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'Could *Alice in Wonderland*'s Red Queen Be Fictitious Within Fiction?'
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Double Crossing Boundaries: Could *Alice in Wonderland*'s Red Queen Be Fictitious Within Fiction?

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The title of this essay might just as well have been "Hybridity strikes back," as, to some extent, it is the result of my persistent questioning of filmic performance. Indeed, today, Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI), among other techniques, is deconstructing the concepts of the real and the imaginary, in animation and beyond.[1] In the filmic context, how do live actors and CGI merge, technically and artistically? I first tackled this issue a few years ago, with a focus on *Sin City* (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, 2005);[2] I then dealt with the carnivalesque appearances of Sigourney Weaver as Doctor Grace Augustine – that is: "venerable beauty" – and of her CGF (for Computer-Generated Fake) idealized blue double in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009).[3]

In the latter, I discussed the extent to which Weaver's intended realistic performances, as both Dr Augustine and her avatar, suffer from a boomerang effect: they somehow fall into the trap, the caricatural and social ghetto of the smoothed-out illusion of eternal youth. Actually, the middle-age look of Weaver as Dr Augustine gives way to her avatar's student-like posture and youthful self-confidence, in which one can sense the weight of today's social values of representation and of existential worries about ageing. Furthermore, one may question the impact of Cameron's own trademark on the aesthetics and personalities of the film's key female characters (Dr Augustine, Neytiri). Whether live actor or CG Creature, both have very strong personalities, and yet both remain highly Hollywood-normed role-models. Arguably, one could consider the conventionality of these female characters, and question the extent to which both Augustine and Neytiri might have been

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[1] This paper was conceived in 2011, at a time when many books developing research on the impact of new technologies upon film and actors had not been published. An additional bibliography can be found below.

[2] Pierre Floquet, "Actors in Sin City's Animated Fantasy; Avatars, Aliens, or Cinematic Dead-ends?," in *Animation Studies Online Journal*, vol. 6, 2011, Society for Animation Studies, http://journal.animationstudies.org/

[3] Floquet, « Avatar ou le cinéma du numérique » in *L'Amérique des images*, dir. F. Brunet, Paris: Hazan, 2013, 366-367.

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differently represented had the film been shot by a female director, such as Kathryn Bigelow (*Point Break,* 1991; *The Hurt Locker,* 2008), who is known for putting genre and gender to the test, and who, incidentally, is Cameron's ex-wife.

With particular focus on Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), this essay will question the attempts to provide filmic creatures with human appearance, movements, and expression, thereby crossing, or blurring, the boundaries of artistic representation and performance. Rather than considering it as "Malice in Wonderland," my purpose is to acknowledge the director's genuine creative commitment both to his craft and to his actors. One must keep in mind his mastery when he – literally and metaphorically – manipulates puppets' bodies and expressions in motion-capture films. So, what exactly is his intention, when he is just as comfortable with live action as he is with animation?

Alice in Wonderland plays with the public's familiarity with the original tale. Indeed, no one could fail to recognize Lewis Carroll's story in Burton's film. Yet it does not provide a "true" rendering, nor an intentionally "faithful" filmic version, and it actually reveals its differences right from the opening sequences. The book begins with the encounter of a bored Alice with the White Rabbit: "Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do […]" is the first sentence, while the second paragraph ends with: "[…] when suddenly a white rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her." The film, however, opens with a zoom-in from the outside to a lighted window on the first floor of a rich mansion. The next shot shows four men in the middle of a discussion. One of them says: "Charles, you have finally lost your senses. This venture is impossible…" to which Charles (Marton Csokas) responds: "For some. Gentlemen, the only way to achieve the impossible is to believe it *is* possible." The men are discussing a business venture in the colonies when they are interrupted by a silent little girl who turns out to be young Alice (Mia Wasikowska). Charles, her father, says: "The nightmare again?" and she nods. When back in bed, as she recounts the dream to her father, we are introduced to the whole bestiary of Carroll's universe. Carroll's original story is thus presented as a (bad) dream, consequently suggesting a peculiar trope which sustains the whole film: the characters, like the spectators, experience regular crossings between imaginary and "true" worlds, and are not necessarily in a position to distinguish between them. Fantasy and illusion are actually lived in Burton's diegesis. From that perspective, the words spoken by the father at the very beginning of the film are no longer incidental: they announce a different perspective and a different motivation for the film, as Alice, in her adventure, repeatedly wonders where reality, dream, and the possible stand.

