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**A DIALOGUE BETWEEN
TECHNOLOGY AND
HUMANITY IN THE
DIGITAL CINEMA**

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Abstract: By exhibiting alternative bodies, lives and worlds, *The Congress* (Ari Folman, 2013, France) opens a dialogue between art, technology and the representation of reality. The director, screenwriter and co-producer use augmented reality to produce an unusual effect of approximation between live action and animation. Amidst the discouragement of their lives, the characters define who they want to be, where and how they want to live. Technology makes possible what the will determines. The clash between technology and humanity in the setting, scripting and characterization of the characters is the subject matter of this study. Through the film analysis of the official trailer, it proposes to demonstrate how augmented reality, as a diegetic cinematographic element, mediates the representation of the real and the virtual perspective in the construction of will.

Keywords: Ari Folman, mediation, *The Congress*, real representation, augmented reality.

INTRODUCTION

The crying eyes closed-up on in the first scene are beat upon by the low voice that insists on talking about mistakes, poor choices and past blunders. When she finally pronounces “And now...”, the tears are gone - the image has revealed a woman with her back to a window where the sun, the green, the bars, and the red come together before the first cut to give time and space to the question: “What now, Albert?” It is the first time we hear the voice of the actress Robin Wright playing Robin Wright. “What did they offer?”

Albert, Harvey Keitel’s character, pauses and takes a sip of his neat whiskey before continuing to ponder: “I have no idea (...). I would like to know. They called me (...), yelled at me (...), and then said they have an offer - the final offer. That this would be the last one. And that the offer wouldn’t stay on the table for long”.

Albert’s speech, which Robin usually calls Al, introduces the disquieting and dense work. The drama is set in the co-production of Israel, Germany, Poland, Luxembourg, Belgium and France. The director is former Israeli soldier Ari Folman and his challenge is to answer the questions.

Now is a near future in which the movements and expressions of the actors are been scanned and the films are developed from their digital images. The offer consists of a digital work proposal for the actress Robin Wright, like everything that, in the given context, means acting.

Her agent Albert has no idea; he would like to know, but how to describe something unprecedented? John Locke once said that languages only have the words they have a need for. They don’t know what they need to do.

The studio professionals called, yelled, and announced an offer. What kind of offer requires screaming? If negotiating presupposes agreements in which all parties are satisfied, what is the meaning of prior depreciation? Why do they believe it is necessary to lower the other party’s sense of worth before making the offer?

It will be the final. The last. It will not be available for long. Is urgency a reflection of the massive use of technology? What will become of the merits of the actress of *The Promised Princess* (Reiner, 1988, USA), *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994, USA), *The Promise* (Penn, 2001, USA), who led the studio to make her this offer, to justify their belief that this is the end of Robin Wright?

The answers come from Jeff Green, an incarnation of Peirce’s concept of fallibilism, in which “sign and all I can use to lie”, interpreted by Danny Huston. He looks at her directly in a dialogue as enigmatic as it is revealing: “We want to scan you. The entirety of you: your body, your face, your emotion, your smile,

your tears". With her back to the camera, Robin walks down the halls of the studio as Jeff's voice continues: "We want to copy you, we want to preserve you".

At that moment, The Promised Princess poster zooms in on an image where Robin Wright's youth takes over the entire screen. "We want to own this "thing" called Robin Wright!"

On stage, the young lawyer and pragmatic: "When they make their copy and put it on the computer there is no turning back. The studio becomes the owner of the character". Robin has her doubts: "Which character?" Then he sentences, "The one the actor was."

The mediation proposal is on the table. Ari Folman is on standby to create a digital representation of Robin Wright. Digitally solve conflicts beyond truth, meet needs beyond time, and eternalize his youth beyond imagination. This study analyzes how this happens.

BEYOND TRUTH

Just as the character ignored the opportunities of her past, in the initial scene the landscape is presented behind Robin. Vertical frames separated Robin from the fence. Yellow flags on the left, a red flag on the right. Above, in a clear blue sky, wheels of a plane's landing gear over blurred green vegetation. In the background, an aluminum fence and in the front plane, the actress wearing dark green, light hair pulled back, hands in a silent plea over her lips as showed in the figure 1.

