

# Seeing through the Car : The Automobile as Cosmopolitical Proposition in *The Fifth Element*

## La voiture révélée : l'automobile comme principe cosmopolitique dans *The Fifth Element*

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Résumé de l'article

À l'aide du film *The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997) et des approches théoriques de Marcuse, Baudrillard et Virilio, lesquelles posent des questions cruciales sur la production, la consommation, la simulation et la perception, cet article analyse les expérimentations relatives à l'automobile au cinéma. Il ne s'agit pas ici d'envisager le cinéma comme représentation ou simulation, mais plutôt d'offrir une lecture attentive du film envisagé comme « composition de forces », mettant en place des orientations matérielles. À partir des travaux d'Isabelle Stengers, cet article montre que la voiture ne constitue pas une chose ou un signe pour le cinéma, mais une force venue de l'extérieur, un principe qui, bien qu'il soit autonome, peut être appréhendé dans les limites d'une composition de forces cinématographique. Les transformations qui affectent le cinéma ont fait de ce changement une nécessité : établir une politique du cinéma exige désormais de prendre en compte que le non-humain technique agit de plus en plus comme principe cosmopolitique pour le cinéma.

# Seeing through the Car: The Automobile as Cosmopolitical Proposition in *The Fifth Element*

Thomas Lamarre

## ABSTRACT

This essay uses *The Fifth Element* as a case study for an analysis of how cinema experiments with automobiles, while working through different theoretical approaches to the automobile, those of Marcuse, Baudrillard and Virilio, which pose crucial questions about production, consumption, representation, simulation and perception. Ultimately, however, rather than treat cinema as representation or simulation, this essay provides a close reading of the film in terms of a composition of forces that sets up material orientations. Building on Isabelle Stengers, it shows how the car is not a thing or a sign for cinema, but a force of the outside, a proposition that remains autonomous yet answerable within the field of cinematic composition of forces. Transformations in cinema make this shift in emphasis necessary: assessing the politics of cinema must begin to take into account that the technical non-humans have increasingly come to function as cosmopolitical propositions for cinema.

*Voir le résumé français à la fin de l'article*

*The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997) gives us our first full look at twenty-third-century New York through the eyes of Leeloo (Milla Jovovich), a beautiful, scantily clad alien who has fallen to earth and is fleeing her military captors. Leeloo, still dazed, escapes down a long horizontal tube that ends outside the building. She finds herself high on a ledge overlooking the city.

The delight of this future New York lies partly in the triumph of the skyscraper, of the vertical. The buildings soar skyward, their foundations scarcely visible below. As Leeloo looks across the city, we see streams of cars that drive on air (Fig. 1). And as Leeloo looks down, we see cars streaming by in an orderly



Figure 1: A view from *The Fifth Element* across New York in 2263 from the viewing position of Leeloo shows the orderly horizontal patterns of traffic circulation. © Gaumont.

fashion, and in stacked layers, which implies the presence of streets, yet these streets are not solid or visible. They are immaterial: although there is nothing there, this is not an absence of materiality; there are material effects that assure smooth circulation. But the streets do not allow for pedestrians. Leeloo's escape is cut short at the "streets."

This vision is at odds with the political ideal of "taking the streets," of people swarming into the streets and taking over the urban spaces of circulation. Compare it to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), an obvious precedent. In *Metropolis*, the highways are elevated, crossing the skies, but streets remain concrete, angled toward and away from the earth. This city allows people to take to the streets, to forge a new political relation between the towers of the metropolitan elite and the underground labyrinths of the workers. But such actions are unthinkable in *The Fifth Element*: despite the design precedent of *Metropolis*, it dramatically transforms the relations between humans and streets, with the car mediating and reconstructing them. It thus provides a good point of departure for exploring how cinema experiments with automobiles.

Faced with a plethora of films dealing with cars, I cannot hope to consider them all. I here propose to use *The Fifth Element* as a case study or general instance, looking at it via different theoretical approaches to the automobile. Three approaches prove especially useful: Herbert Marcuse's notion of

the car as masking the realities of capitalist production ; Jean Baudrillard's view of the car signalling the triumph of consumption over production within simulation ; and Isabelle Stengers's cosmopolitical proposal addressing the entry of non-humans into the realm of politics. I give precedence to Stengers, not to erase the concerns of Marcuse, Baudrillard and others, but to address the concerns that they raise about production and consumption in a manner answerable to how the car operates in cinema.

### Production

In Marcuse's opinion (1969, pp. 71-72), when rioters and protesters burn cars, the act diminishes the hold of the ruling party: "without the barricades and the car burning the ruling powers would be safer and stronger." He sees in cars the repression of humans under capitalism. Yet, for him, the problem is not technology per se but how production and consumption further the interests of the ruling class :

Not the automobile is repressive, not the television set is repressive, not the household gadgets are repressive, but the automobile, the television, gadgets which, produced in accordance with the requirements of profitable exchange, have become part and parcel of the people's own existence, own "actualization." Thus they have to buy part and parcel of their own existence on the market; this existence is the realization of capital. The naked class interest builds the unsafe and obsolescent automobiles, and though them promotes destructive energy... (Marcuse 1969, p. 12).

