So neither the horizontal nor the vertical proportion of the screen alone is ideal for it.

In actual fact, as we saw, in the forms of nature as in the forms of industry, and in the mutual encounters between these forms, we find the struggle, the conflict between both tendencies. And the screen, as a faithful mirror, not only of conflicts emotional and tragic, but equally of conflicts psychological and optically spatial, must be an appropriate battleground for the skirmishes of both these optical-by-view, but profoundly psychological-by-meaning, spatial tendencies on the part of the spectator.

—Sergei Eisenstein, “The Dynamic Square”

Since the early 1990s the directors and effects artists of numerous films—including Titanic (James Cameron, 1997), the Matrix trilogy (Wachowski Bros., 1999, 2003), X-Men and x2 (Bryan Singer, 2000, 2003), Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Ang Lee, 2000), Hero (Zhang Yimou, 2002), Avatar (James Cameron, 2009), and Inception (Christopher Nolan, 2010)—have made increasing use of the screen’s vertical axis with the aid of new digital technologies. Drawing from cultural sources ranging from the narratives and characters featured in comic books, fantasy novels, and television series to the visual logics of video games and virtual reality, recent blockbusters have deployed a broad range of digital visual effects to create composite film bodies that effortlessly defy gravity or tragically succumb to its pull.

In keeping with this tendency, these same films create breath-
taking imaginary worlds defined by extreme heights and plunging depths, the stark verticality of which becomes the referential axis of many narrative conflicts. In this chapter I investigate the spatial dialectics and allegorical significance of contemporary cinema’s vertical imagination—it’s tendency to map the violent collision of opposed forces onto a vertical axis marked by extreme highs and lows. Such verticality often functions emblematically to represent an abstract quality or “state of things.” As an effects emblem, digitally enhanced verticality facilitates a rather literal naturalization of culture in which the operation and effects of (social, economic, military) power are mapped onto the laws of space and time. Hence, in recent blockbuster films, vertically oriented bodies and objects represent a relation not just to the laws of physics but also to a fictional world’s prevailing order. As a result, verticality often functions allegorically to give dynamic, hyperkinetic expression to power and the individual’s relation to it—whether defiant, transcendent, or subordinate. The films I focus on—Titanic, Hero, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, The Matrix, and Avatar—span a number of genres (including martial arts films, disaster films, science fiction films, action-adventure films, and fantasy films), and though they were produced in the United States, New Zealand, Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan, they share a number of characteristics linked to their insistent deployment of verticality; in each film, digitally enhanced verticality functions emblematically to give dynamic and spectacular articulation to the broader thematic concerns and concepts expressed elsewhere in the film through dialogue, characterization, and story.

This new, digitally enhanced verticality participates in (and extends) a very long pictorial tradition that has made use of the vertical axis of the frame (or page) to emblematize the rise and fall of mythological figures. Before turning to specific examples in contemporary cinema, it is worth returning to Andrea Alciati and his use of myths featuring dynamic, vertically oriented movement to represent or allegorize moral and political states. Alciati’s Emblem 56, titled “About Reckless People,” draws on the Greek myth of Phaeton’s chariot ride and is accompanied by an engraving that shows him plunging headlong from the sky to the earth below (fig. 1.1). In the myth, Phaeton, son of the sun god Helios, wishes to drive his father’s sun chariot—a vehicle so difficult to control that even Zeus refuses to pilot it. Despite being warned against doing so, Phaeton attempts to drive the chariot across the heavens, and after losing control of
the wild, fire-breathing horses that pull the vehicle, he comes too close to the earth and scorches it, forcing Zeus to strike him from the sky. Alciati’s “About Reckless People” describes Phaeton as he who “dared to guide the fire-vomiting horses of the Sun,” and uses his fall as an allegorical image for the “adolescent ambition” of reckless kings and their misuse of power: “After scattering enormous conflagrations all over the Earth, [Phaeton] fell disgraced from the vehicle which he had so reck-

Figure 1.1 Phaeton is struck from the sky in “About Reckless People,” Emblem 56 from Andrea Alciati’s Emblemata Libri (1608 [1531]). Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, call no. PN6349 A53 E5 1608.
lessly mounted. Much the same happens to many kings who, driven by adolescent ambition, are carried toward the stars upon the wheels of Fortune. After having provoked much misfortune among the human race, they bring ruin upon themselves and, finally, they pay the penalties due for their crimes.” The image represents the dramatic turning point when the ascent into, and flight across, the heavens (linked to generational conflict, rebellion, hubris, and ambition) is converted to its opposite by a sudden reversal in directionality: struck from above by Zeus’s lightning bolt, Phaeton is abruptly stripped of the power he seized. His fall presents a striking, dynamic image of the unexpected loss of power, of a body given over entirely to the laws of physics, the laws of the gods, and the prevailing order that he defied through his ascent. Taken together, the text and image update the myth of Phaeton’s fateful ride in order to emblematize the power seized and wielded by rulers who, by their actions, upend the order of things and wreak havoc on their subjects, only to suffer the ultimate loss of power in the end.

Much as emblematisists and artists have for centuries made allegorical use of dynamic images of verticality, directors and effects artists have created numerous cinematic spectacles of (more or less emblematic) astonishing ascents and breathtaking falls enabled by historically available special and optical effects, from Harold Lloyd’s precarious climb up the side of a department store in Safety Last! (Fred C. Newmeyer / Sam Taylor, 1923), to Jimmy Stewart’s defenestration at the end of Rear Window (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), to Slim Pickens’s descent through the atmosphere astride a bomb in Dr. Strangelove (Stanley Kubrick, 1964). However, the blockbusters of the 1970s marked a turning point in the history of cinematic verticality as they deployed big-budget special effects to exploit the screen’s vertical axis to a degree not seen before. The Poseidon Adventure (Ronald Neame, 1972) capsized an ocean liner and forced its protagonists to ascend through a series of inverted sets to find a way out through the ship’s upended hull; The Towering Inferno (John Guillermin / Irwin Allen, 1974) turned the skyscraper into an upright labyrinth difficult to exit alive; and King Kong (John Guillermin, 1976) staged a battle between Kong and the New York Police Department on top of the World Trade Center. Films such as Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977), Superman (Richard Donner, 1978), Close Encounters of the Third Kind (Steven Spielberg, 1977), and E.T. (Steven Spielberg, 1982) increasingly used models, miniatures, blue screens, mattes, and motion control to animate their
characters’ movements and desires along the screen’s vertical axis. Meanwhile High Anxiety (Mel Brooks, 1977) parodied the use of the long fall as a device for creating suspense in classical film noir.

The increasing exploitation of the screen’s vertical axis continued through the 1980s and became significantly more pronounced at the end of the 1990s with the development and refinement of digital processes, including wire-removal software, motion control, (photorealistic) digital animation, morphs (between actors and their digital stunt doubles), and performance and motion capture techniques. For example, in 1990 wire-removal software created convincing images of bodies and matter in flight in Back to the Future Part III (Robert Zemeckis), while in 1993 Industrial Light and Magic helped animate the screen’s vertical axis with towering photorealistic dinosaurs in Jurassic Park (Steven Spielberg). That same year Cliffhanger (Renny Harlin) composited images of its actors (shot against a green screen) with digitized images of mountainous landscapes to stage its action at vertiginous heights, much as the infant protagonist of Baby’s Day Out (Patrick Read Johnson, 1994) scaled Chicago’s soaring skyline thanks to composites of the baby’s image with digitized photos of the urban landscape. Such developments continued until 1996, when the three top-grossing films of the year—Independence Day (Roland Emmerich), Twister (Jan de Bont) (both of which used new particle animation software), and Mission: Impossible (Brian De Palma) (for which the Computer Film Company did digital compositing, paintwork, wire removal, and tracking)—suggested that digital technology’s ability to polarize action along extreme spatial coordinates would continue to develop into the new millennium.

At its most basic level the new digitally enhanced verticality is a technique for activating polarized extremes: it choreographs the rise and fall of the narratives in which it appears and emblematizes the soaring aspirations and desires, as well as the downfall and doom, of a broad range of protagonists, antagonists, heroes, and antiheroes. Hence verticality’s abstract spatial coordinates are those of the zenith and the nadir, and its favorite location is the precipice, regardless of setting. Skyscrapers, chasms, national monuments, elevator shafts, upended ocean liners, high towers, tall (and sometimes ambulatory) trees, and hovering helicopters have all functioned with equal efficiency to polarize conflict, to frame possible outcomes in terms of a devastating fall or a willfully insurgent rise. Even when action returns to terra firma and ordinary horizontality,
the mise-en-scènes of these films help activate and orient vision along the screen’s vertical axis: pillared interiors, banners streaming down from high ceilings, floating mountains, cascading waterfalls, and showers of brightly colored petals or spent bullet casings all indicate that actions and events will inevitably follow lines of ascent and descent, thereby compounding the thematic and allegorical significance of vertical movement in these films.