This very short sequence (barely two minutes long) functions as a foreword to the story of twenty-year-old Alice. It bridges the narrative gap between Carroll's tale and that of Burton. Moreover, it introduces the prologue sequence of the engagement party, and its symmetrical epilogue sequence, when Alice rejects the conventional life that would have awaited her had she not lived through the timeless experience of the "Underland."

Furthermore, technology serves to emphasize the atemporality of both the original tale (Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is still read today) and its narrative content (When is it supposed to take place? How long is it supposed to last, given that Alice reappears out of the hole, in front of the guests gathered for her engagement party, after what seems to have been only a few seconds?). *Alice in Wonderland* is a 3D feature; and yet, three-dimensional special effects are not seen until the arrival of the White Rabbit, some ten minutes after the beginning of the film. In fact, 3D only really comes into effect once Alice has fallen into the hole. Alice, and the spectators with her, are thus invited into a new universe: that of the wonders of the "Underland" for her and that of new technology and spectacular special effects for them. One could argue that Burton has added the illusion of a "third" dimension to the oneiric dimension of Carroll's fantasy universe. It definitely is a "new" story that the spectators are

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about to watch: the young woman, Alice, is about to take them back, with her, as she revisits the dreams (or the memories?) of her childhood experience. The ageing of the main character in the film leaves room for some repetition, certainly, *but also* for interpretation of, and variation from, the original tale, in both content and representation.

Right from the start, Tim Burton's Alice seems estranged from the strictly codified world of the nineteenth century. In that respect, she truly belongs to the gallery of Burtonian characters, in so far as they repeatedly appear to exist outside the formatted society of which they should be a part, as is the case as well of *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory* (2005). Alice expresses, and actually experiences, her "otherness" compared to the other members of her social group from whom she eventually escapes by diving into the well. She steps into the "other" world, and copes with her regularly changing size, just as Grace Augustine's mind travels into her avatar's body in *Avatar*. In so doing, both achieve on screen, and in virtual reality, the ultimate fantasy of crossing the boundaries of fiction. In this case, however, the double-crossing is that the spectators can only be passive, and that the uncomfortable barrier of the 3D gear on their faces lures them into the illusion of proximity, if not interaction. Alice, just like Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) in *Avatar*, moves from one level to another until she reaches her goal, and the audience can but be the dazzled witness of her progress. To some extent, the spectators of such shows are just as disabled, in front of the action they are watching, as Sully when, seated in his wheelchair, he first encounters what will become his avatar, floating in his blue, amniotic aquarium. Sully is shown from behind, his dark figure contrasting with the height of the pool, as if he were facing a screen. Thus, Sully is in the same position as any frustrated viewer in front of his own film/video game, yearning to get started and to become immersed in its virtuality. Sully and, more metaphorically, Alice, are, therefore, visible elements of the immaterial interval between the reality of the spectator's experience, and the fiction of the show; the added twist is that they already, ontologically, belong to fiction, in the same way that CG images and special effects contribute a further layer to the blurring of its boundaries.