This setting introduces the viewer to the reality of the character. Although there is life, normality and calm, she is alien to it all. She does not touch the green; neither does not feel the sun nor see the blue of the sky. The flags shake their colors vigorously, signaling landing operations that do not seem to matter to the woman without eyes for the world.

All contact is made through bitter dialogue, in a tone of reckoning, with someone who will prove to be old, brown and beige, with no windows, no doors, and four lit lamps to her left. The words frame colorless pictures arranged on green, tired walls.

A red kite in the sky without bars cuts the speech with melancholic music to, then, return to the sound Albert's silence (Harvey Keitel). "Aaron needs me back home." He speaks while a boy looks up in spite of the fence just behind him. Robin runs, dogs bark. This is the presentation, in live action, of the everyday life without future of the actress Robin Wright. Without a doubt, the proposal is accepted, for a sequence of scenes regarding the actress' digitalization begins in the figure 2.

Dark, the scenes displayed in a panorama around a blue "dome", full of lights surrounding the Robin Wright "thing". Here, technology talks to the image of the character to generate, together, digital representations displayed on the computer screen. The "dome" proposes to execute what Fernando Andacht calls the "Midas touch" (Andacht 2007). The attempt to represent the real of the character results in the production of pixels that refer to illusions that go beyond the captured truth. Al demands, Robin smiles, the process of capturing signs of her emotions progresses.

As the screen fades out transition in, she asks: "Can I go back to where I came from?" Twenty years have passed; she will receive honors due to the success of her character. Stimulating music insinuates itself amidst the answer. Then, she gains height amid an explosion of color in the animation in which Robin flies, drives, and comes across a statue of the young actress in a large hall predominantly pink and golden. He is filled with, if I may so call it, people in their animated versions. In the background, it should be read: "Welcome to the Futuristic Congress" illustrated in the figure 3.



Figure 1: Robin Wright in live action.

Source: Frame from *The Congress* (Folman, France, 2013) DVD.

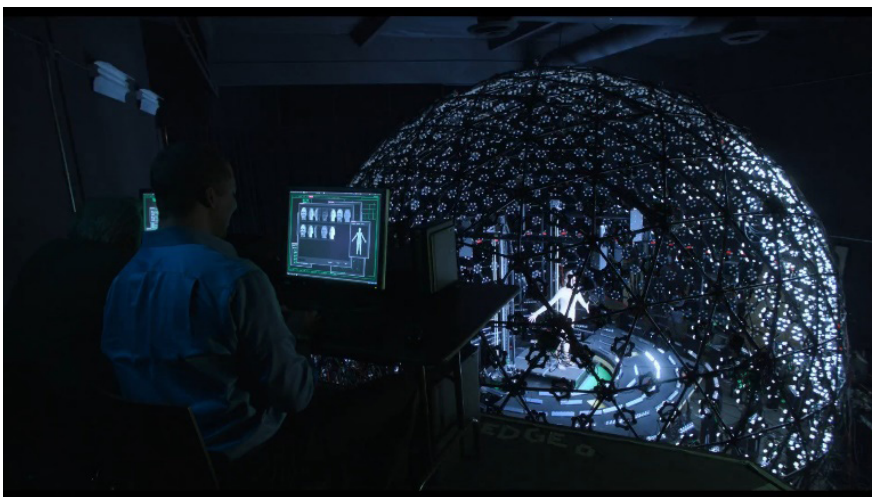


Figure 2 – The dome of digitalization.

Source: Frame from *The Congress* (Folman, France, 2013) DVD.



Figure 3: Robin Wright in animation.

Source: Frame from *The Congress* (Folman, France, 2013) DVD.

The mediation seems to work. Science fiction has given way to fantasy and life is happening in front of it. She is in the center, on the screens, at the reception asking for her room. The reality created around her representation is a success. Other contracts? What for?

BEYOND TIME

Few characters drive the dramatic structure strong and alive. The others configure the ideology of society as a frame of the time they represent. Throughout the course of the feature film, the images talk with ideas. Apparently disconnected voices and plans contribute to the effect of sinechism, “the tendency to consider everything as continuous” (CP 7.565, Peirce, 1931-1958), eliminating the dualism between biology and culture in the gender transitions of the narrative.

