Representing Political Subjectivity: James Cameron's *Avatar* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Annabel Herzog

The question of the relationship between politics and art is as old as political philosophy, or even as philosophy *tout court*. Recall Plato's extravagant (and ironic) diatribe against art and poetry in Books II, III and X of the *Republic*. The ideal city must be purged of these imitators who depict false and inappropriate feelings, set a bad example, and corrupt the characters of decent people. Plato holds that there is a long-standing antagonism between poetry and philosophy, which he formulates as one between poets and political leaders ("guardians"). Since *philosophical truths* and *good political values* are the same, in Plato's well-ordered city art will be tolerated only if it is controlled by good political values—namely, by truth. Artists who do not submit to such values will be sent away.[1]

The fact that truth is susceptible to corruption, and that the corruption of truth can have unjust political consequences, has never ceased to be relevant and, hence, the discussion framed by Plato remains important—albeit with some corrections. We no longer assume the Platonic ideal in which politics is the domain of true justice, and we believe

1 Plato, *The Republic*, Book III 398 a.

that "imitation," or fiction, can serve precisely as a means by which the artist may demand justice. It is clear to us that deception and corruption stem not from art (or at least not only from art), but rather from political regimes which use art (as they use everything) for deceptive purposes. In other words, the longstanding desire of politics to control art is not always legitimized by a concern for truth and justice. Art, on the other hand, can be a tool to fight repressive political regimes or to expose unjust political practices. However, while these observations are self-evident in authoritarian (and *a fortiori*, totalitarian) regimes, they are much less obvious in liberal-cosmopolitan democracies.

By "art" I mean the *creation of affects*—as do Deleuze and Guattari in *What is Philosophy?*[2]—as well as the consequences of these affects on society and culture. By "liberal-cosmopolitan democracies" I mean a neo-liberal political culture marked by sociological parameters such as mobility, urbanity, environmentalism and hybridity.[3] In the following remarks, I will argue that in liberal-cosmopolitan democracies, art is not and cannot be a non-ambiguous political tool—either for propaganda by the regime or for criticism of it—because it is necessarily part of the hegemonic liberal discourse. As such, it is always ambivalent, as is James Cameron's acclaimed film, *Avatar*, which rejects Western imperialism while being a pure product of its values and practices.

In the first section of the paper I will focus on the relationship between politics and art, drawing on the political philosophies of Hannah Arendt and Jacques Rancière. From Plato to Rancière through Arendt, the relationship between politics and art has evolved from being a question of truth (in Plato), to being a question of plurality (in Arendt) and finally to referring to subjectivization (in Rancière). I will show that in such a context, art gives visibility to, or represents new political subjects, but also reflects the ambiguities and contradictions of their struggle for public existence. For that purpose I will offer a "reading" of Cameron's

2 Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 175.

3 A full discussion of cosmopolitanism and of the broad scholarship concerning it is beyond the scope of this essay, which focuses on central elements in the contemporary relationship between art and politics. In this essay, I therefore speak of cosmopolitanism in general terms.

Avatar, arguing that the film is one of the first artistic representations of a new political subject, the "network protester," who in recent years has appeared on the political stage, challenging but also being an expression of hegemonic values. Finally, I will turn to the example of Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, to describe another possible political role of artistic representation in liberal-cosmopolitan times- that of testimony.

Politics and Art

Reflecting upon the relationship between truth and politics originally framed by Plato, Hannah Arendt wrote: "To look upon politics from the perspective of truth… means to take one's stand outside the political realm… The standpoint outside the political realm—outside the community to which we belong and the company of our peers—is clearly characterized as one of the various modes of being alone. Outstanding among the existential modes of truthtelling are the solitude of the philosopher, the isolation of the scientist and the artist…"[4] Contra Plato, who makes a radical distinction between the philosopher and the artist, Arendt argues that both the philosopher and the artist attempt to tell the truth, and that the nature of their attempt is an existential condition of solitude or isolation. Both the philosopher and the artist looking for truth estrange themselves from the political domain, which is the domain of opinion-making, namely, the sphere of togetherness and *plurality*, of different and coexisting *viewpoints* not necessarily related to truth:

> I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. […] It's a question [...] of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my

4 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1968), pp. 259-260

opinion. [5]

For Arendt, the specific essence of politics is not truth, which, in its solitude, is non-political and even anti-political, but *taking other standpoints into account*. In line with Arendt but going a step further, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière argues that the *demand to be taken into account* constitutes the act of *becoming a political subject* and that, accordingly, politics consists of processes of subjectivization.[6]