When focusing on the actual interference of CG effects upon live actors, hybridity is the first, most obvious concern. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary[4] offers the following definitions of hybrid: (1) "an offspring of two animals or plants of different races, breeds, varieties, species, or genera," (2) "a person whose background is a blend of two diverse cultures or traditions," and (3) "something heterogeneous in origin or composition." Cameron's avatars physiologically correspond to definitions (1) and (2) within the diegesis. This paper will leave diegetic hybridity aside, and, rather, consider characters in *Alice in Wonderland*, who, like others from *Avatar* or a number of other recent films, correspond to the third definition, if one considers the creative and technological processes from which they issue.

It is sometimes argued that the term "hybridity" bears too pejorative a connotation, reminiscent of nineteenth-century colonial discourse, and, indeed, at that time, the term was related to miscegenation. From that perspective, therefore, hybridity and otherness, even monstrosity, may have been related, and today, they may actually merge when applied to filmic characters in a postmodern understanding of the terms. For some years now, the concept has been described differently. For example, Rutherford states: "For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'Third Space,' which enables

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[4] See: https://www.merriam-webster.com/ (checked 11/18/2021).

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other positions to emerge."[5] This "third space" (or *tiers-espace*) opens up to a wide range of possibilities, which consequently reach far beyond the scope of both sociology and race, and the term is increasingly used to describe such phenomena in filmic representation. This essay will consider both aspects of hybridity in CG imagery, while keeping in mind that otherness and monstrosity may well not be repulsive, but, rather, that they may offer a fresh aesthetic alternative.

As it is, freaks and monsters inhabit the enchanted world of *Alice in Wonderland*. What we find, on diving into the hole, into the "Underland," is a diegetic, timeless twenty-first century freak-show. Note that the film title, issued from Alice's dream/memory, is contradicted by the name the characters call their universe: arguably, a reference to the Underworld of gangsters – or social monsters – in early twentieth-century America (both in film and in reality). All the characters are hybrid, even Alice, when her size digitally changes from normal or gigantic to minute and back, or when she simply adjusts to the characters she encounters, who are a mix of live action, key-frame animation, and motion capture.

Let us consider, in more detail, the Red Queen and the actress behind, before, or beyond her. Both Helena Bonham Carter and Johnny Depp have haunted Tim Burton's films for a long time and, given that he also directs animation features, Burton himself embodies this extreme hybridity. His favorite actors actually function as one of his creative threads, and indeed, it is easy to recognize Depp and Bonham Carter, respectively, as Victor Van Dort and The Bride (as they provide the voices for the puppets) in *Corpse Bride* (2005).[6] Burton displays his animated representation of live actors, yet keeps a safe distance between the puppets and their models. In *Corpse Bride*, he does not directly confront them with the virtual surroundings, sets, or with partners, contrary to what is staged in *Alice in Wonderland*.

Not only do the puppets recall the live actors, but Bonham Carter's artistic policy includes such connections. Her filmography is rich with parts which relate either to the obscure and mysterious side of human nature, as the gothic drug addict from *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) and Mrs. Lovett (yet another Gothic-looking character) in *Sweeney Todd* (Tim Burton, 2007), or to the uncanny, as a witch in *Big Fish* (Tim Burton, 2003) and in the final parts of *Harry Potter* (2007, 2009, 2010). Unlike many actors, she is not afraid of distorting her physical appearance, being able to express thus alternative beauty through miserable, underprivileged characters, as in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Tim Burton, 2005). Altering her natural appearance generally enhances, rather than conceals, her performing abilities (although her role as Ari, in Burton's *Planet of the Apes,* 2001, might be the exception). In Burton's films, the aesthetic exploration of her looks constitutes a deliberate choice, which tests and celebrates the issue of the real and the imaginary in the cinema. Burton and his favourite actress seem to have actually exploited every possible theatrical device to explore expressivity through performance. And yet, prior to *Alice in Wonderland*, Burton's actors were not required to comply with the dramatic and spectacular metamorphosis that animation would entail when directly applied to them. How can actors adapt to what Paul Wells, in a lecture given at the Dutch Animation Film Festival, Utrecht, in November 2008, called the "post-digital contemporary feature cinema," that is, the integration of traditional live action theatrical performance and computer processing?

