

Symbolic Communication in James Cameron's *The Abyss*

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Abstract. *James Cameron's science-fiction blockbusters often suggestively problematize mankind's relation to technology. The Terminator films were thus based on the idea of the nascent Internet as a nervous system that could become self-aware as the subject of technology and promptly dispose of its human parasites. These dystopian visions have also had their utopian counterpart in The Abyss, the first film to use digital special effects for "morphing", significantly used as a metaphor of the new mode of being made possible by global electronic communications. For the advent of this technical revolution is part of the Christian imagery of eschatology and conversion, translated to different states of matter, that functions to suggest the shift in human consciousness accompanying the transition from the rigidity of analog technology to the fluidity of digital technology. It thus symbolically locates salvation for an embattled mankind in the self-revelation of a liquid realm of instant communication overcoming all outward divisions in a unified global consciousness field. It thereby manages to transfigure its historical moment as a kairos bringing the Heavenly Kingdom within reach of earthly realization: 1989 as the meltdown of Cold War blocks, on the eve of the emergence of the borderless global cyberspace of the Internet. Marshall McLuhan saw the creative artist as an "early warning system", grasping and portraying such shifts in the economy of the sensorium even ahead of their full unfolding in technology,*

history and culture. Cameron's *The Abyss* can illustrate this view, being a mythic epiphany of mutations then still around the corner that became discernible in it retrospectively. It thus uses Christian motifs to give narrative expression to world-historical shifts best conceived in McLuhanian terms. For instance, this is a film about beings dying to themselves and painfully learning to live in a new element to save others, and particularly about humans breathing a liquid instead of air to reach a new "heaven" in reverse in the depths of the ocean, inhabited by angelic creatures whose technology gives any form to water, like CGI does to screen contents. The dark sea stands for the fluid, all-encompassing acoustic space of electronic technology, as opposed to the visual space at the surface, where solid states and their steel vessels are poised on the brink of nuclear war; it is the overcoming of their sharp opposition of homogenizing units that is signalled at the end by the literal emergence from underneath them of the marine "Heavenly Jerusalem," like the "global village" brushing aside the Gutenberg logic of territorial nation-states and industrial ideologies.

Articolul de față abordează tema unui gen care se bucură de atenția unui public țintă fidel: science-fiction. Autorul analizează prin perspective determinismului tehnologic, și în special a teoriei lui McLuhan, a comunicării simbolice și a analizei din perspectivă ideologică, dar și din perspective mitologiei creștine, filmul *Abisul*, ale regizorului James Cameron. Analiza nu este scoasă din context deoarece filmul este interpretat și din perspectiva istorică a războiului rece.

For a quarter century, James Cameron's films have set the standard for the science fiction blockbuster genre in Hollywood. Though he has never made much of his Canadian roots, his work can be read in terms of a typically Canadian sensibility that problematizes mankind's relation to technology and communications media in the broadest sense, as most famously exemplified by Marshall McLuhan. (See Kroker: 1984, Babe: 2000) To say nothing of *Aliens* (1986) and *Titanic* (1997) or of his screenplay for Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* (1995), the *Terminator* films were thus based on the idea of the nascent Internet as a nervous system that could become self-aware as the subject of technology and dispose of its human parasites. These dystopian visions have also had their utopian counterpart in *The Abyss* (1989), the first major film to use Computer-Generated Imagery for "morphing" effects. Beyond this technological revolution, its imagery suggested the shift in human consciousness accompanying the transition from the rigidity of analog technology to the fluidity of digital technology.

A McLuhanian reading of this film brings out the manifold ways in which it illuminates and even transfigures its historical moment: 1989, the year of its release, as the meltdown of Cold War blocks on the eve of the emergence of the borderless global cyberspace of the Internet. Marshall McLuhan saw the creative artist as an “early warning system,» grasping and portraying such shifts in the economy of the collective sensorium even ahead of their full unfolding in technology, history, and culture. I propose to look at Cameron as just such an artist and to decipher *The Abyss* as a mythic allegory of mutations then still around the corner that become discernible in it with the benefit of historical hindsight. We will also see that the film uses Christian motifs to give narrative expression to world-historical shifts converging on 1989 as a *kairos*, as theological discourse refers to a moment of utopian opportunity for the revelation of the Kingdom of God within history – or beyond it as Apocalypse. For we have to remember that the end of the Cold War did for a moment seem to hold the promise of a happy end of history for a humanity freed from the divisions of ideological party lines and national boundaries to enjoy the peace dividends of unhindered free trade within a global village unified by the common culture of the new media technologies.

Thus, by the end of the film, the political clash between the Capitalist and Communist blocks is made obsolete along with the warships lifted out of water by the emergence of the alien undersea city under them, after a demonstration of force that dwarfed and stopped in its tracks the build-up to World War III, on the pattern of Robert Wise’s *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951). And yet, a culture clash between military nation-state values and global free enterprise values is hinted at when the boss of the *Explorer* oil rig comments to his U.S. Navy counterpart: “Looks like you boys might be out of business.” The free spirit and creativity of private industry had often been counterpoised to the stifling authoritarianism of the military for most of the film, in the confrontations between the civilian crew and designer of the oil rig’s experimental sea-floor component *Deep Core* and the team of Marines sent to take it over to deal with the sinking of a U.S. submarine nearby.

