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Additional Information

Animation in the core of dystopia: Ari Folman's *The Congress*

Abstract

Ari Folman's *The Congress* (2013) takes freely from the Stanisław Lem's dystopian view from his Sci-fi novel *The Futurological Congress* (1971) to propose the gradual dissolution of the human into an artificial form, which is *animation*. By moving the action of the novel from a hypothetical future to contemporary Hollywood, Ari Folman gives CGI animation the role of catalyst for changes not only in the production system, but for human thought and, therefore, for society. This way, the film ponders the changing role of performers at the time of their digitalization, as well as on the progressive dematerialization of the film industry, considering a dystopian future where simulation fatally displaces reality, which invites relating *The Congress* with Jean Baudrillard's and Alan Cholodenko's thesis on how animating technologies have resulted in the *culture of erasing*. Moreover, this essay highlights how Lem's metaphor on the manipulation of information in the Soviet era is transformed in the second part of *The Congress* into a vision of cinema as a collective addiction, relating it to Alexander Dovzhenko's and Edgar Morin's speculative theories of *total film* — which become close to the potentialities of today's Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality. As well, although *The Congress* is a disturbing view on film industry and animating technologies, its vision of film is nostalgically retro as it vindicates an entire tradition of Golden Age animation that transformed the Star System into cartoons, suggesting the fictionalization of their lives and establishing a postmodern continuum between animation and film.

Key words

Ari Folman, Stanisław Lem, Robin Wright, animation, simulation, adaptation, double, Star System, Hollywood, Holocaust, virtual.

Introduction

Ari Folman's *The Congress* (2013) provides an unexpected re-reading of the satirical science fiction novel *The Futurological Congress* (*Kongres futurologiczny*, 1971) by Polish writer Stanisław Lem, colored with a nostalgic view of cinema as a profession, of animation as a refuge to the imagination, and of the human that inevitably mutates when coming in contact with what we call *progress*. Ari Folman, better known for his preceding feature film *Waltz with Bashir* (*Vals im Bashir*, 2008) — an animation documentary nominated for the Oscar® for Best Foreign Language Film in 2009 —, has adapted Lem's fable into film to portray our resistance in accepting reality and the consequent need for evasion, placing animation (and *animating*)¹ technologies at the center of the dystopian apparatus. This way, if the novel *The Futurological Congress* was an allegory about the manipulation of information and the lack of freedom, Folman transports Lem's idea of a collectively organized dream to a very near future, with Hollywood transformed into a source of narcotizing power.

However, *The Congress* is, first and foremost, a vision of cinema from cinema itself, where imagination walks on the footprints of the real. Just as Folman's real persona — in animation form — starred *Waltz with Bashir*, the main character in *The Congress* is none other than the actress Robin Wright playing herself — including allusions to her life and titles from her filmography, such as *The Princess Bride* (Rob Reiner, 1987)—, although moving to an immediate future in which the actors are being replaced by their digital avatars. Robin Wright's agent (Harvey Keitel) convinces her to sign a Faustian pact that Jeff Green (Danny Houston), the producer at Miramont, offers her, according to which Robin would agree to being scanned for her subsequent employment in the blockbusters that she would never want to film; in exchange, she will have to retire from the acting world. Like in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the animated double in *The Congress* assumes what the model does not desire; but the cannibalistic price will be immense once *Robin Wright* is within anyone's reach.

Although compared to Leos Carax' cult film *Holy Motors* (2012) and Satoshi Kon's exuberant fantasy *Paprika* (2006), since its premiere in the Director's Fortnight in Cannes 2013, *The Congress* has sparked all sorts of reactions from critics, oscillating from serious questioning (Debruge, 2013; Hutchinson, 2014) to reserved acceptance (Brooks, 2013; McCarthy, 2013) and, less frequently, the welcomed enthusiast (Tafoya,

2014). On occasions the weak points that have been highlighted have been the disparity between the original literary version and its free adaptation to cinema,² and even some controversy originating from the animated part³, to such a degree that the first 55 live action minutes have been considered ‘the good part’ of the film.⁴ Nevertheless, an exploration of *The Congress* is necessary because it allows us to approach it with a renewed vision of such an old, and at the same time young, medium such as cinema.

Stanisław Lem’s science fiction novel was set in the near future; its protagonist, the space explorer Ijon Tychi transcribes with a satirical tone the experience of his travels through different dimensions. Lem composed his adventures in a cycle of five novels, whose writing took from 1957 to 1987. In spite of this, the scene described by Lem more than four decades ago disturbingly evokes many of the global dangers that hover over our present day, such as overpopulation, the chemical and genetic manipulation of food, or the threat of terrorism. In *The Futurological Congress*, Tychi travels to Costa Rica to attend a multitudinous meeting where the congress participants try to impede or hold back, in some way, the end of the known world. But when a rebel cell invades the hotel, Tychi suffers irreparable wounds and is frozen until a cure is found. After his hibernation, Tychi is resuscitated in the year 2039 and it is then when he finds a society in which peace and an extreme well-being reign, in an idyllic world where nature and luxury co-exist. All this has been possible thanks to the generalized consumption of ‘psychemical’ drugs with which the citizens see their most hidden fantasies come true, but, as a result, spontaneity and aggressiveness become inhibited. Nevertheless, under this appearance Tychi discovers reality, camouflaged by the government through the use of vaporized chemicals, the ‘mascons’ that ‘*falsify* the world’ (Lem, 1974[1971]: 113).