It is clear that the Red Queen can be seen as the epitome of illusion. As a diegetic character, her hysterical authority may even inspire worship; as a CG character, she questions the very realm of

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[5] John Rutherford, *The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha. Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, 207–221, 211.
[6] Although traits of Bonham Carter can be seen in the Bride, the female character was already taking shape in Sally, created after actress Lisa Marie, in Burton's 1993 animated picture *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

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reality. Within the diegesis, she *is* the Queen, therefore, the norm. The Mad Hatter (Johnny Depp) reflects, "What a regrettably large head you have," before complying: "Nay, this magnificently heroic globe." Earlier on, when the Queen first meets Alice, without knowing who she is, the latter is standing behind rose bushes that hide her body, so that her head alone appears over the flowers. At the time, Alice is of a large size, in comparison to the court members, and does not fit in the scale of the environment. The Red Queen comments: "My dear girl, anyone with a head that large is welcome in my country!" Like the Mad Hatter, who changes his opinion depending on the circumstances in order to nurture the Queen's illusion, the latter is similarly fooled by the size of young Alice. Illusion is a matter of survival; monstrosity has become a reference, as is demonstrated in the sequence when the Mad Hatter is about to be beheaded. One after the other, the sycophants in the court lose their ugly prostheses, which were meant to satisfy the Queen's pride and flatter her ego. As they abandon the props of their masquerade, her angry response is instantaneous and she blames them for what her persona has obliged them to become: "Liars, Cheats, Falsifiers! Off with their heads." In other words, enough of false attitudes, appearances, and special effects! The Queen's words might thus be read as a metaphor of cinema and SFX, or rather, as a distanced comment on what animation and cinema itself have always been.

How do the Computer-generated and live characters of Bonham Carter combine? To some extent, the Red Queen is a cinematic avatar of Bonham Carter, whose head size was increased by up to 75%, with an emphasis on her skull, so that her white forehead and red hair would, quite literally, bulge onto the 3D screen. Her jaw and neck were distorted into a V shape, which would enable her head to fit to the rest of her body, while recalling the outline of her waist and hips. Ken Ralston, the visual FX supervisor on *Alice*, says, in an interview included among the "extras" on the DVD of the film, that the actress's body was "manipulated and slightly mutated, so not quite real, and that is like the missing link between the CG world and Alice, who is always normal looking, even if she is twenty feet tall." "Manipulated," "mutated," the words are strong when one remembers that he is talking about a human being, as he skips one obvious thing: it is not the "actress's body" but, rather, its image on a computer screen, that they have mutated in order to create their illusion. The linguistic short cut in Ralston's speech unveils a significant semantic understatement. Moreover, Bonham Carter wears heavy make-up that hides most details of her face, and yet conceals neither her wrinkles nor her eyebrows when she is required to convey a feeling. Her face even turns CG-red with anger, so that her digital and natural components combine to express emotion. Indeed, one can regularly and easily recognise the actress under the "CG stress."

Such moments reference the essence of cinema, of animation. To some extent, they may recall David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) which, while a very different film, similarly questions the identity of cinema and the vertiginous issue of representation. Take, for example, the moment in *Alice* when the camera zooms, out of focus, into a bottomless box:

> Hatter: You still believe this is a dream, do you?
> Alice: Of course, this has all come from my own mind.
> Hatter: Which would mean that I'm not real.
> Alice: Afraid so. You're just a figment of my imagination.

These are the Hatter and Alice's words, but they could equally apply to Lynch's film.

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In the diegesis, Alice is indeed confused, and the viewer together with her, both wondering about the meaning of the show and of its performance *per se*, as is revealed in her brief conversation with Absolem, the caterpillar (Alan Rickman):

> Alice: It was not a dream at all… It was a memory. This place is real. And so are you; and so is the Hatter…
>
> Absolem: … and so is the Jabberwocky!