Marcuse recognizes that consumers cannot be unaware of deception. Even though he feels that consumers are duped by "the advertising of violence and stupidity" (p. 12), he considers how the consumer becomes conscious of dupery, and sees through the car :

I ride in a new automobile. I experience its beauty, shininess, power, convenience — but then I become aware of the fact that in a relatively short time it will deteriorate and need repair ; that its beauty and surface are cheap, its power unnecessary, its size idiotic ; and that I will not find a parking place. I come to think

of *my* car as a product of one of the Big Three automobile corporations. The latter determine the appearance of my car and make its beauty as well as its cheapness, its power as well as its shakiness, its working as well as its obsolescence (Marcuse 1964, p. 226).

Yet the car rider's rational experience of the shoddiness of the automobile (and the idiocy of the manufacturing and merchandising system) gives way to an irrational sense that nonetheless we have it better today. People feel the need "to continue the competitive struggle for existence — the need to buy a new car every two years... and it is a very aggressive and repressive need" (Marcuse 2005, p. 107). Marcuse insists that, despite moments of recognition of the flimsiness of technological devices such as the car or television, "people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment" (Marcuse 1964, p. 9). The competition for existence is built into these entities, and people become aggressive through their consumption of them. The very use of automobiles takes on an ignorant, aggressive and implicitly masculine edge: "Self-determination, the autonomy of the individual, asserts itself in the right to race his automobile, to handle his power tools, to buy a gun, to communicate to mass audiences his opinion, no matter how ignorant, how aggressive, it may be" (Marcuse 1969, p. 12).

In *The Fifth Element*, Korben Dallas (Bruce Willis) embodies such aggressive self-determination; his command of his automobile expresses his confidence and his sense of self, and we expect cars skills to extend to weapons skills and confident opinions, no matter how ignorant. Korben Dallas's character arc — an expression used in the film industry to describe the overall changes in a character from the beginning to the end of the film — conforms to the dictates of the film's genre. He is just a guy trying to keep out of trouble and make a living, but the power brokers won't leave him alone; he should do something more than driving a cab, but his autonomy and male pride count more than worldly ambition. Do I need add that he is aching over his broken marriage? Indeed, with its emphasis on male crisis, life-changing events and the male quest, *The Fifth*

*Element* brings into play the genre elements that Timothy Corrigan associates with the road movie (1991, p. 145), and Marcuse's account allows us to link these elements directly to his embodiment of the automobile. When Leeloo's flight brings her to the "streets," she runs into this embodiment of the automobile. And in the course of the film, Korben's encounter with Leeloo will allow him to become what his car savvy anticipated: confident, able and outspoken. But first there must be a car chase.

For those who sit through the increasingly protracted car chases in action films, who marvel not at their technical ingenuity but at the stupidity of destructive competition, Marcuse's remarks strike home. He reminds us that such scenes actually reassure consumers about the safety of automobiles. These scenes ideologically mask the actual cheapness and obsolescence of cars, the repressive nature of post-war capitalist production. Car companies today hire consultants to evaluate film scripts for their presentation of cars, to guarantee that, if their brand appears, it conveys safety and triumph rather than injury and defeat. It's okay if the Volvo crashes, provided the heroes emerge unscathed.

*The Fifth Element* builds obsolescence into car designs. Dallas's cab is an iconic take on the yellow cab, and the patrol cars are generic NYPD. Cars are cartoonish and obsolete, retro. But they don't mask it. What imparts a sense that this world is better than one without cars is their ability to hover. The hover car proclaims the desirability of this world, and thus the desirability of propelling our present into the future. Frederic Jameson's turn of phrase — nostalgia for the present — sums up this yearning for our present in (and from) the future (Jameson 1989, p. 517).

Marcuse's account alerts us to effects of ideological masking: the attractiveness of futurity, so evident in immaterial streets and flying cars, actually seems to run counter to radical transformation or genuine innovation, particularly of the revolutionary sort. For Marcuse did see possibilities for a revolutionary seeing through the car: even as he emphasized the power of merchandising in sustaining the wasteful destructiveness of consumer

society, he held out the possibility for ending it and constructing a more rational mode of production based on equal distribution. He calls for workers to stop consuming and shut down the factories :

They [factories] will shut down for a week or two. Everyone will go to the country. And then the real work will begin, the work of abolishing poverty, the work of abolishing inequality, instead of the work of waste which is performed in the society of consumption. In the United States, for example, General Motors and Ford, instead of producing private cars, will produce cars for public transportation, so that public transportation can become human (Marcuse 2005, p. 107).

In the context of Marcuse's revolutionary politics of seizing the means of industrial production, the entertaining stupidity of the cars in *The Fifth Element* merely appears to conceal underlying realities of industrial production.