Verticality mobilizes and even codifies various connotative meanings and types of affect attached to ascent and descent. Upward mobility gives dynamic expression to feelings of soaring hope, joy, unbridled desire, aspiration, and even escape; it implies lightness, vitality, freedom, transcendence, defiance, and lofty ideals. And while falling and sinking give expression to dread, doom, and terror and are linked to weighty burdens, inertia, subordination, loss, and the void, the volitional nosedive suggests the thrilling mastery of powerful laws of physics. As a dynamic device for conveying the heightened emotions to which violent conflict gives rise, this new, digitally enhanced verticality draws heavily from the 1950s Hollywood melodrama’s use of expressionistic mise-en-scène and takes the genre’s association of staircases with rising and falling emotions to new extremes. Not only has the scale of the vertical setting expanded exponentially with the development of CGI (to elevator shafts spanning more than one hundred floors, for example, or to mountains that float in the air, high above a forest), but so have the stakes: frequently a struggle for the survival of an entire city (as in Spider-Man [Sam Raimi, 2002], X-Men, and Godzilla [Roland Emmerich, 1998]) or humanity itself (as in The Matrix, the Lord of the Rings trilogy [Peter Jackson, 2001, 2002, 2003], The Day after Tomorrow [Roland Emmerich, 2004], Armageddon [Michael Bay, 1998], Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow [Kerry Conran, 2004], and The War of the Worlds [Steven Spielberg, 2005]) is played out along spatial coordinates of extreme highs and lows. Because the new verticality vastly expands the terrain on which (and with which) the cinema compels its protagonists to struggle, it logically favors the epic.

Verticality’s link to gravity and the laws of space and time make it an ideal technique for dramatizing and emblematizing the individual’s relationship to powerful historical forces. Horizontality is an important point of reference that stands for temporal and historical continuity; its rupture by the upsurge or fall of a vertically articulated mass creates a dynamized moment, a temporal/historical break that radically changes the
course of events. Early in *Jurassic Park* the shot of a towering brachiosaur eating leaves from the top of a tree (bracketed by reaction shots of the stunned protagonists) signals the evolutionary past’s astonishing eruption into the present, enabling the dinosaur to embody the park owner’s plan, as Constance Balides describes it, to appropriate “historical time for profit on a grand scale.” In *The Day after Tomorrow*, a towering wall of water crashes into and submerges Manhattan to signal an irreversible shift in the balance of power: the United States’ economic and military supremacy comes to an end, initiating a new era in which it is dependent on Mexico. In *Reign of Fire* (Rob Bowman, 2002), *Deep Impact* (Mimi Leder, 1998), and *The War of the Worlds*, digitally rendered danger descends from above and threatens to bring human time to an end. And while *Star Trek* (J. J. Abrams, 2009) plots the demise of the planet Vulcan along expansively polarized spatial coordinates as rogue Klingons drill a hole into the planet’s core from a ship located in outerspace, *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009) imagines apocalypse on Earth through images of skyscrapers collapsing and plunging into a massive canyon that opens up in the middle of downtown Los Angeles. Later in 2012, when Yellowstone National Park becomes a volcano that erupts with the power of a nuclear explosion, burning chunks of molten rock rain down on the protagonists and nearly thwart their escape.

When verticality is located in the gravity-defying body of a protagonist in these films, it often implies a crisis inseparable from his or her problematic relation to the historical, familial, and traditional past. Whereas a protagonist’s upward verticality is frequently associated with a (rebellious) leap toward a new future, the downward verticality of the long fall is inseparable from the rapid approach of an inevitable end. In some of these films the past is represented as a weighty burden that constrains the protagonist’s freedom precisely so that powerful social, class, and political formations may carry on, unchanged, into the future (as in *Titanic* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*). In other cases, the past repeats itself and revives dark forces that promise to annihilate the protagonists in the not-so-distant future (*X-Men*, *The Fifth Element* [Luc Besson, 1997], the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *Minority Report* [Steven Spielberg, 2002], *Van Helsing* [Stephen Sommers, 2004], and *Star Trek*). Conversely, in yet another group, historical continuity and a tangible relation to the past provide the conditions of possibility for a historical agency able to overcome forces whose power stems precisely from the ability to manipulate or master
space and time at will (the *Matrix* trilogy, *Dark City* [Alex Proyas, 1998], and *Avatar*). Since extreme forms of vertical movement inevitably imply a violation and reassertion of the laws of physics, vertically oriented bodies and narratives provide the ideal form for abstracting power and representing the struggles of the emergent against the dominant—a concept neatly conveyed by the title of the film *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*.

While the popularity of the blockbusters I consider here can be explained in part by their presentation of astonishing digitally rendered spectacles, the “structure of feeling” (to borrow a term from Raymond Williams)\(^6\) invoked by verticality also allows them to resonate with contemporary audiences. Because verticality lends itself so well to the dynamic elaboration of conflict between opposed forces, it seems remarkably suitable for an era defined by economic polarization and new forms of political, religious, and military extremism, all of which seem to have had the effect (or so we are regularly told) of evacuating previously available middle grounds.\(^7\) The way that such global conflicts played out at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, only reinforced the link between verticality and the struggle for power in the popular imaginary. Indeed, verticality allows these films simultaneously to acknowledge extremism, economic polarization, and thwarted upward mobility as significant aspects of their global audience’s condition of existence and to charge these crises with new visual pleasures and imaginary resolutions. Even when they purport to represent actual historical events, these films feature mythological characters, breathtaking vertical terrains, and forms of embodiment detached from any referent in the real world onto which international audiences can map their conflicting identifications and emotional affiliations.\(^8\) Precisely by defying verisimilitude, the new verticality lends these films a different sort of emblematic truth able to resonate—strongly and broadly—within the historical context of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

This is not to say that previous eras have been free of either extremism or cinematic verticality. Indeed, verticality has been used to dramatize violent conflict in the cinema since Gus chased Flora Cameron to the cliff’s edge in *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915).\(^9\) However, before 1990, cinematic being-in-the-world remained, for the most part, anchored on a horizontal axis and verticality was used primarily to punctuate action and accent narrative climaxes and dramatic conflict. Recent blockbuster films exponentially extend and expand on the cinema’s on-
going exploitation of gravity’s dramatic potential. Digital technologies have helped liberate many aspects of production from the laws of physics, allowing for much more pronounced and sustained exploitation of the screen’s vertical axis. Indeed, in what is perhaps the most complex example to date, *Inception* uses the slow-motion image of a van falling from a bridge into the water below to organize vertically oriented action taking place simultaneously in four different diegetic dream worlds: the fate of the protagonists depends on their use of gravity (a “kick,” or the sensation of falling that jolts one from sleep) to awaken themselves from pharmacologically induced dreams and dreams-within-dreams once they have completed a required task. Each “kick” must be perfectly timed to allow characters to awaken in the next dream layer (from the deepest layer to the one closest to the surface of unconsciousness) before the van hits the water. The film cuts from the van to Ariadne (Ellen Page) plunging from a skyscraper, to a tower compound as it collapses down the mountainside, to an elevator propelled upward by explosives that jolt the weightless, sleeping protagonists awake upon impact, and, finally, to the van as it hits the water, awakening most of the crew into the collective dream world closest to the real world.

Hence, just as widescreen processes, according to David Cook, “created the functional grounds for a new film aesthetic based upon composition in width and depth” in the 1950s, digital processes have given rise to a new film aesthetic based on height and depth—hence the screen’s y and z axes. As a result, verticality is no longer confined to hair-raising stunts and dramatic camera angles but has become a cinematic mode that structures and coordinates setting, action, dialogue, and characterization along radical lines of ascent and descent. Now characters such as Gandalf (Ian McKellen) in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson, 2002) and Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) in *Avatar* plunge thousands of feet without bodily injury, displacing the long fall’s dramatic effect away from the body and onto narrative, characterization, and allegorical significance. *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006) uses terrifying downward vertical mobility to stage the event to which the film’s title refers: when a plane carrying Lois Lane (Kate Bosworth) experiences a catastrophic breakdown and plunges through the air in a terrifying nosedive, Superman (Brandon Routh) stops it from crashing at the last moment, thereby precipitating the love triangle and revenge plot that structure the ensuing narrative. Such films consistently locate their conflicts in ex-
treme vertical settings—such as skyscrapers, deep chasms, and mountain peaks—and organize their plots around scenarios that demand a protagonist’s defiance or mastery of the laws of physics. The resulting spatialization of power and time allows the new verticality to map spatial transience onto historical transition, and radical forms of mobility onto the possibilities and perils of change such that the new verticality becomes an emblem for (desired or thwarted, social or political) transformation.