From such a devastating novel, Ari Folman has transformed its discourse of prevention against totalitarian systems into a critique of capitalism. However, it is important to note that the reference to the novel in the film does not begin until its second part, when we see the future that awaits Robin Wright around the year 2033.

Although *The Congress* is not an entirely animated film, Ari Folman uses the idea of animation as a conceptual apparatus to propose his view on Hollywood, his criticism towards capitalism, and, above all, his fear of a future where the virtual may prevail over the real. Significantly, *The Congress* handles two different concepts of animation:

first, animation as a *simulation* —the CGI suggested by live action means in the first part of the film —, and animation as *imagination*, materialized through stylized animated drawings in the film's second part. Then, the subsequent sections will explore the following ideas: firstly, a potential scenario where the virtual —in the form of CGI animation — is capable of displacing the real, eventually sowing the seed of social deconstruction; secondly, the representation of a hallucinatory state through a cartoon-like animation dream, which corresponds to an *expanded* experience of cinema; thirdly, the paper will delve into the parallel lives of Hollywood celebrities who starred Golden Age cartoons, suggesting the fictionalization of their lives and establishing a continuum between animation and film.

1. CGI animation, a phantom menace? Digital doubles in *The Congress*

Jean Baudrillard intuited that 'all forms of high technology illustrate the fact that behind its doubles and its prostheses, its biological clones and its virtual images, the human species is secretly fomenting its disappearance' (1997: 24). Ari Folman develops the first part of his film by posing film industry as a system that has pushed 'Frankenstein's ideology' (Burch, 1999[1991]: 38) to the limit, with the key idea of CGI animation doubles replacing human players in the filmmaking process. As well, in *The Congress* we can find echoes of Sergei Eisenstein's criticism towards Hollywood around 1940, when he referred to 'those who work in film and lead their viewers to forget about truth in life, and into the golden dream of lies', in order to 'distract the attention of 'the man on the street' from the authentic, serious problems of relations between labor and capital' (Eisenstein, 2011[1940-48]: 10-11). If Eisenstein believed that Hollywood was capital's accomplice, Folman suggests that it is precisely neoliberalism that creates the problems of work, camouflaged by that oblivion that induces sleep, the 'weapon to disarm the struggle' (ibid. 11).

The first part of the film, the most cohesive, takes place in a supposed present moment — set around 2013 — and develops entirely as a live action film. Here, Hollywood is introduced as an increasingly less profitable system, where it will be of the greatest interest to replace human labor by technology. Therefore, the new movie stars will be the digital avatars of those actors and actresses who previously agreed to be scanned — and then, to be retired. Immediately afterwards, Hollywood producers will

dispense with the rest of the film crew: cameramen, photography directors, sound technicians, etc. Instead, all new movies will be just CGI animation, though indistinguishable from live action films.

This part of the film offers a reflection on what may happen next in Hollywood, where the inclusion of digital actors in films — by using Motion Capture or other devices — is increasingly frequent. Actually, Robin Wright herself took part in the virtual cast in Robert Zemeckis' *Beowulf* (2007), as the Queen Wealhtow. However, following the narrative needs of *The Congress*, CGI animation scenes in the film have been represented by live action footage. The idea of animation *as simulation* is understood in Folman's film as a production model that aims to redirect the paths of Hollywood towards more viable — though not more artistic — formulas. Although Folman does not openly question the technology or the intentions behind visual effects cinema, he just warns of the dangers of a system that decides to dispense with the human element.

In this sense, *The Congress* establishes connections with other Hollywood films that have already suggested the menaces of impersonating people through digital simulations, long before technology made it possible. For instance, already in 1987, in the film *The Running Man* (Paul Michael Glaser), Arnold Schwarzenegger is trapped into a TV reality show — a perverse instrument of a police state, which dazzles the audience with the search and execution of criminals, live. However, given the inability to capture Schwarzenegger, the television network decides to broadcast the digital simulation of the hero's detention and demise — with a collateral effect, causing the demise of an actor who served as a model for the simulation.