Yet, in layers of immaterial streets, another kind of "industrial" production is palpable: digital effects. Luc Besson worked with Mark Stetson, visual effects supervisor for Digital Domain, who had previously headed the model shop for *Blade Runner*. Apparently, *The Fifth Element* used as many as eighty elements within a single shot, doubling Digital Domain's previous record, with an average of twenty-five elements per shot across 225 effects shots.<sup>1</sup> The film wears its effects right on the surface. In conjunction with (and related to) its special effects, *The Fifth Element* was conceptualized and produced in multiple locations. To say that *The Fifth Element* is not really a French film but a Hollywood film with a Gallic twist is to say very little. Not only is the combination of French elements provocatively eclectic (designs from *bande dessinée* artists Moebius and Jean-Claude Mézières with costumes by Jean-Paul Gaultier), but the film also draws on Japanese manga and anime, Hong Kong cinema and North African music. As director, producer and writer, Luc Besson has proved adept at working with transnational genres and serving as a producer for genre films. Consequently, rather than remain at the level of reality (industrial production) versus representation (mask), we have to dig deeper into the entanglements of production and representation in this cinematic exper-

iment. The dynamics of the automobile are key. But how are we to address this aggressively stupid “automobility”? Is there another way of seeing through the car?

### Simulation

In a persistent dream of the automobile, it exemplifies the ideals of the bourgeois interior, with comfortable seats like the family room sofa, eradicating noise and maximizing visibility, yet guaranteeing security. Car commercials often emphasize the sound barrier when rolling up the windows: “noise” disappears, leaving blissful silence, and music sometimes appears — something to the buyer’s taste. The curvature of the windows reinforces the sense of enclosure, and the use of safety glass, which began with French technologies for laminating glass adopted by Ford, make for a transparent bubble that can shatter without lacerating passengers.

This experience of the car inspires Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation. As Stephen Watt notes (1991, p. 136), “For Baudrillard the most fascinating inexorable purveyor of image (commodities) is, of course, television, which ‘collaborated’ with the automobile throughout the 1960s in ‘sustaining the dominant machinery of capitalist representation.’” For Baudrillard, the car and the television are partners in post-war transformations in capitalism, which conspired to give the management of consumption precedence over production. Consumers became interested in the “sign-value” of commodities, in display and prestige, rather than use-value. The result is a machinery of representation, a system of signs that forecloses any relation with underlying realities. There is nothing outside representation as sign-value; all is banal superficial simulation. The scandal for Baudrillard is not that simulation makes it impossible for us to grasp and transform the realities of production (à la Marcuse). The scandal is that simulation forecloses symbolic exchange.

The car plays an important role in Baudrillard’s simulation because of its monadic isolation, its closure within sign-value (Watt 1991, p. 137). He writes, “the automobile itself — this magnetized sphere which ends up creating an entire universe of tunnels, expressways, overpasses, on and off ramps by treating



its mobile cockpit as a universal prototype — is only an immense metaphor of the same” (Baudrillard 1991, p. 315).

The immaterial streets of *The Fifth Element* seem to exemplify Baudrillard’s take on the automobile and simulation. As the domestic interior of the automobile becomes ubiquitous, anything and everything becomes a mobile cockpit. He remarks, “the car is not the appendix of an immobile domestic universe; there are no more private and domestic universes, only figures of incessant circulation...” (p. 314). As everything becomes interior, the distinction between inside and outside collapses, which puts everything into relative motion, ceaselessly circulating. In *The Fifth Element*, the vastest interiors, such as the opera hall, are not only enclosed but also in motion upon a spaceship. The spaceship is the double of the car, and both space travel and the city streets follow the dictates of seamless and incessant circulation. The film’s digital effects reinforce a sense of simulation in two ways: the ability to add elements to any landscape transforms what is “out there” into another “inside circulation”; and the layering of elements in shots fills the image with internal motion. There seems to be no way to get outside incessant circulation and metaphors of the same.

Thus the question that haunts Baudrillard’s simulation also arises in *The Fifth Element*: if there is no reality or alterity “out there,” how can there be any difference, or change, or future?

Some advise that we transform the underlying system of signs. Roger Gorman writes (2002, pp. 112-13),

Baudrillard’s concept suggests that there is no inherent sociological dependence on the automobile per se, but rather a dependence on the signage underlying it. From this, it would follow that a possible research agenda would be to identify those signs, to understand how they were created, how they came to be so tightly identified with the industrial artifact “the car,” and what that artifact — and car consumption patterns as a whole — might look like with different sets of signs associated with it.

But this is exactly what Baudrillard thinks cannot happen. Signs are not an underlying system, an external reality. They are everything. Still, Baudrillard entertains the possibility of cracking open simulation — via perversion, seduction and the accident.

Baudrillard's discussion of J.G. Ballard's *Crash* provides some clues for thinking about "internal difference" in the context of *The Fifth Element*. In Ballard's novel, he sees a shift away from both classical and cybernetic relations to technology, in which technology (the car) is an extension of the body. He remarks, "there are... only figures of incessant circulation, and the Accident is everywhere as irreversible and fundamental trope, the banalizing of the anomaly of death. It is no longer on the margins; it is at the heart" (1991, pp. 314-15). Therein lie possibilities for a perverse experience of the seductive power of objects and of death, which is not reducible to sex or sexuality. This experience entails "the wide range of symbolic wounds which, in a sense, are the 'anagrammatization' of sex over the entire body" (p. 316), reminiscent of aboriginal rites of tattooing, torture and initiation.