Rancière draws a distinction between the concepts of *police*, *politics* and *the political*. As he conceptualizes it, *police* refers to the social order; it involves the rules, norms, and relationships by which society members are governed. The notion of police "entails community consent, which relies on the distribution of shares and [a] hierarchy of places and functions."[7] In other words, it is "the art of community management,"[8] whose goal is the fair distribution of roles and modes of involvement among the members of the social order, or as Rancière puts it, "the common world." Politics, in contrast, is the realm of conflict about the distribution of roles in the common world. As such, politics is about being seen—or perceived. The public space is in theory shared by all and managed by the institutions of the *police*. Yet in fact, there are individuals who are in effect excluded from this process. As Rancière argues — following Arendt, but also Aristotle and Marx[9]—some people have no share in the common world. They are not there or, more exactly, they are not counted; they are not seen. They have no right to speak and be

5 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 241

6 See Jacques Rancière, *La mésentente* (Paris: Galilée, 1995); Jacques Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," in *The Identity in Question*, edited by John Rajchman (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 63-72.

7 Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," p. 63. Rancière's *police* (in French) is in this book translated by *policy,* which is adequate for "community management" but does not express the fact that repression and management are part of the same concept. In rendering *police* by police I follow translators of other works by Rancière.

8 Jacques Rancière, *Aux bords du politique* (Paris : Gallimard, 2004), p. 16.

9 See Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics,* edited and translated by Steven Corcoran (London and New York: Continuum International, 2010), in particular p. 39.

heard, and when they happen to speak, they are not heard: their voice is not considered a voice but a noise. Politics is what happens when such excluded people suddenly demand to be seen and heard; when some aspect of their situation suddenly becomes unbearable and reminds them that they, too, deserve a share of the public domain; when they show that they are neither invisible nor silent, and speak a language no less articulate than that of the recognized members of the public stage.

For Rancière, issues are not intrinsically political or non-political.[10] Any issue can become political, and actually does so when something about that issue prompts people who were invisible to demand they be seen and heard in a "process of subjectivization"[11]: "Politics can therefore be defined […] as the activity that breaks with the order of the police by inventing new subjects."[12] Politics is about conflict over the distribution and redistribution of the common space, which brings new issues and new voices into the public domain—which brings a *surplus* into the well-ordered world of the *police*. Rancière calls the *political* the confrontation between the *police* and *politics:* between the social order by which people, communities, and organizations share the public space, and the conflicting demands for equal visibility made by the unseen and unheard who are hereby becoming new subjects.

Thus, on the basis of Rancière's analyses, we can say that, contra Arendt and in a kind of ironic agreement with Plato, art has a political dimension because it brings a *surplus* into the public domain. The affects created by artistic work bring into being something not previously perceived. Of course, art is not only political, and it is not equivalent to politics. One can even choose to see in art only art—that is, to hold that a real work of art refers only to itself: "art for art's sake." However, the distinction between artworks that refer to some political exteriority and art for art's sake misses the point. The political dimension of art does not stem from the fact that art can refer to political issues, but from the fact that by its nature, art extends the public space: "There is no 'real world' that functions as the outside of art. Instead, there is a multiplicity of folds in the sensory fabric of the common, folds in which outside

10 Rancière, *La mésentente*, p. 55.

11 Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," p. 66.

12 Rancière, *Dissensus*, p. 139.

and inside take on a multiplicity of shifting forms, in which the topography of what is 'in' and what is 'out' are continually criss-crossed and displaced by the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics […] Doing art means displacing art's borders, just as doing politics means displacing the borders of what is acknowledged as *the* political."[13]

Art is political in a paradigmatic way in a democratic system, where the public domain is characterized by a vibrant, free, ongoing competition for *visibility*.[14] In democracy as in theater, identities, spaces and activities are unstable and fluid.[15] In both, visibility and invisibility take precedence in turns. The rhetoric used in democratic politics and the poetry used in theater—with all their differences—similarly create new and competing realities. This is why Plato wanted to say an irrevocable farewell to the writers of epics and plays—as well as to all democrats. For Plato, identities had to be stable because truth was immutable. As a result, his city had no room for democratic or theatrical games. It was the true task of some to speak and others to work. However, the democratic order is fluid and unstable, because it is characterized by different points of view and competition for visibility, not by truth. In such a context, the affects introduced by art into the public sphere have a political resonance. In this way art sometimes generates some kind of emancipation, but it may also reinforce the dominant regime.