In other words, if, in fact, the Jabberwocky is real, the fantasy can go on, as well as the illusion. In a multilayered echo of the illusion of illusion, to Alice's comment: "This is impossible," the Mad Hatter replies: "Only if you believe it is." In a logical – and absurd – reversal of references to reality, this comment implicitly tells us that anything is possible until it is denied.

Such a concept is already hinted at in the beginning of the film, when a horse comments that "dogs will believe anything!" in an echo of Tex Avery's gullible dog characters, and his famous statement that "[i]n a cartoon you can do anything!"[7] If such is true of cartoons, it is also true of animation and, in particular, CG films and the actors that enter their digital worlds. Every level and layer of reality and of the imaginary are blurred, in both context and form; any "true" notion of "reality" has vanished, within a Baudrillard-like perspective: one may here refer more specifically to the passage about Disneyland, at the beginning of *Simulacra and Simulation*:

> Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America, which *is* Disneyland. […] Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation.[8]

A similar questioning of the fluctuating boundaries of reality is found in *Avatar*, when Sully reflects: "Everything is backwards now. Like out there is the true world," and yet, here too there is prejudice, given that "backwards" has a somewhat negative connotation, when Cameron could have chosen such words as "inverted," or "interchanged."

Whether creating a digital and fantasized clone, as in *Avatar*, or the ultimate puppet, as in *Alice in Wonderland*, CGI respects its ontological principles of using the latest techniques to create the illusion of life and to suggest emotion, with the option of veracity, realism, and anthropomorphism. Simultaneously, the same swing of the creative pendulum, as a reversed rotoscope, pushes CGI increasingly further from the aesthetics of realism, and into postmodern anthropomorphism.

At this point, it is helpful to quote Paul Wells, discussing the breaking of taboos, or, perhaps more pertinently, the crossing of boundaries: "The key aspect here is in the greater freedoms to address the 'body' in animation, where the physical form is highly mutable, indestructible, and in some instances, immaterial."[9] Alice herself notes: "I've been shrunk, stretched, scratched, and stuffed into a teapot," which recalls the "squash and stretch" principle of traditional cartoon animation, except that here we

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[7] The tag-phrase frequently recurs in Tex Avery cartoons, for example, in *Big Heel Watha* (1944).

[8] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, (translated from the original by Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman). New York: Semiotext(e), 1983, 25.

[9] Paul Wells, *Animation: Genre and Authorship*, London: Wallflower, 2002, 62.

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are dealing with a character brought to movement by a live actor. Both Weaver and Bonham Carter endure such treatment, as their characters mirror the digital surroundings that negate the boundaries between fantasy, phantasm, and the real world. If so, what is left of them, their personalities, are trapped in a vicious cycle that Baudrillard recognizes: "Of the same order as the impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is the impossibility of staging an illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible."[10] Just like Avery's kangaroo, which disappears after hiding in its own pouch in *Slap Happy Lion* (1947), actors too might finally pass into a digital nowhere, both existing and not existing in the same non-time. Or, from an alternative and more practical perspective, as Wells claims, "it is necessary to properly define animation as an intrinsically 'modern' art that facilitates 'difference' and 'otherness' in the creative enterprise."[11]

Is Grace Augustine a "demon," and the Red Queen a "bloody big head," as, respectively, Tsu'tey (Laz Alonso) and the Mad Hatter suggest? Should we adopt such words to describe the digital treatment of Weaver and Bonham Carter's images and personae? Both Cameron and Burton have attempted to give filmic creatures a human appearance, with human movements and expressions. Referring to Wells's discussion about "auteurist director[s]," one may claim that both directors have attempted in their own ways to mark out "an aesthetic and thematic terrain, and [to offer] a coherent view of the discourses fundamental to its understanding and 'art.'"[12] The Red Queen, beyond and despite the astounding performance of the actress "inhabiting" her, actually perfectly matches the universe she haunts. Yet she is so deeply embedded in her "Underworld" that the intrinsic distance it implies may impede the audience's interaction with the whole show.

