Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema

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Cinema has always displayed an affinity to characters with a distorted relation to reality, stricken by madness, make-believe and hallucination. Contemporary cinema adds another layer to the canon of film characters: unwitting ordinary victims of deception for who the skepticist fear that the world is in some sense not real has become true. Truman Burbank of The Truman Show spends his life in a TV studio world as the unknowing star of a life-long daily reality show directed by a megalomaniac filmmaker; the world of Matrix turns out to be an interactive computer simulation run by sentient computer programs, and in Vanilla Sky the young media magnate David Aames becomes his own evil deceiver by building a lucid, computer-simulated dream world for himself. Fundamental deception even extends to the characters’ self-knowledge and knowledge about others: Malcolm Crowe in The Sixth Sense does not know that he is already dead, in Moon the astronaut Sam Bell discovers that he is merely a clone of an earlier version of himself, and the fictional film audience of Simone believes this virtual, computer-generated actress to be a flesh-and-blood person.

From a philosophical perspective, such films are variations of skepticist scenarios according to which we are not able to “know what we think we know” (Barry Stroud) about the world we live in, about ourselves, or about others. They are ‘skepticism films’: dramatized, fictional narrative configurations of the thought experiments which are part and parcel of philosophical reflection on knowledge and doubt. The dissertation “Skepticism Films. Knowing and Doubting the World in Contemporary Cinema” introduces skepticism films as updated configurations of skepticist themes that exemplify the pervasion of philosophical ideas in popular culture. By analysing selected skepticism films and the general relation between skepticism and film, this dissertation aims at better understanding the dynamic interplay between film and philosophy.

The first part of the dissertation defends a Wittgenstein-inspired, pluralistic film-philosophical position according to which films can be, but need not be, expressions of philosophical thought in their own right. The second part investigates the role of skepticist ideas in philosophical reflection on the medium of film by critically discussing the works of the film-philosophers Stanley Cavell, Gilles Deleuze, D.N. Rodowick, Josef Fritschl, and Patricia Pisters. The concluding parts of the dissertation explore varieties of skepticism films as an integral phenomenon of contemporary cinema culture in detail, by analysing films such as The Truman Show, Inception, Matrix, Vanilla Sky, The Thirteenth Floor, and Shutter Island.
SKEPTICISM FILMS
Knowing and Doubting the World in Contemporary Cinema

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

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aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
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ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel
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door

Philipp Andreas Schmerheim
geboren te Holzminden, Duitsland
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To the memory of my mother and grandparents
Marion, Hildegard and Hermann

and

to my godmother Sigrid Schmerheim
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I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my mother, Marion Christa Schmerheim, and my grandparents, Hildegard Schmerheim and Hermann Schmerheim, and I dedicate it to my godmother, Sigrid Schmerheim, who was and is always there.

Düsseldorf, September 8, 2013
Introduction: Skepticism Films. A Certain Tendency in Contemporary Cinema

Abstract
The dissertation project “Skepticism Films. Knowing and Doubting the World in Contemporary Cinema” examines configurations of philosophical ideas and thought experiments in contemporary cinema by analysing films that explore the philosophical problem of doubt about human knowledge of the world. Such ‘skepticism films’ are based on film plots that involve characters within deception situations of various sorts – simulated/fake environments, blurred boundaries between layers of reality, systematic self-deception or externally induced deception by other members of a shared world – exposing them to doubts about what they hitherto believed to know about the world they inhabit. The case studies are prepared by a detailed discussion of contemporary scholarship on the relation between film and philosophy. Chapters on the film philosophers Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze deal with the influence of skepticist ideas in reflections on the nature of the medium of film.

Little Do They Know
It is another morning in the picture-perfect seaside town “Seahaven”. The insurance salesman Truman Burbank is ready to start another glorious All-American day. Having enjoyed his cereal breakfast, a goodbye kiss from his lovely blonde wife Meryl, and some chit-chat with his neighbours, he is about to jump into his car and drive into the office of the insurance company he is working for. Little does he know that in a few moments an entire star will fall out of the blue sky right in front of his feet – a headlight tagged as “Sirius 9 (9 Canis Major)”. This is only the beginning of strange events that will turn Truman’s life upside down, and within four days he will discover that he spent his entire life in a TV studio as the unwitting star of a life-long daily reality show, surrounded by actors posing as colleagues, friends and relatives.

Meanwhile, in another part of the fictional universe of cinema, the bored computer hacker Thomas Anderson wakes from his sleep because a chat message starts blinking on his always-on computer screen in his messy, run-down apartment. Little does he know that within a few moments, he will follow the wake-up call “follow the rabbit” into a nightclub, from where a woman called Trinity will bring him to Morpheus, an enigmatic underground rebel who confronts him with a devastating revelation: All his life, Anderson has been living in the dream world of the Matrix, a computer-generated virtual reality built by machines in order to keep him under control.
Meanwhile, in yet another corner of the boundless world of cinema, the rich playboy David Aames suffers from recurring nightmares, reminding him again and again of the horrible accident which left him disfigured before the doctors found a way to reconstruct his face. So horrible do the nightmares become that he starts losing grasp on his life and is even unsure whether the woman he shares it with is really the one she claims to be. Little does he know that soon he will call out loudly for "tech support," and an inconspicuous middle-aged man will patiently tell David that he is living a dream of his own making, while he actually spent the last 150 years in cryostasis, his tormented body frozen at extremely low temperatures, his mind immersed in a lucid dream. Only within this dream he can spend a life together with Sofia, the only woman he ever loved, while actually she is already long gone and... dead.

While all these strange stories unfold, the solitary astronaut Sam Bell is counting down the last few days of his three-year stint at a lunar base, harvesting the precious raw material helium-3 on the far side of the moon for an energy company called Lunar Industries. Longing to see his wife and daughter again, and stricken by rapidly declining health, he sets out one last time to repair a broken harvester on the moon's surface. Little does he know that within a few hours he won't be alone anymore, waking up inside the lunar base after an accident with the harvester knocked him unconscious. But that other man who now is with him is... his own clone. And little does he know that he, Sam Bell, is only a three-year-old clone of the original Sam Bell as well.¹

This kaleidoscope of cinematic deception situations represents only a short glimpse at a vast variety of films that confront their protagonists with revelations about the unreality of their worlds, confront them with the unpleasant insight that they, or other persons they spend their life with, are in a very fundamental way not what they seem to be. For the protagonists of these introductory examples, the skepticist fear that the world is not real has become true: Truman Burbank in THE TRUMAN SHOW (Weir, 1998) lives in a TV studio world, directed by a megalomaniac filmmaker. For Thomas Anderson, of MATRIX (A. and L. Wachowski, 1999), the world turns out to be an interactive computer simulation run by sentient computer programs. In VANILLA SKY (Crowe, 2001), David Aames becomes his own evil deceiver and builds his own lucid dream. And in MOON (Jones, 2009), Sam Bell discovers that he was in fundamental respects ignorant about himself.

From a philosophical perspective, the diagnosis is obvious: All these films are variations of skepticist scenarios, scenarios which are supposed to support the claim or suspicion that we are not able to “know what we think we know” (Stroud 2000 [1994]: 174) about the world we live in, about ourselves, or about others. They are what throughout this dissertation I will define as “skepticism films” – dramatized, fictional narrative versions of the hypothetical thought experiments which are part and parcel of philosophical reflection on knowledge and doubt. The way in which such films play with the skepticist impetus and traditional scenarios is at the heart of the dissertation project.

¹ Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory is the title of Stanley Cavell’s autobiography (2010a) as well as, in the form of “little did he know,” one of the repeated lines in the black comedy STRANGER THAN FICTION (Forster, 2006). There, an estranged character named Harold Crick (Will Ferrell) discovers that he is the fictional creation of the author Karen Eiffel (Emma Thompson), whose narrator’s voice he keeps hearing in his head while she writes the story of his life. Using that phrasing seems only fitting for introducing this dissertation on skepticism films.
The premise of skepticist scenarios is simple: If we are even unable to exclude extreme deception situations in which the entire world fundamentally differs from our most basic beliefs about it, then how can we even claim to know things about our world? René Descartes’ methodical doubt in the *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (Descartes 1904 [1641]) led him to the irrefutable certainty that he exists as a thinking substance as long as he is thinking, but he did not manage to derive other certainties from his *cogito* argument without invoking the existence of a basically good-willed Deity that assures him of the existence of a spatially extended world, and that not all of his fundamental beliefs can be false. Deriving knowledge of the world by exclusive, *a priori* reliance on human rational capabilities turns out to be a dead-end street. In that respect, skepticism is the outcome of a deeply-rooted suspicion about the “claim of reason” (Cavell 1979a) that, as misled as human beings can sometimes be about the facts that constitute our world, in general we do “know what we think we know”.

This dissertation project will claim that at the latest since the 1990s, with precursors in the 1960s to 1980s, there is a proliferation of skepticism films in mainstream cinema which put into doubt the ontological status of their characters’ environments by revealing the manipulative potential of modern technology. The chapters that follow will investigate the manifold expressions of skepticist discomfort in contemporary mainstream films, and they will discuss Stanley Cavell’s and Gilles Deleuze’s philosophical accounts of cinema as an example for philosophies of film that directly or indirectly tap into skepticism as an intellectual resource. As will be shown, some of the skepticism films, such as *MATRIX* and *VANILLA SKY*, present core, quasi ideal-typical screenings of skepticist thought experiments, while others, such as the TV series *LOST* (2004-2010), invoke skepticist ideas as merely one layer of a rich web of themes and topics. Skepticism films, I will argue, update and fictionalise philosophical doubts about claims to knowledge about the external world, and therefore can be functionally similar to, for instance, Descartes’ evil deceiver hypothesis, Hilary Putnam’s brains in a vat (Putnam 1981), or Robert Nozick’s experience machine (Nozick 1977) – thought experiments that are introduced as test devices for the stability of concepts of knowledge.

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2 Films from the era of early, silent and classical cinema such as *DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI* (Wiene 1920), *RASHOMON* (Kurosawa 1950), *BLOW UP* (Antonioni 1962) or *REAR WINDOW* (Hitchcock 1954) tend to explore blurred boundaries between reality and fantasy, dreaming and waking state, truth and imagination, and therefore are effectively films with protagonists who have lost proper contact with the world because they are hallucinating or imagining up non-real worlds of their own. Skepticism films, in contrast, feature basically sane protagonists who are deceived by external forces in their world, simply unaware that they are living in a simulated, artificial, or fundamentally misinterpreted environment. If you will, skepticism films are a pessimistic cinematic version of fantastic literature.

3 While one usually distinguishes film from television studies, for heuristic reasons I will here assume that fiction films as well as fiction television shows are rooted in an increasingly converging moving-image or screen culture, and can thus be referred to simultaneously (as long as, in closer analysis, one remains aware of their functional and structural differences).

The update character of skepticism films is evident in the remarkable presence of virtual or otherwise simulated worlds in films such as *Matrix*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, *Vanilla Sky*, *ABRE LOS OJOS*, *Welt am Draht*, *Dark City*, or *Inception* (Nolan, 2010). All of them tap into the computer-generated fictional universe of cyberpunk literature, which already established itself in the 1950s and 1960s as a premonition of the digital screen culture we live in today. These films are cinematic dystopias which, again, screen a fundamental suspicion about the manipulative and destructive potential of modern technology. In this respect, skepticism films are part of a cinematic tendency towards “digital paranoia” (Rodowick 2007: 3) in which human beings are cloned as living organ donors for their rich counterparts in the real world (*The Island, Never Let Me Go* [Romanek, 2010]), where teenagers are thrown into a lethal battle for survival for the entertainment of decadent masses (*The Hunger Games* [Ross, 2012]), or where a devastating nuclear war or virus has left the surface of the earth almost uninhabitable (*Total Recall* [Verhoeven, 1989; Wiseman, 2012], *Elysium* [Blomkamp, 2013], *Oblivion* [Kosinski, 2013], *After Earth* [Shyamalan, 2013], *THX 1138*). Mainstream cinema is entertainment – but as entertainment it addresses the fears and desires of its mass audiences. Cinema seems to take up the feeling of not quite fitting into the world, by invoking the *mene mene* of digital totalitarianism. This kind of human discomfort, however, is not a recent phenomenon – on the contrary, it is only the most recent form of a main characteristic of occidental intellectual culture (see Früchtl 2013: 11f.).

**Skepticism’s Historical Roots**

The problem of philosophical skepticism is part and parcel of the history of philosophical thought at least since Plato developed his theory of forms and the allegory of the cave in the 4th century BC. Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, a comprehensive account of the tropes and arguments of ancient Pyrrhonian and academic skepticist thought compiled in the late second century, is influential for the transition from mediaeval to early modern philosophical philosophy. At the time Descartes writes his *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*, doubt about knowledge and the attempt to defend it from skeptical doubts has become an established philosophical problem. In the reformation era, skepticism is a by-product of the religious battle within Christian faith: Martin Luther’s reformation movement in the 16th century destabilises the hitherto largely unquestioned supremacy of the Catholic Church over matters of knowledge and faith. The reformation movement and renaissance humanism question the nature and proper conduct of faith, and thereby also nurture doubts about the human position in and knowledge of the world. The religious battles between reformation and counter-reformation as well as the development of a humanist world view in the Renaissance era fuel the development of modern rationalist philosophy. Descartes’ *Meditationes*, written...
with a distinctly skepticist impetus but primarily aimed at establishing an unshakeable foundation of the sciences, mark the beginning and intellectual foundation of the era of modern philosophy, at least as far as the canon of the history of philosophy has it. After Descartes’ cogito argument was in the world, it remained a deeply rooted element in the history of modern philosophy, from Berkeley’s subjective idealism and Hume’s probabilistic epistemology to Kant’s indignation about the

“Skandal der Philosophie und allgemeinen Menschenvernunft, das Dasein der Dinge außer uns […] bloß auf Glauben annehmen zu müssen und, wenn es jemand einfällt, es zu bezweifeln, ihm keinen genugtuenden Beweis entgegenstellen zu können.” (Kant 1998 [1787]: Anm. B XL)

In the increasingly secularised, post-Enlightenment modern world, which puts the human perspective at the centre of intellectual thought, the skepticist impetus gradually loses relevance. The procession of naturalism and positivism in the 19th century, which accompanies the rise of capitalist industrialisation and the scientific “Vermessung der Welt,” is carried by the belief that humanity is rapidly approximating a comprehensive picture of the world and its natural laws.

It is left to the two world wars of the 20th century to shake what the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze will later call “belief in the world” (Deleuze 1989). The “Great War,” as the first World War is called by the contemporaries, debunks the dream of safely mastering the world by technological means, and the Nuclear catastrophes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki throw a deep shadow on the kinds of knowledge attained by the technological world view. In his Cinema books, Deleuze advances the pseudo-historical thesis that World War II ruptured the “link between man and the world” (Deleuze 1989: 164) in an existential way. From that perspective, skepticism in the 20th century is not a mere intellectual toy for (analytic) academic philosophers such as O.K. Bouwsma, Anthony Brueckner, Thompson Clarke, George Edward Moore, Hilary Putnam, Barry Stroud, Michael Williams, or Ludwig Wittgenstein. The renaissance of skepticism particularly in analytic philosophy of the second half of the 20th century can also be considered as resulting from the existential crises brought along by the devastating discrepancy between technological mastery and social progress. Predating on Deleuze’s thesis, technological progress can be identified as triggering a fundamental suspicion against technological and naturalistic ways of knowing the world in secularised societies. It is not only that “God is dead” (Nietzsche) – God’s death even did not improve the way of things on earth.

Skepticism Films as a Sign of Our Times

This, admittedly, is a speculative, culturalist account of the development of skepticist thought throughout the history of philosophy. But if one participates in this intellectual

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7 This historical overview follows Popkin 2003.

8 For Heidegger, the scandal rather was that philosophers still try to attempt such a – in his eyes futile – refutation, see Heidegger 1993 [1927]: § 43.

9 Die Vermessung der Welt, “Measuring the World,” is the title Daniel Kehlmann’s pseudo-biographic historical novel about the 19th-century scientists Carl Friedrich Gauß and Alexander von Humboldt. In their own ways – Gauß as a reclusive mathematician who greatly contributed to progress in mathematics and astronomy; Humboldt as empirically oriented polymath who travelled the entire world – both contributed to filling the hitherto largely blank regions of the human landscape of knowledge. See Kehlmann 2005.
game of correlating high times of skepticist thought with specific socio-historical developments and events, one arrives at a very interesting picture of the appearance of skepticist ideas as a narrative and aesthetic element of contemporary cinema: If one understands skepticism as a reflection of social-cultural uneasiness about (the human position in) the world, then indeed skepticism films can be understood as updated audiovisual configurations of philosophical thought experiments as well as of the skepticist impetus caused by the manipulative power of digital technology, computer-generated imagery and comprehensive control of worldwide information flows. Such worries perhaps converge in the “genesis of computer-generated, virtual image worlds [...] which are directly injected into the neuronal system and which thereby are in no way distinguishable from reality.” (Pinkas 2011: 263) Similarly, the ethnologist Arjun Appadurai directly connects recurrent themes in literature, film and other forms of storytelling and contemporary socio-historical developments: “Like the myths of small-scale society as rendered in the anthropological classics of the past, contemporary literary fantasies tell us something about displacement, disorientation, and anxiety in the contemporary world.” (Appadurai 1996: 58) Such uncertainties need not be equivalent to a literal fear of being a prisoner to simulated worlds. Skepticist scenarios can simply be an extreme expression of the feeling that digital environments are taking control of our lives, that reality is already an augmented reality; a mix of a ‘natural’ world and a ‘computed’ world in which the boundaries between what is real and what is not are inherently blurred. Skepticism films are a sign of our times.

Method and Structure of the Dissertation

One cannot investigate the way in which films configure skepticist themes without having a general position on the relation between philosophy and film. Can films actually be philosophically interesting? Do they illustrate philosophical ideas, or can they be more than mere audiovisual illustrations of things that have already been expressed in written works of philosophy? If films can be more than mere illustrations – does the medium even allow doing philosophy in a special way which is non-reducible to philosophy in its linguistic (written) academic form? In other words, can films be an independent, novel way of thinking philosophically? And if this is so, what is the philosophical significance of narrative films, since traditional philosophy is an essentially non-fictional, non-narrative intellectual endeavour?

Part I, “Thinking through Cinema,” provides the theoretical framework for understanding possible relations between film and philosophy. Drawing on current film-philosophical scholarship, predominantly written by Anglo-American philosophers such as Noel Carroll, Catherine Constable, Stephen Mulhall, John Mullarkey, Robert Sinnerbrink, Murray Smith, or Thomas Wartenberg, this part develops a systematic account of film as expression of philosophical thought. Chapter 1 starts with an overview of the historical switch in film-philosophy from the justification of film as art to the justification of film as philosophy.11 On that historical foil, the chapter develops a
typology of possible relations between film and philosophy. Broadly drawing on the distinction between ‘films as objects of philosophical thought’ and ‘films as expressions of philosophical thought,’ the chapter proposes to understand films as potential configurations of philosophical thought. Chapter 2 focuses on the philosophical potential of narrative fiction film. Using Richard Rorty’s account of narrative philosophy, and Martha Nussbaum’s philosophical appreciation of style, I will claim films can be philosophically significant as screened thought experiments. This offers a consensus position which both film-philosophical camps can agree on. On that basis, chapter 3 takes a shot at the radical position that films can be hierarchically (equal) audiovisual expressions of philosophical thought in their own right. The chapter suggests a transmedial perspective on philosophy: All expressions of philosophical thought, even traditional ‘linguistic’ philosophy, are historically contingent and media-dependent figurations of philosophical ideas.

Part II focuses on the general role of skepticism in film philosophy by exploring the works of Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze. Chapter 4 outlines the function of skepticist ideas and thought experiments in traditional philosophical discourse, particularly in Cavell’s works, and uses Donald Davidson’s model of triangulation – which distinguishes knowledge of the world, self-knowledge, and knowledge of others as mutually indispensable varieties of (empirical) knowledge – as a pragmatic way of coming to terms with the varieties of knowledge and doubt. Chapter 5 critically investigates Cavell’s well-known proposition that “[f]ilm is a moving image of skepticism” (Cavell 1979a: 188) and accounts for the influence of classical film theorists such as Bazin and Kracauer on Cavell’s film philosophy. The fate of Cavell’s film ontology under the significantly altered conditions of digital screen culture is discussed by drawing on D.N. Rodowick’s book The Virtual Life of Film (Rodowick 2007). Chapter 6 turns to Deleuze as the other Godfather figure of current film-philosophy, and his thesis that “[r]estoring our belief in the world […] is the power of modern cinema” (Deleuze 1989: 166) as a quasi-metaphysical variation of skepticist doubt. Based on Josef Früchtl’s book Vertrauen in die Welt (Früchtl 2013), the chapter outlines resonances between Deleuze and Cavell and sketches four ways of understanding the belief restoration thesis. I will read Giuseppe Tornatore’s childhood nostalgia film NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO (1989) for exemplifying my claim that the broken link between man and world diagnosed by Deleuze is a kind of temporary, passing anomaly of ordinary life instead of a metaphysical rupture. Concluding the chapter, Patricia Pisters’ concept of the “neuro-image” (Pisters 2012) will be helpful for understanding the continuation of Deleuze’s belief restoration thesis into the era of digital screen culture.

Part III and part IV conclude the trajectory of this dissertation and provide a typology and evaluation of skepticism films. While part III develops the typology, part IV contains in-depth case studies of selected films. Chapter 7 uses a wide range of film examples for developing the typology, which adapts Davidson’s model of triangulation and broadly distinguishes between external world skepticism films, self-knowledge

and Gilles Deleuze discovered film as an object and potential expression of philosophical thought, and thereby paved the way to establishing film-philosophy as a philosophical sub-discipline which “grant[s] film the status of a subject that invites and rewards philosophical speculation, on a par with the great arts” (Stanley Cavell 1979a: xvi).
skepticism films, and other minds skepticism films. The chapter systematically develops the themes, narrative structures, and aesthetic strategies shared by these varieties of skepticism films. Chapter 8 discusses how skepticism films fit into the broader current cinematic tendency towards complex, non-conventional narratives.

Part IV analyses selected skepticism films in detail by focusing on external world skepticism films (chapter 10) and self-knowledge skepticism films (chapter 11). The goal is to understand better the literary and filmic influences as well as narrative and aesthetic choices the chosen films make for playing with the general idea of skepticism. Chapter 9 outlines the methodology used for the philosophical film analysis in the subsequent chapters by drawing on structural-cognitivist film-analytic approaches. Chapter 10 exposes structural and narrato-aesthetic similarities and differences between the external world skepticism films of the MATRIX trilogy, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, and THE TRUMAN SHOW. Chapter 11 turns to self-knowledge skepticism films in which the protagonists become their own genius malignus (VANILLA SKY, ABRE LOS OJOS, INCEPTION), or are fundamentally unaware of certain unpleasant truths about themselves (e.g., of being a clone, as in MOON).

The coda wraps up this dissertation’s journey through the problematic yet fascinating relation between film, philosophy and skepticism. In lieu of a conclusion, and as a call for continuing film-philosophical reflection, it takes up Stanley Cavell’s metaphor of “cities of words” (Cavell 2004) and claims that philosophy and film are in the middle of an on-going, open-ended dialogue. At least this dissertation tries to understand both conversation partners as hierarchically equal, since film, “the latest of the great arts, shows philosophy to be the often invisible accompaniment of the ordinary lives that film is so apt to capture” (Cavell 2004: 6f.) Skepticism films exemplify this presence of philosophical ideas in contemporary popular culture.

Formal remarks
Foreign-language sources are directly translated; the footnotes contain the original wording. Direct quotes are in double quotation marks (""), informal word use in single quotation marks (‘’). Foreign words and book titles are printed in italics; FILM TITLES are printed in small capitals, article titles in double quotation marks. Internet sources with clearly identifiable authors Internet sources are listed in the regular bibliography.

The chapters 1, 2, 7 and 10 are thoroughly revised and expanded versions of parts of my Amsterdam MA thesis on Scepticism films (Schmerheim 2007). Chapter 4 in part draws on material from chapter 1 in my Amsterdam MA thesis and part I of my Göttingen M.A. thesis (Schmerheim 2005). The terminology of chapter 9 was in part adapted from my co-authored publication Kinder- und Jugendfilmanalyse (Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2013). Chapter 8.3 uses material from my published article “Paradigmatic Forking-Path Films: Intersections between Mind-Game Films and Multiple-Draft Narratives” (Schmerheim 2008a).
Part I

Thinking through Cinema
1. Films as Configurations of Philosophical Thought

1.1. From ‘Film as Art?’ to ‘Film as Philosophy?’

“We take most films seriously, as we take most other forms of art seriously, not just because they demonstrate or manipulate aesthetically intriguing formalisms but because they are about life, the same life that our philosophies and our day-to-day thought is about. And what this life is about is the problem of knowing and acknowledging its own limitations.”


Translation: “Film resembles painting, music, literature, and the dance in this respect — it is a medium that may, but need not, be used to produce artistic results. Colored picture post cards, for instance, are not art and are not intended to be. Neither are a military march, a true confessions story, or a striptease. And the movies are not necessarily film art.” (Arnheim 1957: 8)
aesthetics centres on questions such as “when is film art?”^{13}, on the specific relation of film to other forms of artistic expression, or on the selection of adequate aesthetic criteria for thinking about film.^{14} While the question of the artistic potential of film has been answered affirmatively, the debate on the philosophical potential of cinema, however, has just begun, at least in professionalised academic philosophy, as the increasing output of film-philosophical books and articles in the first decade of the 21st century indicates.

The interest of philosophers in film-philosophical topics is a rather recent tendency; there also is a kind of temporal disjunction within the film-philosophical discourse of Western philosophy: While “Euro-culturalis[t]” (Mullarkey 2009: 8) philosophers, i.e. French philosophers such as Alain Badiou, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière and even Jacques Derrida, early on incorporated film as a topic of their philosophical works, Anglo-American philosophers or philosophically interested film scholars who can be associated with “Anglo-cognitivism” (Mullarkey 2009: 9) only recently intensified their attention to matters of film as a philosophically interesting phenomenon.

Moving within and outside of this rather rough distinction between two allegedly opposing camps is Harvard philosopher Stanley Cavell, whose reflections on the ontology of cinema in The World Viewed, first published in 1971, constitute the first book on film by a major philosopher trained in the Anglo-American tradition (see Cavell 1979a).^{15} Cavell is also one of the first Anglo-American philosophers to devote a

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^{13} This is the title of an article by Jesse J. Prinz (Prinz 2010). See also Bordwell’s article “But What Kind of Art?” (Bordwell 2007).

^{14} Murray Smith shares this judgment (see Smith 2001: 473). Robert Sinnerbrink shifts the focus and argues that the “aesthetic question still persists: granted that film is a (mass) art, what is it that qualifies a particular film as art?” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 43). Sinnerbrink formulates a variant of my claim that the question of the artistic potential of the medium has been answered affirmatively, and that the attention of film-philosophical film aesthetics has turned to the discussion of the specific criteria that qualify a given film as art.

In the introductory section of his article “Eisenstein’s Philosophy of Film,” Noël Carroll outlines how “film as art” was the preeminent topic of early film theory. See Carroll 2003: 127ff. Also compare Carroll’s chapter on film as art in The Philosophy of Motion Pictures (Carroll 2008: 7-34). Arnheim’s book was written at a time when silent cinema reached its artistic peak and had developed unique styles and forms of storytelling. The advent of sound film and the corresponding turn away from a ‘formalistic’ kind of cinema to a more ‘realistic’ one caused major turmoil among theorists of cinema. Apart from Arnheim, early reflections on film as art include essays by Eisenstein (see Eisenstein 2006); Balázs’ Der sichtbare Mensch (Balázs 2001 [1924]); or Vertov’s writings on film (Vertov 1973). A collection of early film theory texts has been assembled in Diederichs (ed.) 2005.

In 1981, the philosopher Roger Scruton provoked a renewal of the debate on film’s artistic potential in his article “Photography and Representation” (Scruton 1981) which, however, mainly served other theorists for clarifying the reasons for defending the claim to film as art (see Sinnerbrink 2011: 42). For a compact overview of arguments for and against the ‘film as art’ thesis, see Carroll 2006; Carroll 2008 and Stecker 2009.

^{15} One could also reserve this title for Hugo Münsterberg’s landmark film theory book The Photoplay: A Psychological Study (Münsterberg 2002 [1915]). However, even though Münsterberg was philosophically trained, his work as a professor of psychology at Harvard University focused on experimental psychology. The Italian philosopher Giovanni Papini published a newspaper article with the title “La Filosofia del Cinematografo” as early as 1907 (Papini 1907). Another exemption from the rule that Anglo-American philosophers discover film philosophy comparatively late is sociologist-philosopher Ian Jarvie, who in 1987 published a book with the title Philosophy of the Film: Epistemology, Ontology, Aesthetics (Jarvie 1987), preceded by Towards a Sociology of the Cinema (Jarvie 1970). Like Cavell, Jarvie broadens the scope of philosophical investigation into film beyond the aesthetic, while his method of inquiry is distinctly more systematic and closer to the conventions of analytic philosophy (see his article with the telling title “Is Analytic Philosophy the Cure for Film Theory?” [Jarvie 1999]).

Even though Cavell is the first major Anglo-American philosopher to write extensively on film, even traditional philosophers such as Bertrand Russell (in Mysticism and Logic; Russell 1933) and Ludwig Wittgenstein occasionally remarked on the new medium. Russell draws on Bergson’s analogy that “the mathematician conceives the world after the analogy of a cinematograph” (Russell 1953: 123) in the context of a discussion of “the impermanence of physical entities” (Russell 1953: 123). I owe this quotation to its discussion in Littau 2011. Richard Gilmore elaborates on Wittgenstein’s rather non-philosophical relation to the movies in Gilmore 2005: 1.
large portion of his philosophical work to film, and to think about film not only in relation to problems of philosophical aesthetics, but in relation to ontological and epistemological issues as well. His approach to philosophy, however, is “out of school” (Cavell 1988b) in that Cavell willingly, in the style of a ‘post-analytic’ philosopher, addresses and uses the works of thinkers from both camps, and additionally derives a large part of his philosophical inspiration from American writers who have never been part of the canon of either philosophical camp: Ralph Waldo Emerson and David Thoreau.¹⁶

Parallel to the constantly growing importance of Cavell’s philosophical work, the late 1980s, the 1990s, and the first decade of the 21st century witness a constant rise in the number of publications on film and philosophy. Film philosophy now begins to institutionalise itself, as is evident, for instance, in the growing number of conferences (such as the annual film philosophy conference) and journals (such as the online and print journal Film Philosophy or Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image). Contemporary philosophers increasingly accept Stanley Cavell’s willingness to “grant film the status of a subject that invites as well as rewards philosophical speculation, on a par with the great arts” (Cavell 1979a: xvi) – and that means: not only to accept cinema as a form of art, but also as a form of art that invites philosophical reflection.

Strikingly, film philosophers particularly attempt to uncover cinema’s philosophical potential by examining narrative fiction films, while rather neglecting non-narrative experimental cinema. At first sight, this seems to be a strange choice, as Thomas Wartenberg and Murray Smith remark in their introduction to their edited volume Thinking through Cinema:

“A paradoxical feature of a great deal of recent work on film as philosophy is that the films that most philosophers have taken to be candidates for making a distinctive contribution to philosophy are the ones that appear least likely to have philosophical content: popular narrative films.” (Smith and Wartenberg 2006: 4)

Of course, writing about popular films is likely to attract a wide circle of readers, and film philosophers might also be inclined to focus on films that have been an important part of their own intellectual-emotional upbringing. The current generation of established philosophers has predominantly received its cinematic education in the 1970s and 80s, decades in which the cinematic experiments of the Nouvelle Vague and Post-Classical New Hollywood Cinema were succinctly replaced by the surge of high concept blockbuster movies by the likes of Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and, in his own way, Francis Ford Coppola (see Carroll 2008).

But there are two deeper reasons for the philosophical appreciation of popular narrative films. Both of them are closely related to insights expressed by Cavell: First, appreciating the medium of cinema from a philosopher’s point of view entails appreciating typical instances of cinema, since “in the case of films, it is generally true that you do not really like the highest instances unless you also like typical ones. You don’t even know what the highest are instances of unless you know the typical as well.” (Cavell 1979a: 6). Cavell sees a “requirement for a certain indiscriminateness in the

¹⁶ Until philosophers such as Arthur C. Danto (in The Transfiguration of the Commonplace) and Monroe Beardsley published their works, analytic philosophers tended to regard aesthetics as a philosophical discipline of inferior interest compared to e.g., ontology, epistemology, or ethics (see Danto 1981).
accepting of movies” (Cavell 1979a: 13) and links it to similar attitudes towards classical music, since “anyone who is too selective about the classical composers whose music he likes doesn’t really like music” (Cavell 1979a: 13). So, the first reason for the popularity of mainstream cinema among film philosophers is an attempt to assess the philosophicality of typical films.

The second reason is that Classical Hollywood Cinema in particular is a distinctly American art form which engendered an “ability to move between high and low [culture, PS], caring about each also from the vantage of the other” (Cavell 2005 [1983]: 91). Unlike music or even literature, popular cinema generally disregards established barriers between so-called high culture (for the educated elite) and low culture (for the uneducated masses), between ‘high art’ and ‘low art’. Even though European art house cinema tends to form an own category of high-brow films, one can still safely to claim that cinema as a whole does not uphold barriers between high and low in the same way as classical and popular music do.

Film philosophers thus face two challenges when they try to incorporate popular narrative fiction films into the philosophical universe: They must show that cinema’s peculiar blend of high and low does not preclude philosophical significance, and if they focus on narrative fiction film they must show how being a narrative is in accordance with being of philosophical significance.

But what does the notion of ‘philosophical significance’ mean? Something can be of philosophical significance because it is a relevant object of philosophical thought or because it is an expression of philosophical thought. Following this distinction, taking films seriously as objects of philosophical thought does not entail that they must be taken seriously as expressions of philosophical thought. Films can be philosophically significant without contributing actively to philosophical topics.

In sum: Philosophers can “find in movies food for thought” (Cavell 1983: 7) without having to attribute an autonomous philosophical potential to the films they reflect on.17 For instance, one can imagine a metaphysics or aesthetics of cinema which does not attribute any independent philosophical value to the content or expressive potential of films but only regards them as a source of inspiration, as “philosophy’s raw material” and “source for its ornamentation” (Mulhall 2008a: 4), as the Oxford philosopher Stephen Mulhall critically describes it in his book On Film.

This, then, is the set of questions an investigation of the philosophical potential of cinema revolves around: Can films be expressions of philosophical thought, not only objects of philosophical thought? Is there not only a philosophy of film but also film as philosophy? There are films which are works of art – but are there films that are works of philosophy?

1.2. Why Justifying the Philosophical Significance of Film?

The question of the philosophical significance of film can be posed in at least two ways: firstly, is the medium of film open to ‘philosophicality’, i.e. philosophical relevance?

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17 As early as 1916 Hugo Münsterberg finds in the photoplay “food for serious thought” (Münsterberg (2002 [1916]): 57).
Secondly, exactly what kind of philosophical potential do narrative fiction films have, if any? Both questions ultimately ask about the nature of philosophy since they want to know how philosophy can be done audiovisually. And, since films can be art, they also are variants of the question whether art can be philosophy, and whether narrative arts such as literature and film can be philosophy.

That there is a need for justifying the philosophicality of film and other arts is, arguably, historically rooted in the arguments of Plato’s Socrates against the arts. In the second, seventh and tenth book of Plato’s *Politeia*, Socrates describes the arts (mostly discussed through the example of poetry) as a merely mimetic practice, a mere “perception of shadows” (534a, my translation). The denigration of the arts culminates in the famous conclusion that “there is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (607b5–6).18

According to the literature theorist Markus Gasser in his elaborated study of the complex relation between philosophy and literature, *Die Sprengung der Platonischen Höhle*, the platonic inheritance until now “positions philosophy as a way of gaining knowledge in opposition to literature” (Gasser 2007: 21, my translation).19 Gasser provocatively talks of the “Straftatsbestand Literatur” (Gasser 2007: 15), the criminal offence of literature, and argues that philosophy constituted its claims to significance through this very opposition to literature:

“Narrative literature is confusing and could mislead to the worst things: That was the basic accusation which philosophy used for justifying itself against literature and which opened the battle between literature and philosophy. In the earliest theories of literature we know of, it is a degrading riddle. Its value is categorically put into question. For Plato, literature is simply not true. Only those who leave the cage theatre of literature break out of the Matrix on their way to reality. This, Plato says, is how it always has been: the battle between philosophy and literature was there forever. The success of his ideal state depended on banning literature […] For Aristotle it could, at least, be of some therapeutic value […]. Whenever it was not self-explanatory, literature now was in need of justification, a justification which, however, was only able to grant her a function which in turn was to be determined by philosophy.” (Gasser 2007: 15, my translation)

Gasser sees a “Legitimationslast” (Gasser 2007: 16) – philosophy is the instance that lends legitimacy to literature. While this legitimacy applies to the very status of literature as an intellectual but not necessarily philosophical enterprise, the question of the philosophicality of literature follows a similar pattern: Philosophy judges the

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18 While the denigration of the arts is a logical outcome of Plato’s theory of ideas (see Hub 2009: §17), it is simultaneously strangely paradoxical: their literary qualities mark Plato’s dialogues as outstanding instantiations of (poetic) art. Secondary (since the criticism in the *Politeia* is directly directed against poetry), the fragments of pre-Socratic philosophers such as Parmenides were written in verses rather than prose.

19 German original text: “formiert die Philosophie als Erkenntnissweg in Gegnerschaft zur Literatur”.

philosophical value of literature and not vice versa. Analogously, philosophy judges the philosophical value of film.\footnote{Gasser indicates that at least Romanticist aesthetics tried to reverse the literature-film relationship: It “turned [...] the need for the legitimation of literature against philosophy itself; in the awareness that the meaning of human existence was less owed to Plato than to Shakespeare.” (Gasser 2007: 23, my translation). German original text: “kehrte [...] die Legitimationsbedürftigkeit der Literatur gegen die Philosophie selbst: in dem Bewusstsein, daß weniger Platon als Shakespeare der Sinn menschlicher Existenz zu danken war.”}

This justificatory structure is, of course, also a result of the fact that usually philosophers reflect on the philosophicallity of film. It is no surprise, then, that the “interrelation [between philosophy and film] takes place under conditions that are entirely set by philosophy” (Constable 2009: 5), as Catherine Constable puts it in her book Adapting Philosophy. But this need not necessarily be so, since one can ask the question of film’s philosophical ‘value’ with or without the burden of a “Legitimationslast” against philosophy. The question then is transformed from the question whether films can be philosophical in analogy to traditional, academic philosophical texts to the question whether they might be philosophical in ways hitherto unimagined, unnoticed or unacknowledged by traditional academia; ways which redefine the conventional understanding of what philosophy is, can or should be. Film could be philosophical in new ways – and therefore philosophical investigations of film’s philosophical potential should meet with the latter on the same hierarchical level. Film should be taken as seriously as philosophy, regardless of whether it eventually should be taken seriously as philosophy.

This, by the way, includes an awareness that methods and tools of film studies fundamentally contribute to an adequate understanding of films. A philosophical study of film cannot be undertaken from an entirely conceptual philosophical position. Research in the field of film philosophy is inherently interdisciplinary. In the context of her study on the MATRIX trilogy, Catherine Constable criticises that current film-philosophy is largely ignorant of scholarship in film studies:

“Most of the philosophical writing on the trilogy is not interdisciplinary and does not make use of the available literature in Film-Philosophy. It operates with the tacit assumption that philosophy is a universal form of meta-critique that can be applied without modification to any field.” (Constable 2009: 5)

Pace Constable, I believe that an increasing number of film philosophy scholars are aware of both sides of the academic discourse even though philosophers still tend to neglect the film-analytic methodological spectrum of film studies (but note that Constable’s criticism is mainly aimed at scholarship on the MATRIX trilogy). However, her idea that the concepts of philosophy are supposed to be “a universal form of meta-critique” is valuable: What is in fact required in thinking about film (and with film) philosophically is a kind of conceptual common ground, a set of concepts which range across both cultural phenomena.
sense that they are expressive of philosophical content. It is possible to affirm the former while denying the latter option, but it is not possible to affirm the latter option while denying the former option: If films are entities that can do philosophy, they are also entities that can be thought about philosophically. Thus, the distinction between films as objects and films as expressions of philosophical thought is not a dichotomy. Since, as the following sections show, there are various possibilities of understanding each relation, the distinction is also a gradual rather than categorical one.

This distinction provides the basis for one of the main arguments of the following chapters: While traditional film-as-philosophy accounts conceptualise selected films predominantly as a kind of adaptation of philosophy and thereby maintain the traditional hierarchical relationship, it is more fitting to conceptualise philosophical films as (con)figurations of philosophy. This puts the philosophical potential of films on the same level as literature and other forms of human expression, instead of subordinating them, and it allows conceiving of traditional academic philosophy as just one of several possible ways of mediating philosophical thought. Even though historically, (Western) philosophy has been predominantly passed on in writing and in conversation, this does not mean that, apart from historically established conventions, these are the only appropriate ways of doing philosophy. Film might suggest other, ‘novel’ ways of doing philosophy. In order to develop this idea further, the following sections of the chapter conceptualise in more detail various ways of relating film and philosophy.

1.3. Philosophy of Film

1.3.1. Films as Objects of Philosophical Thought

In both correlations of film and philosophy – film as an expression or object of philosophical thought –, the term ‘film’ can denote different phenomena: single films, a set of films, or the medium of film. For example, a set of films can constitute genres such as the action film, Cavell’s comedy of remarriage, Thomas Elsaesser’s cinematic tendency of the mind-game film, or the meta-genre (German: Gattung) of the (non-fictional) documentary film.

Each emphasis necessitates different modes of analysis. For instance, a focus on the medium of cinema shifts attention to general, overarching (expressive) features of the medium, such as its simultaneous appeal to different senses, its peculiar spatiotemporal organisation, the role of montage, and so on. Here, film philosophy clearly overlaps with film theory. But the first focus on single films rather concentrates on specific strategies of expression employed by the film under analysis.

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22 I follow Thomas Wartenberg’s terminology in Thinking on Screen: The phrase ‘films do philosophy’ serves as a “shorthand expression for stating that the film’s makers are the ones who are actually doing philosophy in/on/through film.” (Wartenberg 2007: 12). See also Wartenberg 2011.

23 Similarly, in New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images Robert Sinnerbrink suggests that “the most productive way of exploring the idea of film as philosophy is as an invitation to rethink the hierarchical relationship between philosophy and art. The encounter between film and philosophy invites us to explore novel ways in which our conventional understanding of philosophy – and aesthetic receptivity to new kinds of experience – might be renewed and transformed.” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 117f.)

24 See Cavell 1981; Elsaesser 2009a; Elsaesser 2009b. On the notion of metagener, see Kurwinkel and Schmerheim 2013: chapter 1.2.
Based on the tripartite definition of the term ‘film’, it is possible to distinguish three ways of understanding film as object of philosophical thought: philosophising about the medium of film (cinema); philosophising about films or sets of films; philosophising through the conditions of cinema.25

1) **Philosophising about the medium of cinema.** Cinema as a medium can become an object of philosophical thought. Philosophers can reflect on the conditions of cinema or the fundamental properties of the medium. Like Cavell, Kracauer or Bazin, they can consider the nature of the transformative process that takes place during the recording and projection of objects (see Cavell 1979a; Kracauer 1960; Bazin (1967 [1945])); like Deleuze in the *Cinema* books they can focus on the peculiar interplay of cinematic space and time, image and sound (see Deleuze 1986; Deleuze 1989). Even though philosophising on the medium of cinema is often based on exploring single films, it aims at identifying general properties of the medium. The question of film as art outlined in chapter 1.1 falls into this first category, as does the so-called “ontology of film” (see Jarvis 1987, Cavell 1979a).

2) **Philosophising about films.** *Single films or sets of films* with their specific way of handling themes, characters, and aesthetic elements can become the object of philosophical thought. For instance, a philosopher can identify philosophically relevant elements in *Dead Man Walking* (Robbins, 1995), or use the film *Matrix* (A. and L. Wachowski, 1999) as an illustration of external world skepticism (see Litch 2010). Exploring a set of films under a specific philosophical perspective can expand the scope of philosophical investigations. Mulhall, for example, explores the “underlying logic” of the “alien universe” (Mulhall 2008a: 3) of the four *Alien* films, which have each been directed by a different director.26 Mulhall reads the four films as inquiries into philosophical questions of human nature or human identity. In every *Alien* film, the series’ heroine Lieutenant Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) is confronted with a dangerous alien species that threatens to kill or destroy her and her team. Mulhall is particularly interested in how the various film directors navigate the film world, aesthetics, characters and themes they have inherited from the first film’s director Ridley Scott. Mulhall does so by also including each director’s oeuvre into his considerations, showing how each one of them explores specific aspects of human existence throughout his body of work.27

3) **Philosophising through the conditions of cinema.** A third avenue for the philosophical study of film is to regard traditional philosophical problems in relation to the ‘conditions’ of cinema, hoping for alternative perspectives on hitherto established philosophical topics. Here, the medium and the perspectives it offers becomes a guide to new aspects or avenues for the solution or improved understanding of given philosophical problems, a source of inspiration for the philosophically inclined film

25 A note of caution: The following typology of the relations between philosophy and film is not supposed to impose a philosophical meta-structure on films which are deemed philosophical, or philosophically relevant. It rather presents a model of a range of possible ways of relating film to philosophy. How a single film specifically is of philosophical interest is a matter reserved for detailed attention to and analysis of single films. The typology also does not suggest or presuppose that filmmakers always actually and intentionally pursue a kind of filmic philosophising which is inspired by academic discourse on the chosen matter.


27 Wartenberg 2011 criticises a lack of precision and detail in Mulhall’s work on the *Alien* quadrilogy.
Films as Configurations of Philosophical Thought

spectator. Here, the study of film inspires reflection on the nature of (or alternative ways of doing) philosophy, especially due to the focus on the relation between thought and the media of thought, i.e. the ways in which means of expression frame the way we think.

Stephen Mulhall presents a similar tripartite distinction of what Robert Sinnerbrink calls “philosophically sophisticated films” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 122): firstly, films as philosophising, i.e. films which reflect on traditional philosophical problems and “are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action” (Mulhall 2008a: 4). Secondly, films that explore the “nature of the cinematic medium” (Mulhall 2008a: 5) are part of the philosophy of film. Thirdly, films “in the condition of philosophy – of film as philosophy” (Mulhall 2008a: 7) reflect on their own condition of possibility. Mulhall exemplifies this claim by analysing the ALIEN film series and the character of sequels in general. Sequels need to incorporate and reflect on the choices and conditions of their predecessors; in the case of the ALIEN films it is the specific diegetic, narrative and aesthetic universe established by Ridley Scott’s first film from 1979. In this third condition, films are explicitly self-reflexive (see Mulhall 2008a).

Mulhall’s tripartite distinction is particularly aimed at the peculiarities of philosophically understanding sets of films. In contrast, my own tripartite distinction is supposed to distinguish different levels of abstraction in relating film and philosophy.28

Answers to the third option decide about the legitimacy of traditional philosophy’s claim to be the only and proper way and medium of philosophical thought. Consequently, the philosophical potential of cinema can only be understood by assuming a specific position on the proper medium of philosophical thought. Generating, conducting and expressing thoughts depends on the use of tools – and these can differ considerably. Looking at the historical, material genesis of the thoughts of noted philosophers, it is apparent that they generated and organised the genesis of their thoughts in different ways.29

Historically, (academic) philosophical thought is mainly expressed and fixed in print, or developed in the context of lectures and verbal discussions. This is hardly surprising, since until the invention of audiovisual recording mechanisms in the 19th and 20th century, manuscripts (and other forms of fixing written testimony) were the most reliable and endurable means of fixing and storing intellectual ideas.30 Hence, reservations against the very idea of film as philosophy rely on the assumption that the historical reasons for the predominance of written and spoken philosophy express essential characteristics of philosophy proper.

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28 In Philosophy and the Moving Image, John Mullarkey neatly distinguishes “three basic modes in which film and philosophy can form a more or less productive relationship – philosophy through film, philosophy of film, and philosophy as film: ‘through’ (where film illustrates philosophy as a pedagogical tool); ‘of’ (where philosophy offers an ontology for film); and ‘as’ (where film offers us its own philosophy)” (Mullarkey 2012: 13). Mullarkey calls the third way the “holy grail” (ibid.). My own distinction here, though slightly more complicated, is supposed to explicitly capture the interactions between single films and the medium in general, understanding single films as sorts of actualisations of the general (philosophically) expressive potencae of their medium.

29 For instance, Ludwig Wittgenstein once remarked that he was only able to think (philosophically) while writing. Friedrich Nietzsche developed his thoughts while he was wandering the mountain ranges of Sils Maria, writing into a small notebook. These examples apply to the different circumstances of the genesis of thought, but they also hint at the different media in which thought is eventually expressed.

30 For a history of media as storage devices see Jochen Hörisch’s Eine Geschichte der Medien. Vom Urknall zum Internet (Hörisch 2004).
If one accepts the above explanation for the historical predominance of a particular medium of philosophical thought, the idea of philosophising qua film becomes less exotic. In fact, it gives rise to the question how media of thought not only “carry and encapsulate” but also frame “the mind’s labours” (Littau 2011: 154), as the media theorist Karin Littau puts it. She builds on the Nietzschean observation that “our writing tools also work on our thoughts”31, and raises the question how media “work on our thinking” (Littau 2011: 167).32

Littau distinguishes “between conception and perception” (Littau 2011: 163):

To say […] that media, such as print or film, have shaped our thinking about thinking, and have even shaped our conceptual apparatus, is not the same thing as saying that media can and have significantly shaped and altered our sense perceptions. (Littau 2011:163)

This distinction is important for the purposes of the present book: New media potentially introduce new modes of generating ideas by using alternative sensory channels. This raises the question formulated in the preceding sections: Does philosophy’s mode of conception include not only a certain way of writing and speaking but other forms of expression (such as film) as well?

1.3.2. Experiencing Philosophy: The Philosophical Significance of Cinema

Part of Stanley Cavell’s importance for film philosophy lies in the fact that he puts an emphasis on the third possibility of correlating film and philosophy. In an interview, he stresses the relevance of cinema for thinking about philosophical problems:

“Film […] is made for philosophy; it shifts or puts different lights on whatever philosophy has said about appearance and reality, about actors and characters, about skepticism and dogmatism, about presence and absence.” (Cavell 1999: 25)

For Cavell, cinema in general and films in particular not only contribute to a better understanding of philosophical topics but also can “shift[.] or put[.] different lights on” the terms of a philosophical debate. Films can reorient philosophical thinking by redrawing the “shared space of thought” (Mulhall 2008a: 137), the implicit presumptions of traditional philosophical discourse. As Nathan Andersen writes in a review of Mulhall’s book On Film: If understood in this way, cinema provides “new modes of organizing and making sense of experience and knowledge” (Andersen 2003).33

These “new modes” need not be medium-specific ways of doing philosophy, as noted above. Films might simply be well-suited for discovering (hitherto undiscovered?) avenues of thinking about philosophical problems. For instance, cinematographic techniques like time-lapse, slow motion and reverse speed have provided completely new perspectives on the relation between space and time, between human beings and their spatiotemporal environment. Cinematography allows experiencing the flow of time in

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31 Quoted in Kittler 1999: 200. See also Hörisch 2004: 144.
32 The history of literature also exemplifies how the advent of the then new medium of cinema influenced the use of ‘older’ media. Writers such as Alfred Döblin in Berlin, Alexanderplatz (Döblin 1965 [1929]) or James Joyce in Ulysses and Finnegans Wake (Joyce 2008 [1922]; Joyce 2012 [1939]) experimented with “filmic writing,” for example by imitating cinematic montage strategies. See Paech 1997: ch. 7.
33 Philosophical discourse does not only require a shared space of thought, but also different positions within it, as the philosopher Jean Grondin remarks: “Ein philosophisches Gespräch setzt ja nicht nur einen gemeinsamen Boden, sondern auch den Unterschied der Denkkonzepte voraus.” (Grondin 2001: 10) (my translation: “A philosophical conversation does not only presuppose a share ground, but also different intellectual approaches”).
reverse, or to experience patterns of movement which happen across extended stretches of time in time-lapse, such as the flow of traffic or the blossoming of a flower, or to witness events which happen rapidly in extreme slow motion (see fig. 1.1 and 1.2).

![Fig. 1.1: Koyaanisqatsi](image1)

![Fig. 1.2: Film IST. 1-6](image2)

Such new modes of experiencing the world can inspire new avenues for philosophical thinking. But it does not mean that the new avenues can only be discovered through film. Consequently, even someone critical of any claims to cinematic medium-specificity could accept a philosophically innovatory potential of cinema.

In a mailing list discussion in the *Film-Philosophy Archives*, the film scholar Henry M. Taylor discusses a film example which, he claims, literally shifted his perspective on a philosophical problem:

“Trying to find instances of philosophical content in films seems to be [...] still the easier task than to find films or filmic moments which in themselves provoke and generate innovative philosophical insight. [...] I had an ‘epiphany’ of sorts [...] while watching the documentary *Winged Migration* (Le peuple migrateur, Jacques Perrin et al., France 2001) about migratory birds. As we follow a flock of seagulls over the Pacific ocean, with *the camera virtually aligned with the birds at their eye level*, a ship is seen from high above. The gulls descend [and] the camera stays with and follows the birds. Right then it struck me that for the gulls the ship was just as much part of nature and of their natural habitat as anything else. From a *truly animal point of view*, the ship was not the product of human industry and hence alien to or in some ways in contradiction to nature, but part of their one, indivisible environment, no less or more natural than anything else. And that all the stereotypical images we see when there is an oil spill [...] typically provoke highly moralistic and ideologically self-serving sentiments from a *human perspective*. From the *dying birds’ point of view*, from the *animal point of view*, the lethal oil is just part of the one unitary environment that is inherently dangerous. [...] [T]he birds suffer, but they don’t distinguish morally between man-made dangers and all the others they face from predators and nature [...]. So this little example might help us to appreciate animals and their needs from an *animal and not human perspective.*” (Taylor 2011, my emphases)

Taylor claims that the distinctly non-human points of view on the world in *Winged Migration* provided him with a different *philosophical* perspective on the relation between nature and culture, and with a different, non-anthropocentric vantage point from which to think animal philosophy. However, Taylor’s example does not introduce innovative concepts for environmental or animal ethics since he draws on well-established distinctions. It is no wonder, then, that Mullarkey writes that the “compare-
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and-contrast industry between philosophy and film is a one-way-street for a simple reason: there has yet to be an idea identified as philosophical in film which bears no resemblance with any current written philosophy.” (Mullarkey 2009: 16)

But WINGED MIGRATION indeed provides innovative justificatory grounds for maintaining or discovering a non-anthropocentric position because the various travelling shots of the flocks of birds allow the film spectator to experience the point of view of animals to a certain extent. This is something which mere conceptualising cannot do. One can therefore claim that films can make the spectator experience what traditional philosophy merely conceptualises. Films, then, allow experiencing philosophy.

While Taylor’s example suggests how films might provoke new philosophical perspectives (without necessarily changing the terms of the debate), the US-American philosopher Nancy Bauer uses DEAD MAN WALKING, a drama about the relationship between a murderer-rapist on the death row and a nun who, as an example for how a film can change the set of concepts used for conducting philosophical debates. In her article “Cogito Ergo Film: Plato, Descartes, and Fight Club,” Bauer argues that the “philosophical interest” (Bauer 2005: 42) of DEAD MAN WALKING “lies not in any support or condemnation it might lend to the idea of a death penalty, [but in drawing] our attention to features of state-sanctioned killing that have been scarcely articulable in the current death penalty debates.” (Bauer 2005: 42f.) According to Bauer, the film steers awareness to the carefully designed routines involved in the execution of a death penalty: These routines, a highly developed division of labour in which, for instance, one officer is responsible for strapping the prisoner’s arm to the electric chair while another pushes a button, are meant to keep the involved state employees protected “from the fact of their own participation in these killings.” (Bauer 2005: 42). While not directly contributing to the core question of the death penalty debate – is there a justification for state-sanctioned killing? –, the film instead broadens the debate because it directs awareness to effects that death penalty has on the people involved in carrying it through. Like Taylor, Bauer does not suggest that this is something only films can do, but she concludes that the “potential power of even Dead Man Walking to change the terms of our conversation points to at least one reason not to regard films as in principle inferior to written philosophical works.” (Bauer 2005: 43).34

As a preliminary result, it is a mainstream position in film philosophy to grant cinema the status of an object which at least provokes philosophical thought and which is at least worth philosophising about.35 There is, however, still scholarly disagreement about the philosophical potential of the medium in at least two respects: Firstly, there is disagreement about the medium’s means of expressions’ general ability to contribute in any relevant or even significant way to philosophical discourse on matters of aesthetics, ethics, ontology or epistemology. Secondly, even on the assumption that the medium can make philosophically significant contributions it is unclear whether genuinely cinematic philosophical contributions are not shared by any other medium of philosophical expression.

34 As Josef Früchtl weighed in in personal correspondence, an ability to change the terms of a philosophical debate is not unique to film, but shared by other forms of art. Since the focus of this book is on film, this issue will not be pursued further at this point.

The following sections draft a more nuanced picture of how films can be regarded as being philosophically significant. The question whether film(s) can be philosophy cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” because there are various ways of understanding something as being philosophical or philosophically significant; and there are various ways of establishing a relevant relation between what is called “film” and what is called “philosophy”. Consequently, one needs a more detailed account of possible relations between philosophy and film. There is a welcome side-effect of such a nuanced picture of film-and/as-philosophy: It allows a minimum position which proponents and skeptics of the idea of a philosophical significance of film can agree on.

1.4. Film as Philosophy

1.4.1. Films as Expressions of Philosophical Thought

Section 1.3 argued that even critics of the notion of film as philosophy can agree on a minimum position that films can provoke philosophical reflection and insights, even though these might not be called “philosophical”. Chapter 1.4 starts from here and looks for ways of conceptualising film as more than objects of philosophical thought. Another variation of the idea that films can provoke philosophical insights is the illustration thesis: Like other forms of art and human expression, films can illustrate philosophical problems. They are thus at least good at “popularizing philosophical issues” (Wartenberg 2007: 2), as Thomas Wartenberg, who himself champions a stronger idea of film as philosophy, puts it. Just like many scholars agree that films can provoke philosophical insights, there is what I would like to call an ‘illustration consensus’ on the philosophical potential of cinema.

From such a perspective, MATRIX is at least an illustration of skepticist thought experiments; A SHORT FILM ABOUT KILLING (Kieslowski, 1988) and DEAD MAN WALKING illustrate philosophical debates on the justifiability of death penalty. SAVING PRIVATE Ryan (Spielberg, 1998) can be seen as an illustration of the tensions between deontological and consequentialist theories, since the film’s plot revolves around the almost suicidal attempt of a group of US soldiers during the Invasion of the Normandy in World War II to save the life of Private James Ryan (Matt Damon), who was captured by the Germans and is the last surviving of four brothers. The science-fiction film BLADE RUNNER (Scott, 1982) raises questions about the personal rights of androids or, more generally, about the criteria for personhood (see Mulhall 2008a: 29ff.). ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND (Jonze, 2004) and GROUNDHOG DAY (Ramis, 1994) are generally regarded as illustrations of Nietzsche’s Eternal Recurrence. BLOW UP (Antonioni, 1966) questions the reliability of photographic representations of the

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36 For literature affirming the illustration consensus, see, for instance: Wartenberg 2007, Shaw 2008, Smith 2006; Livingston 2006, and Yanal 2005. The illustration consensus and the popularity of (Hollywood) films among students also explain the growing number of textbook introductions to philosophy qua film example. See, for example, the titles Faith, Film and Philosophy (Geivett and Spiegel [eds.] 2007), Philosophy Goes to the Movies (Falzon 2003), The Philosopher At the End of the Universe: Philosophy Explained Through Science Fiction Films (Rowlands 2004), Classic Questions and Contemporary Film: An Introduction to Philosophy (Kowalski 2005), or Introducing Philosophy Through Film (Fumerton and Jeske [eds.] 2010).

37 See Christopher Grau’s anthology Philosophers on Film: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Grau [ed.] 2009).
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world; RASHOMON (Kurosawa, 1950) illustrates the (distorting) human role in describing and interpreting events in the world. And so on.

The short list underscores the presence of philosophically relevant topics in films, especially of issues related to moral philosophy. This is hardly surprising, since films usually address the consequences and motifs of their characters’ actions. But whoever affirms the illustrative potential of film need not commit to the stronger claim that films can be expressions of philosophical thought, e.g. that films are actually able to offer own contributions to the philosophical problems they deal with. There are various possibilities to establish that claim.

The first option is to reconceptualise the very notion of “illustration”. Thomas Wartenberg argues that “being an illustration” can itself be considered as a way of doing philosophy (see chapter 2.2.2). The second and more fundamental option is to establish criteria for philosophicality for measuring the philosophical potential of film (illustration reconceptualised would be one possibility amongst others). Such a strategy runs in danger of – again – judging the philosophical value of film according to standards derived from what is traditionally regarded as ‘being philosophical’. But in turn it provides a systematic framework and makes transparent these criteria.