Likewise, the movie *SimOne* (2002), by Andrew Niccol,⁵ is a dark comedy about the possibility of converting a digital avatar to a movie star — without the audience's awareness of it. In *SimOne*, Viktor Taransky — played by Al Pacino — is a movie director who desperately needs to finish his film, after the abandonment of its female star. Coincidentally, a new simulation system comes into his hands, with which he can create from scratch a virtual actress, and direct her by programming her dialogues and expressions, all inside a simple computer. Significantly, the animated actress, Simone — named after the software 'Simulation One' —, has a library of expressions data from the repertoire of classic movie stars: thus, Simone (played in the film by the actress

Rachel Roberts) may perform a bit like Audrey Hepburn, but also like Lauren Bacall. Old movie stars are suggested here as a paradigmatic model for the virtual one, while the last becomes an alternative model for reality — not in vain, the actress who left the filming, Nicola Anders (Winona Ryder), returns to the studio, claiming to have learned a lot from Simone and that she is ready to shoot again. In this sense, *SimOne* anticipated a situation very akin to today's filmmaking, which is explained by the director in the film — significantly called *Viktor*: 'our ability to generate fraud is greater than the ability to detect it', to which Simone responds with the following line: 'I am the death of the real'.

The virtual as the death of the real: this is also Ari Folman's claim in *The Congress*, which will be taken to its ultimate consequences when the imaginary world takes the place of reality at the end of the movie. As Baudrillard foresaw, 'there is no place for both the illusion of the world and a virtual programming of the world. There is no place for both the world and its double' (Baudrillard, 1997: 27). To date, however, synthesizing reliable human characters is still a pending issue, as evidenced by the 'uncanny valley' effect⁶ aroused by films that include digital versions of movie stars such as Peter Cushing or young Carrie Fisher in *Rogue One* (Gareth Edwards, 2016), or the robot Rachel in *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017). In this sense, CGI animation has provided a sort of spectral afterlife to those artists whose beauty, youth, or life itself, has already been extinguished — an afterlife like that of wax museums.

In *The Congress*, the double created by digitization maintains an ambivalent relationship with its model: on the one hand, the double burdens with the obligations that the model does not want to assume; on the other hand, the fame of the double, always beautiful, immortal — and not by chance, made famous through the franchise of films *Rebel Robot Robin* —, buries the memory of the actress Robin Wright, meaning her *death in life*. Later, in the second part of the film, Robin Wright must be frozen — as instructed by the producer Jeff Green — in order to prevent her from aging: affected by intoxication, Robin imagines her own freezing as a burial, appearing as gravedigger the same photography operator who had scanned her twenty years ago.

The central moment in *The Congress* is the sequence when the actress is scanned. As soon as Robin Wright enters the gigantic sphere covered with flashes, which emits the thunderous noise of a CAT scanner, she understands that she has just passed a point

of no return. The scanner will mercilessly devour all of the actress' authentic emotions, that flow from laughter to weeping while she listens to the confessions of her agent, Al, who becomes the unexpected director of her last performance. Somehow, the scene recalls the fabrication of 'Future', or 'Parody', in Thea Von Harbou's novel *Metropolis* (1926), when in the process of transformation from the sweet Maria to the disturbing robot, Rotwang begs Maria to not only cry but also to laugh, so that the android would appropriate that feeling as well (Von Harbou, 1985[1926]: 89). And, as in the *Metropolis* scene, the birth of the double within the matrix-machine leads to something worse than just atavistic fears related to animism.

In *The Congress*, the digitalization of the performers becomes a predatory act that not only destroys their models, but also the whole production system and consequently, the concept society itself. According to Cholodenko, the computer is today's model of the human — as before was the clock or even the pottery wheel (2015: 33) —, as 'the computer (re)programmes the human as computer, as computer-human, as ciborg, and vice-versa' (ibid. 38). In the film, Robin Wright's main concern about being scanned is the feeling of being an accomplice to a system that is not humane anymore, as it has already decided to dispense with the human element. Actually, in the film, the collaborationism of movie stars leads to a chain reaction that will end with the 'dismantling of the structure' of filmmaking, and, finally, to its collapse. With the ideas of Holocaust and collaborationism at key moments of the film — as they were also in *Waltz with Bashir* —, it can be said that Ari Folman shares with Jean Baudrillard the impression by which the virtual will eventually become the 'final solution of the real' (Baudrillard, 2003: 39), the apocalypse of culture, and with it, of the humane.

2. Spirits in a material world: The animation of phantasmagoria

The second part of *The Congress* formulates the cinema of the future as a hallucination that fills the voids of life, eventually seizing total control of it. And the form adopted by future cinema is an animated form: a luxuriant and psychedelic use of 2D animation.⁷ The in this segment of the movie, however, 2D animation embodies a paradox: the animated vision of beings, movable and metamorphic, actually disguises the petrification of society, with people unable to think for themselves, trapped in inertia. In this part of the movie, animation establishes privileged relationships with two

ideas: on the one hand, the idea of *animation as imagination*, as a deliberately illusory effect; and on the other, with the idea of *total cinema*, as announced by Edgar Morin — taking from Alexander Dovzhenko — and science fiction writers such as Aldous Huxley, Ray Bradbury or Stanisław Lem himself, who shaped their dystopian systems around the world of images.

Twenty years later, in 2033, Robin Wright visits the ‘restricted animated zone’ — Abrahama City, new headquarters of Miramount — to sign the renewal of her contract, without realizing what will happen will be the total elimination of the Hollywood structure: now, those that must be erased from the system are the depressed script writers, animators who do not meet deadlines, who fall in love with their characters, etc. Instead, the new industry proposes that the viewers experience the ‘free choice’, the film as a waking dream after ingesting a chemical compound, acquiring an illusion of interactivity and protagonism: Why be yourself, when you can be Tom Cruise?

