the reason for this change is not that the new one is more attractive, but simply that it is new. We should obey the rules of the everyday economy we live in. Such a comment is in line with Carax's statement:

For *Holy Motors*, one of the images I had in mind was of these stretch limousines that have appeared in the last few years. I first saw them in America and now every Sunday in my neighbourhood in Paris for Chinese weddings. They're completely in tune with our times—both showy and tacky. They look good from the outside, but inside there's the same sad feeling as in a whores' hotel. They still touch me, though. They're outdated, like the old futurist toys of the past. I think they mark the end of an era, the era of large, visible machines. These cars very soon became the heart of the film—its motor, if I may put it that way. I imagined them as long vessels carrying humans on their final journeys, their final assignments. The film is, therefore, a form of science fiction, in which humans, beasts and machines are on the verge of extinction, "sacred motors" linked together by a common fate and solidarity, slaves to an increasingly virtual world. A world from which visible machines, real experiences and actions are gradually disappearing. [...] Where humans park for the night—what we call 'home'. But where is people's real home? Or is it better to live constantly on the move, as an explorer travelling over land and sea? But perhaps our real homes are, already, our computers? (Cannes Dossier of *Holy Motors* 15)

Our cinemas, reading rooms and, last but not least, books, have been replaced by our laptops. They offer us an easy way to blur the borders between illusion and reality; I mean, they offer us what a novel has traditionally offered, that is, the chance to access various possible worlds that are usually inaccessible. Literature, theatre, film, and computer games satisfy this need. The need to install ourselves in fiction, because the reality that we are left with is always there instead of the one that we desire. This need for fiction, and at the same time the potential hidden in fiction can be taken for a trace of completeness of Being. Here I am following the path paved by Hayden White in his reading of Alain Badiou: he points out that "being is everything that is the case and that there is nothing that is not the case. Nothing new can ever be added to being and therefore no event—understood as an eruption of something coming from outside the totality of being—could ever take place" (White 17). I think that such reasoning can also be applied to events brought to life in literary or cinematic fiction. How then, asks White, is an event possible? Following Badiou's line of deduction, he is inclined to suppose that events seem to take place because there is a gap between being and our knowledge of it. An event takes place when we manage to add something new to our knowledge of being, reveal a new aspect of, or cognise a new truth about it. To an extent, this is a shock for our system of knowledge. In reality, says White following Badiou, the new piece of knowledge about being only seems to be something new: like the discovery in the mathematics of the previously unknown prime numbers. They always existed, waiting to be discovered.

Fictional worlds aim to achieve this completeness of being, and they are part of it, too. They wait to be written, filmed, acted out. Fiction, which is "the coexistence of the mutually exclusive" (Iser 79), the real and the unreal, the conscious and unconscious, can be considered as proof of the existence of this alleged "entirety" and certainly as proof of our nostalgia for it. Maybe, like the hitherto unknown prime numbers in mathematics which could not be generated until computers came along, fictions also wait to appear and even to be acted out in reality. This potential of literature (or cinema) is something miraculous but perverse too and gives rise to a situation of moral hazard. As literature is the art of multiplying reality, its agency is an ambiguous force, a promising and sinister one. Saul Bellow said: "I myself believe that everything that can be imagined is bound to be realised at least once—everything that mankind is capable of conceiving, it seems compelled to do" (134). Would we really want some of it to come true?

We all perform our avatars in our imagination. In the virtual world, it is even easier to work on them. Computer games enable us to re-experience our virtual representatives as our alternative identities even more fully. This makes us actors in a postmodern *Theatrum Mundi*. One can say, as David Joselit did in his review of the films of Matthew Barney, that the temptation to create avatars is easy to understand:

According to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the world will eventually die, decay, fall into drift, come to a hopeless end, burn out, slide into disorder. According to Ilya Prigogine, Nobel chemist, under certain circumstances and within certain localities the Second Law fails. Energy increases. An organism is able to reorganise itself into a higher level of order, to transcend itself. [...] The avatar is an organism that reorganises or transcends itself in order to pursue navigational lines inaccessible to a being burdened with physical presence. The mutability of an icon in cyberspace is here actualised through its simultaneous occupation of the communicating worlds of myth and *cinéma vérité* (6).

The potentiality of existence resourced in the world of fantasies or, to put it another way, our ability to dwell in fiction, not only allows us to cross borders but also provides the delights of living in more attractive worlds. Once like a free electron and today like a metaphor travelling in intertextual spaces, a postmodern individual gets increasingly carried away by his/her freedom, driven by his/her anxiety. But this is not so in Carax's film, which brings us a vision rooted in the philosophy of European pessimism. In the final episode we hear an off-screen song whose lyrics have a dramatic resonance:

We would like to live again. But it would mean: we have to experience the same thing again. Repeat perhaps the long journey. [...] But it is impossible.