Image and narrative build the contradiction of superficiality to stimulate creativity as showed in the figure 4. Images resemble delusions in situations that are not at all common, as if people lived in the superficiality of a sensorial dimension. By opting for the framing of characters apparently enjoying the sensations chosen, Ari Folman seems to defend the idea that the superficial unveils what really matters and opposes this understanding in the direct dialogues of multiple connotations of the characters. The narrative syntagma of *The Congress* (Folman, 2013, France) is based on the singularity of “useless details” (Barthes 2012).

At first, the drama starring the decadent actress, mother of a boy with a degenerative disease who is going deaf, turns into an exciting science fiction. After hearing from the director of Miramont “I want to keep you young forever”, her indecision is placated by the cries of her agent “Wake up Robin! This is the door to your freedom!” The soundtrack brings her closer to the

“dome” where she is photographed, scanned, meticulously unveiled. Like a farewell to the hopeless perspective present in her human representation, Al screams, the music screams, the problems scream. Robin succumbs and smiles.

If the script represents a transitory state, the film embodies the poetry of Jean-Claude Carrière’s metaphorical definition of his “passing form destined to disappear, as the larva when it turns into a butterfly”. The film is full of signs of war and other intertwined wounds, written, embedded in the work of Ari Folman. He is ready for the flight of the butterfly, which, in this case, is the transition between live action and animation as showed in the picture 5

In the trailer, the transition is sewn by the fade out after Robin Wright’s question, and the answer to the character Dylan Truliner: “That place you came from doesn’t exist” rocked by the song *Forever Young* composed by Max Richter for the film and played by Robin Wright herself. “You look fantastic! In animation, of course,” says director Jeff Green when he sees it. By accepting the “final offer”, everything that represents this “thing called Robin” has overcome the time barriers of time. The script links the scenes with many Robins in ontological actions and an incessant call by Aaron. *Forever young! Repeat the song. Aaron! Repeat, Robin.* But she wants to know, “How do I know if I’m dreaming?”

The 61st Robin registering that day, as informed by the receptionist, has sexual relations with Dylan. He holds her on the blue, on ice, they make love and meals together. *Forever young* higher and higher. “To find Aaron, we’re going to have to go on a very long journey.” The mesmerizing scenes are rosy, the lines interspersed with melody. “You make a choice and feel what you want.” Aaron’s kite gets lost, the present catches fire. Time’s up, so is the music. The script points to the



Figure 4 – Characters representation in the sensorial dimension.
Source: Frame from *The Congress* (Folman, France, 2013) DVD.



Figure 5 – Robin Wright transformation.
Source: Frame from *The Congress* (Folman, France, 2013) DVD.



Figure 6: Robin and Dylan farewell in the restaurant.
Source: Frame from *The Congress* (Folman, France, 2013) DVD.

second transition. The live action drama, the animated science fiction, Dylan asks, "What will you choose?"

BEYOND IMAGINATION

Robin Wright's self-enactment (Goffman 1959) is the central argument of Folman. In a game of representing herself, in the initial live action scenes, she submits herself to the judgment of the other, to the discourse of society and finally to the digital destiny vested in the "door of freedom". I agree with Gastaldo's interpretation of Erik Goffman's words when he says that "insofar as relations are considered obvious - when in reality they are absolutely not - a hegemony is perpetuated. No wonder this supposed naturalness becomes a source of social constraint" (Gastaldo 2008). I add to it the feeling of rejection, supposedly unconscious, of the protagonist to the status-quo of the transactions, of the behavior they expect of her. If Al configures the fatigue of her past, Jeff Green waves with the surety of a future. But she seems to insist on denaturalizing what for others is natural. After all, who is Robin Wright, anyway? The sequences explore her relationship with the world, her feelings, her needs, until she reaches the point in the film where she meets Dylan's animated version and can choose in the scene pictured in the figure 6.

Andacht states that "when the audience observes the expressions of emotions of ordinary people that they consider not to be scripted or rehearsed, and, therefore, spontaneous behavior, close to the physiological - exactly the opposite of what happens in fiction - spectators yearn to experience of authenticity" (Andacht 2015). I appropriate his statement to analyze Robin Wright's choice as object and sign. Augmented reality interacts with the world. All Robin had to do was take the ampoule for her perception of reality to transform. Unlike virtual reality

that reports to another world through glasses or special clothes, there is no departure. Consequently, there is no return. The access is by one's own body, mind and will. Amid the realm of presumed will, what leads her to differ from the almost unanimous choice of people to adhere to this representation of the world provided by augmented reality? If it is human nature to seek satisfaction and pleasure, what could be more real than to cling to mechanisms to realize one's own will and the satisfaction of their physiological needs? However, she insists on slipping out of script.