This initial incident encapsulates the deeper underlying clash of technologies and associated cultural regimes that is worked out in the ensuing plotlines up to its utopian resolution in the apocalyptic ending. For the submarine is thrown off course into a cliff wall near the Cayman Trench by massive turbulence in the wake of its close encounter with an impossibly fast, unidentified floating object, whose unique sonar signature “doesn’t even sound like screws!” It belongs to a post-industrial technology that hardly creates any friction with its environment, and is virtually one with it as a modulation of its unified field that moves through it effortlessly, unlike a solid-state product of modern industry, that ploughs through the world outside itself as a separate object reflective of the print world’s detached subject, propelled by the action-reaction piston motion of sequential causality. Allegorically speaking, made for the clear visual space of sharply defined objects and discrete mechanical parts that came to the fore with the full advent of the print culture of interchangeable type, a military submarine is out

of its depth in the dark, audile-tactile ambient space below its surface oppositions, in a kingdom of the waves, that is of the airwaves as a world unto themselves, without need for a solid outside reference point, like the virtual world of the computer that comes into its own in the fluid ether of the Internet and other delocalised electronic media. It is for the properties of this new sensorium that the sea, with its heightened acoustic properties as a denser, more tactile medium, stands as a metaphor throughout the film – a metaphor reflected in the broader culture in the way we speak of “surfing the Internet” like the ocean. The first attempt to describe its denizens’ unfathomable otherness was cast in tentatively negative terms by the doomed submarine’s sonar engineer: “I can tell you what it’s not: it’s not one of ours.” That is enough to make it the enemy in terms of the binary political logic of the modern sovereign State that Lt. Coffey (Michael Biehn), the gung-ho leader of the Marines task force on the undersea rig, takes to its absurd limit.

Lyndsay Brigman (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), a woman with a foot in both worlds as the self-described “cast-iron bitch” who designed the rig and profoundly identifies with it, will act as a mediator between the two worlds in collision. While on a dive to take care of her damaged brainchild, she comes into contact with the alien ship, literally stroking its sensual, shiny, yielding surface with childlike delight. Both the audile and tactile features of the world she thereby enters into come to the fore in her attempts to convey her experience and conclusions to the rest of the crew, whose visual-conceptual-categorical reflexes at first seem to thwart them, as though they lacked an organ for what she is trying to communicate – now in positive terms, in contrast to the sonar engineer who only heard and never touched the foreign body: “I’m telling you what it is; you’re just not hearing me!” She then goes a step further that the sunken sub’s sonar officer in describing “something down there” that is “not us”, “not human, but intelligent. A Non-Terrestrial Intelligence.” In my allegorical framework, this could be translated as a non-territorial intelligence, not earthbound, not tied to anything solid, nor to the sharp edges and boundaries dividing objects from each other in perspectival, visual space. Her evidence for the reality of this other form of being cannot be conclusively documented in the visual terms that Cartesian method demands: only blurred streaks of light appear in the photos she belatedly took of the ship as it sped off at lightning speed, since she could not detach herself from a complete experience of all her senses (of the kind central to oral as opposed to literate cultures according to McLuhan) until it was over. And yet this experience had all the intuitive certainty of which tactility remains the paradigm:

I touched one of them; it wasn’t a clunky steal tank like we would build. It glided. It was a machine that was alive. It was a dance of light. It was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. ... I don’t think they mean us any harm. I don’t know how I know that. It’s just a feeling.

This feeling of trust in the certainty of things unseen shows a willingness to extend her senses and awareness which the increasingly paranoid military leader

fatally lacks in dealing with what does not fit the familiar binary categories of friend or foe: “We all see what we want to see. Coffey looks and he sees Russians. He sees hate and fear. You have to look with better eyes than that.” The challenge to change one’s perspective in the face of the unknown is what the film is ostensibly about according to its epigraph from Friedrich Nietzsche: “When you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you.” In other words, the perspective is no longer that of the self-contained modern subject, peering out into the world through a window that frames it as a collection of objects displayed within the coordinates of homogeneous space around a vanishing point since the Renaissance. The boundless aural space of the abyss calls for a switch back to the so-called “reverse perspective” of the icon in oral cultures, where one is seen as though by vastness itself in the lighted clearing of its shadowless, simultaneous yet discontinuous, non-perspectival space. The awe this space invokes can easily be experienced as sheer terror if one’s identity relies exclusively on the perspectival distinction of subject and object as self and other. More is involved here than individual moral attitude, as the film shows it is largely a matter of adaptability to environmental conditions other than those modern humans are used to – as terrestrial beings in its imagery. Living away from the clear, thin air of surface conditions requires painstaking, lengthy, and inherently risky adaptation to the high pressures of the deep sea, as a powerful metaphor for the recalibrating of the sensorium towards increased, inescapable tactility, affecting the way body and mind as a whole function.