Baudrillard focuses attention on how shiny chrome, handbrakes, steering wheels, blinkers and headlights transform into ritual scarring, proclaiming the saturation of simulation with initiatory power. Here the automobile is not a mask to be stripped away; it cannot be peeled off without tearing away the flesh and thus lacerating the mobile isolation of the individual. Thus the accident takes on ritual force.

Car crashes and accidents in films, with the exception perhaps of *Wild at Heart*, rarely embrace the anagrammatical capacity of the accident. This may explain why *Crash* proved so difficult for David Cronenberg to film. Action films like *The Fifth Element* revel in car chases, crashes and accidents, but they do not generally discover the initiatory power that Baudrillard discovers in Ballard. The problem lies not with action films alone, however, but also with theory of simulation in the context of cinema. We reach an impasse with simulation, because there is no force of the outside other than symbolic exchange.

Baudrillard replaces Marcuse's reference to the underlying reality of production with a horizon wherein symbolic exchange makes and unmakes the human. Because Baudrillard's account is at once anthropocentric, centring on what technology does for or to the human, and anthropological in its use of concepts such as symbolic exchange, it might be dubbed "anthropologis-

tic.” The automobile as such drops out of such an account, because Baudrillard situates the car within consumption. He focuses on how consumption overwhelms and subsumes production. The car in itself is not productive for him. Or, if the car is, it is only insofar as it consumes the human. When cars verge on completely consuming the human, they also promise to generate new experiences of symbolic exchanges and death. But the car itself is not and cannot be a source of internal difference for Baudrillard.

In cinema, however, the car can be (and often is) a site of internal difference. Cinema is constantly experimenting with the perceptual parameters afforded by the car, via viewing positions and other techniques. Even if we can detect simulation at work in a film like *The Fifth Element*, the relation of cinema to car is not reducible to simulation. It entails technical experimentation. This opens possibilities for engaging internal difference, but in a less anthropologicistic register than perversion, seduction, or the accident. There’s no guarantee that such experiments will produce anything of interest, and yet, if we do not address this capacity of cinema, we give up on intervention.

## Perception

If we approach the car as a perceptual monad, at issue is not only what the car sees, hears and touches, but also what it perceives *obscurely*, barely at all. The car entails monadic isolation, but this isolation is not simple, unitary or total.

The perceptual horizons of the car encourage lateral and transversal views, commonly echoed in movies: scenery streaming past windows, usually variations on the passengers’ view. There is also the viewing position of the driver, which can tend towards the apparatus viewpoint that Paul Virilio criticizes. Virilio looks at cars and other vehicles from the angle of their submission to technologization, calling it cinematism: “What happens in the train window, in the car windshield, in the television screen, is the same kind of cinematism” (1997, p. 85). Virilio sees cinematism in all technologies of speed and imaging, detecting a perceptual logistics in which distances collapse, threatening to destroy the human-scaled world of experience.

Intent on the technologization of perception, Virilio ignores internal differences within technologies. But the car has its blind spots, not due merely to the limits of windows and the angles of mirrors. Even the windshield, that primary window on the world, insinuates a blind spot. Due to its curvature, it implies a parabola and focal point, which no one in the car occupies. Perfect coincidence between car viewpoint, cinema viewpoint and passenger viewpoint is impossible. The focal point of the car is always off centre. When filmmakers try to see through the car, restlessness overtakes the viewing position. It is difficult to know where to place the camera within the car, not simply because the conventions become tired and demand renewal, but also because the viewing position remains eccentric, no matter how you situate the camera. The automobile thus presents cinema with a perceptual experiment or problematic which will entail seemingly endless negotiations of viewing positions, shots, takes, sequences and other techniques as they try to determine where this car-cinema thing is going. Road movies are particularly fond of this perceptual restlessness, which is well suited to the experience of being on the road with a nebulous destination.

Even more important are the vertical limits on perception. A car has a roof for safety reasons, and you don't need to look up when you drive. The convertible and the sunroof present a variation, not an exception. The convertible, for instance, enhances the feeling of the horizontality of the car with the rush of wind in the face. Passengers don't ever seem to complain that the roof prevents their view of the sky overhead; they seem content with lateral and transversal views, with horizons open to the skies. When shots of the sky appear in road sequences, they really strike us, taking on an affective force. With the vertical habitually occluded, the car tends towards an experience of *relentless horizontality*, which allows the vertical to trouble perception in various ways.

We might associate this experience of relentless horizontality with the ideological effects of commodification (Marcuse), simulation (Baudrillard) or perceptual logistics that collapse time and space (Virilio). Such approaches also suggest ways of breaking with the car's monadic isolation: revolutionary awareness of the idiocy of private ownership (Marcuse), the ritual accident

violently shattering the personalized cockpit (Baudrillard) and the call for a human-scaled world (Virilio). Yet, if we attend to the car's relentless horizontality, a different socio-political horizon appears.