As Wartenberg puts it, for “many contemporary philosophers, especially those working within the analytic tradition, logical argumentation is the hallmark of philosophy” (Wartenberg 2007: 76). Independently of each other, Murray Smith and Robert Yanal propose sets of criteria for measuring the philosophicality of a film. Both scholars build their scheme on an appreciation of logical argumentation.

Smith, who is more skeptical of attempts to align film with philosophy than Mulhall, proposes a multiple-staged catalogue of criteria that allows identifying a film’s philosophical credentials (see Smith 2006). He asks whether a given film can

a) establish the problem under discussion;
b) present a conclusion or position concerning this topic;
c) present arguments that sustain the conclusion;
d) establish or explicate a pattern of inference that leads to this conclusion

Like Wartenberg, Smith singles out arguments as the hallmark of philosophy: A proper philosophical argument and mutatis mutandis a filmic candidate for presenting a philosophical argument, meets all or at least most of Smith’s criteria. But even within the narrow confines of analytically influenced philosophy, there are more ways in which a work of philosophy or art can be philosophically significant in the sense of doing philosophy. Also, according to such rigid standards, few works which belong to the canon of philosophy would make it on the list – a list that would probably only consist of philosophers trained in the intricacies of higher-order formal logic. Actually, the scale of philosophical works ranges from the deliberately obscure writings of Derrida and the often enigmatic fragments of the Pre-Socratics to the ostentatively scholarly works of analytic philosophers such as Schlick, Frege, or Russell. Consequently, even though argumentative standards are certainly a necessary condition for something being an example of good philosophy, in praxi they are not sufficient conditions for something being an example of philosophy. Meeting argumentative standards is no sine qua non requirement for something being philosophical. If this were so, then Nietzsche or Wittgenstein would not belong to the canon of philosophy.
However, Smith’s criteria indicate two important minimal elements of philosophicality: The attempt to establish a philosophical problem in the first place — criterion a) —, and the attempt to present a position and argue for it — criteria b) and c) —, that is, the attempt to make explicit one’s reasons for supporting a specific position.38

Robert Yanal proposes a similar yet not identical scale of criteria for assessing the philosophicality of films, which ranges from “minimal philosophy” to “maximal philosophy” (see Yanal 2005: 4). The more criteria a film meets, the higher its degree of philosophicality:

i) \( x \) raises a problem that is considered as being of philosophical interest;

ii) \( x \) solves such a problem (e.g. by showing that the problem is stated in the wrong terms);

iii) \( x \) defends its solution;

iv) \( x \) refutes other solutions

Yanal’s scale uses different terms, and Smith insists on the explication of patterns of inference while Yanal simply distinguishes between defending a solution and refuting alternative solutions. In turn, Yanal explicitly presents the idea that films may be philosophical to a higher or lesser degree. While Mulhall sees enough philosophical value in the very attempt to shift the terms of a debate, Yanal thereby follows orthodox analytic philosophical venues. Where Yanal and Smith see (argumentative) problem-solving as a hallmark of philosophy, Wittgensteinian philosophers would include problem-dissolving as another kind of venerable philosophical activity (e.g. by showing that a philosophical problem is already stated in the wrong terms). However, even a Wittgensteinian paradigm-shifter fits into the broad categories established by Yanal: She will still present reasons in favour of her position, and she will try to refute other solutions; or at least try to present her own solution in the best light possible.

Yanal’s and Smith’s basic schemes are not designed for addressing the manifold ways of doing philosophy but to capture essential stages or elements of (a certain kind of) philosophical activity. Because of that they can be used for supporting the position the assumption that films can be expressions of philosophy – and can be so without having to compete with highly elaborated instances of philosophy. One need not compare Derek Jarman’s WITTGENSTEIN (Jarman, 1993) or MATRIX to David Lewis’ Counterfactuals (Lewis 1973). They constitute different ways of doing philosophy. Using Smith’s and Yanal’s criteria enables a compromise between competing camps of film philosophers by maintaining the philosophicality of films without assigning them the ‘full’ measure of philosophicality. In these terms, films which are understood as (traditional) illustrations of philosophy are at least doing minimal philosophy.

But can films do more than minimal philosophy? Can they be more than traditional illustrations? I want to propose an answer to this question by expanding its scope: Are films able to contribute to philosophical discourse in a medium-specific, cinematic way? “Medium-specific” does not necessarily mean a way of doing philosophy that is in the exclusive possession of the medium of cinema (or audiovisual media in general). It simply refers to a way of doing philosophy that exceeds standard means of doing

38 If there is no solution, or if one does not want to commit to a solution, this is a position as well.
philosophy via the written word, but leaves open the question whether philosophical thoughts can be reiterated in other media of expression (e.g. painting, dance, etc.).

Even if a film is doing maximal philosophy in Yanal’s sense, this would not say anything about the way in which the film performs this task. It would be possible that the film simply puts a philosophical paper from the Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism on screen, expanding screen time by embedding the statements made in the paper in a narrative context (let us assume that the film is about a philosopher giving a lecture, similar to the sub-sequences in Waking Life [Linklater, USA, 2001] where Robert Solomon and David Sosa give lectures and extensive monologues about philosophical problems).

One obvious candidate for a cinematic way of reasoning philosophically is the combination of visual and aural elements, and the use of montage, i.e. of cinema’s ability to juxtapose and manipulate (audio-Visually filmed) space and time in specific ways. In his article “On Montage”, Vsevolod Pudovkin discusses an example of how a film can express (philosophical) thoughts: by contemporaneously correlating an abstract thought to a specific example. This is a use of the temporal dimension of the medium of cinema. According to Pudovkin, montage expresses a correlation in two senses: on the one hand single shots must blend into another seamlessly; on the other hand they have to make sense, i.e. stand in an identifiable correlation to each other:

“... This correlation can be deeply intended as meaningful, based on the wish to convey an abstract thought. An example – a court room: the unjustly accused person listens to the cruel sentence; all of a sudden on the screen there appears a representation of the true circumstances of the crime, which completely absolve the accused. The truth of the facts unfolds simultaneously with the resounding words of the false judgement. The obvious contradiction between these linked-up pieces establishes the abstract thought of the bias of the court.” (Pudovkin 2001: 76, my translation)

Pudovkin calls this kind of combination “ideal-philosophical concatenation” (Pudovkin 2001: 76, my translation). It is a way of conveying abstract thoughts or ideas via sound-imagery. The described scene is exemplary for a cinematic way of expressing thoughts: Two conflicting thoughts are not only logically but temporally presented simultaneously (the judge made a wrong verdict; the condemned man is treated unjustly in the name of the law). The visual track presents one piece of information, while the audio track contradicts it. The example explores a variant of a paradox. This exemplifies how cinema can play with ideas in different ways as compared to written texts.

Such considerations imply that cinematic philosophical films can extend, or propose alternatives to, the means by which philosophers conduct their inquiries. The abstracted content of philosophical thought might be the same on screen and on paper, but the way in which it is presented is clearly different. Unless one claims that style does not matter in philosophical discourse (a position which is highly unpromising, looking at the
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history of philosophical thought), one can justifiably claim that films can – but need not – present an alternative to written philosophy.

1.4.2. The Philosophical Significance of Style

Martha Nussbaum argues for the philosophical significance of style. She not only claims – like Stephen Mulhall – that “the advent of philosophizing” (Mulhall 2008a: 12) can occur in modes of human existence other than academic philosophical inquiries but argues that some philosophical issues can only be expressed adequately in non-standard philosophical prose. In her essay collection Love’s Knowledge (Nussbaum 1990) she attempts to dissolve the barriers between philosophical prose and apparently non-philosophical prose such as literature. She maintains that a text not written in academic philosophical prose is not automatically disqualified as a philosophical text. On the contrary – style can be an integral part of what one attempts to say:

“Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters. Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content – an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth.” (Nussbaum 1990: 3)

Nussbaum suggests that there are “thoughts and ideas, a certain sense of life” that “reach toward expression in writing that has a certain shape and form, that uses certain structures, certain terms” (Nussbaum 1990: 4). She argues that

“there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it – views, especially, that emphasize the world’s surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty – that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder – but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars.” (Nussbaum 1990: 3)

Tellingly, Nussbaum talks of a “language lacking in wonder” – a harsh judgement on an academic profession claiming to have its inspiring impulse in a sense of wonder (Greek: thaumázein) about the world. Nussbaum effectively argues that standardised academic philosophical prose can be insufficient for some philosophical purposes. For her, the choice of philosophical

“style makes, itself, a statement: [...] an abstract theoretical style makes, like any other style, a statement about what is important and what is not, about what faculties of the reader are important for knowing and what are not.” (Nussbaum 1990: 7)

Stylistic choices amount to foregrounding certain aspects while neglecting others. And indeed, within the academic philosophical community there are manifold varieties of (mutually incompatible) ‘philosophical prose’. The frictions between, for example, so-called French postmodernist philosophy and US West-coast analytic philosophy derive to a large extent not so much from differences in content, but from the chosen philosophical style. Quasi-scientific prose, for instance, reflects pre-assumptions about what qualifies as being philosophical, such as philosophy as a ‘conceptual foundation of the natural sciences’ versus philosophy as a predominantly culturalist or historicist enterprise.

See Plato, Theaetetus 155d and Aristotle, Metaphysics I 2, 982b12.
For Nussbaum, then, stylistic choices are the point of departure of philosophical projects: “How should one write, what words should one select, what forms and structures and organization, if one is pursuing understanding? (Which is to say, if one is, in that sense, a philosopher?)” (Nussbaum 1990: 3) Cavell as well identifies literature as philosophy’s other form of appearance. In his essay “The Fantastic of Philosophy,” he discusses the opening paragraph of Thoreau’s *Walden*, a book that according to him situates itself “in terms of a range of dualities [...] between philosophy and literature” (Cavell 2005 [1986]: 147), and which he interprets as “a book of imaginary travel” (Cavell 2005 [1986]: 147). Cavell writes:

> “People may call such a description literary as a way of dismissing it, but it is no more or less literary than, say, Rousseau’s vision of the human with which he opens his *Social Contract*, as born free and everywhere in chains. That is a vision, as Thoreau’s is, essential to the theorizing that follows it, one that identifies the audience of the writing (as well as its author) and that defines the harm it means to undo.” (Cavell 2005 [1986]: 148)

Here, Cavell identifies works that ‘situate’ themselves between philosophy and literature; works which contain elements of both worlds. For Cavell, philosophical writing is inspired, or informed by a “vision” which determines the problems and scope of writing (“the harm it means to undo”). This “vision” establishes the perspective of the philosophical writing that is about to follow, it establishes the set of problems and ideas it is meant to untangle.

Since a vision can be “essential to the theorizing that follows it” (Cavell 2005 [1986]:148), it can be an integral part of philosophical topics. A literary vision can establish and structure a topic, highlight certain aspects while neglecting others. Such pre-structuring can be regarded as being part of what is deemed philosophical.  

### 1.4.3. Philosophy as Sketches of Landscapes

Wittgenstein, the unofficial saint of analytic philosophers, was self-critically aware of stylistic questions in philosophy. In the preface to his *Philosophische Untersuchungen* he writes:

> “I have written down all these thoughts as remarks, short paragraphs, of which there is sometimes a fairly long chain about the same subject, while I sometimes make a sudden change, jumping from one topic to another. – It was my intention at first to bring all this together in a book whose form I pictured differently at different times. But the essential thing was that the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural order and without breaks. After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I would never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination. […] The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and involved journeyings. The same or almost

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41 Stanley Kubrick’s comment on the cinematic art of Polish film director Krzysztof Kieslowski are close to Nussbaum’s focus on the proper forms and structures of philosophical endeavours. In a foreword to screenplay edition of DECALOGUE (Kieslowski, 1988-89), Kubrick writes that Kieslowski and his co-writer Piesiewicz reveal “the very rare ability to dramatize their ideas rather than just talking about them. By making their points through the dramatic action of the story they gain the added power of allowing the audience to discover what’s really going on rather than being told. They do this with such dazzling skill, you never see the ideas coming and don’t realize until much later how profoundly they have reached your heart.” (Kubrick 1991, vii, my emphasis)
the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new sketches made. Very many of these were badly drawn or uncharacteristic, marked by all the defects of a weak draughtsman. And when they were rejected a number of tolerable ones were left, which now had to be arranged and sometimes cut down, so that if you looked at them you could get a picture of the landscapes. Thus this book is really only an album." (Wittgenstein 2005: ixf.)

Wittgenstein’s language is remarkably metaphorical and visual – the same Wittgenstein who earlier in his life wrote the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, a book structured around seven propositions that are further explained and elaborated by paragraphs numbered with decimal expansions. His wording could even be called ‘cinematic’: Wittgenstein describes his philosophical project as one of compiling “remarks,” “short paragraphs,” sometimes making “a sudden change, jumping from one topic to another”. He compares his efforts as a thinker to those of a painter who draws “a number of sketches of landscapes” while “journeying[…] through intellectual landscapes. Only if selected, arranged and “sometimes cut down,” Wittgenstein writes, it is possible to get a “picture of the landscapes” he was looking at from this written “album”. Here, Wittgenstein describes a book that is not a neat, cleaned-up, detailed philosophical treatise, but rather an (allegedly incoherent) arrangement of single thoughts the readers needs to put into an order himself, because the writer was unable to arrange them. These sketches are supposed to establish new theoretical frameworks or paradigms which are then in need of further refinement.

The main metaphor employed by Wittgenstein is ‘the philosopher as a painter of intellectual landscapes,’ but cinematic rhetoric sneaks in: the *Investigations* “jump” from topic to topic, making “sudden changes” like in a philosophical parallel montage; “the same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions” just as the film camera can approach the same scenery from different vantage points.

Wittgenstein’s writing style seems open to ‘cinematic’ ways of doing philosophy: Even though he advertises the *Investigations* as inferior to full-fledged philosophical enterprises, he does not call them ‘unphilosophical’.

The *Investigations* suggests different possible ways of approaching philosophical topics, sometimes more, sometimes less systematic. Here, Wittgenstein is in accordance with Nussbaum’s approach. The late Wittgenstein exemplifies non-rigid philosophicality, since one cannot ‘measure’ his philosophical merits by applying Smith’s or Yanal’s criteria.

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42 But, then again, even the *Tractatus* is dominated by visual analogies, starting with its basic assumption that language mirrors the logical structure of the world.
43 I owe this thought to Josef Früchtl.
44 Avrum Stroll terms the later Wittgenstein’s way of doing philosophy a “philosophy by example” and designs an entire book around Wittgenstein’s metaphor of “sketches of landscapes” (see Stroll 1998).
45 During his time at Cambridge, Wittgenstein was a notorious moviegoer, albeit no cinéphile. It seems that he used the movies as a way of relaxing from hard days of philosophical reflection. In his memoir of Wittgenstein, Norman Malcolm remarks that “[o]ften [Wittgenstein] would rush off to a cinema immediately after the class ended. As the members of the class began to move their chairs out of the room he might look imploringly at a friend and say in a low tone, ‘Could you go to a flick?’ On the way to the cinema Wittgenstein would buy a bun or cold pork pie and munch it while he watched the film.” (Malcolm 1958: 26)
46 On Wittgenstein and film, see the anthology *Wittgenstein at the Movies* (Szabados and Stojanova [eds.] 2011).
1.5. Conclusion

To sum up, I am sympathetic to Mulhall’s position that films can be philosophical in a Wittgensteinian (and Cavellian) fashion. Films can, firstly, shift the ‘landscape’ of philosophical debates by changing the perspectives as well as ways of investigating them. Secondly, films can be philosophical as “sketches of landscape,” i.e., less systematic and more audiovisual and metaphorical than conventional philosophy.

Borrowing a term used by Edward Branigan in his re-evaluation of the language of film theory, ‘doing philosophy’ can then be understood as a “radial” phenomenon, as a set of established cultural practices unified by a certain common set of topics, interests, problems and traditions (see Branigan 2006). But then ‘philosophy’ is a cluster concept for a multitude of not always homogenous cognitive activities that are mediated through varying forms of expression (verbal, audiovisual, gestural etc.) and categorised as ‘philosophy’ in a kind of family resemblance. As I will claim in the next chapter, the family resemblance approach to philosophy does not exclude the introduction of new practices of doing philosophy, such as ‘film as philosophy’. If one assumes that one way of doing philosophy is providing sketches of landscapes, then films can – but need not – be philosophical as well.\footnote{Robert Sinnerbrink and John Mullarkey also argue for a plural understanding of ways of doing philosophy. See Sinnerbrink 2011: 117 and Mullarkey 2009.}
2. Cinematic Fictions as Configurations of Philosophical Thought

2.1 Philosophical Narratives

If cinema is one of the possible configurations of the radial phenomenon of philosophy, then not only do the ‘properties’ – the range of expressive powers – of the medium define its specific kind of philosophicality. This ‘transcendental’ possibility of a philosophical cinema must also be put to practice by specific films, which in turn rely on the expressive potential of their medium. In particular, there is still the question how narrative fiction films can be conceived of as configurations of philosophical thought. Nussbaum’s account of the philosophicality of literature suggests that narrative possess a philosophical value of its own. But how can narratives – and narrative fiction films in particular – be understood as being philosophical?

To begin with, it is helpful to look at Richard Rorty’s distinction between systematic philosophy and edifying philosophy. In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Rorty introduces both as legitimate albeit incommensurable forms of philosophical discourse:

“Great systematic philosophers are constructive and offer arguments. Great edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms. [...] Great systematic philosophers, like scientists, build for eternity. Great edifying philosophers destroy for the sake of their own generation. [...] Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause – wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is not an accurate representation of what was already there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described.” (Rorty 2009 [1979]: 370)

Like Nussbaum, Rorty links the non-conventional approach to philosophy to a sense of wonder which the other apparently lacks. The edifying approach, in particular, wants to “see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately” (Rorty 2009 [1979]: 378), and tries to “enlarget[e] our repertoire of individual and cultural self-descriptions” (Rorty 2007: 124).48

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48 Hans-Georg Moeller discusses Rorty’s understanding of philosophy as a kind of cultural activity which “cannot be essentially distinguished from literature. Both disciplines produce texts and stories. They provide models for looking at oneself and at the world, and they invite a comparison with other such models. Philosophical ‘tales,’ just like literary ones, are not so much interesting because what they say is true, but because what they say matters to...”
From a Rortyan, pragmatist perspective, philosophy becomes “just another of the potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described.” (Rorty 2009: 367) One can thus understand cinema as “something new under the sun” of philosophy, something that does not provide “accurate representation[s] of what was already there” but new cinematic perspectives on this. The question, however, is whether these approaches to doing philosophy are mutually compatible. Rorty thinks not. Using the notion of “incommensurable discourse” (Rorty 2009: 370), he describes the incompatibility between, for instance, pragmatism and logical positivism. Consequently, whatever form a ‘truly philosophical’ film might assume, it likely will be incommensurable with the philosophical discourse represented in academic philosophy journals like *Erkenntnis* or *Philosophical Review*.

I will now discuss the idea that narratives are one of the forms of philosophical reflection, or at least capable of assuming a function in philosophical arguments. This allows a clearer understanding of the degree of incommensurability between doing philosophy conventionally, and doing philosophy cinematically.

### 2.2 Many Ways of Being Philosophical: Narratives as Philosophical Arguments

#### 2.2.1 Narrative, Fiction, Knowledge

Narrative, Edward Branigan claims in *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, is “one of the fundamental ways to think about the world” (Branigan 1992: xi) because “making narratives is a strategy for making our world of experiences and desires intelligible. It is a fundamental way of organizing data.” (Branigan 1992: 1) Experiencing the world narratively, or rendering one’s experience of the world narratively, is a way of “making sense and significance” (Branigan 1992: xi), “a way of projecting an explanation for our experiences” (Branigan 2006: 32). In short: Narrative is a tool of thought used for making intelligible our experience of the world. From such a cognitive-conceptualist perspective, narrative is closely connected to philosophy and thereby indirectly confirms Rorty’s and Nussbaum’s general position.

Branigan distinguishes four basic types of texts (see fig. 2.1): narrative fiction (novels or Hollywood films), narrative non-fiction (history books), non-narrative fiction (some kinds of poetry), and non-narrative non-fiction (scholarly essays, or Muybridge’s short horse race films).

![Fig. 2.1: Four basic types of texts according to Branigan 1992](image)

While narrative involves the organisation of information (of any type), “fiction” and “nonfiction” are categories that describe the “relationships between data and world” (Branigan 1992: 192). It is important to bear this distinction in mind, since “[n]arrative and fiction are quite different things even if they often appear together in public. Narrative involves such processes as creating a scene of action, defining a temporal

their readers.” (Moeller 2009: 181)
progression, and dramatizing an observer of events.” (Branigan 1992: 192). From the outset, such a conception of narrative avoids all-too-easy equations of narrative with the ‘fictional’. Stories use elements derived directly from the (our) world, but sometimes their elements do not bear a ‘direct’ relation to the world out there. Consequently, narrative can be a property of fictional as well as non-fictional texts.

Indeed, in the way Branigan understands narrative, it is not something confined to the world of the fiction novel or Saturday night theatre performances or weekly movie screenings. Rather, it is conceived of as a general strategy or tool for organising and, in the first place, assembling our knowledge of the world – or of what we think of as being the things we know. In Branigan’s terms, “perceiving the world narratively is intimately tied to our ways of arranging knowledge (schemas), to our skills of causal reasoning, and hence to our judgements about temporal sequence.” (Branigan 1992: xiv). In short: the ability to construct narratives is a cognitive capacity, and constructing a narrative is a “cognitive activity” (Branigan 2006: 32).

According to this definition narrative is intimately tied to the human experience of causality and time. If related to “causal reasoning” or “judgements about temporal sequence,” narrative becomes a kind of glue that conjoins events and phenomena we perceive in the world. Inasmuch as narratives organise our experience of and data about the world, they are related to scholarly enterprises in the natural sciences and the humanities. As soon as, for instance, experimental psychologists try to extract conclusions from a set of research questions and empirical data collected through surveys and other experimental tools, they are forced to organise their data into a certain coherent and consistent order. In that respect, they share properties with narrative.

Narrative, then, is a way of ordering and establishing causal correlations between experiential data. Thereby, narrative – and narrative films as well – provide a form of knowledge, even though it is not clear whether they provide the kind of knowledge appreciated by traditional philosophers. Cinematic modes of expression have been put to scientific use, but it remains to be seen how they can be used for treating the rather general, abstract questions asked by philosophy. A philosopher is not so much interested in Eadweard Muybridge’s discovery that at some points a horse has all its hoofs off the ground while running. Philosophers could rather be interested in the philosophical implications of the phenomenon that time-lapse or slow-motion cinematography can speed up or slow down time and motion, of recorded objects in space, thereby changing the correlation between space and time in the perceived space-time continuum as well. A philosopher could also be interested in the philosophical implications of the phenomenon that time lapse or slow motion apparently refine our (mediated) sensory perception of the world to such a degree that it enables re-seeing it from hitherto unknown perspectives.

2.2.2 The Epistemic and the Artistic, the Philosophical and the Literary

Narrative fiction films differ in many respects from works of philosophy or philosophical arguments. One strand of philosophical criticism frequently launched against the philosophical relevance of narratives maintains that they are entertainment vehicles, or pursue artistic concerns, while arguments are brought forward for advancing knowledge. Philosophical insights, the argument goes, must be extracted from
narratives, and brought into a ‘proper’ philosophical form. Even though narratives as well as philosophical considerations rely on specific structures, philosophers of the ‘constructive’ tradition are rightly wary of assimilating the formal structure of philosophical arguments to the dramaturgical structure of a film or stage play.

Murray Smith expresses this alleged tension between narrative and philosophical aims by maintaining that narratives subordinate the epistemic to the artistic, while philosophical arguments work the other way around (see Smith 2006: 39). However, as Smith recognises as well, the distinction between narratives and arguments is a gradual rather than categorical one: “since philosophy has freely conjured up fictional counterexamples and thought experiments throughout its history […] it cannot without contradiction deny that fictional narratives may deliver knowledge” (Smith 2006: 35). Philosophical investigations or texts are thus linked with epistemic concerns.

How, then, should one understand this gradual confluence between the philosophical and the narrative, between the epistemic and the artistic? Analytic thinkers like Smith try to formalise the results of their investigations in arguments that consist of a number of (hopefully) well-founded premises, a pattern of inference, and a conclusion that (necessarily) follows from these premises (see Smith 2006: fn8, and section 1.4.1). Philosophers such as Mulhall propose alternatives to such a ‘formal’ understanding of philosophical practice. He assigns to films the capacity to offer new ways of looking at philosophical topics, for instance by reorienting “a shared space for thinking” (Mulhall 2007: 8) within which a given philosophical problem is addressed. Nancy Bauer’s discussion of DEAD MAN WALKING in section 1.3.2 is one example for this.

Reorientation of the shared space of thought is supposed to allow discovering hitherto unnoticed philosophical problems in a traditional way. This is what the later Wittgenstein does: Instead of opting for one of the sides of a philosophical controversy, he looks at their pre-assumptions. This can result in the disappearance of the philosophical problem if it turns out that it arises out of erroneous pre-assumptions:

“The [philosophical] problems are solved, not by reporting new experience, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language.” (Wittgenstein 2005: §109)

Wittgenstein coins the notion of an “übersichtliche Darstellung” (perspicuous representation):

“A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of the use of our words. […] A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’. […] The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things. (Is this a ‘Weltanschauung’?)” (Wittgenstein 2005: §122)

For Wittgenstein, a lack of orientation is closely linked with the simplicity and everydayness of whatever we are thinking about philosophically: “The aspects of things that are most important to us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes.)” (Wittgenstein 2005: §129)

If it is (one of) the tasks of philosophy to provide perspicuous representations of philosophical problems, then cinema might be an apt candidate for such an activity. The history of film theory is full of claims about cinema’s ability to present (things in) the
world in their “virginal purity” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 15); to show them as they are independently of the erroneous ways of human world-making, or to ‘redeem’ reality from the human gaze (Kracauer 1960). Indeed, remarks made by the realist film theorist Siegfried Kracauer are strikingly similarity to Wittgenstein’s line of argument. He complains that the “truly decisive reason for the elusiveness of physical reality is the habit of abstract thinking we have acquired under the reign of science and technology” (Kracauer 1960: 299f). Insofar as human beings ‘indulge’ in abstraction, they do not grasp reality, or the things in the world, as they are: “Strange as it may seem, although streets, faces, railway stations, etc., lie before our eyes, they have remained largely invisible so far.” (Kracauer 1960: 299) Cinema can help in such a reorientation of philosophical problems – even though this potential is not exclusively owned by cinema but a feature shared by other art forms as well.49

Still, the question remains why one should understand a mainstream narrative fiction film not only as a work of art, but as a work of philosophy, too. Even if cinema bears a philosophical potential, trying to assign the label ‘philosophy’ to a mainstream narrative fiction film raises the stakes: Prima facie, there is as little reason to understand THE NAKED GUN 33 1/3 (Segal, 1994) as a work of philosophy as there is to regard a novel written by Rosamunde Pilcher as one. Not every work of literature is a work of philosophy, or deemed ‘worthy’ of philosophical investigation. Why should it be different in the case of film? Put more generally, the question asked here is whether even typical instances of film – mainstream films – are capable of being works of philosophy, of being expressions of philosophical thoughts. Can a big-budget moneymaking production elaborate on issues of a philosophical nature? And, can it do so in a way that justifies labelling it as philosophical?

Mulhall says so. He insists that there is “no essential break between the natural, inherent reflectiveness of human life-forms and the inveterate reflectiveness of philosophy” (Mulhall 2008b: 12), which means that “the advent of philosophizing can occur within any and every mode of human existence” (Mulhall 2008b: 12). This echoes Stanley Cavell’s formulation in “The Thought of Movies” that he understands philosophy

“as a willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think about, but rather to learn to think undistractedly about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about, or anyway cannot help having occur to them, sometimes in fantasy, sometimes as a flash across a landscape.” (Cavell 2005 [1983]: 92)50

That is to say, philosophy is not reserved to the academic specialist. Even though philosophical problems are addressed with the help of specifically developed methods and argumentative tools by trained academic philosophers, many of these problems concern the ‘common man’ as well.51

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49 Mulhall is also very Wittgensteinian in claiming a potential for cinematic self-reflexivity. He maintains that films cannot only reorient thinking about philosophical problems, they are also able to reflect on their “own conditions of possibility” (Mulhall 2008b:3), i.e. about what makes a film a film in the first place. These questions are, however, not limited to what makes a film a film. Mulhall thus calls for a careful interpretation of particular films.50

50 The notion of thinking “undistractedly” about what one cannot help thinking about echoes Kracauer’s account of cinema’s redemption of reality and Wittgenstein’s call for a conspicous representation of things in their simplicity and everydayness.

51 Mulhall provocatively invokes the philosophical relevance of a number of scientific problems and questions: “[I]f
2.3 The Philosophical Significance of Thought Experiments

2.3.1 Thought Experiments as Philosophical Narratives

It should be now clear that being a narrative does not a priori preclude a text from (potentially) being of philosophical value. The present section will now elaborate on Smith’s insight that philosophers “cannot without contradiction deny that fictional narratives may deliver knowledge” (Smith 2006: 35). Narrative actually plays a central role for the process and progress of philosophical investigations – even analytic ones. This becomes most clear if one considers an argumentative device which is an integral part in all philosophical traditions: philosophical thought experiments.

Thomas Wartenberg defines thought experiments as “imaginary narratives” (Wartenberg 2006a: 132):

“In a thought experiment, the reader is instructed to consider a certain possibility that she might not have considered before, a possibility that is often at odds with her established patterns of belief and action. Once this possibility is entertained as a real possibility, then the reader is confronted with the question of what justifies her customary belief rather than the possibility put forward in the thought experiment.” (Wartenberg 2005: 275)

For example, philosophers thinking about philosophical skepticism tend to develop “[s]keptical possibilities [...] according to which the world is completely different from how it appears to us, and there is no way to detect this” (Nagel 1986: 71), as Thomas Nagel puts it in The View from Nowhere.52 Like claims about the reliability or limits of our beliefs and sensory-cognitive capacities, skeptical possibilities are often hypothetical. If then it turns out that these hypothetical possibilities cannot be excluded by line of argument, they are regarded by skeptics as contributing more evidence to their line of reasoning.

The parallels between philosophical thought experiments and narratives are evident: Thought experiments ask the reader (or spectator) to imagine a specific counterfactual setting, usually introduced by the phrase ‘imagine that ...’ They are often used as test devices for philosophical theories and designed in such a way that they either express core assumptions of a given theory or thesis or present borderline cases and counterarguments against a given theory or thesis. Philosophers tend to introduce thought experiments in order to support their claims. They also use them for showing that their theories are able to withstand hypothetical counter-scenarios. Predating on Popper’s principle of falsification, philosophers also use thought experiments for falsifying competing theories, by claiming that these theories are not able to cope with the counterexample posed by the thought experiment. Films as thought experiments might be able to arbitrate between rivalling theories, “playing the role of an experiment in scientific theory by allowing us to have a field in which to judge which of two theories is more successful in helping us understand the film.” (Freeland and Wartenberg 1995: 8)

In short, thought experiments assume various roles in philosophical investigations. If a thought experiment is used in order to establish or support a given theory, then it is

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52 See also chapter 4.
constructive. If it is used for undermining a theory, then it functions as a destructive thought experiment, i.e. as a (falsifying) counter-example. Philosophical thought experiments are embedded into a larger argumentative context as soon as they are used to support or reject certain theoretical positions, and hence are not autonomous from their philosophical context (see Wartenberg 2007: 57).

If films are understood as thought experiments, they can assume a function as a stage in a philosophical argument (see Freeland and Wartenberg 1995: 7). For instance, they can be used for stage c) or d) of Yanal’s philosophicality scale (see Yanal 2005: 4; and chapter 1.4.1). In fact, film philosophers broadly agree that films-as-thought-experiments can become part of philosophical investigations, even though they value the potential of this possibility to different degrees. Clearly, however, films-as-philosophical-thought-experiments are an example for a more than minimal way of doing philosophy.

Wartenberg distinguishes several roles of philosophical thought experiments. In all of them, they assume an assistive function – they support or counter given theories or philosophical assertions (the following descriptions, examples as well as their wording follow Wartenberg 2007: 58-65):

- Counterexamples to philosophical claims (e.g., a skepticist scenario counters knowledge assumptions);
- Establishing possibility (e.g., establishing the possibility that we do not know anything about the external world);
- Failed thought experiments as demonstrating impossibility (e.g., demonstrating the indeterminacy of translation via a failure to imagine a linguistic anthropologist who can successfully compile a dictionary that correctly translates the language of a hitherto unknown Native tribe into English);
- Establishing necessary connections (e.g., using an imaginary example for justifying a conceptual or necessary connection);
- Confirming a theory (e.g., using a thought experiment to adding further confirmation to a given theory);
- Theory building through idealisation (e.g. building an idealised abstract version of reality, e.g. an ideal state).

The main reason for a film’s potential as a philosophical thought experiment is that thought experiments possess a narrative structure, even though often of a rudimentary sort. As noted already, philosophers tend to introduce their thought experiments by formulaic expressions such as ‘imagine that ...’. Many famous philosophical thought experiments read like stories or story outlines. Compare the acuity with which Plato describes his allegory of the cave (Plato 2006: book VII [514-517]), or Saul Kripke’s lengthy discussion in Naming and Necessity of how extreme imagined counterfactual worlds can become before the concepts we use for describing them lose their initial

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53 In an entry on thought experiments, James Brown lists functions of thought-experiments-as-counter-example: by refuting it because of inner contradictions, by showing that the theory conflicts with other established theories, by showing that at least one premises of a given argument conflates two possible meanings of a term, by functioning as a counter thought experiment to another thought experiment. See Brown 2007.

54 See Noël Carroll’s Theorizing the Moving Image (Carroll 1996: 280f.). See also Mullan 2007; Smith 2006; Wartenberg (2006a); and Wartenberg 2006b.
meaning and reference (Kripke 1980: 26f. and 29ff.); or Hilary Putnam’s different versions of the brains-in-a-vat thought experiment (Putnam 1981: chapter 1).  

Even though these thought experiments only have a rudimentary structure, they could already serve as treatments for getting a film (or book) project started. Putnam’s brain-in-a-vat scenario is a kind blueprint for the basic situation in MATRIX (A. and L. Wachowski, 1999): Imagine people unknowingly plugged into a gigantic computer simulation of the world. Descartes’ idea that the people outside of his window could possibly be only automatons (Descartes 1904 [1641]: II, 13) figures in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s short story “Der Sandmann” (Hoffmann 1982 [1816]). And VANILLA SKY (Crowe, 2001) as well as ABRE LOS OJOS (Amenábar, 1997), films in which the main character is unknowingly only dreaming his life, are configurations of Robert Nozick’s thought experiment of the experience machine (see chapters 4 and 11).

Identifying similarities and parallels between film narratives and philosophical thought experiments does not imply that the filmmakers actually know these thought experiments (or, the other way around: that a philosopher is inspired by a film he has seen or a book he has read). It only means that there are structural similarities. Wartenberg insightfully points out that

“[a]lthough philosophical texts are the origins of many ideas, theories, and positions, they acquire a life of their own within a culture and all that is necessary for a creator-oriented interpretation [which tries to understand a film’s content in relation to the intentions of the creators of the film, PS] to be acceptable in this regard is that the creator might have been acquainted with the philosophical ideas, etc., because of, for example, their general circulation within a culture.” (Wartenberg 2007: 91)

This is to say that being philosophical does not require specific knowledge of the related (academic) philosophical debates. But it requires a grasp of the philosophical problem that is at stake, an understanding of its underlying structure. This is possible without intimate knowledge of a specialised debate. Philosophical ideas circulate within a culture independently of such specialised debates. One need not be familiar with Descartes, Berkeley or Putnam for grasping the idea underlying external world skepticism.

Another reason for the similarities between films and philosophical thought experiments is that thought experiments as well as narratives rely on a diegesis. Both are introduced as taking place in an actual, fictional or counter-factual world, which is the setting for the events taking place in the narrative or the thought experiment. The diegesis, in a way, determines the narrative preconditions, the scopes and limits of the story that is about to be told. Thought experiments and fictional narratives, then, are explorations of things that happen to characters of the imagined scenario. Thought experiments are narratives because they usually describe a series of events with spatio-temporal extension.  

Their similarities notwithstanding, philosophical thought experiments and films differ in several respects: While thought experiments usually play a role within a

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55 These variations will be addressed in chapter 4.
56 This is another variation of the Cavellian idea that philosophy pervades everyday life and vice versa.
57 Here, I freely borrow from Edward Branigan’s description of narrative as a patterned organisation of spatiotemporal data in Projecting a Camera. Language-Games in Film Theory (see Branigan 2006: 28-33; and Branigan 1992: 3).
philosophical argument’s logical structure, a film usually is a ‘free-standing’ thought experiment that only subsequently might be incorporated into explicitly philosophical considerations.

As already remarked, Murray Smith recognises the structural analogy between films and philosophical thought experiments, but he is nevertheless skeptical of Mulhall’s claim that films can think “seriously and systematically” about philosophical views and arguments (Mulhall 2008a: 4). He does not deny that films can allude to philosophical issues or that the medium of film can in general be used for making philosophy, but he objects against the idea of mainstream, typical, films, or even artworks, as being philosophical. According to Smith, artworks generally have different priorities as compared to works of philosophy: While the latter establish a primacy of the epistemic, the former are primarily concerned with artistic considerations. Instead of trying to find the explicitly philosophical in films, then, Smith proposes to take films seriously as artworks in their own right, artworks which have goals that differ from explicit philosophical activity:

“[T]he point is not to deny the evident possibility of overlap between a philosophical and an artistic […] project, but to ask whether there is not some tension between the goals of philosophy and the goals of art, and that for this reason we find that, typically, a film or a text will organize these goals hierarchically.” (Smith 2006: 40)

Smith notes that there is a contrast between the “concreteness and particularity of art” and “the abstract, conceptual character of philosophy,” in particular because the “meaning and experience that works of art typically create is one characterised by sufficient complexity and indirectness that it resists restatement – or ‘paraphrase’ – in clear and unequivocal terms” (Smith 2006: 40).

Smith argues for an “overarching contrast” (Smith 2006: 41fn2) between philosophical thought experiments and narratives: A philosopher, in order to make his point, only needs to establish the core facts and most important contextual factors of a thought experiment. In contrast, narrative films explore the world of their topic extensively, they are, “relatively speaking, immensely detailed and elaborate” (Smith 2006: 35). But Smith does not deny that this contrast need not apply in each single case (see also Smith 2006: 39). He correctly observes that

“a work of philosophy and a work of art will, typically, rank [their] priorities differently; philosophical insights and the creation of comedy are facets of both [Bernard] Williams’ essay [about personal identity, PS] and All of Me [which Smith discusses in order to clarify his arguments, PS], but they are weighted quite differently, and thus function differently, in the two cases” (Smith 2006: 39).

To sum up, Smith’s main objection against the idea of film as philosophy is that films, as artworks, tend to value artistic concerns over epistemic ones, such that the “subordination of the epistemic to the artistic is […] the main reason why narrative

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58 A number of Williams’ articles on personal identity and bodily continuity can be found in the collection Problems of the Self (see Williams 1973).
Skepticism films as dramatic imaginings

Exposing the unthought

films based on philosophical themes [...] will often compromise the ‘logic’ of the philosophical problem that they dramatize” (Smith 2006: 39). He borrows from Richard Moran and draws a contrast between dramatic and hypothetic imaginings: Dramatics imaginings are attempts to flesh out how it would be like to actually live in the imagined world. They “involve[...] something [...] like genuine rehearsal, ‘trying on’ [a] point of view, trying to determine what it is like to inhabit it” (Moran, quoted in Smith 2006: 39). By contrast, hypothetic imaginings “pose the possibility of some counterfactual in a spare and abstract way. Dramatic imagining involves elaborating and ramifying the bare counterfactual in one or more ways.” (Smith 2006: 39)

I want to argue that skepticism films are dramatic imaginings of skepticist thought experiments in exactly that sense: They elaborate on hypothetical philosophical thought experiments, and by way of elaborating contribute to the philosophical discourse at stake. While not all dramatic imaginings are philosophical, some of them are. Being a dramatic imagining does not preclude philosophicality, even though Murray Smith implies something like this in the article discussed here. Smith is right in maintaining that typical films, such as ALL OF ME (Reiner, 1984), usually tend to compromise story logic in favour of dramatic effects even if they otherwise address a philosophical topic quite intelligently. MATRIX is another such example where philosophical thoughts about skepticism are brought up and then quickly dismissed in order to make way for a conventional action plot. In other words: philosophical thought experiments in film are conventionally subjected to what I would term the narrative dynamics of the story. But these observations notwithstanding, I see three points in favour of the idea of ‘narrative films as works of philosophy’. Firstly, there are films that do not compromise the ‘logic of the philosophical problem’ in favour of story logic. One example of such a film is, as will be shown later, THE TRUMAN SHOW (Weir, 1998). Secondly, films can contribute to philosophy by exposing un-thought implications and consequences of the thought experiments they rely on. Films can, for instance, expose potential psychological effects on persons that are in a deception situation (see Yanal 2005: 2 and 14). (Analytic) philosophical arguments tend toward the abstract and the conceptual while paying less attention to, for example, what it actually means to inhabit a simulated world. Philosophers tend to not accurately imagine the consequences and implications of the thought experiments they use. If this is so, then narratives can provide a corrective to a one-sided way of thinking about thought experiments, because they usually deal with them in greater detail.

59 In this context, it is interesting to look at Edward Branigan’s concept of narrative: “In general, the basic elements of narrative are not to be found on the screen, as if they had been tacked up on a bulletin board, but instead are inside us as a way of thinking, as a way of projecting an explanation for our experiences; including the experiences we have of our Self. As a cognitive activity, narrative appears in the form of a process or procedure (a procedural schema) that organizes data into a special pattern that seeks to represent both causal structure (i.e., to show what may follow what on local and global scales) and causal efficacy (i.e., to trace the possibilities for the being/becoming of an object)” (Branigan 2006: 32 – all emphases except the last two are mine, PS). I believe that Branigan here mentions many factors (see italics) which could also be part of philosophical investigations or of formal philosophical arguments.

60 See chapter 10. James Walters also argues against the idea that dramatizing runs counter to story logic. The films he analyses in his study Alternative Worlds in Hollywood Cinema "balance the ambition of their storytelling structures with an ability to preserve the internal logic of the worlds they present [instead of compromising the one in favour of the other, PAS]” (Walters 2008; 218). Thus, film versions of philosophical thought experiments will try to preserve the logical, and hence philosophical, implications of the thought experiment they rely on. Chapter 7.2 elaborates on Walters’ categories in more detail.
While this statement is also valid for literature, I think that films can contribute to a philosophically inspired understanding of the world that in at least some crucial respects differs from a purely verbal or oral form. The audiovisual dimension of cinema and its ability to manipulate space and time by means of montage, the use of specific camera strategies or other ways of juxtaposing image and sound track, and, in particular, the mixture of all these elements with the performative and curiously experiential character of film spectatorship, can create, or offer, a new outlook on the world, might reveal new insights into the world that have not been noticed before.

Thirdly, Smith underestimates the value of ambiguity for philosophical investigations. While philosophical arguments demand specific, unambiguous answers, this non-ambiguity might not be what actually is required for the solution or proper understanding of a given philosophical problem. Narratives might simply be better suited for dealing with ambiguity than proper philosophical arguments, as Daniel Shaw points out in Taking Movies Seriously: He argues that a “film need not unequivocally answer the philosophical questions that it raises in order to properly considered as such.” (Shaw 2008: 109) For Shaw, raising more questions than answers can under certain conditions even be of philosophical merit: “The fact that a movie raises more questions than it answers is, to my mind, a point in its favour, both philosophically and aesthetically (especially given the demand for closure in traditional Hollywood films).” (Shaw 2008: 108)

Shaw invokes BEING JOHN Malkovich (Jonze, 1999) for making his point. That film exploits the (admittedly crazy) idea that a hidden door in an office building leads directly and literally into the head of famous actor John Malkovich, allowing other people to inhabit Malkovich’s body and sensory point of view for a certain amount of time, seeing the world through his eyes. Who is that version of Malkovich, then? Shaw writes: “From my perspective, Being John Malkovich is a more philosophical film because its position on the issue is unclear, and it does not serve to simply illustrate a common theory of personal identity” (Shaw 2008: 108). This is because, instead of suggesting a definite answer to the question of personal identity, the film willingly ends on an unclear note: While Malkovich (or rather, Malkovich’s body) continues to be the temporary host to many different people, his master puppeteer Schwartz “is [later in the film] trapped in the mind of a young girl and can neither speak nor have any effect on her actions.” (Shaw 2008: 108). What BEING JOHN Malkovich does, then, is to raise the possibility that it might be elusive to search for a unique philosophical definition of personal identity. Shaw himself takes the film as suggesting “a Nietzschean theory of human being, which identifies the core person with the will that moves his or her body” and describes “the individual as a collection of drives, with each seeking control of the entire organism” (Shaw 2008: 109).

The lesson from the preceding considerations, then, is that films such as BEING JOHN Malkovich suggest that films can expand or reorient philosophical debates by, for instance, making it clear through well-developed narratives that answers to philosophical questions might not be as non-ambiguous (analytic) philosophers want them to be.

61 On personal identity films as a sub-category of skepticism films, see chapter 7.5.2.
2.3.2 Being an Illustration: Thought Experiments as Philosophy

Even though the preceding sections outline a range of examples of how films can contribute to philosophical investigations, one could still object that films present “ideas of revelation and suggestion rather than argument,” a position which Wartenberg and Smith attribute to Jinhee Choi (Smith and Wartenberg 2006: 8). Since, the objection goes, films do not explicitly articulate insights, it is up to the philosophically inclined film spectator to articulate the film’s alleged philosophical propositions. It is, then, the philosopher who imposes his philosophical interpretation on the film, not vice versa. Thomas Wartenberg calls this the “imposition objection” (Wartenberg 2007: 25ff.): Whoever is in favour of the idea of ‘film as philosophy’ imposes his own philosophical arguments on the film, arguments that the film itself does not state in this form.62

Wartenberg’s counterstrategy is to develop a range of possibilities according to which a film can nevertheless be said to be doing philosophy. He is most innovative when he closely examines the illustrative role that film can play for philosophical ideas, something that even philosophers critical of cinema’s philosophical potential agree on. Such critics tend to raise a kind of ‘illustration objection’, according to which films can only ‘merely’ be illustrations of philosophical ideas, therefore nothing more than illustrations without genuine philosophical content. Against this, Wartenberg attempts to show that being an illustration does not automatically disqualify the example in question as an independent contribution to philosophical discourse.

By discussing illustrations of children’s books such as Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and illustrations of birds in birding books, Wartenberg shows that “certain ‘illustrations’ are essential to the texts they illustrate” (Wartenberg 2007: 43), and that they are more than mere illustrations. The Alice sketches by John Tenniel, for instance, were part of the original publication of Lewis Carroll’s Alice novels and since then have become an integral part of them, determining to a great extent the way in which the little girl Alice has entered public imagination (see fig. 2.2). Wartenberg claims that illustrations, if done in the right way, can shape the role of an original text in public imagination to such an extent that it becomes an indispensable part of it.63

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62 Patricia Pisters also expresses disapproval of the film-as-mere-illustration thesis: In her book The Neuro-Image, she writes that “[r]ather than working as illustrations, films are instead acknowledged as actual seeds of thought: important encounters that create new brain circuits (new perceptions, new feelings, new thoughts) and that connect to or resonate with philosophical reflections and scientific findings.” (Pisters 2012: 18)

63 This phenomenon is well-known in popular literary film adaptations. For an entire generation, Harry Potter looks like film actor Daniel Radcliffe, and Frodo Baggins like Elijah Wood.

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Fig. 2.2: John Tenniel, Illustration from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland
While in these examples illustrations assume a contingent role in our public imagining of a certain text, Wartenberg’s birding example points at another functional feature of illustrations: They might enable a user to identify what is described in and by a text in the first place. As Wartenberg claims, flying birds are best – and sometimes exclusively – recognisable by their jizz, “their appearance as they disappear from view” (Wartenberg 2007: 42). Mere written descriptions of this jizz, however, are inadequate for recognising it while birding out in the field, and at the same time it is very difficult to produce photographs that display a bird’s jizz. Consequently, illustrations of a bird’s jizz are necessary in order to provide birders with hints for identifying flying birds. Wartenberg concludes that “without the presence of illustrations, birding guides would not achieve their purpose of helping people recognize birds with which they are not familiar” (Wartenberg 2007: 43) and thus are no “mere supplement” (Wartenberg 2007: 43) to the birding book texts. Wartenberg therefore rejects the illustration objection by establishing that “illustrations need not be subordinated to that of which they are the illustration, so that a work’s status as an illustration cannot in itself justify denigrating it” (Wartenberg 2007: 44). There is at least the possibility that an illustration can be “original or illuminating” (Wartenberg 2007: 44).

Having established the potential independence of illustrations from their originals, Wartenberg turns to the role of illustrations for understanding philosophical theories. He discusses Charlie Chaplin’s film MODERN TIMES (Chaplin, 1936) as an illustration of core aspects of Karl Marx’ philosophical criticism of capitalism, especially Marx’s remarks on the exploitation and Entfremdung of the worker in a capitalist society (see Wartenberg 2007: 52ff.). Through a careful discussion of several scenes of the film Wartenberg shows how MODERN TIMES “provides its viewers with concrete illustrations of Marx’s abstract claims” (Wartenberg 2007: 53). For instance, Marx explains his theory of alienation by claiming that the machines in industrial factories turn the worker himself into a machine since they require of him “labor that is external to the worker”; labour of such a nature that he or she “denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind” (both quoted in Wartenberg 2007: 50). Wartenberg subsequently shows how MODERN TIMES screens several scenes that can be understood as very precise elucidations of Marx’s rather general assertions. For instance, at some point Charlie continues to perform the tightening motion required for fastening the bolts on the assembly line even when he is off duty – the mechanized work required of him has turned him into a “veritable bolt-tightening machine” (Wartenberg 2007: 51) or “mechanized human being”. Wartenberg claims that this specification of a more general philosophical theory is a philosophical contribution, and he supports this argument by pointing at the vast percentage of the annual turnout in academic philosophical papers that are nothing but attempts at a proper exegesis of other philosophical theories of canonical philosophical thinkers (see Wartenberg 2007: 53), which nevertheless are regarded as being philosophical enough to appear in a philosophy journal.

It is worth emphasising that specification is not identical to illustration, as Wartenberg’s jizz example and the MODERN TIMES example show. While each specification is also an illustration, not every illustration is also a specification. Specifications respond to stricter standards of specificity than illustrations.
Wartenberg’s examples are helpful for, first, recognising the potentially philosophical value of illustrations and, second, countering the imposition objection. In fact, MODERN TIMES provides so concrete and vivid an illustration of the work conditions of workers in industrial capitalism that it is implausible to deny its having a relevance for a philosophical discussion of said problematic. Filmmakers need to be able to find concrete situations that bring these work conditions, and their consequences, to the point. Such a kind of reduction of a topic or problem to its core constituents, or – formulated differently – the discovery of specific situations that highlight the general problem or topic they are part of, can be understood as a philosophical activity. By using MODERN TIMES, Wartenberg shows “how a film that illustrates a philosophical theory can actually make a contribution to the philosophical discussion of that theory by providing specific concrete interpretations of some of the central claims of the theory.” (Smith and Wartenberg 2006: 4).

In a later essay “On the Possibility of Cinematic Philosophy,” Wartenberg expands his position on the illustrative philosophical potential of film (see Wartenberg 2011). He introduces a distinction made by Richard Eldridge between interpretive and cartoonish illustrations and argues that he understands the latter “as genuine instances of cinematic philosophy” (Wartenberg 2011: 17). Wartenberg exemplifies interpretive illustrations with the help of Michel Gondry’s ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND (2004). This film, Wartenberg claims, makes a certain (historical) philosophical theory understandable or plausible in contemporary contexts: ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND “has presented Nietzsche’s theory [of the eternal recurrence of the same] in a way that makes it plausible in our contemporary context.” (Wartenberg 2011: 18). More specifically, it applies Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence to a specific situation – a couple which eventually resumes their love affair even though they know they will have to go through traumatic relationship problems again and again. Thereby the film

“shows exactly what Nietzsche intends our acceptance of that idea to accomplish, namely to foster the realization that even the most painful features of our lives are part of our own identities, things that we must be able to will, to acknowledge as if chosen” (Wartenberg 2011: 18).

According to Wartenberg,

“there are increasingly more films that develop such interpretive illustrations of philosophical positions and […] these should be credited with doing philosophy, just as we credit the historian of philosophy with doing philosophy when she comes up with a new interpretation of a philosopher’s view.” (Wartenberg 2011: 17)

In such ways, cinematic philosophy can apply philosophical theories to specific situations or events, and it can do so by ‘updating’ philosophical theories to our contemporary contexts.

The philosophical update function of film plays a major role in the discussion of skepticism films in the subsequent chapters, since it is obvious that films such as MATRIX, WELT AM DRAHT (Fassbinder, 1973), THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR (Rusnak, 1999), VANILLA SKY and, by contrast, older films such as RASHOMON (Kurosawa, 1950), BLOW UP (Antonioni, 1966) or SHERLOCK JR. (Keaton and Arbuckle, 1924)
dramatize the skepticist hypothesis in relation to their current dominant media for manipulating our representations of the world.  

After having established the possibility that even being an illustration of a philosophical theory can contribute to a philosophically relevant increased understanding of this theory, Wartenberg expands the list of variations on the topic of film as philosophy by one more step: He argues that several films can screen philosophical arguments or thought experiments, and that this is something that philosophy done in the traditional way cannot do. The example he uses is MATRIX, and this brings us one step closer to the main topic of this book: skepticism films. While, according to Wartenberg, philosophical thought experiments as well as fiction films “present non-existent events and/or worlds to their audiences” and “their audiences have to imagine the reality of a certain non-actual state of affairs” (Wartenberg 2007: 66), MATRIX even achieves something more: the film gets “its viewers to see the world of the Matrix as (fictionally) real when it is (fictionally) only apparent” (Wartenberg 2007: 72), since the opening sequence of the film takes place in the Matrix but is presented to the audience as if (fictionally) real. Only later in the film does the main character Thomas Anderson (and the audience) learn that he has been living in a computer-simulated world. This, Wartenberg argues, gives a “new twist” (Wartenberg 2007: 72) to René Descartes’ deception hypothesis by which Descartes wants to make plausible his (initial) radical doubt about the possibility of knowledge. Wartenberg writes:

“What’s unique about The Matrix, however, is that it deceives viewers about their perceptual beliefs, for, while watching the initial segment of the film, they believe themselves to be perceiving a real, albeit fictional, world when all they are perceiving is the illusory world of the Matrix” (Wartenberg 2007: 72).

Screening philosophy, in this case, has to do with playing with our perceptual beliefs as spectators, with showing to us what we conceptually can only describe inaccurately. For Wartenberg the film succeeds in making plausible, if only initially, the otherwise outrageous skepticist hypothesis that our world might not be real. By doing so, a film such as MATRIX supposedly lends a different credibility to the skepticist thought experiment than a description in a philosophy book.

The screening function of filmic thought experiments is related to the medium’s ability to draw its audience into its representations of fictional world, leading to a temporary ‘suspension of disbelief’ about the reality status of the fictional representations on screen.  

Screening philosophy

[In The Neuro-Image, Patricia Pisters contrasts films as illustrations from films as “actual seeds of thought: important encounters that create new brain circuits (new perceptions, new feelings, new thoughts) and that connect to or resonate with philosophical reflections and scientific findings” (Pisters 2012: 18). She bypasses the discussion of this chapter by indicating that it is only possible to “truly comprehend the richness, layeriness, and immense complexity of human experience in contemporary digital media culture” (Pisters 2012: 20) by synergizing different fields of thought (philosophy, art and science, following Deleuze and Guattari). While the accounts in this chapter depart from a determinedly philosophical point of view, Pisters’ approach is more culture-centred. The Neuro-Image concentrates on how what she calls the “neuro-image” represents as well as forms contemporary screen culture, and how the concept can be understood from a Deleuzian film-philosophical perspective, and is thus focused on a specific aspect of understanding film as a way of (philosophical) thinking.

The suspension of disbelief hypothesis has been debated controversially throughout the history of film theory. See, for instance Carroll 1990 and Ferri 2007.]

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65 The suspension of disbelief hypothesis has been debated controversially throughout the history of film theory. See, for instance Carroll 1990 and Ferri 2007.
the world it presents to us no part of the ‘real’ world, but there is also the possibility that
the film world itself is (fictionally) non-real. MATRIX cleverly exploits this double layer
and, according to Wartenberg, makes plausible the skepticist hypothesis. In this way, a
film can become a contribution to philosophical discourse about the value of thought
experiments. While MODERN TIMES carefully and concretely exemplifies an abstract
philosophical theory and makes the ‘real-world implications’ of this theory more
palpable, MATRIX involves the film audience into its cinematic thought experiment by
using the means available to the medium, by exploring the possibility of screening events
and the immediate affective reactions of the audience to the events on screen.66

The MATRIX example suggests, then, that the philosophical power of film lies in its
ability to make one experience something which a traditional, written philosophical
theory only can describe with the concepts it uses. Films, such as the exposition of
MATRIX, put one into an experiential situation similar to our everyday experience, and
they proceed by subverting or unmasking the beliefs derived from this everyday
experiential situation. Films make perceivable, or even ready to grasp, illusions of reality.
As aestheticized story worlds which become part and parcel of their audience’s
Lebenswelt, films create their own screened reality – and this is one of the most
extraordinary philosophical powers of the medium of film.

However, there is something peculiar about the MATRIX example: While the film
certainly succeeds in experientially motivating the plausibility of the skepticist hypothesis,
the diegesis of the exposition is already codified as being illusory, even though this codification is only recognisable in retrospect, on subsequent film viewings. As chapter 10 elaborates in more detail, each level of reality in MATRIX is codified with specific aesthetic patterns. For instance, each reality level is designed according to a pre-established colour grading scheme: The world of the Matrix represented on screen is
green-tinted; the ‘real’ world comes across in cold blue colour tones, while the colours
on the level of the ‘Construct’ are neutral, with a dominating white background. Even
the use of camera lenses is strategically adapted to each reality level. In other words: The
filmmakers have already decided on a specific representation of reality levels which only
becomes apparent under closer scrutiny.

2.4 Outlook: Films as (Con-)figurations of Philosophical Thought

The present chapter outlined some of the fundamental discursive threads that run
through the contemporary Anglo-American debate about the philosophical potential of
film. Following Wartenberg, Mulhall and Nussbaum, I opt for a pluralistic
understanding of philosophy that, even though grounded in an analytic philosophical
perspective, recognises the legitimacy of a number of different approaches to thinking
about philosophical questions.

The most important suggestion to be distilled from the discussion in this chapter is
to regard the medium of film as a potential (con-)figuration of philosophical thought.
Such a conception assumes that doing philosophy on film is not some kind of extra or
alternative way of doing philosophy the way it is usually done. It does also not suggest

66 Catherine Constable critically discusses Wartenberg’s extended conception of illustration (Constable 2009:
158ff., 15, and 29ff.)
that cinema simply ‘transforms’ the way in which philosophy should be done. The latter assumption is certainly valid if one assumes that philosophy has always been what it is supposed to be in the philosophical tradition that regards Plato and Aristotle as their epitomes. But this conception, I argue, is eventually wrongheaded: There has always been a plurality of ways of doing philosophy – in writing, on the theatre stage, in painting, even though academic discourse has not always recognised this dimension of these forms of discourse. Doing philosophy *qua* cinema, according to this conception, becomes one of the possible ways of doing philosophy alongside the established ones, and in these terms one possible configuration of philosophy.

In order to better understand this suggestion, I will pick up the idea that the media of thought influence the expression of thought in the next chapter. In order to understand better how the relation between different media of thought can be conceptualised, I turn to concepts used in intermedia studies and argue that philosophical thought is a transmedial phenomenon, i.e. an activity that is always already conducted with the help of various media of expression. Each of these media of expression has its own conditions of expression which may be better or worse suited for thinking in specific ways. While the writing and verbal expression are the historically dominant media of conduct of philosophical inquiry, there is no intrinsic reason why audiovisual media should not be a potential medium of philosophical expression. That is: Even though written philosophy is, historically speaking, the original to its filmic adaptation, from a theoretical point of view there is no such inherent ancillary relation of film to ‘real’ philosophy. One of the recurrent terms used for this phenomenon in recent film-philosophical scholarship is the concept of figuration. This will be the conceptual point of departure of the next chapter.
3 Remediating Philosophy, or: The Media of Philosophical Thought

3.1 Films as Food for Thought

As the first two chapters outlined, it is all but obvious “to grant film the status of a subject that invites and rewards philosophical speculation, on a par with the great arts” (Cavell 1979a: xvi). Even Cavell who reflects on many films as “instances manifesting a dimension of moral thinking [or of other forms of thinking, PS] traceable through Western culture” (Cavell 2004: 15) cannot shake a certain paternalistic philosophical attitude. For instance, he cautions semi-ironically that he does not “wish to give the impression that philosophy left to itself requires compensation by revelations within the medium of film. These films are rather to be thought of as differently configuring intellectual and emotional avenues that philosophy is already in exploration of, but which, perhaps, it has cause sometimes to turn from prematurely, particularly in its forms since its professionalization from roughly the time of Kant” (Cavell 2004: 6f., my emphasis).