After entering Abrahama City, Robin Wright describes her animated alter ego as the product of ‘a genius designer on a bad hashish trip’, while she is surrounded by an audience who appears to be dressed in cosplay, we could say, as if it were a gigantic Comic Con. However, after a terrorist attack on this ‘restricted zone of animation’, Robin Wright is trapped in that world, frozen in coma until she wakes up again in 2053, to find that the whole world is now as seductive and exuberant as Hieronymus Bosch’ *Garden of Earthly Delights*, since the chemical has regulated individuals’ desires, eliminating their frustrations. Through the ingestion of drugs that regulate the behavior of society, not only the individuals are free to become the desired fetish, be it Elvis Presley, Cleopatra, Buddha, or Jesus Christ, but the surroundings can also be transformed at will; they can be *animated*. However, under this seductive surface a miserable world is hidden, which recalls, in some way, the dystopia in Richard Fleisher’s film *Soylent Green* (1973), with a scenario of overpopulation and ecological and climatic catastrophe that governments hide to their citizens. Animation becomes allegory of the hallucinatory state that the film describes, to the extent that it is, along the line suggested by Yoni Goodman, the result of an optical illusion:

Animation is all about fooling the eye—making the eye see what’s not really there. Nothing about is real, but you make the eye think it’s real. [...]—the eye is fooled because it accepts the ‘rules’ of that world. (Kriger, 2012: 6)

The aesthetic break used in *The Congress* allows us to establish relations with other examples where the real is connected to the imaginary and/or *fabricated*, such as Robert Zemeckis's *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) or Ralph Bakshi's *Cool World* (1992). In these films, animation is a liminal zone, an area where our desire, as well as our fears, are materialized, as can be seen when Wright observes how all around her they reproduce Marilyn Monroes and John Waynes, or even herself, characterized as a superheroine in those films made from her archived images. Like in these cases, the disruptive use of 2D animation leads to *metalepsis*, the combination of 'two worlds that are perceived as mutually exclusive are connected at the same time' (Feyersinger, 2010: 281), like the superposition of a universe that appears more real than another: a *metadiegesis* or second level of representation localized in the *intradiegesis* or world-frame, that invites us to explore different narrative levels. Thus, Ari Folman makes the decision that animation must recreate the imaginary in the most anti-illusionist way possible: the more virtual the environment of the film, the more unreal its representation becomes. For this reason, the animated part of *The Congress* not only serves to shape the sophisticated futuristic world described by Lem — with clothes that change color and highly technological environments —, but also to enhance its most critical side, an aspect that will explode when the effect of fantasy fades out.

Stanisław Lem's novel proposed the world of the future as a chemical party, an enchanting mirage to endure an insufferable reality: a *hyper-reality*. This suggestion has not only been praised by science fiction literature, but by film critics who anticipated the idea of *total film*: Total film, as suggested by Edgar Morin, is 'the ultimate myth of cinematography [...], which is at the same time its original myth' (Morin, 2005[1956]: 41). As well, Alexander Dovzhenko prophesied that there will be 'a cinema without a screen, where the spectator would take part in the film as if he were at the center of the cinematic action' (quoted in Morin, op cit, 42),⁸ what can be understood as a plausible option for the development of what we understand as *cinema*.

Moreover, Jean Baudrillard claimed: 'When the indifference of the masses becomes dangerous for the political or cultural class, then interactive strategies must be invented to exhort a response at any price.' (Baudrillard, 1997: 22). The illusion of interactivity has been pointed out as a strategy of collective control by dystopic literature such as Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) or Aldous Huxley's *A Brave*

New World (1932), where the lethargy of the population is in direct relation to the evolution of mass media towards hyper-reality: if in *Fahrenheit 451* television has become directly interactive with the citizens, in Huxley's fable there are sung, spoken, synthetic, colored, stereoscopic and olfactory *films*. Likewise, Lem's novel also suggests this scenario when describing a television that has ceased to exist as a medium, and yet is omnipresent:

(Television hasn't been used for the last fifty years). It takes some getting used to, to have strange people, not to mention dogs, lions, landscapes and planets, pop into the corner of your room, fully materialized and indistinguishable from the real thing. Though the artistic level is quite low. (Lem, 1974 [1971]: 73)

At present day, the idea of total film is summoned where all senses of the viewer are demanded, and animation is playing a decisive role in the fashioning of such hyper-reality, like the creation of mechanisms such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR),⁹ which put the viewers at the center of action. For instance, today tourists can visit architectural remains of historical relevance, such as the ruins of Crete or Olympia, and use AR tablets to see simultaneously their 3D reconstruction, populated with animated characters that invade the space like artificial ghosts.¹⁰ In a near future, VR could be a consistent alternative to travel, through virtual visits to all kind of touristic destinations.¹¹ Moreover, we must consider the evolution of videogames linked to AR, like *Pokemon Go* (2016-) — and the generation of parallel worlds through their communities of players — which transform the experience of reality for the users. These multiple realizations of what can also be considered within the specter of total film eventually lead to 'a simulacral process of ecstasis, exponentialising, maximalising, a *hypertrophic* process in the Baudrillardian sense, driving the subject, culture, memory, the human, the world itself, to a delirious state, that of hyperreality, virtual reality [...] erasing the human and reality itself' (Cholodenko, 2015: 33). Like in *The Congress*, a reality populated with the creatures and characters that feed our fantasy is a possibility as close as inescapable.