The Example of *Avatar*

In the following section I will illustrate art's political resonance and its incorporation into the political domain through an example: James Cameron's film, *Avatar*, which I will read as a text. A few words justifying this example are called for before I proceed. First, some might disagree that *Avatar*, as a Hollywood blockbuster, can represent an example of "art." However, as I speak here of art in terms of the creation and reception of affects, I regard the distinction between "art" and "pro-

13 Rancière, *Dissensus*, pp. 148-149.

14 See Rancière, *Dissensus,* pp. 31-32.

15 See Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible: esthétique et politique* (Paris : La Fabrique-Editions, 1998), pp. 12-15.

duction culture" as irrelevant.[16] Second, and more seriously, it might be argued that a Hollywood production is by definition part of the hegemonic discourse and an expression of the *police* and ipso facto cannot be used to exemplify the *political* (in Rancière's sense) dimension of art. In response, I would underline the *ambivalence* of this specific Hollywood production, *Avatar*, which affirms and celebrates the hegemonic system even as it rejects it, in a form of *mise-en-abyme*. Beyond that, what I wish to focus on here is the creation or presentation in the film of a new political subject: the "network protester."[17] This new manifestation of *politics* represents a surplus in the *police* order to such an extent that it is currently modifying the political sphere in the Arab world; on Wall Street; and in Europe, South America, Russia and elsewhere.

A New Political Subject

Avatar depicts a world and a way of life in which the problem of mobility has been completely mastered. All places, no matter how far, can be reached without effort. On the planet Pandora, transportation has attained its optimal level. Technology provides humans with optimally efficient machines. Nature provides the Na'vi people with natural carriers: tamed animals, one equine-like, one winged, each optimally adapt-

16 Moreover, the rejection of Hollywood films as authentic art seems to me mistaken. In spite of uniform processes of production, the Hollywood industry is not wholly homogeneous; there is art and there are artists in Hollywood. Among the many scholarly works on this topic, see particularly John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008).

17 As I write these lines, *Time Magazine* has just elected its "Person of the Year" for 2011: the Protester. I am not arguing that Cameron invented the protester as a political subject between 1994, when *Avatar* began development, and 2009, when it was released, but I do claim that his film represents one of the first artistic expressions of the "network protester." Another such expression—also ambivalently both part of the hegemonic system and rejecting it—is found in Stieg Larsson's bestselling "Millenium" novels.

ed for long-distance travel. There are no barriers between plains and mountains, earth and sky, sky and the entire cosmos—not because the divisions between these domains have been removed but because technology and Nature have provided means to overcome them. Indeed, in *Avatar* the body itself is, or can be made, essentially a perfect vehicle: Should you lose your legs, medical treatment can restore them; or you can become a Na'vi—and then you can run immeasurable distances, jump vast heights, swim in any stream.

If Cameron's previous great film, *Titanic*, drew from the realm of transportation to symbolize the perils of human hubris for the 20th century, *Avatar* symbolizes the world we are heading toward in the 21st—a world characterized by the complete mastery of geographic displacement. Cameron's vision in *Avatar* is descriptive—this is the life we will be living in the near future, this is the spirit of our time—but also critical, because absolute mobility is the tool for absolute imperialism, absolute greed, and eventually absolute destruction. In contrast, Cameron presents an ecological and moral ideal, as reflected in the life of the Na'vi. Even more than the humans, the Na'vi move with great ease. Unlike the human characters, however, the Na'vi are situated—*rooted*—in specific places, and they do not covet lands which are not theirs. The film thus makes a double statement: our world is one of physical mobility; physical mobility should never mean the cutting of our connection to particular places and the destruction of other people's connection to their own places.

As widely emphasized in environmental literature, the "world" can be seen in two ways. It can be considered an *extended space* of many opportunities, which humans exploit for their own benefit. At the same time, it can be regarded in terms of the natural environment: the web of interrelationships among the living and nonliving things that fill the surface of the planet. The world as extended space and the world as the natural environment are distinct points of view that lead to different ways of life. *Avatar* shows that considering the world as extended space implies disconnection, while living in nature implies connection.