For Cavell, philosophically interesting films seem to be a corrective for philosophy, they remind the profession of issues it has forgotten or neglected. But such films merely explore what the traditional philosopher could have reflected on independently of them. Cavell implicitly works with a hierarchy: First philosophy, then film.

This becomes apparent in the context of Cavell’s claim that reflecting on the question why film should be philosophically important includes asking “what makes philosophy philosophy” (Cavell 2005 [1983]: 91, original emphasis). As already outlined in chapter 1.2.2, Cavell’s own answer addresses the connection between philosophy and what he calls the “everyday” or the “ordinary”:

“I understand [philosophy] as a willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think about, but rather to learn to think undistractedly about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about, or anyway cannot help having occur to them, sometimes in fantasy, sometimes as a flash across a landscape” (Cavell 2005 [1983]: 92, my emphasis).
This attitude inspires Cavell’s philosophical interest in film (and other forms of art). It is a reminder that philosophy, even in its professionalised form, shares a common culture with these art forms. From this position Cavell asks, according to the philosophers Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer,

“that we take most films seriously, as we take most other forms of art seriously, not just because they demonstrate or manipulate aesthetically intriguing formalisms but because they are about life, the same life that our philosophies and our day-to-day thought is about. And what this life is about is the problem of knowing and acknowledging its own limitations.” (Cohen and Guyer 1993: 6f.)

Cavell judges films from the vantage point of the philosopher, who is the one who uses a variety of forms of reflections to “think [...] about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about” (quoted above).67 Consider also Cavell’s autobiographical remarks that his starting impulse for writing about films, and for writing The World Viewed in particular,

“was to demonstrate that movies may be written about, and that some are worth thinking and writing about, with the same seriousness that any work of art deserves, with the same specificity of attention to the significance of the work at hand and to the formal devices of the work by means of which this significance is achieved.” (Cavell 1979a: 163, my emphasis)68

The present chapter reflects on this peculiar subject-object relation. It tries to understand films “as differently configuring intellectual and emotional avenues that philosophy is already in exploration of” (see above) without the paternalistic attitude. It tries to understand philosophy as a transmedial phenomenon; an activity which is in principle can be expressed in more than just one medium, even though historically (academic) philosophy has developed as a verbal and scriptural activity.69

I will use the concept of the figural for re-theorising the expression of philosophical thought across media.70 The present chapter uses conceptions of the figural as proposed by the film theorists David N. Rodowick and Catherine Constable. As a result, doing philosophy will be regarded as an activity that can be performed across media, i.e. as an activity which is not dependent on verbal or written expression alone.

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67 In his article “Der Rosarote Panther Lebt,” the media philosopher Frank Hartmann praises Vilem Flusser’s communicologist work as an approach which allows philosophising with media rather than philosophising on media. See Hartmann 2001: 142.

68 In Vertrauen in die Welt, Josef Früchtl interprets the Cavellian version of the relation between film and philosophy as one of partial mutual interdependency: For film, philosophy presents the opportunity to render the medium as more than mere entertainment; for philosophy, film is one of the necessary sites of philosophical self-understanding. More specifically, of “all forms of art, film offers the highest challenge for this philosophical and existential concern” (Früchtl 2013: 225, my translation). Früchtl shows that Cavell’s philosophy of film is “not simply essentialistic but culturalistic” (Früchtl 2013: 225, my translation). As far as Cavell is concerned, film naturally assumes a “role of cultural self-reflection (in US-American culture, PS) which in the European context is and has been carried out by philosophy and – another assumption – literature” (Früchtl 2013: 199, my translation).

69 Nicole Mahne outlines transmedial narration in Transmediale Erzähltheorie (Mahne 2007). See also Wolf 2005.

70 See Rodowick’s study Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media (Rodowick 2001: preface and ch. 1).
3.2 Thinking with Hands

The critical attitude of traditional philosophy against alternative ways of doing philosophy suggests a certain degree of philosophical media blindness: not so much against reflecting philosophically on media – it is rather an unwillingness to acknowledge other media as potentially expressive of philosophical thought.71

This is perhaps not all too surprising: Reflection on the media in which philosophical thought is expressed confront the more basal metaphilosophical question of the characteristics of philosophical thought as contrasted with other ways of thinking.72 Denis de Rougemont’s aphorism at the beginning of this chapter provides an elegant back entrance to the issue. De Rougemont proposes that “think[ing] with hands” is “man’s true condition,” as opposed to thinking in and from the armchair – which is, as stereotypes have it, the favourite place of reflection of armchair philosophers, or “[c]erveaux sans mains” (de Rougemont 1936: 147).73

De Rougemont’s essay “Penser avec les mains” substitutes an alleged dichotomy between thinking and action with the dictum that “la vraie condition de l’homme, c’est de penser avec ses mains” (de Rougemont 1936: 147).74 He describes thought as an activity which is always expressed with specific means of expression, and therefore is (always already) mediated.75 This might appear banal at first, but it is the starting point for a non-hierarchical conception of the media of philosophical thought which allows

71 There actually exists a flourishing sub-discipline of media philosophy in the wake of the so-called medial turn in cultural theory. The accusation of media blindness therefore does not apply to philosophy as a whole. For instance, in the social-culturalist German philosophy community, scholars such as Lorenz Engell, Frank Hartmann, Gertrud Koch, Sybille Krämer, Alexander Roesner, Mike Sandbothe, Martin Seel and Matthias Vogel are representative of this tendency (see the bibliography). These scholars are, roughly, very much influenced by pragmatism and sociological theories and theorists, such as Niklas Luhmann and Villem Flusser. Specifically, Sandbothe is a major representative of a pragmatist media philosophy, while Hartmann’s point of departure in his textbook Medienphilosophie is Villem Flusser’s Kommunikologie (see Hartmann 2000; see also Hartmann 2001). The edited volume Medienphilosophie: Beiträge zur Klärung eines Begriffes by Münker, Roesler and Sandbothe provides a valuable overview of the various directions of current media-philosophical research (see Münker, Roesler and Sandbothe (eds.) 2003). The most nuanced philosophical account of the concept of a medium is perhaps Matthias Vogel’s Medien der Vernunft (Vogel 2001a). Expanding on Donald Davidson’s interpretationalist philosophy and various critical theory philosophers, Vogel attempts to integrate media concepts in an extended concept of rationality which incorporates non-linguistic forms of communication as parts of processes of signification (see Vogel 2001a: Vorwort; Einleitung). Vogel understands non-linguistic communication as a particular case of mediated action, and language therefore as one medium amongst others (see Vogel 2001a: 12). This attempt at widening the area of (potentially philosophical) rational signification is closely related to the concept of (con)figuration of philosophical thought across media in the present chapter. Another extended study on (written) language and philosophy can be found in Werner Konitzer’s Medienphilosophie (Konitzer 2006).


73 The philosopher in the armchair is a cousin of the brain without a body, and thereby reminiscent of a sort of embodied version of Descartes’ res cogitans, a thinking substance which is disconnected from the world of spatial extension – a ‘brain in the armchair,’ so to speak, a less radical version of Hilary Putnam’s brains in a vat. De Rougemont’s aphorism finds surprising expressions in contemporary digital screen culture, in which the manufacturer has been replaced by the desk worker who repairs things by hitting specific hot key combinations on a computer keyboard, or by using touchscreens and gesture recognition. Gesture recognition famously features in MINORITY REPORT (Spieberg, 2002) or STAR TREK episodes years before Microsoft’s Kinect system introduced that technological fantasy into everyday life. MINORITY REPORT and other science fiction films such as TOTAL RECALL (Wiseman, 2012) exemplify Hollywood’s ability to sell off as their own visionary imagination technological innovations which are already tested behind the closed doors of high-tech laboratories.

74 De Rougemont’s call for reuniting action and thought was influential for the French existentialist movement. De Rougemont’s “pensée engagée” also aptly described the activities of committed intellectuals who tried to influence political processes (see Theofanidis 2013).

75 Rodowick uses the “thinking with hands” metaphor differently for emphasizing dominant figures of thought in modern philosophical aesthetics: “Thinking, or the ’play of ideas’ in Kant’s account, shows and thickens if expressed by the hand and absorbed by the eye. Yet it soars weightlessly if released by breath to enter the ear.” (Rodowick 2001: 34). Rodowick describes how aesthetics since Schelling contrasts the “more material and gravity-laden” arts such as painting and sculpturing against rather “spiritual” arts such as poetry.
exploring the philosophical potential of film without relying on a hierarchical notion according to which traditional, written philosophy is the original source against which ‘philosophical film’ must live up to.

The debate on the philosophical potential of film is at heart a debate on the possible media of philosophical expression. This shifts the burden of proof from film to philosophy. Instead of justifying the idea that films can be philosophically valuable, one can ask: What would be reasons against that claim? De Rougemont and Godard suggest that the conduct of thought requires operative tools. Using the written or spoken word then can be seen as one among many possible tools for philosophical thought, and claiming that they are the only adequate ones would require further argument.

### 3.3 Thinking Philosophically with Film: Terminological Obstacles

So if thinking with hands can be praised as being man’s true condition, what about thinking philosophically with or through film? How does one think with film? What is philosophy, or perhaps philosophical thought, through audiovisual media? Traditional philosophy rejects film (or, for that matter, literature, theatre, or painting) as an inadequate expression of philosophical thought. Historically, philosophy’s media blindness is concerned with the expression of philosophical thought rather than with its genesis. Especially philosophers with literary or at least cultural-social inclinations have repeatedly written about the effect of their bodies and of the world in general on the genesis or character of their philosophical thoughts.

The most influential reflection on the genesis of philosophical thought can perhaps be found in Plato’s “Seventh Letter”: Philosophical insight

“does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself. [...] And if I had thought that these subjects ought to be fully stated in writing or in speech to the public, what nobler action could I have performed in my life than that of writing what is of great benefit to mankind and bringing forth to the light for all men the nature of reality? But were I to undertake this task it would not, as I think, prove a good thing for men, save for some few who are able to discover the truth themselves with but little instruction; for as to the rest, some it would most unseasonably fill with a mistaken contempt, and others with an overweening and empty aspiration, as though they had learnt some sublime mysteries.” (Plat. L. 7.341c-e)

Plato’s account of doing philosophy involves continuous dialogic interaction. In the Dialogues, philosophical insight or knowledge comes to fruition through a dialogue

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76 This varies Rodowick’s question “[w]hat is history, or perhaps historical thought, through visual culture?” (Rodowick 2001: 171)

77 Filmmakers and theorists of film have thought about the relation of film (or moving-image media) to thought since the early phases of the medium. The question is thus not a new one (see the remarks on Münsterberg and Papini in chapter 1.1) A comparatively new development is that professional philosophers, i.e. those academics affiliated with philosophy departments, seriously reflect on the philosophical merits of non-linguistic media of expression.

78 Examples are Walter Benjamin’s flaneur discovery of the shock effects of the modern metropolis on traditional world views (see Benjamin 1996 [1929] and Benjamin 1996 [1935/6]), Michel de Montaigne’s complaints that “[m]y thoughts sleep if I sit still; my fancy does not go by itself as when my legs move it” (quoted in: Scheller 2010: 62), or Nietzsche’s philosophical wanderings in the mountain ranges of Sils-Maria.
between philosophers.\footnote{See Plato, \textit{Phaidros} 276bff.} For Plato, written philosophy is not an adequate form of philosophising because it a fixed and therefore inferior record of philosophical insights. Interestingly, however, the dialogues exemplify the process character of philosophical knowledge acquisition through dialogues between a philosophical teacher and his pupils. So, in a way, the amount of interaction within Plato’s thought as we know it could be used to turn around claims against the philosophical character of film by insisting that written philosophy itself does not live up to imposed (Platonic) standards. Indeed, there is a certain irony throughout Plato’s repeated arguments against the arts (which he put even further in the \textit{Politeia}). As John Mullarkey puts it in his book \textit{Philosophy and the Moving Image}, “Plato banished the poets, yet he wrote like a poet.” (Mullarkey 2009: xi)

Current talk about the relation between film and philosophy regularly suffers from a number of imprecisions. The first one concerns exactly this correlation of “film” with “philosophy”. More precisely, film-philosophy aims at contributing to the question whether films can be (audiovisual) \textit{expressions} of philosophical thought. In contrast, philosophy is \textit{prima facie} predominantly expressed by the written or spoken word. According to this, film is a medium, while philosophy – or rather, philosophical thought (or discourse) – is expressed in (or with the help of) a medium.\footnote{This counters Constable’s remark on “the differences between the two media, philosophy and film.” (Constable 2009: 82). For Constable this concept use is rather a convenient short-hand than a full-fledged medial position.} Therefore, strictly speaking, the direct comparison “can films be philosophy” –often found in film-philosophical discourse – should rather be formulated as the question: can films be expressions of philosophical thoughts?

This does not mean that whatever is considered as being traditional philosophy exhausts the expressive \textit{potentiae} of its preferred medium of thought. On the contrary, expression of philosophical thought in the medium of the written or spoken word uses specific ‘formal frameworks’ which are passed on and slightly modified from generation of philosopher to generation of philosopher. Among these traditional (academic) forms are (mainly non-narrative) academic papers, book-long treatises and conference presentations which all adhere to sets of rules which in turn again determine the form in which philosophy is done.\footnote{See also chapter 2. Mike Sandbothe suggests that writing-based kinds of philosophy encourage a dominance of theoretical, contemplative philosophical questions about reality, time, and man’s place in the world, while modern forms of discourse sort of intrinsically combine such questions with their moral implications, with – as Sandbothe says in the tradition of Aristotelian philosophy – the question of which insights make one a better human being (see Sandbothe 2004, first section).}

This leads to a second inadequacy of direct comparison: As addressed in chapter 2, in the current discourse on film philosophy, it is often \textit{narrative} fiction films which are compared to ‘philosophy’ – and philosophy is predominantly a non-fictional written (academic) discourse. But direct comparison of philosophical insights gained from these two is not possible, because both belong to – borrowing freely from Foucault’s \textit{Archaeology of Knowledge} – different discursive formations.\footnote{See Foucault 2002 [1969]: chapter 2.} What is needed is a comparative mechanism which allows comparing these two. In principle such translations already happen when, say, one tries to adapt insights gained from a treatise on modal logic for the formulation of (ordinary-language) philosophical insights.
Looking at philosophical literature on film, one usually can detect some ‘extraction mechanism’ at work: a theorist/philosopher extracts whatever philosophical ‘content’ she finds in a given narrative film and compares this extract to whatever philosophical argument, idea or position she has found elsewhere.  

If these two objections are correct, the comparison at stake in the shorthand expression “film and/as philosophy” is one between ‘philosophical films’ and ‘philosophical academic texts,’ where both expressions serve as shorthand expressions for ‘films which express philosophical thoughts’ and ‘academic texts which express philosophical thoughts’. What is needed, then, is a theoretical framework that more precisely allows the comparison of, or at least correlation of, these different media for the expression of philosophical thought.

### 3.4 Media of Philosophical Thought

But why is it so important to reflect on the media in which philosophical thoughts are expressed? If one adheres to a simple container-content metaphor, then media are only the package in which the essence of philosophical thought is delivered. Philosophical thought would be an immutable essence which is simply packaged in different ways. But if one subscribes to a contrasting conception, the choice of a specific medium of thought has consequences not only for how thought is expressed, but also changes the character of such thought: When thought is dependent on its expression via a medium, the choice of medium retroacts on and therefore shapes the expression or form of thought. This allows understanding the traditional form of academic philosophical discourse as one possible form of philosophical expression – another one being philosophising via film.

Rodowick also argues against the container metaphor in a Deleuzian fashion. In *The Virtual Life of Film* he writes:

> “Neither thought nor creation occurs without a medium. A medium in this sense is not a passive or recalcitrant substance subject to artistic will. It is itself expressive as *potentiae*, or powers, of thought, action or creation. But these powers are variable and conditional. In exploring their potential we discover the conditions of possibility of a medium; in exceeding or exhausting them we may in fact create a new medium, and new powers of thought and creation.” (Rodowick 2007a: 45, original emphasis)

In another passage, Rodowick concludes that a “medium, then, is nothing more or less than a set of potentialities from which creative acts may unfold.” (Rodowick 2007a: 85). Media thus shape the expression of thought, they even express “powers” of thought in the sense that a given medium expresses certain aspects of what human thinking is able to express. Expressive possibilities retroact on the actual expression of thought. One needs to explore the expression of thought in a given medium to discover its possibilities and limits.

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83 As Constable shows, Thomas Wartenberg establishes such a comparative mechanism in conceptualising films as thought experiments as parts of philosophical arguments. See chapter 2.3.2 and Constable 2009: 15.
84 For a critique of such container metaphors, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s influential *Metaphors we Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).
85 This echoes Stanley Cavell, who for Rodowick encourages to “rethink the notion of a medium as a horizon of potentialities” (Rodowick 2007a: 84).
If the expression of philosophical thought varies across media, and if (academic) philosophy’s predominant form of expression is only historically contingent, then the exploration of the philosophical potential of film gains an additional value, also because the character and function of discourse in the contemporary world changes profoundly, as Rodowick argues, echoing Kittler: “Formerly, discourse was considered a linguistic activity; now it is a multimodal activity.” (Rodowick 2001: 212) The rise of new media from the invention of photography to contemporary multimodal and multicable media such as the internet significantly shapes and changes forms of discourse, and those new media give expression to “powers” or “potentiae” of philosophical thought which have not found expression (through the historically older media of expression) before.

Current film-philosophical literature acknowledges the importance of assessing film’s potential as a medium of expression of philosophical thought. For instance, Robert Sinnerbrink aims at film-philosophy as “an aesthetic, self-reflective, interpretative approach that puts philosophy in dialogue with film as an alternative way of thinking.” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 5, my emphasis). This approach fits into the framework sketched in chapter 1 of this book. For Sinnerbrink, film-philosophy “questions the common tendency to philosophically privilege conceptual theorization over film aesthetics” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 7), and the film-philosophical involvement with film “prompts philosophy to reflect upon its own limits or even to experiment with new forms of philosophical expression” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 7, my emphasis). Thus, Sinnerbrink sketches an approach of “thinking with film” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 8) in at least two ways: First, using film to explore new ways of (conceptual) thinking and therefore as an inspiration for writing philosophically, and, second, using film as a means of expression of thought. But narrative films in particular predominantly consist in constellations of actions and events - where does the conceptual enter here?

The trick is to turn the issue upside down: Instead of trying to find ways of aligning film to philosophy, one should rather try to reconceptualise philosophy in such a way that the cinematic becomes one of the natural possible ways of expressing philosophical thought. This is also, in principle, the feminist film philosopher Catherine Constable’s approach. In Adapting Philosophy, she proposes a “reconceptualisation of philosophy as thought in figuration” (Constable 2009: 154). In the tradition of feminist philosophy, she challenges a definition of philosophy as “general, abstract, rational and reliant on logical arguments” and as “ahistorical and universal” (Constable 2009: 153), and replaces this definition with the notion that philosophy is “the place where thought is figured” (Constable 2009: 154):

“Philosophy is to be found wherever figuration forges imaginary pathways, creates new concepts and opens up new perspectives, it can take any form or combination of forms: visual, verbal and/or aural, and occurs everywhere and anywhere.” (Constable 2009: 154)

Difficulties notwithstanding, Constable’s position shares many traits with two other theorists who invoke the notion of figuration in reflecting on the philosophical

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66 Kittler is interesting in this respect: As the literary critic Philipp Goll writes in a review of two new volumes on Kittler’s work: “Kittler directs his attention exactly on those things that stand in the way of thinking. More precisely: what makes thought present in the first place.” (Goll 2013, my translation).

67 For a concise yet theoretically inspiring introduction to media history, see Jochen Hörisch’s introduction Eine Geschichte der Medien. Vom Urknall zum Internet (Hörisch 2004).
merits of film (or the arts). One of them is D.N. Rodowick, whose book *Reading the Figural* is an extensive meditation on Lyotard’s use of the same term (see below). The other is the German art theorist Gottfried Boehm, who sees that part of the justificatory pressure put on the intellectual and cognitive potential of film is grounded in the long history of the supremacy of language over the Iconic. Boehm attempts to expand the language-centred conception of *logos* by adding the ‘logos of the image’ to the ‘logos of language’. For him, “logos no longer dominates the potency of the image but rather admits its dependence on it.” (Boehm 2007: 36, my translation)\(^88\)

3.5 Adapting Philosophy, Transmediality and Remediation

The problematic film-and-philosophy relation can be better understood by looking at adaptation, a concept used for conceptualising the transition between a literary text and its use in other media. The concept of adaptation traditionally describes an intermedial relation: a text in medium A is adapted in medium B. But the term already also inscribes a hierarchical normative relation: the text in medium B is an adaptation of a text in medium A which sort of provides the raw material for the adaptation. It is a post-text of a pre-text both temporally as well as hierarchically (because without the original text there would not be an adaptation). This echoes the hierarchy often found in academic film-philosophy literature: philosophy in film as something that comes after the fact, or that is only another version of what has already been said and thought (remember Mulhall’s criticism of seeing film as “philosophy’s raw material” and “source for its ornamentation” (Mulhall 2008a: 4. See the discussion in chapter 1.1).

Intermediality is here understood as a process involving the migration of narrative or non-narrative content from one conventionally distinct medium to another – e.g. from literature to cinema, audio play, theatre, or video game –, where the initial medium is also the pretext.\(^89\) Similarly to processes of adaptation, this pretext functions as a point of reference for the analysis or assessment of the post-text. The relation between both can be (but need not) be understood as being normative, insofar as the pretext can set the standard for the (qualitative) evaluation of the post-text.\(^90\)

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\(^88\) Specifically, Boehm writes that there exist spaces of meanings beyond the logos of language which do not stand in a justificatory relation to the logos of language: “It is a *non-predicative meaning* which is not preceded by *linguistic logo* [...]. Beyond language there exist enormous spaces of meaning, unexpected spaces of visuality, gesture, facial expression, and movement. *They do not need any improvement or retroactive justification through the word*. The logos is not one of predication.” (Boehm 2007: 492, my translation and emphasis). For Boehm, the image has, or is a *logos* in its own right, on the same footing as the *logos* of language.

\(^89\) This concept of media follows Werner Wolf’s account of intermediality (see Wolf 2008). The academic discipline which provides the concepts for such a framework is the study of intertextuality, intermediality and transmediality. Intertextuality became one of the dominant terms in literature studies in the late 60s, when the poststructuralist thinker Julia Kristeva used the work of Russian formalist Michail Bakhtin in order to postulate her delimited concept of intertextuality, according to which every text is an intertext, i.e. related to at least one other text. For an encompassing systematic and historical account of intertextuality and intermediality studies, see Irina O. Rajewsky’s introduction *Intermedialität* (Rajewsky 2002). Encyclopedic overviews can be found in Schmerheim 2012 and Wolf 2005b. On the concept of intertextuality, see Julia Kristeva’s original article on Bachtin (Kristeva 1996 [1967]); and Kurwinkel 2012a.

\(^90\) This was the dominant position in scholarship on the relation between film and literature until the 1990s, since most scholars evaluated film adaptations of literary pretexts in terms of whether they could be regarded as ‘faithful’ adaptations of the original text. Contemporary scholarship on film adaptation is close to unified in its opposition against fidelity theories. See, for instance, textbook introductions and anthologies such as Timothy Corrigan’s *Film and Literature* (Corrigan 2011); Brian McFarlane’s *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (McFarlane 1996); or Kamilla Elliott’s *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (Elliott 2003). Other standard books: Stam and Raengo 2005, Stam 2004, Chatman 1980, MacCabe, Warner and Murray (eds.) 2011.
The present investigation, however, wants to conceptualise the relation between pretext and post-text as non-normative, i.e. the dissertation forgoes concepts of fidelity: instead of asking whether a given adaptation is ‘faithful’ to its pretext, the interest is in describing the way in which the analysed films configure philosophical ideas prior to asking questions about an alleged adaptive process from a philosophical pre-text to film.

Like Constable, I am contrary to a “view of adaptation as a form of concretisation that is necessarily literal” (Constable 2009: 87). Even if a given film is ultimately analysed as an adaptation of a specific philosophical text or position (say, because the philosopher in question wrote the screen play or because, as WITTGENSTEIN TRACTATUS [Forgács, 1992], the film title openly invites the idea that it is an adaptation of a work of [written] philosophy), this does not mean that the evaluation of the film is necessarily subject to normative standards of adaptation (as represented by fidelity theories). Of course, the adaptation aspect is one element of film-philosophical analysis, but it is not the only one, and it is clearly not the deciding one. Even a filmic adaptation of a work of written philosophy should be analysed as a potentially independent work of filmic philosophy with its own standards of philosophicality.91

For Constable, the concept of adaptation is a mechanism for “linking philosophical and filmic text” (Constable 2009: 41) that is effected by the “symbolic and conceptual aspects of figuration” (ibid.). Her main concern is not to fall back into dichotomies such as perceptual/conceptual when discussing the relation between a filmic and a ‘philosophical’ text (see Constable 2009: 46). She is also against conceptualising adaptation as a kind of ‘direct translation’ under a “verbal-to-visual model” (Kamilla Elliott; quoted in Constable 2009: 47) which is impossible anyway because of the different modal characteristics of both. Instead, like the model presented in this dissertation, Constable uses the concept of figuration in order to understand film texts as adaptations of philosophical texts while simultaneously doing justice to the specific characteristics of both: “focusing on the figural offers common strategies for reading both types of texts.” (Constable 2009: 63)

Consequently, one should be cautious in conceptualising philosophical films as mere adaptations of philosophical ideas or texts. The expression of philosophical thought in different media certainly involves transitional processes such as the migration of ideas found in non-fictional philosophical literature to film. However, specifically philosophical films are rarely simple adaptations of single texts; they rather incorporate or (re-)configure philosophical ideas which might also have been expressed in philosophical treatises without necessarily being tied to a given expression in a prior text.

By way of example: The idea of film as adaptation stands behind the assumption that the MATRIX films are adaptations of the philosophy of Jean Baudrillard (see Constable 2009). Constable’s concept of adaptation is very specific, since she tries to “think of philosophy itself as a form of adaptation” (Constable 2009: 64). But understanding the films in such a way still steers attention dominantly to the question whether they are

91 A good exemplification of this position is, perhaps, the use of philosophical ideas or characters in literary fiction: For instance, Irvin D. Yalom’s fictional novels When Nietzsche Wept, The Schopenhauer Cure and The Spinoza Problem by their own standards depart from the philosophical works or biographies of named philosophers, and they certainly aspire to give a somewhat accurate representation of some of these philosophers’ philosophical positions. Still, however, they can (and should be) read as fundamentally autonomous literary-philosophical reflections on their themes. See Yalom 2012; Yalom 2005; Yalom 1992.
accurate renderings of Baudrillard’s ideas, instead of simply considering the ways in which the films examine topics addressed by Baudrillard as well. Constable explicitly approaches the question of the philosophical merits of the MATRIX films through a thorough and critical discussion of the idea of film-as-adaptation. Indeed, Constable eventually concludes that “The Matrix Trilogy takes up and transforms Baudrillard’s work, thereby creating its own postmodern position.” (Constable 2009: 150).

Here I propose to evaluate philosophical ideas in films as parts of transmedial processes while reserving the term ‘philosophical adaptation’ to films which obviously or even intentionally adapt specific ideas (e.g. Wittgenstein [Jarman, 1993], Wittgenstein Tractatus, The Ister [Barison and Ross, 2004] or the direct and indirect references to Baudrillard in the MATRIX films). That is, like so many other ideas generated by human beings, philosophical ideas should be understood as phenomena of the human mind which can be – and actually are – expressed in different media, each of which has at its disposal specific means of expressing these ideas. Even though thoughts and ideas are always already expressed (i.e., uttered) in a specific medium of thought, from the theoretical point of view of this dissertation the idea comes first, not its expression in a specific medium.92 Such an approach has two advantages: One is not forced to understand philosophical thought as being tied to its oral or written expression and it is possible to talk about the philosophicality of a film without constantly having to recur to existing works of philosophy.

One last remark: Even though systematically written philosophy should not be granted any hierarchical priority over filmic philosophy, there is a historical sense in which the former comes first: Philosophy qua film does not replace philosophy qua written or spoken word – it supplements it as a form of remediation of traditional philosophy. Remediation describes a “formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms” (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 273). Philosophical films make use of certain forms of the expression of philosophical ideas, and they refashion them by using the expressive potentiae available to their medium.93 But how exactly does the “medial logic of film” (Sandbothe 2004) shape the expression of philosophical thought? In what ways does film, as John Mullarkey writes in Refractions of Reality, “challenge what we mean by philosophy and thought itself; in our case, not only might film be philosophical but, even worse, philosophy might be filmic.” (Mullarkey 2009: vxii)

92 According to Irina Rajewsky, transmediality signifies “media-unspecific phenomena, which can be applied in various media with the means of expression available to each medium, while the assumption of a constituting original medium is impossible or not important.” (Rajewsky 2002:13, my translation). The notion of transmediality allows for discussing the specific figuration of philosophical ideas expressed via films sans the necessity of (but with the possibility of) evaluating them in relation to their written counterparts in the first place.

93 Jochen Hörisch remarks that already at the time of Gutenberg’s invention of movable type printing, the content of new media most often consists of old media; his specific example is that the new post-Gutenberg books of the 15th century were often ‘reprints’ of hitherto hand-copied books such as the Bible or Plinius’ Historia Naturalis (see Hörisch 2004: 144). Remediation is thus not a new phenomenon.
Part II

Skepticism in Film Philosophy
The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as Dead: his eyes are closed. Albert Einstein, “The World As I See It” (Einstein 1954 [1931]: 11)

Die einzige Meinung, die garantiert jeder Revision standhält, ist vermutlich der Zweifel. Harald Martenstein, “Der Sog der Masse” (Martenstein 2011: 18)

4 Varieties of Philosophical Skepticism: Knowledge, Acknowledgement and Trust

Remember the deception situation described in the introduction: In THE TRUMAN SHOW (Weir, 1998), the All-American town of Seaside, Florida, home to the insurance salesman Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey), turns out being a giant TV studio for a daily reality show whose star is, unbeknownst to him, Truman Burbank himself. It is only an unusual happenstance in a day in the life of Truman, a headlight crashing onto the road out of the blue sky, which triggers a chain of events that makes him realise that he does not know what he thought he knew about the world he is living in. His wife, his best friend, his parents as well as everyone he shares this fake world with are paid actors, and even the sun in the blue sky above him is nothing but a giant headlight. All this is the result of the schemes of a megalomaniac failed-artist-turned-TV-director Cristof (Ed Harris), who directs every aspect of Truman’s life and environment from his office high above the city, which, ironically, is hidden inside the fake moon of Truman’s TV world. Truman has been fooled all his life by the ‘man in the moon,’ and he cannot take anything he believed to be certain for granted anymore.

This is a variation of the primal scene of philosophical skepticism: The world is, contrary to what we believe, not what it seems to be. The world is not real. Reality is illusion, Sein is Schein. In worst-case scenarios, this is not simply due to some regrettable miscalculation of man’s place in the world but the result of the schemes of some evil deceiver. This is the standing threat of “[s]keptical possibilities […]” according

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94 This is a variation of Barry Stroud’s description in “Kantian Argument, Conceptual Capacities, and Invulnerability” of skepticism as the suspicion that we do not “know what we think we know” about the world (Stroud 2000 [1994]: 174)

95 Markus Gabriel builds his introduction to philosophical skepticism on the contrast between “Sein” and “Schein” and locates the roots of this dualism in Pre-Socratic and classical ancient philosophy. See Gabriel 2008.
to which the world is completely different from how it appears to us, and there is no way to detect this.” (Nagel 1986: 71)

Even more extreme than the scenario of THE TRUMAN SHOW seems to be the one envisioned in the science-fiction film MATRIX: The computer nerd Thomas Anderson discovers that the entire world he and his co-habitants experienced in his life so far is only a gigantic computer simulation, while his own body is floating in a tank filled with nutritious fluids, and his neural endings are connected to a supercomputer that generates the perfect simulation.

The setting of MATRIX appears like a cinematic adaptation of two not less radical contemporary philosophical thought experiments: Robert Nozick’s experience machine and Hilary Putnam’s brains in a vat. In Anarchy, State, Utopia Nozick asks his readers to

“\[s\]uppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain.”

(Nozick 1977: 42ff.)

This is the state Thomas Anderson finds himself in after ‘unplugging,’ with the difference that the electrodes are not attached to his brain but rather plugged into the nerve endings of his spinal cord. While the individual situation of the film character Thomas Anderson appears structurally similar to the situation in the experience machine scenario, overall MATRIX appears like a less radical version of the perhaps most radical thought experiment in the history of philosophy: Hilary Putnam upgraded the historical evil genius scenario invented by René Descartes and in Reason, Truth, and History proposed the following scenario, which is worth to be quoted at full length:

“\[I\]magine that a human being (you can imagine this to be yourself) has been subjected to an operation by an evil scientist. The person’s brain (your brain) has been removed from the body and placed in a vat of nutrients which keeps the brain alive. The nerve endings have been connected to a super-scientific computer which causes the person whose brain it is to have the illusion that everything is perfectly normal. There seem to be people, objects, the sky, etc.; but really, all the person (you) is experiencing is the result of electronic impulses travelling from the computer to the nerve endings. The computer is so clever that if the person tries to raise his hand, the feedback from the computer will cause him to ‘see’ and ‘feel’ the hand being raised. Moreover, by varying the program, the evil scientist can cause the victim to ‘experience’ (or hallucinate) any situation or environment the evil scientist wishes. He can also obliterate the memory of the brain operation, so that the victim will seem to himself to have always been in this environment. It can even seem to the victim that he is sitting and reading these very words about the amusing but quite absurd supposition that there is an evil scientist who removes people’s brains from their bodies and places them in a vat of nutrients which keep the brains alive. The nerve endings are supposed to be connected to a super-scientific computer which causes the person whose brain it is to have the illusion that... [...]

Instead of having just one brain in a vat, we could imagine that all human beings (perhaps all sentient beings) are brains in a vat (or nervous systems in a vat in case some beings with just a minimal nervous system already count as ‘sentient’). Of course, the evil scientist would have to be outside — or would he? Perhaps there is no evil scientist; perhaps
(though this is absurd) the universe just happens to consist of automatic machinery tending a vat full of brains and nervous systems.

This time let us suppose that the automatic machinery is programmed to give us all a collective hallucination, rather than a number of separate unrelated hallucinations. Thus, when I seem to myself to be talking to you, you seem to yourself to be hearing my words. Of course, it is not the case that my words actually reach your ears — for you don’t have (real) ears, nor do I have a real mouth and tongue. Rather, when I produce my words, what happens is that the efferent impulses travel from my brain to the computer, which both causes me to ‘hear’ my own voice uttering those words and ‘feel’ my tongue moving, etc., and causes you to ‘hear’ my words, ‘see’ me speaking, etc. In this case, we are, in a sense, actually in communication. I am not mistaken about your real existence (only about the existence of your body and the ‘external world’, apart from brains). From a certain point of view, it doesn’t even matter that ‘the whole world’ is a collective hallucination; for you do, after all, really hear my words when I speak to you, even if the mechanism isn’t what we suppose it to be. [...] 

Suppose this whole story were actually true. Could we, if we were brains in a vat in this way, say or think that we were?” (Putnam 1981: 5ff.)

Putnam plays with different versions of the brain-in-a-vat scenario, ranging from a single kidnapped brain with simulated world experiences to a world that never contained anything else but envatted brains tied to one super-computer, subjected to a collective, ergo synchronised experience of the simulated world.96

It is easy to see the difference to MATRIX: while in the film embodied brains are floating in the tank (i.e., a human being ‘as a whole’ is inserted into a vat), Putnam explicitly relies on disembodied brains – cerveaux sans mains (see chapter 3).97 Although the inhabitants of the Matrix actually interact with other human beings (in this respect, the Matrix is similar to an online role game), the physical structure and constitution of the world they experience is completely different from what they think. It is a world that only exists in their heads and in the form of computer algorithms, while they actually are floating in tanks with nutritious fluids. MATRIX addresses doubts about the nature of the external world, but it does not question the existence of this world as such.

Having seen THE TRUMAN SHOW or MATRIX, on the way out of the dark screening room of the local cinema a film spectator with philosophical inclinations might feel unduly reminded of ‘glitches’ in the Matrix, of strange happenstances in one’s own life which might hint at the possibility that things are not what they seem to be. But, after all, this is only a movie, right? An adult version of the ghost stories one’s parents or older siblings used to tell when we were little children. There are no ghosts, so just as well the world we live in is not an illusion but made of solid bricks and bolts. Or is it not, really? How do we know?

96 For examples of how variations of elements in the thought experiments influence the issues at stake see Putnam 1981: chapter 1; and Olaf Müller’s Wirklichkeit ohne Illusionen I - Hilary Putnam und der Abschied vom Skeptizismus oder warum die Welt keine Computersimulation sein kann (Müller 2003a: 1-43). Putnam’s philosophical strategy, roughly, is to show that the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis is self-refuting: it is not possible that a brain that has been envatted its entire life could utter the sentence “I am a brain in a vat” and that this utterance would be true. The reason for this is that the language a speaker uses is tied in reference to the world which causes the stimuli to which the speaker’s utterances are a response to. See Putnam 1981: chapters 1 and 2. On the limits of Putnam’s strategy, see Olaf L. Müller’s Wirklichkeit ohne Illusionen II - Metaphysik und semantische Stabilität oder was es beisst, nach höheren Wirklichkeiten zu fragen (Müller 2003b).

97 See, again, Müller 2003a: 1-43 on the question of embodiment in scepticist scenarios, in particular pp. 29-43.
Varieties of Philosophical Skepticism

Such reasonings are usually dismissed as “philosophical exaggerations” but they constitute the roots of what one could call the existential variant of philosophical skepticism, which radicalises an awareness of the limits of human knowledge, and/or a latent feeling of uneasiness with the human position in the world into extreme deception scenarios, into metaphysical conspiracy theories or secular versions of Gnosticism, as it were. But one need not invoke scary stories of scheming TV directors and skepticist ghosts in order to arrive at some version of a skepticist argument or position. A number of contemporary philosophers, most of them with an analytic background, subscribe to a rather technical, methodologically grounded version of skepticist arguments.

The present chapter offers a basic account of the motivations, properties and argumentative strategies for and against philosophical skepticism. The goal is to provide a basic understanding of philosophical skepticism and possible justifications for as well as answers to it. This will help assessing the manner in which skepticism figures in films and in film theory, which is the main focus of this dissertation.

4.1 Skepticism as Methodological Doubt

Technically speaking, skepticism can be described as a philosophical position that expresses dissatisfaction with, or outright denial of, general claims to knowledge. More specifically, skepticist positions are concerned with the question whether there is anything we properly ‘know’ or can know about the world that we (believe to) live in. Skeptics give a negative or at least pessimist answer to that question: They doubt or deny that we can have any ‘knowledge’ at all about our world, on the grounds that we are unable to prove our knowledge claims or to eliminate doubts about them. Doubt about knowledge can be termed as weak skepticist doubt (“It is doubtful that it is possible to gain knowledge of the external world”), while denial constitutes strong skepticist doubt (“It is not possible to gain knowledge of the external world”). The distinction is important because it facilitates the skepticist task: One need not necessarily prove our fundamental beliefs and knowledge claims to be wrong in order to establish skeptical hypotheses. An inability to eradicate possible doubt would be enough, since if our beliefs are subject to doubt, they do not, strictly speaking, belong to the body of knowledge. That is, for undermining claims to knowledge it is already sufficient to successfully argue for weak skepticist doubt, since ‘to know that p’ already implies that one can exclude relevant doubts against the truth of p. If one accepts the assumption that the mere possibility of doubt disqualifies knowledge claims, this is all the skeptic needs to show.

Both variants attack the very possibility of knowledge, not only single (erroneous) knowledge claims such as “I know that George Clooney played Batman in Christopher Nolan’s film THE DARK KNIGHT” (actually it was Christian Bale). That is, philosophical skeptics advance global skeptical arguments, not local skeptical arguments.99 Because of their emphasis on knowledge, such arguments are called epistemological positions: it is

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98 Julian Nida-Rümelin calls extreme skepticist scenarios a “philosophische Überspanntheit” (Nida-Rümelin 2009: 20).

99 For this distinction, see Dancy 1985: 8. In relation to ethical and physical theory formation, Nida-Rümelin distinguishes local universal skepsis from global radical skepsis (see Nida-Rümelin 2009: 201).
knowledge of the world which is primarily in question, not so much the existence of the world.

Skepticist positions are typically based on assumptions about
a) the limits of our cognitive faculties (senses and reason), or
b) the unreliability of our cognitive faculties (senses and reason).

On the first account, the data we gain about the world around us are regarded as incomplete and therefore not sufficient for assuring us that we “know what we think we know” (Stroud 1994: 174) about the world. On the second account, our senses (hearing, vision, smell, taste and touch) or our higher-level cognitive capacities are regarded as not being sufficiently reliable in order to provide a viable foundation for knowledge claims. Hence, skeptics work with the possibility of incompleteness, the possibility of error or with both possibilities.

The perhaps most famous skepticism-driven investigation in the history of modern philosophy, René Descartes’ Meditationes de Prima Philosophia, is methodologically based on the ineradicability of doubt: Descartes methodologically doubts everything he believes to know, even his most fundamental beliefs – such as that he is not dreaming, that he has a body, that there are other persons in the world, that 2 and 2 make 4, and so on – in order to find at least one belief he cannot doubt. Descartes introduces a genius malignus, a malignant God or evil deceiver who is able to deceive him about all these things that he believed to know, even about apparently self-evident mathematical (analytic) truths such as $2+2=4$. Eventually, however, Descartes arrives at the insight that, no matter how much he doubts, he cannot doubt that he exists as long as he thinks: “Ego sum, ego existo, certum est […] quandom cogito” – I am, I exist […] as long as I am thinking (Descartes 1904 [1641]: meditatio II, 6).

This is Descartes’ famous discovery of the res cogitans, the thinking entity whose existence as a thinking entity is certain as long as it finds itself in the activity of thinking (in this sense Descartes advances a performative argument). But, as is well known, the price Descartes had to pay for this absolutely certain foundation of knowledge is solipsism: at the end of the second meditation there is nothing but a thinking substance which he can be certain of being. The existence of everything else from the realm of the rei extensae can be doubted – at least if one follows the same procedure used for the discovery of the res cogitans. Descartes moved himself into an “egocentric predicament” (Nagel 1999: 196), from which he erroneously hoped to progress steadily to other beliefs about whose truth he can be certain. But he never found a water-proof way out of the self-created wormhole of the egocentric predicament, and in the third meditation he even had to rely on the certainty of God’s existence which he rather unsuccessfully believed to have proven by the conjunction of an ontological, causal and cosmological proof of God’s existence.101 So, even though he is the protagonist of a new wave of

101 The more famous formulation “cogito ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”) can actually be found in the Discourse de la Methode: “Je pense donc je suis” (Descartes 1992 [1637]: IV.3). A Latin variant is formulated in the Principia Philosophiae: “Ego cogito, ergo sum” (Descartes 1995 [1644]: 1.0007).

102 See the third meditation. Richard Popkin summarises the genesis and the various objections against Descartes’ anti-skepticist attempts in chapters 9 and 10 of his History of Scepticism (see Popkin 2003). An overview of variants of philosophical proofs of God’s existence can be found in John Leslie Mackie’s The Miracle of Theism. Arguments for and Against the Existence of God (Mackie 1982). For an exegesis of Descartes’ philosophy, see Williams 1978; Kenny 1968; and Perler 1998.
(Cartesian) skepticism and commonly regarded as the founder of modern (rationalist) philosophy, Descartes himself was not a skeptic: He only advanced radical philosophical doubt in order to find non-doubtable claims he could build his concept of science on.\[102\]

The *Meditationes* point at an important property of skepticist doubt: As Peter Strawson argues in *Scepticism and Naturalism. Some Varieties*, it is actually often introduced “for methodological reasons” (Strawson 1985: 2) in order to test the validity of and reasons for (philosophical) claims to knowledge rather than being an outcome of a decisive position which denies claims to knowledge:

> “Strictly, scepticism is a matter of doubt rather than of denial. The sceptic is, strictly, not one who denies the validity of certain types of belief, but one who questions, if only initially and for methodological reasons, the adequacy of our grounds for holding them.”

(Strawson 1985: 2)

Such methodological doubt is perhaps best compared to the conception of extreme environmental scenarios which are supposed to test the stability of skyscrapers or airplanes. The higher the standards met, the more secure a building or airplane is. Methodological doubt in philosophy is thus motivated by the attempt to find a water-proof definition of the concept of knowledge. Still, such a methodical use of skepticism easily ends up with the assertion that we are *never* sufficiently justified in proving these beliefs to be knowledge, even if they turned out to be true – just as no architect or plane engineer will ever be able to construct a building or plane that withstands even the most extreme environmental conditions.\[103\] Such is the fate met by René Descartes at the end of his second *Meditatio de Prima Philosophia*: Even if many or most of our beliefs about the world may in fact be true, as human beings in the world we are in no position to show or prove this; we are never equipped with a ‘best case’ for knowing.\[104\] It seems, then, that methodological doubt can be an indirect way of arriving at the allegedly exaggerated philosophical suspicions mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.\[105\]

As the subsequent sections will outline, there are at least two possible ways to avoid the skepticist conclusion without having to develop intricate arguments against it: One, exemplified by Stanley Cavell, is to *prima facie* accept the skepticist conclusion about the inherent limits of our knowledge claims while simultaneously claiming that these limits nevertheless do not constitute a skepticist ‘threat’ because these very limits are a precondition for knowledge: There is no knowledge without limits to it (see chapter 4.2). The other solution, here exemplified by Donald Davidson’s externalist account of knowledge, is to claim that it is not even possible to end up in the egocentric predicament of the Cartesian skepticist because this would rest on a misconception of knowledge (see chapter 4.3). Both solutions find their cinematic counterparts in a number of skepticism films.\[106\]

\[102\] This is why “Cartesian skepticism” must not be conflated with Descartes’ own position towards skepticism. Cartesian skepticism employs Descartes’ method of doubt and, contrary to Descartes himself, is not convinced that from the egocentric predicament there is a way to knowledge of the world.


\[104\] See Stanley Cavell’s *The Claim of Reason* (Cavell 1979b: 133f.).


\[106\] There is also a fundamental distinction between refutations and eliminations of skepticism. Both ways also influence the way skepticism is dealt with in the first place. The German philosophical language allows for more precise distinction between a *Widerlegung des Skeptizismus* and a *Zurückweisung des Skeptizismus*. Wolfgang Carl approximates these terms in English in distinguishing between a “refutation” (~Widerlegung) and “elimination”
4.2 Cavellian Skepticism: From Knowing to Acknowledging

Stanley Cavell accepts the epistemic limits of the conditio humana and the claim of the skepticist (as characterised by Cavell) that “our relation to the world as a whole, or to others in general, is not one of knowing, where knowing construes itself as being certain.” (Cavell 1979b: 45) But he proposes an alternative concept: Skepticist doubt notwithstanding, we are able, and even forced to, acknowledge our very position in the world as human beings with limited cognitive capacities who nevertheless ‘know’ certain things about that (in that) world.

Cavell uses a specific interpretation of skepticism for developing this concept of acknowledgement. He starts with the “skeptic’s apparent progress from the discovery that we sometimes do not know what we claim to know, to the conclusion that we never do” (Cavell 1979b: 46). The twist Cavell’s interpretation then gives to skepticist doubt is an objectification of the epistemic situation: Skepticist doubt, formulated as doubt about our relation to the world “as a whole,” corresponds to the question whether human beings can know about an object that is called ‘the world’ – which suggests an inside-outside relation between humans and the world. An analogy to such a relation is the inside-outside relation of someone standing on the dock of the bay looking at an anchored ship.

But in relation to the world as a whole, such a position is clearly unattainable. The attitude underlying the desire for assessing the human epistemic relation to the ‘world as a whole’ is reminiscent of the guiding metaphor in Thomas Nagel’s book The View from Nowhere. There, Nagel describes the philosopher’s desire as a desire to gain a complete, unrestricted, objective view on the world, as if seen from a “view from nowhere” that is reminiscent of a God’s-Eye-View perspective (see Nagel 1986: chapter V). On such accounts, human beings, at least those in a philosophical frame of mind, are seen as would-be detached observers of the world who are cut off, divorced, or isolated from the world while at the same time being removed from that world’s control. There is a gap that divides those isolated subjects from the world as it is. Knowledge, then, is the thing that bridges the gap between human beings on the one side, and the world on the other. With knowledge, there is a connection between human beings and the world, a connection that at the same time mysteriously elevates the knowing subject into a Nagelian position; without knowledge, there is no such connection.

A neat summary of Cavell’s interpretation of the skeptic is provided by Putnam:

“[S]kepticism, as Cavell sees it, is a perpetual dissatisfaction with the human position, a demand for a God’s Eye View or Nothing, that degrades the only perspective that is

\(^1\) Chapter 5 discusses another alleged bridging device: the film or photo camera. Sinnerbrink describes the gap as a sentiment “that we remain metaphysically isolated from reality/Being” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 103).

\(^2\) There is also a pragmatic reason for turning to global claims: strong skeptical doubt requires an epistemological argument which attacks knowledge of the external world in general and thereby hierarchically precedes local epistemic claims. Establishing a powerful skepticist position “cannot be done piecemeal” (Stroud 1984a: 5) since it is practically impossible to identify every single possible knowledge claim and then to doubt each one after the other. Stroud argues that “[s]ome method must be found for assessing large classes of beliefs all at once.” (Stroud 1984a: 5f.) Stroud identifies two ways to do this: shaking the foundations of knowledge by doubting the reliability of the source of knowledge claims, or doubting their target (Stroud 1984a: 6f.).
actually available to us. It is this *downgrading of the human position, this aspiration to be outside our own skins* (nothing else would be good enough), that Cavell calls 'skepticism'” (Putnam 1993: viii, my emphasis).

The downgrading attitude generates skepticist claims, and this attitude is Cavell’s starting point for finding an own answer to the problem or threat of skepticism, as Putnam outlines precisely in the following quote. Putnam’s Cavell sees

“that the urge to be more than (what we have known as being) human is part of being human. […] ‘Skepticism’ is inseparable from the emancipatory interest; that is why Cavell has repeatedly said that the war between our skeptical and anti-skeptical impulses cannot and must not have a victor. Cavell’s aim is not to ‘cure’ us of our conflicts but to teach us to live gracefully (and gratefully) with them.” (Putnam 1993: ix, my emphasis)

Indeed, Cavell’s ‘anti-skepticist strategy’ can be described as a call for peaceful co-existence. Cavell grants skepticism its arguments against the human epistemic situation (that our relation to the world as a whole is not one of knowing), but he denies that this is a problem. Cavell acknowledges the phenomenon of skepticism as a constitutive part of the *conditio humana*.

So, Cavell follows the skeptic in accepting the epistemic limits of the human position in the world, but he offers a different and basically Kantian interpretation of its existential consequences: For Cavell, the very limits of our capacity to gain knowledge constitute the *conditio sine qua non* of human experience and knowledge. Without limits, there is no knowledge. This is why Cavell is able to say, in his seminal book on skepticism *The Claim of Reason*, that “the limitations of our knowledge are not failures of it.” (Cavell 1979b: 241) Drawing on Kant, Cavell attacks skepticist positions which are based on such absolute conceptions of knowledge as “criticizing knowledge against an inhuman idea of knowledge” (Cavell 2004: 128) – an idea characterised as being motivated by a craving for generality that abstracts from specific, local forms of knowledge.  

Thus, for Cavell the limitations of the human position in the world are not degrading but constitute the basis for the very possibility of knowledge. From such a perspective, skepticism results from “an insufficiency in acknowledging what in my world I think of as beyond me, or my senses” (Cavell 2005 [1996]: 227, my emphasis). That being so, Cavell still acknowledges the “truth of skepticism” (Cavell 1979b: 241 and Cavell 1979b: 448ff.) that our relation to the “world as a whole […] is not one of knowing” (Cavell 1979b: 45) but instead one of acknowledgment of our limited position in the world. As Stephen Mulhall puts it, it is an “acknowledgement of human finitude” (Mulhall 1996: 1).

109 The term ‘craving for generality’ used by Cavell was coined by Wittgenstein, who criticised the scientist, reductionist attitude of philosophers of his time (Wiener Kreis, Russell, etc.) (see Wittgenstein 1958: 18). ‘Craving for generality’ is a resounding motif of 20th-century analytic philosophy: For Cavell’s philosophical teacher Thompson Clarke, whose article on “The Legacy of Skepticism” was hugely influential in analytic epistemology, the skeptic’s craving expresses a desire for taking off the “limiting eyeglasses of the restricted” (Clarke 1972: 762) and to gain an unrestricted, all-encompassing glance at the world (see also Stroud 2000 [1972]: 35). Barry Stroud describes skepticism as a position which maintains that “we cannot consider all our knowledge of the world *all at once* and still see it as knowledge. […] [Skepticism] would suggest that a certain kind of understanding of our position in the world might be beyond us” (Stroud 2000 [1984]: 8). Thomas Nagel’s discussion of *The View from Nowhere* is another example.
The concept of acknowledgement transcends a merely epistemic meaning: In thinking about our position in the world (and about our relation to others), we already acknowledge that there is some kind of relation and the existential fact of that relation. The world which rises to skeptical doubt is one we cannot help but acknowledge, since it is the world which prefigures everything we are able to say or think about it. The world is a given, it is an existential precondition of our existence as human beings, an entity we are – to play with Heidegger’s concept of “Geworfenheit” – thrown into (see Heidegger 1993 [1927]: §38).

Cavell poetically varies a Wittgensteinian aphorism for advancing this position:

“To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world. For if there is a correct blindness, only love has it. And if you find that you have fallen in love with the world, you would be ill-advised to offer an argument of its worth by praising its Design. Because you are bound to fall out of love with your argument, and you may thereupon forget that the world is wonder enough, as it stands. Or not.” (Cavell 1979b: 431).

In exploring this aphorism, Cavell contrasts “the voice of [...] intellectual conscience” with “the voice of human conscience” (Cavell 1979b: 431). While the skeptic proposes a “picture of intellectual limitedness,” Cavell’s Wittgenstein proposes a “picture of human finitude” (ibid.) and calls for an account of this finitude, which Cavell finds in his own version of the aphorism. Where the skeptic argues that “there are possibilities to which the claim of certainty shuts its eyes” (ibid.), the Wittgensteinian non-skeptic replies that they are shut. The skeptic tries to outline an active process (shutting one’s eyes in the face of doubt as an allusion to the alleged ignorance of our epistemically insecure situation), Cavell and Wittgenstein reply with saying that there is nothing that can be done about it in playing the knowledge game – and there should not be done anything about it. Acknowledgement of human finitude is all that is needed, since it is the very willingness to accept one’s limited position in the world which allows exploring it and discovering it as one with which one can fall “in love”.

Closing one’s eyes implies being willing to cede control over to whatever one closes one’s eyes in front of – or, alternatively, to leave room for uncertainty about whatever happens in front of eyes wide open. In this sense, the Cavellian-Wittgensteinian

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110 Cavell’s concept of acknowledgement is informed by Heidegger’s notion of Being-in-the-World, Wittgenstein’s later philosophy and Kant’s transcendental philosophy. Cavell repeatedly acknowledges his indebtedness to these philosophers, see Cavell 1979a: xxii ff., Cavell 1979b: 241. As Josef Früchtl claims, Cavell’s concept of acknowledgement differs from “the one which Hegel made popular in a German-language and continental-European context and which Honneth readopted for a social theory that is able to combine the power-theoretical reflections of Foucault with Habermas’ theory of communicative agency” (Früchtl 2013: 203, my translation).

111 In Kantian terms, our knowledge begins with experience (and is thus dependent on the acknowledgement of the existence of things which give rise to experience), even though not all knowledge arises out of experience, as Kant famously argues in the introduction to the Critique of Pure Reason: “denn wodurch sollte das Erkenntnisvermögen selbst zur Ausübung erweckt werden, geschähe es nicht durch Gegenstände, die unsere Sinne rühren und teils von selbst Vorstellungen bewirken, teils unsere Verstandestätigkeit in Bewegung bringen, diese zu vergleichen, sie zu verknüpfen oder zu trennen, und so den rohen Stoff sinnlicher Eindrücke zu einer Erkenntnis der Gegenstände zu verarbeiten, die Erfahrung heißt? Der Zeit nach geht also keine Erkenntnis in uns vor der Erfahrung vorher, und mit dieser fängt alle an.” (B1)

112 Wittgenstein writes, in the Philosophical Investigations: “But, if you are certain, isn’t it that you are shutting your eyes in face of doubt? – They are shut. (Wittgenstein 2005: 191e [PI II, xi]) Interestingly, the Einstein motto at the beginning of this chapter also relies on the “his eyes are closed” analogy, but Einstein is rather concerned with an ability to retain a sense of wonder and an openness to the limits of knowledge in a (scientific) world where only the knowable counts. Cavell and Wittgenstein approach the subject from the other direction and make a plea for openness to the limits of doubt.
acknowledgement of human finitude implies a kind of existential trust. Trust is the source of Cavell’s notion of acknowledgement as an alternative to the concept of “knowing”. As Josef Früchtl writes, Cavell’s aphorism about falling in love is an adequate answer to the problem posed by the epistemological skepticist since it turns the screw the other way round: Instead of calling for “salvation” (Früchtl 2013: 198, my translation) from the limits of our knowledge of the world, it tells us “to live gracefully (and gratefully) with” (Putnam 1993: ix) the conflicts instilled upon us by skepticism (see, in more detail, Früchtl 2013: 197f. and 220f.). Expanding on Cavell’s concept of acknowledgement and Nancy’s philosophical reflections on film, Früchtl puts the concept of trust (Vertrauen) at the centre of his philosophy of film: He identifies “aesthetic experiences” as the key human practice through which “we experience qua evidence that the connecting link with the world is not broken, more precisely: which, as evidence shows, seems not to be broken.” (Früchtl 2013: 220, my translation)

Moving from knowledge to acknowledgement enables Cavell to understand skepticism as not so much as an epistemological problem but an existential position. And acknowledgement – this is an interpretation advanced here in preparation of the analysis of skepticism films – allows understanding the traditional skepticist position as a desire for control. More specifically: It is the craving for generality, the desire for a detached, all-encompassing view of the world underlying the skepticist position which is a desire for control, because a world I know everything about is a world which in principle I can control. In contrast, a world that retains elements of the unknowable, elements of the uncertain, a world to which my eyes are (at least in part) closed, is a world I cannot entirely control.

In such a context, it is less interesting whether there is any philosophical apparatus which allows dismissing the skepticist threat in a philosophically sound way. It becomes more important to understand the motivation behind the skepticist threat. This is something Cavell understands all too well, for instance when he writes in his early essay “Knowing and Acknowledging” that

“[s]kepticism may not be sanity, but it cannot be harder to make sense of than insanity, nor perhaps easier, nor perhaps less revealing. And the first fact it reveals is that an appeal to what we should say is not the same as a piece of testimony on behalf of what we all believe. [...] [M]y interest in finding what I would say (in the way that is relevant to philosophizing) is not my interest in preserving my beliefs. [...] My interest, it could be said, lies in finding out what my beliefs mean, and learning the particular ground they occupy. This is not the same as providing evidence for them. One could say it is a matter of making them evident.” (Cavell 1976a: 240f., my emphasis)

This rather psychological element of understanding skepticism (making evident my beliefs in the process of coming to terms with skepticism) is important for a functional analysis and understanding of skepticism films. The case studies in part IV attempt to show that desire for control is an integral narrative and aesthetic element of films such as MATRIX, THE TRUMAN SHOW, WELT AM DRAHT (Fassbinder, 1973), THE

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113 The relation between concepts of acknowledgement, trust and Deleuze’s notion of “croyance au monde,” “belief in the world” (Deleuze 1989: 175f.) as restored by cinema will be discussed in chapter 6.

114 See Früchtl 2013: 213.
Thirteenth Floor, THX 1138 (Lucas, 1971), The Island (Bay, 2005), Inception (Nolan, 2010) and other such films. All these films also not only figure characters that are subjected to control, but they also show how the employment of this kind of control eventually falls back on those human or digital genii maligni who exert it.

4.3 Triangulating Knowledge

To sum up the previous section, Cavell’s account of skepticism invites acknowledging – and in that way understanding – the motivation that underlies the skepticist attitude, but at the same time it proposes a way out of the skepticist wormhole by practically urging the skeptic to temper her desire to “criticiz[e] knowledge against an inhuman idea of knowledge” (Cavell 2004: 128).

It is important to note here that Cavell’s work does not deal with just one monolithic concept of knowledge. The Claim of Reason, his most important work on skepticism, not only addresses skepticism of knowledge of the world, but – in the entire third part – also knowledge of other minds and self-knowledge.115 This corresponds to the conventional distinction of areas of knowledge in epistemology since Descartes’ Meditationes between knowledge of the world (of states, event and things in a spatiotemporally extended environment), self-knowledge (knowledge of one’s personal identity or of one’s inner mental states), and knowledge of other minds (about the ability to recognise others as persons, and the ability to ‘know’ the mental states of others).