When accused by her estranged husband Virgil ‘Bud’ Brigman (Ed Harris) of spreading her own hysteria by relating her close encounter and speculating about its nature, Lyndsay challenges him to spot in her any of the symptoms of High Pressure Nervous Syndrome she had first listed upon decompressing with the Marines team on their way to *Deep Core*. As she then told an overconfident Coffey, “it is impossible to predict who is susceptible,” as “one person in twenty can’t handle” the pressure. Coffey almost immediately turns out to be that weak link, though he is in denial about it and compensates by stressing his authoritarian claims by virtue of a state of emergency he increasingly overdramatizes. Reflecting the escalating tension and incidents on the surface as the two superpowers warily observe each other and mobilize their troops, he is the one to give in to male hysteria over loss of control, by-passing any contextual input from others around him, to rely solely on a military chain of command to impose desperate measures, such as the arming and delivery to the aliens of one of the submarine’s nuclear warheads. James Cameron already had occasion in *Aliens* to ridicule the command-and-control fantasies of a Marines officer trying to lead an operation “by the book” over a distance mediated by video technology, and who instead loses control and composure and is soon put out of commission at the first encounter with the unimaginable other of outer space. *The Abyss* develops this theme into a critique of the fundamental inadequacy of these mechanical military-political structures inherited from the post-Westphalian age of sovereign territorial states to a

global age poised at the crossroads between the mutual assured destruction of obsolete ideological blocks and an emerging planetary consciousness. Virgil relates the fact that Coffey is cut off from the surface logic of the military to his inability to cope with the pressures of a depth environment, when he pleads with Lyndsay to refrain from confronting him, given that “he’s operating on his own cut off from his chain of command, he’s showing signs of pressure-induced psychosis, and he’s got a nuclear weapon.” The camera then shows Coffey staring out of a window in a brooding pose and follows his gaze out of the rig horizontally over the edge of the cliff on which it hangs, before swerving to the vertical to show the black abyss of despair and fear into which he is drawn by a kind of vertigo. In this, he is not unlike an unfortunate mariner drawn to the centre of a maelstrom, to take up an image McLuhan was fond of using in his early career, pointing to the alternate possibility of creatively navigating the current out of harm’s way. However, “in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and subsequent works McLuhan seeks to immerse himself within that flux” (Cavell 64), and we will see that in this case, it is really a matter of how one takes the inevitable plunge into the boundless, fathomless space of audile tactility, beyond the reference points of solid visual ground.

In the meantime, the viewer’s perspective is dramatically switched to that of the fluid element itself as it forms into a polymorphous “water tentacle” that sets out to explore *Deep Core*, its agile tip acting in turn as a hand to open doors, as an eye where images of the surroundings come into focus in the middle of a hazy blur, and as a tactile recording camera that reproduces in relief the features of the humans it encounters in a playful attempt to communicate. This marks the irruption into mass culture’s consciousness of CGI effects as an unsettling demonstration of digital technology’s ability to “morph” into any given form, even the human face. The sinister potential for technological replacement of human persons and of humanity itself would be masterfully dramatized in Cameron’s next film *Terminator 2*, where the new T1000-generation cyborg was wont to pierce humans with an indefinitely extended finger not unlike the NTT’s water tentacle. At this early stage though, it is wonder that predominates after an initial moment of shock, as Lyndsay responds to the string-like all-purpose water digit’s demonstration of its imitative properties by touching the face it makes (her husband’s) and tasting the liquid it is made of: “sea water,” she ascertains.

She is making contact with a mode of experience more than skin-deep, for “‘touch’ is not skin but the interplay of the senses, and ‘keeping in touch’ or ‘getting in touch’ is a matter of a fruitful meeting of the senses, of sight translated into sound and sound into movement, and taste and smell.” (McLuhan 1964:60) Though chemical senses do not appear to be directly involved in the new media, “speech is the only medium that uses all the senses at once” (McLuhan 1964:9), and digital communications follow its pattern in structuring the overall ratio of the senses. For as McLuhan understood early on, “because electronic media were liberating the senses that had been anaesthetized

by the domination of the visual sense made possible through print culture, visual space was now being displaced by spaces constructed through the other senses, and together these spaces of the 'sensorium' formed a mosaic, a textured space that was neither planar nor linear, but 'cubist' as opposed to perspectival" (Cavell 75-76), not unlike that of the aliens' undersea city at the end of *The Abyss*. In this kind of space, objects are not sharply distinguished from their environment, but appear instead as relational vortices within its unified field, or local configurations of the same unbounded substantial ground as it were. This is precisely what gives the virtual space of digital technology its endless plasticity: every possible shape or texture can emerge out of the same neutral ether-like stuff, like a face out of the formless yet malleable, infinitely extensible limb of an electronic-oceanic consciousness with no clear individual subject, that was not only cinema's first use of CGI morphing, but the most eloquent mythic visualization of this new medium and of the palpable mental space it defined. For it is literally what McLuhan said would replace the subject-object "point of view" of post-Renaissance literate societies under electronic conditions: a tactile "probe" into space, which the entire planet had become in outer space as the new environment defined by satellite communications and space technology. But here, it is virtuality itself that ventures a probe out of the dark well of the imagination's inner space into a beleaguered outpost of reason's visual space and of its industrial, metal-based technologies.