The cinematic experience of automobile horizontality can be (and has been) associated with broad, flat American space-time, and thus with a geopolitical paradigm of Americanization and modernity. Devin Orgeron (2008, p. 77) proposes such a reading in his chapter on Godard, for instance :

Godard's fascination with the automobile and the road is rooted in his fascination with (and skepticism of) all things 'modern' and all things 'American,' categories that become increasingly intertwined in Godard's work... The automobile is a modern object with inarguable American associations, and Godard draws out this Americanness by frequently using American cars in his films. [The automobile] is the physical embodiment of transportability and it signifies, in Godard's work, the global movement of American popular culture.

Orgeron's point is well taken, but there is a risk here, that of recuperating Frenchness in contrast to Americanness, or French modernism as resistance to American modernity. This is always a risk when evoking the Americanness of the automobile in post-war France.<sup>2</sup>

Central in Godard is the sense of the car and road as a movement without destination, which threatens (or promises) to uproot meaning as *sens*, as directionality or orientation. Godard's techniques also address the relentless horizontality of the car monad. There is the jump cut that breaks horizontal continuity, as in *À bout de souffle*: you leap into the car, you're on the lam, you're suddenly back at the start. The occluded verticality of the car monad returns to disrupt linear temporality. There is a rupture of horizontality from another dimension, that of time. There is also a tear in perceptual experience (affect).

If we associate relentless horizontality (car) with the spatialization of time (modernization), we tend to conclude that the jump cut makes for a sort of temporal disruption into American modernization or Americanization. But we run the risk of naturalizing the constitution or reconstitution of French moder-

nity. It is a familiar and comfortable gesture: the reconstitution of French identity through its co-figuration with post-war American modernization. But if we enlarge the picture of the car, we also see that the vertical occluded by the car's horizontality is literally the sky overhead. The "other dimension" that the car scarcely perceives need not take the form of time. It may take the form of the sky, or cosmos, or universe. The vertical is also the door to the "cosmic" that cannot be perceived except in obscure fashion from within the car. This is why encounters between cars and UFOs take on an archetypal quality in film. The car shudders and shakes, and the road is bathed in intense light, but no one in the car can see the marvel that lies overhead. *Close Encounters* made this vision indelible, and it recurs in countless films and television series, to the point that the *X Files* made it an article of faith. The car is insistently haunted by alien encounters because it calls for the vertical. This call can take a variety of forms, but often entails an unexpected encounter with the alien as the "cosmic." The automobile tends to summon the spaceship, in a bid to free itself from its relentless horizontality and its ignorance of what happens above and beyond.

The cosmic, and everything associated with it that can, also swarm into cinema via the car: humanoid aliens, non-humanoid life forms, spaceships, time travel, warp speeds. Significantly, these forms enter cinema not via techniques of "external editing" (post-production) but via techniques of "internal editing" or compositing, in which case the boundaries between pre-production, production and post-production become porous, as with the elaborate preparation of designs and storyboards for *The Fifth Element* in order to attain that average of twenty-five elements per special effects shot.

The experience of the obscured vertical can arrive acoustically, via sound, voices and music. Music often reinforces the road-hugging feel, earth beneath the wheels, grounding the experience of horizontality. But the car monad often entertains sound distribution that appears to come from all around: the voice-over; the swelling or fading soundtrack that permeates and grounds the screen; and in films with alien encounters, non-locatable sounds and voices.

In sum, the disruption/integration of the “cosmic” vertical takes on a very different trajectory from Godard’s temporal disruptions. This general contrast might be mapped onto modernism (Godard) versus postmodernism (Besson), and even mapped onto the prior distinction between the politics of representation/reality (Marcuse’s revolutionary project) versus that of simulation/accident (Baudrillard’s symbolic exchange). Yet the dynamics of the obscured vertical in the cinematic car suggests a different turn, towards experimentation/non-human (cosmopolitics). In the cosmopolitical framework (which is not the same as cosmopolitanism), the question of Frenchness, of national identity and the nation form, can no longer be understood in terms of a yearning for America, or even in terms of modernist co-figuration with post-war American modernization constituting identity under erasure, or identity in alienation.<sup>3</sup> In *The Fifth Element*, Frenchness entails something beyond yearning or fascination for American modernity or postmodernity, for the film introduces the dynamics of non-humans, aliens and species, which considerably transform the articulation of what Benedict Anderson calls “nationness.” Here too the relentless horizontality of the car monad affords the key.

### Composition

When Leeloo looks over the city, it is striking that, even though cars no longer have wheels hugging the road, their circulation is primarily horizontal. The earth remains a palpable yet invisible ground for these immaterial skyways. Flying cars, in conjunction with a panoramic view, impart a sense of freedom, of freewheeling movement. Yet the orderly patterns of horizontal circulation imply a high degree of control and regulation. Despite the intense verticality of the city, the cars remain almost anachronistically bound to the paradigm of horizontality. Cars generally don’t move vertically or take advantage of their freedom to move in three dimensions, and the film doesn’t bother to show us exactly how a car goes from one layer to another. The relentless horizontality of the automobile has been magnified, expanded into layers. It is a new variation on Marcuse’s notion of the stupidity of the automobile, also resonant with

Baudrillard: cars appear free to travel in any direction yet obediently follow patterns, presumably for fear of accidents. In this film, however, cars do not present problems of industrial production and revolution, or of traffic accidents and fatal seduction. There is a sort of accident and a kind of revolution, but it comes from outer space.