These three “varieties of knowledge” (Davidson 1991a) are conjoined systematically in Donald Davidson’s externalist account of knowledge. The difference between the knowledge varieties can be outlined by turning again to THE TRUMAN SHOW: The philosophical acuity of this film consists not so much in its topic (Mr. Everyman discovers that he is the lifelong star of a TV show) but in the intricacy with which the film explores it. Truman not only discovers that the skepticist fear about the external world has, in his case, come true. He also painfully realises that every single person he shared his life with is not what he or she seemed to be. All of his co-habitants are paid actors – even his wife, his parents, or his best friend. This is the realisation of the skepticist fear of other minds. And the discovery of the deception situation incites Truman to ask skepticist questions about his own personal identity, about his knowledge of himself: Who is he, actually? Where is the true man behind the TV star Truman who spent his entire life in a completely controlled environment, subjected to the will of another person (the show’s creator-director Cristof)? Is there any difference? Can he even know if there is one? Thus, THE TRUMAN SHOW can be interpreted as an exemplification of the interdependency of the varieties of knowledge.

So, knowledge is, trivially, not a monolithic concept. Davidson’s externalist conception is built on this insight and systematically explores the connections between the varieties of knowledge, which according to Davidson are mutually dependent, each of them being indispensable (see figure 1).

115 See also Cavell 1976.
‘Knowledge of the world’ applies to the beliefs we hold about the material world we live in, about objects such as trees, park benches, desks, bottles, and so on, about actions and events in that world. ‘Knowledge of Others’ involves other persons, the people with who we share a social world, and, more fundamentally, the knowledge that there are other persons at all. Part of our knowledge of other minds involves our knowledge that others have thoughts, feelings, and emotions as well, and it involves our ability to recognise that they feel pain, joy, etc. at particular moments. Finally, self-knowledge applies to the knowledge we (assume to) have of ourselves, of our thoughts, feelings, emotions.

For Davidson, the varieties of knowledge are “kinds of empirical knowledge” (Davidson 1991a: 205) with distinct characteristics. He stresses that “all three varieties of knowledge are concerned with aspects of the same reality; where they differ is in the mode of access to reality” (ibid.). This common character is also the reason why Davidson talks of “varieties” instead of “kinds” or “categories” of knowledge. Davidson summarises the intricate connections between the three varieties of knowledge as follows:

“Until a base line has been established by communication with someone else, there is no point in saying one’s own thoughts or words have a propositional content. If this is so, then it is clear that knowledge of another mind is essential to all thought and all knowledge. Knowledge of another mind is possible, however, only if one has knowledge of the world, for the triangulation which is essential to thought requires that those in communication recognize that they occupy positions in a shared world. So knowledge of other minds and knowledge of the world are mutually dependent; neither is possible without the other. [...] Knowledge of the propositional contents of our own minds is not possible without the other forms of knowledge since there is no propositional thought without communication.” (Davidson 1991a: 213, my emphasis)

Davidson employs his concept of triangulation in the context of a broader philosophical agenda: he tries to show that the very nature and the existence conditions of our most fundamental beliefs about the world already guarantee that they are by and large correct, that they cannot all be false, although single beliefs can turn out to be wrong: “Any particular belief may indeed be false, but enough in the framework and fabric of our beliefs must be true to give content to the rest.” (Davidson 1991a: 214f.) Our beliefs are embedded in a larger, holistic, framework from which they derive their very intelligibility. Outside of it, they become unintelligible. Since skepticism is devoted
to attacking the very framework within which it poses its doubts, it becomes an impossible enterprise. We can maintain single beliefs only within a pre-established, already accepted framework to which these very beliefs refer.116

Davidson maintains that a skeptic already has to accept the very things she intends to doubt if she wants to have any thoughts at all: “[I]n order to have a thought, even a doubt, one must already know that there are other minds and an environment we share with them” (Davidson 1995: 206). Davidson claims that the very possibility of thought depends on the existence of other people we communicate with (and learn a language from), an environment that we share with them and within which we interact with other people, and, of course, on our own existence, as beings that have thoughts and feelings, and that interact with the environment they live in.

In sum, for Davidson the very fact of thought alone guarantees that we know certain (albeit not necessarily all) things about the world around us, and it guarantees that our thinking is subject to certain objective truth conditions (Davidson 1995: 207). If this is so, then our picture of the world is by and large correct, and “there is no point in attempting, in addition, to show the skeptic wrong.” (Davidson 1999a: 163). If one shares Davidson’s account of the conditions for the very existence of thought, then the skeptic’s doubt cannot be posed at all (see Stroud 1999: 177).

Davidson follows a classical anti-skepticist strategy; he identifies an assumption that even a skepticist has to share and subsequently shows that it blocks the road into the skepticist predicament. Davidson chooses the existence of thought as the main ingredient of his anti-skepticist antidote and claims that “what I know for certain is that thought exists, and I then ask what follows” (Davidson 1995: 205). Even a skepticist cannot doubt the very existence of thought if she wants to be able to express her doubts at all. This is one of the minimal assumptions for skepticist doubt.

For Davidson, the very attempt to imagine oneself as being a thinking substance that only has knowledge of its inner, mental events, is mistaken and the expression of an impoverished notion of our thought:

“I see no point in pretending to doubt most of what I think I know; if I could carry out the pretense I would have to deprive the remaining beliefs of so much of their substance that I would not know how to answer the question, or […] to entertain it.” (Davidson 1995: 205)

Davidson does not even commit to such pretences. While the skeptic says that she only has thoughts and that she cannot derive more than this from that assumption, Davidson says: I have thoughts, and from this fact it already follows that I know a lot of things. One can only have thoughts when certain other conditions are met, and when one stands in connection with the world in a way that precludes the flight into the skepticist solipsistic snail shell. And this is exactly how Thomas Nagel neatly summarises Davidson’s strategy: “Instead of getting out of the egocentric predicament, [Davidson] is trying to show that we can’t get into it.” (Nagel 1999: 196, see also ibid. 200) Nagel presents Davidson’s stance as an inversion of Descartes’ cogito: Instead of ‘je pense, donc je suis’ it is ‘je pense, donc je sais’.

116 These anti-skepticist implications become particularly clear in a scholarly debate with Barry Stroud and Thomas Nagel, two protagonists of the tendentially skepticist movement in contemporary analytic philosophy. See Davidson 1999a; Davidson 1999b; Nagel 1999; Stroud 2000 [1999].
So, if Davidson is right, then the skeptic is defeated with her own weapons: he starts with an assumption that even a skeptic has to share, and shows that this assumption a) already precludes the possibility of formulating skepticist doubts, and b) even shows that the scepticist assumptions cannot be true.

An 'egocentric predicament' is one in which a skeptic can only be sure about her knowledge of her inner, mental, proceedings, while her knowledge of the world around her, and about the existence of other persons (conscient beings) remains uncertain (because it can only be indirectly inferred). Davidson's reflections are supposed to show that these three varieties of knowledge – self-knowledge, knowledge of other minds, knowledge of the world – are mutually dependent and therefore indispensable. If you want to explain one kind of knowledge, you have to get back to the others as well. One cannot use one variety of knowledge without at the same time having to rely on the others, too. In other words: When human knowledge forms a triangle, none of the three varieties of knowledge possesses any so-called epistemic priority (as happens in Cartesian epistemology).\(^\text{117}\)

From his considerations Davidson draws the conclusion that

“if I am right that each of the three varieties of empirical knowledge is indispensable, scepticism of the senses and scepticism about other minds must be dismissed. For the Cartesian or Humean sceptic about the external world holds that it is all too obvious that we can get along without knowledge of the world of nature – what we know of our mind is self-sufficient, and may be all the knowledge we have.” (Davidson 1991a: 208)\(^\text{118}\)

Davidson’s argument against the epistemic priority of any of these varieties of knowledge is at the same time an argument against the claim that our sense perceptions have any priority due to their allegedly more direct explainability or knowability (as compared to their causes). It is, as Barry Stroud observes, the

“epistemic priority of ideas or appearances or perceptions over external physical objects [which] has fatal consequences. Once some such distinction is in place, we will inevitably

\(^{117}\) In *Sein und Zeit*, Martin Heidegger develops a slightly similar conception of the human position in the world, even though Heidegger starts from ontological and not epistemological-explanatory considerations. Like Davidson, Heidegger sketches three components of the human predicament: self, world, and, indirectly, other persons. See Heidegger 1993 [1927]: 220/1 (§ 44): "Erschlossenheit aber ist die Grundart des Daseins, gemäß der es sein Da ist. Erschlossenheit betrifft gleichursprünglich die Welt, das In-Sein und das Selbst. […] Sofern das Dasein wesenhaft seine Erschlossenheit ist, als erschlossenes erschließt und entdeckt, ist es wesenhaft wahr'. *Dasein ist ‘in der Wahrheit’*," Heidegger maintains that in order to conceive of oneself as a person, as a *Dasein*, one has to conceive of oneself as living in a world that is open to oneself (erschlossen), that lies open to grasp. This, in turn, means that the world one conceives of living in is an essential and indispensable part of one’s self-understanding and self-characterisation. To doubt this world in any way means to dissolve every understanding of oneself (see Heidegger 1993 [1927]: 229). Earlier he writes that "alle Seinsmodi des innerweltlich Seienden sind ontologisch in der Weltlichkeit der Welt und damit im Phänomen des In-Seins fundiert. Daraus entspringt die Einsicht: Realität hat weder innerhalb der Seinsmodi des innerweltlichen Seienden einen Vorrang, noch kann gar diese Seinsart so etwas wie Welt und Dasein ontologisch angemessen charakterisieren." (Heidegger 1993 [1927]: 211). Parallel to Davidson’s denial of the epistemic primacy of self-knowledge, here we have a denial of the ontological primacy of ‘reality’. Like Davidson, Heidegger reinterprets the meaning of the self which (erroneously) finds itself trapped in an egocentric predicament: "Sollte das »cogito sum« als Ausgang der existenzialen Analytik des Daseins dienen, dann bedarf es nicht nur der Umkehrung, sondern einer neuen ontologisch-phänomenalen Bewahrung seines Gehalts. Die erste Aussage ist dann: »sum« und zwar in dem Sinne: ich-bin-in-einer-Welt. Als so Seiendes »hin ichs« in der Seinsmöglichkeit zu verschiedenen Verhältnungen (cognitiones) als Weisen des Seins bei innerweltlichem Seienden. Descartes dagegen sagt: cognitiones sind vorhanden, darin ist ein ego mit vorhanden als weltlose res cogitans." (Heidegger 1993 [1927]: 211, §43b)

\(^{118}\) Davidson’s talk of self-knowledge as a form of empirical knowledge might sound strange since one usually conceives of it as being an instance of a priori knowledge. But Davidson maintains that the observation that there is thinking is an empirical observation. See Davidson 1999b: 207, 209.
find ourselves cut off forever from sensory knowledge of the world around us.” (Stroud 1984a: 255)\(^{119}\)

By arguing against epistemic priorities, Davidson sets in exactly at this point. He does not even allow assumptions about epistemic priorities of one kind of knowledge over others. Skepticism, for him, is the result of a failed attempt at unifying (and reducing) the three varieties of knowledge (see Davidson 1991a: 206).

For Davidson, the very fact that we have beliefs ensures that not all of them can, at the same time, be false. In Stroud’s interpretation this means that “the way the contents of beliefs are determined puts certain limits on the extent of falsity that can be found in a coherent set of beliefs.” (Stroud 1999: 183) Stroud objects that Davidson’s reflections might very well show that our beliefs are largely truth-ascribing, but that this does not preclude the logical possibility that these beliefs might, after all, turn out to be false.

Davidson does not only sustain his view that our beliefs are by and large true through his observations on the varieties of knowledge, but he also sustains it with an account about the relation between our most fundamental beliefs about the world and their objects or causes. Davidson starts with the observation that our most basic (verbal) reactions to the world are determined by the stimuli that cause these reactions: “[T]he stimuli that cause our most basic verbal responses also determine what those responses mean, and the contents of the beliefs that accompany them” (Davidson 1991a: 213).

Certain stimuli somewhat systematically cause responses that cannot fail systematically: “[I]f anything is systematically causing certain experiences (or verbal responses), that is what the thoughts and utterances are about. This rules out systematic error.” (Davidson 1991b: 199) Our basal beliefs about the world have to be true, because they are a reaction to the stimuli we receive from that world. Davidson concludes:

“The nature of correct interpretation guarantees both that a large number of our simplest beliefs are true and that the nature of those beliefs is known to others. Of course many beliefs are given content by their relations to further beliefs, or are caused by misleading sensations; any particular belief or set of beliefs about the world around us may be false. What cannot be the case is that our general picture of the world and our place in it is mistaken, for this is the picture which informs the rest of our beliefs, whether they be true or false, and makes them intelligible, whether they be true or false.” (Davidson 1991a: 213 f., my emphasis).

Stroud draws the conclusion that Davidson even goes that far as to maintain that our fundamental beliefs “cannot be false because, if they were, they would not have been held” (Stroud 1999: 191).

As we have seen, for Davidson skepticist assumptions derive from an inversion of the normal process of concept development. Skepticists likewise seem to assume that we first form concepts and subsequently apply them to the world. Davidson, in contrast, maintains that at least in the most simple cases it is the other way around: Our most basic verbal responses to the world are caused by the way we are affected by it, which means that the reference of these concepts is determined by the very stimuli that cause them. This precludes their objective invalidity:

\(^{119}\) Here one can, again, witness the proximity of skepticist arguments and the alleged potential of the film/photo camera for bridging the gap between humans and the world in classical film theory. See chapters 5 and 6.
“[I]t is clear that it cannot happen that most of our plainest beliefs about what exists in the world are false. The reason is that we do not first form concepts and then discover what they apply to; rather, in the basic cases the application determines the content of the concept. [...] The situations which normally cause a belief determine the conditions under which it is true.” (Davidson 1991b: 195, my emphasis)

The validity of a belief is determined by its conditions of use. “It is only after belief has a content that it can be doubted. Only in the context of a system tied to the world can a doubt be formulated” (Davidson 1999a: 165). Davidson concludes, as if in direct reply to the Nagelian desire for a view from nowhere: „We cannot occupy a position outside our own minds; there is no vantage point from which to compare our beliefs with what we take our beliefs to be about” (Davidson 1995: 208). After all, “[a] community of minds is the basis of knowledge; it provides the measure of all things. It makes no sense to question the adequacy of this measure, or to seek a more ultimate standard” (Davidson 1991a: 218).

This abstention from a “more ultimate standard,” the acknowledgement of the limits of a “community of minds,” the conceptualization of limits as a precondition of knowledge – all these are connecting elements between Davidson and Cavell, even though both approach skepticism from different angles. While the former starts from the problem of radical interpretation and is prima facie not concerned by skepticist doubts, Cavell starts by accepting the “truth of skepticism” before going on to say it is not really a problem. Both thinkers seem to highlight the unacceptable existential dimension of skepticist thought, for, after all, as Cavell writes in The Claim of Reason, “skepticism is inherently unshareable” (Cavell 1979b: 448).

4.4  The Metaphysical Speculation of Skepticist Thought Experiments

Unshareable skepticism might be, but this does not render it inconceivable or even unimaginable or unconceivable. On the contrary, the stark presence of skepticist scenarios in skepticism films suggests otherwise. Indeed, even though Davidson presents sophisticated contemporary anti-scepticist account, it remains vulnerable to the power of skepticist thought experiments.

More specifically, triangulation does not seem to be immune to the “metaphysical speculation” (Müller 2003b: chapter VII, my translation) of skepticist doubt: It still leaves open the possibility that the basic stimuli we receive are not caused by what we conceive of as a ‘real’ world, but instead by a world we would not call ‘real’ if we knew about it. The objection against Davidson’s externalism is that the language we use in coining knowledge claims about the world is a reaction to the stimuli of the world we happen to live in – not more, not less. There could be higher (or/and lower) levels of reality of which we are not aware, and perhaps (hypothetically) we happen to live on a level of reality where stimuli are not caused by a physically real world containing medium-size objects, but instead by electronic stimuli ignited by a sophisticated computer simulation. In short, our basic experiences and verbal responses could still be caused by and tied to a world of envatted brains that only exists as a computer simulation without us knowing this.

This aspect of metaphysical speculation makes the scenarios entertained by skepticism films interesting – most directly perhaps in film such as MATRIX (A. and L.
Wachowski, 1999), THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR (Rusnak, 1998), or WELT AM DRAHT, all of which are basically cinematic variations on the “brains in a vat” scenario.\(^\text{120}\)

According to Olaf L. Müller, skepticist worries are not so much directed at our knowledge of the world we happen to live in, but instead at our reassurance that the world we live in is ‘real’. Applied to Davidson’s externalist account discussed in this chapter, the objection (also against externalism in general) then would be that it only neutralises skepticist doubt from an internal perspective (i.e., from within the world where they are posed), while it cannot eliminate it from a hypothetical external perspective (see Müller 2003b: xvi). Davidson’s externalism only ensures that our reactions to our living environment refer to the world from which we derive our stimuli. What it cannot do is informing us whether this world is, for instance, only a computer simulation or ‘real’.

In his two-book-long study of philosophical skepticism, Olaf L. Müller argues that indeed we cannot eliminate such doubts as to whether we actually live on the highest reality level (Müller 2003a, Müller 2003b). But he insists that we can indeed rule out epistemological doubts about the truth of our most basic beliefs about the world we live in because the words we use to describe the world refer to exactly the world we happen to live in: Because our language does not refer to a world on a different reality level, skepticist doubt cannot get off the ground as an epistemological position: “Epistemological skepticism concerned our knowledge of the nature which surrounds us, and it could only be set in motion – if at all – with the help of a scenario which was located on this level.” (Müller 2003b: 257, my translation)\(^\text{121}\)

In effect, Müller argues that epistemological skepticism can be philosophically refuted, but metaphysical doubt can only be muted. Persons who live in a perfect simulation of the external world (including other simulated persons) could repeat every single of Davidson’s anti-skepticist musings and could come to exactly the same conclusion as he does, but it would still not change the fact that they are unknowingly living in a computer simulation (see Müller 2003b: xiv). Because of that metaphysical doubt is an intelligible position, but because of its very metaphysical nature it cannot be answered without falling back into some kind of metaphysical speculation as well (see Müller 2003b: xvii). Metaphysical questions cannot be answered because they ask about realms that transcend the area of knowledge accessible to us. Speaking with Cavell, they ask about our relation to the world as a whole. We are located on the level of reality we live in, and we can only make knowledge claims about things within that reality level. And precisely because of that, neither the skeptic nor the non-skeptic can give answers to the “philosophische Sorge,” the “philosophical worry” (Müller 2003b: 43ff., my translation)\(^\text{121}\)

120 The skepticist scenario presented in THE TRUMAN SHOW is less direct, more subtle, but all the more subversive: Truman Burbank’s cognitive apparatus has entirely been shaped by real things and real people within a profoundly fake but physically real world. Instead of being shaped by the world ‘out there’, Truman’s world view has been modeled by traditional methods of the Hollywood dream factory. In that respect, THE TRUMAN SHOW is less a cinematic version of skepticism but a critique of ideology.

121 Original German text: “Der erkenntnistheoretische Skeptizismus betraf unser Wissen über die uns umgebende Natur und konnte, wenn überhaupt, nur mithilfe eines Szenarios in Gang kommen, das auf dieser Ebene angesiedelt war.” More precisely: Müller argues, with Putnam, that “Putnams Beweis zertrümmert den halbherzigen Versuch, mittels naturwissenschaftlicher Ausdrücke Metaphysik zu treiben.” The “philosophical worry” expressed by skepticism does not trace back to epistemological concerns, but is a metaphysical position.
translating) about knowledge of the external world without falling into metaphysical speculation. Accordingly, Müller entitles the last chapter of his study “Metaphysische Spekulation statt erkenntnistheoretischer Skepsis” – metaphysical speculation instead of epistemological skepsis (Müller 2003b: chapter VII). 122

Müller distinguishes two kinds of metaphysical speculation: Horizontal and vertical speculation. While an envatted brain which conducts horizontal speculation is trying to refer to (things in) “a parallel world, which sort of is located on the same level as the natural world of the brain in vat” (Müller 2003b: 178, my translation)123, vertical speculation aims at higher (and, also, lower) levels of reality, “a world, in which its [the envatted brain’s, PS] natural world is embedded and without which its natural world would not exist”124 (Müller 2003b: 178, my translation). More specifically, for envatted brains, parallel worlds contain other computer-simulated worlds, while the “higher-level world contains the brain, various connecting cables, the tank with nutritious fluids, and the simulation computer alongside with the universal memory; the natural world of the brain – which it calls “nature” – is located on the universal memory in the form of numeric codes, and without the simulation computer of the higher-level world it could not exist”125 (Müller 2003b: 178).

A skeptically worried philosopher might be worried whether the world she is living in is not contained in other worlds from which its existence depends. i.e. whether the world of the skeptic is an “outermost layer of this world”126 (Müller 2003b: 56, my translation).

Imaginatively, then, philosophers that deal with skepticism switch between parallel worlds or hierarchically structured levels of reality. It is not surprising, then, that the history of philosophical discourse on skepticism is infested with a variety of thought experiments, from Plato’s Allegory of the Cave127 over Descartes’ evil genius to more contemporary thought experiments such as the mad scientist, O.K. Bouwsma’s paper-

122 Müller distinguishes three conceptions of metaphysics, contrasted with the natural sciences: an ontological, epistemological and semantic one: While an ontologically motivated metaphysics deals with objects outside of the natural, physical order, epistemological metaphysics is concerned with findings which cannot be justified empirically but rather a priori. Semantic metaphysics plays with concepts that do not belong to the arsenal of the natural sciences, such as “me,” “freedom,” “supernatural” or “God” (see Müller 2003b: 184f.). Müller favours a conception which combines the ontological and semantic dimension: “Wir verzichten auf metaphysische Erkenntnis und deuten die Pointe des philosophischen Gedankenspiels vom Gehirn im Tank als Anzeichen für unsere erkenntnistheoretische Beschränktheit hinsichtlich eines Themas, das Gegenstände jenseits der Natur betrifft. An die Stelle metaphysischer Behauptungen und Begründungen treten Vermutungen, in denen mithilfe nicht-wissenschaftlicher Ausdrucksmittel über unsere Position im Wirklichkeitszusammenhang spekuliert werden soll.” (Müller 2003b: 186)

123 Original German text: “eine parallele Welt, die sozusagen auf derselben Ebene liegt wie die natürliche Welt des Gehirns im Tank”.

124 Original German text: “eine Welt, in die seine natürliche Welt eingebettet ist und ohne die seine natürliche Welt gar nicht da wäre”.

125 Original German text: “Die übergeordnete Welt enthält das Gehirn, allerlei Verbindungskabel, den Tank mit Nährflüssigkeit, und den Simulationscomputer samt Universalspeicher; die natürliche Welt des Gehirns im Tank – das, was es „Natur“ nennt – steckt in Form von Zahlen- codes im Universalspeicher und könnte ohne den Simulationscomputer der übergeordneten Welt nicht bestehen”.

126 Original German text: “äußerste[,] Schale der dieser Welt”.

127 Caves have a curious intimate correlation with the cinema. This is not all-too-surprising, since the darkness of an enclosed space is a prerequisite for the screening of a film (or at least for the enjoyment of projected moving images, as everyone who had to watch open air screening in broad daylight can certainly confirm). For Baudry, it plays an important role in his Theory of the Apparatus – and Bernard Stiegler in his Organology of Dreams practically parodies Plato’s Cave: Stiegler directs attention to the Chauvet cave as a starting point for an archaeology of cinema which begins 30,000 years ago. Images on the walls of this cave show animals in single movements, similar to the chronophotographs of Etienne-Jules Marey (see also chapter 3).
made world, Putnam’s brains in a vat which opened this chapter, or Robert Nozick’s Experience Machine. All these thought experiments focus on different aspects of the “how do I know the world is real?” question.

Bouwsma’s scenario, for instance, imagines an evil genius who invents a ‘fake’ world for the sake of deceiving you, one in which real flowers have been substituted for paper-made flowers, real persons for paper-made persons etc. In the Allegory of the Cave, the deception scenario is rather one in which persons tied to a wall are mistakenly led to believe that the shadowy projections of real things are the things themselves (which, however, are present in the same ‘reality realm’). Nozick’s thought experiment, which shares many structural similarities with Putnam’s envatted brains, raises the question whether the source of our experiences actually matter – whether there could be a philosophically justifiable decision to plug in to the experience machine Nozick describes:

“Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life’s experiences? [...] What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside? [...] What does matter to us in addition to our experiences?” (Nozick 1977: 42ff.)

Philosophically sophisticated answers to such diverse scenarios require the involvement of much more details from philosophical discourse than can be given here. What matters at this point is that, first, the skepticist thought experiments mentioned in this chapter, as well as the general approaches to skepticism, present a kaleidoscope of skepticist imagination whose narrative potential literally invites artistic exploitation in literature, film and other arts. In the terminology of the first two chapters: Skepticism films are dramatic imaginings of the hypothetical imaginings of philosophical skepticist thought experiments.

Second, the cursory comparison of the skepticist thought experiments in this chapter shows that each one of them has a specific structure which can be altered at specific points in order to foreground or background certain aspects, or to simply play around with the effects (Putnam and Müller are good examples for this, but also the intellectual movement of the first two meditations in Descartes’ Meditationes).

This insight, that skepticist thought experiments rely on specific, changeable structures, is the starting point for reflection about skepticism films, i.e. specific films that directly or indirectly explore and (con-)figure the various dimensions of skepticist doubt. The hypothesis is that skepticism films contribute to exploring the boundaries within which skepticist scenarios can be conceived of, repudiated, or even defended.

Chapter 2.2 proposed three functions of thought experiments in film: the illustration function, the philosophical update function and the screening function. Take, for example, the way in which MATRIX could be linked to Putnam’s “brains in a vat” scenario or Nozick’s “experience machine” scenario (if one wants to think about the film philosophically by linking it to works of academic philosophy): The film might simply illustrate the idea that

129 Obviously, this is a scenario which the inhabitants of the MATRIX are subjected to. In a telling film scene (subsequence 18), one of the main characters, Cypher, reflects exactly on Nozick’s question: “You know, I know this steak doesn’t exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy, and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realise? Ignorance is bliss.”
“[s]uperduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain[...].” (see above)

But the film could also be regarded as an upgraded, updated version of Descartes’ 17th-century *genius malignus* scenario – in that case one would, for instance, try to figure out the philosophical significance of such a technological upgrading of the technological means available to the evil deceiver (or, put differently, what difference does it make whether God is some kind of demiurge or, literally, a *deus ex machina*?)

These first two ways of linking a skepticism film to academic philosophical predecessors does not specifically ask about the philosophical potential or contribution the film makes *qua* being a film. But the third way does: Asking how a skepticism film *screens* a skepticist thought experiment equals asking about the way in which the medium contributes (or not) to the specific philosophical value one would attach to the film. Such questions will be explored in the subsequent chapters. The correlation of skepticism and the medium of film in chapters 5 and 6, and the role of skepticism in skepticism films in the remaining chapters.
“Film is a moving image of skepticism: not only is there a reasonable possibility, it is a fact that our normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist – even, alarmingly, because it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes.”

Stanley Cavell, The World Viewed (Cavell 1979a: 188f.)

5 A Moving Image of Skepticism? Philosophy’s Acknowledgement of Film

5.1 Illusion and Reality in Film History

The exploration of the diffuse borders between reality and illusion, fact and fiction, dreaming and waking state, certainty and doubt is an integral narrative and aesthetic tradition throughout the history of cinema. It is no happenstance that one of its most important pioneers, George Méliès, is a stage magician turned filmmaker who joyfully experimented with the cinematograph’s potential to manipulate cinematically rendered impressions of reality.130

Méliès and his contemporaries initiated a venerable cinematic tradition: Many other early narrative fiction films exploit the affinity of human beings to mistaking daydreaming, fantasy or hallucination for reality, for instance DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI (Wiene, 1920), DER STUDENT VON PRAG (Ewers and Rye, 913, remake by Galeen, 1926), DER MANDARIN (Freisler, 1918), and SHERLOCK JR. (Keaton, 1924). This tradition was continued in the era of sound film, most notoriously perhaps in THE WIZARD OF OZ (Fleming et al., 1939), Akira Kurosawa’s RASHOMON (Kurosawa, 1950), Michelangelo Antonioni’s BLOW-UP (Antonioni, 1966), Federico Fellini’s 8 1/2 (Fellini, 1963), or Ingmar Bergman’s SMULTRONSTÅLLET (Bergman, 1957). For instance, Kurosawa’s drama explores the tension between an indispensably subject-dependent human perspective on the world and the equally inherent aspiration to attain objective, or at least truthful accounts of events and actions in the world.

The tendency to scrutinise the idea of objective truth persists in Bergman’s, Antonioni’s, Fellini’s films and in the works of other art house filmmakers from the 1950s to the 1970s. A borderline figure is Alfred Hitchcock, who throughout his career (which spans from British silent cinema of the 1920s to the days of decline of the

130 Examples are the vanishing lady in his ESCAMOTAGE D’UNE DAME AU THÉÂTRE ROBERT Houdin (1896), the dancing heads in LE MELOMANE (1903), or the dreamed-up presence of the moon in an astronomer’s office in LA LUNE À UN MÈTRE (1898). Méliès’ film art just received a cinematic comeback in Martin Scorsese’s 3D homage HUGO (2011). In her monograph The Neuro-Image, Patricia Pisters correlates the ways in which stage “magicians and filmmakers alike play with the spectator’s attention and awareness” (Pisters 2012: 85) in her discussion of THE ILLUSIONIST (Burger, 2006) and THE PRESTIGE (Nolan, 2006).
Hollywood studio system in the 1970s) repeatedly exploited the cinematic opportunities offered to films about psychologically disabled characters, unreliable narratives, and misleading camera and sound direction. Even a distinctly un-Hitchcockian film like REBECCA (Hitchcock, 1940) revels in the pitfalls of deception the Cinderella-like, nameless heroine (Joan Fontaine) has to endure as the second wife of a wealthy husband who is haunted by the memories of his first wife who died under mysterious circumstances. Other famous Hitchcock films which play with the unstable relation between illusion and reality, belief and make-believe are classics such as VERTIGO (1958), the long-concealed revelation of Norman Bates’ schizophrenic mind in PSYCHO (1960), or the meditations on the reliability of photographically rendered impressions of events in the world in REAR WINDOW (Hitchcock, 1954). Other Hitchcock films which are inhabited by schemers, deceivers, schizophrenics, or which deliberately aim at misleading or irritating their film audiences include THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH (1934 and 1956), SHADOW OF A DOUBT (1943), DIAL M FOR MURDER (1954), SABOTEUR (1942), NORTH BY NORTHWEST (1959) or MARNIE (1964). Looking at these examples, one might be tempted to call Hitchcock’s way of filmmaking a cinema of deception.

More recently, David Lynch appears obsessed with the narrato-aesthetic potential of the cinematic reality-illusion divide in films such as ERASERHEAD (1977) or later endeavours such as LOST HIGHWAY (1997), MULHOLLAND DRIVE (2001), or INLAND EMPIRE (2006).

Contemporary “mind-game films” (Elsaesser 2009a) and other complex narratives refine this tradition of cinematically challenging human perceptions or interpretations of reality. Christopher Nolan’s films centre around what Patricia Pisters calls the “brain-worlds” (Pisters 2012: 27) of their main characters: For instance, MEMENTO (NOLAN, 2000) uses a radically non-linear narrative structure which mirrors the short-term memory loss of its main character Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce), which results in his distorted evaluation of events, actions and persons he encounters. INCEPTION (Nolan, 2010) is a heist film in which industry spies literally enter the various levels of their victims’ dream worlds. INCEPTION subverts the conception that dreams can only be experienced by the dreamer alone: The construction of inhabitable dream levels suggests the possibility of sharing the world of the dreamer, of living in non-material shared worlds which resemble life in the real world to such an extent that at some point it is not entirely clear anymore which is reality and which is a dream.

Two other films, THE ILLUSIONIST and THE PRESTIGE focus on the mind-games which fin de siècle stage magicians play with each other and their diegetic and extra-diegetic audiences. That is, the characters of the films play mind-games with their theatre audiences within the diegesis, while the films play mind-games with their cinema audience.

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131 REBECCA was Hitchcock’s first Hollywood film. The adaptation of Daphne du Maurier’s bestselling novel was the pet project of producer David O. Selznick, then one of Hollywood’s most powerful figures. It was the first and last time Hitchcock had to direct contract work without any significant amount of control of the filmmaking process (see Truffaut and Hitchcock 1967: chapter 6). For an account of the psychology of deception employed in REBECCA, see chapter 3 of Yanal 2005: 16-30.

132 Note that early filmmakers are also under the impression of Freud and Jung’s then still new and revolutionary works on the human psyche.

133 See also chapter 8.

134 For an in-depth analysis of the narrative structure of MEMENTO, see Klein 2001. Henry Taylor argues that “what Memento is really about is cinematic storytelling and the process of watching a movie.” (Taylor 2012)
 audience. Christopher Nolan has explicitly described THE PRESTIGE as an exploration of the illusionist possibilities of the medium of cinema, and thereby joins ranks with the Méliès strand of cinematic tradition.135

The mind-game film which perhaps gained the most attention from current film scholarship, apart from MEMENTO, is FIGHT CLUB (Fincher, 1999). Fincher’s psycho-thriller literally enters the brain-world, and consequently the distorted perceptual world of its schizophrenic main character, played by Edward Norton. While the film accurately displays the experiential world view of Norton’s character, who believes that his schizophrenic alter ego Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) is actually another person, it does not accurately represent the (assumed) state of the world: There is no Tyler Durden; he is only the imagined counterpart of the main character’s schizophrenic self-perception. FIGHT CLUB is an example of a mind-game film which focuses on the manipulability and the distortions of human perception of the world, and by doing so the film continues the cinematic tradition established by Méliès, Wiene, Hitchcock, Kurosawa, Antonioni, Fellini and other earlier filmmakers.

Skepticism films as well play with the variable contrast between illusion and reality, but they shift the focus from the manipulability or distortedness of human (or film audiences’) perception of the world to ontological questions about the ‘reality’ of reality. The plots of mainstream blockbuster vehicles such as MATRIX (A. and L. Wachowski, 1999), THE TRUMAN SHOW (Weir, 1998), THE ISLAND (Bay, 2005), or the already discussed borderline case INCEPTION are built around such questions. INCEPTION can be characterised as a skepticism film because it suggests the possibility of not only inhabiting a dream world but of sharing it with other persons. The idea of sharing a dream qua literally inhabiting it runs counter to any traditional understanding of the concept of dreaming, which is usually regarded as the quintessentially private realm of the dreamer. For instance, compare INCEPTION to other dream-world films such as WAKING LIFE (Linklater, 2001), ABRE LOS OJOS (Amenábar, 1997) and the latter’s remake VANILLA SKY (Crowe, 2001): All immerse their main characters into a dream state (near-death experience in the first, cryostasis in the second and third film) in which they appear to interact with other persons who eventually turn out to be mere (computer-generated) mental projections of the protagonists.136

All these skepticism films explore plots in which protagonists knowingly or unknowingly navigate between different reality levels or find that the world they live in is, literally speaking, not what it seems to be. This is most evident in MATRIX and THE TRUMAN SHOW, where the initial Lebenswelt of their characters is either entirely computer-generated or a fake TV studio representation of small-town life. In skepticism films, early cinema’s psychoanalysis-inspired undercurrent of “life is a dream or fantasy,” (projected on the silver screen mostly with the help of films that involve mentally unstable characters), has been – under the impression of the rapid victory of computation-based technologies – transformed into “life is simulation”.

135 See the interview with Nolan in the special features of the DVD and Blu-ray edition of the film.
136 Chapter 8 discusses in more detail how skepticism films fit in the current cinematic tendency towards increasingly complex filmic narratives. An in-depth analysis VANILLA SKY, ABRE LOS OJOS and INCEPTION can be found in chapter 11.
This survey of films and filmmakers, by no means comprehensive, suggests that skeptical doubt about the reality status of the world comes natural to cinema even beyond the confines of the genre of skepticism films. Cinema is related to concerns about the possibility of knowing the world on two levels: Firstly, films such as the ones already mentioned exploit the idea that there might be a gap between reality and human notions of reality for narrative and aesthetic purposes. Secondly, the very process of filmmaking as well as the ontological constitution of the film medium already raises questions about the relation between the so-called ‘reality’ of filmic worlds and the (physical) reality their creators and spectators are a part of. This suggests an integral role of skepticism in serious theoretical reflection about cinema in general. It is not only the problematic difference between film reality and physical reality (or between the film world and the real world) which is addressed by such reflections, but also the very understanding of what “reality” means in the employment of both concepts.

5.2 Screening ‘Reality’ in Cinema

Stanley Cavell addresses the latter aspect when he asks, in his seminal film-philosophical study *The World Viewed*, “[w]hat happens to reality when it is projected and screened?” (Cavell 1979a: 16). Cavell spells out his answer by playing with the ambivalent meaning of the English word “screen,” which can both be used as a verb “to screen” and as a substantive “screen”: According to Cavell, the silver screen “screens me from the world it holds – that is, makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me – that is, screens its existence from me.” (Cavell 1979a: 24). Cavell’s answer hints at what one could call the ontological Janus-face of film, since the medium screens a reality which is at the same time present (to its audience) and absent (because it is only screened). What is more: in being present to its spectators during the process of film perception, the reality screened by a film affirms its very absence in Cavellian film philosophy. The very purpose of a film screening is to project a world that has been previously recorded or assembled elsewhere (in the case of live screenings of sport events, for instance, the event projected even almost simultaneously takes place elsewhere).

The ontological status of this film reality is dubious since it is not something spectators can access, because they are ontologically and temporally absent from it: The audience of a film is *ontologically absent* since spectators occupy a different ontological realm compared to the fictional characters on screen (they cannot interrupt a love scene on screen). The audience of a film is *temporally absent* since it witnesses a screening of

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137 See also Früchtl 2013: 208.
138 Here, Cavell's position is obviously influenced by Bazin and based on assumptions about photography's recording mechanisms. In another part of *The World Viewed*, Cavell writes that “[p]hotography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it.” (Cavell 1979a: 23).
139 A film audience member is unable to enter the diegesis of a film, which would be inaccessible to the audience even if it were present at the film set when the film scene is shot. The diegesis of a film is situated in a completely different ontological realm, a realm which is closer to the world of literature than to the physical world. Common knowledge of this fact makes metaplasis such an effective and surprising narrative device because it apparently neglects the mutual ontological absence of audience and film characters. One of the filmmakers who repeatedly uses metaplasis is Woody Allen: Allen even bases an entire film on the effects of dissolution of the ontological barriers between the world of the audience and the world of the film: *THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO* (Allen, 1985). While the film's protagonist Cecilia, played by Mia Farrow, is watching her favourite film of said title for the umpteenth time, her favourite character Baxter (Jeff Daniels) suddenly turns to her on the screen, starts talking to her and then leaves the screen in order to begin a love affair with Cecilia. *THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO* is inspired
past events which have been shot and assembled before being screened in movie theatres, on TV or internet websites. In this way, the reality presented by film is one which is at the same time present to its audience as well as absent from it, even more since it does not, physically speaking, exist. It exists only in the mind of its spectators, in the sense that it is constituted by the very act of being perceived. This is true also for live-action films which display a physically extant fraction of the reality we know, because in the process of recording it is transposed from a physical reality into a filmic reality. For the world of the film, the proverbial Berkeleyan philosophical dictum esse est percipi – to be is to be perceived – is actually true: No film world without a spectator (or the possibility of a spectator).

This statement holds for film in particular, but can – with variations – be applied to art in general: Works of art are products of human culture, and in that respect made for human beings to perceive them as works of art (or as works of fiction). There are gradual differences, however, depending on the general, basic correlation that applies to the specific artwork: While the “material basis” (Cavell 1979a: 72) of a sculpture is usually a processed piece of solid material, films are that which Cavell terms “a succession of automatic world projections” (Cavell 1979a: 72), i.e. configurations of light and shadow and sound waves, from which, qua perception of it, results that which we call the “film world”. Of course, this succession can be projected on a screen without ever being perceived by a spectator (or, even more radical, even the recording itself could have happened entirely automatically by some strange course of the world). But whatever is being projected is not identical with the fictional space of the film because, for instance, spectators perceive the two-dimensional projected film space as a three-dimensional (fictional) space, and because they construct a unified fictional film space from the succession of disparate shots.

This is also why Cavell’s dictum that “[a] painting is a world; a photograph is of the world” (Cavell 1979a: 24) is only valid to a limited extent: Of course, the causal connection between a live-action film recording or photograph and its objects is, at least partially, of the world, while there does not seem to be such a direct causal connection in traditional painting. But this all-too facile correlation blurs if one considers the developments of abstract art, where, for instance, the traces left by a brush or other painting tools become the topos of the painting, or if one considers photorealist painters such as Chuck Close or Mike Gorman, who aim at adapting the reality effect of photography to the painted canvas. Also, historically, one should not underestimate the

by the “film within a film” setup of Buster Keaton’s SHERLOCK JR., in which the main character falls asleep during a film screening and in his dream enters the scene projected through the screen, as if the canvas is actually a theatre stage. Even in traditional theatre, audience members are unable to participate in the events enacted on the stage, even though they are physically able to enter the stage. But their presence would destroy the diegetic illusion maintained by the play.

142 This double absence is formulated by Christian Metz in terms of the “scopic regime” (61) which cinema subjects its (voyeuristic) spectator to, as outlined in The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema: “For its spectator the film unfolds in that simultaneously very close and definitely inaccessible “elsewhere” in which the child sees the amorous play of the parental couple, who are similarly ignorant of it and leave it alone, a pure onlooker whose participation is inconceivable” (64). Both quotes can be found in Metz 1982. For a general account of Metz’ theory of cinema and the notion of the scopic regime sketched above, see Casetti 2011.

143 Josef Früchtl describes the relation between audience, screen and film outlined by Cavell in terms of an “imaginary access” to the film world while ontologically spectators do not have access to the film world while it is being screened. For Früchtl, the most important feature of this ontological exclusion is that film spectators are excluded from this fictional world as agent (“als Handelnde”). See Früchtl 2013, 208.
role of indexical tools such as the camera obscura for painters such as Canaletto or Vermeer, who used it for rendering correctly the details and proportions of their subjects.

In the case of contemporary film, it is also questionable to claim of films such as AVATAR (Cameron, 2009), or the outer space scenes in STAR TREK (Abrams, 2009) or STAR WARS: EPISODE III – REVENGE OF THE SITH (Lucas, 2005) that they are simply “of a world” in the sense claimed by Cavell. Such films bring to the fore a general trait of narrative fiction films: They construct imaginary spaces which to a lesser or greater extent rely on recordings of the world – but the world which is eventually perceived by the spectator is, in any case one which does not exist without being imagined by the spectator.

Considering the intricate relation between world, world projections and the spectatorial perception of such projections, it is rather unsurprising that cinema’s alleged affinity to skepticism is a constituting element in classical film theory: Thinkers such as André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer or Jean Epstein, and later psychoanalysis-inspired theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry (Baudry 1986), are fascinated by the peculiar analogies they discover between the way in which the (formerly) new medium of cinema records or elsewise registers reality, and philosophical ideas which run under the name of skepticism. Perhaps best-known is the excitement of realist film theorists about the alleged ability of the film and photo camera to ‘bridge’ the gap or divide that persists between the world “in all its virginal purity” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 15) and the imperfect, incomplete or inaccurate world view of the human beings which inhabit that world. The film theorist and philosopher David N. Rodowick calls such gap assumptions “skepticism’s division of consciousness from the world by the window of perception” (Rodowick 2007a: 141).

Said theorists only indirectly use such analogies as genuinely skepticist ones, since in classical film theory skepticism, i.e. the assumption that there is something wrong with the human epistemological or existential position in the world, is often the unacknowledged grounding basis of the claims of theorists. If this is an accurate characterisation of at least some of the classical film theories, as the following sections will claim it is, then skepticism is also a key factor for understanding the history of thought about cinema.

5.3 Film as Moving Image of Skepticism

For Stanley Cavell, whose book The World Viewed is characterised by Rodowick as “the last great work of classical film theory” (Rodowick 2007a: 79), there is more than a mere analogy between the medium of film and skepticism. Film’s ontological Janus face, its strange mixture of presence and absence, implies an inherent connection between both:

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142 See, for instance, Malcolm Turvey’s influential study Doubting Vision, Film and the Revelationist Tradition on the work of the film theorists Balázs, Epstein, Kracauer and Vertov, who he sees as standing in a revelationist tradition. According to Turvey, revelationists believe that cinema possesses the “ability to uncover features of reality invisible to human vision” (Turvey 2008: 3). Turvey’s study extends to implicit assumptions in certain modernist theories of art.
“Film is a moving image of skepticism: not only is there a reasonable possibility, it is a fact that here our normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist – even, alarmingly, because it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes.” (Stanley Cavell 1979a: 188f., bold highlights are my emphasis)

This is a bold claim which needs further clarification: “film is a moving image of skepticism” – i.e. a moving image of the idea that we may (or even do) not “know what we think we know” (Stroud 2000 [1994]: 174) about the world. By saying that film is a moving image of skepticism, Cavell establishes a general claim about the properties of the medium of film, and not about some films or even a single film, since he does not write that “films are moving images of skepticism”.

Cavell motivates his relating of film to skepticism by introducing another, similar relation between a spectating human being and some kind of ‘reality’. He claims that “our normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist”. I.e., for someone who is in a skeptical predicament, the sensorial impressions of (film) reality, or at least significant portions of it, have no corresponding factual (or, using Deleuzian parlance, ‘actual’) reality, even though they create some kind of (phenomenal) reality. According to Cavell, however, film does not only raise this possibility – he even calls this cinematic entanglement of reality and impressions of reality “a fact,” and not a mere possibility, as in weaker versions of ontological skepticism.

What is more, for Cavell the very act of “viewing […] is all it takes” in order to render film a “moving image of skepticism;” and indeed, as claimed before, the world of the film is constituted by the act of viewing it (and, one should add, hearing and feeling it). But it is a world which provides an impression of reality that does not exactly correspond to a real world. One might be able to find in the world an actor called Christian Bale dressed up in a bat suit, but he would not be the Batman you encounter on the cinema screen. Similarly, you might be able to find a fake space ship that resembles the Millennium Falcon, but it would not be the STAR WARS hyper speed machine you know from the cinema screen. Contemporary digital cinema further complicates the issue: On a set, you will not even be able to meet the animated characters you see interacting on screen with real-life actors: in some cases, on the set you will see a tennis ball dangling from a rope about the height where the head is supposed to be. If Performance Capture Technology is used, someone dressed in a tight black diver’s suit with dots and lines attached to it will function as the blueprint for the animated character later screened in the cinemas. The unsurprising lesson to be drawn from this is: The world of the film is only fictionally real, in the sense that it does not ‘exist’ materially while we are viewing it. It is a world which is inaccessible to us, because it exists in a different ontological realm.

A few sentences later, Cavell extends his claim about the relation between film and skepticism:

“In screening reality, film screens its givenness from us; it holds reality from us, it holds reality before us, i.e. withholds reality before us. We are tantalized at once by our subjection to it and by its subjection to our views of it.” (Cavell 1979a: 189, my emphasis)

Here Cavell introduces a range of different nuances in which film “screen[s] reality,” all of which establish a strange intimate relation between whatever is considered as reality, screened reality and its spectator(s). Screened reality is held at a distance from
the spectator while at the same time being constituted by her through the very act of spectating. In two senses of the word, the silver screen of the cinema theatre functions as a barrier to the world it screens: It projects the world we see and thus makes it perceivable to its spectators, but at the same time it functions as a barrier which bars access to this world (see Cavell 1979a: 23-25). Buster Keaton’s SHERLOCK JR. and Woody Allen’s THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO both rely on the surprise effect of the ontological transition which constitutes the core of their plots (see footnote 139 in this chapter).

Elsewhere, Cavell asks

“[h]ow do movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen. […] It is as though the world’s projection explains our forms of unknownness and of our inability to know. The explanation is not so much that the world is passing us by, as that we are displaced from our natural habitation within it, placed at a distance from it. The screen overcomes our fixed distance; it makes displacement appear as our natural condition.” (Cavell 1979a: 40f.)

Viewing unseen is another variation of the screening of reality; it is structured by the same absence-presence-relation, the same distance-closeness relation. The skeptic at the cinema is released from her usual “fixed distance” from the world, is able to explore it in ways not possible in real life – but at the same time it is only a projected world, this time even in a mechanical sense. However, Cavell here claims that the magic of cinema is constituted by the possibility it offers to see the (cinematic projection of) the world unseen. Strangely, however, the subsistence of this kind of world (which can be perceived by an unseen spectator) depends on exactly this: on the presence of a spectator. Only a spectator is able to transform the propped world of film with its fake facades and assembled montages into a fluid, seamless, ‘wholesome’ world.

No film world without a spectator, and no spectator without a film world

In preparation of this assessment, let us resume the result of the preceding paragraphs first: Film presents us with a world that gives an impression of reality while it only exists in the minds of its spectators; the impressions of its spectators do not have a

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143 Eva Sancho Rodriguez steered my attention to this passage.
144 Cavell’s claim also plays with the ambiguity of the adjective “moving”: Film is moving because of its kinetic characteristics, and it is moving because it emotionally affects its spectators. Film, then, is skepticism in motion, and it is (potentially at least) a version of skepticism which actually affects people because single films act out the hypotheses advanced by rather detached philosophical discourse.
counterpart in ‘physical reality’. This world, the filmed reality as such, is inaccessible to its spectators, just as the real world appears inaccessible to the skeptic. Film is a moving image of skepticism also because its recording mechanisms and viewing conditions parallel the everyday situation claimed by skeptical positions.

Simultaneously, however, the very fact that the world of the film is constituted by the possibility of spectating it subverts the analogy between film and a certain variant of skepticism: If skepticism is merely understood as the epistemological worry that human beings might be unable to perceive the world accurately, while the existence of such a world which gives rise to our cognitions of it is not put into question – then the worry of the skeptic is that the world which we perceive or think about is a distortion or even fiction of the real world, the world “as it is,” so to speak, while leaving the notion of the existence of an external world intact. Traditional skepticist worries are directed at the correspondence between our notions of the world and the factual constitution of that world. But if the subsistence of the world of the film is dependent on the presence of at least one spectator – again: no film world without a spectator –, then the analogy between film and skepticism fails at this point. Film is a moving image of skepticism – but only insofar as it highlights certain aspects of the skepticist predicament, among them the assumed gap between the spectating human being on the one side and the ultimately inaccessible world she spectates on the other.

The relation between film and spectator thus can only partially be characterised in skepticist terms, but Cavell’s arguments are sufficient for maintaining that “skepticism is not simply a topic examined by certain films but an issue that is central to any real understanding of our relationship to the medium of cinema” (Mulhall 1994: 223), as the Cavellian philosopher Stephen Mulhall remarks in his study of Cavell’s work, Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary. Still, it is not sufficient for establishing the metaphor of film as a moving image of skepticism as a comprehensive analogy for the relation between the world and its (human) inhabitants.

5.4 Cavell and the Skepticist Impetus of Classical Film Theory

Cavell’s claim that film is a moving image of skepticism, and in this respect some form of acknowledgement of skepticism, is particularly interesting because film – and its mediatic family member photography – has been, implicitly or explicitly, described by a number of earlier classical film theorists as an antidote to the threat of skepticism. One of them is André Bazin, who is interested in the psychological effect of cinema and the way its photography-based, seemingly mechanic and neutral recording mechanism appears to eradicate all human intervention from photography’s (and film’s) representation or rendering of reality.

The aesthetic qualities of photography, according to Bazin in his essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” reside “in its power to lay bare the realities,” to “present [its object] in all its virginal purity to my attention,” “stripping [the perception of] its object of all those ways of seeing it” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 15). Thus, photography succeeds in delivering a “natural image of a world that we neither know nor can know” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 15). Bazin implies that human ways of seeing reality consist in

145 Compare also the following quote from Bazin’s essay “The Myth of Total Cinema”: “The guiding myth [...]

André Bazin and skepticism
seeing aspects of reality and, consequently, only parts of it (and indeed Bazin uses the substantive “realities” instead of “reality” in the quote above, implying that there is no single, unitary “reality” in the first place). To see an aspect of reality implies seeing it from a certain perspective, in a certain way. But it consists not in seeing reality as it is, which seems to be what Bazin alludes to in talking of “lay[ing] bare the realities”. Perceiving aspects of the world is like putting layers over its “virginal purity,” layers which function like veils that screen us from seeing the world as it is (veils that function as filters which simultaneously ‘distort’ whatever is perceived as well as select from the abundance of material present in front of them).

Bazin even writes that the “photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it.” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 14) This suggests that the camera not only succeeds in objectively connecting humans to the world, it also succeeds in freeing the objects of perception from their bondage to the Kantian Anschauungsformen (forms of sensibility) of time and space, which somehow allows to grasp them independently of their temporal and spatial dependence. However, the ironic twist to this idea is that in order to consider these “freed” objects they must in turn be re-perceived by a subject which is again tied to Kantian Anschauungsformen. But even so, the fundamental insight remains valid: photography and film perpetuate the pictorial presence of things and events past, such as deceased persons who were alive in another time and place.

The anti-skepticist potential of photographic representations of the world is grounded in the mechanistic character of their processes of creation: “[f]or the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 13). This claim, of course, is too general, as has been noted repeatedly in scholarly literature: Even though photographic images in fact are the result of mechanistic, i.e. automatic, recording processes. Humans intervene in the creation of photographs in various ways, through frame selection, choice of film stock, selection of camera perspectives, etc. However, in Bazin’s ontology, the mechanistic recording process assures a direct, uncontaminated connection between the photograph/moving image and the entities photographed. The Bazinian moving image is an index of the world it is a recording of.

Because of this emphasis on the seeming objectivity of the mechanic photographic or cinematic recording process, Bazin is particularly exemplary for realist film theorists. However, he is not a full-fledged realist: in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” he traces the psychological effects of the recording process of cinema and photography without explicitly (albeit implicitly) subscribing to these views. Similarly, in “The Myth of Total Cinema” Bazin builds on the “imaginations” of film pioneers of “cinema as a total and complete representation of reality” (Bazin 1967 [1946]: 20), which he terms as the “guiding myth” of an “integral realism” (Bazin 1967 [1946]: 21) which guides the artistic endeavours of his contemporaries.146

inspiring the invention of cinema, is the accomplishment of [...] an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time.” (Bazin 1967 [1946]: 21) That is to say: the origin of cinema is the attempt to deliver a complete imitation of nature.146 Following his own account of philosophy as providing refractions rather than representations of reality, in his book Philosophy and the Moving Image John Mullarkey dismisses such attempts to form concepts of a ‘total cinema’ or ‘pure cinema’ which is allegedly able to screen reality ‘as such’: “‘Reality’ too is a process to participate in. Once we have accepted this, we can forego the myth of a pure cinema that would correspond with, capture or
Cavell’s work on film is strongly informed by Bazin’s writings. Similar to Bazin and other classical film theorists, Cavell reflects on the absence of the human hand and the involvement of automatism in the creation of film’s (and photography’s) projection of reality. But he disagrees with the idea that film can present us with reality as such “in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 15). Cavell prefers to say, in a more cautious fashion, that “the basis of the medium of movies is photographic and that a photograph is of reality or nature” (Cavell 1979a: 16).

Realist film theorists hoped to find in film (and photography) an ally which allows them to bridge the gap that allegedly persists between, on the one side, the world as it is, and human beings who perceive the world on the other side. The discovery of a bridging device is what is regarded as the antidote to skepticism. For Cavell, the very hope that film might close the gap is misplaced. He evades any easy affiliation with film realism since he is all too aware of the epistemic limitations of the camera:

“I am content to proceed on the assumption that the camera is no better off epistemologically or scientifically than the naked eye – that the camera provides views of reality only on the assumption that we normally do, apart from the camera, see reality, i.e., see live persons and real things in actual spaces.” (Cavell 1979a: 192f.)

Cavell’s existential epistemology (see chapter 4) limits the anti-skepticist promise of the camera in saying that it provides “views of reality” and therefore cannot, by implication, present the world in its “virginal purity”. He also emphasises that the camera provides these views of reality “only on the assumption that we normally do, apart from the camera, see reality”. The camera, including the views it produces, is just another part of the reality we are able to perceive, and it provides only more views of reality in addition to our own camera-independent views of reality. It does not provide an epistemologically improved way of world access and is thus not an antidote against skepticism.

Cavell’s parlance draws attention to the insight that the camera’s views of reality are, eventually, viewed by a human spectator (after all, this is what photography and filmmaking were invented for). Hence, even if the camera would provide the desired objective views on the world, these views eventually end up as just another spectatorial object of inescapably epistemologically limited viewers. This, I would add, is another reason why “the camera is no better off epistemologically […] than the naked eye”.

Is there not, then, a contradiction between Cavell’s claim that film is a moving image of skepticism, and the claim that the camera provides views of reality “only on the assumption that we normally do, apart from the camera, see reality”? No, because, firstly, Cavell’s claim can be understood as a model of the way in which skepticism is usually characterised, secondly, these views of reality might still be fundamentally flawed; and, thirdly, as chapter 4 and the subsequent sections of the present chapter spell out in more detail, Cavell relies on a modified conception of skepticism: it is an existential rather than epistemological position.

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147 See Cavell 1979a: 13 and 16ff.

148 However, Cavell has sometimes mistakenly been described as an advocate of full-fledged film realism. See Rothman and Keane 2000: 23 and 54ff.
The view from nowhere

5.5 The Skeptic’s Desire for a View from Nowhere

The anti-skepticist hopes of classical film theory and Cavell’s dismissal of them provide another point of entry to Cavell’s characterisation of skepticism and the resulting exceptional position of film with regard to skepticism: Rather than presenting the world in its virginal purity, film’s anti-skeptical promises lay bare the desire of human beings to attain an unlimited “view from nowhere” on the world, a standpoint which would ensure them that they know everything they think they know (and everything they need to know, one might add). This desire for a “view from nowhere” is a desire for a detached standpoint from outside, or from the ‘borders’ of the world which would provide a perspective on the world as it ‘really’ is. This detached position can be described as external, objective, and unrestricted – a position which, the skeptic claims, is unattainable for us.

But if we could attain a view from nowhere, what would our relation to the world be? First, we would be able to ‘see’ the world as a whole, i.e., we would not see only parts of it. We would be faced with the world in its entirety, grasped at one glance. Such a standpoint not only would provide us with an objective, i.e. impartial and detached, view on the world, but also with a complete view, from all possible angles and perspectives. As such observers, we would be present everywhere at the same time. We would be (like) God – or at least in his position.

This means that, in addition to being cut off, detached from the-world-as-it-is because of our insufficient cognitive faculties, we are also too close to the world: We are entangled with it instead of occupying the desired ‘nowhere view’. Human beings, it turns out, are doubly limited: they are too detached from the world (because of the alleged gap between them and the world), and they are too close to the world (because they are unable to attain an encompassing view from nowhere).

For Cavell, the desire for epistemic transcendence is the source of the skepticist problem with our epistemic as well as existential position in the world. The very description of the wish list that comes along with the skeptic’s position, however, already implies its inherent absurdity: If a view from nowhere is what a skeptic wishes for, one could say that only God can occupy such a position.

If the desire cannot be tamed, the only way out seems to be to learn to live with that desire. In the essay “Crossing Paths” Cavell writes, in relation to a discussion of Wittgenstein’s stance toward skepticism, that the “battle of the human with itself [...] creates the possibility, and necessity, in philosophy, of skepticism. I express this in the first part of The Claim of Reason [...] as the discovery of the absence of criteria for distinguishing the real from the imaginary, Descartes says from dreams, I say also from simulacra (though I did not use the word) [...]. The conclusion I drew from such cases was, unlike all other accounts of Philosophical Investigations that I...”