Gravity, Historical Inertia, and Inevitability

I begin with two extremely profitable films—Titanic and Hero—that use verticality’s spatial dialectics to represent mythologized historical pasts defined by the violent opposition of polarized (political, economic) extremes. As an effects emblem, verticality creates an interpretive framework for the rising and falling bodies and matter in these films that goes well beyond their reality effect: by mapping complex struggles for power onto the laws of physics, verticality can make historical change a matter of inertia or inevitability. While Titanic’s verticality represents history as a body or force that will remain in motion along a specific trajectory unless displaced by another force, Hero uses verticality to make the outcome of imperial history as predictable as the operation of gravity itself. And while verticality loans some support to the “official” histories that these films appear to confirm (i.e., class conflict lies submerged in the United States’ distant past; national greatness demands the violent suppression of internal dissent), its bidirectional movement also accommodates the contradictory or ambivalent interpretations that global audiences might bring to it.

Titanic links its ship’s forward propulsion to historical inertia and a sense that the early twentieth century was drifting blindly toward disaster. As a number of scholars have argued, Titanic depicts 1912 as a moment in history defined by a rigid and punitive class-gender system in which a corrupt and decadent industrial patriarchy (modeled after European aristocracy) greedily pursued wealth and fame at the expense of others. This world is remarkably polarized: there is no middle class (the ship offers only first- and third-class passage), and proper Victorian femininity (contrasted only with images of the French prostitutes seen in Jack’s [Leonardo DiCaprio] sketchbook) remains unchallenged by the New Woman. The ship’s rigid segregation of classes by deck emphasizes two-tiered hierarchy and subordination from above. Aside from
some minor grumblings about the tendency of first-class passengers to walk their dogs on the third-class deck, and the hushed explanation that women’s choices are always difficult, acquiescence to a corrupt industrial patriarchy prevails among the *RMS Titanic*’s female and third-class passengers. Described by one character as “a steamer so grand in scale, and so luxurious in its appointments, that its supremacy would never be challenged,” the ship materializes both the decadent excesses of the industrial class and the arrogant presumption that it, like the *Titanic*, is unsinkable. Computer-generated tracking shots emphasize the ship’s considerable length, while wide shots display its smooth passage along the ocean’s flat, expansive surface, linking the prevailing order with an insistent horizontality and unperturbed stasis. The film thereby turns the *Titanic* into an emblem of historical inertia: unless acted on by another force, the ship/history will continue to move in the direction of an increasing imbalance of power between classes and genders.

Historical inertia is doubled by the inertia that seems to govern the fate of Rose Dewitt Bukater (Kate Winslet), whose impending marriage has been arranged purely for the profit of others: it will enable both her fiancé (Billy Zane) to come into his inheritance and her mother (Frances Fisher) to retain the upper-class lifestyle threatened by her late husband’s debts. Her imminent marriage seems to reduce Rose to a mute object, incapable of action. A panning shot of the dining room at teatime shows other women gossiping animatedly about the wedding as Rose sits paralyzed, staring blankly ahead as her voice-over explains, “I felt like I was standing at a great precipice, with no one to pull me back, no one who cared or even noticed.” Her later suicide attempt links her plight to a descent into a dark void. When asked by Jack why she tried to jump overboard, she explains, “It was everything. It was my whole world and all the people in it, and the inertia of my life, plunging ahead and me powerless to stop it.” To extend the association of marriage with the bride’s downfall and social constraints with the inexorable force of gravity, Rose shows Jack her large diamond engagement ring, about which he comments, “God! Look at that thing! You would have gone straight to the bottom.”

Verticality intervenes as a spectacular emblem for temporal rupture and violent historical “break.” An iceberg’s sudden appearance looming high above the ship’s upper decks reconfigures the ocean’s topography by activating vertical space high above and deep below its surface: the iceberg punctures the ship’s hull, causing water to rush in from below and
chunks of ice to rain onto the deck from above. This reorganization of linear space prepares the way for the astonishing visual effects shots of the ship’s stern catapulting high up into the air, converting the ship’s magnificent length into a terrifying precipice that spurs the fall of an unjust era (fig. 1.2). Gravity therefore acts as a historical corrective in this film: it violently undoes the flattened hierarchy of the ship’s two-tiered class configuration by turning the first- and third-class decks into equivalent parallel lines aligned upright, side by side. Computer-generated long shots and point-of-view shots from the top of the upended stern show hundreds of (digital) passengers—transformed into mere matter by gravity—plummeting the length of the ship to the icy waters far below. All fall to their deaths at the same speed regardless of class or rank as the ship’s bow points to its new destination at the bottom of the ocean (fig. 1.3). Social determinism gives way to “mathematical certainties” as the indifferent laws of physics take control of the Titanic’s fate, emphasizing the idea that “in the act of falling, history relentlessly marches on to its foregone conclusion.” Verticality further emblematizes the notion of a historical break as the ship cleaves in two before upending again and then plummeting downward to the depths of the ocean floor.

That Rose’s struggle for survival takes place at the stern is significant, for this site is associated with her earlier desire to give herself over to gravity and dissolution. The ship’s sinking ultimately provokes her resistance to the force to which she earlier succumbed: she refuses to stay in the lifeboat (reserved for first-class passengers) that would preserve her identity, and ends up quite literally on a new precipice where, with Jack’s help, she resists gravity’s previously alluring pull. Verticality inverts the
logic of Rose’s attempted suicide: rather than Rose escaping an oppressive social order by jumping overboard, the oppressive social order is instead sent plunging into the depths of the ocean. Rose’s temporary submersion ultimately dissolves oppressive social/familial ties and consigns Victorian femininity to an obscure past: kicking to the surface, she emerges from disaster as Rose Dawson, New Woman. By simultaneously resisting gravity and succumbing to its corrective forces, Rose bridges verticality’s historical break to become the subject of a new history defined not by polarization and inertia, but by the middle ground and hyperkinetic motion. While the frame narrative reveals that Rose went on to get married in the Midwest and progressed into old age as part of California’s comfortable middle class, old photographs show a young Rose Dawson standing in front of a biplane and riding a horse in front of a roller coaster.

Critics have argued that Rose’s transformation into a penniless third-class passenger who eventually rises to the middle class upholds the American ideology of upward economic mobility. I agree, but I would add that Titanic is equally concerned (as its digital visual effects suggest) with downward mobility, and that the film’s focus on descent simultaneously addresses a global audience for whom such myths of upward mobility are largely untenable. Verticality is masterfully and profitably deployed in Titanic to charge downward mobility with unprecedented visual pleasure: not only are the most astonishing digital visual effects reserved for the ship’s near ninety-degree inversion and sinking, but the latter facilitates a decline in Rose’s social status that the film argues has only liberating effects. Fantasies of potential and possibility are ultimately
tied to a protagonist who wins by losing. Her ongoing determination to cast off the burdens of the society life she left behind is signaled when the elderly Rose tosses the Heart of the Ocean diamond into the sea—a moment that should remind us that she never was, in fact, poor or lower class. In contrast, Jack, who is the film’s primary figure for an irrepressible desire for upward mobility, heroically slips beneath the ocean’s surface. Even as the frame narrative makes the myth of upward mobility available to some audiences, the film’s tendency to map mobility along a downward trajectory acknowledges that, in the late twentieth century, the middle class may indeed have been accessible only from above. As Titanic suggests, verticality’s spatial dialectics and bidirectional movement allow it to mobilize extremes, to elaborate and emblematize struggles for and imbalances in power, and to accommodate contradictory interpretations of each. In this way, verticality allegorizes and makes pleasurable the (spectatorial) position of being caught in the middle of fictional violent conflicts between polarized extremes, whatever their outcome.

Like Titanic, Hero represents a historical shift through verticality in order to emblematize the spectacular end of an era. In this film, verticality finds its most stunning elaboration through the four assassins who attempt to end the King of Qin’s (Daoming Chen) bloody conquest of the region’s warring kingdoms. Digitally enhanced wire fighting mobilizes their bodies along an expanded vertical axis and works in tandem with a highly stylized mise-en-scène to map complex historical forces onto (spatially) polarized oppositions. Hero is organized around three narratives that provide competing versions of the events that have brought the assassin Nameless (Jet Li) within ten paces, and hence striking distance, of the King. Within these narratives, the assassins defy gravity in settings defined by high bookshelves, tall trees, mountains, and desert rock formations, linking their verticality to their plotted obstruction of the King’s plans for conquest. From the beginning, an Eisensteinian use of mise-en-scène supplements vertical motion to materialize the idea that history proceeds dialectically from the intersection of directionally opposed forces. When Nameless arrives at the King’s court, horizontal and vertical lines clash to create a form of graphic montage within the frame. As Nameless mounts the stairs to the palace, his upright figure cuts sharply against the lines of the broad staircase that span the entire width of the screen. Inside, the interior of the Great Hall is even more starkly defined by linear conflict: in one shot, taken from the King’s point of view, Name-
less’s kneeling figure and the palace’s pillars are dwarfed by horizontally aligned ceiling beams and rows of candles that dominate the frame and appear to exert pressure on vertical elements from above and below (fig. 1.4). The graphic montage that creates a conflict between horizontal and vertical elements of the mise- en- scène and the dominance of horizontality in the opening scene is important, for Hero concludes with a funeral procession that lionizes the willing demise of the forces of resistance. Analog and digital elements within the film (including set design) thereby work together to enable the screen’s x and y axes to be used for emblematic signification. As the narrative unfolds, increasingly graceful images of downward mobility charge the assassins’ surrender of power with elegiac beauty. In this respect, verticality aids in the aestheticization of acquiescence, and gravity’s inescapable pull lends a sense of inevitability to past (and future) history and to the protagonist’s heroic willingness to be leveled by the forward thrust of imperial “progress.”

