The Funambulist Pamphlets 11: Cinema
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I have been fascinated for several years by material encounters in films and photographs that reveal the true weight of things, and thus the weight of the material assemblages that bodies (living and non-living) constitute. I often make this reading through Spinoza’s philosophy, which insists on the relation that these encounters compose.

This reading is possible when the weight of things constitutes their relationship to gravity. It is therefore legitimate to expect another approach when it comes to these encounters considered in outer space, where the gravitational force is still strong enough to carry each body in its own orbit but weak enough such that these bodies are not drawn back to the center of the
earth. As we will see later, the very title of Alfonso Cuarón’s film, *Gravity* (2013), constitutes a true dedication to the expression of these encounters in space. The ‘Hollywood’ storyline can be seen as a strategy of capitulation to big budget productions, but let us not be mistaken; this film is truly about the collision of matter in the vacuum of space. What triggers the plot itself is the encounter of the protagonists with a pack of debris created by the explosion of a satellite whose high speed does not suffer from any friction. Throughout the film, we are reminded of this fact: vectors of movement are absolute in space. In other words, a body in space barely pushed in one direction will be moved according to this vector without encountering any friction. Henri Bergson’s “sliding point” is captured in an infinite inertia. Thus, throughout the film, we are observing the body of the main character subjected to the violence of each change of vector it manages to adopt thanks to exterior elements. *Gravity*’s silent explosions — there can’t be sound in the void of space, for example, illustrate magisterially the multi-vectorial directions that the debris adopt — it makes us wish that we could see the last scene of Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* in 3D.

This does not tell us why the film is called *Gravity* and not *gravityless* or *anti-gravity*. Of course, a work of art is ‘strong’ enough not to depend wholly on its author’s intentions; however, I would like to insist on the fact that Cuarón evidently knows exactly what he is doing. It could not be less innocent that, when the main character ‘lands’ on earth, she is immediately confronted with another milieu in which gravity is reduced: water. The scene insists that she does not seem uncomfortable in this milieu: she puts off her space suit that was filled with water and easily reaches the surface of the lake she is in. These conditions are sufficiently similar enough to space for her not to be disturbed by them. Indeed, when she reaches the shore, she cannot manage to stand up as she
is experiencing gravity ‘for the first time.’ Cuarón insists on this image of this body that has faced the worst difficulties, but cannot compose one of the simplest relations to gravity that a toddler has learned to have. Similarly, it is not innocent that there is no ‘Hollywood’ ending here, no swarm of Apache helicopters coming to the rescue. The main character is alone in a ‘natural’ environment and, it is alone that she eventually manages to stand up and compose the parts of her body in relation to gravity. The name of the film is thus retroactively expressing the fact that the entire movie was dedicated to its very last scene, the simplest one. We can even associate this final scene with the teleological manifestation of the tool become weapon, and thus the ape become human in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey. She is the first human on earth, the first one to experience gravity. For the second time in the history of cinema, we paradoxically need a futurist ‘spacecraft movie’ to make us think about the birth of the human.

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