149 This phrase is coined by Thomas Nagel in The View from Nowhere. See Nagel 1986, particularly chapter 5.
150 An echo of this desire can be found in Wittgenstein’s claim in the Tractatus: “Das Subjekt gehört nicht zur Welt, sondern es ist eine Grenze der Welt” (Wittgenstein 1998 [1922]: § 5.632, see also §§ 5.633 and 5.634).
151 Cavell talks about ‘the world as a whole’ in detail in The Claim of Reason (Cavell 1979b: 45).
152 Thus interpreted, the desire for a view from nowhere implies a religious or spiritual reading of skepticism. For the religious roots of modern skepticism in the religious crises that preceded and accompanied the reformation and counter-reformation period in the 16th and 17th century, see the introduction, Popkin 2003 and Perler 2006.
153 The paperback edition cover of Nagel’s The View from Nowhere, which supposedly mirrors the topic of the book, is ironically designed with Romanticist painter Caspar David Friedrich’s landscape painting Das Große Gehege (Ostra-Gehege) bei Dresden (ca. 1832, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden).
knew of then, that Wittgenstein had not in fact or in intention provided a refutation of skepticism but had articulated a source of it. Human language is such that dissatisfaction with it can never be stilled; the question is not so much whether we can live within our finite means […] as whether we can become responsible for our infinite desires.” (Cavell 2005 [2002]: 366, my emphasis)154

From this perspective, the desire to transcend the limits posed by the human position in the world is a (or even the) source of skepticism, because one of the inevitable consequences of this desire is an eventual dissatisfaction with the limited human position. This is exactly how his Harvard colleague Hilary Putnam summarises Cavell’s interpretation of the skeptic’s position:

“[S]kepticism, as Cavell sees it, is a perpetual dissatisfaction with the human position, a demand for a God’s Eye View or Nothing, that degrades the only perspective that is actually available to us. It is this downgrading of the human position, this aspiration to be outside our own skins (nothing else would be good enough), that Cavell calls ‘skepticism’” (Putnam 1993: viii)

According to Cavell, this dissatisfaction should be taken seriously as another part of the conditio humana, which is why he writes in “Crossing Paths” that the real question posed by skepticism is “whether we can become responsible for our infinite desires”. Hence, the proper aim of a philosophical preoccupation with skepticism is not a ‘refutation’ or some other kind of dismissal of skepticism. According to Putnam, Cavell sees

“that the urge to be more than (what we have known as being) human is part of being human. […] ‘Skepticism’ is inseparable from the emancipatory interest; that is why Cavell has repeatedly said that the war between our skeptical and anti-skeptical impulses cannot and must not have a victor. Cavell’s aim is not to ‘cure’ us of our conflicts but to teach us to live gracefully (and gratefully) with them.” (Putnam 1993: ix)

If the “urge to be more than [human]” and the “dissatisfaction” with the conditio humana are indeed part of what constitutes the experience of being human, then arguably they should find also their expression in film and in other cultural enterprises, whether in a philosophically elaborated form or only in a more or less illustrative fashion. Cavell’s Wittgensteinian outline of skepticism thus prompts the very attempt to investigate further the way in which skepticism appears in film.155

154 In that quote, Cavell is concerned predominantly with human dissatisfaction with language. For him, Wittgenstein shows that the “drama” of “human self-dissatisfaction” is “enacted in philosophy’s dissatisfaction with or disappointment with ordinary language” (all quotes in Cavell 2002: 365). The skeptical dissatisfaction with language is also fuelled by the limits of language to express what human beings feel they know about the world: feeling as a form of knowing the world (see, for instance, Sobchack 2007) Here, film might reveal its potential as an anti-skeptical antidote and, like other forms of art, express emotions or insights which have not yet been put into words (or cannot be put into words). The film critic Michael Althen once wrote that in cinema there may be “moments in which the cinema knows more than oneself. And these they are probably not even deep truths, but only a specific glance at outer appearances, or at a constellation of influences which congeal into something we would call present, if we had to.” (Althen 2002: 167, my translation)

155 The idea of a cultural manifestation of philosophy is in line with Cavell’s other books and essays, such as Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare, where he extends the search for manifestations of skepticism to other arts, most importantly in Shakespeare’s dramas. See Cavell 2003 and Cavell 1988. Josef Früchtl interprets Cavell’s account of skepticism as not so much dissatisfaction with the limits of the human condition but with the limits of the modern subject, viz. with modern subjectivity. See Früchtl 2013: chapter 2 and chapter 9. On the role of the modern subject in modern culture and contemporary film see also Früchtl 2004.
Cavell assumes a Kantian stance in arguing that the very limits of our capacity to gain knowledge constitute a *conditio sine qua non* for human experience or knowledge. For Cavell, “the limitations of our knowledge are not failures of it” (Cavell 1979b: 241), as he concludes in his seminal book on skepticism *The Claim of Reason*. Drawing on Kant, Cavell attacks skepticist positions that are based on absolute conceptions of knowledge as “criticizing knowledge against an inhuman idea of knowledge” (Cavell 2004: 128), an idea which is motivated by a craving for generality which in turn abstracts from specific, local forms of knowledge. For Cavell, the limits of the human position in the world are not degrading but the basis for the very possibility of epistemic knowledge, and consequently not “failures” of knowledge.

As outlined in chapter 4.2., Cavell claims that our relation to the world as a whole “is not one of knowing” (Cavell 1979b: 45), but one of *acknowledgment* of our position in the world. In thinking about our position in the world (or about our relation to others), we already acknowledge *that* there is some kind of relation. In this respect, Cavell’s concept of acknowledgement appears inspired by Martin Heidegger’s notion of Being-in-the-World. The world which gives rise to skeptical doubt is one we are forced to accept in the first place, since it is the world which we are thrown into, which prefigures everything we are able to say or think about it. The world is a Given, it is an existential precondition of our existence as human beings and of everything that follows from it – and therefore cannot be something we ‘know,’ as Cavell puts it in “The Avoidance of Love”: “Since we cannot know that the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing” (Cavell 1976b [1969]: 95).

Josef Früchtl argues that the move from the concept of knowledge to the concept of acknowledgement enables Cavell to reinterpret skepticism, as being not so much an epistemological problem rather than an existential position. Früchtl identifies two forms of the conditions underlying skepticist doubt; a cognitivist one which generalises the insight that knowledge of single entities or events in the world always calls for an epistemological relation between subject and object of knowledge, and a psychological-anthropological one which is an expression of the skeptic’s fear of human finitude (see Früchtl 2013: 200). In the terms outlined in the paragraphs above, the psychological-anthropological form of skepticism is an expression of the idea that the limitations of our knowledge are failures of it.

If we draw the contrast in these terms, the skeptic as seen by Cavell commits a fundamental category error: She transposes the epistemological insight into the limitations of our access to knowledge of the world into an overarching metaphysical position. This metaphysical position of the skeptic is one which “generalises the strict

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156 The notion of ‘craving for generality’ used by Cavell is originally coined by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who criticises the scientist, reductionist attitude of philosophers of his time, who try to arrive at the smallest possible number of maximal explanations for their problems (see Wittgenstein 1958: 18). For Cavell’s philosophical teacher Thompson Clarke, the skeptic’s craving expresses a desire for taking off the “limiting eyeglasses of the restricted” (Clarke 1972: 762) in order to gain an unrestricted and all-encompassing glance on the world (see Stroud 2000 [1972]: 30). Thomas Nagel employs a similar metaphor in *The View from Nowhere* (see Thomas Nagel 1986).


158 In his article “Can There Be an Epistemology of Moods?”, Stephen Mulhall puts this insight clearly in the following words: “[T]he world’s existence – unlike the existence of a given object in the world – is not something which we ‘believe,’ not an ‘opinion’ that we hold on the basis of evidence” (Mulhall 2002b: 33). Both quotes are referenced in Abbott 2013: fn10.
model of knowledge and declare it as the foundation of all forms of knowledge” (Früchtl 2013: 200, my translation).

This is why “an overcoming of skepticism cannot be a merely theoretical task” (Früchtl 2013: 201, my translation) which aims at showing that knowledge of the world indeed can be representative in single cases. This would be a merely epistemological exercise. Rather, the task is to “expose [skepticism’s] subcutaneous strategies of suppression in a theoretically plural way” (Früchtl 2013: 201, my translation) in order to re-establish a fundamentally reliable correlation between the subject and its world. Put shortly: “Knowledge eventually needs to relegate itself to acknowledgement” (Früchtl 2013: ibid., my translation).

In The Claim of Reason, his extensive study on skepticism, Cavell formulates this basal, pre-argumentative acknowledgement of the world in terms of an aphorism:

“To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world. For if there is a correct blindness, only love has it. And if you find that you have fallen in love with the world, then you would be ill-advised to offer an argument of its worth by praising its Design. Because you are bound to fall out of love with your argument, and you may thereupon forget that the world is wonder enough, as it stands. Or not.” (Cavell 1979b: 431).

As Früchtl writes, Cavell’s aphorism suggests that falling in love as a form of acknowledgement is the only adequate answer to the problem posed by the epistemological skepticist, since it turns the screw the other way round: instead of calling for salvation from the epistemological limits of our knowledge of the world, it tells us “to live gracefully (and gratefully) with” the conflicts instilled upon us by skepticism. This call for acknowledgement also grounds Cavell’s film-philosophy, and it is one of the most important traits in which, Früchtl argues, Cavell differs from Gilles Deleuze, the other big philosopher of film of the 1970s and 1980s, because he presents a “philosophy of cinema […] which does not call for salvation” (Früchtl 2013, my translation).

So far, skepticism has been described as a desire for epistemological transcendence which results in an existentially problematic position. Film theory along Bazinian lines interprets this desire as the desire to close a gap between humans and the world, with the (film or photo) camera as a device which, at least psychologically, might be or is able to close that gap.

Another classical film theorist about to be discussed in the next section, Siegfried Kracauer, pursues another explication of the skepticist predicament. It echoes the second limitation inherent in Nagel’s desire for a view from nowhere: human beings are, metaphorically speaking, too close to the world, too immersed in their generalisations and preconceptions, in order to perceive the world as it is. It is film’s realist potential which for Kracauer can provide an antidote.

5.6  Kracauer and the Redemption of Physical Reality

Kracauer is another classical film theorist whose work is inspired by skepticist presuppositions. He revels in what he sees as cinema’s capacities to record rather than
transform reality, as it happens in other arts which are more dependent on the ‘intervention’ of the human hand. Kracauer’s theory of film is an example for a theory which is based on the assumption that human beings are too close to the world in order to allow them to perceive reality unclouded by the limits of their own subjectivity. While in Bazin the camera closes a gap, in Kracauer it lifts a veil of perception.159

For Kracauer, the photo and film camera are able to record the material world as it is, something which human beings in Western societies do not manage to do. He claims that the “truly decisive reason for the elusiveness of physical reality is the habit of abstract thinking we have acquired under the reign of science and technology” (Kracauer 1960: 299f.). Hence, our very capacity for conceptual thinking alienates us from the world we live in, since concepts by their very nature are abstractions. Kracauer follows a long philosophical tradition according to which the concepts we use also influence the way we experience and perceive the world.160 He is specifically concerned about western societies’ indulgence in abstraction, which he contrasts with an attention to details, an urge for concretion (Kracauer 1960: 296f.).

As a consequence of this “indulgence in abstraction,” things in physical reality are no more taken by us for what they are, nor do they derive their value from what they intrinsically are.161 Rather, they become implemented into a larger context and thereby become a means for a different end. Kracauer’s description of artists’ use of elements from reality mirrors this indulgence:

“To the extent that painting, literature, the theater, etc., involve nature at all, they do not really represent it. Rather, they use it as raw material from which to build works which lay claim to autonomy. In the work of art nothing remains of the raw material itself, or, to be precise, all that remains of it is so molded that it implements the intentions conveyed through it. In a sense, the real-life material disappears in the artist’s intentions. [...] [T]he significance of a work of art determines that of its elements; or conversely, its elements are significant in so far as they contribute to the truth or beauty inherent in the work as a whole. Their function is not to reflect reality but bear out a vision of it.” (Kracauer 1960: 300f., my emphasis)

In short: An artist “overwhelms rather than records reality” (Siegfried Kracauer 1960: 300). For Kracauer, it is the very “opportunity reserved for the cinematic medium” (Siegfried Kracauer 1960: 301) to record and represent reality as it is, without being transformed by whatever artistic intentions or concepts. Cinema’s ability to give us reality in the raw is what, in Kracauer’s view, really makes it special and distinguishes it from other means of grasping reality. This is how he ends up with his prescriptive realist theory of cinema.

But, one might object, the film camera bears out a vision of reality as well – in particular since many filmmakers have artistic aspirations. Kracauer, however, does not

159 Here, Kracauer’s theory of film can be read as a rebuttal of Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy, and as an allusion to Schopenhauer’s proverbial celebration of the Maya, the “Schleier des Trugs” (Schopenhauer 1859[1859]: §3).
160 Compare Plato’s theory of forms or Kant’s transcendental idealism. According to the latter experiences are co-constituted by the concepts we employ to understand them. See the Vorrede in Kant’s Kritik der reinen Vernunft (Kant 1987[1787]).
161 Some passages in Bazin also celebrate the photograph’s “impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it” (Bazin 1967[1945]: 15). However, Kracauer talks more explicitly about the exaggerated proximity of humans to their world, as noted above.
appreciate films that aspire to be art in the classical sense due to the way in which they distort representations of reality:

“Art in film is reactionary because it symbolizes wholeness and thus pretends to the continued existence of beliefs which ‘cover’ physical reality in both senses of the word. The result are films which sustain the prevailing abstractness”. (Siegfried Kracauer 1960: 301)

Kracauer does not exclude the possibility of ‘film as art’, but claims that an artistic film would be “art with a difference”:

“All this does not imply that camera-realism and art exclude each other. But if films which really show what they picture are art, they are art with a difference. Indeed, along with photography, film is the only art which exhibits its raw material” (Kracauer 1960: 302).

It is the very ability to get to the core of reality, to “exhibit” the material world in the raw, which makes cinema special, and an art with a difference, in Kracauer’s view. Cinema is Kracauer’s antidote to the intimate detachment from the world he finds in his fellow human beings. His conception has many elements already known from skepticist theories: human beings are placed in a position remote from the world as it ‘really’ is; the tendency to think about and experience the world via abstract conceptions impedes the perception of things in the world as they are; it impedes the human perceiver from distancing herself from the world in order to perceive it ‘as it is’. The way human beings perceive and experience things throws a veil over things as they really are, or blurs, or otherwise distorts, human access to them. The remedy to this are the film camera and, to a lesser extent, the photo camera. These two devices come way closer to reality than humans ever could.

Peculiarly, in Kracauer’s account the world, as it is, is so close, so very much within our reach, that we are unable to grasp it – and thereby he mirrors Nagel’s general philosophical position described in the earlier passages of this paper:

“In recording and exploring physical reality, film exposes to view a world never seen before, a world as elusive as Poe’s purloined letter, which cannot be found because it is within everybody’s reach. What is meant here is of course not any of those extensions of the everyday world which are being annexed by science but our ordinary physical environment itself. Strange as it may seem, although streets, faces, railway stations, etc., lie before our eyes, they have remained largely invisible so far.” (Kracauer 1960: 299)

Kracauer’s claim that film is the only art which exhibits its raw material is misguided, since, for instance, collage art or Marcel Duchamp’s or Joseph Beuys’ objet trouvé art quite literally exhibits its raw material. In addition, even traditional art literally exhibits its raw material, even though in a sense not intended by Kracauer: paint, visible brush strokes, frames, the texture of the canvas etc.

Kracauer’s account echoes Wittgenstein’s derision of the philosopher’s methods in On Certainty: “Es ist, als sehe ich ein Gemälde […] und erkenne von weitem sofort und ohne den geringsten Zweifel, was es darstellt. Nun trete ich aber näher: und da sehe ich eine Menge Flecke verschiedener Farben, die alle höchst vieldeutig sind und durchaus keine Gewißheit geben.” (Wittgenstein 1984: §481). The situation described by Wittgenstein parallels the situation which the main character of Antonioni’s BLOW UP finds himself in: He enlarges photographs he has taken in a park to such an extreme extent that he only sees grainy configurations of shades of White, Grey and Black which are highly ambivalent and open to interpretation.
5.7 The Skeptic and ‘the’ Camera

Kracauer’s account resonates with Bazin’s and Cavell’s assumptions that the photo camera is an instrument that mechanically, or automatically, records reality viz. is a recording of reality. With Béla Balázs, Kracauer shares the conviction that cinema is able to redeem to us the capability to rediscover the details which can be found in the world. These positions retrace the dualism outlined in the earlier sections of the chapter: On the one side there is the world in its so-called virginal purity, on the other side there are humans whose world view is hopelessly contaminated by their perceptual apparatus or by the concepts they use. They are thus incapable of perceiving the world as it is. Enter the camera, which allegedly has the potential to function as a bridge which crosses the epistemological divide between humankind and the world, or as a device which lifts the “veil” which bars a proper perspective on the world.

While Bazin’s description of the camera’s psychological appeal emphasises the imperfection, and thus fundamental insufficiency, of man’s cognitive faculties, for Kracauer man is not necessarily separated from the world but rather is due to his own fault: because of his indulgence in abstractions. Kracauer emphasises the camera’s ability to reveal small details of everyday life on screen; things which inhabitants of the urban world might never even notice in actual everyday life, such as a specific expression on a face or the uniqueness of an ordinary street (see Kracauer 1960: 303). For Kracauer, this ability is cinema’s great contribution to modern life. However, it is an insight which he transforms into an overly prescriptive realist theory of film. It is ironic that someone who starts with a certain anti-theoretical, or at least anti-conceptualistic, impetus ends up being one of the patrons of yet another suffix theory with an “-ism,” film realism.

The artist as described by Bazin as well as the Cavellian skeptic share the same desires: They want to gain access to the world as it is, unrestricted by what Bazin calls human’s “inescapable subjectivity”. They want to transcend the limits of the human perspective, gain an external, unlimited standpoint, a detached view on the world which for skeptics is inaccessible. In Bazin’s ‘psychological account,’ film and photo cameras are means for making human beings believe that they can overcome and bridge the gap that prevents them from having direct access to the world. Conceiving of the camera in this way, it functions as a replacement (Stellvertreter) which enables human beings to

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165 See Balázs 2001 [1924]: 16ff. See also the chapter “The Face of Man” Balázs’ Theory of the Film (Balázs 1970 [1949]: 60-88.
166 Even though one should be cautious in ascribing this desire to Bazin himself, his use of words over and over again implies that he is certainly drawn to the temptations of skeptical desires. See the following quote from “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” already discussed earlier: “The aesthetic qualities of photography are to be sought in is power to lay bare the realities. It is not for me to separate off, in the complex fabric of the objective world, here a reflection on a damp sidewalk, there the gesture of a child. Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love. By the power of photography, the natural image of a world that we neither know nor can know, nature at last does more than imitate art: she imitates the artist.” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 15, my emphasis).

I confine myself here to point out the implicitly skeptical tone of Bazin’s formulations, such as “lay bare the realities,” “objective world,” “impassive lens,” “stripping its objects of all those ways of seeing it” (does that mean: revealing the way of seeing it?), “preconceptions,” “spiritual dust and grime,” eyes that cover the objects with this spiritual dust and grime (here ‘to cover’ seems to mean: to separate oneself off from the world), longing for “virginal purity”. He also talks of “a world that we neither know nor can know”. Bazin’s use of metaphors exemplifies Edward Branigan’s point that the language games played in a particular film theory determine its perspective on film, and its emphasis on the elements of film it finds most important. See Branigan 2006: 22ff.
gain the desired all-encompassing view of the world (as it really is; as a whole). In this respect, the camera is able to ‘do’ what human beings are not, because it is not restrained by the inescapable subjectivity of human beings: No painter’s hand interferes in the process of mechanical reproduction of the world. In Kracauer’s account, the position of human beings in the world is slightly varied: we are not able to see the world as it is because the abstract concepts we use to access the world (and think about it) impede us from seeing the world and all its small details as it is.

As tempting as these notions and metaphors may appear, the belief that the camera can—in the best case—give us an access to that otherwise inaccessible view from nowhere is misguided for a couple of reasons. First, even a camera is still subjected to conditions of recording: think only of the selective influences of framing, film stock, lighting as well as the challenges of film sound (diegetic sound vs. non-diegetic sound, cocktail party effect, the dependency of film sound on the frequency range of microphones, etc.). They all influence the audiovisual perspective of the camera on the world. Thus, even a camera distorts, selects, shapes, or frames views on reality. Second, whatever has been recorded by a (film) camera must be reinterpreted by their spectators. Even if the audiovisual means of recording reality would reveal the world ‘as it is,’ without an interpreter they would be on the same side of the divide between the world as it is and its human spectators. Put differently, even if a camera is able to occupy the skeptic’s desired external standpoint, we would in the end be faced again with the same ‘limited’ human interpretations of the world, or of reality as before. In sum: even if we accept the skeptic’s terms, the camera does not provide us with a view from nowhere.

5.8 Insufficiency vs. Incompleteness

The theories discussed in this chapter operate within a binary structure: Either cinematic technology functions as a bridging device or it does not. My main objection against the assumption of the film camera as a bridging device was that it still does not meet the most fundamental skepticist worry that the human condition is insufficient for the acquisition of knowledge. In Cavell, Putnam and Früchtl, we saw that a possible way of meeting skepticist worries consists in interpreting them as the outcome of an existential rather than epistemological position and that the appropriate move is to ‘tame’ the skepticist desire instead of attempting to refute it—thereby acknowledging it.

Even though Cavell’s existential position proposes to live with the idea of imperfect knowledge, the fundamental skepticist claim against the inescapable subjectivity of the human condition remains. This comes down to the position that whatever data humans

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167 The early Heidegger would say: The camera is not a being-in-the-world, or Dasein, but something which is ready-to-hand: a Zuhandene. From a Heideggerian point of view the camera is not in the world because to “be” in the world presupposes that one is a sentient being conscious of one’s own existence.

168 In personal correspondence, Josef Früchtl suggested a play with words: Even though the camera does not provide a view from nowhere, it provides a view from now-here and thereby provides a snapshot of how the recorded portion of the world was at the exact moment the photograph (or film scene) was taken (the camera is thus a kind of indexical expression-machine). Leaving aside problems caused by the possibility of manipulating exposure duration, lens aperture and other parameters, this is in fact a viable reductio ad absurdum against the skeptic: The camera’s ability to ‘capture the fleeting moment’ thus (literally) exposes the skeptic to the limitations of a view from nowhere, because it would not provide a view from now and here, a specific glimpse at states and events of the world, which can arguably be regarded as just as valuable as an all-encompassing viewpoint.
acquire about the world is subjected to the inescapable subjectivity of human world access. As a consequence, even the most accurate cinematic recording device would still be subjected to the skepticist worry, because even an automatic (cinematic) recording of the world needs to be interpreted by humans.

The possibility of doubt in every single case of alleged knowledge, however, does not logically allow the inference that all of our knowledge of the world is fallible. A generalised inadequacy assumption about human vision is unintelligible if one adopts a Wittgensteinian line of argument, as Malcolm Turvey points out:

“General, systematic doubt within the context of sight is equally as unintelligible as in other contexts. Doubting and testing what we see is only intelligible against a background of certainties that are taken for granted, such as the existence of our eyes. And it is only because of the logical possibility of being certain of what we see that, when we have grounds for doing so, it makes sense to doubt it.” (Turvey 2008: 112).

In On Certainty, Wittgenstein repeatedly argues from different angles that doubt is intelligible only within pre-accepted belief system and that a “doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt.” (Wittgenstein 1984: §450) Wittgenstein claims that doubt makes sense only within the accepted rules of a specific language game: “[T]he questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.” (Wittgenstein 1984: §341, see also ibid.: §317) In other words, Wittgenstein expresses a contextualist theory of knowledge (or certainty): “Our knowledge forms an enormous system. And only within this system has a particular bit the value we give it.” (Wittgenstein 1984: §410) Hence, in his notes Wittgenstein tries to outline a contextualist position within which he reflects on the meaning and mutual relation of epistemological concepts such as “doubt,” “certainty,” “belief,” or “knowledge.” Since for Wittgenstein all variants of doubt only make sense on the basis of a „Boden meiner Überzeugungen” (§ 248), this basis cannot deliver arguments for skeptics who are convinced that human knowledge is deficient. Wittgenstein’s epistemology is thus, along with Kant’s transcendental philosophy, an important basis for Cavell’s claim that “the limitations of our knowledge are not failures of it”.

But what happens if the insufficiency assumption is replaced by an incompleteness assumption? That is, if what is at stake is not the inadequacy of the human condition – which implies that we can never be certain that whatever we think we know about the world is based on reliable information – but rather the worry that the human senses will never give us enough information about the world we live in? According to such a position, our assumptions about the world are quantitatively deficient, not qualitatively.

170 German original text: “die Fragen, die wir stellen, und unsere Zweifel beruhen darauf, daß gewisse Sätze vom Zweifel ausgenommen sind, gleichsam die Angeln, in welchen jene sich bewegen.”
171 German original text: “Unser Wissen bildet ein großes System. Und nur in diesem System hat das Einzelne den Wert, den wir ihm beilegen.”
172 These are the conditions under which the so-called Gettier debate in analytic philosophy has been discussed. In 1963, the philosopher Edmund L. Gettier undermined the then common understanding that knowledge can be defined as “justified true belief” (see Gettier 1963).
Under such assumptions the role of the camera changes: It no longer replaces the allegedly inadequate human senses but extends or supplements them, and thereby narrows the alleged gap between humans and the world (instead of simply closing it). And indeed, this provides an accurate common sense description of the way in which (moving) image technology historically has enriched human knowledge and multiplied the number of imaginable perspectives on the world.

But, as Turvey points out, it is easy at this point to confuse two revelatory potentiae of the cinematic. He argues that it is misleading to compare cinema to revelatory visual technologies such as microscopes or telescopes in general (see Turvey 2008: 116f.): Films do not “reveal truths about reality” (Turvey 2008: 117) in the scientific sense, i.e. it is not the revelation of natural phenomena which are indiscernible for the ordinary human senses which distinguish the medium from other ways of representation. Classical film theorists such as Epstein, Kracauer and Balázs (who are the prime focus of study of Turvey’s study Doubting Vision) failed to clearly distinguish the film camera’s ability to extend (or refine) ordinary human vision from the latter’s replacement with visual tools in the microscopic or macroscopic range. As a mere extension, film shows what, in principle, is accessible to the human eye. While Turvey is basically right, he neglects the fact that scientific imagery and film have never been two totally separated areas. Experimental films or more unorthodox fiction films have always explored the narrato-aesthetic potential of ‘scientific’ imaging devices.

The first experiments with the technology of the moving image indeed did not result from a concern to tell stories in a new way, but rather in order to solve specific technological challenges which made possible new scientific discoveries: Joseph Nicéphore Niépce (1765-1833), credited with the production of the first permanent photograph in 1825, was an inventor (who also invented a combustion engine); Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904) and Étienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904), who established early practical applications of tracing motion via photography (see figures 5.1. and 5.2), were inventors and scientists without an explicit interest in the artistic potential of their medium, but the devices they invented for their focus of research were later picked up by filmmakers for narrative as well as aesthetic purposes.

Fig. 5.1: Chronophotographic study of man pole vaulting (Marey, 1890-1891)

Fig. 5.2: Running (galloping) (Muybridge, 1878-79)

173 Malcolm Turvey adapts this position and claims, following a broadly Wittgensteinian line of reasoning, that “the cinema [...] augments our already existing capacity to find out about the environment around us using our eyes.” (Turvey 2008: 113) The augmentation position builds on the presumption that incompleteness is not inadequacy.

174 The most succinct study of the cinematic relevance of pre-cinematic explorations of time is Mary Ann Doane’s influential study The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive (Doane 2002).
The epistemological usefulness of imaging technologies is obvious in their omnipresence in medical and natural-scientific research, in the significance of x-rays, CAT scans or MRT scans for medical diagnoses, in the role of thermal imaging for the detection of infected passengers at airports during the SARS epidemic or for analysing the chemical constitution of far-away stars in astronomic research, in the effectiveness of super slow-motion shots for systematically analysing animal motion, assessing the impact of a bullet passing through an apple or identifying the effects of frontal crashes on the front area of automobiles. Imaging technology, often data-enhanced, plays a significant role in understanding and shaping the world as it is today.

The omnipresence of such means of visualisation reveals how natural such ‘views’ on the world, such ‘extensions’ of the human senses (McLuhan), have become in popular discourse. By means of uncovering a more complex and detailed picture of the world, these media actually contribute to diminishing the “gap” between humans and the world hoped for by classical film theorists, even though they do not necessarily close that gap but rather add more nuanced perspectives on the world.

This double extension is part of a long-standing tradition in experimental filmmaking, starting with Marey’s “pre-cinematic” experiments in chronophotography and Muybridge’s stop-action photographs. Silent filmmakers experimented with the epistemological potential of the film camera, e.g. by exploring the rhythms and almost geometrical structures of urban cityscapes in MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA (Vertov, 1929) or BERLIN – DIE SYMPHONIE DER GROßSTADT (Ruttman, 1927), or by systematically discovering the expressive potential of montage (Kuleshov’s montage experiments). This tradition continues until now, as shown, for instance, by Godfrey Reggio’s QATSI trilogy (KOAANISQATSI: LIFE OUT OF BALANCE (1982), PWAQQATSI: LIFE IN TRANSFORMATION (1988), NAQOYQATSI: LIFE AS WAR (2002)). Reggio’s films use extreme time lapse and slow motion cinematography as well as other expressive cinematic techniques in order to expose the radical transformation of natural landscapes into increasingly technologized and industrialised environments.

The most elaborated experimental film project on the epistemological and expressive potential of the medium of film is perhaps Gustav Deutsch’ 12-part film essay FILM IST (part 1-6: 1998, part 7-12: 2002). The first six parts celebrate the scientific laboratory “as the first birth place of cinematography” (Deutsch). In film chapters such as “movement and time,” “light and darkness” or “an instrument,” whose titles continue the open sentence “film is…,” Deutsch systematically shows how the use of cinematographic techniques enriches the aesthetic repertoire as well as the visual means of exploring the world. In particular, the use of time lapse and slow motion, extreme close-ups and panorama shots, the systematic tracking of objects and living beings in motion, the invention of visual recording mechanisms such as x-rays or inverted colour spectrums all have added to the inventory of possible human perspectives on the world.

From an epistemological perspective, however, the fact that cinematic media are crucial for contemporary knowledge gain does not signify that they actually increase or

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175 Parts 7 to 12 present a systematic inventory of commonly used aesthetic devices and themes of narrative fiction films. Other experimental filmmakers also systematically explore the narrative and aesthetic tradition or creative possibilities of film, e.g. KRISTALL (Girardet and Müller, 2006) or the various works of Bruce Conner, Bill Morrison or Douglas Gordon, such as 24 HOUR PSYCHO (Gordon, 1993).
improve our knowledge of the world. Instead, from a skepticist position that embraces the insufficiency assumption the Cavellian objection still applies: these means of gaining knowledge are “no better off epistemologically” than the naked eye because eventually the data produced by them still need to be evaluated by humans. If one subscribes to the position – rejected by Cavell – that the “inescapable” human subjectivity is a flaw or fundamental restriction for all attempts to gain knowledge, then no way of enhancing mediatic access to the world is enough (as long as one does not develop a Nietzschean-inspired “transhumanistic” vision in which humans in the flesh are replaced by machinic humans which are unhampered by the flaws of the organic human body).}

5.9 Skepticism and the Lebenswelt

The world, cinematically represented, is a world which, qua suspension of disbelief, I am tempted to believe to know, but it is also a world which I do not have direct access to. During a screening, the world of the film is literally passing before the audience’s eyes and ears, and even though the world of the film has been shot and assembled in the past, during a screening it has the character of an “eternal present” (Shaviro: 67), a sense of perpetual now-here. The perceived world of the film is that world, because it is constituted through the very process of being perceived, with no external counterpart to match it exactly. It does not make sense to inquire about the ‘real world’ that lies behind or is the ground of the world of the film. Each film creates a world of its own, even though it consists of building blocks taken from the supposedly ‘real’ world.

There are thus limits to the notion of film as a moving image of skepticism because the world of the film is, ontologically speaking, always already a projected reality. Films aspire to a certain degree of credibility in rendering the worlds they present as being conceivable and verisimilar (to the world as we know it). At the least they try to establish a conceivable ontology in which, for instance, travels through time and space are not experienced as being self-contradictory or otherwise implausible. But it does not make sense to question the reality of the film or film world/diegesis itself (the “fact of film,” if you will), because the world of the film is constituted through the act of experiencing it. In contrast, the world “as it is” is not constituted through the act of experiencing it – only “my” world, the world as I experience it, is constituted in that way. The only similarity between our access to film and our access to the world as imagined by the skeptic is that in experiencing both we do not entirely experience the world as it is “out there,” outside of ourselves.

It is important to keep in mind that the skeptic’s world-as-it-is is a world devoid of human presence, a world whose properties are not co-shaped by human actions. This is the only way of consistently claiming a gap between man and world. But this underestimates that the world we live in is a Lebenswelt, a world which is not simply a given but shaped, formed, moulded, inhabited by human beings. In Heideggerian terms: the world we share is not simply vorhanden (present-at-hand) but zubehören (ready-to-hand); it is a world which is formed through our human interventions.

This ready-to-handness becomes even more evident in current digital culture with its omnipresence of mediated images, touchscreen user interfaces and virtual

communication. E.g., one cannot describe Manhattan’s Times Square without recourse to its character as a Lebenswelt, at least unless one conforms to extreme solipsistic positions according to which everything we experience is a mere illusion. The emergence of digital media in the past thirty years presents a profound adaptive challenge to the older, ‘analog’ world view. Not only does an ontology of digital film differ at least in nuances from an ontology of analog film; the emergence of digital media also introduces a different relation between the digital image and sound track and their addressees: Recipients increasingly become users who interact with their object of consumption.

In playing computer games, players participate in and co-create the world of the game, even though within the confines of pre-established boundaries of the game design. Films on DVD or Blu-ray allow a much higher degree of spectatorial freedom in comparison to movie theatre screenings: One can freely jump between scenes; audio commentaries, behind-the-scenes featurettes, or alternative endings influence film interpretation. Even though some of these new features are merely optional or evolutionary developments that basically already existed in the video film era, the switch from consumption to interaction seems to be a categorical rather than gradual one.

The concluding chapter sections consequently examine the idea of film as a moving image of skepticism under the conditions of digital media by focusing on their ontological implications and the possibility of interaction. The questions raised by digital media, I argue, pose new challenges which cannot automatically be answered in traditional terminology. Even if the concepts of traditional philosophy are apt for describing, analysing and understanding the changes brought forward by the emergence of the digital, they must be applied to the current state of the world.

5.10  Cavell Digitalised: Animated Film Characters and Digital Film

Cavell’s philosophy of film, while essentially being a philosophy of the ontological implications of the experience and memory of films, is intricately tailored to the philosophical challenges posed by analog filmmaking. His ontological reflections revolve around the peculiar indexical relation between the world and its audiovisual traces on celluloid. But how does his designation of film as a “moving image of skepticism” survive under the conditions of 21st-century digital cinema? At every stage of the production process, current digital filmmaking profoundly changes the way in which film are produced, marketed and screened to audiences. Most significant for the topic of this chapter is the fact that – in comparison to analog film – digital image capture changes the ontological correlation between the image and its (digitally) captured objects.

Cavell never explicitly addresses this issue – in The World Viewed he is not able to, since the second edition was published in 1979, nor in his other writings on film. However, in the section “More of The World Viewed” (Cavell 1979a: 162-230) he

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177 For a filmmaker’s practical account of digital filmmaking, see Mike Figgis’ Digital Film-making (Figgis 2006). Giovanna Fossati intelligently discusses the transitional processes from analog to digital film by bypassing the binary distinction of the analog and the digital in the introduction and first chapter of From Grain to Pixel (Fossati 2009). Henry Jenkins explores the areas where both media constellations mingle in terms of media convergence. See Jenkins 2003 and Jenkins 2006. See also chapter 3.6.

178 Exceptions are his 1988 essay “The Advent of Videos” (Cavell 2005 [1988]) and the 1982 article “The Fact of Television” (Cavell 2005 [1982]). Both explore how the experience of movies changes in the turn away from the cinema as the prime locus of film experience to the mass-distribution of them via television and video access.
discusses objections launched by film scholar Alexander Sesonske against the claim that the “material basis of the media of movies” consists in “a succession of automatic world projections” (Cavell 1979a: 167). Cavell’s definition, as he himself acknowledges, understands movies as “projections of the real world” (Cavell 1979a: 167). As Sesonske points out, this seems to exclude a popular genre of cinema: animated cartoons. The Cavell-Sesonske discussion on this issue offers a shop window for a ‘digital version’ of Cavell’s ontology of film, since animated cartoons share a number of features with digital cinema. Animated cartoons do not originate in a photography-shooting procedure on a set, and at least in digital blockbuster cinema a considerable portion of the screened material it generated with the help of computer-generated imagery (CGI).

Here is Sesonske’s argument against Cavell’s position: The world and characters of these films “never existed until they were projected on the screen.” (Quoted in Cavell 1979a: 167) Therefore, the projected world of an animated cartoon exists only “now, at the moment of projection” (quoted in Cavell 1979b: 168) and thus differs profoundly from (the experience of) the projected world of a real-footage film: “There is a world we experience here, but not the world – a world I know and see but to which I am nevertheless not present, yet not a world past.” (Quoted in Cavell 1979a: 168, original emphasis)

For Cavell, animated cartoons are indeed not “successions of automatic world projections”. Instead, he defines them as “successions of animated world projections” (Cavell 1979a: 13), thereby distancing himself from automatism as a defining concept of his film ontology, and at length outlines features that distinguish them from live-action films: Cartoon characters are “anthropomorphic […] in everything but form” and therefore “animistic” (Cavell 1979a: 169), they are “animations, disembodiments, pure spirits,” they “abrogate[ ] corporeality” (Cavell 1979a: 170).179

The main reason for Cavell’s position is that for him the audience’s temporal absence from the world projected on screen is the most fundamental aspect of what makes films special (see also Cavell 1979a: 155).180 He is fascinated by the movies’ ability to make present (in both senses of the word) a world which has, in whatever form, existed in the past. The world of a real-footage film is not entirely invented, it draws on, re-combines and elevates into a different ontological dimension actual elements of the world. His use of the word “automatic” in “successions of automatic world projections” is supposed to register this difference: Because the material basis of movies (channelled through the film camera) is a succession of automatic world projections, they project the world in a completely different fashion than other forms of art such as painting. And animated cartoons are projections of a world rather than of the world, and in this respect closer to painting than to photography-based media.

179 Cavell himself seems unsure whether to accept the criticism and consequently reformulate his definition, or whether he should reject it and define animated cartoons as something other than movies (“cartoons are not movies” [Cavell 1979a: 168]), or to even interpret his own definition differently in order to include animated cartoons. Cavell’s (actual or only pretended) hesitation is apparent in his repetitious use of relativising phrases such as “what I said about movies, if it is true” (Cavell 1979a: 168), “I do, apparently, have to show that cartoons are not movies” (Cavell 1979a: 168f.). Cavell’s hesitance, I suspect, is strategic: Echoing Popper, he insists on not being able to prove that cartoons are not movies. Cavell thinks that he “does not have to show that cartoons are movies because [someone with such a position] has no theory which his taste contradicts” (Cavell 1979a: 168).

180 On the difference between temporal and ontological absence, see section 5.2 of this chapter.
Cavell does not assume a definite position on the definitional status of animated cartoons, but he is also not too concerned about this failure, because, firstly, he is not interested in a comprehensive, i.e. essentialist definition of the medium of movies. As he remarks elsewhere, “the answer [to the question ‘what is the essence of movies?’] seems to me more or less empty” (see Cavell 1979a: 165). Secondly, he is rather interested in the “role reality plays in this art” (Cavell 1979a: 165) – and for Cavell it is intricately connected to the experience of movies rather than to their ontological constitution: Experiencing movies is the experience of a world past. Movies allow directly experiencing, here and now, a world which is already (long) gone. This is what no other art delivers (except from subsets of audiovisual technology such as photography and radio). This is why Cavell is inclined unfavourably against animated cartoons.

But if reality plays such an important role for Cavell’s understanding of film, present-day (blockbuster) cinema presents an enormous challenge for him. The distinction between real footage and animated footage does not even make sense anymore for a large portion of contemporary popular cinema: Digital technology has advanced to such an extent that for spectators it is often not even possible to distinguish actual on-set footage from the additions and transformations implemented by the visual-effects department in post-production. This does not apply so much to motion-captured film characters like Gollum in THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING (Peter Jackson, 2001), or Jar-Jar Binks in STAR WARS – EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE (Lucas, 1999), who can be subjected to Cavell’s claim that animated characters are “animistic” and “abrogate[e] […] corporeality”. It is rather the fact of digital cinema as a whole that presents problems for Cavell’s position, since digital animation plays such an integral role in this kind of cinema. More fundamentally even: Digital cinema has loosened its alleged indexical relation with the world it films and projects.

Actually, the boundaries between real-footage film and animated film have never been absolute, as the extensive use of visual effects in Méliès’ early films shows. Also, more recent non-digital films also deliberately cross the boundaries between real-footage and animation. Two such examples are WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT (Zemeckis, 1988), in which cartoon characters and real actors share their film world (see figure 5.4), and the fairy tale mash-up ENCHANTED (Lima, 2007) (see figure 5.3).

The latter film is based on the idea that animated fairy-tale cartoon characters are thrown into real-life Manhattan (where they assume the form of real characters, played by actors in the flesh, such as Amy Adams, Susan Sarandon and Timothy Spall). ENCHANTED switches between animated cartoon scenes and real-life scenes (see figures 5.5 and 5.6) – but the film never juxtaposes them in the way WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT does. For these examples, Cavell would perhaps say that these films are partly movies, partly not. But WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT already points to the problem presented by digital filmmaking: The very attempt to distinguish real-footage films from digitally animated films loses meaning because both elements of filmmaking are so inextricably intertwined.
The question, then, for the concluding discussion is: How does digital cinema change the ontology of film, and consequently, the assessment of Cavell’s definitional attempts of the “material basis of the movies”?

The ideal starting point for this discussion is David N. Rodowick’s *The Virtual Life of Film*. Despite being a book on the fate of (analog) film theory in the age of the digital computation of the (cinematic) image, it is to a large extent also a meditation on Cavell’s *The World Viewed*. For Rodowick, a committed cinéphile, the vanishing of the celluloid film strip entails a radical shift in the character of film: In digital cinema, the indexical photographic image is replaced by “a computational simulation that enables new forms and modalities of creative activity” (Rodowick 2007a: 184).

In Rodowick’s account, digital images are not so much recorded as computated, since whatever the lenses of digital camera capture is immediately “transcod[ed]” (Rodowick 2007a: 117) with the help of algorithms into computational language. This code must be recalculated or retranslated into an output form perceivable by human agents. Consequently, there is no direct, continuous correlation between the image output and its generating input:

“Where analogical transcriptions record traces of events as continuities in time, digital capture and synthesis produce tokens of numbers through a process of calculation – a symbolic expression – of what humans would call a ‘perception’.” (Rodowick 2007a: 112)

Rodowick invokes the philosopher Roger Scruton in suggesting that “what fades in film is the historical dimension of photographic causality” (Rodowick 2007a: 86), while digital images are more and more becoming “the art of synthesizing imaginary worlds” (Rodowick 2007a: 87). This is particularly so because, as a result of computation, real-world input captured by a lens is, for the computer, ontologically on a par with animated...
or graphic material; all of them are simply present in transcoded form. Computers do not distinguish between the encoded information of digital film cameras and the encoded information of computer-generated imagery. Cinema in the digital age is less indebted to indexicality and therefore “less anchored to the prior existence of things and people” (Rodowick 2007a: 86), and consequently also more open to imaginative experiments. In other words: Méliès trumps Lumière.

The emergence of the digital has a profound effect on our ontological concepts; Rodowick calls the result “transcoded ontologies” (Rodowick 2007a: 174), since the intrusion of digital screens and images into our everyday lives also affects our relation as human beings to the world (our Lebenswelt) in general. Being the result of a process of computation, the digital image does not presuppose a pre-existing physical reality it can be a transcription (or index) of.¹⁸¹

Digital technology has also become an indispensable element of our contemporary everyday lives. ‘Analog’ manual activities are more and more replaced by ‘digital’ manual activities: touching surfaces, swiping, typing, browsing, etc. Our interaction with a world of spatial depth (a world of manual labour) becomes interaction with computated surfaces (a world of touchscreen surfaces). Filmmakers now can even change the trajectory of the camera’s movement through film space years after the actual on-location shootings of the actors’ performances.¹⁸²

Why does the adaptation of the digital to the inventory of our world so radically change our ontologies? Referring to Kracauer, Rodowick writes that

> “the material content of physical reality is not simply nature but rather what phenomenology calls the Lebenswelt: the global accumulation of the events, actions, activities, and contingencies of everyday life, an asubjective world overwhelming individual perception and consciousness.” (Rodowick 2007a: 77)

This ontological relevance of the Lebenswelt allows Rodowick to ask “how our ontology has changed in our interactions with computer screens. What epistemological and ethical relations to the world and to collective life do simulation automatisms presuppose?” (Rodowick 2007a: 174)

Rodowick’s “guess at the riddle” is a “retreat from the sensuous exploration of the physical world and the material structure of everyday life to probe imaginative life and a new kind of sociality” (Rodowick 2007a: 174) which explores “new relations with space and with time […] that involve expectations of interactivity and control.” (Rodowick 2007a: 175) The notion of a new kind of sociality is, of course, familiar to those who increasingly rely on social media and social networks such as Skype, Facebook and Twitter for communicating with family, friends and colleagues. Such new forms of communication facilitate temporally and spatially asymmetric conversations all around

¹⁸¹ Tom Gunning also does not give up on digital indexicality, claiming that “storage in terms of numerical data does not eliminate indexicality.” (Gunning 2004: 40) But Frank Kessler notes, appropriately, that “one should be careful not to glide from stating the object’s ‘having been there’ to the more global assertion that the image depicts ‘how it was’” (Kessler 2010: 191).

¹⁸² James Cameron and his team pioneered this approach by developing a Simul-Cam for AVATAR. A Simul-Cam is basically a monitor which fusions real-time shots with the virtual environment produced by the CGI department, while allowing the director to freely move through that film space. However, even though increasingly based on digital devices, almost all of the digital effects of a film are in pre-production based on hand-drawings or digital transformations of actual textures. The clothing of digital characters, for instance, is most likely based on actual clothes produced by the costume department. See the behind-the-scenes materials on the Extended editions of the LORD OF THE RINGS trilogy.
the world. Digital means of communication allow for a higher degree of interactivity and control.

For Rodowick, film’s“overcoming of skepticism relied on a perception of the shared duration of people and things as expressed in the condition of analogy, a condition wherein space functions as the conveyer of duration rather than representation,” (Rodowick 2007a: 179).

Thereby, according to Rodowick, film overcame skepticism, because – unlike painting or other arts – film automatically records the duration of events in the world and does not merely render a re-presentation of it. The fact of film reassures us of the existential fact that there is a spatiotemporal world, and it allows us to explore and reflect on this world without being directly immersed in it.

Digital screen technology still allows reflecting on a projected world – but the ontological intimacy of the digital with the world it is a projection of is weaker than in analog cinema. Digital cinema does not assure us of the prior existence of the projected world as strongly as older analog media do. Therefore Rodowick claims that digital screen technology “is not an overcoming of skepticism, but a different expression of it” (Rodowick 2007a: 175). The digital era reformulates the problem of skepticism: The problem of the accuracy of filmic representations of reality becomes less important in an era of increasing interaction between, on the one hand, spectators or users and, on the other, increasingly interactive media products. In interactive media, the problem of other minds gains significance and postpones the alleged skepticist problem of knowledge of the world. In a society governed by constant indirect computated interaction there can be no final reassurance about the identity of (or behind) the interfaces we interact with. In that way, digitality paves the way to a sort of pragmatic “acceptance of skepticism” that updates Cavell’s claim:

“In the world of computers and the Internet, we have little doubt about the presence of other minds and, perhaps, other worlds. And we believe, justifiably or not, [...] in our ability to control, manage or communicate with other minds and worlds, but at a price: matter and minds have become ‘information’. In this sense, the cultural dominance of the digital may indicate a philosophical retreat from the problem of skepticism to an acceptance of skepticism. For in the highly mutable communities forged by computer-mediated communications, the desire to know the world has lost its provocation and its uncertainty. Rather, one seeks new ways of acknowledging other minds, without knowing whether other selves are behind them.” (Rodowick 2007a: 175, my emphasis)

Where before knowledge was, metaphorically speaking, in the possession of the world we insufficiently tried to grasp, it is now computer technology which is the keeper of the kind of knowledge the skeptic yearns for:

“Our disappointment in failing ever to know the world or others now becomes the perpetual disappointment of failing to attain the more nearly perfect (future) knowledge of computers and computer communications, whose technological evolution always seems to run ahead of the perceptual and cognitive capacity to manipulate them for our own ends. It is the failure to arrive at what always comes ahead.” (Rodowick 2007a: 176)
Rodowick suggests that, as the composition of our Lebenswelt changes, so does the concept of knowledge. A world dominated by computer technology continuously creates new forms of knowledge, which human beings have to try to catch up with.

Rodowick’s account downgrades the epistemological dimension of skepticism. He is much more interested in how its existential dimension is reconfigured in the context of digital screen culture. The digital world radically postpones the question of the human relation to the world ‘as it is’ – simply because the digital world is never ‘as it is’ because it is in a permanent state of transformation. The digital world is indispensably created by the ‘intervention’ of the human hand, and its computated character entails that it is always changing, always being reconfigured.

What are we then to make of Cavell’s idea of film as a moving image of skepticism? The first answer is: Yes, film is a moving image of skepticism insofar as spectatorship is structurally analogous to a number of philosophical skepticist thought experiments, most notably Plato’s Allegory of the Cave (with immovable spectators watching a screen which displays projections of moving material objects via a light source located behind them). Film is also a “moving” image of skepticism in the sense that it characterises, along with other mediatic expressions such as science fiction literature and video games, the changing conditions of skepticist thought experiments in the context of digital culture on two levels: On the one hand, the themes and motifs addressed by film foreground the transformations of our shared environment (Lebenswelt) under the conditions of digital ontologies, on the other hand, the genesis of digital films takes place under different ‘ontological conditions’ as compared to analog cinema. These conditions change the terms in which the problem of skepticism is negotiated.

However, to conceptualise cinema as a moving image of skepticism does not entail any definite answer on the question whether cinema affirms or negates the skepticist stance, even though it is possible to sketch the general onto-epistemological character of cinematic processes of world-making. Speaking with Cavell, the most one can claim after careful investigation that the camera is “no better off epistemologically” than the eyes of the average human world spectator. One should add: What the “camera” is better off at is the addition of new perspectives on the world not directly available to the human sensory apparatus. This includes features such as slow-motion, time-lapse, extreme close-ups or aerial views, the manipulation of visual and aural data, correlating structural features of different images – all of them features not only explored and experimented with by filmmakers but by natural scientists as well.

This suggests that Cavell’s reflections as well as Rodowick’s updated digital version raise the question whether cinema’s perspectives on the world may actually reveal more than our own limited access to the world we live in. The medium makes available conditions of world-access, or perspectives on the world, and it is able to establish (perceptually non-standard) frameworks for exploring the human position in the world and the possibility of human knowledge of the world. For Sinnerbrink, Cavell assesses “[v]isual art […] precisely [as] a response to skepticism, a human expression of selfhood against metaphysical isolation, and thus a way of revivifying our sundered sense of connection with the world.” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 106)

While, as argued, this might be the way in which cinema in its analogue state answers the modern philosophical problem of skepticism, digital cinema is a sign of a
transformation of the problems raised by skepticism: With the advent of the digital age, the epistemological and onto-existential dimension of skepticism recedes into the background while exposing another philosophically problematic dimension of knowing and acknowledging our (life) world as we believe to know it: “Despite the success of modern rationalism in conquering epistemic skepticism, the knowledge that really matters to us – about the self, morality, or our relations with others – remains frustratingly uncertain.” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 103). In this sense, digital cinema “is not an overcoming of skepticism, but a different expression of it” (Rodowick 2007a: 175).
Into the great wide open
Under them skies of blue
Out in the great wide open
A rebel without a clue"

Tom Petty, “Into the Great Wide Open”

“A cinema for believers. Trust, belief, and the expulsion from the paradise of childhood

6 A Cinema for Believers. Trust, Belief, and the Expulsion from the Paradise of Childhood

6.1 Prelude: When the Bell Tolls

Giancaldo, Sicilia, in the late 1940s. The Second World War is over, but not all soldiers have yet returned to the small Sicilian town close to Palermo. The strade and piazze are predominantly populated by older men, young and old women, and a bunch of little children. The social centre of the community is not the church, but the local cinema – no coincidence it is thus that the external and external structure of the building is highly reminiscent of the house of God.183 And no coincidence it is that the padre Adelfio (Leopoldo Trieste) dutifully, and most certainly willingly, examines each new film arrival, censoring profane and un-Christian film scenes before the movie is allowed to boost the townsfolk’s morale, ringing his little bell every time a couple is seen kissing on the screen. Alfredo (Philippe Noiret), the projectionist, then marks the illicit film scenes to be cut out on the reel, shaking his head sarcastically as he goes along.

Among the many illiterate cinéphiles of the town – for the Giancaldoans of the late 1940s are mostly fishermen, peasants, craftsmen or small farmers – the most enthusiastic of them all is the little boy Salvatore, called Totò by everyone, like the most popular Italian cine-comedians of them all. Alongside his fellow townspeople, Totò lolls in front of the screen almost every afternoon and night, marvelling at it with eyes and mouth wide open, his posture a perfect illustration of the stereotypical emotionally involved child-spectator (or, as Deleuze would perhaps call him, child-seer; see fig. 6.1-6.4).

183 In the accompanying text of a German DVD release version, the journalist Harald Pauli semi-ironically plays with an alliteration allowed by the German language: He claims that in CINEMA PARADISO the four “k” of the Italian Catholic small-town-community – Kirche, Küche, Kinder, i.e.: Church, Kitchen, Children, or chiesa, cucina, bambini – are enhanced by a fourth “k”: Kino. Verbatim, Pauli writes: “Zu den drei Ks der katholischen Kleingesellschaft kommt neben Kirche, Küche und Kindern noch ein viertes: das Kino. Dort wird geweint und gelacht, mitgefeiert und erschrocken weggeschaut, laut kommentiert und leise geträumt.” (Pauli 2007)
Even more than the moving sounding images projected on the screen, however, Tottò loves the projection booth. He is utterly fascinated by the source of the beam of light emitted from the mouth of a lion face at the theatre’s back wall (see fig. 6.5). Peeking through the pigeonhole or sneaking into the projection booth itself, he attentively observes how Alfredo loads the projector with the reel, silently memorising every hand movement performed by the older man and excitedly looking at the film strips left on the cutting table (see fig. 6.6). Here is a boy who certainly loves the cinema.

The film that presents all these small stories of a cinéphile life is, of course, Giuseppe Tornatore’s award-winning NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO (Tornatore, 1989), a nostalgic Italian melodrama which seems to be a cinematic transformation of Stanley Cavell’s aphorism in The World Viewed that “memories of movies are strand over strand
with memories of my life” (Cavell 1979a: xix). 30 years after he left his hometown, the famous film director Salvatore di Vita (Jacques Perrin) returns to Giancaldo in order to attend the funeral for his old friend Alfredo. This visit turns into a stroll down memory lane: Salvatore remembers his childhood and youth at the *Cinema Paradiso*, whose projectionist he becomes as a little boy when Alfredo goes blind due to injuries sustained during a fatal fire in the old building (during the fire, little Totò saves Alfredo’s life by pulling him out of the burning projection booth). The memories Salvatore is haunted by are not only those of the movies (which are of a rather fond, innocent, happy nature), but also memories of his first love lost, Elena (Agnese Nano), the daughter of a wealthy banker. The young couple lost contact when her parents forced her to move away with them to Tuscany and Salvatore subsequently decided to try his luck in the movie business in Rome.

As much as *Cinema Paradiso* is a film about the life-changing power of cinema and about unrequited love, it is on a deeper level a film about the consequences of a life lived with and within the cinema. Neither Totò nor Alfredo become really happy in their lives, even though one could say that both of them live, in different ways, fulfilled lives: Day in and day out, Alfredo watches life – the lives screened and the lives lived – passing by in front of his projection booth which faces the screening room as well as Giancaldo’s main square, while he himself does not seem participate in it. In his place, Totò moves on into the whole wide world and makes his mentor’s dreams come true: to witness the now grown-up boy on the cinema screen instead of in front of it. (However, tragically, Alfredo cannot see Totò or his films anymore after he became blind; he can only hear him). But even Totò does not find real happiness – too grey, too worn is the impression of the aged Salvatore di Vita’s face (played by Jacques Perrin). The sad, even depressed face of adult Salvatore poses a stark contrast to the excited and impish face of little Totò (Salvatore Cascio) and the intense, melancholic face of teenage Totò (Marco Leonardi) (compare fig. 6.1 to 6.4, 6.7 and 6.8).

So, in a way the *cinema paradiso* (as a Stellvertreter for cinema in toto) has not been kind to either of them: It leaves the older protagonist blinded and scarred (“you end up with egg on your face,” Alfredo says, timecode: 01:02:26), and the younger one has not

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A life lived with and within the cinema and its consequences

A life not fully lived

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184 Giancaldo is a fictional town supposedly reminiscent of Tornatore’s hometown Bagheria. The film was shot across several small villages in the region of Palermo, Palazzo Adriano being the main location.

185 As the attentive cinéphile knows, Alfredo plays his part in the outcome of these events, refraining from telling Totò that his girlfriend came by the projectionist’s booth to leave an address just before she moved away. The original theatrical release does not explicitly reintroduce Elena after her sudden disappearance; here, Totò can be said to have lost her for the rest of his life (even though in the credit sequence she can be spotted standing among the congregation of mourners during the funeral service for Alfredo, leaving open the possibility that they might spot each other). The director’s cut, however, adds an entire 30-minute-long sequence, in which Totò finds Elena again after he returns to Giancaldo. Now a mother of two children, Elena lives a satisfied though not entirely happy life as the wife of a local politician, one of Totò’s former classmates and mutual rival for Elena’s heart. Their temporary reunion results in a passionate love night and in their mutual discovery that Alfredo has, by lying to both of them, hindered their last teenage reunion for the sake of Totò’s shining future as a famous filmmaker. Even though Elena claims to share Alfredo’s sentiment that with her, he would never have become the filmmaker he is, it is clear that for both of them their lives have, in an important sense, not entirely been lived, because it was a life lived without the other. A conversation between Alfredo and Totò shortly before the boy’s decision to return to seek fame in Rome reveals the reasoning behind Alfredo’s deception to the spectator. The old man says that “each of us has a star to follow” (timecode: 01:52:01, implying that it is the unfulfilled desires or dreams that keep a man going to reach other things in his life (as if in passing).

186 Alfredo, of course, knows this. In the deciding conversation he uses to convince Totò to find his happiness in Rome instead of on the island, he says: “I don’t want to hear you anymore. I want to hear about you!” (timecode 01:54:50)
found happiness in the movie business, running from one woman he does not love to the next, always trying to find in them the one woman he has lost. For both of them, Alfredo’s penultimate lesson rings true: “Life is not what you see in films. Life is much harder” (timecode: 01:54:33). Cinema may stir up dreams, incite them, nourish them, but at the end of the day (and at the end of life) a life lived in and with the movies has the bitter-sweet taste of escapism; it does not seem to be a life fully lived.187

This theme of cinema’s ambivalence is at the heart of the present chapter on Deleuze’s well-known thesis that “[r]estoring our belief in the world […] is the power of modern cinema” (Deleuze 1989: 166). The preceding reflections on Tornatore’s NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO will form the background for assessing Deleuze’s thesis, and I will repeatedly return to discussing aspects of the film.188

### 6.2 Trust or Belief in the World in and Through Cinema

In Deleuze’s philosophy of cinema, the decoupling of impressions or perceptions from their correlated sensory-motor reactions and actions is constitutive for the emergence of the so-called time-image – a kind of cinematic expression in which time no longer follows actions (in the world, understood as movements) but becomes an isomorphic expression of its own:

“Time is out of joint’: it is off the hinges assigned to it by behavior in the world, but also by movements in the world. It is no longer time that depends on movement; it is aberrant movement that depends on time.” (Deleuze 1989: 39)

On the level of narrative, film characters cease to be agents and become “pure seers” (Deleuze 1989: 39) instead. As Robert Sinnerbrink puts it in New Philosophies of Film, a “new cinema of ‘the seer’ replaces the old cinema of the agent” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 96; he refers to formulations in Deleuze 1989: 2)189

Deleuze discusses a variety of real-life and cinematic examples for the time-image. Among them are filmic situations which involve dream states, near-death states, lack of focus – in all of them the (alleged) direct link between a living (and experiencing) human being and the world (out there) is distorted, disrupted or even broken (see Deleuze 1989: chapter 3), and which are presented in cinema in many different forms. From that

187 Again, Tornatore faces his audience explicitly with the issue of love lost and found. During a conversation late into the film, his mother tells adult Totò why she did not remarry – being still young and a beautiful woman – after her first husband’s death: “I remained faithful, first to your father, and then to you and Lia [Totò’s younger sister, PS]. It’s the way I am, what can I do? And you’re like me. You’re too attached to the past. I am not sure if it’s a good thing. Being faithful has its drawbacks. Fidelity brings loneliness. […] When I phone you, it’s a different woman every time. […] But I haven’t yet heard the voice of someone who really loves you. I can tell, you know. All the same, I’d like to see you settling down, in love with someone. But your life is there [in Rome]. Here there are only ghosts. Let go, Totò” (timecode: 02:13:33-02:18:20) Needless to say that in the next scene Totò goes to Elena’s house and manages to meet her again.

188 A note of caution: This chapter does not aim at an exegesis of Deleuze’s “kinematic philosophy” (Mullarkey 2009: 78); rather, it uses snippets of it as a source of inspiration for reflecting on the theme of trust or belief in the world in the context of the present inquiry into skepticism films and into the general issue of film and (as) philosophy. I am not a trained Deleuze scholar and therefore not in command of the vast amount of research in Deleuze studies. Therefore I dare the reader to read this chapter as a kind of prolegomenon for future skepticism and skepticism films-related inquiries into Deleuze’s work on cinema as restoring, qua croyance, the link between man and world.