Folman's film describe the future subdued to the phantasmagoria depicted by Lem: the idyllic appearance of a world without conflict, without violence. However, what these components mask is that there are not enough resources in the environment; humans suffer grotesque mutations; climate change has demolished overpopulated

cities, and more than existing, the inhabitants subsist. The world, the way it is perceived, is only a mirage used to deal with the intolerable reality:

The general splendour had disappeared without a trace. They walked separately, in pairs, clothed in rags — patches, holes — many with bandages and plasters, some in only their underwear [...] amputees and paraplegics rolled along on boards with little wheels, talking and laughing loudly [...]. Robots predominated in the crowd, wielding atomizers, dosimeters, spray guns, sprinklers. Their job was to see that everyone got his share of aerosol. (Lem, 1974[1971]: 139-140)

As explained by Doctor Barker (Paul Giamatti) to Robin Wright in the film: ‘Once we just masked the truth with antidepressants, drugs that concealed and lied; now we reinvented truth’. In *The Congress*, animation incarnates desire because it substitutes reality, and its use is even more disruptive to the viewer when the illusion fades before Robin Wright’s eyes: where there was once a luxurious restaurant, now there is only an abandoned and dilapidated factory; where there were exuberant movie stars, there only remain dazed indigents. If in *Waltz with Bashir* the animation allowed us to see gruesome scenes without feeling wounded by them — as if it were the ‘imaginary camera’¹² that the conscious uses to protect itself from horror —, the animation in *The Congress* strengthens the impact that Wright’s return to the nauseating reality would imply: a shocking experience comparable to that at the end of *Waltz with Bashir*, when the animation gives way to the documental register of the massacre at Sabra and Shatila — the director’s recovered memory.

Although the narrative coincidences between Folman’s film and Lem’s novel are scarce, their underlying affinity is considerable, causing in the viewers an uneasiness that obliges to reconsider our socioeconomic model and the impact of technology — according to Cholodenko, epoch-‘defining technologies’ are by themselves *animators* (2015: 31). Undoubtedly, *The Congress* suggests a pessimistic hypothesis on just what the machine of cinema can be transformed into, if there are private interests and not the common welfare those who rule the use of animating technologies. As film critic Scott Tafoya pointed out: ‘If tomorrow we could end disease but it meant the end of motion pictures, who would give up fantasy for reality? That is the terrifying core of *The Congress*.’ (Tafoya, 2014).

3. The parallel lives of a cartoon avatar: the animated Star System

As we have seen, *The Congress* raises interesting questions about the reinvention of the human through animating technologies, which can be immediately applied in today's world. At the same time, we have seen the uses acquired by the 2D animation that were chosen for this film, as a fracture of reality — the metalepsis —, and as a language in opposition to the realistic — since this virtual 'camera' eventually breaks to awake a reaction in the viewer. However, *The Congress* is a complex film to analyze because it abounds in paradoxes between its background message and what its surface may allow one to guess. *The Congress* denigrates Hollywood as an allegory of neoliberalism, but at the same time it maintains a nostalgic relationship with classic Hollywood, which arouses fetish fascination through the Star System — with Marilyn Monroe and John Wayne multiplied around Robin Wright upon arrival to Abrahama City, for instance — and towards a melancholically retro vision of cinema and animation industry: being a futuristic film, the 2D animation style and aesthetics in *The Congress* are directly connected to the traditional cartoon, and especially to the creations by the Fleischer brothers and Walt Disney's — with his *Silly Symphonies* — during the 1930s. This section of the paper will consider the historical relationships between the Star System and their animated caricatures, which started a tradition that continues to manifest up to present day.

Ari Folman states that *The Congress* is 'a story about the search for truth and one's own personality in the next world' (Krammer, 2011), taking as starting point the life of an actress, who observes how her identity vanishes at the service of the *new* film industry, marked by digital image. However, as also exemplified by *SimOne* — who is imagined by the audience as an actual actress —, Hollywood stars are a collective construction from their own films and press echoes, in which the real person has little to do — for example, the actor does not stop being an actor during the interviews that take place in the promotions of the films. As well, Robin Wright in Ari Folman's film is not like Robin Wright in the real world, despite the concomitances between the character and the real persona, which is comparable to the plot in TV series *Life's Too Short* (Ricky Gervais, Stephen Merchant, 2011-13), with the actor Warwick Davis starring the

actor Warwick Davis; or, more recently, Michel Gondry's series *Kidding* (2018), with Jim Carrey embodying a comedian in crisis, based on his own life experiences. Despite their link to actual events, all these cases pose a fictionalization of reality.