Recall the premise of the film. In 1914, aliens (Mondoshawans) come to Egypt to prepare the weapon that will defend the planet Earth from the "Great Evil" that appears every five thousand years to destroy all planetary life. The weapon consists of five elements, the four classical elements and a fifth that will combine and transform these elements into an operative defence. In 2263, when the Mondoshawans are returning to Earth with the fifth element, another group of aliens attacks, and the delivery is incomplete. Human scientists discover the fifth element and try to reconstruct it, and it takes the form of a beautiful young woman, Leeloo, who, bewildered by her early awakening, wanders off. It falls to Korben Dallas to outpace her pursuers, unravel the mystery and return the fifth element (Leeloo) to the site in Egypt where "she" can activate the planetary defence system.

If this narrative works, it is because it emerges and follows from the cinematic perceptual experiment, wherein the car plays the pivotal role. In the future city of New York, the magnification of the horizontality of the car goes hand in hand with a magnification of the scale for summoning the vertical. The intense verticality of the city, its towering skyscrapers, does not reintegrate the vertical. It expands the relentless horizontality of the automobile to the entire metropolis. At the same time, this arrangement opens the city to the heavens, calling for the vertical. But the vertical and horizontal have been so magnified that they feel like distinct modalities. They verge on becoming distinct of modes of existence; they co-exist, but it may be they are not related and cannot be related. This polarization tends to increase the scope of the disruption/integration of the vertical. The vertical mode of existence imparts a sense of freedom, an ability to leave the ground, to take flight without direction. Yet the horizontal mode dominates, in the form of regulatory and apparently arbitrary power: the immaterial streets imply the



imposition of a ground in its absence, a groundless ground, which is imposed arbitrarily.

In contrast with Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, in which humans swarm into the streets and negotiate a relation between tower and labyrinth, the magnification of the occluded vertical in *The Fifth Element* implies a situation in which the vertical is so different from the ground or earth that it reaches into outer space, into the domain of aliens, nonhumans, the cosmic. While humans in their horizontal habits remain unaware of what happens above, aliens fall to earth. It isn't clear whether the alien intrusion will serve to shatter the existing order, or whether it will stitch it together. But it is clear that humans cannot navigate this situation without the car monad. They cannot take to the streets; they take to their cars, exploring the possibilities for mediation via the mobile cockpit.

The automobile becomes the site for articulating (or at least exploring the possibility of) a relation between apparently co-existent yet non-related domains (human and alien, earthly and cosmic). This is because, in its very inability to perceive the vertical, the automobile appears open to the vertical, to summon it. The obscurely perceived allows for the unexpected. This is what happens to Korben Dallas. An alien, a beautiful woman no less, crashes through the roof of his taxi. Reaching the streets, finding nowhere to run, Leeloo has leapt from the building, repeating her vertical descent to earth by plummeting into a car from above (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: To flee her pursuers, Leeloo jumps into the “streets,” plummeting through the layers of circulation and landing in Korben Dallas’s taxi.  
© Gaumont.

Once Leeloo has fallen into his cab, Dallas finds himself in the middle of the efforts to capture her. And he suddenly finds his horizontal movement blocked. There is no choice for him but to go into a vertical dive, plummeting car-long through the orderly layers of horizontal traffic (Fig. 3). Dallas goes into free fall, and his car becomes a pure vector of flight from regulatory forces, embodying a loss of ground in a moment of sheer freedom. This is *the* exhilarating sequence of the film, where all the forces traversing the film are proclaimed at once, and the scene will be echoed in later science-fiction action fare such as *Minority Report* and *Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones*. It is here that digital effects and the automobile combine forces.

One of the basic techniques for producing special effects is the blue screen or something like it, which allows filmmakers to introduce different layers into the image; or, as Digital Domain puts it, elements into the shot. Consider, for instance, the use of mobile backgrounds to produce the sensation of a travelling car: the car is still, while the landscape streams past the windows. Such techniques rely on and reinforce the horizontality of the car, because the effect works best when the view from the windows is lateral. Something analogous happens with digital effects in which different elements are added to the shot. The different layers of the image have to be carefully composited to ensure that the world of the image appears continuous. Even when there is motion in depth or along the diagonal, the actual techniques of layering and compositing impart a flatness and



Figure 3: Korben Dallas's yellow cab begins its vertical free fall down through the layers of traffic. © Gaumont.

planarity to the image. Motion within the image turns into layers of information, a proliferation of elements. In the cityscapes and car chase scenes in *The Fifth Element*, the relentless horizontality of car meshes perfectly with the material orientations implicit in digital effects, which is as much to the credit of Mark Stetson (visual effects supervisor) and Dan Weil (production designer) as Luc Besson, as well as the production of story boards out of *bande dessinée* art. Digital effects and the car monad come together to generate a set of material or “mediatic” orientations for the entire film, a manner of composing forces.