189 In chapter 2 of his monograph Deleuze and World Cinemas, David Martin-Jones writes extensively on the child-seer in Deleuze’s cinema books (see Martin-Jones 2011). A reinterpretation of the child-seer in contemporary Italian cinema can be found in Paul Sutton’s article “The Bambino Negato or Missing Child of Contemporary Italian cinema” (Sutton 2005).
perspective, I suggest, the time-image can be characterised as an anomaly of ordinary human life in at least two respects. Not only do the forms of the time-image constitute direct “presentations of time” (Deleuze 1989: 39), which, as Deleuze repeatedly claims, is possible in this form only in cinema, it also means that the cinematic time-image is an anomaly as compared to ordinary experience. This resonates with a formulation by Jean-Louis Schefer Deleuze explicitly refers to: “[C]inema is the sole experience where time is given to me as a perception” (Deleuze 1989: 35).

Time-image situations are also situations that do not correspond to the ‘worldly’ sensory-motor schema: For instance, in dreams the dreamer experiences situations to which she (qua dreaming state) believes to actually react – but in fact she is lying asleep in her bed, moving only involuntarily. This is a situation Deleuze pays a great deal of attention to. Dying people, too, are not entirely ‘of’ or ‘in’ this world anymore but instead moving through a Netherlands to which none of the still living has access to.⁹⁹⁰

In short, as a “direct” presentation of duration the time-image is anomalous, and it is anomalous because what is presented with it is anomalous in regard to “ordinary” waking life situations.⁹⁹¹

The reason for marking the time-image as anomalous (and not as a normal state of the world) is that this allows understanding it as an ambivalent image form of cinema. Deleuze claims that it is modern cinema – his source of examples for time-images par excellence – and not simply cinema per se that is able to restore belief in the world. And because of that the ambivalence of the time-image can be applied to the medium’s restorative capacities as well. As an anomaly, the time-image’s restoration of belief in the world is also ambivalent because what it restores belief in is a state of (or at least perception of) the world to which the spectator is not able to return after leaving the movie theatre. This is one of the reasons why the cinema paradiso helps neither Totò nor Alfredo much in finding happiness in ‘real’ life. And Deleuze makes clear that life, and love, is of crucial importance for him:

“To believe, not in a different world, but in a link between man and the world, in love or life, to believe in this as in the impossible, the unthinkable, which none the less cannot but

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⁹⁹⁰ Even though Deleuze distinctively locates the appearance of the time-image in the emergence of what he calls modern cinema (the cinema of Godard, Resnais, Özu, and others), he states clearly that the "direct time-image is the phantom which has always haunted the cinema, but it took modern cinema to give a body to this phantom" (Deleuze 1989: 42). Sinnerbrink insightfully recognises that Deleuze’s notions about the “difference between pre- and post-War cinema” echo earlier remarks by Cavell on the “end of myths” in cinema after the Second World War, which by Cavell is described in terms of a “loss of ‘conviction in our presentness to the world’.” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 113). On the influence of the 1968 revolution on Deleuze’s exclusive attention to film pre-1968, see Mullarkey 2009: 104ff. Curiously, Cavell and Deleuze share a selective approach: Cavell’s film body of reference mainly derives from the film-historical period of so-called “Classical Hollywood Cinema”.

⁹⁹¹ Deleuze repeatedly claims that modern cinema “implies the collapse of the sensory-motor schema” (Deleuze 1989: 233, see also ibid.: 122ff., 167ff., 190, 205f., 221): “Now, from its first appearances, something different happens in what is called modern cinema [...]. What has happened is that the sensory-motor schema is no longer in operation, but at the same time it is not overtaken or overcome. It is shattered from the inside. That is, perceptions and actions ceased to be linked together, and spaces are now neither coordinated nor filled [as is the case in the movement-image, PS]. Some characters, caught in certain pure optical and sound situations, find themselves condemned to wander about or go off on a trip. These are pure seers, who no longer exist except in the interval of movement [...] ‘Time is out of joint’; [...] It is no longer time that depends on movement; it is aberrant movement that depends on time. The relation, sensory-motor situation -> indirect image of time is replaced by a non-localizable relation, pure optical and sound situation -> direct time-image. Opsigns and sonsigns are direct presentations of time.” (Deleuze 1989: 39; my emphases, PS). For a definition of opsigns and sonsigns, see appendix B of Pisters 2003: 231.
be thought [...] It is this belief that makes the unthought the specific power of the absurd, by virtue of the absurd” (Deleuze 1989: 164)\(^{192}\)

Ironically, for Deleuze modern cinema simultaneously constitutes the rupturing in the link between man and world, replacing it by a ‘mere’ belief in the world: “modern cinema develops new relations with thought from three points of view[; among them]: [...] the erasure of the unity of man and the world, in favour of a break which now leaves us with only a belief in this world.” (Deleuze 1989: 181) Modern cinema puts on display in the very first place the existential wound it then promises to heal. *Nota bene:* Belief in the world qua cinema here is described by Deleuze as a belief in a *link* between man and the world, which amounts to saying: We may not *know* that there is a link between the two, but we are led to *believe* that it is so.\(^{193}\)

The thesis put to the test in this chapter is that one can understand the broken link between man and world – this specifically Deleuzian loss of belief which allegedly only cinema is able to restore – as a kind of anomaly of ordinary life, which in the cinema is, first, put on display, i.e. screened, but which is, second, precisely because of its anomalous character something that can be healed, or only temporary.\(^{194}\) Tied back to the problem of skepticism investigated in the preceding chapters: While the Cartesian or some other skepticist walk through life burdened with a fundamental suspicion against the human position *in or against* the world, and while they distil their skepticist lament from this mistrust, the Deleuzian loss of belief is, as it were, a passing thing – just like Hume, Deleuze’s early intellectual sparring partner, left his skepticist musings at the desk in order to join Edinburgh’s or London’s vibrant social life. Cinema’s Deleuzian restoration of belief in the world is thus not, literally speaking, an anti-skepticist move, because the broken link is not seen as an intrinsic part of the *condition humaine*.

Returning once again to *NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO*, the film seems to take up the ambivalence outlined above. It allows two apparently counter-directional perspectives on the way in which the cinema can restore (or, in a weaker formulation, establish) a link between man and world: One way is the perspective of the child, which at the movies gains a kind of belief in the world that is directed at the possibilities (adult) life and the world in general hold in store for it. Metaphorically speaking, the *cinema paradiso* (the institution as well as the medium) is a kind of cavern to which the (now grown-up) child returns after its expulsion from the paradise of childhood – only to see that the cinema, too, has aged with the child, has grown old and grey, dusty and fragile – and yet the (cinematic) paradise of childhood lives on in some of the favourite past films scenes as an emotionally involving memory image. The latter point constitutes the second perspective of the adult whose belief in the world has been shaken or shattered, and who regains, or hopes to regain, his or her belief in the world by returning to the (memories of) cinema.

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\(^{192}\) This actually leaves open whether the world fulfils whatever cinema makes believe.

\(^{193}\) In *The Neuro-Image*, Patricia Pisters analyses how David Hume’s probabilistic epistemology of knowledge as matters of degree influences Deleuze’s own approach. Deleuze effectively champions an “epistemology of probabilities”. See Pisters 2012: chapter 5. On Deleuze’s incorporation of Hume in his philosophy, see also Jeffrey Bell’s study *Deleuze’s Hume* (Bell 2009).

\(^{194}\) From this perspective, mainstream cinema’s tendency towards happy endings does not appear all too surprising.
These are exactly the movements undertaken in NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO: the cinéphile (Totò) returns to the quintessential site of his childhood as an aging man, only to find this site in ruins, covered by cobwebs and dust. The once growling lion in front of the projection booth has turned into a shattered dusty remnant (compare fig. 6.9 and 6.10), the eroticism of Brigitte Bardot in ET DIEU ... CRÉA LA FEMME (Vadim, 1956) has given way to soft-pornographic “trasgressioni erotiche” (compare fig. 6.11 and 6.12), and the little boy in short pants, who had to balance on a chair while trying to peek into the projection booth, has grown into an aging adult man wearing a grey trench coat (compare fig. 6.13 and 6.14).

But still, even though for Totò his memories have literally turned to dust, it is not by accident that in the concluding scene of the film it is the “Kissing Reel” that at last gives him back an access to his memories of a childhood past, and which restores a link to his own emotions, his fond relationship to Alfredo and, last but not least, into the power of cinema itself: The Kissing Reel is an edited sequence which contains a number of the kissing scenes Alfredo has to remove at the request of padre Adelfio, some of which little Totò already witnessed on the silver screen in secret while peeking through the curtains of the back entrance (see fig. 6.1).\\footnote{195 It is not without irony that the only persons to witness these innocent erotic transgressions back then, in the}
Even though NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO portrays it as an ambivalent affair, cinema is, then, able to restore the broken link between man and the world, and in this case it is the link between the grown-up boy and his desires, wishes and other emotions which earlier in life incited him to go out and conquer the world.

The choice of such a particular, peculiar sequence – a sequence full of kisses – is, of course, also in a second sense entirely not accidental: The one event that divides childhood from adulthood is the advent of love as the erotic desire of another person, and it is more often than not already preannounced to the child not only in everyday life but by the world of cinema, which is populated by happy and unhappy lovers. This might not always be the case, but for Totò this interpretation rings true because he grows up as a half-orphan who does not even remember his father (who died on the Russian front), as the son of a woman who does not remarry and who grows up in a Catholic society that sanctions public displays of erotic affection. The kissing scenes are, seen from that perspective, yet another announcement of the promises that life beyond childhood holds for the cinéphile child.\textsuperscript{196}

6.3 Cartesianism Revisited: Resonances between Cavell and Deleuze

All the themes touched upon so far resonate in Stanley Cavell’s philosophy of film as well – a philosophy which, as has been claimed in chapter 5 already, is essentially a philosophy of the ontological implications of the experience and memory of films. In the first pages of The World Viewed, Cavell outlines his own expulsion from the paradise of cinema, but in this case it is marked by the moment in which he loosens his experiences and memories of the movies out of their embedding in everyday life and begins reflecting on them philosophically (see Cavell 1979a: xix-xxv). By this, Cavell simultaneously removes the cinema as a ‘natural’ part of his life. Cavell distances himself from cinema through a self-inflicted estrangement, resulting in a broken emotional link between the two. He then goes on asking, pre-sounding many passages we can later find in Deleuze’s second cinema book almost verbatim: “What broke my natural relation to movies? What was that relation, that its loss seemed to demand repairing, or commemorating, by taking thought?” (Cavell 1979a: xix)\textsuperscript{197}

For Sinnerbrink, the

“shared problematique [of Deleuze and Cavell] involves the question of the relationship between film and philosophy. For both thinkers, philosophy and film engage with problems – in particular, scepticism and nihilism – that cut across cultural, aesthetic and ethico-political domains. Both thinkers also argue that philosophy cannot merely be

\textsuperscript{196} Interestingly, the film’s display of Catholicism once again leads back to Deleuze’s second cinema book, where he declares that there “is a Catholic quality to Cinema” (Deleuze 1989: 165). In Vertrauen in die Welt. Eine Philosophie des Films Josef Früchtl uses Deleuze’s quasi-theological claim as the starting point for his critical re-evaluation of Deleuze’s philosophy of cinema. See Früchtl 2013: chapter 1, in particular 19-22 and 32-37; see also ibid.: 92ff.

\textsuperscript{197} Indeed, it is an interesting question to determine how familiar Deleuze was with Cavell’s work, since the World Viewed was first published in 1971, while the first Cinema book was published in 1983.
‘applied’ to film as its object; rather, film and philosophy enter into a transformative relationship that opens up new ways of thinking.” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 102)\(^\text{198}\)

In another summarising statement, Sinnerbrink says that “[c]inema is philosophical, for both Deleuze and Cavell, because of the way it retrieves the ordinary and fosters the creation of new perspectives or modes of existence.” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 90) Cavell and Deleuze, then, both regard the relation between film and philosophy as existential (compare chapter 5).

It is worth the while to highlight the *problematiques* shared by both philosophers by looking closer at some of the reasons for Deleuze’s philosophical appreciation of cinema: his reversal and outright rejection of the Cartesian tradition of modern philosophy.

The beginning of chapter 8 in *Cinema 2*, “Cinema, Body and Brain, Thought,” highlights clearly the gulf that divides Deleuze’s philosophical approach from the Cartesian, rationalist tradition:

“‘Give me a body then’: this is the formula of philosophical reversal. The body is no longer the obstacle that separates thought from itself, that which it has to overcome to reach thinking. It is on the contrary that which it plunges into or must plunge into, in order to reach the unthought, that is life. Not that the body thinks, but, obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think, and forces us to think what is concealed from thought, life. Life will no longer be made to appear before the categories of thought; thought will be thrown into the categories of life. The categories of life are precisely the attitudes of the body, its postures. […] To think is to learn what a non-thinking body is capable of, its capacity, its postures. It is through the body (and no longer through the intermediary of the body) that cinema forms its alliance with the spirit, with thought.” (Deleuze 1989: 182)

Where Godard and de Rougemont say, in chapter 3: give me a hand then, Deleuze claims: Give me a body then. As much as the quoted passage oscillates between clear and obscure formulations, one should highlight four aspects:

First, Deleuze seeks to overcome the body-mind schism so virulent in philosophy, not only in modern philosophy since Descartes, but also already in Plato’s Theory of Forms, which both regard the human body as an obstacle on the road to philosophical truth or wisdom. For Deleuze, *res extensa* and *res cogitans* do not occupy separate metaphysical realms. As Deleuze states it above, “[t]he body is no longer the obstacle that separates thought from itself, that which it has to overcome to reach thinking.”\(^\text{199}\)

Deleuze reverses the traditional direction of philosophical thought: The philosopher should not try to get rid of the corporeal as a negligible impediment to philosophical truth, but on the contrary has to find a way to include it in her (way of) thinking. Philosophy is no longer an activity for incorporeal substances (envatted brains, as you will), but something that is done *through* the body (whatever the ‘body’ is, exactly). To freely borrow a well-known catchphrase from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, it is a

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\(^{198}\) Still, however, as claimed in chapter 3.1, Cavell implicitly presupposes the philosopher as the patron of film-as-philosophy.

\(^{199}\) Deleuze’s claim is a direct retort to Plato’s Socrates so influential position that the true aim of the philosopher is to leave his body because it is a mere obstacle on the way to attain pure knowledge (Phaidon, 66e-67e). The attack on Platonism and Rationalism is a constant element in Deleuze’s philosophical thought.
“philosophy in the flesh”.\textsuperscript{200} This already precludes the march into a Cartesian egocentric predicament.\textsuperscript{201}

Second, this has consequences for the character and purpose of philosophical thought:

“It is on the contrary that which it plunges into or must plunge into, in order to reach the unthought, that is life. Life will no longer be made to appear before the categories of thought; thought will be thrown into the categories of life.”

The goal is thus no longer a kind of philosophical insight that abstracts from matters of the body, but something that takes the body into account (whatever that precisely means). Deleuze claims that the body \textit{per se} does not “think” (this is still the task of mental activity), but is nevertheless an indispensable part of processes of thought. For Deleuze, the goal is to reach “the untought, that is life” (my emphasis). Any philosophy that abstracts from bodily matters is, then, a philosophy unfulfilled.\textsuperscript{202}

Third, Deleuze takes care not to present the body as a mere medium of thought in the sense of a mere transparent carrier for mental activity, or as a hierarchically equal but other form of thinking (“It is through the body (and no longer through the intermediary of the body) […]”). Corporeal factors, in other words, \textit{influence} the nature of philosophical thought.

Fourth, in this Deleuzian philosophical web of thoughts, cinema assumes a special role for reorienting the character of philosophical thought:

“To think is to learn what a non-thinking body is capable of, its capacity, its postures. It is through the body (and no longer through the intermediary of the body) that cinema forms its alliance with the spirit, with thought.”

The delicate details of Deleuze’s position need not concern here; the important point is that, again, Deleuze repositions the function of the body for philosophical thought: It is no mere transparent carrier for mental activity, but instead kind of retroacts with thinking and thereby influences the character and direction of what is thought. And cinema “forms its alliance […] with thought” through the body. In other words: Cinema in its philosophical mode is, too, not a mere carrier for a kind of spiritual, non-corporeal activity, but uses the body (of its film characters and the affected spectators) as a way of expressing philosophical thought on screen.

Film philosophy à la Deleuze, then, penultimately is about life, but about a life that includes corporeal matters (and not only the realm of purely spiritual, disembodied, perennial ideas). This emphasis on “life” constitutes another area of overlap between Cavell and Deleuze, even though methodologically they differ profoundly in the way they approach their issues (and, despite his idiosyncratic writing style, Cavell does not come along with an overblown metaphysical apparatus like Deleuze does, but is rather firmly rooted in the pragmatist line of thinking so characteristic of ordinary-language philosophy). As has been noted before in chapter 2, in his essay “The Thought of Movies” Cavell understands philosophy

\textsuperscript{200} See Lakoff and Johnson 1999.

\textsuperscript{201} On egocentric predicaments see chapters 4 and 5.

\textsuperscript{202} Again, this is a direct retort to Plato’s Theory of Forms.
“as a willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think about, but rather to learn to think undistractedly about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about, or anyway cannot help having occur to them, sometimes in fantasy, sometimes as a flash across a landscape.” (Cavell 2005 [1983]: 92)

Ted Guyer and Paul Cohen add to this, in their introduction to Cavell’s philosophy of film, that

“[w]e take most films seriously, as we take most other forms of art seriously, not just because they demonstrate or manipulate aesthetically intriguing formalisms but because they are about life, the same life that our philosophies and our day-to-day thought is about. And what this life is about is the problem of knowing and acknowledging its own limitations.” (Cohen and Guyer 1993: 6f., my emphasis)

In the introduction of Cities of Words, Cavell highlights his intricate correlation of philosophy and life through the lens of film perhaps most explicitly: “[F]ilm, the latest of the great arts, shows philosophy to be the often invisible accompaniment of the ordinary lives that film is so apt to capture” (Cavell 2004: 6). In a recent essay on cinematic skepticism in the films of Abbas Kiarostami, Matthew Abbott also implicitly outlines the similarities between Cavell and Deleuze:

“For Cavell, we go to the movies to experience a reconnection to the world, a connection we feel has been severed in modernity. Cinema simultaneously screens the world before and from the viewer; it presents an uncannily literal version of the truth of skepticism. Film allows us to view the world, to take views of it. Film toys with, exasperates, undermines, and restores our faith in it.” (Abbott 2013: 171, the first emphasis is mine, PS)

Hence for both Deleuze and Cavell philosophy is ultimately about life, even though they use the term differently, and cinema is one of the lenses that allow the philosopher to reach through to it. This is also how Patricia Pisters, in her book The Neuro-Image, interprets the Deleuzian position, assigning to Deleuze a vitalistic metaphysics of spiritual choice:

“the alternatives are not between terms (such as good or bad) but between modes of existence of the one who chooses. The true spiritual choice is choosing choice (choosing that you have a choice) or choosing that you have no choice” (Pisters 2012: 32).

As we will see in section 6.4 below, Cavell and Deleuze evaluate the shared problematique of the human relation with the world in divergent ways. With Josef Früchtl (and Sinnerbrink) one can claim that in Cavell, this problem is spelt out in terms of skepticism, while Deleuze reflects on it as a problem of nihilism (Sinnerbrink, see quote above), in short: as a genuinely metaphysical problem (Früchtl 2013: 17, and ibid.: chapter 1). Where for Cavell the crucial concept is “acknowledgment” as a form or quasi-transcendental precondition of knowledge, for Deleuze the crucial concept is “croyance,” belief as a substitute for knowledge, a direct result of the need “to replace the model of knowledge with belief” (Deleuze 1989: 166).

223 This resonates, of course, with the themes of ontological and temporal absence outlined in chapter 5.2ff.
6.4 Four Ways of Restoring “la Croyance au Monde”

Let us take a closer look again at Deleuze’s claim that modern cinema has the power to restore our belief in the world. There is a macroscopic layer and several microscopic layers to this claim: On a macroscopic scale, Deleuze’s strategy of explicating the problematic man-world relation via the time-image results in a recommendation to “follow the skepticist epoché concerning judgments and actions” (Früchtl 2013: 17204).

In contrast, Cavell in an affirmative way advances the

“thesis that film is a form of trust, of being in love with the world, insofar as it, on the one hand, […] delivers, specifically as a medium of movement, ‘acknowledgement’ of subjectivity and of the modern era. On the other hand, film as well as the arts in general deliver a kind of acknowledgement, insofar as the aesthetic sentiment of fitting-into-the-world […] is a sentiment, or rather an attitude, or even better: a practice of trust.” (Früchtl 2013: 17205)

Belief vs. trust: While Deleuze presents a heavily metaphysics-infested account; Cavell delivers a pragmatist solution to the problematique of the link between man and world.

Deleuzian belief (croyance) explicitly bears religious undertones; Deleuze marks it as a form of religious belief, or even as a kind of cult, when he writes that “[t]here is a catholic quality to cinema” (Deleuze 1989: 165) and suggests: “Is there not in Catholicism a grand mise-en-scène, but also, in the cinema, a cult which takes over the circuit of the cathedrals, as [the French art historian] Elie Faure said?” (Deleuze 1989: 165) We will get back to this shortly.

In his recent book Vertrauen in die Welt Josef Früchtl develops a philosophy of film that revolves around the formula of trust in the world and thereby critically renegotiates the Deleuzian formula of “croyance au monde,” belief in the world. Roughly, Früchtl aims at a symbiosis of Deleuze’s position with Stanley Cavell’s notion of acknowledgement. Like Deleuze, Früchtl recognises that cinema does not so much convey trust in the world, but trust in the modern world, into Modernity (see Früchtl 2013: 11).

What I am interested in here is the peculiar interrelation between the correlated concepts of belief and trust. As much as both concepts overlap and are entangled with one another, Früchtl’s diagnosis shows that the aphorism of “falling in love with the world” marks the differences between both: Belief or faith is a matter of the subject, in the sense of “I believe in you” or “I believe in something,” an attitude not necessarily directed at a world shared with others, an attitude with (particularly in Deleuze’s formulation) profoundly religious connotations (see above). In fact, even though the English translation of Deleuze’s Cinema books tends to use the term “belief,” what

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204 German original text: “der skeptischen Urteils- und Handlungsenthaltung zu folgen”.
205 German original text: “[Am Ende steht] die These, dass der Film insofern eine Form des Vertrauens, der Weltverliebtetheit ist, als er zum einen […] spezifisch als Bewegungsmedium eine „Anerkennung“ von Subjektivität und Moderne leistet, und zum anderen, ebenso wie die Kunst allgemein, eine Anerkennung von Welt leistet, sofern das ästhetische Gefühl des In-die-Welt-Passens […] ein Gefühl oder besser eine Einstellung oder besser noch eine Praxis des Vertrauens ist.”
206 Let it be noted that the concepts of “trust” and “acknowledgement” play an important role in current cultural theory and sociology, such as in Axel Honneth’s studies Kampf um Anerkennung: Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte (Honneth 2010) and Verdinglichung. Eine anerkennungstheoretische Studie (Honneth 2005) and in Martin Hartmanns Die Praxis des Vertrauens (Hartmann 2011). See Früchtl 2013: 203, 218ff.
Deleuze talks about is actually a version of “faith”. Trust, on the other hand, essentially seems to be an attitude directed at a world shared with others, a matter of being-with-someone, or being-with-others. Put prosaically, trust means closing one’s eyes and falling asleep on the passenger seat in the certainty that the driver will steer you safely towards your mutual goal. It is a form of letting go. As such it is an ontological-existential attitude.

207

As Früchtl argues, the Deleuzian project of cinematic belief-restoration is only possible in the context of the occidental negation of the world, “Weltverneinung” (Früchtl 2013: 11), which is historically influenced by Platonic Idealism, Cartesian Methodological skepticism, and by the experience of a rupture in civilisation (“Zivilisationsbruch[...],” ibid.) during the two world wars. Thus the Deleuzian project depends on the occidental intellectual tradition to which Deleuze is opposed so often (see chapter 6.3): “That cinema can be seen in the perspective of restoring belief in the world – this is only possible because of Christian eschatology and Cartesian epistemology.” (Früchtl 2013: 2728) And this attitude of world negation is associated with a way of life: “In this sense, the occidental form of life has not developed a culture of trust” (Früchtl 2013: 12).

209

Früchtl contrasts this with the “ontological affirmation” (ibid.) strongly elicited in the arts by aesthetic evidence or presence – an experience that there is something we experience, regardless of what exactly its content is. If belief or trust is an attitude (“Einstellung”), and if that attitude (partially?) becomes the model which replaces the concept of knowledge, then – using Früchtl’s terminology once again – the belief or trust conveyed by cinema (and other arts) functions not so much as an ontological-epistemological bridge across the gap between man and world but rather an ontological-existential one. In knowledge there is no choice, one either knows or doesn’t. In epistemological models, accepting or rejecting knowledge is a secondary step: One may decide to refuse to know only with the knowledge that in fact one does know (or does not know). But if knowledge is replaced by belief or trust, then attitude (as “Einstellung”) becomes the relevant factor. For Früchtl, trust in the world can assume the form of an as if attitude, and thereby becomes an aesthetic attitude: “Trust in the world is […] an as if attitude. Aesthetic experiences affirm our ways of behaving as if we can have trust in the world. This is their ontological merit.” (Früchtl 2013: 14)210 We behave as if we can have trust in the world. This is a more precise reformulation as well as development of Deleuze’s thesis.

Roughly following Deleuze, Früchtl distinguishes at least four possibilities according to which cinema might be able to “restore” the lost belief in the world: First, to present the relation between humans and the world as one of endless conjunctions of things in the world – even though the intrinsic link between them is broken, they can enter

207 Früchtl distinguishes an ontological-existential form of trust from its ontological-epistemological form (see Früchtl 2013: 10, and ch. 5).

208 German original text: “Dass das Kino überhaupt in der Perspektive gesehen werden kann, uns den Glauben an die Welt zurückzugeben, ist möglich erst aufgrund der christlichen Eschatologie und der cartesianischen Epistemologie.”

209 German original text, in full: “Die westliche Lebensform hat in diesem Sinn keine Kultur des Vertrauens ausgebildet. Zumindest nicht stark ausgebildet.”

210 German original text: “Das Vertrauen in die Welt ist […] eine Haltung des Als-ob. Ästhetische Erfahrungen bestärken uns darin, so zu tun, als ob wir Vertrauen in die Welt haben könnten. Das ist ihre ontologische Leistung.”
“infinite” (Früchtl 2013: 33) connections (think of the innovative conjunctions of kissing scenes in NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO).

Second, one may conceptualise the man-world relation as one of a game, expressed in the “as if” attitude outlined above. Just like cinema invites us to make-believe in the fictional world it presents, this attitude can be used for assessing the relation between man and world in general. The as-if attitude is perhaps most pertinent in little children such as Totò, but it can also be taken up by adults. (Früchtl opens his book with a discussion of the as-if attitude of the main character in Michelangelo Antonioni’s BLOW UP (Antonioni, 1966). See section 6.5 below.)

The third option is to assert the autonomy of the medium against doubt. For Früchtl, Deleuze here reveals himself as a “typically modernist aesthetician” (Früchtl 2013: 35) because he assigns modern art with the task of distancing itself from the traditional concept of mimesis.

“insofar as this concept is calibrated to the imitation of nature as natura naturata […] In the art of modernity, the relation between I and world is […] neither managed through a third instance (such as similarity) nor through the order of ideas or signs themselves, nor through idealistic subjectivity in its epistemological form” (Früchtl 2013: 35).

The autonomy solution aims at dissolving reference in favour of self-reference: “The less the I […] leers at the world, the less it emphasizes the dimension of reference, the closer it comes to the world” (Früchtl 2013: 36). In other words: The third alternative amounts to a retreat from the world in order to get closer to it (since the less significance the question of correspondence between man or the subject and the world assumes, the less it can become a problem). We will come across this dimension of self-reference again in part III, particularly in the comparative analysis of skepticism films about self-knowledge: When doubt becomes self-referential, the alleged gap between man and world falls out of the equation.

The fourth strategy advanced by Früchtl’s reading of Deleuze (see Früchtl 2013: 32ff.) has been addressed already in chapter 5: Thinking through the problem under the perspective of skepticism, and finding the answer in Cavell’s stance of acknowledgment.
Here, Früchtl again sees a decisive difference between Cavell and Deleuze: The former presents

“a philosophy of cinema […] which does not call for salvation. Deleuze entirely thinks under the spell of Christianity and Cartesianism. Because of that he must and wants to be delivered [from it]. With Cavell and all the other pragmatists one is able to dismiss this grand gesture.” (Früchtl 2013: 37)

And here we come full circle again: Trust – as a concept associated with sharing a world, as suggested above – is the deciding concept for thinking about the relation between man and world:

“Because we […] always have to rely on something, even though we do not know whether we can rely on it; since in this sense we always have to believe in the world, film as well as every aesthetic experience presents us the world – a world which has returned from its epistemological split-up – in the ambivalent mode of the as-if. Not more, like Deleuze, the metaphysician of time, wants to have it, but also not less.” (Früchtl 2013: 37)

Thus, Früchtl presses for a basically pragmatist solution to Deleuze’s problem which has no need of the metaphysical burdens inflicted on Deleuze’s own answer.

6.5 NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO Revisited: The Child’s Expulsion from the Paradise of Cinema

With this overview of different strategies for cinematic restoration of belief in the world let us return, once again, to the primal scene of NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO; this time in order to understand it better as a recurrent theme of cinema in general: The child in the cinema seat, staring at the screen with eyes and mouth wide open (see fig. 6.1 to 6.4). Cinema history is full of such images of spectators lost in reverie. To name a few: SHERLOCK JR. (Keaton and Arbuckle, 1924), HUGO (Scorsese, 2011), THE CIDER HOUSE RULES (Hallström, 1999), THE MAJESTIC (Darabont, 2001), THE GREEN MILE (Darabont, 1999); all of them films in which huge child’s eyes (or child-like adults) stare secretly or not-secretly at what happens on the screen. All these scenes reveal, again, the ambivalence of cinematically mediated belief in the world: The cinema as the site of cinematic procurement of belief is also a site that is cut off from the rest of the world, from the rest of life, at least during the film screening in a darkened room with closed doors which keep out the noises and lights of everyday life. Film theory’s recurring

216 German original text: “Da wir uns […] immer auf etwas verlassen müssen, auch wenn wir nicht wissen, ob wir uns darauf verlassen können; da wir in diesem Sinne also immer an die Welt glauben müssen, präsentiert uns der Film, wie jede ästhetische Erfahrung, die aus der epistemologischen Aufspaltung zurückgekehrte Welt im ambivalenten Modus des Als-ob. Nicht mehr, wie Deleuze als Zeitmetaphysiker es möchte, aber auch nicht weniger.”
217 Strikingly, Früchtl’s pragmatist Deleuzian answer shares a family relation with analytic-philosophical attempts at solving the ‘problem’ of skepticism. Particularly Barry Stroud attempts to immunise basic beliefs, i.e. beliefs that are indispensable for the formulation of skepticist doubt at all (see chapter 4). This shows again that the so-called continental and analytic traditions have more in common than usually admitted.
218 However, one should not forget cinema history’s equally numerous traumatic primal scenes: the punishment of Alex in CLOCKWORK ORANGE (Kubrick, 1971), agonic Pre-Cogs witnessing future crimes in MINORITY REPORT (Spielberg, 2002), or the horrifying intra-cerebral snuff films in STRANGE DAYS (Bigelow, 1995).
analyses between the darkened cinema room and the Platonic Cave are not by accident.\footnote{Cinema’s escapist function is a well-established research topic. E.g., for an account of the role of movie theaters in the German ‘Wirtschaftswunder’ era, see Paech and Paech 2000; see also Paech 1985.}

As an aesthetically authoritative film on the power of cinema as a dream factory, \textsc{Nuovo Cinema Paradiso} carries its title for a good reason: Tornatore’s film can be interpreted, as has been done in the first section of this chapter, as a meditation on the expulsion from the paradise of children’s cinema dreams – the return of the disillusioned protagonist into the cave of his dreams included. This amounts to a specific interpretation (or at least version) of the intellectual trajectory discussed in chapter 6.4:

Is the screening of a kind of (escapist) paradise from which humans have been expelled a part of the character of cinema – the paradise of dreams screened, the paradise of (imagined) childhood and youth, which the adult spectator hopes to find again, if only for the duration of two hours? Is cinema one of the sites that houses the memories of such a paradise – the memory of first love lost, the memory of the magic of childhood, which has vanished for the adult and which only appears again from time to time as a shadow of a memory?

For many a few children the cinema might have created (and still creates) a kind of trust in the world: The hope that in the end everything will be fine, just like in the movies; the hope that, as soon as the kid has grown into an adult, life will house many adventures for it, just like in the movies. And for the already grown-up adult, who is perhaps a prisoner of his monotonous everyday routines, cinema might convey the (all-too-often delusive) hope that there still is a world beyond the dim horizons of everyday life, a life to which one could walk towards, just like in the movies.

The excited child spectators may not already know it, but their sense of wonder about this new world on the screen, which conveys a premonition of a larger, more beautiful, more reassuring world out there, beyond the confines of the parental house – this sense of wonder is indeed a kind of escapism, a flight from the world. Going to the movies is, on the one hand, a way of discovering the world (and something that, qua stirring up of emotions, temporarily ‘heals’ the broken link between subject and world), but at the same time it is a flight to another world, a world which is not the same in which we happen to live in. This is another facet of cinema’s ambivalence: Because cinema leaves the world as it is outside of the door, it conveys a kind of reconciliation with it.

Adults, of course, already know all this. This is nicely illustrated in the fifth season of the television series \textsc{Mad Men} (2007–), in which Don Draper (Jon Hamm), the legendary creative executive, and his other creatively damaged advertising men populate Manhattan’s cinema theatres with increasing frequency in order to have at least two hours of peace among the capitalist madness of Madison Avenue. But instead of giving in to the fascination of cinema in the semi-crowded theatre rooms, they succumb to semi-somnolent states, give blow-jobs or hand-jobs to random co-spectators, or they
start talking – upon running into each other – with colleagues about their current advertisement campaigns. The original sense of wonder of childhood, the feeling Geborgenheit which the cinema is still able to convey to the child – all of this has passed away in MAD MEN, it is just a faint echo, which at least is strong enough to lure the adults back into the familiar cave of the cinema theatre from time to time. But the magic has gone. This also is the sentiment that transpires in the closing scenes of NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO, when adult Totò is faced with the ruins of his childhood. But just then the film finds a reconciliating ending with the screening of the Kissing Reel. NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO is a Deleuzian film insofar as – and only insofar as – it is a film calling for salvation in a double sense: Salvation from our own dreams of cinema, which promise us a world that gives us more than the real world can give; and salvation from the world, which gives (or at least seems to give) so much less than the dreams of cinema have promised.

Most importantly, NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO underlines all the more the significance of one’s experience of cinema, and of the existential relevance of this experience; an insight which is, as outlined before, the deciding bridge to understand what Cavell is doing when he does film philosophy: He is writing his own filmic autobiography. To quote Cavell’s introduction to The World Viewed again: “Memories of movies are strand over strand with memories of my life”. But one should add: It is not the cinema as a medium alone – the films, and the movie theatres constitute these memories, and contribute to cinema’s ambivalent ability to restore belief in the world.

There is another film by an Italian filmmaker which circles around the problematic of belief or trust in the world: Michelangelo Antonioni’s BLOW UP (Antonioni, 1966). Früchtl uses the concluding scene of this film as the opener of his book Vertrauen in die Welt: the main character, the photographer Thomas (David Hemmings), stumbles upon a group of pantomimes while wandering through a park. The artists are playing tennis on a court – sans rackets and tennis balls. They merely behave as if they were actually swinging a racket and hitting the ball. While Thomas watches, the ball “flies” beyond the area of the court, coming to an (imagined) halt in front of his feet. The pantomimes urge him to throw the ball back at them. Hesitating at first, Thomas then kneels down, picks up the imaginary ball, and throws it back. At the end of the film, the photographer who throughout the film only believes in what he sees with his own eyes, lets himself fall into the gesture of the as-if (see the more extensive discussion in Früchtl 2013: 7f.). It is this gesture that brings salvation to Thomas. It is his courage to follow the “invitation to trust” (“Einladung zum Vertrauen,” Früchtl 2013: 8) that unbans him. And, quite ironically, here it is not the cinema in the film, the as-if machine par excellence, which brings along this kind of salvation. Thomas is unbanned precisely because in this scene he does not hide behind the camera (which in the course of the film has repeatedly impeded him from either knowing his world or establishing trustful relations with it).

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222 See particularly episode 6 of season 5.
6.6 “...Then It’s Done and You Can Gasp!” Digital Cinema and the Neuro-Image

Let’s recapitulate: For Deleuze, cinema is a grand belief restoration machine. As Michael Wedel puts it in his book *Filmgeschichte als Krisengeschichte*, Deleuze even claims that “it is only in cinema that the world as an ontological certainty becomes evident” (Wedel 2011: 403). According to the preceding sections of this chapter, this kind of evidence is an ambivalent affair. I now want to conclude the study of Deleuzian cinematic belief restoration by looking at the status of Deleuze’s thesis at the beginning of the 21st century, which is marked by the emergence of digital cinema as a part of a digital screen culture that pervades almost every aspect of our everyday lives.

One reason for putting a special focus on digital cinema is that – like the bulk of Cavell’s philosophy of film – Deleuze’s kinematic philosophy was formulated during the era of analog filmmaking, and also uses epitomic examples from that era (as noted, Deleuze’s range of film examples stops in 1968). Nevertheless, Deleuze already saw possible changes and extensions of the time-image in a time when electronic forms of film making and distribution gave a premonition of changes to come. One can ask, then, about the “possibilities of world- and self-access [… ] which cinema can still grant humans at the beginning of the 21st century.” (Wedel 2011: 408) One possible answer was already discussed in chapter 5: For D.N. Rodowick, digital moving-image culture is becoming “the art of synthesizing imaginary worlds” (Rodowick 2007a: 87), resulting in an acceptance rather than overcoming of skepticism. Computated digital media bring into being a corresponding computational ontology, an ontology that to a high degree also depends on interactivity between man and digital interfaces (in the form of video games, control menus, tablets, touchscreen notebooks, smartphones and other haptic audio-visual interactive devices).

Starting from Rodowick’s position, I want to discuss two possible answers to the challenges posed to Deleuze’s thesis in the 21st century. The first one focuses on the effects of (digital) interactivity on the belief restoration thesis, and on the increasing possibility for users to immerse in digital worlds. In that context, I will analyse a selected film from TOTAL RECALL (Wiseman, 2012), a re-adaptation of Philip K. Dick’s short story *We Can Remember It for You Wholesale* (see Dick 1991). The film shows how digitalisation, as presented in cinema, reaffirms Deleuze’s attempt to close the mind-body schism, albeit, again, in an ambivalent fashion. The second answer grows naturally out of the first one: In her book *The Neuro-Image*, Patricia Pisters extends Deleuze’s duality of movement- and time-image and introduces the concept of the neuro-image for describing and understanding narrato-aesthetic phenomena in contemporary cinema from a Deleuzian perspective:

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221 German original text: “allein im Kino werde die Welt als ontologische Gewissheit noch evident”.
223 German original text: “Möglichkeiten des Welt- und Selbstzugangs [… ], die das Kino dem Menschen zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts noch gewähren mag.”
224 A closer analysis of current and older blockbuster cinema shows a steady occupation with de-humanisation, with attempts to stay human in an increasingly technological world: *METROPOLIS* (Lang, 1927), *THX 1138* (Lucas, 1969), the TERMINATOR Series, MINORITY REPORT, A.I. – ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (SPIELBERG, 2001), IRON MAN (Favreau, 2008), TRANSFORMERS (Bay, 2007), or PACIFIC RIM (del Toro, 2013).
“[W]ith the neuro-image we quite literally have moved into the characters’ brain spaces. We no longer see through characters’ eyes, as in the movement-image and the time-image; we are most often instead in their mental worlds.” (Pisters 2012: 14)

One can use the neuro-image as a further shift in the understanding of the belief restoration problem: A cinematic projection of the mental world of a character poses the problematic of the relation between man and world in different terms than films that focalise their characters more externally. A neuro-image film implicitly can be understood as consistently screening the world in the way its main character experiences (and not only perceives) it, being kind of an update on the famously infamous film noir LADY IN THE LAKE (Montgomery, 1947). By contrast, non-neuro-image films work with an implicit trajectory between ‘external’ focalisations of events and situations in the film world, and ‘internal’ focalisations of the same, allowing the spectator to speculate more liberally on what is allegedly ‘real’ in the film’s diegetic universe and what is not. This is no option if, a film-as-neuro-image is understood as a consistent projection of a characters’ mental world. In neuro-image films, even hallucinatory perceptions of the film world need to be acknowledged “as real agents in the world” (Pisters 2012: 6), because they are part and parcel of what influences the characters’ actions and attitudes. There is no ‘I’ and a world – the ‘I’ generates a world.

TOTAL RECALL is a dystopian science fiction film. After a devastating global chemical war, there are only two still inhabitable parts of the world at the end of the 21st century: The United Federation of Britain (UFB) in the geographic area of the former United Kingdom, and the ‘Colony’ on the Australian continent. Increasingly unable to provide living space for its population, the UFB wants to take over control of the Colony, which is basically the source of raw materials and workforce for the wealthier UFB region. An interplanetary gravity elevator called “The Fall,” which travels right through the Earth’s core within fifteen minutes, connects both parts of the world.

The construction worker Douglas Quaid (Colin Farrell), happily married to Lori (Kate Beckinsale), wants more adventure in his monotonous private life and books a virtual vacation with Rekall, a company that offers their customers fake memories implanted in the brain by a sophisticated virtual reality technology. Quaid books a neuro-adventure trip which is supposed to deliver to him memories of a past life as a secret agent. However, something goes wrong when Quaid undergoes the procedure: Apparently, Quaid already has similar residual memories, which wreak havoc on Rekall’s computer system. All of a sudden, Quaid finds himself chased by government forces. It turns out that his wife is (allegedly) actually an undercover agent trying to uncover Quaid’s hidden identity as a double agent for the UFB who swapped sides in order to...

225 See also Pisters 2012: 196f. for another summary.

226 The idea that the things that happen ‘in our heads’ can assume a reality status of their own is deeply rooted in Western culture and not confined to the niche of madness films. For instance, entire generations of readers will be familiar with the idea from the Harry Potter books. In Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, an apparently dead Harry Potter wakes up in a foggy, white Netherland remotely reminiscent of King’s Cross station, where his journey into Hogwarts once started. His deceased headmaster Albus Dumbledore, dressed like Merlin in shining white robes, and a terribly deformed infants wailing underneath a bench are waiting for him there. At the end of their conversation, which solves many of the riddles that troubled Harry, the apprentice asks his master: “Tell me one last thing […] Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?” Dumbledore replies with his usual mix of serenity and sarcasm: “Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?” (Rowling 2007: 579)
support the resistance group of the Colony, a group that tries to sabotage the UFB’s attempts to take over power of the entire planet. In order to hide his former identity, Quaid erased his memory, rendering himself ignorant about his real self. The rest of the film is an extended chase sequence, with Quaid trying to escape the UFB forces while simultaneously unearthing the truth about his identity. The film results in a lethal confrontation between Quaid and UFB chancellor Cohagen (Bryan Cranston). Quaid prevails in the fight and is able to stop the impeding invasion of the Colony. TOTAL RECALL concludes in an ambivalent manner: How real are Quaid’s memories and impressions about his identity and actions; which parts of his remembered and experienced life are only derivatives of an implanted memory?

A central scene of the film contains an interesting detail: After Quaid has unsuccessfully mounted the Rekall chair which was supposed to implant him memories of being a spy, a police unit turns up, shooting the staff of the Rekall Company and trying to arrest Quaid. Just when Quaid is held up, he suddenly breaks free and in a succession of fantastically versatile martial arts body moves manages to kill every one of the dozen-or-so officers in the room. He reacts out of pure instinct, his body moves occur as if he has never done anything else. Only when the fight is over, with everyone but Quaid lying dead or unconscious on the floor, he breathes in and literally regains consciousness, staring in disbelief at the massacre he has left behind. Quaid’s body apparently remembered something which his conscious, merely ‘neural’ memory could not.

In a behind-the-scenes interview on the Blu-ray edition of the film, director Len Wiseman remarks on this scene with the words “then it’s done and you can gasp”. As mediocre as the film as a whole might be, it actually quite coherently enacts, performs or puts to motion a recurring thread: If you want to know who you are, it is not only your present actions that count, or an introspection into your feelings and emotions – it is actually what your body tells you, and what your body is able to do (without even thinking consciously). Assuming that at least part of the events in the film are supposed to take place on a level of (fictional) reality, the main guideline for the Quaid character in finding out who he really is, is not what he consciously ‘knows’ or makes himself believe – it is the things his body tell him which can be a guideline to the truth, things that actually (re-)connect him with whoever he really is. So, assuming Quaid’s adventures are not only dreamed-up but (film-fictional) fact, his versatility during the action scenes reveals that he is in fact a double agent who was trained perfectly in all matters of survival. It is not the higher-level cognitive insights that are the link to his life world – it is an awareness of what he is able to do, an awareness of what his body is best suited to do and feel.

Suppose this is so – where does this leave the role of film in re-discovering belief or trust in the world? My attempt at an answer would be: Films, due to their performative character, are much better at transporting such a bodily mediated belief or trust in the world than any philosophical argument, or any elaborate passage in a book of fiction will be able to transport. If film actors, and the coordinated workforce of cinematography, sound and editing department, do their job in the right way, the way they embody such a

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227 The amnesiac double-agent is also a central theme of CYPHER (Natali, 2002).
character looking for his or her links to the world will be the standard measure for aesthetically conveying what it is that is able to provide belief or trust in the world.

But again, this belief restoration is an ambivalent affair – like at the end of TOTAL RECALL, it is ultimately a matter of belief whether what has been experienced is real or not, bear a link to “the world” or not. But simultaneously, this ending suggests that, at the end of the day, it does not really matter: The problem (so prevalent in classical film theory) of the cinematically rendered illusions of reality has given way to an acknowledgment of the reality (or realities) of illusions. In The Neuro-Image, Patricia Pisters regards this shift as a characteristic contemporary phenomenon. She argues that “contemporary culture has moved from considering images as ‘illusions of reality’ to considering them as ‘realities of illusions’ that operate directly on our brains and therefore as real agents in the world.” (Pisters 2012: 6)

This is the starting point for the second answer to the challenges posed by digital screen culture and TOTAL RECALL: Digitalisation has intensified cinema’s intrusion into the mental worlds of its characters and audiences. Since digitally rendered augmented realities “operate directly on our brains,” as Pisters writes, they become an integral part of our phenomenological life world. TOTAL RECALL is an almost literal example for this: For Quaid, the question whether he is a double-agent or only the victim of implanted fake memories ultimately becomes irrelevant, since whatever he remembers and assumes being influences his actions in his life world, and in turn influence the way others in this life world react towards him. Even though the Rekall memory implants may at first be illusions of reality, they quickly assume their own reality, not the least because they “work on” Quaid’s capabilities and on the cluster of problems he has to deal with.

In effect, TOTAL RECALL can be understood as a projection of Douglas Quaid’s mental world. If this is so, then the film is an example for what Pisters calls the neuro-image, “a new type of cinema belonging to twenty-first-century globalized screen culture” (Pisters 2012: 2). The transformations of audio-visual culture can already be recognised in the massive proliferation of screen technologies in everyday life:

“navigation displays, computer screens, cell phones, television sets, urban screens, and surveillance technology; they are the markers of both a typical twenty-first-century media city and the practices of everyday media use. The neuro-image is part of this networked media practice, related to digital technology’s ubiquity, and engages with these technologies in ‘an internal struggle with informatics.’ [A quote from Deleuze, Cinema 2, PS]” (Pisters 2012: 2f.)

Pisters argues that the neuro-image is a term adequate for this contemporary digital screen culture:

“the third synthesis of time, the dominant temporal dimension of the neuro-image, connects to the logic of digital screen culture. Where the movement-image follows the motor-sensory logic of continuity editing, and the time-image relates to a logic of the irrational cut and the incomprehensibility of the crystals of time, the neuro-image mixes and reorders all from the previous image regimes, un grounding and serializing according to a digital logic.” (Pisters 2012: 148)

Pisters anchors the category of the neuro-image in the web of Deleuzian philosophy by grounding it in Deleuze’s account of the “passive synthesis of time” (Pisters 2012:}
136) in *Repetition and Difference*. This synthesis is basically a way in which human beings (cognitively) embed their experiences in a temporal structure: “on the basis of what we perceive repeatedly in the present, we recall, anticipate, or adapt our expectations in a synthesis of time.” (137) Deleuze distinguishes different levels of this synthesis, which are occupied with the present (first synthesis), the past (second synthesis), and the future (third synthesis). As Pisters explains, the

“first synthesis of time as ‘the living present’ relates to the past and the future as dimensions of the present. In this way the flashback (and the flash-forward) in cinema can be seen as the past and future of the movement-image [which, however, are experienced by the audience, and sometimes by the film characters as well, as taking place in the perceived present, PS]. In the second synthesis of time the past becomes the actual ground, as the synthesis of all time and thus the present and the future become dimensions of the past.” (Pisters 2012: 138)

Pisters correlates the neuro-image with the third synthesis of time, in which “the present and past are dimensions of the future” (Pisters 2012: 138). Deleuze defines the third synthesis as the “repetition of the future as eternal return” (quoted in Pisters 2012: 138), thereby explicitly referring to Nietzsche’s conception of Eternal Recurrence in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. This third synthesis, if I understand correctly, involves a sense that the things happening in the present, and the things happening in the past are already premonitions of the future – an idea that is actually already pragmatically used by security organisations and insurances which calculate the future behaviour of suspects or potential clients based on patterns of their past and present behaviour. One can also understand the third synthesis as invoking the insight that whatever happens in the present is an actualisation of hitherto ‘virtual’ states of the future. For instance, at the present moment I am writing these sentences in order to finish the chapter. Finishing the chapter will be, in Deleuzian terms, an actualisation of what yet is only a ‘virtual’ possibility.

The crucial step in Pisters’ development of the concept of the neuro-image is the correlation of the syntheses of time with the time- and movement-image in the *Cinema* books (see Pisters 2012: 129ff.): The movement-image is correlated with the first synthesis of time, the time-image is correlated with the second synthesis of time, and, consequently, the neuro-image is a cinematic correlate with the third synthesis of time. This allows her to present the neuro-image as a kind of yet-unoccupied position in Deleuze’s kinematic philosophy, a notion already implied, but not explicated in Deleuze’s body of philosophical work.

Narrato-aesthetically, the main point of the neuro-image is, as indicated at the beginning of this section, that contemporary films no longer tend to merely present the perspective or point of view of their characters (as happens in the time-image), but “literally enter brain-worlds in cinema ([…] *Fight Club*, James Cameron’s *Avatar*, Christopher Nolan’s *Inception*, and Duncan Jones’ *Source Code* are just some of the most recent films of this type)” (Pisters 2012: 27). In the narratological terminology adapted by Edward Branigan to film studies in *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, neuro-image films advance from internal surface focalisation to internal depth.

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focalisation (for those terms see Branigan 1992: 86ff.), by which “the mental processes of storytelling are being displayed onscreen.” (Pisters 2012: 213) Perhaps it would even be advisable to add another level of narration to Branigan’s scale which delves even deeper into the circuits of their characters’ brains, as exemplified by the freewheeling camera ride through the synaptic structure of a brain in the opening sequence of FIGHT CLUB (Fincher, 1999) (see Pisters 2012: 14ff.). That additional level of narration could be called mental or neural focalisation.

It is, by the way, quite useful to remember the talk about levels of narration here: As Pisters herself repeatedly emphasises, the neuro-image is not a distinct category of its own, but rather a development or intensification of aspects of the time-image which were, partly, already present or incipient in earlier cinema. Neuro-images thus present a recognisable trend in the contemporary use of cinematic means of aesthetic and narrative expression, which may or may not have been fostered by the emergence of new creative possibilities in the era of digital filmmaking. As Pisters writes, “technology is not the cause of aesthetic change, nor the agent of [a] specific film’s aesthetic difference, even though it can be profoundly related to it.” (Pisters 2012: 206) Thus, the concept of the neuro-image can be understood as a proposal for a better understanding of certain tendencies in current filmmaking even if one wishes to proceed without Deleuzian baggage. As Pisters writes: “Calling this new type of image the ‘neuro-image’ is to acknowledge the fact that images now quite literally show us the illusionary and affective realities of the brain.” (Pisters 2012: 26)

What is, then, the neuro-image’s potential for tackling the problematique of restoring belief in the world? One side-effect of the neuro-image as a projection of mental worlds is that it gives rise to a plethora of films which revolve around madness, such as schizophrenia, and around characters with instable mental lives in general (see Pisters 2012: chapter 1). Thus it highlights the importance of neural processes for the constitution of what people call ‘reality’. Additionally, the neuro-image signals the transformation of the ways in which films participate in contemporary digital screen culture: They are not self-sufficient “closed objects” (Pisters 2012: 177) anymore, the themes, stories and motifs of many contemporary moving-image products are dispersed across different media, they “operate more like seeds that grow and spread rhizomatically with other parts of culture” (Pisters 2012: 177).

Pisters analyses the television series LOST (TV series, 2004-2010) as an example of a “transmedial Gesamtkunstwerk” (Pisters 2012: 186). Starting by discussing Hume’s probabilistic theory of knowledge, she argues that LOST “can be seen as a Humian experiment in positioning belief as the basic principle of knowledge” (Pisters 2012: 173), and thus as another instantiation of filmic occupation with knowledge.

In LOST, the survivors of a plane crash end up on a mysterious island in the middle of the ocean. Throughout the six seasons of the series, they must confront a number of mysterious incidents which again and again call into question whether what the

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229 Pisters claims that the neuro-image is a continuation of Deleuzian kinematic philosophy by invoking the cinema of Alain Resnais since the 1950s (see Pisters 2012: 145-148). She introduces Resnais’ films as “neuro-image[s] avant la lettre, or as digital cinema without digits.” (Pisters 2012: 129) Even though these films did not come into being by relying on digital filmmaking technologies, they “demonstrate[...] how the neuro-image can be sensed at its incipience as a will to art and can anticipate aspects of digital culture, such as participatory aesthetics and database logics.” (Pisters 2012: 129) In her analysis of Resnais’ films, Pisters outlines “how the future, as the third synthesis of time, at certain moments transforms the time-image into a neuro-image.” (Pisters 2012: 146)
characters (and the audience) experience is real or only a mind-game of an illusory nature. For instance, the possibility is brought up (but eventually dismissed) that everything going on in LOST is a mere “fantasy” in the head of one of the characters (see Pisters 2012: 174). The audience as well as the characters are constantly forced to choose whether to believe what is happening or not. Therefore, for Pisters, “[w]ith its incredible emphasis on the possibly delirious nature of our perceptions and its questioning of knowledge – proposed as a degree of belief that can never give complete assurance – Lost can be considered as a neuro-image.” (Pisters 2012: 174)

Even though one might decide to believe instead of to doubt, there always remains the possibility that this belief is illusory or in another sense a fabrication of the imagination. No matter how many reasons cinema/moving-image culture might give us for believing, this belief always ultimately remains ambivalent, at least as long as belief is considered in Hume’s sense of “degrees of belief”. Deleuze sees this ambivalence of cinematically mediated belief clearly: “Surely a true cinema can contribute to giving us back reasons to believe in the world and in vanished bodies. The price to be paid, in cinema as elsewhere, was always a confrontation with madness.” (Quoted in Pisters 2012: 5) Following Pisters, the neuro-image is the most recent instance that very clearly brings into view this deep ambivalence of contemporary screen culture.

6.7 Coda: Fantasy Ain’t a World Apart From Reality

Metaphorically, one could say that the benefit of a Deleuzian stance on cinema’s potential for belief restoration is that it hands over the choice of believing or disbelieving to humans. But this benefit comes at the price of madness as an accepted possible element of the belief model, or as one of the accepted “realities of illusions”:

“[Cinema] has participated in the transformation of the world into an object of belief – even if this belief should prove illusory. It is precisely because everything that I see and hear is capable of being false, the expressions of deceit or trickery, of false oaths and betrayal, that only my belief is capable of connecting with what I see and hear.” (Gregg Lambert, quoted in Pisters 2012: 174.)

In the Bible, Adam and Eve have to pay for their act of choosing choice, i.e., for their choice of eating the apple from the forbidden tree, with the expulsion from Paradise. In NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO, the price Totò pays for moving on into the world is an expulsion from the paradise of (unconditional love for the worlds of) cinema. The theories, themes and films discussed in this chapter share a penultimate desire for salvation, a desire for returning to the paradise once known, in other words: a desire for a better world, even if it might be only of an illusory kind. (As Cypher in MATRIX would say, this is acting on the belief that “ignorance is bliss”.)

While Cavell agrees with replacing the (ontological-epistemological) model of knowledge with an (ontological-existential) alternative, he disagrees with the accompanying call for salvation, because it still implies that the nature of our position in


230 Pisters characterises Hume’s inferential epistemology by contrasting belief with certainty: “To think in an empiricist way is […] not to be certain (of given sense data) but, on the contrary, to believe where we cannot be sure. So here we see how belief becomes the basis of knowledge: different yet similar cases of certain instances are observes and in the imagination (by principles of association) are fused in the mind, coming to constitute a habit. Degrees of belief can then be calculated based on experience and probability.” (Pisters 2012: 159)
the world is deficient. His concept of acknowledgement is, in contrast, more pragmatic and affirmative.\textsuperscript{231}

However, Deleuze, Deleuzian film-philosophy and Cavell agree that it is a mistake to separate dreams, fantasies, even hallucinations from what we believe to know of the world. In \textit{The World Viewed}, Cavell writes:

“It is a poor idea of fantasy which takes it to be a world apart from reality, a world clearly showing its unreality. Fantasy is precisely what reality can be confused with. It is through fantasy that our conviction of the worth of reality is established; to forgo our fantasies would be to forgo our touch with the world”. (Cavell 1979a: 85)

This resonates with Deleuze’s thesis that “cinema can restore our belief in the world” in a more general fashion. Where for Deleuze the shock elicited in the spectator by cinema reassures us in our belief that there is a world, for Cavell fantasy (as storytelling) enables us to assign a value to reality, a worth: Because we can tell stories about the world, we know that we are in “touch with the world” – the world is touched by us, and we are (emotionally) touched by it, just as the Kissing Reel does for Salvatore di Vita, the once little boy who left the ambivalent paradise of a childhood spent at the movies in order to pursue self-fulfilment as a creator of movies.\textsuperscript{232}

\textsuperscript{231} Freely invoking Wittgenstein again, Deleuze as well as Cavell assign a special role to belief, but they inject it with different colourings: “Am I to say that belief is a particular colouring of our thoughts? Where does this idea come from? Well, there is a tone of belief, as of doubt.” (Wittgenstein 2005: §578)

\textsuperscript{232} There is proof that this chapter’s reflections on a cinema for believers are not entirely theoretical: In a recent piece in the \textit{New York Review of Books}, “The Persisting Vision: Reading the Language of Cinema,” Martin Scorsese writes about his life with and within the movies, and traces his love of cinema to his early formative experiences at the movies as a little boy. His memories resonate with the current chapter’s emphasis on the ambivalence of a life lived with and within the movies: “I realize now that the warmth of that connection with my family and with the images on the screen gave me something very precious. We were experiencing something fundamental together. We were living through the emotional truths on the screen, often in coded form, which these films from the 1940s and 1950s sometimes expressed in small things: gestures, glances, reactions between the characters, light, shadow. These were things that we normally couldn’t discuss or wouldn’t discuss or even acknowledge in our lives. And that’s actually part of the wonder. Whenever I hear people dismiss movies as ‘fantasy’ and make a hard distinction between film and life, I think to myself that it’s just a way of avoiding the power of cinema. Of course it’s not life—it’s the invocation of life, it’s in an on-going dialogue with life. Frank Capra said, ‘Film is a disease.’ I caught the disease early on.” (Scorsese 2013)
Part III

Skepticism Films
7 Varieties of Skepticism Films

7.1 Introducing Skepticism Films

If the medium of film can be understood as a Cavellian moving image of skepticism (as chapter 5 suggested) or even as (ambivalently) restoring our belief in the world (as chapter 6 suggested), then single films as well are likely to address skepticism, or at least revolve around the difference between what is real and what is not (see chapter 5.1). In the spirit of chapter 4, skepticism is understood as a position which makes problematic the epistemological and ontological relation between man and world by using thought experiments which raise the question whether we are able to distinguish reality from non-reality. The current chapter will develop a typology of skepticism films which, as I will claim, constitute a significant subset of the cinematic tendency that plays with the difference between what is real and what is not.

Skepticism films are fictional narrative versions of skepticist thought experiments; i.e. they present dramatizations of hypothetical thought experiments of traditional philosophical discourse. The plots of skepticism films are typically based on a diegesis that encompasses at least two different planes of reality, one of which is designated as being ‘real’ while the other is not. The difference between a ‘real’ world and a ‘non-real’ world shapes the narrato-aesthetic strategies of the films: cinematography, editing, the narrative structure, set design, the actors’ performances, and so on.