Here appears therefore the main topic of the movie: *connectivity*. The Na'vi are connected people, who plug themselves into the natural world by means of a special braid (this practice is called "bonding"). It is their

being plugged in that makes the Na'vi special. At first sight, the moral of the film seems to be something like "be connected to nature, not to electric appliances." However, the film's idea of the natural life is drawn precisely from the model of electronic appliances. On Pandora, all living things are interconnected via a vast neural network—but to access the neural network, the Na'vi must plug in. As for the human beings in the film, they too need to get plugged in to access the Na'vi world. Sophisticated technology, including advanced genetic engineering, has allowed the scientists on Pandora to develop "avatar" hybrid bodies from human DNA and Na'vi genetic material; the humans whose DNA was used for each avatar can then use their dreams and mental energy to activate the avatar, which can plug into the Pandoran neural network. This procedure, which takes place in dedicated "sleeping machines," is called "the link" (note that "bond" is the word used for the Na'vi, the less-strong "link" for the human-Na'vi connection).

In short, there is no ontological continuum in *Avatar* between humans and the Na'vi, or between the Na'vi and the natural world. The link *has to be created*. One can be part of the web of life on Pandora—but one has to initiate the connection; one must plug in. What we have here is not technology imitating Nature, but nature imitating Technology. The nature we love to love on Pandora is attractive because it works just like the Internet—it is a simulacrum of a technological model. While the metaphor of the neural network comes ultimately from nature—the Pandoran network is a vast system of electrochemical connections, with trees serving as the equivalent of neurons in the brain—the language used to describe this network is drawn from computer technology. The trees form—I quote the film—a global network. The Na'vi get connected to it and they download or upload data."

The link established in *Avatar* between environmental issues and the fight against capitalism and imperialism is not new.[18] The film's innovation, however, is that the aboriginal population's natural way of life is based on a model offered by the internet. The Na'vi people dwell in a single village while being part of a cosmic web; they have absolute mobility while remaining connected to their world. It is this situation that constitutes the

18 In general, the plot of *Avatar* is not new. The film has been compared to several others, including *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Pocahontas* (1995).

cause and possibility of their resistance against Western imperialist culture.

Avatar gives visibility to a new kind of political subject—the *plugged-in* or *network protester*. The film shows that in liberal-cosmopolitan times, the idea of the network and the notion of protest come together. The network is not simply an instrument of communication. It is a metonymy for a new kind of protest, which involves the rebellion of *rooted* people against capitalist disconnection, and *solidarity* between subjects, and between subjects and earth, against the atomization and insensitivity of global hegemony. Put differently, connectivity *in itself* encapsulates the essence of a new kind of protest, one which allies capitalist technology and ecology, universal values (the call for traditional liberal rights) and parochial care for one's specific culture, rituals and pieces of land. The network protesters are at one and the same time participants in the Western imperialist system, and its opponents. Their participation in, and patronage of the very system they are opposing dooms them to ineffectiveness or at best gradual undermining of the system's values, and not their radical transformation.

The Ambivalence of the Liberal Framework

In *Avatar*, as in most movies about aliens, human beings encounter a population which is wholly "other," yet nevertheless similar to humanity. The Na'vi are blue and tall; they have four fingers, a tail and a braid-plug; and they worship Nature in a way that most contemporary people are likely to find alien. However, these strange humanoids have the same feelings and the same cognitive abilities as human beings. In spite of their physical, cultural, linguistic, and religious differences, they are reasonable creatures. Put differently, the encounter with the very "other" Na'vi is a paradigm of the encounter with the other in the liberal, Kantian fashion: at the end of the day, the other is one of us, or can be one of us if he or she, and we, make the effort to communicate and understand each other. Reason is universal and, therefore, justice and morality are universal too.

On the basis of this universalism we can distinguish three ways in which one can encounter other cultures and ethnic groups. The first is

through ambition and imperialistic passion, namely, through the urge to eliminate those who are other, and to take what is theirs. In *Avatar*, this is the way chosen by most human beings: passionate ambition proves to be the main human drive.

The second is through intellectual cognition, whereby one tries to know and understand otherness. This is the way of science and, in the film, of the scientists who conceived the avatar program. In *Avatar*, science creates a simulacrum thanks to which the scope of rational knowledge is enlarged. This simulacrum, or fiction, is presented as a tool that is amoral—i.e., neither moral nor immoral. True, the scientists designed this tool to acquire knowledge for the sake of better social and political cohesion. The *Avatar* scientists wish indeed to live in peace in the world with all reasonable creatures, including the Na'vi.[19] However, knowledge is intimately related to power. Power requires knowledge to give it legitimacy; and knowledge requires power to give it the means to develop. The scientists need the soldiers to bring them to Pandora, protect them, and build the infrastructure of the avatar program. The soldiers need the scientists to provide them with the information that will enable the conquest.