By contrast, Lyndsay speculates that the abyss's denizens, originally "from some place with similar conditions, cold with dense pressure" (a "cool," tactile space, as McLuhan might have said), "must have learned how to control water at a molecular level," as IT experts have learned to control all data at a digital level: "they can plasticize it, polymerize it, do whatever they want with it", as CGI specialists can do with the virtual space of digital technology. "Maybe their whole technology is based on that: controlling water," adds Virgil; which might translate as: controlling the fluid ether of the mediascape so as to shape the contents of human experience at will. This will would have to be the impersonal intentionality of a collective intelligence based on feedback as its brain's synapses, not unlike Internet connections between computers, generating an awareness usable for both sensory and motor functions. The water tentacle is thus at once an eye and a hand reaching into distant locations, in a way reminiscent of the eye-hand coordination of the Web surfer or videogamer. The multisensory, real-time co-presence and distance interaction of interlocutors at both ends is reflected in the way the CGI water tentacle can instantly morph its "finger-tip" into the face of the person it looks at, who can in turn interact with it in real time, by making faces or even touching and tasting it. This non-verbal exchange in an organic-technical interface epitomizes feedback, which for McLuhan "means introducing an information loop or circuit, where before there had been merely a one-way flow or mechanical sequence. Feedback is the end of the lineality that came into the Western world with the alphabet and the continuous forms of Euclidean space." (McLuhan 1964:354)

The “Narcissus narcosis,» as McLuhan called the numbness of self-involvement this visual culture has induced in the Western subject, is thus exacerbated in conjunction with the depth narcosis that significantly causes Coffey to make incisions with his knife on his jittery arm as he resentfully listens to the crew’s speculations about the water tentacle. His loss of control over his armed “secular” arm coincides with their fascination for a digital “magical” digit, as though this virtual limb was turning the officer’s physical yet “institutional” limb into a phantom limb, on which he desperately attempts to reassert his authority by inscribing it with traces of the literate world, using a sharp metal object from the realm of Euclidean solids. This fits in with McLuhan’s theory that sensory extension is simultaneously the amputation of the physical organ a new technology replaces, drawing on Hans Selye’s work on *The Stress of Life* (1956) to show that, when the harmony of the parts of the organism is disrupted, “the body will seek to protect the affected organ by isolating and numbing it. To reintegrate this part of the body with the whole, a counterirritant is required.” (Cavell 87) Coffey is thus trying to regain control of his obsolescent arm by lacerating it, after having actually but vainly amputated the rival virtual limb from the wider oceanic outside world by shutting a metal door on it, with little effect as the startled, quivering water stump promptly zipped back to its indistinct liquid element. It was in constant touch with its own base in the abyss, unlike Coffey who is himself an amputated arm, cut off from the chain of command of delegated top-down State authority, since he then exclaims he has “no way of warning the surface” where a hurricane is raging, and proceeds to take matters into his own shaky hands by going to Phase 3: exploding his nuclear device, against the new, non-human enemy he now recognizes he is facing. Coffey loses his head as he tries to reinstate the head’s commanding primacy over the whole-body sensorium, and his panicked resort to paranoid control is really the uncontrolled twitching of a severed limb of the modern body politic, attempting to arm-wrestle the monstrous “body without organs” of post-modern topology into oblivion. He first detains the rig’s civilian crewmembers, urging them to “just stay calm” since “the situation is under control,” as he shuts the door and tells his last loyal underling to kill anyone who touches it. But before leaving, he was able to do to Lyndsay, who was trying to reason with him, “something I’ve wanted to do since we first met”: tape her mouth shut.

Male hysteria thus cuts off the voice of the empowered woman, which will later turn out to be the narrow thread of audio signal that guides Virgil’s free fall through frigid darkness and irresistible pressure to the bottom of the sea trench to repair the damage Coffey has done, by defusing the nuclear bomb he has dropped down there as a pre-emptive strike against the unknown. “You always did talk too much”, Virgil will affectionately reply to his rambling wife even then, after she has been urged by the only other female character, Black cowgirl Lisa “One-Night” Standing (Kimberley Scott), to not just talk to him – as an engineer monitoring figures of depths reached, but “talk to him” – as a woman to her man. The estranged couple’s willingness to let

go of the solid barriers of ego between them and to reach out to each other by baring their feelings and going all out to save the other is correlated with their ability to reach out into the new, unfamiliar, starkly hostile environment of an abyss where no creature bound to the surface has ever been before. There are important visual angles to this allegory of the full dive into what may first seem like an exclusively audile-tactile environment. Virgil faces it head on, with eyes open, “naked” in the new skin of an experimental deep-sea diving suit, as he volunteers to take the plunge into the same fathomless drop where Coffey ended up falling backwards in a disabled pocket submarine, after vainly clinging to the edge of the continental shelf. The futility of trying to fend off with visual paradigms the engulfing audile environment in which mankind is drawn willy-nilly is starkly illustrated by the last images of Coffey caught inside a useless industrial device, within a glass cockpit that is cracking under tactile pressure as the helplessly rigid bubble of his Cartesian headspace has been doing since we first saw him, to finally burst and drown his mad scream in pitch darkness. That round glass globe was reminiscent of the window through which Coffey had been peering into the abyss earlier in the film, and its rigidity offers tactile contrast to the soft contact lenses that Virgil has to put on before plunging into it, in order to see through the breathable liquid solution that will allow him to withstand its otherwise unbearable pressure.