The plots of skepticism films involve characters that are either victims or originators of the fundamental deception situations they are ignorant about. Skepticism films also have a specific mode of audience address, since it is up to the filmmakers to determine the degree to which the film audience is aware of the deception situation of the film’s narrative. Consequently, narratological concepts of reliable and unreliable narration figure prominently in the analysis of the structure of skepticism films.

Skepticism films are not necessarily skepticist films. Even though they screen skepticist thought experiments, this does not imply that the films ‘assume’ a specific position concerning the philosophical problem of skepticism, and it does not imply that a skepticism film proposes philosophically elaborated answers to the problem of knowing the world. However, skepticism films at least tend towards an affirmative or negative answer to the skeptical challenge, since most skepticism films eventually allow

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233 Translation: “‘But, if you are certain, isn’t it that you are shutting your eyes in face of doubt?’ – They are shut.”
their main characters to discover their skepticist predicament, and to escape from it, e.g. by fleeing from the simulated or isolated environment they have been held hostage in. But other films such as The Thirteenth Floor (see chapter 10) perpetuate doubts about the discernibility of the reality status of the world, if only through ironic twists which throw into doubt the happy ending just introduced.234

The paradigmatic example for a skepticism film is MATRIX (A. and L. Wachowski, 1999), a cinematic version of Hilary Putnam’s “brains in a vat” thought experiment – a film that also explicitly invokes Jean Baudrillard’s postmodernist treatise Simulacra and Simulation as an instance of a philosophy of irreality, or, rather, of “the hyperreal”235. MATRIX follows the adventures of its main character Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves), who discovers that he spent his entire life phenomenologically immersed in a computer-simulated environment while his body is actually suspended in a dream state, floating motionless in a tank filled with nutritious fluids. The film uses Thomas Anderson’s skepticist revelation as a plot twist: For the film’s first 31 minutes, the audience is epistemologically on a par with the main character and supposed to share with him the astonishment about being immersed in (the screening of) a diegetically simulated world (see fig. 7.1). This astonishment is provoked by the plot structure, since the exposition of the film entirely takes place within the simulated environment of the Matrix code. Only when Anderson decides to unplug, “the world as it is today” (Morpheus) is revealed to him.236 Even though MATRIX closely follows the goal-oriented narrative formulae of Classical Hollywood Cinema, the film plays with audience expectations.237

While it is certainly interesting to analyse single films which are (or seem to be) related to skepticism in one way or the other, introducing skepticism films as a film genre pursues a more far-reaching goal: It aims at embedding single films about general

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234 Effectively, I am proposing a number of ideal-typical examples of skepticism films, which constitute the core of the present typology. In personal correspondence, Josef Früchtl suggested the term “ideal type,” which is best known for its use in Max Weber’s sociological work. A systematic explicating of the historical genesis of the concept and its use in social theory can be found in Uta Gerhardt’s study Idealtypus. Zur methodischen Begründung der modernen Soziologie (Gerhardt 2001). For the purposes of this dissertation project, the most important aspect of this concept is that it draws the focus away from a tendentially essentialist, non-empirical definition of the term “skepticism films” and instead urges the analyst to work with a rather pragmatic set of properties which can be used to identify a given film as a “skepticism film” without neglecting the possibility of discerning other possible descriptions of the film.


236 Compare the in-depth analysis in chapter 10.

VARIETIES OF SKEPTICISM FILMS

questions of knowledge, belief, trust and doubt into a network of films they are part of. This makes possible a systematic comparative analysis of the way in which these films explore variants of skeptical doubt. Often, philosophical insights result from reflecting on the implications of different versions of basically similar thought experiments, e.g. canonical philosophical texts often develop several variants of a thought experiment before committing to one specific variety. Similarly, in the natural sciences the selection of an adequate experimental setup is crucial for the success and viability of scientific research.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the term ‘philosophical thought experiment’ applies to such thought experiments that can assume a function in the context of philosophical reflection and arguments. It does not matter whether a thought experiment actually plays a role in existing philosophical literature, since it is possible that there are hitherto undiscovered yet philosophically interesting variants of thought experiments. Exemplary for this is the ‘brains in a vat’ thought experiment, since it is at heart an updated and radicalized, hence new version of already extant skepticist thought experiments such as Plato’s ‘Allegory of the Cave’ or Descartes’ invocation of a genius malignus (see chapter 4).

The often outrageously radical thought experiments have an important function for philosophical concept clarification, and in that respect their role can be compared to the role of worst-case scenarios in military strategies or nuclear plant construction plans. In the latter example, project managers need to determine the stability of their buildings in hypothetical adverse environmental situations, such as earthquakes in metropolitan areas. The nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima I Nuclear Power Plant on 11 March 2011, partly caused by the insufficient safety design of the reactors, is an obvious example of the importance of tailoring the stability of buildings to the demands imposed by extreme scenarios.

For (analytical) philosophers, testing concepts of knowledge with the help of radical thought experiments plays a similar role. When they try to establish limit situations in which a given concept of knowledge is non-applicable, the result is either a limited extension of the concept in question, or the radical thought experiment gives clues for a subsequent reformulation/refinement of the concept under scrutiny. The design of a philosophical thought experiment can thus be crucial for the overall success of a philosophical project. Therefore it seems promising to investigate the ways in which films configure and vary thought experiments on a given topic. Chapter 2.3.2 showed that philosophical thought experiments can play an indispensable role in philosophical arguments. If films succeed in varying basically philosophical thought experiments scenarios, then this strengthens the claim that films can be philosophically significant.

Like philosophical discourse in general, the design of philosophical thought experiments is reflects the Zeitgeist of which philosophers are a product. Put differently: Despite claims to objectivity, philosophy is the expression of a Zeitgeist, a reflection of a specific Weltbild (world view), in general concepts. This is evident in contemporary skepticist thought experiments, since they predominantly present technological

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236 Skepticism films are differentiated from mind-game films, puzzle films, complex narratives and other denominations of contemporary filmic tendencies in chapter 8.

239 See also the introduction of chapter 4 and chapter 4.4.

240 See, in more detail, chapter 2.2.
dystopias. The deception imagined by Putnam and others is computated. As a
technology-based art form, cinema arguably is even closer to the ideas, desires and fears
of the culture its films stem from. Thus it is a medium apt to reflect on updated versions
of the skepticist predicament. This provides additional good reasons for a systematical
philosophical analysis of skepticism films:

Firstly, skepticism films reflect philosophy’s pervasion of everyday life; they put on
display how the most influential ideas of the philosophical tradition have found their
way into the artefacts of (Western) popular culture, and henceforth into the lives of at
least major parts of globalised post-industrial information societies.

Secondly, skepticism films also exhibit the reverse direction of pervasion: from the
more general domain of (popular) culture into the (more specialised and restricted)
domain of serious, systematic, philosophical thought. If philosophy’s dominant
discourses are a reflection of a Zeitgeist, then cinema as a major component of that
Zeitgeist also influences professional philosophers. Skepticism films then can be said to
influence the thoughts of epistemologists and aestheticians of philosophical skepticism,
whether directly or indirectly. It is therefore apt to try to find out in more detail how
skepticism films address philosophical skepticism and the more general discourse of
epistemology.

Thirdly, as instantiations of philosophical ideas in popular culture, skepticism films
mirror contemporary uneasiness with human beings’ position in the world (see
introduction and chapter 6).

This assumed mutual influence between philosophy and cinema as a domain of
popular, hence everyday culture reflects Stanley Cavell’s conception of philosophy as an
intellectual enterprise whose problems are not extraneous to everyday thought. In his
essay “The Thought of Movies” he characterises philosophy as

“a willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think
about, but rather to learn to think undistractedly about things that ordinary human beings
cannot help thinking about, or anyway cannot help having occur to them, sometimes in
fantasy, sometimes as a flash across a landscape” (Cavell 2005 [1983]: 92)

This is a typically Cavellian-style broad definition which threatens to turn a great
many topics, not only those of ‘officially acknowledged’ academic significance, into
philosophy. Note, however, the twist in Cavell’s definition: He defines philosophy as a
certain sort of intellectual activity, as a specific mode of thinking. Philosophy here is not
that which one cannot help thinking about but rather a “willingness” to think in a
specific way (undistractedly) “about things that ordinary human beings cannot help
thinking about”. I.e., even though academic philosophers and ‘ordinary people’ often
reflect on the same things, former apparently think about them in a more refined way:
undistractedly.

Be that true or not, the world-wide success of Hollywood cinema is partly attributed
to its ability to tune in with the desires and preoccupations of their audiences, which are
heavily influenced by concurrent social, political and historical developments, which in
turn leave traces in philosophical discourse. In this respect, Hollywood cinema is a
looking glass of contemporary social developments, and therefore mirrors or enlarges at
least parts of the things that “ordinary human being cannot help thinking about” –
including cinema itself. In Cavell’s terms, then, a film with philosophical value is a film
that “think[s] undistractedly” about its issues – at least insofar as philosophising qua film allows reflecting on philosophical issues outside of the restraints and specialised rules of academic philosophising, but within the everyday/ordinary contexts which for Cavell are the origin of valuable philosophical thought.

A comparative analysis of skepticism films also can be significant for another reason: Films and filmmakers communicate with each other, they form an own kind of intertextual discourse, as the repeated parallel release of different films with similar themes shows. In this respect, contemporary skepticism films are typical products of Hollywood’s industrialised production methods. For instance, MATRIX was in development, produced and released (US release on 31 March 1999) roughly at the same time as Peter Weir’s THE TRUMAN SHOW (1998, US release on 5 June 1998), Alex Proyas’ DARK CITY (1998, US release on 27 February 1998) and Josef Rusnak’s THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR (1999, US release on 28 May 1999). The world-wide success of MATRIX and of THE TRUMAN SHOW subsequently spawned a succession of other films that play with the idea of simulated or fake worlds – D.N. Rodowick called the summer of 1998 the “summer of digital paranoia” (Rodowick 2007: 3). This accumulation of similar films mainly results from economic considerations. But it also opens a promising avenue for the comparative analysis of the way in which films address skepticistic ideas. Even though most of these films may not significantly contribute to philosophical discourse on their own, looking at them as constituting a genre or cinematic tendency can offer not always obvious or even overlooked nuances of skepticism.

7.2 Alternative Worlds in Skepticism Films

Skepticist thought experiments imagine alternative worlds which, they propose, might have more and hierarchically superior layers of reality than thought of. However, there are many forms of alternative worlds in the history of cinema, and not all of them can be understood as cinematic skepticistic thought experiments. James Walters’ tripartite distinction between Imagined Worlds, Potential Worlds, and Other Worlds is helpful for coming to terms with the varieties of alternative worlds in cinema (see Walters 2008: 10f.):

241 The latter film is a more film-noirish adaptation of the novel Simulacron-3 by science fiction author Daniel Galouye, which was already put to screen under the name of WELT AM DRAHT (“World on a Wire”) by German film director Rainer Werner Fassbinder in 1973.

242 All these films ultimately mark the return of cyberpunk literature to mainstream Hollywood cinema (which was already present in the early 1980s with films such as BLADE RUNNER (Scott, 1982).

243 Another fruitful avenue of philosophical investigation into film is the analysis of single films from the perspective of a genre, as Stephen Mulhall has done in his book On Film, which philosophically explores a series of films and their sequels such as ALIEN and MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE (see Mulhall 2008a). An auteurist perspective is pursued by writers who focus on the ‘philosophical universe’ of film directors such as Ingmar Bergman, David Lynch, Steven Spielbergs and others. (See Dean A. Kowalski’s edited volume Steven Spielberg and Philosophy: We’re Gonna Need a Bigger Book (Kowalski (ed.) (2008)); Paisley Livingston’s Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman. On Film as Philosophy (Livingston 2009); Irving Singer’s Three Philosophical Filmmakers: Hitchcock, Welles, Renoir (Singer 2004); or Irving Singer’s Ingmar Bergman, Cinematic Philosopher. Reflections on His Creativity (Singer 2007).) Another example for a comparative approach to films with a philosophical twist is Josef Früchtl’s The Impertinent Self: A Heroic History of Modernity (Früchtl 2009). Grounded in a philosophical explication of different concepts of modernity and the self, Früchtl analyses how cinema, or more specific, different film genres, mirror the different conceptions through their hero figure(s), in films such as PULP FICTION (Tarantino, 1994), THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS (Demme, 1991) and THE SEARCHERS (Ford, 1956).
Films of the **Imagined Worlds** category “contrast the real world with the [dreamed or hallucinated] world of a character’s imagination” (Walters 2008: 52). Walters mentions examples such as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Woman in the Window* (Lang, 1944) and *Sherlock Jr.*. In all these films, the characters move between their ‘real’ world and the world they imagine, dream or hallucinate. For instance, in *Sherlock Jr.*. Buster Keaton’s character is a movie theatre projectionist who temporarily falls asleep in the projection room. There he dreams being the protagonist of the detective film currently running in the theatre. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the heroine Dorothy Gale (Judy Garland) apparently imagines being taken away by a tornado to a fantasy world called Oz, where together with a group of newly acquainted friends she fights an evil witch before being able to return to her home in Kansas. The end of the film suggests that Dorothy has imagined her adventures all along while she was actually lying unconscious in her bed.

In films of the **Potential Worlds** variety, “a character visits an alternative version [or alternative versions] of the world they inhabit” (Walters 2008: 10f.). Walters’ case studies of this category centre on Frank Capra’s classic *It’s a Wonderful Life* (Capra, 1946), *Groundhog Day* (Ramis, 1993), Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Scorsese, 1988) and *Donnie Darko* (Kelly, 2001). These films provide alternative accounts of how the state of the world, or the flow of events in that world, could be, and thereby explore what I would term counterfactual states of the (film) world: In the absence of George Bailey’s (James Stewart) soothing influence, the hometown of the main character of *It’s a Wonderful Life* transforms into a kind of Sin City that bears no resemblance to the small-town-life paradise as which the city of Bedford Falls has been depicted before. In *Groundhog Day*, the weather TV-anchorman Phil Connors (Bill Murray) is forced, by a metaphysical event of unknown origin, to relive the same day over and over again until his cynical character and overall behaviour has changed so much that he finally manages to win the heart of the woman he loves. *The Last Temptation of Christ* envisions what would have happened if Jesus had lived the happy family life of an ordinary man instead of suffering as God’s son for the sins of humankind (in the film, this alternative life is the last temptation which Satan imposes on Jesus while he is already hanging on the cross). Instead of contrasting a world within a character’s mind with the outside world, in the Potential World category Walters contrasts two different worlds or states of the world outside of a character’s mind, even though usually at least one of these worlds is eventually rendered as being counterfactual.

Walters’ third category is composed of films that make use of **Other Worlds**, i.e. parallel worlds, which are not merely potential but actually exist. Walters discusses *Liliom* (Lang, 1934) and *A Matter of Life and Death* (Powell and Pressburger, 1946) – two films that screen a bureaucratic vision of life in Heaven. *Flatliners* (Schumacher, 1990) and *The Others* (Amenábar, 2001) introduce the afterlife as a kind of actual ontological realm. In *The Others*, it is an additional layer of the world of the living; the world is phenomenologically ‘visible’ for the ghosts, but they cannot interact with those who are still alive. Other examples are Woody Allen’s *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, *Brigadoon* (Minelli, 1954) and *Pleasantville* (Ross, 1998). If
there is a skepticist challenge in these films, then it is the one of recognising that one lives in a multi-layered reality.\textsuperscript{244}

Walters’ distinctions highlight different ontological correlations between reality layers within a film’s diegesis. Along with V.F. Perkins, he argues that the main factor in understanding and appreciating film worlds is \textit{conceivability} rather than probability or familiarity (see Walters 2008: 27 and 214). A spectator must accept the events happening in that film world as being conceivable, even if by everyday standards they may be improbable or impossible. Applied to skepticism films, it does not matter whether it is probable that mankind one day ends up as living batteries, or whether it is probable that one day a TV company will build a city-sized reality TV show studio like in \textit{THE TRUMAN SHOW}. It is only necessary to being able to imagine and conceive of such scenarios. Such fictional worlds adhere to their own logic:

“Whatever kind of world the film proposes, it must operate according to the logic of that world, rather than imposing meanings upon it. […] [T]he advent of the alternative world does not threaten credibility, but the arrangement of that world might.” (Walters 2008: 26f. See also Walters 2008: 218)

However, Walters is careful to maintain that a given film is not tied to a specific “diegetic logic” once it is introduced to or established in the film, but “that a film possesses the ability to alter and expand the terms of its logic at any time” (Walters 2008: 33). This can happen, for instance, when different worlds within the diegesis operate according to their own logic, so that “although the film’s narrative may harbour different frames of time and space, these divergent states will always be framed within the widest boundary of the ‘cinematic space’. Within that frame, any number of events or complications is possible.” (Walters 2008: 33)

In his introductory chapter, Walters picks up an insight by Edward Branigan: In writing and thinking about the ways in which different worlds are distributed within a film, one need also recognise that an audience understands

“worlds in film as worlds not only through a cognitive ability to make the two-dimensional three-dimensional but also because of the film world’s relationship to our own: the ways in which it relates to a reality that we already understand through experience.” (Walters 2008: 21).

Walters’ study reminds us that skepticism films are not some kind of singular film-historical phenomenon but rather elements of a more overarching film tradition which explores, in Walters’ terms, “resonance[s]” (Walters 2008: 218) between different (imagined, alternative, transcendent, counterfactual) realms. It also draws attention to the plurality ‘alternative world design’ in cinema.

7.3 Family Resemblances: A Typology of Skepticism Films\textsuperscript{245}

\textit{MATRIX}, earlier introduced as a prototypical skepticism film, is based on a specific version of the skepticist predicament. Here, a fictionally real world consisting of

\textsuperscript{244} Walters is less interested in films such as \textit{THE DEPARTED} (Scorsese, 2006) or \textit{DONNIE BRASCO} (Newell, 1997), in which characters travel between the contrasting social spheres of organised crime. These films highlight the contrasts between the social sphere of organised crime and the characters’ ordinary (family) lives.

\textsuperscript{245} This section is a completely revised version of chapter 3 of my Amsterdam MA thesis.
physically manifest objects and incarnated human beings is contrasted with a computated, i.e. simulated virtual world which basically only exists as an algorithm that generates specific sense impressions in ‘envatted,’ physically immobile human beings. This simulated world is imagined insofar as it subsists only within the minds of the characters who share it, but it is simultaneously an Other World which actually exists, even though in a different ‘material form’. MATRIX is a literal example for Cavell’s “moving image of skepticism” in which “our normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist – even, alarmingly, because it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes” (Cavell 1979a: 188f.). Viewing the film is all it takes to have our senses satisfied of the (fictional) reality of the Matrix world, even though it turns out that (fictionally) this reality does not exist physically. Viewing is make-believe.246

As prototypical as MATRIX may be, its diegetic setup only presents one of the multiple possibilities for creating skepticist predicaments in film. Other skepticism films configure the ontological texture of their filmic realities differently. The following sections introduce a typology based on some of the properties shared by, or distinctive for, skepticism films. The overview indicates areas of attention for the case study chapters.247

‘Non-real’ Levels of the Diegesis

Skepticism films are structured around the notion that the world their protagonists live or act in is in some sense not real (but imagined, hallucinated, counterfactual, fake, or simulated). While, strictly speaking, the diegesis of any film does not have a counterpart in reality since even a non-fictional documentary is but a filmed selection and ‘distortion’ of reality, this difference between a ‘real’ and a ‘non-real’ world is a defining narrative pattern of skepticism films: At least temporarily, some of these reality levels are misrepresented to the film characters or/and the audience.248 For instance, the simulated environments of MATRIX and THE THIRTEENTH Floor, and WELT AM DRAHT are presented as being physically manifest within the diegesis of the film, while actually they are only computer-generated there. THE TRUMAN SHOW was not only shot in a pre-planned community, the real city of Seaside, Florida, which was turned into an on-location studio set. The fictional events of the film take place in a studio set, since the film’s protagonist Truman Burbank unknowingly is the star of a daily reality TV show, and only gradually he realises the truth. Such films need to find ways of expressing the

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246 And, as the second and third MATRIX film suggests, a physically non-extant layer of reality can be a Lebenswelt in its own right.

247 Thomas Elsaesser also sketches a “list of common motifs” (Elsaesser 2009a: 17) for mind-game films. For instance, “[n]ot only is the hero unable to distinguish between different worlds, he or she is often not even aware that there might be parallel universes, and neither is the audience – until a moment in the film when it turns out that the narrative and plot have been based on a mistaken cognitive or perceptual premise” (Elsaesser 2009a: 17f.). Mind-game films are addressed in depth in chapter 8.

248 The very introduction of fictional or fictionalised characters in a standard narrative fiction film already precludes the possibility of an exact counterpart in reality. One example: Although almost all earlier films of Woody Allen take place in a very recognisable and somehow accurately depicted Manhattan, the characters in these films still are fictional or, in the case of Allen himself, fictionalised to a certain extent. Film critics have remarked on VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA (Allen, 2008), one of the films produced during his European period, that Allen depicts a kind of idealised Catalan capital as it is possibly perceived by tourists. For Alan A. Stone, “[t]he film is a sumptuous tourist travelogue of the city of Gaudí’s architecture and Miró’s art.” (Stone 2009). Similar things could be said about his Paris film MIDNIGHT IN PARIS (ALLEN, 2011). For a filmmaker like Allen, the city is used as a character of its own that is shaped according to the film’s needs. That is, real environments are still subjected to the narrative concerns of the film.
difference between what is real and what is not real not only via narrative structure and narrational strategies, but also visually, aurally, via montage and actor performance.

Reality levels in skepticism films are often distributed vertically, i.e. they are hierarchically ordered. Also possible is a horizontal distribution of reality levels, common in “alternative worlds” films with parallel universes such as JOHN CARTER (Stanton, 2012), DONNIE DARKO (Kelly, 2001), TRON (Lisberger, 1982), TRON: LEGACY (Kosinski, 2010) or SOURCE CODE (Jones, 2011). Skepticism films with an exclusively horizontal distribution of reality levels are rather rare. TRON and JOHN CARTER illustrate this: The discovery of additional reality levels expands rather than questions the protagonists’ range of knowledge of the world. In TRON, the computer hacker Kevin Flynn (Jeff Bridges) is abducted into a computer game world which in principle is dependent on the physically manifested real world. In JOHN CARTER, the protagonist (Taylor Kitsch) unwittingly discovers a new planet when he wakes up on Mars after falling asleep in a cave.

S1mONE does not envision simulated worlds but a virtual, computer-generated actress called Simone or S1mOne (Rachel Roberts). The entire (inner-diegetic) world believes that she is a real, yet highly reclusive real person. It is the audience of Andrew Niccol’s film that knows, on a par with the film character Victor Taransky (Al Pacino), ‘who’ S1mOne really is. The film’s title alludes to the virtuality of its main character: S1mOne is an acronym for “Simulation One”.

While S1mONE addresses the issue of knowing other minds, other films introduce skepticist scenarios concerning self-knowledge. THE OTHERS and THE SIXTH SENSE both feature unwitting ghosts who are ignorant about their existential position: Grace Stewart (Nicole Kidman) and her children in THE OTHERS, and Dr. Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) in THE SIXTH SENSE, fail to realise that they are already dead and now inhabit another layer of the world as ghostly beings. While they are able to perceive the world of the living, they cannot interact with it. The world in itself has not changed; the protagonists have changed even though they cannot detect these changes. Such films are doubly interesting, because, firstly, they explore the correlation between the Self and the world it inhabits, and, secondly, they address the idea that the world we call real may consist of different co-existing yet non-interacting layers of reality.240

Diegetic Hierarchies and Externally Induced Deception

Skepticism films not only distinguish levels or layers of reality vertically or horizontally, they also tend to establish diegetic hierarchies between them. For instance, there usually is an outer plane of diegetic reality which is presented as hierarchically superior if compared to alternative or lower reality levels. This tendency notwithstanding, films such as EXISTENZ (Cronenberg, 1999) and THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR surprise their audience because their ending remains ambiguous about the (diegetic) existence of a clearly identifiable outer layer of reality. They use aesthetic strategies such as unusual

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240 John Mullarkey discusses AWAKENINGS (Marshall, 1990) and WINK OF AN EYE, an episode of the STAR TREK TV series (Taylor, 1969, season three, episode 66), two other examples of a coexistence of layers rather than levels of reality, even though he does not use this terminology (see Mullarkey 2009: 150f.). In the examples, the characters live their lives according to different ‘speeds,’ making “spatial coexistence” (Mullarkey 2009: 151) impossible: “Where Awakenings involves the speeding up of others to match our pace […], the TV episode from Star Trek […] involves our lives being sped up to match a different one alongside us.” (Mullarkey 2009: 151)
VARIETIES OF SKEPTICISM FILMS

In these films, the Outer Worlds is a world that is not necessarily a ‘real world,’ i.e. that layer of reality which is not dependent on or controlled by other reality levels.

Control, as preannounced in chapter 4.4, is a recurrent theme in skepticism films. For instance, in MATRIX, THE TRUMAN SHOW or THE ISLAND (Bay, 2005), the film characters are deceived about the ontic status of their Lebenswelt, or parts of it, by an intending external force. In THE TRUMAN SHOW, the role of the deceiving external force is played by the wanna-be omnipotent TV show director Cristof (Ed Harris), who is the fictional inventor and director of the all-life-long reality show the film’s main character Truman Burbank is subjected to. Cristof wants to control every aspect of Truman’s life. Even Truman’s surname indicates his predicament, since he is named after the suburb of Los Angeles, CA where the fictional TV studio is located.

In MATRIX, the deceiving entity is a mega computer that controls the Matrix simulation. In WELT AM DRAHT and THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, several computer programmers construct and control simulated worlds. In DARK CITY, an alien species on the verge of extinction conducts experiments on human beings which involve personal identity replacement and memory manipulation.

Only rarely the film protagonists themselves are responsible for the deception situations, as it happens in SIMONE. In this dissertation, the main examples for self-induced deception are the Spanish film ABRE LOS OJOS (Amenábar, 1997) and its Hollywood remake VANILLA SKY (Crowe, 2001). In these films the main character – César (Eduardo Noriega) in ABRE LOS OJOS, David Aames (Tom Cruise) in VANILLA SKY – decides to live a ‘lucid dream’ life in a virtual reality environment after a car accident disfigured his face. That dream world is designed according to his desires, but he remains unaware about his immersion into a simulated world until the end of the film. The narrative twist of the film is that César/David is both the deceived character and the one who is responsible for inducing the deception.

Control aspects in skepticism films also reveal their proximity to Utopian and Dystopian literature: MATRIX, DARK CITY, THE ISLAND, THE VILLAGE (Shyamalan, 2004) or THX 1138 (Lucas, 1971) are basically dystopias in the tradition of Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World or George Orwell’s classical modern novel Nineteen-Eighty-Four. They present a vision of societies (or social groups) that are confined to isolated

colour schemes or camera positions for establishing that ambiguity. In these films, the outer layer of the plot is not necessarily a ‘real world,’ i.e. that layer of reality which is not dependent on or controlled by other reality levels.

Significance of control

Abre Los Ojos and Vanilla Sky

Proximity to Dystopian literature

250 There is a group of films which circle around rather political dimensions of external deception: conspiracy films. Unlike external world skepticism films, these do not call into question the ontological constitution of the protagonists’ Lebenswelt but rather force them to unravel political conspiracies. Films such as THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR (Pollack, 1975) or THE CONVERSATION (Coppola, 1974) involve their characters in Sherlock-Holmes-like investigations to discover the truth about the plots they find themselves in. Such plot devices involve elements of trust since, for instance, in THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR the main character, CIA agent Joe Turner (Robert Redford), has to figure out who of his CIA colleagues he can trust and which ones belong to the group which wants to kill him. But conspiracy films do usually not transcend some kind of pragmatic skepticism. There are, however, conspiracy films such as THE BOURNE IDENTITY (Liman, 2002) which are close to the topoi important for skepticism films: Jason Bourne, who suffers from major memory loss after an accident at high sea, piece by piece discovers his identity as a CIA agent who is part of a secret undercover operation gone rogue within the CIA. Such a film, which revolves around double attempts at identity reconstruction (discovering his own personal identity, and discovering his function within the CIA apparatus), directly address the issue of self-knowledge. Robin Cellikates and Josef Früchtl raised my awareness of the resemblances between skepticism films and conspiracy films in personal conversations. An introduction to conspiracy films can be found in Barma W. Donovan’s Conspiracy Films: A Tour of Dark Places in the American Conscious (Donovan 2011).

251 For a detailed case study of ABRE LOS OJOS and VANILLA SKY, see chapter 11.

252 Huxley 1932; Orwell 1949. For an overview of scholarship on Utopian literature see The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature (Claeys (ed.) 2010). On historical and political issues regarding Utopian thought see Sargent
environments, knowingly or unknowingly controlled by an external or hierarchically superior force.

The conjunction of epistemological and socio-political questions via control issues is philosophically interesting because it introduces moral and political-philosophical questions within the context of onto-epistemological scenarios. Control relations are decisive for thinking about the recognisability of reality and about moral or ethical implications of the film scenarios under scrutiny. In that way, skepticism films, I claim, contribute to philosophical discourse.

Epistemic Symmetry vs. Epistemic Asymmetry
The correlations between (diegetic) reality levels can also be spelled out in terms of epistemic symmetry and epistemic asymmetry: Either the majority of the inhabitants of a diegetic world is ignorant about the actual ontic status of the latter, while single individuals or small groups know the truth (MATRIX, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, WELT AM DRAHT); or it is the other way around and the majority knows the truth while single protagonists remain ignorant about the diegetic status quo (THE TRUMAN SHOW). Deception is thus imposed on single individuals (THE TRUMAN SHOW, VANILLA SKY, ABRE LOS OJOS, WAKING LIFE, and, as borderline cases, THE SIXTH SENSE and THE OTHERS), or on collectives. Collective deception is either imposed on a comparatively small group of individuals (DARK CITY, THE VILLAGE, THE ISLAND), or is implemented as mass deception (MATRIX, SIMONE).

The Ontological Status of Non-Reality
Skepticism films also vary the ontological texture of the reality levels they introduce. For instance, the audience and the (main) characters of MATRIX, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, VANILLA SKY, and ABRE LOS OJOS are confronted with computer-generated worlds; in EXISTENZ the characters move through various levels of an interactive virtual-reality computer game. DARK CITY, THE TRUMAN SHOW, and THE ISLAND contrast a physically real world with artificially constructed, controlled and isolated environments. The plot of WAKING LIFE revolves around a protagonist who mistakes his (near-death) dream experiences for experiences of real events, things and characters. In the experimental William S. Burroughs adaptation NAKED LUNCH (Cronenberg, 1991), drug-induced hallucinations create a world of their own for the main character Bill Lee, a fictional version of Burroughs played by Peter Weller.

The Everyday Generates the Skepticist Predicament
Skepticism films move from everyday situations to more philosophically charged situations. Initially, their main characters lead ordinary, seemingly innocuous lives before strange occurrences lead this everyday world ad absurdum. Only after the introduction of this normal state or order of things odd events happen in the characters’ world, until they realise that their world is not real. The narrative trajectory of these films mimics the stages of Descartes’ skepticist meditations in the Meditations de Prima Philosophia.253


253 For a philosophical account of the movement from the Everyday to the Philosophical in Descartes, see Barry Stroud’s The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism (Stroud 1984a: chapter 1).
Thus, typical skepticism films explore the idea that even ordinary human beings are, under standard conditions, unable to recognise the nature of the environment they inhabit. In contrast, typical “mind-game films” – another “tendency in contemporary cinema” (Elsaesser 2009a: 15) – investigate the partly disordered, partly disrupted world perceptions of traumatised or mentally ill film characters who are unable to distinguish between their imaginations or hallucinations of the world and the world as it is.254

In epistemological discourse, the Everyday/Ordinary is a point of departure for discussions about the extension and stability of the concept of knowledge: “That is where the philosophical problem of our knowledge of the external world gets posed” (Stroud 1984a: 13). Discussing the premises and assumptions by which Descartes arrives at methodological doubt, Barry Stroud writes: “It is the investigation of his everyday knowledge, and not merely the fanciful picture of a veil of perception, that generates Descartes’ negative verdict [about the possibility of our knowledge of the world].” (Stroud 1984a: 37) This implies that the admittedly radical deception scenarios of skepticism films are typically not raised by massive drug experiments and neurologically-based character hallucinations. Rather, they are a part of ‘the everyday,’ they arise out of completely ordinary situations. Because of this, I claim, skepticism films generally do not experiment with narrative and aesthetic conventions; they tend to adhere to the narrato-aesthetic traditions of mainstream cinema. In that way they differ from arthouse films, mind-game films, network narratives and other recent cinematic phenomena which (pretend to) experiment with narrative and aesthetic conventions.

As will be shown in the subsequent chapters, films that rely on epistemic asymmetry present the philosophically most interesting versions of this gradation from the Everyday to the skepticist predicament. The upshot of films such as THE TRUMAN SHOW, MATRIX, DARK CITY and others is that there is a real world, and that it is possible to discover it, even though there is an epistemic asymmetry between the deceived subjects and the deceiving entity.

Ontology and Epistemology Entangled
Skepticist thought experiments and assumptions can be discussed within the context of different philosophical disciplines, such as ontology (‘is there a real world?’) and epistemology (‘how do I know what I believe to know about the world?’). Both perspectives are inextricably correlated: Wondering about the epistemological relation of human beings to the world ‘as it is’ implies questions about the way the world is, and vice versa. Consequently, skepticist thought experiments usually examine the epistemological question whether I can rely on my alleged knowledge of the world by introducing an ontological scenario in which the world is not the way it seems to be. The question asked then is whether it is possible to either rule out such a possibility or whether the introduction of a skepticist ontological scenario is even irrelevant for a stable or valid concept of knowledge (see chapter 4.4).

As will be shown, skepticism films entangle the epistemological and ontological perspective in similar ways. Consider, again, THE TRUMAN SHOW which immediately outlines its two inner-diegetic worlds; the gigantic TV studio, and the ‘real’ world outside of it. The inhabitants of the latter world are represented by the film crew and the

254 Mind-game films are further discussed in chapter 8.
TV audience sitting in front of their TV screen. This clear ontological set-up is contrasted with Truman’s epistemological learning process, who only gradually realises that the one world he hitherto took for real is not – and that something is not necessarily real in the full sense of the word because I can smell, touch and taste it. The reality of one’s environment also seems to depend on the truthfulness of the relations to the people one shares one’s Lebenswelt with.

Skeptical Doubt within Pre-Established Realities
The bulk of the skepticism films discussed in this thesis contrasts layers of reality. But other films explore skepticist issues without introducing additional physically manifest reality levels. These films work within the boundaries of one pre-established (level of the) world and turn to the way in which the human mind perceives its reality.

In scholarship, such films are usually subsumed under the label of the mind-game film, exemplified by the cinematic work of David Lynch, some of David Cronenberg earlier films such as VIDEODROME (1983), Joel Schumacher’s THE NUMBER 23 (2007), Martin Scorsese’s SHUTTER ISLAND, Christopher Nolan’s sophisticated explorations of mind worlds in MEMENTO or even, with some restrictions, INCEPTION (2010). These films do not ‘question’ that the world their story takes place in is real (within the film’s diegesis) but rather centre on their film characters’ problems to form accurate or reliable beliefs about it because they are mentally ill or drug addicts. These characters struggle with their mental projections of the world. The principal focus of such films is epistemological rather than ontological. Because of that, they are closer to the category of the mind-game film than to the core set of skepticism films.

7.4 Varieties of Knowledge in Skepticism Films

As shown in chapter 7.3, skepticism films are play with the contrast between appearance and reality in different ways. Preparing the more detailed case studies in part IV, the following sections sketch a typology of skepticism films by correlating them to varieties of knowledge. These categories are not mutually exclusive, since a given skepticism film can cover more than one variety.

The typology follows Donald Davidson’s model of three varieties of knowledge: knowledge of the world, knowledge of others, and self-knowledge; which according to Davidson form a mutually supportive triangle (see chapter 4.3 and fig. 7.2). For Davidson, none of these varieties is hierarchically prior to the others; on the contrary, each variety of knowledge is indispensable for understanding the others. As Davidson writes, “all three varieties of knowledge are concerned with aspects of the same reality; where they differ is in the mode of access to reality” (Davidson 1991a: 205).

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255 This section and section 7.5 contains portions of chapter 5 of my Amsterdam MA thesis.
Davidson’s model helps foregrounding what this dissertation considers as one of the core intellectual strategies of skepticism films: the deliberate juxtaposition of aspects of skepticism which in academic philosophical discourse tend to be treated separately.

The following list of varieties of skepticism films parallels Davidson’s model and distinguishes three basic varieties of skepticism films (see fig. 7.3): ‘external world skepticism films’, ‘self-knowledge skepticism films’, and ‘other minds skepticism films’.

This tripartite distinction facilitates the conduct of the case studies and allows applying a general theoretical framework on the selected films without imposing too many philosophical presumptions on them. Since Davidson claims that each variety of knowledge is indispensable for the others, qua analogy it is also possible to assign a given skepticism film to more than one variety, even though the films tend to focus on one of them.

Chapter 7.5 provides an overview of some films which fit into the respective categories. It is not the goal of this chapter to provide a detailed philosophical analysis of the films mentioned. That task is left to the case studies.

7.5 Varieties of Skepticism Films

7.5.1 External World Skepticism Films

External World Skepticism films are the main group of skepticism films; they focus on doubt about our knowledge of the external world, i.e. whether we know that there is an external world. In such films, the world is not real but instead simulated (MATRIX),
artificial/fake (TRUMAN SHOW, DARK CITY, THE VILLAGE, THE ISLAND), an illusion (VANILLA SKY) or fundamentally misinterpreted (RASHOMON). As diverse as the film examples mentioned are, they share a diegesis which for their main characters turns out to be ontologically different from how they (and/or the film recipients) think it is.

*Simulation Films*

In simulation films, (some of) the main characters live in at least one simulated world or environment, i.e. an environment that is not spatio-temporally extended in a physical sense. This world is usually a computer-generated simulation which is elaborated enough to be taken for real. Main examples are MATRIX, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, and Rainer W. Fassbinder’s WELT AM DRAHT. The simulated environments do not have a direct counterpart in reality, even though they are constructed from elements of reality. MATRIX, for instance, constructs two levels of reality: the real world, which was devastated during a nuclear war, and the computer-generated, simulated worlds of the Matrix and the so-called Construct. In his conversation with Neo in the sequel MATRIX RELOADED (A. and L. Wachowski, 2003); the Architect of the Matrix asserts that there have been five previous versions of that computer-generated world, all of which eventually had to be destroyed due to a malfunction in the software program. The second and third MATRIX instalment allows the interpretation that even the ‘real’ world of the first film is only a computer-simulated level of reality. All of the scenes in the MATRIX films would then take place within computer-generated reality levels, while the actual level of reality is located on an even higher yet unspecified level of reality.

THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, based on Daniel F. Galouye’s novel Simulacron-3, is about computer expert Douglas Hall (Craig Bierko) who is specialised in designing a computer-generated simulation of Los Angeles of the year 1937. This simulation contains artificial intelligences, self-conscious computer algorithms which think they are actually living in a real world. Through an immersive device, Hall is capable of ‘uploading’ his consciousness – or rather: an exact counterpart of his neurological structure – to these simulated environments. This allows him to mentally inhabit one of the artificial intelligences and to explore and directly interact with his own computer-generated environment. Eventually Hall makes a disconcerting discovery: His own world, the city of Los Angeles in 1998, is only computer-generated as well, designed by someone else on a higher reality level. At one point on the film he is literally confronted with the boundary of his world. There, the Californian desert dissolves into an arrangement of vertical and horizontal green vectors which replace the mountain ranges and the sky, and even the birds up in the air turn out to be nothing more than moving vectors (see fig. 7.4).

THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR presents at least three levels of reality, each of which like matryoshka dolls is contained within the other. The film characters are able to move from one neighbouring reality level to another but they cannot skip the next-higher reality level in an attempt to move several levels up. The final film scene is ambivalent: Hall wakes up on another next-higher reality level, L.A. in 2024. Even though he believes that he finally arrived in the real world, the unnatural colour grading of that scene suggests differently (fig. 7.4). Also, the film’s final shot is visually ‘turned off’ like a TV set (transition from fig. 7.5 to 7.6). Therefore, even the layer of reality presented in the
last film scene possibly is only a simulation constructed and controlled by someone on
an even higher level of reality.\footnote{This is a well-known twist in contemporary cinema. E.g., the closing credits sequence of \textit{Men in Black} (Sonnenfeld, 1997) visualises the idea of an endless arrangement of worlds contained within worlds. The camera pans back from planet Earth, and rapidly follows through our sun system, galaxy, universe, etc. until it comes to a halt in a world where worm-like aliens are playing with marble balls, one of which does contain the Universe we live in. This sequence, though, is merely a gag at the end of the film, but it plays no substantial role for the film plot.}

\textit{Matrix} as well as \textit{The Thirteenth Floor} audiovisualise, update and vary
Descartes’ evil genius hypothesis: The films’ diegesis is not simply a deception of sorts,
but a computer-generated simulation inflicted on the deceived by an external force (an
evil programmer, so to speak).

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figs}
\caption{The Thirteenth Floor}
\end{figure}

\textit{Existenz}, another simulation film, very clearly exploits video-game logic. In the
film, a group of computer game players voluntarily immerses into a virtual reality
computer game via an interface implanted into their spine. As the plot advances, the
main characters move from computer game level to computer game level and eventually
return to the real world. But the last scene of the film arouses confusion about which
plane of reality depicted in the film is the actual outer layer of reality. \textit{Existenz}
effectively presents a chain of simulation levels contained within one assumed outer layer
of reality. The film characters’ task, once they have entered the computer simulation
game, is to move from one game level to the next until they reach the end of the game
and supposedly get back to the outer layer of reality. The levels of the computer game
are connected like the elements of a chain.

\textit{Fake-Environment Films}
In contrast to the non-physicality of simulated worlds, the non-real worlds of fake-
environment films are part of ‘physical reality’ but nonetheless designed. They are
artificial, or even fake. They are typically built in order to keep the subjects of deception
away from the ‘real’ world for a variety of reasons: While in THE TRUMAN SHOW a studio set is the main environment, the unwitting star of his own reality TV show, THX 1138 (Lucas, 1971) and THE ISLAND feature subterranean cities which are a habitat for collectives of human beings. The inhabitants of the latter two films believe that these cities are, as a consequence of a nuclear war (which in the case of THE ISLAND never took place), the remaining inhabitable part of the otherwise destroyed earth.

In THE VILLAGE, a group of adults and their children apparently live in a village in 19th-century rural USA. Only the adults know that they are actually living at the end of the 20th century. The parents have built the village in a remote corner of the country in order to protect their children from what they believe to be a wicked and dangerous world. Like Cristof, the mastermind behind the ‘Truman Show,’ they believe that only an Emersonian small-town life provides an opportunity to live life as it should be lived, although this requires them to keep their children under a veil of deception. Similar to simulation films, deception is inflicted by an external power which is functionally analog to Descartes’ evil deceiver.257

To a higher degree than simulation films, fake environment films problematize the dependence of our conceptions of reality on the world views of the culture one is a part of. They suggest that what we believe to be real depends to a large extent on what the people we share our environment with make us believe to be real. For instance, Truman Burbank is systematically made to believe that he is living in a ‘real’ city and is constantly bombarded with sometimes subtle, sometimes explicit, messages which declare Seahaven to be the most beautiful place on earth, while the rest of the world is apparently either an incarnation of Dante’s inferno or utterly uninteresting.

The predicament of the inhabitants of the subterranean city in THE ISLAND is similar; they believe they are living in a post-nuclear-war world but actually they are clones of their real-world counterparts, and are used as living organ donors in cases of emergency. Similar to THE TRUMAN SHOW, the fairy tales about their living space keep the inhabitants of the subterranean city under a veil of ignorance.258

In THE TRUMAN SHOW, there is only one (physically manifest) outer layer of reality. Truman’s world is, ontologically speaking, located on the same level of reality as the ‘real’ world is. Both levels of reality in THE TRUMAN SHOW respond to the same physical laws. But Truman’s world contains a boundary to the real world, the outer wall of the TV studio (see fig. 7.7, an aerial view of the gigantic television studio in the middle of Los Angeles’ Metropolitan area). THE VILLAGE, THX 1138, and THE ISLAND have the same diegetic structure. There is one significant difference, though: while the village in THE VILLAGE is a hermetically isolated space that barely witnesses contacts with the rest of the world, in THE TRUMAN SHOW there is a higher degree of interaction between the studio world and the real world — although the studio dome shields the external world away. But the sheer mass of actors and crew members necessary to keep

257 Apart from a certain affinity to Emerson and Thoreau’s writings, the plot premise of THE VILLAGE is similar to the children’s book Running Out of Time by Margaret Peterson Haddix (Haddix 1995), with revolves around a little girl named Jessie who believes to live in a rural village in the 1840s until she is told by her mother that she is an inhabitant of a tourist attraction town in 1996. The novel differs from the film in that the former focuses on Jessie’s experiences in the contemporary world once she leaves her ‘hometown’ in order to retrieve medicine for the treatment of a disease which threatens to kill all of her village’s inhabitants.

258 The film adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel Never Let Me Go varies the motif of the Organ donor. See Ishiguro 2005; and NEVER LET ME GO (Romanek, 2010).
the TV show running already soften up the barriers between both worlds. The
distinction between levels of reality in THE TRUMAN SHOW is based on the access and
control that different persons in the film’s diegesis have to the different reality levels.

The considerations put forward in this section show that in fake environment films
our knowledge of the world (or rather, our beliefs about what kind of world we live in)
are closely related to our knowledge of others (or rather, to our beliefs about who these
people we share our world with).

7.5.2 Self-knowledge Skepticism Films

Simulation films and fake-environment films address doubts about the nature of the
world, and thus can be assigned to the ‘knowledge of the world’ leg of Davidson’s
triangle of knowledge. Another variant of skeptical doubt is directed at the possibility of
self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is an ambiguous term: It can be aligned with questions
about one’s identity in the fashion of “who am I?” but can also be stated as the question
“what am I?” — What ontological status do I actually have? If you will, this is the
Pinocchio version of skepticism, famously varied on screen in Steven Spielberg’s Kubrick
adaptation ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE — A.I. (Spielberg, 2001), and in Ridley Scott’s
Dick adaptation BLADE RUNNER (Scott, 1981).

Self-knowledge in External World Skepticism Films

Problems of self-knowledge can be explicated as problems of personal identity. For
instance, not knowing that one is living in a computer-generated environment also
throws doubt on one’s identity as a person. The artificial, entirely computer-generated
sentient beings of MATRIX and THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR do not inhabit a physical
body — they are virtual versions of a res cogitans (neglecting for the time being the
hardware their algorithm is operated with). Protagonists such as Neo or Morpheus
mentally interact with their simulated environments while their physically manifested
body is rendered inactive. In that respect, skepticism films re-enact the mind-body
problem in the context of contemporary technological utopiae.

Neo’s doubts about his own identity rearticulate Descartes’ questions about the
relation between res cogitans and res extensa: Is control over one’s own (physical) body
an integral part of one’s perceived personal identity? Is the body more than a passive
physical medium which streams experiences in the Matrix, i.e. is the body a substantive
(physical) component of the self? The MATRIX trilogy provides different approaches to
such questions. The first film suggests that human beings die in the real world if they are
fatally wounded in the Matrix, which suggests an indispensable connection between res
extensa and res cogitans. But, as screened in MATRIX RELOADED and MATRIX
REVOLUTIONS, inside the Matrix there also are sentient computer programs such as the
Merovingian (Vincent Cassel), the Oracle (Gloria Foster), or the little computer
program Sati (Tanveer K. Atwal), whose existence, even though being dependent on
some kind of hardware, does not depend on a specific physical carrier.

The ambivalent relation between body and mind is taken up in other (non-
skepticism) films. The economically most successful film of this sort is James Cameron’s
AVATAR (2009), which revolves around a paraplegic soldier who can navigate through
the world of an alien planet in the body of an avatar. The film’s protagonist Jake Sully
(Sam Worthington) replaces his deceased twin brother on a mission to a remote planet called Pandora. There, he is supposed to inhabit a genetically bred body which exactly resembles a Na’vi, the planet’s aboriginal inhabitants. Sully’s mind is uploaded to the avatar’s brain structure while his original body is kept in a suspended state. Sully’s mission is to establish contact with the Na’vi and to convince them to allow the exploitation of the planet’s natural resources. Before the mission starts, Sully learns how to inhabit the avatar’s body, and – like John Locke (Terry O’Quinn) in the TV series LOST (TV series, 2004-2010) – to control his own excitement about being able to walk again. Throughout the film, the experiences of inhabiting the new body profoundly influence and change his character. Sully’s shared experience of Na’vi life changes his perspective on (the value) of that form of life. Proper understanding of forms of life, this implies, requires inhabitation. From that perspective, AVATAR is a screened meditation on the philosophical problem of the correlation of body and mind.

Truman Burbank is also stricken with a form of doubt about self-knowledge. In the wake of his discoveries he questions his role in life, questions whether his alleged friends and relatives actually care for him or only pretend so. THE TRUMAN SHOW addresses mind-body correlations only metaphorically, by showing the multitude of factors that constitute internal and external perceptions of a person’s identity. Truman’s personality is strongly formed and manipulated by the persons he interacts with, and by various staged events and occurrences during his life. His most traumatic experience, watching his father apparently drown in the ocean, instils Truman with a life-long fear of the water – a kind of fear deliberately instilled on him in order to make sure that he will not attempt to escape from Seahaven by sea.

**Being One’s Own Evil Deceiver: Shared Dreams, Illusions, and Hallucinations**

In other skepticism films the main characters are, at least at some point, unable to distinguish imagination, dream states, or hallucinations from reality. Here, it is the characters, not external agents, who are the source of doubt. In WAKING LIFE the main character eventually realises that he is actually dreaming but finds himself unable to wake up. Hallucinations figure in a peculiar way in SOLARIS (Tarkovsky, 1972; remake: Soderbergh, 2002), a story about a space shuttle crew that approaches a mysterious planet whose magnetic sphere makes the secret desires of the space shuttle crew apparently become reality. For example, the dead wife of the ship’s psychologist Kris Kelvin/Chris Klovin (Donatas Banionis (1972); George Clooney (2002)) comes to life again and literally haunts him with her devoting presence. Such hallucination or dream state films will not figure prominently in the case studies of the subsequent chapters, since they are based on non-standard states of mind of their main characters, e.g. pre-mortal dream states and drug-induced hallucinations.

259 In 2009, the film’s main actor Sam Worthington appeared in another role which raises mind-body questions: In TERMINATOR SALVATION (McG, 2009) he plays Marcus Wright, a convicted and executed murderer who 15 years later surfaces again from a Skynet research facility. Skynet is an artificial intelligence which has assumed power over the humans and devastated the earth through a nuclear war. Wright eventually discovers that he is a terminator, a precursor of the T-800 which brought worldwide fame for Arnold Schwarzenegger: His heart and brain were transplanted into an endoskeleton covered with human skin and, so the film suggests, this suffices to keep his self-identification as Marcus Wright basically intact (in fact, Wright is not even aware of his cyborg status until an accident in a mine field uncovers his metallurgic bodily interior). By implying that Wright’s identity is left basically intact through the survival of his heart and brain, TERMINATOR SALVATION reaffirms the tradition of identifying these two organs as the seats of the human soul and consciousness.
An exception is Christopher Nolan’s INCEPTION (2010), which treats the question of the indistinguishability of dreaming and waking state by also exploring the idea of shared multiple dream levels (instead of reality levels, as outlined in the section on simulation films). The film is about the industrial spy Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), who uses an elaborated dream-share technology to infiltrate the dreams of other persons. In the shared dreams, he and his team extract valuable secrets and ideas from their target person. When an assignment goes wrong, Cobb is forced to accept a highly dangerous mission, in which he is supposed to plant rather than steal an idea in the mind of industrial heir Robert Fischer (Cillian Murphy). INCEPTION relies on the idea that dreams, usually the private experience par excellence, can be shared by a community of dreamers and thereby become realities of their own. From this premise, the film develops a dynamic which eventually makes it hard to distinguish the dream realities from waking life reality. Chapter 11.3 will analyse INCEPTION in more detail – as a skepticism film which continues the themes and tropes of external world skepticism films, but which simultaneously is an extensive investigation of the trials and perils of a man who runs danger of becoming his own evil deceiver.

There are two other films, already mentioned in section 7.3, that literally explore the idea that the protagonist, without knowing it, becomes his own evil deceiver: VANILLA SKY and ABRE LOS OJOS, films about a man who spends his life in a lucid dream he has prepared for himself. This is the most direct translation of the external world skepticism theme to skepticism about self-knowledge. These two films will be analysed in more detail in chapter 11.2.

Virtual Identities: The Self-knowledge of Multiple Personalities

As the examples show, questions of self-knowledge and personal identity are part and parcel of simulation films and fake-environment films. Other films, however, more directly address these questions without embedding them in an external world skepticism scenario, among them films like MEMENTO, IDENTITY (Mangold, 2003), and CYPHER (Natali, 2002). For example, the amnesiac main character of MEMENTO, Leonard (Guy Pearce), suffers from short-term memory loss after an accident. He tries to puzzle together the pieces of his identity and tries to recall the events that caused his memory loss by making notes, shooting Polaroid photographs and tattooing messages on his skin in order to fix important information he gained during his investigations.

IDENTITY addresses multiple personality disorder: Several characters introduced at the beginning of the film turn out to be different personalities of Malcolm Rivers (Pruitt Taylor Vince), a murderer on death row who suffers from multiple personality disorder. Although the film clearly states that Malcolm is initially not aware that he has multiple personalities, the puzzle about his identity mainly concerns the film audience, since the film apparently presents two different plot lines. In the first one, Malcolm’s psychiatrist (Alfred Molina) suspects that his patient is a victim of multiple personality disorder. He tries to save his patient’s life by proving his theory to a judge. In the second plot line, ten people get cut off from the rest of the world during a storm which forces them to spend the night together at a motel. As one after another of these persons dies, it becomes clear that a murderer is on the loose in the motel area, but neither the characters nor the audience quite know who it is. The puzzle is resolved only at the end of the film: The events in the motel occur in Malcolm’s mind, and the different characters actually are his
different personalities who are eradicated, one after the other, by Malcolm’s one murderous personality (a little boy). IDENTITY is a skepticism film about the problem of knowing oneself in the disguise of a mind-game film; a film that plays tricks with the audience, and a film that takes place within the confused mind of the protagonist.

CRYPTER introduces another variant of self-knowledge: The main character Morgan Sullivan (Jeremy Northam) assumes a new identity which enables him to work as an industrial spy for a company called Digicorp. Only at the end of the film Morgan – as well as the film spectators – realises that he is a highly skilled undercover agent who operates on his own account; he brainwashed himself in order to gain access to an almost inaccessible Digicorp database. CRYPTER is a mind-game film that plays with the spectator’s expectations, but at the same time it establishes epistemic symmetry between Morgan and the film audience, since the spectators never know more than Morgan himself.

Another sophisticated variant of the self-knowledge theme is presented by Duncan Jones’ directorial debut film MOON (2009). Sam Bell (Sam Rockwell) is the sole employee at the lunar station of an energy resources company which harvests Helium-3, an ecologically sustainable raw material which solved the earth’s energy supply problems. During his three-year-contract, Bell is responsible for maintaining the station and the harvest machines. His only companion is the computer program Gerty which manages the everyday routines of the station and can communicate with Bell. Shortly before his three-year-term ends and he is about to return to earth, Bell falls victim to an accident with one of the harvest machines on the Moon’s surface. Apparently rescued by Gerty, Bell regains consciousness at the lunar station. On a subsequent tour of the moon’s surface, Bell discovers another astronaut who looks like him in the damaged moon vehicle. Back at the station, they learn how to live with each other and gradually discover the truth about themselves: Each Sam Bell is a clone with a limited life-span of three years. The lunar station houses dozens of other Bell clones which are brought to life (or: consciousness) as soon as the previous clone dies. The video transmissions of Bell’s wife and daughter as well as the video conferences with his superiors on earth are merely devices to keep him in the belief of having a future and family back on earth. Obviously, MOON presents a rich range of starting points for the discussion of personal identity: Is it possible to discover one’s actual predicament without the help of external circumstances? If there are more than one Sam Bells – then who is the ‘real’ Sam Bell?

Chapter 11.4 analyses MOON in more detail.

Jones varies such questions of personal identity in his most recent film SOURCE CODE (Jones, 2011), in which the Army helicopter pilot Colter Stevens (Jake Gyllenhaal) suddenly wakes up on a commuter train to Chicago, sitting opposite of an unknown woman called Christina Warren (Michelle Monaghan). Christina seems to know him, under the name of Sean Fentress, as a regular fellow commuter. Stevens is profoundly irritated since the last thing he remembers is having been on a helicopter mission in the Afghanistan war. When he retreats to the train restroom in order to check upon himself, he discovers that his mirror reflection does not look like him. Colter Stevens inhabits the body of another man. His jacket contains a wallet which, according to the ID card, which belongs to a high school teacher called Sean Fentress – the man Stevens sees in the mirror. Suddenly, a bomb blows off, and Stevens finds himself strapped to a seat in a dark room which looks like a military command centre. On a
monitor, the Army officer Colleen Goodwin (Vera Farmiga) briefs him that he is part of a special secret mission. He is supposed to go back over and over into the train situation, where each time he only has eight minutes for discovering the location of the bomb, disarming it and uncovering the terrorist who has planted the device.

It takes Stevens countless attempts to fulfil his mission while simultaneously trying to discover the truth about his own situation: His body was mutilated beyond recovery during the helicopter mission, and he is now being used as a guinea pig for a newly developed “Source Code project,” a time travel device which uses mental echoes of the train passengers for generating a parallel universe. This parallel universe is an exact replica of the train environment eight minutes before the bomb explosion. The project aims at collecting intelligence which can be used for tracking down terrorists in the real world. Due to his experiences in the Source Code, however, Stevens becomes convinced that it is not simply a temporally limited computer-generated simulation. Stevens believes that the Source Code actually generates an independent parallel universe, a different ontological timeline whose inhabitants lead their own lives and follow different paths (as compared to the original timeline).

After Stevens has fulfilled his mission, he convinces Goodwin to bring him back into the Source Code one last time before deactivating the machines which keep his body alive in the original universe. This allows Stevens to prevent the explosion, capture the terrorist and to continue a life with Christina, with who he has fallen in love in the meantime. The film concludes with a reflection shot of the couple standing in front of the Cloud Gate sculpture in Chicago’s Millennium Park, reflecting Christina’s silhouette and... the silhouette of Sean Fentress, now definitely inhabited by Colter Stevens’ mental counterpart.

SOURCE CODE obviously raises questions about the existence of multiverses and of the inhabitability of computer-simulated worlds, and in that respect is akin to external world skepticism films sans the problem of detecting the world one lives in. More fundamentally, however, the film reflects on the possibility of inhabiting another person’s body, even though in SOURCE CODE the body in question appears to be a projection of the body of a man who is already dead. SOURCE CODE establishes an ambivalent and asymmetric relationship between ‘Colter Stevens as Sean Fentress’ and Christina Warren: Stevens predates on Christina’s affinity to Fentress and wins her over with his more adventurous persona. Christina, unaware of what is actually going on, begins her relationship with in the belief of coupling with Sean Fentress who, for whatever reason, has become a much more secure person in the course of the most recent train ride to Chicago.

MOON and SOURCE CODE continue and vary the personal identity experiments of analytic philosophers. They use the medium’s advantage as compared to written philosophy: Relying on actors’ performances and the possibility of screening their interactions with their environments, films allow evaluating the problem of mind-body interactions in a much more pragmatic way. Specifically, they address “who am I”-questions from different perspectives: MOON raises the question of personal uniqueness in relation to the possibility of clones as physically identical yet spatio-temporally dislocated counterparts of oneself; SOURCE CODE addresses the philosophical implications of transferring the mind (as phenomenal self-awareness) into another body. In this respect the films communicate with other personal identity film experiments
such as All of Me (Reiner, 1984) and Being John Malkovich (Jonze, 1999) (see chapters 1.3.1 and 11.1). In the latter two films, multiple mental selves compete over the control of the body they mutually inhabit, while in Source Code Sean Fentress seems to be absent or erased from his own body.

7.5.3 Other Minds Skepticism Films

The third variety of skepticism films is mainly correlated with skepticism about Other Minds. The present study addresses two sub-categories of this variety: doubt about the possibility of knowing that some entity is a person (i.e. another mind), and doubt about the possibility of knowing who another mind is.

Virtual Persons and Actors

SIMONE addresses a specifically cinematic form of other minds skepticism. It explores the peculiar relation between the actors we see on a cinema screen and their real-life counterparts. The film revolves around the inclination of film audiences to make-believe that the characters seen on screen are either impersonated by real-life actors or are supposed to impersonate ‘real’ characters within the film’s diegesis. With the help of a powerful computer program left to him by a genius software developer, the rather unsuccessful film director Viktor Taransky (Al Pacino) creates a virtual actress called S1mOne (Rachel Roberts) who becomes the shooting star of his films. The film audiences (in the film’s diegesis) believe that S1mOne is a real person who prefers a reclusive, non-public life, not unlike the late Greta Garbo. The film tracks Taransky’s initially successful but increasingly desperate efforts to profit from S1mOne’s popularity, which even results in a concert ‘appearance’ in front of an audience of thousands of people.