These mediatic orientations are the story. Or, at least, they are as integral to the film as plot and narrative. The problematic of the film derives from visually magnifying and digitally expanding the relentless horizontality of the automobile, which forces an increased concern for the obscured vertical and a new orientation to it. Opening the vertical to the cosmic promises at once to rupture and to heal the arbitrary power that composes the forces within this world. And the vertical dive not only recurs throughout the film in other forms; it also sets the orientations for the film, with Leeloo’s fall to earth continued in her leap from the building into Korben Dallas’s cab, and continued in the taxi’s vertical dive. The film will end, appropriately enough, with a powerful beam of coloured light shot skyward from the pyramid, saving the earth. Travelling at speed along the vertical (perpendicular to earth) promises salvation and protection.

The vertical dive of the taxi also condenses the two modalities of orientation that become embodied in our heroes, Leeloo and Korben Dallas. The car not only affords a momentary yet asymmetrical coincidence of horizontal and vertical modes of existence (human and alien) but also holds out the promise that there can thus be a genuine relation between them, beyond the flight and free fall that dynamically “consummates” their relation in the first place. Indeed the film ends with Leeloo and Korben Dallas making love after saving the world. And the place for the consummation of their relation is the resurrection chamber, a strange mixture of the techno-scientific and the domestic, of the test tube and the bed. This place is rather ambivalent in terms of horizontal or vertical orientation, and

evokes that other site where romances and domestic interiors become realigned with technically realized mobile life support units: the back seat of the car.

### Experimentation

Implicit in my analysis of *The Fifth Element* is an approach to media, technology and cinema inspired by Isabelle Stengers's "cosmopolitical proposal" (Stengers 2005a). Rather than treat cinema as representation or simulation, I looked at cinema as a composition of forces that sets up material orientations. Such a composition of forces is more than a combination or recombination of already neutralized or submissive forces. For composition to happen at all, there has to be some force of the outside — in this instance, the automobile, not as a thing to be represented or a simulation of reality, but as a force. Isabelle Stengers speaks to this situation when she comments, "both experimental science and technology need to address things not from the point of view of their submission, but in terms of what can generically be called their force, what they are able to do in particular well-defined circumstances" (Stengers 2005, p. 190). If I nonetheless dwelled on Marcuse and Baudrillard, it was in the spirit of resituating those concerns.

For Stengers, the cosmopolitical is not about cosmopolitanism but about the entry of non-humans into the political. Steven Shaviro provides a lucid summary of the problematic of the nonhuman:

For modern science, the constructivist question is to determine how this practice is able (unlike most other human practices at least) to produce objects that have lives of their own, as it were, so that they remain "answerable" for their actions in the world independently of the laboratory conditions under which they were initially elucidated. This is what makes neutrinos and microbes, for instance, different from codes of justice, or from money, or from ancestral spirits that may be haunting someone.<sup>4</sup>

This is precisely how cinema approaches the automobile, as an object that has a life of its own, as a non-human entity that is answerable for its actions independently of the conditions under which experimentation initially brought it into the world. Of

course, one may object that the car differs from a neutrino or microbe in that it is brought into a world through mechanical production, via Fordism or Toyotaism: it is not merely elucidated but industrially produced. Still, while cinema shares a history of mechanical reproduction with automobiles, cinema does not encounter the automobile at the level of industrial production but in the mode of experimentation, as a sort of perceptual problematic or proposition, as a non-human entity that has a life of its own and introduces a force of the outside into the field of cinema. Even though cinema can be seen to represent cars or to simulate them, cinema first addresses them in terms of their perceptual force rather than from the point of view of their submission (in representation or simulation). The car is not a thing or a sign for cinema, but a “life” or non-human entity that remains autonomous yet answerable within the field of cinematic composition.

I have taken the stance that cinema addresses the automobile in the manner of an experimental science, rather as an ideological mask concealing production, or as a ritual mask summoning initiatory power, or as a prosthetic of the human. This does not mean that cinema excludes, or is incapable of taking on, questions about production and consumption or about the human. On the contrary, I have proposed such an approach to cinema based on experimentation and non-human life not simply for the sake of novelty, to add something new to the study of cinema, but because it seems to me that transformations in cinematic production, reception and expression over the past twenty to twenty-five years make this shift in emphasis necessary. It is difficult to talk about the politics of films like *The Fifth Element* within the received frameworks that use representation and simulation as a basis for thinking about national belonging, otherness or identities under erasure.