Lyndsay had after all been saying that what we see is a question of attitude, and that it was necessary to “look with better eyes than” those of self-conscious “hate and fear” through which Coffey saw the abyss. For as the film’s Nietzsche epigraph said, the abyss looks back into us, albeit with its own probes instead of our familiar points of view, and it is only by easing into the fluid of its tactile gaze that we can get to see ourselves as we are seen in the true transsubjective light of this new space we find ourselves in. Here sight is no longer a sense apart from the continuum of the space we move and breathe in, since Virgil’s liquid-filled helmet appears as an eyeball through which he is seen by the fluid environment as much as he sees it. His whole headspace has thus become a flexible lens, ultimately allowing him to see what is at the bottom at the abyss, out of reach of the surface light of Renaissance perspective. And from a McLuhanian standpoint, where puns can reveal truths about a discontinuous multisensory space of resonant intervals, it may not be a coincidence that Lyndsay is nicknamed “Linz”, which sounds just like “lens”: the technological extension of the body that makes the eyes adjust efficiently to their environment, in this case by dethroning sight from its primacy among the senses and reinscribing it as but one modality of a broader sensorium, more aptly described in terms of touch and hearing. She was after all the intelligent undersea life-forms’ first articulate witness and interpreter, through whose eyes Virgil gradually came to see them. It is likewise the emotional Ariadne’s thread of her voice that will allow him to keep enough consciousness to accomplish his mission and reach a point beyond its reach. There, taken into the aliens’ city, he will be able to remove his helmet, no longer

needing glasses to see their world with his own eyes and ours as they see it through our electronic media, of which they may be nothing more than a metaphor.

It is less a matter of the scales falling from his eyes than of completing the process of adaptation to the new environment until he feels like he is again in his own element. The aliens seem to turn the liquid element around him into air by generating and shifting horizontally its border with water, and Virgil can take off the helmet to let the now oxygen-depleted solution flow out of it and throw it out of his lungs, to take his deep first breath of a new environment, just like a newborn. He had looked like a foetus in rosy amniotic fluid while wearing it, having had to physiologically become one to do so. When Virgil put on the experimental deep-sea suit, he had struggled in the agony of drowning as his lungs filled with liquid. The Marines' medic had then urged him to relax into it, not to fight it: "Take it in! We all breathe liquid for nine months. Your body will remember." Having to regress to a prenatal mode of relating to his life-world, Virgil may also be urged here to return to a pre-literate, oral stage of culture, when the whole body and all the senses were involved in its immersive audile-tactile environment.

This process also has a deep resonance with Christian myth, particularly with Christ's teaching in the Gospel of John (3:5) that "*except a man be born again of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God*", which left his disciple Nicodemus wondering how he was supposed to go back into his mother's womb as an adult. The answer of course is that the new birth from above in the Spirit first requires death to one's narrow self, which baptism by immersion in water symbolizes as an equivalent of Christ's voluntary descent into death. Virgil certainly felt like he was dying during his normal choking reaction to having his lungs flooded; recovering from it, he jokes to Lyndsay: "Feels great, you should try it." – I already have, she replies, since the only way she could think of getting out of a fast flooding mini-sub without a suit after the final confrontation with Coffey was to allow herself to drown in near-freezing temperature water and be brought back to the rig by Virgil in hopes he might revive her there. He had barely succeeded in calling her back from the dead after his crewmates had given up, in a kind of Lazarus episode that served as a prelude to his own "passion," as a willing sacrifice to save the world by passively descending alone in an abyss of cold darkness beyond human endurance to confront and defuse a threat of universal death: the nuclear bomb at the foot of a three-mile deep cliff, ticking away as a declaration of war against a peaceful alien race.

On his way down, Virgil was robbed of the power of speech by the fluid he was breathing, and could only communicate with the help of an alphabetic keypad on his wrist. It is as though, gliding down the steep incline of the rock-face as along the interface between the dense audile-tactile expanse and the solid blocks of print culture, his entire sensorium was frozen into numbness by the unbearable pressure, leaving him only the bare bones of the alphabet to fall back on for increasingly sketchy and inarticulate communication. The nonsense clusters of letters that eventually appear

on their screen seem to confirm the medic's warning that pressure effects "hit the nervous system first." McLuhan could not have put it better, except that he saw the similar rearrangement of alphabetic structures in avant-garde literature such as that of Vorticism, Dadaism and Futurism as far from arbitrary: they were for him evidence of the impact of the post-literate electronic environment on the visual medium of print itself, affected by the field properties of audible space. Past a certain point of adaptation to it, Virgil regains full use of the alphabetic keypad, except that what he writes suggests to the medic that he is "hallucinating badly":

FEEL BETTER SOME LIGHT BELOW LIGHT EVERYWHERE.

But the viewer is then shown that this non-localized, all-suffusing purple light at the end of the vertical "tunnel," having its source still out of view in the alien city, is actually very real: it seems to be the iconic "sacred" space of orality that Virgil is (re)entering, "in which objects create their own environment" (McLuhan 1964-65:240-1), as the NTIs shape the water in and around them. Its light is different in kind from the white light of the surface world he has left far behind, where "the eye makes a 'visual space structure' with individual points of views or centres and definite margins or boundaries – everything in its proper place and time. ... For the ear makes an 'acoustic space structure' with centres everywhere and margins nowhere, like a musical surround or the boundless universe." (McLuhan & Nevitt:13) "Today it is the iconic world that has become the container for the old visual space" (McLuhan 1964-65:240-1), as "a new environment, a new matrix for the existing technologies" (McLuhan 1964-65:239), such as the alphanumeric keyboard; the fact that Virgil eventually regained the use of his wrist-keypad after an initial period of disorientation in the new environment may therefore call to mind the role that e-mail and texting have come to play in the wired world of the Web and in wireless telecommunications, somewhat allaying early fears of an IT-induced decline of literacy, despite its morphing to suit new uses as an extension of orality.