In the first, least truthful narrative, Nameless represents himself as a prefect who defeats the King’s enemies—a group of assassins consisting of Sky (Donnie Yen), Broken Sword (Tony Leung), and Flying Snow (Maggie Cheung)—by taking advantage of a love triangle that has bitterly divided them. Here gravity-defiant insurgency is linked to heightened emotions and feuds fueled by jealousy and disloyalty. These connotations are most pronounced in the scene in which Moon (Zhang Ziyi) fights Flying Snow to avenge her master’s murder. Throughout the scene, rage fuels vertical mobility as the combatants whirl through the air like tornados, give chase over treetops, and dive from high up in the air toward...
grounded targets below. Throughout the fight, bright yellow leaves rain down on the combatants, suggesting that the unbridled passions that propel them upward will ultimately lead to their downfall. Indeed, when Flying Snow fatally wounds Moon, the trees and the falling leaves turn blood red. The mise-en-scène appears to mourn the futility of Moon’s death, giving the impression that the natural world bleeds with her. At the end of the tale none but Nameless—the King’s loyal prefect—is left standing. Though the King ultimately disproves this story, it serves the broader ideological function of allowing vertically articulated bodies to stand for the warring kingdoms that suffer needlessly by fighting among themselves, making unity through empire appear natural and necessary.

In the second tale, the King narrates events as he imagines they must have transpired, given his knowledge of the assassins’ honorable characters. The King correctly surmises that Nameless, too, is an assassin and assumes that unity of purpose among the assassins has allowed Nameless to come within striking distance of the King’s throne. In this version of the tale, verticality allows the King’s admiration for the assassins’ willingness to sacrifice themselves for their cause to be expressed through stunning images of descent. After picturing Flying Snow’s heroic death during her staged battle with Nameless (as they fight, she exclaims, “I die willingly for our cause! Please make your move!”), the King imagines a subsequent, more spectacular fight between Nameless and Broken Sword (the vertical orientation of which was made possible by the digital removal of the wires, harnesses, and cranes used to create convincing images of flight). However, this battle unfolds only in their minds as a tribute to Flying Snow, whose body lies nearby on a bier. The imagined fight takes place on a lake, the perfectly still surface of which mirrors the tree-covered mountains in the background, inverting the treetops and peaks so they point to the bottom of the frame. In some shots, only the reflection is visible in the frame, orienting mise-en-scène along a downward trajectory, while in others, the frame is divided between the landscape and its mirror image, between competing images of ascent and descent that match the rising and falling action (fig. 1.5). The camera cuts between images of the fighters skipping across the surface of the water like birds taking flight and wide shots of them plunging headlong toward the lake, using the tips of their swords to rebound off the water’s smooth surface. Here ascent (and with it insurgent power) is most beautiful when followed by images of descent that aestheticize the surrender to gravity and the loss of power.
Not surprisingly, the King’s imagination charges self-sacrifice and surrender with elegiac beauty and foreshadows the film’s conclusion, in which Nameless is given a hero’s funeral after sacrificing himself and his cause to the King’s ostensibly higher goals of empire.

The third and final tale combines elements of the first two: the assassins are divided not by desire and jealousy but by conflicting political ideals. While Snow and Nameless still oppose the King (their families were killed by his army), Broken Sword embraces the vision of “Our Land” and the unification of the warring kingdoms through bloody conquest. Predictably, Broken Sword’s decision to succumb to the forward march of progress follows a downward trajectory. In a flashback within the tale, he describes the fight in which he passed up the opportunity to assassinate the King. The fight unfolds in the Great Hall among long green banners that hang from the high ceiling and match the color of Broken Sword’s clothing. Here, vertically oriented mise-en-scène aids wire-fighting to give outward expression to Broken Sword’s desire to relinquish his part in the struggle and thereby helps to map a shift in power. At a crucial moment Broken Sword has the chance to cut the King’s throat but ultimately pulls back. After the King realizes his life has been spared, a long shot shows the massive banners streaming gently to the floor on either side of the combatants. The opposed spatial coordinates of high and low are flattened as opposition gives way to acquiescence, allowing gravity to double for the inexorable force of China’s (future) imperial history.

This historical trajectory finds expression through the arrows that slice across the court when the King gives the order to execute Nameless, sac-
rificing him to the ideology of “Our Land.” Having taken to heart Broken Sword’s argument that only the King has the power to end suffering and “bring peace by uniting our land,” Nameless also declines to assassinate the future emperor and therefore forfeits his life. His execution concludes with an image that simultaneously documents the fall of oppositional power and aestheticizes its absence. The camera tracks along the court wall—now transformed by thousands of black arrows that protrude in a thick horizontal mass from its surface—until it reaches the empty, blank space where Nameless once stood. The negative space formed by the assassin’s absent upright figure perfectly emblematizes the ideology that national history always demands the noble self-erasure of insurgent forces who resist its forward movement and idealizes (self-)subordination to an oppressive regime.15

**Walled Cities, Mountaintops, and the Force of Tradition**

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a *wuxia* film that undoubtedly helped prime *Hero’s* enthusiastic reception by Western audiences, uses digitally enhanced visual effects to melodramatize a dynamic struggle for power by protagonists whose upward verticality is linked to insurgency against ongoing tradition and the past. As in *Hero*, resistance has deadly consequences, and the film ends with a willing fall into a void. At the opening of *Crouching Tiger*, each of the main characters is poised to break from the traditions and institutions that define his or her life. However, the past thwarts each attempt and asserts itself primarily through the obligations of duty (to dead fathers, fiancés, and masters) and revenge, both of which preserve lines of power and maintain past traditions in the present. Jen Yu (Zhang Ziyi) is about to enter into an arranged marriage that is certain to advance her father’s career and increase her family’s power. Though she appears to be an obedient upper-class daughter, she is, in fact, a powerful fighter trained by the notorious Jade Fox (Pei-Pei Cheng) and is in love with Lo (Chen Chang), an outlaw bandit. Jen wishes to lead a warrior’s life, which she mistakenly believes is defined by freedom from duty to others. Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun Fat) wishes to quit his life as a warrior in order to spend it with Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh); she, in turn, contemplates forgetting her duty to honor the memory of her dead fiancé to be with Li Mu Bai. However, Yi (duty to his dead master) binds Mu Bai to the past. At the beginning of the film, he gives away the Green Destiny sword to escape the *jiang hu* underworld, but, as he notes, “the cycle of
bloodshed continues” as Jade Fox’s arrival in Peking forces him to avenge his master’s murder. In Crouching Tiger, vengeance maintains the past in the present by keeping one murder alive, so to speak, until another one consigns it to the past. Though Mu Bai kills Jade Fox, she also slays him with the same poison she used to kill his master. Rather than free Mu Bai to pursue a new future, the act of vengeance gives the past the power to repeat itself and foreclose on the future altogether. As in Titanic and Hero, the struggle for power between polarized forces takes place on a historical threshold where a younger generation’s priorities and desires threaten to overturn long-standing tradition. The film represents the upheaval characteristic of such moments of (generational) conflict and transition through vertical movement.

Mu Bai and Jen are defined in part by their desires to jettison traditional duties to fathers and masters in favor of satisfying individual desires. They also imagine and long for a future that departs from the ongoing order of things. In the first half of the film, Mu Bai plans to abandon his training altogether to be with Shu Lien, but in the second half, he revives his pursuit of Jade Fox and decides to return to Wudan to train a female disciple. In turn, Jen leaves behind the obligations of aristocratic femininity and marriage to roam freely as a rogue warrior unbound by any duty to others—even Qing (the duty of consideration of others), which Shu Lien points out is necessary for any warrior’s survival. Indeed, by running away from her arranged marriage and having a relationship with Lo, Jen rejects the traditional female virtues of both Xie (filial piety) and Zhen (female sexual purity), gives way to Yin (excessive sexual feeling), and fails to exhibit Li (propriety or conformity to accepted standards of social behavior). Not surprisingly, Jen and Mu Bai are the film’s primary and secondary agents of verticality, respectively. Ultimately the film is ambivalent about any complete rejection of or acquiescence to the demands of the past and the constraints of tradition, for both the fulfillment of traditional duties and the rejection of them have disastrous consequences for each of the characters.