As well, film stars have frequently endured their pigeonholing in a certain archetype, as the characterization associated with a paradigmatic character, making the actors experience the fictionalization of *their own lives* since their characters become objects of desire. It is significant to remember the words of Rita Hayworth at the height of her fame, when she bitterly declared that 'men fell in love with Gilda, but they wake up with me' (Kobal, 1977). Likewise, about this split between person and *star*, Grace Kelly pointed out that for any taxi driver in Hollywood, she was simply 'someone who looks like Grace Kelly' (Grimaldi Forum Monaco, 2007: 84). As observed by Edgar Morin, the world of Hollywood is consubstantial to this dissolution of personality, since film stars are to carry out two lives — that of their films and their real life:

Their contracts even oblige them to imitate their screen personae, as if the latter possess the authenticity. The stars then feel themselves reduced to the state of specters who outwit boredom through "parties" and diversions, while their true human substance is sucked out by the camera. (Morin, 2005[1956]: 40).

Such duality of the artist's life has often led to tragic consequences which have turned cinema into a vampiric medium, as Folman's film suggests in the paradigmatic scene where Robin Wright is scanned; but also when the protagonist enters the hotel in Abrahama City and they say to her in reception that she is 'the sixth *Robin Wright* we received today', which constitutes the first warning of the actress' identity erasure in the animated world. Like Hollywood majors, animation studios created their own star system of popular cartoon characters, and very soon their world was permeated by an abundance of cameos of movie stars, coexisting with animation characters — of which I will name only a few, just to understand why the animation of movie stars is something as old as the Star System.

Already in 1918, Bud Fisher's characters *Mutt & Jeff* included Theda Bara in their cast in an animated short film — from which we no longer have anything but the original poster. Moreover, in *Felix the Cat in Hollywood* (Pat Sullivan, 1923), the feline protagonist met the animated doubles of Charles Chaplin, Gloria Swanson or Cecil B.

De Mille, who were rapidly recognized by the audience of their time. In this sense it is also interesting to revisit two Walt Disney's short films, *Mickey's Polo Team* (1936) and *The Autograph Hound* (1939), where animated and real stars tease each other. In the first, *Mickey's Polo Team*, the 'Movie Stars' team — formed by Stan Laurel, Oliver Hardy, Harpo Marx and Charlie (sic) Chaplin — confront the 'Mickey Mousers' — Mickey Mouse, Goofy, Big Bad Woolf and Donald Duck: in other words, Walt Disney made his own stars beat the best comedians of the time. The second sample, *The Autograph Hound*, allows to identify a usual feature of this kind of cartoons, which was the animated crossover of players who had signed contracts with different majors — the kind of meeting that could never take place in their actual films: this way, *The Autograph Hound* combines Metro-Goldwin-Mayer stars Greta Garbo and Mickey Rooney, with 20th Century Fox performers Shirley Temple, the *Queen on Ice* Sonja Henie, and the Ritz Brothers slapstick trio; ironically, this crossover is similar to today's trend in fandoms of putting together heroes and heroines from diverse universes like Marvel, DC, Disney, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, etc.¹³

Interestingly, although artists were not popular enough if they did not appear in the cartoons, today some of these old film stars are almost forgotten, which perhaps is why these productions lost their relevance after several years: fame is often an ephemeral phenomenon. For all that, the caricature of stars obeyed to their public image, clichés derived from their habitual roles or their physical appearance with which they built a comic gag, and not to the essence of their personality itself, which was irrelevant for the audience. Deliberately aimed at an adult audience, Tex Avery's satirical parody *Hollywood Steps Out* (1941) presents an animated world featuring exclusively film stars such as Clark Gable, Gary Grant, Greta Garbo, Groucho Marx, Johnny Weissmüller, James Stewart, Bing Crosby, etc. Here comedy not only derives from the extreme caricature of their appearance or physical defects — such as Greta Garbo's long feet or Clark Gable's massive ears —, but also from a number of winks to the audience and complicities that imply certain degree of cinephilia.

Despite their comical and iconoclastic aspects, the drawing style in *Hollywood Steps Out* makes visible the difficulty in producing these films: to make the caricature of film stars always recognizable, each character is mostly shown from the same view, renouncing to a more three-dimensional design, except when rotoscoping was used. As a result, the cartoon lacks the elasticity of animation — which also limits the animation of

The Congress in the scenes featuring multiple characters, like Liz Taylor, Muhammad Ali, David Bowie or Pablo Picasso. Therefore, from the 1940s onwards, the cameos of Hollywood stars would tend to disappear, or be limited to very specific moments of cartoons starred by animation characters like Bugs Bunny in *What's Up Doc* (Robert McKimson, 1950), a very self-conscious parody of the comedians who are pigeonholed in the same role or punchline — in this cartoon, Al Jolson, Jack Benny, Eddie Cantor and Bing Crosby appear for a few seconds as park bums.