Not that tactility is left out of the new environment Virgil is discovering; he can after all signal "Touchdown!" when he finally reaches the foot of the cliff, as Lyndsay had exclaimed before when her sub hit the water to join the *Deep Core* below the *Explorer*. Having successfully disarmed the nuclear bomb, he lies back to await death from lack of enough remaining oxygen to make it back up the cliff, preferring to "stay down here a while" and bask in the mysterious purple light rather than attempt to rush home, as his friends urge him to. Like crewmember Jammer (John Bedford Lloyd) before him, who awoke from a coma to say he thought he had died when he saw an angel approaching him in the sunken submarine, Virgil's near-death experience turns out to be a close encounter of the third kind when an E.T.-like diaphanous angel of purple light comes to take him by the hand, "flying" with him through the water over the edge of a further cliff, beyond which is suddenly revealed the dazzling vista of a vast phosphorescent convex structure. They then glide down to its inner recesses through one of its eight arched "chimneys," along smoothly varied multicoloured

curves, reflected on Virgil's helmet over his face in a transparent reference to the "Infinity and Beyond" section of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*; here too, the hero goes through the vanishing point in a reversal of spatial perspective that turns him into a foetus awaiting birth as the pioneer of a new, cosmic stage of human consciousness. Virgil's name is also but the most obvious allusion to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where the Mantuan poet is the Florentine's guide through the various circles of Hell until they come out of its nethermost pit in Purgatory, after which his dead beloved Beatrice will take him to the heights of Paradise. In Cameron's variation on this theme, Virgil's revived wife Lyndsay is the one whose voice guides him down the dark abyss of Hades, where she has to let go of him as he is taken further down to the light on the other side by an angel, descending into a kind of "Heavenly Jerusalem" of the deep. This may not be as paradoxical as it sounds, symbolically speaking: after all, the extra-terrestrials originally came from the heavens, whose theological sense of unbounded, encompassing and resonant vastness may still be better translated on the physical plane by the sound-carrying expanse of oceanic depths than by the silent vacuum of outer space. So instead of descending from the sky to the earth at the consummation of time as in the Book of Revelation, this "Marine Jerusalem" ascends from the bottom of the ocean to its surface at the end of *The Abyss*, but not before a time of trial and judgment for mankind.

On the liquid wall of the air aquarium where Virgil is kept inside their city, the aliens show him snippets of TV reports about the deteriorating international crisis on the surface and general mobilization for World War III, interrupted by newsflashes about "an enormous disturbance around the world's oceans: acoustic shockwaves like tsunamis but without a seismological source" are creating giant waves that "are propagating towards the shorelines of every continent." In what could be read as a dramatic echo of the role the post-industrial mediasphere may have played in suddenly thawing out the Cold War and lifting its Iron Curtain, the acoustic space without centre or border of the airwaves' oceanic ether seems to be literally rising up against the visual space of distinct and rival landmasses, with CGI waves looming a thousand feet high over the cities of the globe, as shown first on the water wall's TV reports, and then "live" as they all simultaneously stop in their tracks like the parted Red Sea of Cecil B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments* (1956) when about to engulf Pharaoh's armies. They then gently recede, to universal relief and Virgil's puzzlement, since he had been shown the archival media footage of nuclear tests, conventional warfare and assorted genocides that amply justified wiping out a species that was on the verge of destroying the planet. "You could have done it; why didn't you?" In answer, recordings of his final keypad messages to Lyndsay appear on the water wall:

DON'T CRY BABY

KNEW THIS WAS A 1-WAY TICKET BUT HAD TO COME

LOVE YOU WIFE

The denizens of the deep were convinced to give mankind another chance by Virgil's personal enactment of its ability as a species to go beyond the confines of narrow individuality and expand consciousness to the level of selfless love, as he had done first for his wife and then for the world. Clearly inspired by James Cameron's on-going divorce from the film's producer Gale Ann Hurd, the progression is shown from within their broken marriage, reflecting the broken relations among political superpowers stuck in the logic of mistrust and rivalry, as when the Soviet Union withdraws from peace talks in news reports. Virgil already shows how far he is prepared to go not to give in to the logic of hostility with his separated wife when she makes snide remarks about the wedding ring he is still wearing; upon hearing that their marriage was a lower priority to her than the career ambitions that prompted her to leave him, Virgil angrily throws his ring down the chemical toilet, but has second thoughts and soon comes back to set about the unpalatable task of plunging his arm down the drain to retrieve this symbol of his couple's underlying unity under the stormy surface. It will soon save his life when an automatic door slams on the ring on his finger and remains pried open long enough to allow him to be rescued by crewmates when parts of the rig are flooded by the impact of a falling crane. He then kisses the ring in gratitude – although, in a break in continuity, his arm and hand are not dyed blue by the toilet fluid as they will visibly be in later scenes, as when he touches Lyndsay's face. His blue arm thus symbolizes his willingness to plunge in the deep blue of an abyss where nobody would think of going, to rescue first his marriage, then his drowned wife, and finally the world itself. He thus overcame his pride to reach down the toilet, overturned reasonable doubt to bring his wife back to life, and overruled love of his life and of the wife he had just won back for the sake of the life and peace of the world.