No hope is given by Carax here. We only live once, but even this one life turns out to be a series of repetitions. Oscar fails as "an action": his actions are illusory since he is an actor performing his assignments. He gets stuck in repetitions of ritual, always the same. "See you tomorrow, Mr. Oscar," Céline says. "Same time?" asks Oscar. "Same time," replies Céline. Oscar is directed all the time, he is never himself, or else he is himself only when he is being directed. Nothing belongs to him, and nothing depends on him. It is a parody of the Nietzschean idea of the Eternal Return because according to Nietzsche the matter of return is a matter of free individual choice. If there is no choice, you cannot choose to repeat "all the same." The movement here happens to be in a movement of programmed repetitions. By whom? In the *Matrix* trilogy, the world was a computer-generated simulacrum, where human bodies and minds are controlled by intelligent machines. Is the world of *Holy Motors*, the Parisian mediascape, governed by a panoptical centre? Or might it be a decentralised bio-technopolis, a society without political regulation of the new technologies market? People live there according to selected (imposed?) scenarios, creating various networks and from time to time leading to a variety of collisions, emergencies and disasters. As Appadurai notes, our everyday lives are "a stage characterised by radical disjunctures between different sorts of global flows and the uncertain landscapes [ethnoscapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, mediascapes and ideoscapes—M.Z.] created in and through these disjunctures" (Appadurai 308). In Carax's film, we do not find a clear-cut answer to these questions.

In the epilogue to *Holy Motors*, we see an excerpt of Etienne-Jules Marey's film made in the pioneering years of cinema, the scene of a naked little boy jumping around. This seems to be Carax's comment to himself. Marey's film is the essence of cinema, if we are to agree with Deleuze that the cinema seeks to create a picture of movement as the principle and impetus of reality—its motor, as it were. The quotation of Marey is an affirmation of pure cinema: Carax's film is an effusion of pictures of what happens. But it also asks how each of us contributes to creating our own reality, and what the possible consequences of this are. Although it is we who create and operate the media, we are their benevolent slaves.

Several questions emerge here. What are the consequences of this state of affairs for our identity politics? What does it mean to be human? Is there any border between the actual and virtual? When are we truer to ourselves? Do the media enforce our presence, or are they our prosthesis without which we fail to move. David Joselit claims a new brave world of virtuality as a political enrichment: "as in recent theories of the posthuman, the politics of the mediascape and the avatar could build coalitions across balkanized identities" (5). Creating avatars offers many chances to multiply our personality and extend our freedom.

In cyberspace an avatar is a movable icon representing a person, a virtual-presence capable of navigating mediascapes [...], [it] does not possess an identity but rather exercises one (or many) provisionally in order to chart a particular path: as a fictional character controlled by an actual body, it is defined by where it goes rather than what it is. [...] The potential of the avatar is considerable: by injecting a powerful ingredient of fantasy into the delineation of identity, the avatar makes possible an imaginary/real mobility that the artist's physical presence in site-specific art could hardly allow. (Joselit 5)

This optimistic view has its dark reverse side too. Can we play such games without risking anything? New television series such as *Humans* and *Black Mirror* explore our fears concerning the uncontrollable progress of technology. To what extent can we be part of the mediascape, as a reality virtually extended, without coming to any harm? Slavoj Žižek blogged quite recently on Pranav Mistry, a young IT specialist and director of the Samsung Research Centre, who works on a project called "Sixth Sense": you have a small digital camera attached to your head or glasses, and a mobile telephone connected to the internet in your pocket and a small iPad. The camera identifies a person in front of you, and because you are connected, your iPad can identify the person and display to you a vast array of data on it (Žižek). Žižek mocks this new technology, which on the one hand can help enormously in forging interpersonal contacts, by making the people we encounter perfectly transparent. At the same time, though, it strips away all privacy, mercilessly preying on the other person's gaze, and denying us our innate mystery.

The World Economic Forum, the international organisation for public-private cooperation, "committed to improving the state of the world" (as its statute proclaims) honoured Pranav Mistry in 2013 as one of the Global Leaders of the World. Well, I don't know... Although it's hard to say we have an alternative here. The reality created by mediascapes (and other "scapes") is the one which is real. It cannot be denied. Retroutopias revive our nostalgia for good old times, but, as it seems, they can only be implemented in a totalitarian state. In a liberal democracy, every offer of multiple existence finds its customers. Meanwhile, although mediascapes offer us the opportunity to live in a "more attractive" world, in fact, as it seems paradoxical, they limit our freedom or offer the illusion of it. Our choices, although widened by the fact that we participate in alternative or parallel worlds, are in fact limited. They derive from the available opportunities offered by the mediascapes agenda. The mediascapes also place us in a world of unclear axiological solutions. It is often by making us our own avatars; they blur the boundary between the responsibility for the choices we make as individuals, and the responsibility for the roles we play as the particles of the "desiring machine," the inhabitants of mediascapes. It is the price that affluent societies pay when imagined worlds appear more important to them than the imagined communities. Our easy access to virtual worlds results in the erosion of our experience of reality and in various types of escapism. The consequence of this, according to many, is the emergence of moral confusion and political indifferentism. For example, Sianne Ngai draws attention to the increasingly popular aesthetics (but also politics) of weak and equivocal affects, which are not so much ambivalent as indeterminate; affects which do not lead to a decrease in emotions, which do not cause a cathartic experience, but, on the contrary, leave us in confusion and suspended agency (Ngai 1-53). In this context, it is interesting to ask why those who do not belong to wealthy and technologically advanced societies, yet who have access to global mediascape, the new brave virtual world offers no kind of political enrichment so far: the "balkanized identities" are still at war. There is one conclusion to be drawn from this: the enigma of virtuality is now becoming inseparably connected with the enigma of identity, but the more attractive world of virtuality does not seem to offer a panacea for our identity problems.

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