The first vertically oriented fight scene appears immediately after Jen indicates to Shu Lien her desire to evade the confinement and subordination of her approaching arranged marriage. Hence the dialogue that precedes and follows the extended fight sequence frames the vertical action in a way that allows the sequence to emblematize the characters’ resistance against or adherence to duty, tradition, and the past. During
her first meeting with Shu Lien, Jen expresses a desire to live a life free from the constraints that bind her to an unwanted marriage arranged by her father. After finding out that Shu Lien is a warrior, she exclaims, “It must be exciting to be a fighter, to be totally free!” Shu Lien points out Jen’s error and explains that in order to survive a warrior’s life, one must abide by a code, a set of ethics or rules that binds one by duty to others: “Warriors have rules too: friendship, trust, integrity. Without rules, we wouldn’t survive for long.” Despite this correction, Jen persists in thinking of the warrior life as defined by freedom from all obligations to others and by fighting as a means of overcoming the barriers to the fulfillment of individual desire. She counters, “I’ve read all about people like you, roaming wild, beating up anyone who gets in your way.” Later, when Shu Lien visits Jen following the theft of the sword, Jen indicates that she resents having to marry for the sake of her father’s career and reiterates, “I wish I were like the heroes in the books I read. Like you and Li Mu Bai. I guess I’m happy to be marrying. But to be free to live my own life, to choose whom I love—that is true happiness.” Shu Lien again corrects Jen, and reveals that she and Mu Bai have never acted on their love for each other. Shu Lien chides, “I am not an aristocrat as you are, but I must still respect a woman’s duties.” From her reading of fictional stories about warriors, Jen mistakenly assumes that the jiang hu life confers radical freedom to its warriors, eliminates one’s duty to others, and releases the individual from fulfilling his or her duty to the demands of filial piety.

The vertical movement of the fight sequence that these scenes bookend emblematizes these characters’ contrasting and even polarized relationships to filial piety and tradition. As Christina Klein argues, the fight enacts “the conflict between the desire to pursue one’s self-interest and the sense of obligation to others and to the rules that define one’s social role. The two women represent opposite poles of this tension, which finds expression in the very form of their fight.” Klein argues that, “like a romantic waltz in a musical, the fights communicate visually what is difficult for the characters to say verbally. The fights express characters’ feelings and desires, externalize their inner lives, and give physical shape to their relationships.” However, I would argue that verticality spectacularly renders that which has already been expressed in dialogue before (and again after) the fight, such that dialogue and visual effects work together to emblematize the broader conflicts around the themes of desire and duty,
the present and the past, that the film as a whole narrates. Story and dialogue simultaneously produce the meanings to be attached to spectacular images of verticality and (to quote Walter Benjamin) drag “the essence of what is depicted out before the image” to shape the audience’s interpretation of them.¹⁹

Hence, despite Shu Lien’s caveat regarding the duties and rules that define a warrior’s life and actions, Jen nevertheless commits an act of reckless rebellion that will give her a material connection to the (mythological, fictional) warrior life she desires by stealing the Green Destiny sword from Sir Te. Hearing the raised alarm, Shu Lien pursues the masked thief over the peaked rooftops, which give the chase an undulating rhythm that coordinates Shu Lien’s and Jen’s contrasting relation to the traditions and duties binding present and future behavior to the past. As Klein notes, whereas the dutiful Shu Lien acts with the force of gravity throughout the scene, Jen defies gravity much as she desires to defy duty and tradition.²⁰

Hence, throughout the fight scene, Shu Lien counters each of Jen’s vertical ascents: she knocks Jen out of the air by throwing bales of hay and pieces of brick at her; she steps on Jen’s feet as Jen pushes off the ground to fly away, grabs her clothes before she soars out of reach, and scrambles up a wall to cut off Jen’s ascent, demanding, “Get down here!” In another shot, as Jen flits lightly across rooftops, Shu Lien remains earthbound and gives chase below through the labyrinthine streets and alleys of the city.

Indeed, given her function as an anchor working to keep the fight on solid ground, it is significant that throughout much of the film Shu Lien chooses to remain bound by tradition: she exemplifies filial piety by successfully operating the security business her father passed on to her (one client declares her an honor to her father’s memory); she protects at all costs the interests and reputation of Sir Te (who regards her as a daughter); and, as she explains to Jen, she and Mu Bai have repressed their desire for one another to remain faithful to the memory of Meng Si Zhao, her deceased fiancé and Li Mu Bai’s blood brother. Rather than challenging patriarchy, her role as a warrior and security agent fulfills the principle of Xie, simply because she carries on her father’s work in his absence.²¹ If the digitally rendered walled city of Beijing is the (horizontally articulated) architectural manifestation of Jen’s confinement by ongoing traditions and family histories far more powerful than she, then Shu Lien embodies the structural support of dutiful femininity on which patriarchy
and its traditions depend. Hence, throughout their first fight, tradition and duty—figured as the earth’s gravitational pull—exercise themselves through Shu Lien, who acts as a counterweight to Jen’s vertical flight.

We can compare the vertical action of this scene with the fight between Mu Bai and Jen in the treetops of a bamboo forest. In contrast to the rigid up-or-down verticality of the first fight (facilitated by the walls and buildings of the city), the choreography of the fight in the forest is defined by the swaying flux of the bamboo trees that yield to the lightness and weight of the fighters’ bodies (fig. 1.6). This pliant, bending verticality is a visual manifestation of Jen’s wavering position, her suspension between courses of action—she may return to her parents and subordinate herself to her father’s wishes, she may become Mu Bai’s disciple and subordinate herself to another tradition, or she may roam free as a masterless warrior. Whereas in the first fight scene Jen seems far more weightless than Shu Lien, in this scene Mu Bai floats and balances with far greater ease. Here the forest is an important element of verticality’s mise-en-scène: the trees provide a structural support for the weightless body that demands the masterful use of gravity as much as the transcendence or defiance of it. If gravity represents the force of tradition and the past, then Mu Bai’s more masterful verticality derives in part from his connection to the traditions, training, and duties of a warrior trained at Wudan Mountain. Hence he is able to use the rise and fall of the branches with far greater skill than Jen, who plunges halfway below the tree line when he shakes her from a branch. His greater utilization of gravity’s force thereby implies that without some structural support from past tra-
dition, without any master, the future is characterized by a perilous free fall. Yet as an agent of verticality, he is also at odds with tradition. Indeed, at this point in the narrative, Mu Bai chases Jen into the treetops because he wishes simultaneously to carry on tradition and transform it by bringing a female disciple to Wudan Mountain.

In keeping with its ambivalence toward the unconventional future each of the characters longs for, the film ends by suspending its protagonists between old and new worlds. As I mentioned, the past repeats itself in the present when Mu Bai is poisoned by Jade Fox, killing his future. Rather than use his last moments to meditate and enter heaven, Mu Bai chooses instead to remain a ghost that walks the earth by Shu Lien’s side. This figurative suspension between two worlds, between heaven and earth, past life and future life, is visually expressed through the film’s final image, as Jen jumps off Wudan Mountain (fig. 1.7). Before she jumps, Jen reminds Lo of the legend of Wudan Mountain. Earlier in the film, Lo tells the legend of a boy who jumped from the mountain to save his ill parents from certain death and simply floated away, unhurt, never to return. He tells her, “Anyone who dares to jump from the mountain, God will grant his wish. . . . The elders say, ‘A faithful heart makes a wish come true.’” Invoking (and perhaps reenacting) this legend, Jen tells Lo to “make a wish” (he wishes “to be back in the desert, together again”) and jumps. On one hand, Jen’s descent may be read as an elegiac image of the insurgent figure’s fatal acquiescence to the laws of physics and, hence, to the conventions and traditions that govern the social order she had so violently resisted. On the other, her fall might fulfill Lo’s wish for them to return

*Figure 1.7* Jen jumps off Wudan Mountain in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2000).
to the desert to lead a life unconstrained by family duty and class differences. Though the path has been cleared for Jen to live a life of freedom and autonomy, the film holds the future at bay, suspending the narrative (and the spectator) between opposing outcomes. Jen’s descent through space thereby foregrounds verticality’s more general ability to accommodate ambivalence along with the film’s specific melodramatic negotiation of—and radical refusal to resolve—conflict between the representatives of the future and the past, the desire for change and the insistent pull of tradition, and the struggle of the emergent against the dominant. *Crouching Tiger*’s open-ended conclusion therefore foregrounds the melodrama’s generic refusal to resolve the conflicts emblematized by verticality’s spatial dialectics and enacts at the level of action and image what Steve Neale refers to as the “wish structure” of the melodrama, its tendency to provoke spectators to wish, “If only . . .” (i.e., if only Jen had never left the desert; if only she had become Mu Bai’s disciple; if only she had arrived in time with Mu Bai’s antidote after he is poisoned by Jade Fox, etc.). Indeed, Jen’s final words—“Make a wish, Lo”—invoke this structure. Rather than use verticality to provide an easy resolution to complex (generational, gender, and class) conflicts, the film ends with a series of shots that make it difficult to determine whether Jen falls (and therefore succumbs to gravity and the force of tradition) or floats away into the mountains to fulfill Lo’s wish and her own desires. By refusing to confirm whether Jen’s rebellion against tradition will be rewarded with a return to the desert or punished with her death, this ambivalent, inconclusive image of verticality ultimately works not only to emblematize the (ongoing) desire for historical change but also to accommodate the conflicting identifications, politics, and interpretations of the blockbuster’s broadly heterogeneous global audience.