As technical non-humans have increasingly become the “life” of cinema, received configurations of alterity in particular have shifted. We are all familiar with the mapping of human others (immigrants especially) onto aliens (extraterrestrials) in popular culture, especially in science fiction. It is a gesture that builds literally on the idea of the non-national as extraterrestrial. For

instance, while Leeloo may look and sound foreign when the point of reference is American English or American daily manners and dress, she is an extraterrestrial, literally the fifth element. As such, actual linguistic and cultural differences give way to technological difference. When Leeloo falls into the cab, for instance, she rather quickly masters English. Linguistic difference has no purchase; it gives way to tonality or accent. Similarly, since she can process information rapidly, Earth's history and culture are instantly accessible. Like the cars that continue to drive as if on streets, signs of difference circulate as if in accordance with received cultural and national paradigms, such as American, French, Japanese, Egyptian and Algerian. We may rue this situation and wish for a strong reading of the film that will wrest linguistic and ethnic difference back from this field of technical differentiation. But that is not where the film goes. Nor is the film about cosmopolitanism per se, even though there are plenty of cosmopolitan effects. The overall emphasis on technical differentiation over linguistic or cultural determination is in keeping with the introduction of non-human and non-humanoid objects endowed with "life" into the cinematic field of forces.

One might notice, for instance, the careful placement of manga as reading material on Korben Dallas's bed, which relates this futuristic New York as much to Tezuka Osamu's manga and Hong Kong action film as to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. The car chase exposes viewers to massive signage for Coca-Cola and McDonald's, and there are also Gaultier's costumes and Moebius's designs to reckon with, and locations in Egypt. As the taxi takes its vertical dive, Khaled's song "Alech Taadi" plays. This unmooring of identities is not simply an effect of Americanized cosmopolitanism, of making a film for the American global distribution system. These free-floating malleable identities are not merely an indicator of a loss of depth. Once such putative identities are unmoored, they seem to pose questions about their potential integration: with the flattening of linguistic, cultural and historical difference, we cannot say whether these apparently distinctive modes of social existence are somehow related, or whether they can co-exist without

relation. Much as the horizontal layers of automobile circulation in the future city fairly beg for, and open to, a moment of sheer vertical movement that temporarily forces layers into a mobile whole, so the layers of identity in this “French” entry into the transnational science-fiction action genre conjure forth an aura of multilateral initiative. At stake, however, is not the negotiation of geopolitical identities but cosmopolitical and bio-political struggles. Ultimately, in *The Fifth Element*, the politics of the nation form is not a matter of identities but of preservation of the species. As humans become one population among interstellar populations, universal population management takes the place of the representation or simulation of identities.

The bio-political thus appears almost as a corollary to the cosmopolitical in this film; they appear reciprocally determined. As cinema earnestly experiments with the proposition of non-human “life,” identities-to-be-recognized are transformed into populations-to-be-managed, and everything hinges on the elaboration of a workable cosmopolitical relation between humans and non-humans, to assure their co-existence. While *The Fifth Element* may be more a symptom of than a critical response to this situation, it does serve to signal such a transformation. When cars take over the streets, it becomes more difficult to “ground” the experience of streets and cars (they take to the skies and verge on starships). Consequently, when people today take to the streets, they may well find themselves inspired cinematically, working to negotiate a peace that calls non-human actors to the table.

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#### NOTES

1. See <http://www.filmscouts.com/SCRIPTS/matinee.cfm?Film=fif-ele&File=effects>. Consulted 21 April 2010.
2. The finest analysis of the automobile and cinema in the construction of post-war national identity is Ross 1995.
3. There seems to be general agreement (or at least a strong current of opinion) in film studies today that we can no longer rely on the idea of national cinema, and yet film scholars often do national cinema by default, working within national archives, languages and histories, and then making gestures towards regional dynamics or evok-



ing the global and the transnational in the last instance. Scholars try to finesse the question of the nation by treating national identities as contested or vexed. Transnational productions like *The Fifth Element*, which are ever more common and have broad appeal across sometimes segregated markets, present a challenge to this “post-national” or “non-national” paradigm. The challenge would be not to go beyond the nation form but to gauge its continuous transformation.

4. Steven Shaviro, “Cosmopolitics,” *Pinocchio Theory*, at <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=401>. Consulted 21 April 2010.

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#### RÉSUMÉ

### La voiture révélée : l’automobile comme principe cosmopolitique dans *The Fifth Element*

Thomas Lamarre

À l’aide du film *The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997) et des approches théoriques de Marcuse, Baudrillard et Virilio, les -quelles posent des questions cruciales sur la production, la consommation, la simulation et la perception, cet article analyse



les expérimentations relatives à l'automobile au cinéma. Il ne s'agit pas ici d'envisager le cinéma comme représentation ou simulation, mais plutôt d'offrir une lecture attentive du film envisagé comme « composition de forces », mettant en place des orientations matérielles. À partir des travaux d'Isabelle Stengers, cet article montre que la voiture ne constitue pas une chose ou un signe pour le cinéma, mais une force venue de l'extérieur, un principe qui, bien qu'il soit autonome, peut être appréhendé dans les limites d'une composition de forces cinématographique. Les transformations qui affectent le cinéma ont fait de ce changement une nécessité : établir une politique du cinéma exige désormais de prendre en compte que le non-humain technique agit de plus en plus comme principe cosmopolitique pour le cinéma.