The characters in the animation scenes contrast with the people who suffered from the first live action sequences as showed in the figure 7. The images are full of signs of need. In contrast, in the animation there are signs of exuberance. Starting from the fictional context of the actress who plays herself, what better example of a genuine relationship between object and the sign that represents it could we find (CP 2.92, Peirce, 1931-1958)? Robin presents herself with her chronological age, her slender body, and her deep eyes. Would, in final analysis, the possibility of self-representation have freed people from the need of others' approval? On the other hand, would Robin be incapable of assuming herself in another perspective, as she had in the past, by giving up productions and breaking contracts?

Ari Folman displays the mechanisms of technological mediation and presents Robin with loving possibilities, adventures, a privileged place in the digital society that her images helped build. In intelligent dialogues, she gives clues of the latent conflicts under the brightly colored "the futuristic congress" beyond her imagination to which she was invited. Through studio resources, she breaks through the boundaries of genres in audiovisuals and puts Robin Wright the person-actress-personage in search of what



Figure 7: Contrasts between live action and animation representations.

Source: Frame from *The Congress* (Folman, France, 2013) DVD.

moves her, always has and digitalization has not changed: Aaron. The fundamental sign of the representation of the real in Robin is the feeling for her disabled son.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Robin's index appeal (Andacht 2015) reverberates in the multicultural context of the film *The Congress* (Folman, 2013, France). Culture consists of the semiotic perspiration of a people. Motherhood, disability, care for the other are of the order of the "qualities belonging to the natural and undeniable mode of the sign considered in itself". This sign is seen in the light of Folman's trajectory, an ideal of humanity that he pursued in the representation of the real through alternative bodies, lives and worlds.

Through the ingestion of a chemical compound to establish the dialogue between art and technology, Ari Folman opts for setting in the human body the representation of reality. Therein lies the truth of feelings and will, expressed, in my opinion appropriately, in psychedelic imagery. After all, we are talking about a mediation of the effect of symbols with the objective, in my opinion, of cognitive transfiguration of those who are caught in the narrative mesh (Andacht 2012). If aesthetic passion reflects the fear of reality, the transitions in the film script suggest a

mediation bias. As an experiment in language, it adopted hybridism to construct sensory delirium and make the "real" technological, pure, simple, and intelligible.

Augmented reality presupposes the expanded perception of elements by individuals who, when projecting themselves before the eyes of others, reveal themselves in their preferences. And the visibility, in my opinion, provided by the augmented reality in a utilitarian way, reflects the desire of humanity to be seen. From Belgium to Poland, from Israel to France, people want to participate in the spectacle, even if only in the triviality of its routines (Marquioni and Andacht 2016), or even in the bizarre self-image chosen by people. The narrative constructs the reality of the character who travels to contaminate himself with otherness.

To run or to fly, the affliction motivates the movement. The anguish of uncontrollability accompanies the protagonist in the transience of her journey through drama, through science fiction, in a wander through places full of people and empty of answers. She neither answers the questions in live action nor feeds her identity in a flow of signification. Without will, technological mediation proves innocuous. More than a liberation from the eyes of others, her animated image reflects its inanition before opportunity.

Despite the proliferation of quality signs, or iconic ones, and factual, or indicative ones, Robin does not reach the aesthetic moment in which she could wake up, have a keen perception, feel the taste of life. Happiness and sadness defined in colors, shapes and behaviors. Technology permits one to suppress tears and represent feelings in behaviors such as jumps and distortions. How can we say that these representations are less appropriate, if technology only mediated the option preferred by many individuals?

The semiotic mediation of technology shows itself to be efficient on screen and ineffective on the actress. She prefers the promise of reunion in the desolation left behind. Considering Peirce's definition of representation, everything that is present before us is a phenomenal manifestation of ourselves. In the rigor of Robin Wright's script, motherhood surpasses the actress and the woman. It anesthetizes her imagination, consumes her time and reveals itself as her truest representation.

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