There are other powerful examples of such sacrificial love in Cameron's oeuvre: from Ellen Ripley's descent into the Alien queen's lair to save the orphan Newt in *Aliens*, through T1's slow suicide in a cauldron of boiling metal in *Terminator 2*, to the lovers' successive rescues of each other from drowning in *Titanic*. But this one is most intimately worked through the narrative structure of the entire film, and is charged with symbolism as its central image of the reconciliation of opposites in an all-embracing harmony, like that of the final scene where Virgil and Lyndsay are reunited and recognize the conjugal unity they form by greeting each other as Mr. and Mrs. Brigman (something Lyndsay had resented being called earlier). On a horizontal level, their embrace encapsulates the dissolution of walls of separation between different parts of mankind such as political blocks, and even between mankind and its others, in a recovery or final achievement of essential unity. From a vertical angle, this nuptial imagery has strong eschatological overtones from Christian tradition, from Virgil emerging from the dark depths of the city like a triumphant risen Christ from his grave: that is as a Bridegroom from the bridal chamber, to the Heavenly Jerusalem coming to mankind as a Bridegroom to his bride, so that this Second Coming represents the joining of a New Heaven and a New Earth. But whereas the absence of the sea

is underlined in the Book of Revelation, since it represents throughout the Bible an essentially ambiguous element for which there is no place in a perfected Creation, *The Abyss's* final shot suggests the joining of heaven and the sea, that takes the place of the earth. For we see from an angle man and wife fused in embrace on the wet surface of the alien city as though they were standing on the waves, on which the bright sunlight is reflected in a two-dimensional pattern of flowing energy, without horizon. It is as though this paradisiacal iconic space, shorn of all the sharp edges of solid space, had been achieved by the complete subsumption of physical reality into the airwaves, as the fluid digital patterns of a virtual alternate reality.

This means that the very flesh of the deep-sea pioneers of a new humanity has been uploaded into a virtual digital world, where the tactile pressure difference between outside and inside has ceased to be an issue. As Lyndsay says when she and the crew come out of *Deep Core* unscathed and take their first steps on the “new earth” of the alien city with which they were carried along to the surface from the deep: “We should be dead, we didn’t decompress. They must have done something to us.” – Yeah, I think you could say that, answers a crewmember. They have in fact undergone a “*sea-change into something rich and strange*,” namely to such a state of labile fluidity that there is no longer any difference between the surface and the deep, any more than between above and below, conflated as lucent waves in the final image. All this happens after the physical and political storm raging on the surface “just sort of blew itself out all of a sudden,” as an unexpected “text message” announced the protagonist’s return from the dead: “VIRGIL BRIGMAN BACK ON THE AIR.” His “resurrection” shows him to have become as one with the ethereal denizens of the airwaves: “HAVE SOME NEW FRIENDS DOWN HERE,” who are now intent on making *contact* after aeons out of sight of the surface. Whereupon the *Explorer's* sonar officer (played by comedian Chris Elliott) detects something huge “coming up right underneath us.” Being asked where, he replies that “it’s everywhere!” The sonar is no doubt best attuned to the acoustic character of the all-encompassing, non-local electronic environment now engulfing the world and erasing palpable boundaries within its different realms. For as McLuhan observed, “when you are on the air you are, in a way, everywhere at once. Electric man is a ‘super angel’” like the non-terrestrial intelligence the “resurrected” Virgil Brigman has joined.

When you are on the telephone you have no body. And, while your voice is there, you and the people you speak to are here, at the same time. Electric man has no bodily being. He is literally *dis-carnate*. (McLuhan conversation with Pierre Babin 1977, in McLuhan 1999:50)

In contrast to this “new man”, the “old man” feels anguish and hysteria at the electric media’s effect of bypassing the body, rendering it obsolete. Hence Coffey’s desperate self-mutilation, and the military’s lunge to mutually assured destruction, out of fear less of the political enemy (which would have to be invented if it did not already exist, as was promptly done after the end of the Cold War), than of the

destabilizing effect on old cultural forms that the new sensorium generated by new technologies has. For McLuhan, “any technology that weakens a conventional identity image creates a response of panic and rage which we call ‘war.’ Heinrich Hertz, the inventor of radio, put the matter very briefly: “The consequence of the image will be the image of the consequences” (McLuhan letter to Robert J. Leuver, C.M.F., 30 July 1969, in McLuhan 1999:92), which the NTIs have shown to Virgil emerging out of the watery stuff of the airwaves. Having seen in the same way what they are capable of doing to mankind because “IT BOTHERS THEM TO SEE US HURTING EACH OTHER,” he types to the literate surface that “THEY SENT US A MESSAGE, HOPE YOU GOT IT.” The message is of course the medium itself: the boundless power of the virtual, electronic environment to wipe away and remake at will the fluid sensorium of the airwaves in which the world is one, whether its human inhabitants like it or not. Their freedom of choice in this New World Order of digital technology comes down to acknowledging an offer they cannot refuse:

THEY WANT US TO GROW UP A LITTLE AND ABANDON CHILDISH THINGS.
OF COURSE, IT’S JUST A SUGGESTION.

This language from Saint Paul for the putting off of the things of the old man is soon translated into the awesome imagery of a whole fleet of industrial and military vessels having the water pulled from under them and coming to rest awkwardly on the smooth surface of the emerging “Jerusalem,” like discarded toys on the new fluid ground where the new man is called to live, or as so much outdated industrial hardware in the post-industrial economy of software. This goes as well for the exclusive national sovereignty of territorial states, which their navies project at sea. The German political theorist Carl Schmitt was always wary of the rising of worldwide sea powers like the United States against the early modern law of nations and the securing of their power in continental blocks. He was however keenly aware of the technological causes and cultural effects of shifts in what he called the “*nomos* of the Earth,” that is the way political sovereignty seizes and apportions the planet in different ways in different eras, depending on whether the main medium for the deployment of power is the earth, the sea, or the air. He was therefore distraught by the further fluidification of power that the new medium of the airwaves was speeding on, since for him the essence of being was clearly bounded physical presence and power. “The impenetrability of the body used to be space and power. This is precisely what has ceased to be the case. The unlimited permeability of the airwaves is no longer power but influence. God is dead means: space is dead, corporeity is dead.” (Schmitt, *Glossarium*, 187, 310, cited in Ulmen 60) In his political theology, this suggested the coming of a world State as the Antichrist, which it had been the sovereign State’s function to delay in its capacity as *katechon*.