The third way to encounter otherness is open to a very few select people. This is the way of conversion—which, in the world of the movie, is total. Conversion in *Avatar* entails both a physical and spiritual transformation, in which nothing remains of one's previous life. Jack is literally *born again* into his new community—the Na'vi people—in the midst of Nature. This route is available, in the film, only to individuals touched by grace or love. (It is worth remembering that Jack can only become a Na'vi because he is chosen by Eywa, the Nature goddess.) When he becomes a Na'vi, Jack must renounce his previous reality and accept the other's culture totally. In essence he must choose the dream as reality, over reality.

Conversion applies to human beings only. No Na'vi would ever wish to renounce his or her identity. In fact, the "others" have no interest in us (namely, Westerners) and our culture. It is only we who turn to

19 Of course, one can be far more critical as to the pure intention of science and scientists than *Avatar* and other works of fiction allow themselves to be.

them—whether to conquer them, to learn from them, to teach them, or to join them. The political statement of the movie is clear: The Na'vi are better people with a better way of life; it is we who should change, not them. However, it must be strongly emphasized that it is thanks to Western science and technology that Jack discovers the dream world that he finally chooses as his own. Moreover, it is he—a human soldier trained to conquer—who teaches the Na'vi how to defend themselves against the evil humans who try to destroy their land. It is the militarily and technologically trained Westerner, not the "natural" aboriginal, who leads the fight against Western power, in the name of a universal morality applicable to everybody—Westerners and aboriginals together.

What appears here is the paradox of liberalism, which holds self-criticism as the key feature of its ideology. In other words, liberalism never triumphs so much as when it criticizes itself in the name of its own values. The real human (or American) culture is not the cruel and selfish culture that destroys the holy trees of Pandora. It is the culture that sustains the rights of man, the rights of indigenous peoples, the rights of the natural world—all rights and values formulated by humanity (or America)—against the cruel and selfish human soldiers. Hegel got it right when he said it is the self-contradiction inherent in bourgeois liberalism that makes bourgeois liberalism the foremost power of the time—his time and, 200 years later, our own.

However, we can understand that paradox in another way. Or, more precisely, we are dealing here with another paradox, that of modern struggles and revolutions. As emphasized by post-structuralist theorists, modern theories of liberation are based on the very same values and practices as those of the repressive powers. Western culture has succeeded not only in repressing other cultures (and repressing its own minorities), but it has obliged them to defend themselves in a manner created and defined by Western culture. The Na'vi have no chance against the humans if they behave as orthodox Na'vi (as their young leader would like them to do). They must adopt a human strategy, taught by the good human, Jack.

Avatar therefore celebrates US politics and culture no less than it attacks them. It both illustrates and embodies the spirit of our time: it denounces capitalism and imperialism while being a pure product of

Hollywood, the highest-grossing film of all time, and, therefore, one of the main tools for propagation of American culture worldwide. The film does not come down on the side of the Na'vi's connection to nature, but on that of American enthusiasm for the Na'vi's connection to nature. It gives imperialism a satisfying feeling of being able to criticize itself—of being strong enough and moral enough to allow self-criticism—and transforms this self-congratulatory criticism into a public icon.

What appears in *Avatar* is a series of ambivalences: the network protester both participates in the hegemonic culture and rejects it in the name of values that the film both celebrates and criticizes. *Avatar* works at the same time for and against specific policies. As an artwork showing repression and a new kind of protest, and as a product of Hollywood, it is a manifestation of the confrontation between *politics* and *police*. Such a kind of art is part of a general discourse issuing from existing subjectivities and creating or revealing new subjectivities. It is neither lie nor truth; neither pure instrument of liberation nor tool of manipulation and repression. It is part of a game of appearance and disappearance, part of a general economy of norms and cultures challenged by a surplus of political subjects. The fact that it is part of a general discourse in this way is the reason it cannot be unambiguously a tool for social and political criticism.