In addition, it could be mentioned those animation series starring comedians, produced in parallel to their live action films — such as Pat Sullivan's *Charlot* series of short films (1918-19) —, or conceived to spin out the fame of their characters after the retirement of their actors, such as both Hanna-Barbera series *A Laurel & Hardy Cartoon* (1966) — time after the decease of both comedians —, or *Abott & Costello* (1967) — when Lou Costello had already passed away. This scenario poses a similar state of affairs to the one stated in *The Congress*, with animation relieving the actors of their functions. Also, during the 70s, 80s and 90s, a large number of animation shows were produced to commercially squeeze the success of popular live action series or films, such as the animated versions of the *Star Trek* (Hal Sutherland, Bill Reed, 1973-75), *The Real Ghost Busters* (Will Meugniot et al, 1986-91), *Teen Wolf* (Gordon Kent, 1986-1988) or *The Mask* (July Murphy, 1995-97); and the more recent *Mr. Bean: The Animated Series* (Aleksey Alekseev et al, 2002-2016), giving as a result a continuum between cinema, animation and television. Most notably, the veteran *The Simpsons* (Matt Groening, 1989-) has re-habituated the audience with the cameos of film and television stars, as well as all kinds of characters from culture, politics or science, as we can also see in other series such as *Family Guy* (Seth MacFarlane, David Zuckerman, 1998-) or *South Park* (Trey Parker, Matt Stone, 1997-).

Eventually, we can make all kinds of fantasies, mockeries and parodies through the animated characterization of celebrities. Animation allows the fulfillment of wishes and fantasies through these idols of the masses, like Charlot defeating the Kaiser (*How Charlie Captured the Kaiser*, Pat Sullivan, 1918) or John, Paul, George and Ringo challenging the Nazi-esque 'Blue Meanies' with the power of their music (*Yellow Submarine*, George Dunning, 1968), although they can also be ridiculed or sadistically exterminated. Through the usurpation of film stars personality, *The Congress* materializes Laura Mulvey's observations about Hollywood as a catalyst of desire:

The magic of the Hollywood style at its best (and of all the cinema which fell within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure. Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order. (Mulvey, 2009[1989]: 16)

The Congress clearly indicates that cinema and animation are not mutually exclusive worlds: in spite of their ontological differences, they are intimately linked in the collective imaginary, while their intercrossing is a privileged space for desire. Nevertheless, in *The Congress*, animation *is* desire. Animation represents desire through its subversive connotations and infinite transformations. And the (impossible) desire in *The Congress* is to return to the past, the ultimate longing in a future without any hope or purpose.

Conclusions

The Congress significantly resembles a novel like *The invention of Morel* (*La invención de Morel*, Adolfo Bioy Casares, 1940), where the cinematographic apparatus plays a central role in the reinvention of the human. In *The Congress*, the human is dissolved into an *animation* form. The self-referencing universe of cinema in *The Congress* suggests animation as a mean to achieve immortality; however, despite the privileged relationships between animation and cybernetics, robots, and automata — as attempts to pursue the Frankensteinian ideal, none other than the construction of a repairable, *re-animable* body —, when the virtual subdues the real, its only consequence is the *erasure* of the human, because we tragically become what we consume most.

Moreover, if the digital becomes ‘not only the archive but, as such archive, the crypt of (the memories of) the human’ (Cholodenko, 2015: 32), traditional animation has endured a parallel process, which concludes with its own subdue to the digital. Thus, Ari Folman contrasts CGI with animation conceived as a purely human work, suggesting a melancholic on animation as a world entirely *invented*, designed frame by frame.

By placing animation at the center of its dystopian apparatus, *The Congress* ponders on animation of the future, and animation of the past. Aesthetically, its 2D animation scenes have anticipated the retro-style tendency followed by some

workpieces like videoclips — such as *Are You Lost in the World Like Me?* (Steve Cutts, 2016), which reflects bitterly on the impact of mediating technologies in our view of the world — and the popular videogame *CupHead* (Studio MDHR, 2017). In *The Congress*, Folman confronts CGI animation — conceptually *present*, but technically *absent* from his film — with 2D animation, used to describe a hallucinatory state. In this sense, 2D animation in the film not only plays an interesting role in avoiding an illusion of authenticity — the suspension of disbelief that CGI facilitates in Hollywood cinema —, but also replaces that state with an aesthetic experience, where cinema is conscious of itself as if it were a lucid dream, penetrating such an unstable and *animated* entity as psychic life, inaccessible through any other medium than the evocation that allows us ‘to imagine the world from someone else’s perspective’ (Honesty Roe 2013: 25).

Eventually, Ari Folman’s formulation of *animating* technologies as a hallucination that fills life’s voids, taking over life completely, has not only been praised by Sci-fi, but by what Alan Cholodenko relates to Baudrillard’s ‘hysteresis’: the collectively organized dream is none other than that of social networks, the *cloud*, music on iPods, messages that need to be answered while we walk on the street — never in a straight line —, zombified: where the *hyperhuman*, the *shadow*, has made the body its own crypt (Cholodenko 2015: 38).