### Severed Pasts and Skyscrapers

Science fiction’s focus on the nature and experience of time, as well as its tendency to imagine worlds, technologies, and forms of embodiment that defy the laws of physics, has made it another genre ideally suited to exploit the new digital verticality (prime examples include *The Fifth Element, Dark City, Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow, I, Robot, War of the Worlds, Inception*, and *Avatar*). *The Matrix* is undoubtedly the film that most insistently ties vertically oriented action to the struggle for control over the laws of space and time. In it, humanity has been enslaved by
machines and exists in a state of suspended animation, as nothing more than a power source for artificially intelligent computers. Implicit and explicit in The Matrix is the idea that history operates according to horrifying cycles and ironic inversions: while images of the shackled Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) link the current enslavement of mankind to the transatlantic slave trade, humanity’s subordination to machines perverts modernity’s equation of historical progress with technological development. Once freed from the matrix, Neo (Keanu Reeves) struggles to rescue humanity from machine-made, simulated space and time. This struggle has evolutionary overtones: while Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving) compares humans to dinosaurs and viruses, Neo will become “the One” (who saves humanity) precisely because he has somehow acquired the characteristics of his captors (Tank [Marcus Chong] refers to him as “a machine”). The film borrows and expands on the vertically oriented action of the martial arts film (Yuen Wo Ping choreographed the fight scenes in both The Matrix and Crouching Tiger) to spatialize its protagonist’s relation to historical time and power. Whereas Neo’s powerlessness is emphasized through his fear of heights at the beginning of the film (he is first captured by Agent Smith when too frightened to climb the scaffolding to the top of the Metacortex building), his ascension to his position as the One is marked by his increasing ability to bend the laws of physics and defy gravity. Put differently, Neo’s ascension to new ontological heights as the One is marked by his gravity-defying upward mobility; such ascension in turn signals his transformation into an agent and emblem of historical rupture.

As in the other films discussed here, The Matrix does not use verticality simply for the sake of spectacle. Rather, verticality is the dynamic, emblematic expression of a desire to change the course of history, to precipitate a new future. Nearly all violent conflict with the Agents takes place along a vertical axis, from the opening scene when bullet-time sequences first display the spectacle of Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) suspended in the air as she kicks her way out of a trap, to a later scene in which the rebels flee the hotel by sliding down through its interior walls. The spatialization of power is most evident in the scenes organized around Morpheus’s rescue from the Agents, which begins with Neo and Trinity storming the lobby of a skyscraper and engaging in a shoot-out with security guards. The pillars that line the lobby materialize the film’s broader theme of imprisonment and structure the vertical mise-en-scène of the fight se-
quence. As agents of verticality, Neo and Trinity create a downpour of falling shrapnel, objects, and bodies even as they defy gravity themselves. Fragments of marble and concrete, spent bullet casings, shards of glass, and water from a sprinkler system create a constant stream of downward motion that mimics the descent of the binary code seen falling across computer screens throughout the film. As other bodies drop, Neo and Trinity rise: in one of the rescue scene’s many high-angle shots, they propel themselves to the top of the skyscraper by the cables of an elevator car they have sent plunging to the lobby, packed with explosives (fig. 1.8). Later in the rescue, as Trinity and Neo shoot from a hovering helicopter into the office where Morpheus is being held, the camera cuts to a low angle beneath the shower of bullet casings that rains down from above (fig. 1.9).

The bidirectional movement of such shots foregrounds the link between verticality and narratives of emergence. Neo’s repeated defiance and bending of the matrix’s machine-made gravity (he dodges bullets, runs up walls, dangles over a digitized greenscreen cityscape, and rescues Trinity as she falls from a downed helicopter) ultimately demonstrate that he is the One and present the possibility of humanity’s liberation from the matrix. Importantly, the film exploits the skyscraper to do so. While the jagged, burned-out spikes of the real world’s city skyline represent the end of human progress, the mirrored postmodern skyscrapers inside the matrix represent an inversion of the principles according to which modern progress was measured. If the upward reach of the twentieth-century skyscraper implied the limitless potential of human
endeavor, the simulated skyscrapers of the matrix imply humanity’s backward slide, its reduction to nothing more than the energy given off by the body’s biological processes. Hence the simulated skyscraper filled with workers in tiny cubicles simply cloaks the real-world skyscrapers of the film’s twenty-second century—the massive energy towers that reduce human history to the ahistorical temporality of thermodynamics. Like some of the other films I discuss here, The Matrix has a somewhat inconclusive resolution. Whereas Crouching Tiger ends with its protagonist’s downward fall, The Matrix ends with Neo promising a future revolution in voice-over and rocketing upward above the city skyline of the matrix. While we might link this open-endedness with the film’s position as the first installation of a trilogy, it is worth noting that the trilogy itself ends not with a triumphant victory of human over machine, but with a truce between polarized forces.

**Diving Downward and Looping Back**

Like many recent blockbusters, Avatar maps (a fictional) historical transition onto spatial transience and sets its narrative at a pivotal moment in history that promises to bring about the return of the past. The film dramatizes a struggle over which past—or, to be more precise, whose past—will return in the present to determine the course of the future on the moon Pandora. The “pull” of the past and the drive to manifest it in the present find emblematic expression in the film’s emphasis on volitional downward mobility. The film opens onto a violent conflict already under way between the Na’vi (Pandora’s native population) and the Sky People.
(humans from Earth—here, the invading aliens) for control over space and time on Pandora. It is clear from the outset that this conflict will be played out on a polarized vertical terrain: the Sky People have arrived by spaceship from above to mine a precious metal (called “unobtainium”) from deep below the surface of Pandora’s rainforest. To gain access to Pandora’s unobtainium, the humans first use their avatar program (which allows humans to upload an individual’s consciousness, via a computer link, into hybrid Na’vi/human bodies able to endure Pandora’s toxic atmosphere) to try to persuade the Na’vi to yield their natural resources to the mining company; when that fails, they use military force. The struggle over the space of the rainforest (and what lies beneath it) is inseparable from a struggle over the historical past and the future. The humans and the Na’vi inhabit structurally similar but conflicting recursive temporalities: while the Na’vi organize life around the cyclical time of nature, tradition, and myth (with an emphasis on renewal and return), the humans fight to incorporate Pandora and the Na’vi into humanity’s (or the United States’) cyclical history of military-industrial conquest and natural destruction (disguised, of course, as linear progress). Significantly, to reach unobtainium, the mining corporation must dig up and destroy the rainforest, an ecosystem that also functions as a biological, networked database that stores elements of the Na’vi’s past (souls, memories, voices of the dead) and makes them accessible in the present. By mining underground deposits of unobtainium, the humans uproot not only the forest but with it the ongoing presence of the historical past in the everyday life of the Na’vi.

The horizontal configuration of this bioluminescent network links its design strongly to the historical past it stores (when the Na’vi attempt to “upload” Grace’s [Sigourney Weaver] and Jake’s consciousness permanently into their Na’vi avatars through this network, we see it spread, weblike, across the surface of the forest floor); but the violent struggle over its destruction or preservation is fought on a vertical axis. Hence in Avatar the ability to occupy the spatial coordinates of the zenith and the nadir is inseparable from the power to control space and time on Pandora. Early on in the film, a hologram in the mining corporation’s database maps out the terms of the polarized conflict and its downward directionality. In a key scene, Selfridge (Giovanni Ribisi) and Colonel Quaritch (Stephen Lang) reveal that Home Tree—an immense structure that towers above the rest of the forest and serves as a village for the
Na’vi—rests on top of a massive deposit of unobtainium. To extract the precious metal from deep beneath the village, the mining company must raze Home Tree. Time has nearly run out for the corporation to get the Na’vi to leave voluntarily; efforts at incorporating the Na’vi into the temporality of imperial progress by building schools and roads have failed, making the use of military force increasingly likely. Just as mining leads the alien humans on a downward trajectory, the Na’vi ascend to vertiginous heights that allow them to attack their enemy from above; hence Na’vi verticality is epitomized by the highly controlled nosedive executed from extreme heights—a thrillingly volitional descent that displays their transcendent mastery of gravity through flight. Each Na’vi ascent (usually accomplished by climbing) is thus matched by a spectacularly masterful descent—a joyful drive toward the traditional past that downward mobility emblematizes.