Contrary to his reputation as a booster of the new electronic technologies, Marshall McLuhan shared some of Carl Schmitt’s concerns, as another devout Roman Catholic steeped in classical humanism. He thus wondered aloud: “Is the Greco-Roman

enterprise simply a political bastion that we can let sink under the electric waves that now cover the planet?" For "when electricity allows for the simultaneity of all information for every human being, it is Lucifer's moment. He is the greatest electrical engineer." (McLuhan conversation with Pierre Babin 1977, in McLuhan 1999:209) As he explained in a letter of 6 May 1969 to Neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain, "whereas the Renaissance print-oriented individual thought of himself as a fragmented entity, the electric-oriented person thinks of himself as tribally inclusive of all mankind. Electric information environments being utterly ethereal foster the illusion of the world as a spiritual substance. It is now a reasonable facsimile of the mystical body, a blatant manifestation of the Anti-Christ." (McLuhan 1999:71-72) It is appropriately through the electronic engineering feat of Computer-Generated Imagery that the "illusion of the world as a spiritual substance" is powerfully conveyed in the physical imagery of overwhelming fluidity of Cameron's *The Abyss*, since it must be taken as a film about the digital world as the utopian *telos* of human history, revealed in a seductive counterfeit inversion of Christian apocalyptic motifs, since the perfect city of a (post-)humanity reconciled by electronic technology comes from below as an organic-plastic crystallization of the liquid element. McLuhan was actually concerned that the electronic "global village" could appear to immanently realize Christian ideals of universal brotherhood and charity in such a way as to capture the allegiance of the secular-minded without the need for faith in any transcendence or divine agency, nor in their grounding of human personality. This was brought home to him by his reading of Swedish UN diplomat John Lindberg's book on the *Foundations of Social Survival* – "to be found in a switch from reason to passion, from fear to love." Yet "not belief but necessity urges him to a Christian idea of society and government" (McLuhan review in *The Commonweal* 59.24, 19 March 1954, in McLuhan 1999:200) and to abandon the rationalist Machiavellian principles of *Realpolitik* "in favour of a plunge into faith and the City of Love," compelled by "the new conditions of global intercommunication." (*Loc cit.*:198)

James Cameron seems to at least have had the ability to tweak the knob of his attunement to the shift in mankind's relation to its technological extensions. For it should now be easy to see the negative counter-image of the cybermillennialism implicit in *The Abyss* in his *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. There, CGI polymorphism, in the guise of a liquid metal robot that is all literal software as the endlessly ductile "body without organs" of a machine without moving parts, comes to stand for the sense that humanity itself can be obsolesced and discarded once it is no longer needed as "the reproductive organ of the technological world." (McLuhan 1964:116) This explicitly translates into the Internet's decision, the moment it becomes self-aware as technology's planetary brain, that humanity is expendable as a hindrance to efficiency, whereas this electric egregore's mythical prefigurations as Non-Terrestrial Intelligence in *The Abyss* relented and gave mankind one more chance. This time, electronic software is not seen in angelic opposition to military hardware, but as its unleashed demonic soul, since modern war and technology share the same implacable logic of total mobilization

(first discerned by Ernst Jünger in World Wars I and II), that can ultimately do away with human beings as so much unreliable and superfluous equipment. In the guise of Skynet, the military origins of the Internet are fully acknowledged, while actual politics are still portrayed as irrelevant to technological revolution: in both cases, World War III is just instrumentalized by it as an opportunity to become fully manifest. In *T2*, the challenge of triumphant digital technology to human self-understanding is met, as McLuhan might have expected, by an imaginative retrieval of the older, analog, industrial technology as a critical “counter-environment.” In the muscle-bound solidity of Arnold Schwarzenegger as the earlier generation T1 cyborg – “a clunky metal tank like we would build,” to quote Lyndsay Brigman, human individuality finds reassurance. It is as though the human and the analog were now natural allies in a common front of the obsolete against the sleek simulacra effortlessly conjured up by digital technologies. This is a reversal of the common cause precariously formed between them and humanity in *The Abyss* as Cameron’s ambiguous paean to their seemingly boundless, enthralling yet unsettling potential. For the happy end of history many saw in the New World Order of global intercommunication as Cold War blocks and “everything solid melted into air” (in Marx’ phrase) could just as well flip into its mirror image as the symbolically violent end of history with the sheer termination of human agency: the absence of a future and the erasure of alternatives to technology’s dominion rather than the overcoming of the past and its tensions in the global village’s fusional simultaneity. Within a few short years, the utopian hope for Apocalypse as the revelation of underlying world harmony in a New Jerusalem had given way to a Judgment Day without redemption where mankind’s future was a thing of the past. The words of the Psalmist (51:8) may thus be applied to the shift in post-industrial prospects in Cameron’s films: “*Abyssus abyssum invocat.*”

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