To finish, *The Congress* not only takes up the suggestions emanating from Stanislaw Lem’s text, but also contributes to critically illustrate a future page in the history of film — and that is of humanity: the disappearance cinema as we know it, dissolved in a myriad of languages, genres and (plat) forms, where animation plays an essential role. If in *Waltz and Bashir*, the film itself can be recognized as an analogy of its own therapeutic function —as much as for Ari Folman making the film meant *remembering*—, in *The Congress* animation is the symbolic apparatus that supports Folman’s dissection of animation as a vertebral element of industry, entertainment and society.

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¹ 'The computer has gone global, 'inside' and 'outside' the telly, ist net (inter), web (world wide) and reign as "medium of all media", networking, enveloping and operating everything [...]. As all technologies, for me themselves animators, do, especially epoch-'defining technologies'.' (Cholodenko 2015: 31).

² Peter Debruge (2013), who recommends *Waltz with Bashir* followers moderate their expectations, indicates that the free adaptation of the novel has meant, in his opinion, the lack of connection between Lem's allegory and our world ('somewhere in his adaptation, Folman lost the thread that connects this speculative fiction allegory to our world.')

³ Kate Hutchinson (2014), who comes to consider the film as ‘lifeless’ and ‘flat’, points out that ‘it’s as if the film-makers have licked too many acid tabs and forgotten to give their characters an exit door.’

⁴ After its debut in Cannes, Todd McCarthy points out: ‘The film’s first half is full of pregnant ideas about how rapidly changing technology could effect entertainment, creativity, corporate control, free will, selling out, identity, medicine and other endeavors. Folman’s live-action direction is confident and attractive and if the film had continued in the same vein to follow up on the ramifications of Robin’s decision in the “real” recognizable world, it might have stood a change of being more satisfying.’ (McCarthy, 2013).

⁵ Andrew Niccol had previously addressed issues related to the reinvention of the human — through genetics — in *Gattaca* (1997).

⁶ ‘Masahiro Mori described the uncanny valley as that dip in trust people feel when encountering a robot that appears too perfect to be real. Likewise, in CGI animation, many critics currently use the same term, ‘uncanny valley’, to describe scenes or movies that seem too perfectly rendered. In all of these uncanny moments with places and people, past memory and present experience somehow don’t mesh.’ (Blatter, 2014).

⁷ The animation in *The Congress* fully explores the possibilities of movement, like the changes of lysergic beauty of prolonged extremities like wings or the tendrils that proliferate like arabesques; an essential quality of animation that Eisenstein described in Disney’s *Silly Symphonies* as ‘plasmaticity’: a kind of polymorphic plasticity which occurs in the animated being who ‘behaves like a primordial protoplasm, not yet having a stable form, but capable of taking on any and all forms of animal life on the ladder of evolution.’ (Eisenstein 2011[1940-48]: 15).

⁸ Quoted by Jean-Georges Auriol: ‘Formes et manières’, in *LaRevue du Cinéma. Nouvelle Série*, Vol. III, n° 18.

⁹ Virtual reality (VR) is an environment of scenes or objects of real appearance, generated by computer technology, which creates in the user the sensation of being immersed in it, allowing some interaction with the environment as well as the perception of different stimuli that intensify the sensation of reality. Instead, augmented reality (AR) is the term used to define the vision of a real environment through a technological device, that is, tangible physical elements are combined with virtual elements. Therefore, the augmented reality is different from the virtual reality because augmented reality is perceived over the physical world, allowing the user to perceive a mixture of the two realities.

¹⁰ With this purpose, firms like MOPTIL (Mobile Optical Illusions) virtually recreate monuments such as the Acropolis or the Palace of Knossos. More information at: <https://moptil.com/es/inicio/>

¹¹ Although VR and AR may still seem prosthetic experiences to the users, their evolution is unpredictable, as it will be linked to the habits developed by users of technologies to come, such as 5G mobile phones, which greater speed and capability will make VR and AR an experience as universal as portable at all times. In the very near future, VR and AR could transform *imaginatively* any environment or city.

¹² As Bruno Hachero states, drawing from Georges Didi-Huberman (*Images In Spite of All*, 2004), the anecdote that Dr. Zahava Soloman refers to in the film about the photopgraher who goes into shock upon seeing the moribund horses at the hippodrome in Beirut, summarizes the sense of the narrative device proposed by *Waltz with Bashir*: that of animation as an ‘imaginary camera’ or ‘the distance that protects, which isolates the individuals from the horrors in which they’re immersed’ (‘cámara imaginaria’, ‘distancia que protege, que aísla al individuo del horror en que está inmerso’), but that breaks when an experience violently questions the viewer. (Hachero Hernández, 2015: 116. Author’s translation).

¹³ In her essay ‘Animation: The New Performance?’, Teri Silvio (2010) puts emphasis on the way in which animation serve to structure thought and behavior in contemporary times, where the ontological differences between fictional characters and those who *recreate* them through media such as ‘cosplay’ tend to be erased.