Pandora’s fantastical computer-generated landscape makes possible this spatialization of time and power: the opening scenes reveal a topography marked by waterfall-covered cliffs, tall bamboo trees, and branches that span massive chasms to emphasize the verticality of the rainforest’s terrain. Moreover, we learn early on in the film that Pandora has low gravity, a notion evidenced by the Hallelujah Mountains—massive rock formations that float high above the rainforest. Even as the floating mountains seem to transcend gravity, hanging vines and waterfalls cascade over their sides to display, in spectacular fashion, an ongoing process of gravitational give-and-take in which gravity appears to yield to some objects just as, elsewhere, they yield to it (fig. 1.10). This same process is evident in the design of the massive stone arches that reach skyward over the Tree of Souls only to bend back down again to the forest floor. In turn, the towering Home Tree twists skyward to loom over the rest of the forest, its spiraling, double-helix design implying simultaneous ascent and descent. If verticality spatializes time by linking upward movement to a new future and downward motion to the pull of the historical past, then the bilateral exertion of gravitational pull and resistance evident in Pandora’s landscape emblematizes the notion of a movement toward the future that always returns to the past—a recursive history organized around the cyclical time of nature and tradition. Here computer-generated images are used to present the digital landscape as a Bakhtinian “chronotope” in which “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thick-
ens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history.”

The design of the Tree of Souls provides an example of the vertical landscape as chronotope: its soaring structure reaches upward only to have its tendril-like, bioluminescent leaves cascade back down to the ground to give the Na’vi access to ancestors from bygone eras. Given the location of the mountains and the Tree of Souls within the “flux vortex” (an area where the laws of physics are attenuated), it is not surprising that much of the violent conflict between the Na’vi and the corporation is staged on a vertical axis in and around the mountains above the Tree of Souls. Hence, upon realizing the impossibility of incorporating the Na’vi into imperialism’s progress narrative, Quaritch opts to bomb the Tree of Souls, claiming that doing so “will blast a crater in their racial memory so deep that they won’t come within a thousand clicks of this place ever again.” When he hears of this plan, Norm (Joel David Moore) exclaims, “If they get to the Tree of Souls, it’s over. That’s their direct line to Eywa, their ancestors. It’ll destroy them,” indicating that by severing this connection to the past, Quaritch will foreclose on the Na’vi’s future.

Just as the Na’vi are poised on a historical threshold, the film’s protagonist, Jake Sully, also teeters on the edge separating his past and a new future, between his role as a spy for the mining company and his emerging identity as the warrior who protects the Na’vi and the rainforest from
annihilation. Jake’s development from Quaritch’s spy to the leader of the rebellion follows a vertical trajectory so that the ontological heights to which he ascends correspond to his mastery of gravity upon completing a series of astonishing ascents. In a prologue, Jake, a paraplegic ex-marine, is persuaded by representatives from the mining corporation to take his murdered twin brother’s place in the mining company’s avatar program, promising him “a fresh start in a new world” as he watches his brother’s remains being cremated. And while Jake’s voice-over states, “One life ends, another begins,” suggesting that he has embraced the idea of a new future, moments later he continues, “There’s no such thing as an ex-marine. I may be out, but you never lose the attitude,” implying that this new life may not entirely reject the past. Indeed, once the Na’vi take in Jake (in his avatar form), he is quickly drafted by Colonel Quaritch to gather intelligence that will prove useful in negotiating the Na’vi’s removal, or for using military force against them. If Jake succeeds in his “mission” (persuading the Na’vi to move), Quaritch will arrange to have his spinal injury fixed so that Jake can return to his old life and his old body back on Earth. However, as Jake (via his Na’vi avatar) completes the rituals that will allow him to become “One of the People,” he comes to sympathize with the Na’vi way of life and falls in love with Neytiri (Zoe Saldana). If he succeeds in becoming a Na’vi, Jake will begin a new future in a world that is profoundly tied to Na’vi tradition and the rainforest, to the cyclical time of nature. In the end, Jake’s violent resistance against the mining company and Quaritch is in the service of preserving a traditional, tribal way of life that remains profoundly connected to the past. Hence his path toward insurgency and becoming “One of the People” follows a vertical trajectory that requires him not just to defy gravity through moments of astonishing ascent but, like the Na’vi, to master gravity through breathtaking moments of controlled descent.

That Jake will master gravity is suggested early on in Avatar, when he is chased through the rainforest by a jungle creature and, at precisely the moment escape seems impossible, leaps from a cliff and plunges into the water below, fearlessly using gravity to avoid certain death. Later his training with Neytiri requires him to master gravity far more skillfully, until he is able to convert the deadly long fall (with its connotations of doom and death) into a volitional, controlled dive; he must learn to leap from treetops to the ground far below, using only tree branches and leaves to break his fall. The difference between the dive (or leap) and the fall is
important, for the former converts the passive, helpless subordination to gravity of the latter into an active appropriation of its power to the ends of survival, preservation, and the mastery of space and time. Jake’s training culminates with a final test that takes him to the incredible heights of Oo-rah, which floats at the top of a chain of rocks that stretch skyward, high above the rainforest in the Hallelujah Mountains, so he can claim an ikran (a pterodactyl-like creature used for hunting). As Jake climbs up the hanging vines that tether the mountains loosely together, vertiginous high-angle shots (the astonishing z-depth of which is considerably enhanced by 3D) measure the fearsome distance to the forest below (fig. 1.11) to reveal the all-or-nothing stakes of the trial: should he succeed, Jake will become a new being—a hunter and One of the People; should he fail and fall, his fate is oblivion—a descent into nothingness, a free-fall into the void, and a return to his old, gravity-bound disabled body and his past.

In Avatar flight becomes a dynamic device for emblematizing the connection between Jake’s aspiration to reach the ontological heights of his new Na’vi being and the imperative to ascend to the dizzying heights (of Oo-rah) where the ikran and possibility for flight are located. Once Jake captures his ikran (only after nearly being thrown over the edge of a cliff), he tentatively commands, “Fly?” and the two plunge downward, ricocheting off the sheer face of the cliff in a struggling, tumbling mass until Jake commands in an authoritative voice, “Shut up and fly straight!” They then
level off and soar through the air, weaving joyfully through the floating mountains as they are joined by an elated Neytiri. The flight sequence culminates with a series of hyperkinetic tracking shots of Neytiri and Jake as they dive down the side of a cliff and then level off to a peaceful, floating glide, with the camera cutting to a position below them. This shared nosedive gives dynamic expression to the broader desire to preserve the Na’vi’s past into the future—now shared by Jake. He exclaims in voice-over, “I may not be much of a horse guy, but I was born to do this,” linking his mastery of gravity to his “progress” toward becoming a new being. That such becoming is inseparable from the ascent to new heights is confirmed when he leads the Na’vi insurgency against the mining corporation.

_Avatar_ links the apex to power, and so within the fictional world of the film, flight is a means to an end, an enhanced form of vertical mobility that enables one to occupy the highest position in the sky. The scene in which Jake captures the giant ikran, Toruk, allegorizes this connection. Toruk is first introduced in a flight sequence in which Jake exclaims in voice-over, “I was a stone cold aerial hunter. Death from above. Only problem is, you’re not the only one” as Toruk attacks and drives Jake and Neytiri from the sky into the rainforest below. Later, when Jake formulates his strategy for becoming Toruk Makto (“rider of Last Shadow”), he explains, “The way I had it figured, Toruk is the baddest cat in the sky. Nothing attacks him. . . . So why would he ever look up?” Sending his ikran into a nosedive from high above Toruk, Jake leaps off and drops onto Toruk’s back. This ascent to the highest point in the sky has historical and temporal as well as spatial implications: earlier Neytiri has explained that only five Na’vi have become Toruk Makto, the most recent of whom “brought the clans together in a time of great sorrow.” By becoming the sixth rider, Jake inscribes himself into, and becomes an agent and an emblem of, Na’vi cyclical history and oral tradition. As his strategic use of the nosedive and the volitional leap suggest, Jake becomes Toruk Makto to help ensure that the past (all that is stored in and circulates through Pandora’s global network) will continue to live on in the future.

In _Avatar_, and in many of the other films I have discussed in this chapter, the new verticality joins the plasticity of the digital image (its radical malleability) to the fungibility of the emblem (its ability to produce an intellectual concept from an image, story, and dialogue) in order to represent a violent struggle over the course of history, the outcome of which will leave one era, one way of life, in ruins. _Avatar_ orchestrates the final
battle for control over space and time along lines of radical ascent and descent, with each side using the strategy of “death from above.” While Quaritch and his army fly into the flux vortex to bomb the Tree of Souls, hundreds of ikran-riding Na’vi cling to the sides of the Hallelujah Mountains, high above Quaritch’s sortie, in order to drive the aliens’ bomber into the ground—and the invading humans into the past—before it reaches its target. Each side masters gravity to force the other to succumb to its pull. The mise-en-scène of the battle and the emphasis placed on gravity’s link to destiny foreground the new verticality’s insistent use of the laws of physics to represent historical change. Much like the emblematic mise-en-scènes of the baroque tragedies discussed by Walter Benjamin, in which “history becomes part of the setting,” in *Avatar* “the word ‘history’ stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience.”