Art and Testimony

In the last section of this paper I would like to propose another example, that of an artwork that is part of the general discourse but in a different way. Its immediate purpose is not to celebrate and/or reject the political system, but, rather, to *bear witness* to fundamental values in a fictional or, maybe, prophetic way. My example is Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road,* which, I argue, is a mirror image of *Avatar,* showing the same spirit of the times but from a different perspective.

In *The Road,* humanity has been reduced to the fate that would have befallen the Na'vi had Jack not succeeded in preventing the total destruction of their world. Nature lies in ruins, as do all the distinguishing

features of contemporary civilization—cities and machines. The world we see in the book—explicitly, America—is cloaked in smoldering ashes. Ironically, cosmopolitan mobility is here as absolute as in *Avatar*—the world has shrunk to a road, but it is a road through endless space with no frontiers. People in *The Road* are slow but mobile. Indeed, they walk endlessly. They walk because there is nothing else to do but walk. As in *Avatar*, nothing can stop them except death.

In McCarthy's novel, nothing is left of triumphant technology. Hence, there is an immediate and ontological relationship between humanity and what is left of nature—a painful and desperate relationship. To be part of nature here means to suffer—from hunger, from thirst, from cold, from the rain, from the dark, from other people. The electrical power grid, along with all the other accoutrements and necessities of modern life, is gone. There is no switch, nothing we can plug in (or link to, or bond with) that will light the world and create an appeasing fiction. More painfully, all the links among people have been broken. The characters rarely talk, and when they do, McCarthy reduces the language of their dialogues to a minimum. People no longer share culture or beliefs; instead, they have entered a Hobbesian state of nature, where they serve each other as sustenance of the most fundamental kind. In this world of absolute immediacy, people make use of whatever they find in their path: clothes, cans, or corpses, even to the point of eating the latter. Nor is this behavior considered unjust. As Hobbes wrote, "In this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place."[20] Justice has disappeared because all connections that mediate between nature and humanity, or between human beings, have been obliterated.

Like *Avatar*, *The Road* is a dream, but, this time, it is the nightmare of a world in which absolute individualism has overcome all other realities. Absolute individualism means that there is no more policy and no more police, no more protest and no more networks. The book, however, *does* give voice to a new political subject, the *survivor*. The survivor emerges not in his or her ambivalent struggle to be part of a public sphere both desired and loathed—indeed, in *The Road* such a public sphere

20 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 90.

no longer exists. He or she appears as remnant of the *big catastrophe*—which, in current political discourse, regularly appears as environmental cataclysm, atomic disaster, or capitalist calamity (whether collapse of the economic system or, on the contrary, its unlimited triumph). The survivor does not struggle to be heard and seen, to confront current policies. He or she does not even fight merely for life, but for a *life of remembrance*, the remembrance of facts and (holy) values that "once" existed: "Once there were brook trout… On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again."[21] As a straight answer to Plato, the function of art appears here to be that of a fiction able to reveal the *true* idea of the common good. In Rancière's words, "To investigate something that has disappeared, an event whose traces have been erased […] is a form of investigation which certainly cannot be assimilated to the representative logic of verisimilitude […] On the other hand, it is perfectly compatible with the relationship between the truth of the event and fictional invention specific to the aesthetic regime in the arts."[22] The survivor is a kind of "anamnetic" character, recollecting what our actual political reality has destroyed.

Unlike *Avatar, The Road* does not offer explicit social criticism, but rather bears witness to vanishing values, values that will be lost when individualism triumphs and the war of all against all envelops the planet. What emerges from the literary representation of the devastated world-to-come is, *a contrario*, the remembrance of the possibility of human relationships in a living Nature. *The Road* is an example of these "artistic *dispositifs* that tend towards a function of social mediation, becoming the testimonies, or symbols, of participation in a non-descript community construed as the restoration of the social bond or the common world."[23] Contrary to what Plato thought—at a time when global destruction was neither a political fantasy nor a real political danger—art can be a window onto a truth that *the polis-police* does not take into account: the possibility of its own dissolution. The political subjects rep-

21 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (London: Picador, 2007), pp. 306-307.

22 Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image,* translated by Gregory Elliott (London, New York: Verso, 2009), p. 129.

23 Ranciere, *Dissensus*, p. 194.

resented in such an art-as-testimony do not fight to make their voices heard and redistribute the political space, but to maintain the existence of that space. Art-as-testimony does not give visibility to this or that specific subjectivity, but to the very idea of political subjectivity, at a time when the ambivalence of political struggles casts doubt on the values and sustainability of liberal democracy.