Illustration 1:
Immersion between Recursiveness and Reflexivity: Avatar

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This essay approaches the topic of immersion from the perspective of reflexivity and recursiveness. I consider different forms of reflexivity – commonly understood as the opposite of immersion and empathy – that ‘bind’ the spectator to the cinema as ‘event’ rather than ‘text’. Contemporary Hollywood cinema creates immersion through forms of self-reference that reflect the film industry’s situational contradictions as well as engage the recipients’ cognitive dissonances. My case study is James Cameron’s Avatar, a film that evokes the idea of self-forgetful immersion, but achieves this effect through layers of self-reference and feedback loops that generate intense but floating forms of identification.

1. Immersion and Recursiveness

My contribution is devoted to the topic of immersion from a perspective which at first may seem counterintuitive, namely, the self-applied forms of reflexivity and recursiveness in Hollywood movies and their production conditions. To this end, I will begin with a few explanations. Today, the term ‘immersion’ is broadly defined. As this collection shows, its meanings range from classical formulations of cinematic immersion such as plunging into an artificial world through the dissolution of spatial boundaries between the viewer and the image, to a full-body experience of space and time and the somatic-affective, proprioceptive, and identificatory involvement of the recipient, all the way to the interactive transition from bodily, physical reality to a media-based, fictional computer-game environment. The term also encompasses the creation of illusion and imaginary participation in general and takes into account the tendency to consider the cinematic experience to be body-based rather than merely ocular.

Béla Balázs, perhaps the first film theorist to formulate the basic idea of cinematic immersion, famously stated:

The agile camera carries my eye and thus my consciousness along: into the heart of the picture, into the middle of the space where the action takes place. I don’t see anything from the outside. I am seeing everything as the acting person must see it. I am surrounded by the figures of the film and thus entwined into its action.