And yet, to develop the point further, a parallel can be drawn between CGLAP (Computer-Generated Live Actor Performance) as hybrid, on the one hand, and as polymorphic soundtracks on the other. Either live-action or digital, actors and/or the characters they play manage to keep in tune and rhythm, as they perform and interact within the filmic "ballet." In a study of songs in Bollywood films, Aniruddha Dutta notes:

> The hybridity of quotation and stylistic separation tends to index or bracket musical styles, and can be seen as opposed to hybridity of continuity and stylistic synthesis that tends to deconstruct stylistic boundaries, subsuming "original" or "source" styles in the new. Of course, both tendencies can simultaneously interact in a single piece.[13]

Arguably, when applied to CGI, such hybridity may correspond to entirely digitally created characters as well as to "untouched" live actors immersed in a CG setting. One element is filmed as such, and included into the stream of CG images that show other characters and/or backgrounds, and structure the picture-track. Unlike Augustine and Sully's characters, who retain much of the original appearance of the actors who play them, hybridity of quotation and hybridity of continuity can merge to allow the representations of their avatars. Considered on its own, the hybridity of continuity and stylistic synthesis will match with live actors when computerized and mutated into CG creatures, hence

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[10] Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 38.

[11] Wells, *Animation: Genre and Authorship*, 29.

[12] Ibid., 72.

[13] Aniruddha Dutta, *Negotiating a Newer Hybridity: Technology in Bollywood Film Songs*, 14th International Symposium on Electronic Art, 2008. http://static2.docstoccdn.com/docs/160219095/Negotiating-a-Newer-Hybridity--Technology-in-Bollywood-Film-Songs---Aniruddha-Dutta, Accessed 8 May 2014.

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deconstructing pre-existing filmic boundaries. So, they suggest new and infinite forms of representation, as Helena Bonham Carter, computerized into the Red Queen, reveals.

As a consequence, in such instances, fiction is yet one step beyond the so-called "traditional" live action generated film which has prevailed so far. Hollywood fosters the evidence of technology in recent features; the obviousness of theatrical processes, such as performance, has somehow become a *raison-d'être*, just as much as the ontological and original cinematic quest for illusion. Technology is sophisticated to the point where, more than ever, live actors have become filmic material. Their human appearance and flesh are turned into digital clay, processed and glazed until their original physiognomies are barely recognizable under their embedded disguises.

It is surely the case that actors are professionally polymorphic. Each character they create is, to some extent, one avatar of themselves. The give-and-take relationship between the fictional character and the actor is ontological. However, the survival of the actor's persona is put to the test with Computer-Generated Technology, so that surviving such heavy digital make-up is increasingly challenging. Creating illusion and conveying emotion require considerably more than the simple manipulation of an ever-growing quantity of pixels. If this fails, the audience could well decide that illusion on screen is disillusion indeed. It could be argued that whether live action, key frame, or stop motion, animated clones or digital mutants, the Red Queen and other characters betray their emotional, pragmatic connection with the audience; the alternative is that they participate in the evolution of cinema as animated art, and thus transcend filmic "reality."[14]

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[14] For further references on digital cinema, see: A. Gaudreault, P. Marion, *La fin du cinema ? : Un média en crise à l'ère du numérique,* Paris: Armand Colin, 2013; J.B. Massuet, *Le Dessin animé au pays du film — Quand l'animation graphique rencontre le cinéma en prises de vues réelles*, Rennes: PUR, Le Spectaculaire, 2017; J.B. Massuet, and M. Grosoli, *La Capture de mouvement ou le modelage de l'invisible*, Rennes: PUR, Le Spectaculaire, 2014; S. Price, *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality*, Rutgers University Press, 2012.