Thus historical transition finds expression as spatial transience through a mise-en-scène organized around gravity’s pull. Each character’s death or near defeat (along with that of the civilization for which he or she fights) is represented through a long fall: Neytiri, forced from the sky by a plane, is shot from her ikran and falls to the forest floor; Tsu’tey (Laz Alonso) falls headlong from the bomber’s cargo hold to the distant forest floor (only after first hurling several human soldiers into the void). When Trudy’s (Michelle Rodriguez) helicopter is shot, it doesn’t explode in the sky (as is typical of cinematic firefights) but plunges through the air in a fiery mass, linking the involuntary long fall to loss, doom, and, here, incorporation into humanity’s cyclical history of conquest and destruction. In turn, Jake and the bombers race to subject each other to gravity’s deadly pull: as soldiers push the bombs to the edge of the cargo hold, Jake leaps from Toruk onto the ship, drops a grenade into an engine, and leaps onto Toruk’s back. The ship cants to the side once the grenade explodes, forcing the bombs back into the cargo hold as the ship plunges to the ground and crashes, just before reaching its target. Through these falling bodies—live action, digital, composite—the computer-generated image transcends the laws of physics in order to (re)appropriate them at the level of representation, pressing gravity into the service of allegorical signification so that the natural world and the laws of physics function as emblems of a struggle over the past and the future.

In the end the humans’ technological mastery of space and gravity fails to ensure their mastery of historical time, partly because of their failure to fully comprehend their own past. Just as Jake inscribes himself into
Na’vi history by becoming Toruk Makto, he also inscribes his knowledge of the history of humanity’s destruction of nature on Earth into Pandora’s global network. Earlier in the film Jake brings the dying Grace to the Tree of Souls and asks the Na’vi to upload her soul permanently into her avatar. Precisely because the attempt to save Grace’s life fails, her memories become part of Pandora’s networked archive of the past. On the eve of battle Jake petitions the Na’vi’s deity to search Grace’s memories of Earth’s destruction, thereby exposing the global stakes of the upcoming fight. Just when defeat seems inevitable, all of the forest creatures join in the battle and attack the invading aliens (the humans), allowing the Na’vi to renew their assault from above.

Much as the film’s narrative privileges a future that includes the past, Avatar’s concluding shot of Jake “waking” into his avatar body repeats the film’s opening, but with significant differences. The film opens with a high-angle shot as the camera flies above the rainforest, then tilts and plunges downward, cutting to black just as it is about to hit the forest canopy. Jake’s voice-over states, “When I was lying there in the hospital, with a big hole blown through the middle of my life, I started having these dreams of flying. I was free! Sooner or later, though, you always have to wake up.” He thereby links downward mobility to the end—the end of (the dream of) freedom from the limitations of a body bound by gravity, of a future unbound by the tragic events of the past. The next shot shows Jake awakening in “cryo” as his spaceship approaches Pandora. By the end of the film, the association of downward mobility with doom has been altered, so that Jake awakens into a new body able to master gravity and, moreover, one that thrills in the nosedive that emblematizes his new relationship to the historical past. However, as this new body (which combines Jarhead Jake with Toruk Makto) suggests, Avatar does not simply privilege the past over the future but instead favors a vision of the future that includes the past, one that combines old and new. The final shot of the film invokes, on a far smaller scale, the spatial dialectics Avatar uses throughout to emblematize this notion of history: as Jake and his avatar lie on the ground and his soul is uploaded permanently into his avatar, the “camera” moves around the bodies to a higher angle above the avatar, then tilts down and dollies in to a close-up of Jake’s face as his eyes open directly into camera. These two looks—Jake’s look upward and the “camera’s” downward point of view—invoke the vertical coordinates around which the film organizes the protagonists’ struggle for control of
space and time. This final, stylistic invocation of old and new, past and present, is relevant to Avatar’s position within film history, for while the film developed and deployed new digital technologies (including revolutionary performance capture techniques, stunning key frame animation, and digital 3D) to an unprecedented degree and to astonishing effects, its narrative structure, generic conventions, editing, and story remain well within the conventions of popular, Hollywood-style filmmaking. And while the Na’vi victory can be read as the triumph of “nature” over industrial capital, I think it is more accurate to read it as the triumph of one type of technology (fiber optic networks) over another (heavy industry) simply because the film redefines (and idealizes) the notion of life-as-information that can be stored and networked by the natural world, even after the death of the body. Finally, we might say that this closing image suggests film history’s own recursive structure, not just in terms of the ongoing historical remediation of older moving picture technologies by new, but also in terms of the (relatively) recent dominance of film franchises. This image of awakening (an ending that opens the way for a new narrative beginning) portends the cyclical return of Pandora’s fictional history in the form of sequels and prequels.

That films defined by their spectacular use of CGI should be so concerned with historical thresholds is not surprising, particularly if we keep in mind the centrality of powerful new (and sometimes alien) technologies to the plots of so many recent blockbusters in which verticality is notable. As theorists and historians have noted, the “remediation” of film by digital technologies frequently provokes critical speculations about the relation of the cinema’s (digital) future to its (celluloid) past.25 Indeed, the vertical bodies under consideration here are composites of old and new, of analog and digital effects, of film and digital media—sometimes visibly so. Put differently, cinematic verticality has its own history, and that history is inscribed on the bodies it mobilizes through space. Sometimes the computer-generated status of the digital stunt doubles, and their corresponding freedom from the laws of physics, becomes too visible in moments of verticality, while at other times the ongoing subjection of upwardly mobile live-action bodies to gravity is evident: though the harnesses and wires that keep the live-action actors airborne (as in The Matrix, Crouching Tiger, and Hero) can be erased from the digitized image, the visual effects of the actual force of gravity on live-
action bodies sometimes cannot. Unless compensated for by some other dynamic motion (kicking, running up a wall), occasionally these vertical bodies retain visible traces of their true condition in space: they exist in a state of suspension between the upward pull of an invisible apparatus and the downward force of gravity. In such instances, gravity’s visible trace corresponds, roughly, to the state of suspension in which these characters exist, on one hand, and their association with the new, the historical rupture, or the historically emergent, on the other, within their fictional worlds as well as within film history. Digital verticality’s occasional lack of transparency foregrounds its association with historical thresholds and transitions (including emergent digital processes and practices, and emerging film histories), as well as the effects emblem’s willingness to court artificiality for the sake of (allegorical) signification. Through flying and falling bodies, the new verticality makes visible the position occupied by computer-generated images within the recent past of commercial film history—poised at a historical threshold, between continuity with past tradition and a future defined by aesthetic and technological change.26

Yet this particular digital effects emblem (especially in more recent examples) often seems to allegorize broader historical changes taking place in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. If before September 11, 2001, the new verticality gave expression to a millenialist anxiety over the arrival of a new epoch and the changes it portended (as imagined in the technological dystopias of The Matrix or Jurassic Park, for example), after that day the new verticality seemed harnessed to a more profound expression of despair over the collapse of twentieth-century civilization (defined by the global dominance of U.S. military power and capitalism) into twenty-first-century ruin (defined by global economic crisis, endless war, and political upheaval). Hence even a film like Avatar, which features an ostensibly happy ending for its protagonist, nevertheless imagines the defeat of human civilization (here represented by the militarized corporation) and questions whether it is worth saving at all. After 2001 the now iconic images of the World Trade Center on 9/11 and the (hauntingly vertical) photograph of “The Falling Man” function as the twenty-first-century counterparts to the mythological figures of Phaeton and Icarus that appeared in emblem books—ready to accommodate a range of contradictory and even oppositional meanings.27 Like the images of Icarus and Phaeton, the stark verticality of such modern images gives
(horrifying) articulation to the violent intersection of opposed forces, emblematizes the individual’s relationship to powerful processes of historical change, and functions allegorically to emblematize the fall of an era.

Despite my focus in this chapter on a digital effects emblem that exploits the screen’s y axis, it is important to keep in mind the quote from Eisenstein’s “Dynamic Square” that opens this chapter and, with it, the cinema’s simultaneous exploitation of the screen’s x (horizontal) and z (depth) axes. The x axis has been used in recent films to organize the movements of, and allegorical meanings articulated by, the various hordes, swarms, armies, armadas, flocks, and crowds that compose the “digital multitude” in recent popular films. Though the multitude’s spatial articulation is profoundly horizontal, like the new verticality it is an “optical-by-view, but profoundly psychological-by-meaning” digital visual effect that appears across a number of films and a range of genres to emblematize imbalances of power as well as radical (and even apocalyptic) historical change.