Taransky’s digital creation even passes the Turing test for virtual actresses, because (via live video transmission) she successfully participates in talk show interviews without raising any doubts about her appearance. Actually, every gesture, every facial movement, everything S1mOne says is controlled by Taransky. He is the one actually talking during the interviews; a voice transcoder transforms his voice into S1mOne’s voice. Her appearance on the cinema screen is so perfect that nobody believes her to be only a virtual actress. Through the magic of digital cinema, Taransky is the puppeteer and impersonator of S1mOne at once. Instead of being an artificial intelligence, S1mOne is an artificial appearance that provides a façade for the actual intelligence behind the

260 Interestingly, SIMONE and The Truman Show, both scripted by Andrew Niccol, share this narrative transparency towards their audience. In contrast to directors such as M. Night Shyamalan or Alfred Hitchcock, Niccol seems not to be interested in experimenting with the narrative potential of plot twists but prefers straight-on narratives which are, however, located in rather unusual, futurist settings. Niccol’s other films such as GATTACA (Niccol, 1997) and IN TIME (Niccol, 2011) exemplify this. Niccol wrote and directed both films.

261 The Turing test, designed by Alan Turing, was intended as a test to determine the capacity of an interactive computer program to deceive its human ‘correspondence partner’ about its actual status of being only a computer program (see Turing 1950). In contemporary terms, such a program would pass the Turing test if it could participate in an instant messaging correspondence (e.g. on Skype, ICQ or MSN) for a certain amount of time without raising any suspicions in the human correspondence partner that s/he is only conversing with a program that produces algorithm-governed responses.
scenes, i.e. film director Victor Taransky, who is enabled by the program to satisfy his own narcissism.\textsuperscript{262}

SIMONE presents a scenario in which a single man deceives film audiences around the world about the ontological status of a person appearing on screen. This film addresses what could be termed the problem of digital minds, a kind of updated version of the perennial philosophical problem of other minds. SIMONE addresses concerns raised about the increasing importance of virtual, digitally created characters in audiovisual media due to the increasing manipulative potential of digital technology. Some actors fear, for instance, that modern digital technology will eventually enable film production companies to replace their actors with digital renderings of movie stars which have long passed away.\textsuperscript{263}

SIMONE was written and directed by Andrew Niccol, who also authored the screenplay for THE TRUMAN SHOW. Both films are satirical reflections on modern media's manipulations and idealised representations of reality, both address the eagerness with which audiences succumb to such fake worlds (the audiences within both films are portrayed as being almost slavishly devoted to broadcasts of the screen appearances of their idols). But the films also meditate on the devastating effects that these fake realities can have on their creators, i.e. on Taransky in SIMONE and on Cristof in THE TRUMAN SHOW. Niccol acknowledges the intricate mirroring relation between both films in an interview, where he agrees that “SIMONE was THE TRUMAN SHOW inside-out” – or, as the interviewer puts it in his question, “almost an inverse of the story of the Truman Show, instead of having people watching a real person living in a fake world, in SIMOne it was about a fake person living in the real world”.\textsuperscript{264}

Virtual actors are an integral part of contemporary cinema, at least since Peter Jackson’s film adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s epic The Lord of the Rings and George Lucas’ STAR WARS: THE PHANTOM MENACE (1999). One of the major characters in Tolkien’s story and its adaptations is Gollum, a degenerated creature tormented by longing for the One

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\textsuperscript{262} There are parallels between Victor and the character of Cristof in THE TRUMAN SHOW: Where Victor is directing a virtual actress, Cristof is directing the lines his actors have to say to Truman over a small headphone. In both cases, it is the director speaking through the medium of an actor, virtual or physically real. Both films ironise the proverbial directorial ambition to turn his or her actors into his creations, being entirely dependent on and obedient to the director’s will.

\textsuperscript{263} The debate is, of course more complicated than the short description given here. Even animation or stop motion films still need speakers for the animated characters, a job that provides a welcome extra income for a range of Hollywood superstars. Even though animation or CGI films enable a broader range of control, their production process is actually more time-consuming and expensive than average live-footage films (see Kloock 2010). TERMINATOR SALVATION features a Cameo appearance of young Arnold Schwarzenegger, even though the former Governor of California did not participate in the production of the film. For a film scene in which a T-800 prototype with Schwarzenegger’s stature and face fights against John Connor, the visual effects designers imposed footage of Schwarzenegger from the 1980s on a body double. However, the film scene did not require elaborate actual acting performances, which facilitated the use of computer-generated imagery. Other films which ‘rejuvenate’ or ‘age’ their actors’ faces for narrative are THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON (Fincher, 2008) and TRON: LEGACY. In the TRON sequel, Jeff Bridges’ face was, on the one hand, rejuvenated for some scenes which portray his character as a young man, and, on the other hand, for his second role as the computer program Clu his face was rejuvenated in such a way as to give it the semblance of the ageless face of a computer program. In THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON, Brad Pitt’s face was constantly digitally transformed in order to allow him to believably portray a man, whose aging process is reversed, taking him from being born in an old body to dying in the body of an infant.

\textsuperscript{264} See Jacobs 2005. In terms of the current thesis, SIMOne is a simulated virtual character, not a fake one – she does not put on fake behaviour, since she is not a person at all. Only a person is capable of faking behaviour, since faking requires the ability of not faking, of being authentic or truthful.
Ring it once possessed. Technically speaking, the role of Gollum is still based on an actual acting performance by the actor Andrew Serkis, whereas the upshot of S1mOne is that she is a completely virtual character whose outer appearance and acting performances are a mash-up of characteristics and performances of dozens of other (actually existing) actors. For The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers (Jackson, 2002) and The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (Jackson, 2003), Serkis acted in front of the camera dressed in a white body-tight suit which only left his face uncovered. The visual effects designers at WETA workshop, the company responsible for the trilogy’s visual and special effects, later added a digital recreation of Gollum’s body and face to the motion-captured performance. The post-production process significantly alters the nature of the actor’s performance, since the animators alter facial and bodily features and movements. The resulting performance hence is a synthesis between the acting of a real actor and the transformations it undergoes in the post-production process (see fig. 7.8). A similar method was used for creating the Na’vi characters in Avatar (fig. 7.9).

The final example in this section is Being There. Again, the question posed is not who I am – but who the other is. Unlike The Truman Show, it is not the main character Chance (Peter Sellers) who is left to wonder about the Other, but rather Chance’s friends and acquaintances who are by own mistake deluded about his actual character traits. After the death of his master, whose garden he tendered for almost 50 years, the mentally retarded gardener Chance is evicted from the house and forced to leave it for the first time in his life. When he is lightly injured in a car accident, the owner of the car, the wife of one of the most powerful spin-doctors in political Washington, introduces him to her husband, Ben Rand (Melvyn Douglas). The old man, as well as almost everyone else, is impressed by Chance’s simple, modest behaviour and his allegorical responses during conversations, but instead of seeing them as what they are – the partly helpless, partly vain responses of a man with a severe mental handicap – everybody thinks that he is a genius. The film plot follows Chance’s seemingly inevitable ascent into the highest ranks of the political society of Washington, D.C.

The film chooses an ironic external perspective: From the outset it provides the audience with detailed information about Chance’s limited mental capacities, portraying him as an early version of Forrest Gump (Forrest Gump (Zemeckis, 1994)). By doing

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265 The film S1mOne itself, however, was produced based on footage of real-life actress Rachel Hunter, which was later edited in the post-production process in order to give her the artificial look needed for the film.
so, the spectators own a higher degree of insight into Chance’s predicament than the film characters. The film thereby becomes a kind of looking glass into the idea that who a person is is to a great extent determined by what society and the people one shares an environment with believe one is (and make one believe one is).

It is not too surprising that the films discussed so far add a distinctly psychological dimension to the discourse on skepticism, knowledge and doubt. The addition of a psychological dimension contributes to the philosophical value of these films. The philosopher Robert Yanal indicates that one of the ways in which films can contribute to, or enrich, discourse on philosophical topics by laying bare their psychological implications: In the first part of his book *Hitchcock as Philosopher* (Yanal 2005), he discusses Alfred Hitchcock’s *REBECCA* (1940), among other Hitchcock films such as *SUSPICION* (1941), *VERTIGO* (1958), and *NORTH BY NORTHWEST* (1959), as a filmic illustration of the “problem of deception” (Yanal 2005: 2), to which Hitchcock “brings [...] an investigation of the psychology of the deceived” (Yanal 2005: 2) which shows “what character traits enable the deceptions to take hold.” (Yanal 2005: 14).

Yanal identifies in films the power to explore more deeply the psychological requirements for successful deception. Although he focuses on deception, which does not necessarily include the radical skepticist thought experiments considered in this book, his awareness of the psychological dimension of deception scenarios provides a useful additional focus for the subsequent case studies.

7.6 Summary

The skepticism films introduced in this chapter explore variants of doubt about what human beings understand as being real, and they sometimes provoke a redefinition of what qualifies as being ‘real’. In their exploration of pluralities of reality, skepticism films re-negotiate the conceptual relations between belief, certainty and doubt – sometimes by opting for a specific understanding of the onto-epistemic relation between human beings and their world, sometimes by implying the possibility of multiple ways and levels of human access to the world.

It is striking that many of the films discussed foreground the relation between the tendency of human beings to deliberately ignore fundamental concerns about the nature of their living environment, and the possibility of insurmountable ‘blind spots’ of human knowledge. The films deliberately play with the ambiguity Wittgenstein references in the opening quote of this chapter: In skepticism films, the film characters’ eyes are either shut by the limitations of human epistemic access to the world, or by external forces that cover up certain unpleasant facts about the world. And the films play with variants of the first part of the Wittgenstein quote (“if you are certain, isn’t it that you are shutting your eyes in face of doubt?”); they expose an unwillingness to acknowledge the sources of doubt which at times literally stares them into their faces: Truman Burbank ignores all symptoms of the fakeness of his environment, Neo initially is unable to correctly interpret the ruptures in the Matrix; Douglas Hall belatedly realises that he himself is only a computer-generated character – but all it would have taken him to find out is a long car ride.
These skepticism films explore skepticist doubt in the light of contemporary enhanced possibilities of creating realities never experienced before, such as the artificial and manufactured realities present on the cinema or TV screen or the changes brought forward by the ever-increasing pervasion of technology in the natural world. Humanity’s increasing technological control over its natural environment and the accompanying demystification of everyday life might partly explain the “present preoccupation with visual magic or virtual imaging” (Elsaesser 2005: 14) that Thomas Elsaesser identifies in contemporary Western societies.

In fact, it is striking that skepticism films like MATRIX, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, or SIMONE – all of which explore the notion of ‘reality as simulation’ rather than ‘reality as fantasy’ – appear at a time when the technological state of the art of digital cinema allows filmmakers almost absolute freedom (limited in principle only by budget restraints) in creating film worlds. Contemporary skepticism films can be seen as a reflection of this newly acquired freedom, as a reflection of the impact of digital technology not only on contemporary conceptions of reality, but on filmmaking as well.

Stanley Cavell argues that we should happily acknowledge the limited human position in the world and live with it rather than trying to succumb to the desire for transcending it (see Cavell 1979b: 241 and 431f.). In this light, the creation or imagination of fictional or virtual worlds in cinema appears as a substitute for the Cavellian unavailability of the world, as a different means for transcending our limitations by creating new worlds completely subjected to our control. Digital cinema, then, is merely another, more radical, variant of this desire.

This preliminary survey of several skepticism films sketches the extent of skepticist topics entertained by various recent films, and it shows that even films based on similar skepticist scenarios vary them to surprisingly high degrees. The question that remains to be answered in the following chapters is, first, whether or how these various cinematic configurations of skepticist thought experiments actually contribute philosophically significant insights, and, second, how exactly the films’ narrato-aesthetic strategies contribute or not to this alleged philosophical significance. In order to answer these questions, the chapters that follow turn to detailed case studies of selected films, each of which is representative of categories of the skepticism films triangle.

Outlook on the subsequent chapters

Skepticism films update skepticist thought experiments
8 Skepticism Films as Complex Narratives

8.1 Complex Narratives, Mind-Game Films and Skepticism Films

Contemporary skepticism films are not only configurations of skepticist ideas and part of a storytelling tradition which involves alternative, imagined or other worlds. They also are a part of a broader tendency in contemporary cinema towards “complex narratives” (see Poulaki 2011). These films experiment with complex narrato-aesthetic strategies and try to refine or reformulate the straightforward storytelling conventions of (Hollywood-dominated) mainstream cinema. This tendency produces films which are not always completely transparent during a first viewing and must be re-experienced in order to be properly understood. As Maria Poulaki remarks, film scholars have developed a richly varied terminology for conceptualising the tendency toward complex narratives (see Poulaki 2011: 12). Of these terms, Warren Buckland’s “puzzle films” (Buckland [ed.] 2009) and Thomas Elsaesser’s “mind-game films”267 bear a particularly close relation to skepticism films – not the least because some skepticism films can be called ‘mind-game films’ or ‘puzzle films’ as well.268 The present chapter will try to outline similarities and differences between these types of films (or rather, areas of intersections in the analytical description of a range of selected films with the help of these terms). This will help understanding better the usefulness and scope of the term “skepticism films” for describing and analyzing the development and mutual interaction between contemporary films. As we will see, there are notable similarities and differences between the cinematic phenomena mentioned above.

Elsaesser is careful not to describe mind-game films as yet another film genre. Instead, he assesses them as a “phenomenon” (Elsaesser 2009a: 14 and 39f.) which reveals “how the cinema itself has mutated: rather than ‘reflecting’ reality, or oscillating

266 For the concepts of alternative, imagined or other worlds, see Walters 2008 and chapter 7.2.
267 Elsaesser 2009a. See also Hesselberth and Schuster 2008.
268 The growing market share of the home entertainment market favours films which are complex enough to incite the audience to re-spectate theatrical releases on DVD, Blu-ray or video streams, because a single viewing is insufficient for grasping all intricacies of the plot. Producing a puzzle film thus means designing it for multiple viewings (see also Elsaesser 2009a: 38f.). However, James Walters convincingly argues that Hollywood has always had a “history of producing stories where ambiguity, symbolism and complexity feature as traits that attract us as audience members, drawing us back to the films in an attempt to better appreciate the themes and issues represented in their narratives.” (Walters 2008: 218). In his book, he analyses THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW (Lang, 1944), BRIGADDOON (Minelli, 1954) NORTH BY NORTHWEST (Hitchcock, 1959) and SHERLOCK JR. (Keaton, 1924).
and alternating between illusionism/realism, these films create their own referentiality” (Elsaesser 2009a: 39). Their “switches between epistemological assumptions, narrational habits, and ontological premises draw attention to themselves, or rather, to the “rules of the game”” (Elsaesser 2009a: 39), i.e. to the sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit sets of rules which are “conditions for spectatorship” (Elsaesser 2009a: 37). Mind-game films, Elsaesser argues, play with (parts of) these normative rules and replace them with others. By doing so, they self-referentially draw (or even force) the audience’s attention to their habit of rule-breaking.269

Elsaesser distinguishes two types of mind-game films: films in which characters are being played games with and films in which the audience is being “played games with, because certain crucial information is withheld or ambiguously presented” (Elsaesser 2009a: 14). This corresponds to the traditional difference between the narrative structure of a film and its narration, in which the latter concerns the mode of audience address. A significant group of mind-games films such as David Fincher’s THE GAME (Fincher, 1997) merely play games with the impression of reality of basically mentally sane characters, and in that way are close to the narrative patterns of skepticism films (which feature basically mentally sane characters subjected to deception situations).

Other mind-game films, however, “put the emphasis on ‘mind’: they feature central characters whose mental condition is extreme, unstable, or pathological” (Elsaesser 2009a: 14), such as most major characters in David Lynch films or the schizophrenic mathematical genius John Nash (Russell Crowe) in the biographical film A BEAUTIFUL MIND (Howard, 2001). The plot pattern of Martin Scorsese’s thriller SHUTTER ISLAND (Scorsese, 2010) is structurally similar to Robert Wiene’s classical expressionist film DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI (Wiene, 1920). In both films the protagonist turns out to be hallucinating the film’s events: In DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI, the mad, murdering Dr. Caligari (Werner Krauss) is eventually revealed as (apparently) being the doctor of the schizophrenic Francis (Friedrich Feher) who merely imagined the events the audience witnesses on screen.270 In SHUTTER ISLAND, the main character Teddy Daniels (Leonardo DiCaprio) turns out to be one of the delusional patients of the high-security sanatorium where he allegedly conducted a criminal investigation as a federal detective. His partner Chuck Aule (Mark Ruffalo) is revealed as being Daniels’ therapist, and the alleged villain Dr. Cawley (Ben Kingsley) is actually a doctor committed to the well-being of his patients.

Adapting Elsaesser’s typology to the concerns of the present dissertation project, in plot-terms skepticism films are a part of the mind-game variety: In deceiving their characters about the actual ontic status of their environment, and by (partially) misleading the audience about it as well, skepticism films certainly play games with their characters and audience. However, just as Elsaesser does not want to define mind-game films as a subset of complex narratives, skepticism films remain a cinematic phenomenon in their own right. The relation between mind-game films and skepticism films is one of

269 This self-referentiality, however, is not a new cinematic development. Experimental films (e.g. by Maja Deren), art films or European avant-garde films such as L’ANNÉE DERNIÈRE À MARIENBAD (Resnais, 1961) have already formed a well-established tradition of explicit cinematic self-referentiality which complex narratives of the mainstream variety willingly make use of.

270 David Robinson provides a critical introduction to this classical film (Robinson 1997).
a family relation with partial overlapping areas (concerning similar aesthetic and narrative themes).

One difference between both phenomena is that the main instances of skepticism films – simulation films and fake environment films – put a strong emphasis on the exploration of filmic ontologies. They introduce levels of reality, but not necessarily layers of world perception. Second, the narrative structure of most skepticism films is surprisingly conventional. MATRIX (A. and L. Wachowski, 1999) and THE TRUMAN SHOW (Weir, 1998), for instance, are textbook examples of films which follow the narrato-aesthetic rules of Classical Hollywood Cinema. Mind-game films, and complex narratives in general, are supposedly much more willing to experiment with established conventions.

For instance, in typical skepticism films the characters’ perception of reality stays coherent, even though they tend to question their mental sanity as they discover the ‘true’ nature of their world. The characters of David Lynch’s films, by contrast, often lose their ability to perceive reality as such: as films like INLAND EMPIRE (Lynch, 2006) or MULHOLLAND DRIVE (Lynch, 2001) proceed, these characters increasingly confuse reality-induced impressions with self-generated illusions of reality.

In SHUTTER ISLAND, Teddy Daniels conducts a criminal investigation on an isolated island where dangerous criminals with psychological disorders are treated at Ashcliffe Hospital. The longer the investigation takes, the more Daniels is convinced that Shutter Island is used for secret psychiatric experiments with human beings, and that the doctors, in particular the director Dr. Cawley and his Nazi-style superior Dr. Naehring (Max von Sydow), try to prevent him from further investigating the matter by exposing him to various hallucinatory drugs. As the film progresses, Daniels increasingly finds himself unable to distinguish between real events and imagined ones, in particular because he is haunted by traumatic memories of concentration camps in World War II and of his dead wife who allegedly died in a house fire caused by one of the island’s inhabitants. The film eventually reveals that Daniels himself is one of the patients of the hospital who killed his depressive wife (Michelle Williams) after she drowned their three children. The film represents the confused state of mind of its main character through the use of various aesthetic, visual as well as auditive, means of expression.

As argued in chapter 7, the conventional use of narrative structure is a prerequisite by which skepticism films raise doubts about the epistemological stability or reliability of our “standard” or normal perception of reality in the first place. Mind-game films, in contrast, play with non-standard conditions of reality perception. Skepticism films aim at exposing the vulnerability of ordinary reality perception to externally or self-induced

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271 On the narrato-aesthetic conventions of Classical Hollywood Cinema, see Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985; and Bordwell 1985. In the more recent book The Way Hollywood Tells It Bordwell argues that even apparently innovative films which seem to subvert or reform traditional Hollywood storytelling do eventually adhere to the traditional formulae (see Bordwell 2006).

272 Here I disagree with Elsaesser’s general assessment that in mind-game films, the characters’ “ways of seeing, interaction with other characters, and their ‘being in the world’ are presented as normal. The films […] oblige one to choose between seemingly equally valid, but ultimately incompatible ‘realities’ or ‘multiverses’” (Elsaesser 2009a: 14f.). I would rather argue that mind-game films early on insert narrative and aesthetic clues about the eventual revelation of the characters’ distorted view of reality. M. Night Shyamalan’s famous narrative twist device at the end of THE SIXTH SENSE (Shyamalan, 1999) is an example for this: in an elliptical montage sequence, the film reviews all the clues about Dr. Malcolm Crowe’s (Bruce Willis) erroneous assumption that he still is alive which were already open to view for the audience before. However, Elsaesser is certainly right in identifying the representation of characters’ world views as being seemingly normal as a trait of many mind-game films.
illusion, but both cinematic tendencies share a common idea: they introduce the notion of possible alternative worlds or alternative world views - sometimes only for the audience, sometimes for the film characters as well.

8.2 Alternate and Possible Worlds: Skepticism Films as Multiple-Draft Narratives

Part of the effect of cinema on its audiences is based on the audience’s implicit awareness that it is a projection of a non- or pre-recorded (part of the) world. A narrative fiction film’s credibility depends on the willingness of its audience to make-believe that the screened film is set in a counterfactual or alternate world that presents a “possible state (or history) of the world” (Kripke 1980: 48, fn15), e.g. a “counterfactual course of history” that resembles “the actual course in some respects but not in others” (Kripke 1980: 6). Counterfactual history books and films put this assumption to the extremes when they, for instance, imagine a world in which Nazi Germany has won the Second World War, such as the film adaptation of Robert Harris’ novel Fatherland or Philip K. Dick’s The Man in the High Castle.

Apart from envisioning a different course of history, possible worlds in film can also be governed by different laws of nature or by phenomena believed to be mystical, improbable or impossible in our world: teleportation (the STAR TREK franchise), time travel – e.g., TIME BANDITS (Gilliam, 1982), BUTTERFLY EFFECT (Bress and Gruber, 2004) or the presence of talking animals in ANTZ (Darnell and Johnson, 1998), FINDING NEMO (Andrew Stanton, Lee Unkrich, 2003), WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT? (Zemeckis, 1988). Horror films also imagine a possible world governed by phenomena we would call ‘supernatural’ – for instance by introducing Undead beings in BRAM STOKER’S DRACULA (Coppola, 1992), NOSFERATU, EINE SYMPHONIE DES GRAUENS (Murnau, 1922), NOSFERATU: PHANTOM DER NACHT (Herzog, 1979), VAMPYR (Dreyer, 1932), THE MUMMY (Sommers, 1999), NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD (Romero, 1968), or WARM BODIES (Levine, 2013). Such film worlds, however, need to appear coherent enough (or cover logical flaws up sufficiently) in order to be accepted as a possible fictional world at least for the duration of the audience’s immersion in the film.

Narrative fiction films, then, present possible worlds, alternative states of reality. The concept of possible worlds used in this chapter is derived from Saul Kripke’s theory of direct reference which can fruitfully be adapted for conceptualising the relation of films to the world their audience is part of. Kripke’s account, which is primarily aimed at

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273 See chapter 5.
274 See Harris 1992 and Dick 1992 [1962]. Dick’s novel is interesting since its characters imagine the possibility that history could have been different; that the Allies instead of the Nazis have won the war (see also Taylor 2012). Harris’ novel was adapted as the film FATHERLAND (Menaul, 1994). Harris’ and Dick’s novels belongs to the literary genre of alternate history, which despite its cross-references is distinct from “counterfactual history”. The latter is a sub-discipline in history and the Social Sciences which evaluates the importance of certain historical events and persons by developing alternative outcomes of these events, or different acting personalities involved in the historical process. One of the first scholars to establish virtual history as a legitimate branch of the humanities and social sciences is Geoffrey Hawthorn in books like Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences (Hawthorn 1991). Another influential collection of essays on Virtual History. Alternatives and Counterfactuals is provided by Niall Ferguson (Ferguson [ed.] 1999).
275 This statement is valid for documentary films as well. Even though they claim to represent events and states that actually occur in the world, this claim must be confirmed by the audience.
solving a range of philosophical problems about the reference of proper names, identity, and other issues in the philosophy of language and metaphysics, is also well-suited for describing the peculiar ontology of skepticism films. In Kripke’s account, thinking about fictional objects and persons, and about counterfactual states of reality implies that human beings neither invent a new language nor a completely new world in thinking about possible worlds and counterfactual scenarios. They rather adapt the language and the world they already use and experience to the requirements of the alternative scenario. Put differently: We think about other worlds, such as the possibility of multiple levels of simulated reality, in terms which are derived from the world as it actually appears to us.

Possible worlds as conceived by Kripke are thus not “like a foreign country” (Kripke 1980: 43), “a distant country that we are coming across, or viewing through a telescope”. They are rather “given by the descriptive conditions we associate with it,” and therefore “are stipulated, not discovered by powerful telescopes” (Kripke 1980: 44). For Kripke it is essential that in thinking about alternative states of reality we do not conceive other realities from the scratch, but rather start with the world that is already present to us, and then begin to imagine certain objects or elements in it differently:

“We can refer to the object and ask what might have happened to it. So, we do not begin with worlds […] and then ask about criteria of transworld identification; on the contrary, we begin with the objects, which we have, and can identify, in the actual world. We can then ask whether certain things might have been true of the objects.” (Kripke 1980: 53)

Applied to cinema, Kripke’s account allows describing film worlds as projected partial transformations of the world their audience is already familiar with. However, these transformations assume a more or less radical form – a documentary transformation in films such as DARWIN’S NIGHTMARE (Sauper, 2004) or PLASTIC PLANET (Boote, 2009), a narrato-documentary in EARTH (Fothergill and Linfield, 2007) or SICKO (Moore, 2007), where a documentary topic is presented narratively. The stories told in narrative fiction films transform the world in several ways as well, ranging from quasi-historical sujets in BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN (Eisenstein, 1925), neo-realistic approaches to a story in PAISÀ (Rossellini, 1946) or ROMA, CITTA APERTA (Rossellini, 1945), up to the pseudo-realistic stories with a super-natural touch told by Hollywood action hero blockbusters such as HANCOCK (Berg, 2008). Berg’s film situates an immortal God-like superhero with supernatural powers in an otherwise realistic depiction of upper-class Los Angeles at the beginning of the 21st century. At the extreme end of this scale are alternate history films such as the already mentioned FATHERLAND

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276 The key concept employed by Kripke is “fixing the reference”: “There is a certain referent which we have fixed, for the real world and for all possible worlds, by a contingent property of it, namely the property that it’s able to produce such sensations in us.” (Kripke 1980: 132). Fixing a reference is not the same as giving a definition: With the help of expressions we fix the reference of names, which allows us to identify the object we want to refer to among a given set of objects. It is in this sense that the expression is used for fixing the reference in ‘all possible worlds’. While the set of expressions which allow identifying an object can be different from possible world to possible world, the world of the speaker is the area of reference which is the starting point for the identification of objects.

277 Such an account avoids the objection often raised against modal accounts that they require the identification of “counterparts” in possible worlds. For Kripke, instead of looking for the “counterpart relation” (Kripke 1980: 45, fn13) between an object in the actual world and its counterpart in the imagined possible world, a speaker can “simply […] ask whether certain things might have been true of the [already known, PS] object[…]” (Kripke 1980: 53) in the possible world.
and fantastic, science fiction, or animation films such as ALICE IN WONDERLAND (Burton, 2010), ANTZ, MEN IN BLACK (Sonnenfeld, 1997), or AVATAR (Cameron, 2009).

However, all these films introduce only partial changes to the world as known to the audience. Instead of envisioning a “distant country that we are coming across,” they only change elements of the world already known, similar to a house owner who changes the arrangement of furniture in his living room or replaces his white couch with a red one.278

Conceiving of (narrative fiction) films as possible worlds that are evaluated by audiences in terms of credibility allows asking whether the world could actually be the way it is presented in the film, or whether the events presented in the film could really happen, or have happened, the way they do in the film. This assumption can be formulated more precisely: Applied to a film like JFK (Stone, 1991), which presents an account of the events leading up to the assassination of former US president John F. Kennedy that runs contrary to the official version, the question becomes ‘have things actually happened that way?’ – has Kennedy actually been murdered by a lone assassin called Lee Harvey Oswald, or has there been a conspiracy plot to kill the president? Applied to action films such as DIE HARD (McTiernan, 1988), in which nationalist terrorists plot an attack on a skyscraper, the question is transformed into ‘could things happen like that?’, a question affirmed by the terrorist attacks on New York’s World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. In relation to a third set of films one might rather ask, along with James Walters, whether the plot presented by the film is conceivable, while the question of happenstance is of secondary importance.

These different meanings of conceivability play a crucial role for the analysis and evaluation of skepticism films. The skepticist scenarios presented in THE TRUMAN SHOW, MATRIX, or THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR (Rusnak, 1999) must be conceivable, i.e. coherent enough to allow at least temporary acceptance as a thought experiment worth being considered by the audience (and the philosopher relating them to the philosophical problem of skepticism). At least some of the skepticism films, however, must also answer the question of possibility: Is it possible that such a state of the world exists? Is it possible that someone spends his entire life in a gigantic TV studio without realising it?

In general, films explore implicit ‘what if?’ questions, while skepticism films address explicit ones. They explicitly present either counterfactual or alternative realities or introduce conflicting accounts of reality, e.g. between the world as understood by a deceived person and the world as it present to a deceiver.279 Since they play with different perspectives on the world, non-actual states of the world, skepticism films are close to another recent “certain tendency in contemporary cinema” (Elsaesser 2009a: 14): Multiple-draft narratives and forking-path plots.

278 This is one of the reasons why alien life forms in science fiction and fantasy forms always appear so humanoid.
279 Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland use the “theory of possible worlds” in order to explain “the ontology of the digital image,” but they only use it for conceptualising the difference between the “digital image” and the (analog) “optical image”: “the digital image is not bound or limited to the actual world in the same way as the optical image” (all quotes: Elsaesser and Buckland 2003: 211).
8.3 ‘What If?’ Questions, Multiple-draft Narratives, Forking-path Plots

As we saw, narrative fiction films can generally be understood as presenting fictional or alternate realities as compared to the ‘real’ world of the audience. But there is another set of films which internalises this distinction. Such films operate on a distinction between multiple states of the film’s diegesis. David Bordwell calls them “multiple-draft narratives” (Bordwell 2002); Edward Branigan discusses them under the rubric of “forking-path plots” (Branigan 2002). These films use ‘what if?’ questions as the starting point or structuring element of their narrative. Multiple-draft narratives such as LOLA RENNT (Tykwer, 1998), SLIDING DOORS (Howitt 1998), GROUNDHOG DAY (Ramis, 1994), or IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE (Capra, 1946) envision several outcomes of narrative events, several possible paths the lives of their main characters could have taken. Thereby they allow their characters (or at least the film audience) to cast a glance at answers to the question ‘what if life had been different?’

Narratologically speaking, multiple-draft narratives explore different plot lines “seriatim” (Bordwell 2002: 89). The film audience is challenged to keep in mind the different versions of the film plot s/he is presented with one after another. In contrast, typical mind-game films such as MULHOLLAND DRIVE, DONNIE DARKO (Kelly, 2001), or ASHES OF TIME (Kar-Wai, 1994) usually present one single plot line, but do so in such a way that spectatorial interpretations of the film can differ to a great extent. But both film categories are not mutually exclusive. One example is the mind-game film EXISTENZ (Cronenberg, 1999), in which the characters move from one level of a (virtual reality) computer game to the next. EXISTENZ uses a kind of narrative video game logic and aims at confusing its spectators by leaving it unclear during the first viewing on which level of reality a given scene takes place (and at which level of reality the film actually starts).

IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE establishes a ‘standard’ state of the diegesis and of its characters during the first part of the film, which is subsequently altered through the introduction of counterfactual occurrences and circumstances: Faced with bankruptcy, the film’s protagonist George Bailey (James Stewart) wants to commit suicide and wishes he had never been born. God listens and fulfils this wish and sends Clarence, one of his angels (Henry Travers), to help George coming back to his hometown. However, a lot of bad things have happened in the wake of George’s absence (since in the new state of the world George was never born): His brother Harry (Todd Karns) died as a little boy because there was no George to save him from the frozen lake he once fell into. His wife Mary (Donna Reed) has become a sad and lonely woman, and his hometown, formerly a Disney-esque Home of the Brave, has changed into a small-scale version of Frank Miller’s Sin City. The film then proceeds along the lines of Classical Hollywood Melodrama, making George realise the foolishness of his wish, from which he eventually

280 Chapter 8.3 uses material from my article “Paradigmatic Forking-Path Films: Intersections between Mind-Game Films and Multiple-Draft Narratives” (Schmerheim 2008a).

281 Films, too, result from a series of decisions made by filmmakers during the pre-production, shooting, and post-production process. Theoretically, each release version of a film could have turned out differently, at least in minor respects: Lead roles could have been cast differently, the film could have different locations or been shot in black-and-white instead of colour. Most importantly, the entire plot of a film, or elements of it, could be different. For instance, any given film could have been shot with a different ending. The film seen and heard during a screening is only one possible result of the creative process of filmmaking. In short: each film suppresses “alternative tellings of the story, and alternate stories [...] in favour of the final version” (Branigan 2002: 107).
refrains. Coming home at the end of the movie, the entire town is already waiting for
him and everybody donates money in order to save him from bankruptcy.

In IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE, a hypothetical thought – ‘what if I had never been
born?’ – is temporarily transformed into filmic reality. The narrative locates a forking
point of the story – George Bailey’s birth/non-birth – and elaborates two plot lines
which are counterfactual to each other. Adhering to Hollywood’s narrative closure
rule, the end of the film takes up the initial, non-counterfactual plot line again: George Bailey
continues with his life as a bankrupt bank manager, while the alternate plot line, in which
he has never been born, is closed and thereby rejected as an actual state of the world. Of
the two plot lines, the first one is dominant, while the other one is reduced to a mere
possibility, a conceivable world that is not actualised. This does not mean that the latter
is non-existent. In Deleuzian parlance, the (diegetic) world without George Bailey is a
virtual world, not an actual world (regarded from the perspective of the film diegesis).
Bailey only manages to find out about another, virtual state of the world because the
film’s God allows him to see it.

The difference between the two possible states of the world presented in IT’S A
WONDERFUL LIFE is put to screen with identical characters and locations. IT’S A
WONDERFUL LIFE is a filmic example of Kripke’s notion of “fixing the reference”
introduced earlier: The alternative state of the world wished for by George Bailey is
presented to him as a partial transformation of an already known world. To quote Kripke
again, “we begin with the objects, which we have, and can identify, in the actual world.
We can then ask whether certain things might have been true of the objects” (Kripke
1980:52).

In contrast to IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE, Woody Allen’s film MELINDA & MELINDA
(Allen, 2004) envisions a tragic and a comic version of the life of the film’s protagonist
Melinda (Radha Mitchell). In the one version she is a depressive and suicidal woman, in
the other one an urbanised single who is enjoying her life. In the film, the two stories are
introduced by a couple of characters who contemplate the question whether life is
essentially comic or tragic during a restaurant dinner. In order to get closer to an answer,
they imagine a comic and a tragic version of Melinda’s life. Accordingly, this means that
the film does not privilege one of the alternate plot lines.

MELINDA & MELINDA present non-hierarchical alternative plot lines, while films
such as IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE and also LOLA RENNT introduce counterfactual plot
lines - counterfactual compared to a dominant, favoured plot line. The comparison of
IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE to MELINDA & MELINDA also shows that multiple plot lines
are no privilege of contemporary cinema, but are already present in classical Hollywood
cinema.\footnote{David Bordwell lists a number of older films which rely on multiple-draft plotting, calling GROUNDHOG DAY
(Ramis, 1993) the “prototype”. Among the older films mentioned are THE LOVE OF SUNYA (1927), THRU
DIFFERENT EYES (1929), and THE I DON’T CARE GIRL (1953) (see Bordwell 2011).}

In the preceding sections, I used the term “counterfactual” to stress that many
multiple-draft narratives rest on dominant plot lines. Bordwell uses the additional phrase
“forking-path plots”, borrowing from Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “The Garden of
Forking Paths”.\footnote{See Borges 1998.} At one point in that story, the narrator describes an ontological
account in which every conceivable state of affairs in the world – in the past, present, and
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future – is extant. That is, according to the forking-path account each state of the world that we, from our position in the world, would call counterfactual, is extant, subsists somewhere else, in some other (state of the) world. Using Deleuzian terms again, according to Borges’ ‘garden of forking paths’ metaphor there are many virtual states of the world, while only some of them are, at certain moments, actual.

In Borges’ story this is visualised by the picture of the garden of forking paths. All possible states of the world(s) are contained in this garden, and each life takes place on several of the forking paths there. According to this account there is no such thing as a counterfactual occurrence, because each of these occurrences subsists somewhere. This does not mean that talking of ‘counterfactual occurrences’ does not make sense. It does, but only in relation to a favourite point of view or favourite ‘path through the garden’, or in relation to a favourite telling of the film’s story that has already been chosen by the filmmaker or spectator in advance (see Branigan 2002: 107).

Even if the ending of multiple-draft narratives tends to favour a final, definite outcome, it does not necessarily superecede the other preceding plot lines. In LOLA RENNT, a film about the young woman Lola who must find 100,000 Mark within the next 81 minutes in order to save her boyfriend’s life, Lola (Franka Potente) apparently advances in mastering her obstacles from repetition to repetition. She learns from her failures in preceding plot lines and eventually manages to save her boyfriend Manni (Moritz Bleibtreu) from certain death.284

Tykwer’s film also blurs the distinction between counterfactual and alternative plot lines: On the one hand, the non-dominant plot lines are counterfactual, since they contradict the final, favoured plot line. On the other hand they are alternative and extant, since the Lola seems to learn from her preceding failures and eventually gets the future right. In Borgesian terms, not only are all the alternative states of (our) world extant, but they even influence one another. Bordwell calls this phenomenon a “crosstalk between futures” (Bordwell 2002: 98f.).

Lola’s (unconscious) learning process is similar to the one Phil Connors (Bill Murray) goes through in GROUNDHOG DAY. Connors, a misanthropic and cynical television weather forecaster, all of a sudden finds himself waking up every morning on the same day in a hotel in the small town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, where he is scheduled to report from the annual ‘groundhog day’ festivities. He is forced to live through this day again and again and only manages to break the curse put on him in this filmic adaptation of the Nietzschean “Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen” by becoming a good human being and winning the heart of the woman he loves.285

BUTTERFLY EFFECT even explicitly relies on the idea that the events in one plot line influence other plot lines as well. The film’s main character, the teenager Evan (Ashton Kutcher), suffers from blackouts and cannot remember the catastrophic events that happened during these blackouts. His therapist advises him to keep a diary. Years later, as a college student, he discovers that he is able to travel back in time to these events, where his grown-up mind takes over the body of his childhood alter ego. He decides to change the horrible things that happened back then, but each time he returns to the

284 See Bordwell 2002: 100 about “getting the future right”, and Bordwell 2002: 102 about multiple-draft films’ search for the “most satisfying revision” of the plot.

285 Nietzsche most famously coined his account of eternal recurrence (“Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen”) in his Also sprach Zarathustra (Nietzsche 1989 [1883]). See, for instance, the chapter “Vom Gesicht und Räthsel”. 
present he realises that the changes made in the past often have disastrous effects on his and his friends’ future lives. Consequently, he returns to another one of his childhood blackouts – which for the later Evan are doorways, or switch points, into the past – in order to literally get the future right. This, however, does not work: every time he manages to rescue one person, someone else has to suffer. Finally, he realises that the disastrous chain of events originated at the moment his childhood girlfriend Kayleigh (Amy Smart) fell in love with him while she was still a child. He returns to the earliest switch point he is able to find, a children’s birthday, and whispers a threat into the young girl’s ears. As a consequence, she never develops the affection for him that later would indirectly cause so many tragic circumstances. The final scene in the director’s cut is even more radical: Evan returns to the moment before he was born and strangles himself with his umbilical cord while still being in his mother’s womb. BUTTERFLY EFFECT is the clearest example of an entanglement of different plot lines and even comes close to creating a garden of forking paths, because it is easy to imagine that even small changes at any point in Evan’s life could alter its future course in important respects. This idea resembles the structure of popular chaos theory examples which also explain the film’s title: The flapping wings of a butterfly in a South American rainforest might be able to (indirectly) cause a hurricane in Florida.

But at least from a spectator’s point of view, there are limits to the amount of changes: Bordwell argues that (mainstream) films only employ a limited amount of alternative plot lines in order to keep the film cognitively manageable by an average spectator (Bordwell 2002: 88). One of the limitations of standard multiple-draft narratives, compared to a Borgesian garden of forking paths, is that usually the alternative plot lines start from a “fixed point – the fork”, and, once the alternative plot line is finished, return to this “switchpoint”, in order to start another plot line (Bordwell 2002: 89). In addition, the plots are overall relatively stable. Unlike multiple-draft narratives, films working with the forking-path model would potentially overwhelm a spectator’s cognitive capacities.

In other words: even if conventional multiple-draft narratives are more complex than traditional narratives, they are usually designed in such a way that they do not pose demands that are above an average audience’s cognitive capacities. They do not push forward the philosophical idea of forking paths as consequently as would be possible in theory.286

For the purposes of this book, the most important function of multiple-draft narratives and forking-path plots is their explicit implementation of ‘what if?’ questions. These films entertain the idea that the world, a course of events, or persons could turn out to be different from what they are thought to be. It is this idea they share with skepticism films, the subset of films that is the main concern here. However, there are at

286 Deleuze discusses a Borgesian story forking paths through the paradox of “contingent futures” – the apparent logical dilemma of aligning statements about the potential occurrence of a further event with the statement that the event has in fact taken place – as an illustration of the “powers of the false” by which claims to truth are substituted, since these powers “pose[.]the simultaneity of incomposable presents, or the coexistence of not-necessarily true pasts.” (Deleuze 1989: 127) Deleuze uses this for describing a “a new status of narration” (Deleuze 1989: 129) which expresses an “irreducible multiplicity” (ibid.) of outcomes of events, a form of narrating in which diverging possible courses of events of a story are seen as hierarchically equal; there is no one “true” or “truthful” account of these events anymore. Applied to Bordwell’s concept of multiple-draft films, the attempt of “getting the future right,” of trying to eventually attain a satisfying “happy end” for the film characters, loses significance.
least three typical differences between multiple-draft narratives/forking path plots and skepticism films:

First, while multiple-draft narratives present different ontologies, skepticism film typically operate with one diegetic world which, however, is subdivided into several layers or levels of reality (e.g., a ‘real’ world and a computer-simulated world) which are accessible, and recognisable, to different extents to different members of that world. Multiple-draft narratives, while typically relying on a dominant plot line that represents the diegesis as it actually, or eventually, is, explicitly mark counterfactual or alternative plot lines as such. These non-dominant plot lines hence are assigned a status comparable to the scenarios imagined in philosophical thought experiments.

Second, multiple-draft narratives and forking-path plots do not operate with deception hypotheses. They do not involve an ‘evil’ deceiver who misleads his victims about the world they actually inhabit. Interestingly enough, the main characters in multiple-draft narratives and forking-path plots are, in general, aware of their involvement with alternative or counterfactual tellings of the story (GROUNDHOG DAY, BUTTERFLY EFFECT, IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE), or the different plot lines are in the first place introduced as thought experiments, as narratological devices directly aimed at the film audience (LOLA RENNT, SLIDING DOORS, MELINDA & MELINDA).  

Third, skepticism films concern their characters’ ability to recognise the world they are living in as what it is. While multiple-draft narratives and forking-path plots primarily address ontological questions and problems (concerning the course of life) that result from the way our world is, skepticism films infuse an additional epistemological element in the questions they raise, since they are concerned with the philosophical problem of the possibility of knowing the world as it is.

As the case studies will show clearly, skepticism films also operate with simpler narrative strategies as compared to mind-game films, forking-path films or multiple-draft narratives. The different focus such film phenomena have on philosophical issues and narrato-aesthetic strategies makes them a useful comparative backdrop for the analysis of skepticism films.

However, LOLA RENNT introduces, as already mentioned, a kind of “cross-talk” between the three plot lines, since the main character Lola learns from earlier failures and avoids them in subsequent plot lines.
Part IV

Analysing Skepticism Films
9 Tools for Philosophical Film Analysis

In preparation of the case studies in chapter 10 and 11, the aim of the present chapter is to reflect on the methodology and analytic tools needed for properly analysing (rather than merely interpreting) films from a philosophical perspective. Section 9.1 outlines basic challenges to philosophical film analysis, and proposes a simple three-step procedure for philosophically approaching single films. Section 9.2 exemplifies some of the problems an analytically under-informed philosophical investigation of films can encounter. The chapter concludes with a short overview of the cinematic means of expression under analysis in the case studies (section 9.3).

9.1 Philosophy and Film Analysis

The “hybrid nature of cinematic expression – which combines moving photographic images, sounds, and music, as well as speech and writing” (Rodowick 2001: 35f.) poses the most complex challenge to a systematic analysis of film. More precisely, the medium’s hybridity derives from three characteristics: Films are multimodal as well as multicodal, and they invoke extra-textual contexts which influence the understanding of a given film’s ‘meaning’.

Films are multimodal because, when screened, they address different senses at once, i.e. the sense of hearing, the sense of vision, and indirectly (and in some cases directly) the senses of smell and touch.288 They are multicodal because they employ a multitude of different semiotic systems, such as writing, numerics, language, gestures, mimics, or graphic elements. Nevertheless, spectators usually experience a film as an “organic unity” (Gast 1993: 53, my translation) – and not as a discontinuous conglomerate of random sign systems.289

Adding to this complexity, the multimodal and multicodal character of films generates overarching structures which are not directly ‘perceivable’ but rather inferred. Examples are the dramaturgic structure of a film, and extra-filmic references, such as allusions to other films and pop-cultural phenomena. The latter can only be detected and understood by spectators which are in command of culturally specific background knowledge.290 For instance, filmmakers can create a film as a homage to other, earlier...

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288 Throughout the history of cinema, there have been attempts to incorporate smells and haptic elements into the film experience. See Schmerheim 2013: 115f.
289 This paragraph follows Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2013: chapter 2.1.
290 Following this basic insight, the film scholar Helmut Korte distinguishes between product analysis (Produktanalyse), reception analysis (Rezeptionsanalyse), and context analysis (Kontextanalyse) of a film. Only the first category of analysis can go along without addressing extra-textual references of a film (see Korte 2010: 28). The inclusion of context and reception is most important for film-historical studies.
films or works of art: THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN (Sturges, 1960) pays homage to THE SEVEN SAMURAI (Kurosawa, 1954); PSYCHO (Van Sant, 1998) is a shot-by-shot colour remake of Hitchcock’s original PSYCHO (Hitchcock, 1960); VANILLA SKY (Crowe, 2001) is an US-American pop-culturalist remake of the Spanish film ABRE LOS OJOS (Amenábar, 1997). Even though a spectator can enjoy each of the newer films without such background knowledge, she will not entirely understand the film without it.

Filmmakers can play with the different degrees of background or cultural knowledge in the members of an audience. This is perhaps most evident in so-called “family entertainment films” – films that explicitly address multiple audience groups, in this case: children as well as adults. Family entertainment films tend to play with the phenomenon that members of an audience will understand a given film scene in different ways, depending on their cognitive and cultural competence. For instance, in the Pixar family entertainment film FINDING NEMO (Stanton and Unkrich, 2003) there is a film scene in which the piscine main characters come across a group of jaws who invite them to join their “Fishaholics” self-help group, which is supposed to help the latter to become or stay vegetarian jaws. For an adult spectator, this scene is an obvious reference to “Alcoholics Anonymous,” while children without such background knowledge will simply enjoy the (quite funny) film scene.

The methodological challenge does not so much consist in identifying specific instantiations of aesthetic or narrative strategies. As the plethora of introductory textbooks shows, film studies is in command of well-established tools for analysing the uses and effects of camera strategies, sound strategies, or montage strategies. Rather, the challenge is to grasp the interplay of these elements, and to unify all these divergent elements into a coherent written (or, for that matter, spoken or audiovisual) analysis of the film in question. Since it is obviously impossible to exhaust all aspects a film raises, a case study needs to focus on selected aspects while neither unduly imposing analytic preassumptions onto the film nor neglecting other potentially important elements.

In the philosophical analysis of films, the standard challenges of film analysis are heightened by the need to explicate a given film’s philosophical ‘merit’ or ‘content’ without imposing, from the outset, a distorting philosopher’s perspective. Philosophical film analysis should try to approach its films as neutrally as possible, and not with a predetermined wish to find philosophy in it.

Philosophical film analysis is also challenging because, as Gilles Deleuze maintains, philosophy is a discipline of human thought which tends to deal in the creation of and reflection on concepts, not percepts. But the multimodal and multicable entity we understand as being a film is, prima facie, a percept, something which works on our senses and on our higher-level cognitive capacities rather than on the latter alone. If this

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292 A more extensive exploration of this kind of multiple audience address, based on said scene in FINDING NEMO, can be found in Kurwinkel 2012c.
294 The methodological need for developing strategies for a comprehensive analysis of the interplay of film elements is addressed more extensively in Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2013: chapter 2.1 and 3.1.
295 In the case of blockbuster films, Catherine Constable terms the opposition (which she ultimately objects against) as “visceral rather than conceptual” (Constable 2009: 2).
is so, one needs a routine for extracting the philosophical-conceptual from the perceptual – or one needs to understand how the perceptual ‘in itself’ is already philosophical, i.e. a perhaps alternative but hierarchically equal way of expressing philosophical thought. Chapter 3 outlined a conception of philosophical thought which basically agrees with John Mullarkey’s position that “the power of film [is] simultaneously perceptual and conceptual” (Mullarkey 2009: xiii). Constable, invoking Michele Le Doeuff’s work, also raises awareness to the “conceptual role played by imagery within philosophy” (Constable 2009: 6) – that is, even traditional philosophy is not entirely conceptual.

Methodologically, film-philosophical analysis as understood in this dissertation consists of three steps: The first step formulates guiding research questions which are based on a first, speculative assessment of the philosophical issues addressed in the film(s) which is based on a first, intuitive understanding of the narrato-aesthetic design and intentions of the film.296 The guiding question for the analysis of skepticism films is, of course, is how these films address the varieties of the problem of knowing. Chapter 7 has already presented speculative assessments of selected films as skepticism films. It is important to keep in mind that such an assessment cannot exhaust the analytic and expressive potential of a film: While, for instance, the play with philosophical ideas is an integral element of the MATRIX films, one can also analyse them as action vehicles which are adorned with philosophical issues. As with every product of human culture, there is always a multitude of possible perspectives on them. As Mullarkey puts it in Refractions of Reality,

“[t]here are more effects in film than can ever be captures by textual ‘philosophy’ (so-called), for more is produced on screen and in the audience than simply representations of stories, of gender, or even of philosophy.” (Mullarkey 2009: 3)

Secondly, the chosen research questions inform the focus of subsequent in-depth analyses. The analytic results should be verifiable by independent readers of the analysis. Visualisations facilitate such a task (for examples, see chapter 7.5), as does the use of screenshots, film clips and precise references to sequence protocols of the film.297 The sequence protocols are a basis for short plot summaries, which, together with background information about the production of the films in question, initiate the written film analysis. Sequence protocols are also an indispensable tool for understanding and visualising the dramaturgic structure of a film and for visualising the use of a film’s various means of expression.298 In addition, screen plays of the films,

296 One standard objection against the philosophical value of film is that, unlike traditional works of philosophy, films are necessarily collaborative works, from the persons in front of the camera to the creative and labour workforce behind it. This objection can be avoided by understanding films as texts which stand for themselves, and which can be analysed for their narrato-aesthetic expressions or even positions. The focus then is on the film’s structural features, not so much on its allegedly intended features. Indeed, it would be promising to understand them as a kind of “collaborative philosophy” as opposed to the works produced by the solitary armchair philosopher.

297 I here follow Helmut Korte’s dictum that sequence protocols form the basis for an in-depth analysis of a film because they facilitate precise references to selected portions of the film (see appendix “sequence protocols”).

298 See the visualisations in chapter 7.5 and 10: The visualisations of the ontological structures used in the subsequent chapters are very similar to Juri Lotman’s topological model of analysis of cultural phenomena. See Borstnar, Pabst and Wulff 2008:167.
which often contain directions concerning the setting and the behaviour of the characters, provide useful further information.

This second step is supposed to explicate the narrato-aesthetic structure and strategies of a film. Even if the penultimate result of the overall analysis is that the film cannot properly be regarded as having “philosophical merits,” it will have explicaded how philosophical ideas influence the aesthetic and narrative design of films. Even though not many films are philosophical in the sense of being a contribution to philosophically serious discourse, they can exemplify the ways in which philosophical issues and ideas pervade contemporary (pop-) culture, and are therefore, in Cavell’s words, reflections “about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about” (Cavell 2005 [1983]: 92).

Thirdly, on the basis of in-depth analysis one can explicitly correlate the film to philosophical issues, to philosophical ideas, specific discourses in philosophical literature, etc. The separation of these two steps reduces the danger of imposing a pre-determined philosophical perspective on the film under analysis, even though it does not entirely eliminate it. One example: An analysis of the MATRIX films typically explicates the films’ plot and story and the films’ ways of aesthetically presenting its diegesis. It is possible to do this without invoking subsequent questions about the philosophical plausibility or stringency of the films.

Proceeding from the second to the third analytic step, however, one should avoid what Simon Critchley calls in a Husserlian fashion describes as a “hermeneutic banana skin”:

“To read from cinematic language to some philosophical meta-language is both to miss what is specific to the medium of film and usually to engage in some sort of cod-philosophy deliberately designed to intimidate the uninitiated. […] Any philosophical reading of film has to be a reading of film, of what Heidegger would call der Sache selbst, the thing itself. A philosophical reading of film should not be concerned with ideas about the thing, but with the thing itself, the cinematic Sache.” (Critchley 2005: 139)

The aim of the case studies here is indeed to pay attention to “the thing itself” before moving on to elaborated philosophical evaluations. The methodological distinction between analysis and evaluation is supposed to support this aim, even though it is clear that analysis always already includes evaluative elements.

9.2 The Status Quo of Philosophical Film Analysis

As flourishing as contemporary film-philosophical literature is, there is no real discourse on the problem of analysing specific films from a philosophical perspective. Put bluntly, a surprisingly high amount of current film-philosophical case studies still mostly focuses on an exegesis of the films’ content and dialogues, enriched with a rather eclectic attention to single aesthetic details of the films. Rarely do philosophically motivated books on filmmakers or single films include an extensive reflection on the aims, powers and limits of philosophical film analysis. All too often they still treat film as a kind of literature by other means. But film is not merely literature by other means. Even books which take pride in analysing the particular in films, such as Stephen Mulhall’s On Film or Robert Sinnerbrink’s New Philosophies of Film, do not include explicit reflections on
the way in which a philosopher is supposed to find the philosophical in the films under scrutiny (see Mulhall 2008a and Sinnerbrink 2011).299

A paradigmatic example for film-philosophical eclecticism is Gilles Deleuze’s film-philosophy:300 The Cinema books invoke a myriad of aesthetic or narrative examples which are derived from the entire history of film until the late 1960s, often highlighting certain striking aesthetic features of the films discussed. But Deleuze rarely devotes more than one or two paragraphs to the discussion of the film.301 This is also true of Cavell’s writings, which reveal a high aesthetic competence of their author, a former jazz musician. But nevertheless, in the discussion of single films, Cavell tends to focus on exegeses of narrative and dialogue.

Films are not moving images and sound – films are structured kinetic audio-visions, structured audio-visions in motion. Film-philosophy still is highly infested with an outdated use of terms like “motion pictures” or “moving images”. One major film-philosophical example for this is the work of Noël Carroll – a highly precise philosopher who has devoted a lot of intellectual energy to attempts at defining films as essentially being moving images (see Carroll 2008). Visualistic parlance is even noticeable in Deleuze’s terms image-movement and image-temps, even though he is highly aware of cinema’s audio-visual nature (see for instance chapter 9 on “The components of the Image” in the second Cinema book).

Put differently: Sound is never the mere auxiliary or addition to a visual medium. Even so-called silent film is nowadays defined through the absence of sound (and the era of talkies is, tellingly, nowadays defined through the advent of sound).302 Understanding film as a merely visual medium means missing its philosophical potential. Film is, of course, from early on highly defined by the dominant presence of visuality. But it is impossible to grasp the impact of contemporary screen culture without being aware of the indispensable role played by sound in the audio-visual fusion we experience in the movie theatres.

In Adapting Philosophy, Catherine Constable points out one of the pitfalls that awaits film-philosophers who are not aware of the integral role of sound in film, or of the effects of its interactions with the visual track and other filmic means of expression. It is particularly problematic to regard dialogues in films in direct analogy to the expression of philosophical positions: “The use of dialogue as a surrogate for philosophy

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299 It is telling that none of the major compendiums on the philosophy of film include single entries or articles on “analysis” or similar methodological topics. This is, of course, the result of film philosophy’s origins in the area of philosophy rather than film or media studies: Most of the early major film philosophers were and are philosophy or literature professors rather than specialists in the field of film studies, a tendency that only changes now. Philosophers such as Cavell even flirt with their status as non-specialists (see Cavell 1979a: xvi and 12f.). This parallels the development of the field of adaptation studies: The first theorists to focus on these topics, such as Seymour Chatman, came from literature studies and implicitly imposed the methodology they learned there to film, without paying proper attention to the fact that the narrative media of literature and film rely on different sets of expressive possibilities. Nowadays few film scholars would treat film adaptations as a mere instantiation of literature-by-audio-visual means.

300 Even though Deleuze himself objects against this label (see Mularkey 2009: 78), this is essentially what he is doing: It is a philosophy of film as well as a philosophy of film as philosophy.

301 John Mularkey makes the same point in Mularkey 2009: 128.

302 See Rick Altman’s extensive study on Silent Film Sound (Altman 2004). Altman shows that even early silent filmmakers tried to find ways of integrating or at least adding sound elements to their sound-less film reel projections. Silent films such as METROPOLIS (Lang, 1927) even could only be restored because the film score gave exact cues for the film’s original cut, revealing that Gottfried Huppertz’ score was intended as an integral rather than additional element of the film’s design and effects on its audience.
involves the editing out of elements that might undermine the representation of the speaker as the disembodied Word.” (Constable 2009: 82) What is said in a film should always be interpreted or analysed in relation to what else is simultaneously heard and seen. Constable exemplifies this by an on-the-spot analysis of the verbally uttered philosophical positions of Morpheus in the first MATRIX film: She criticises that many analyses of the MATRIX films tend to take whatever one of the main characters, Morpheus, says at face value, in effect establishing him as “the voice of truth […]”, his dialogue presented as pure philosophical exposition” (ibid.). However, as Constable points out, the “interplay of visual, verbal, and aural elements” (Constable 2009: 85) positions Morpheus as an ambivalent figure whose declarations and beliefs should not be taken by the spectator as constituting the unanimously ‘official’ position of the film. The question of the ‘philosophical position’ of the MATRIX films will reappear again in chapter 10 – at this point it is simply important to keep in mind that in film-philosophical analysis should not base its exegesis on more than just one expressive dimension. To quote Constable again:

“Rather than simply privileging the dialogue as the closest analogue to the written word, successful philosophical analyses of film texts have to pay attention to the verbal, visual and aural dimension of filmic figuration.” (Constable 2009: 157)

9.3 Dimensions of (Philosophical) Film Analysis

While chapter 9.1 outlines the three basic elements involved in the kind of philosophical film analysis proposed here, the present section will discuss the importance of paying attention to the specific means of expression used by the films under analysis.

As outlined in chapter 7, the case studies in the subsequent chapters will investigate groups of films rather than single films will focus on one of the varieties of skepticism which are derived from Davidson’s tripartite distinction of varieties of knowledge: knowing the world, knowing oneself, knowing others (see chapters 4 and 7). Analysing more than one film at once strengthens the position that skepticism, in one or more of its several varieties, is a recurring issue in contemporary screen culture. It also allows showing how contemporary filmmakers creatively play with skepticist thought experiments, and how these variants affect philosophical perspectives on these films. The subsequent comparative case studies are supposed to reveal in more detail how such films work, and how changes to basic skepticist models affect their philosophical evaluation.

The case studies will address the narrato-aesthetics of their films, based on a traditional distinction of four basic areas of film analysis (see fig. 9.1):

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The dimensions of film analysis sketched here follow Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2013: chapter 3; see also Korte 2010, Mikos 2008, and Bordwell and Thompson 2013 for similar approaches.
One focus area is narration and narrative, particularly the overarching dramaturgic structure and character development of the films. As chapter 7 already showed, skepticism films play with different levels of reality, with multiple diegeses. These multiple diegeses are revealed to and concealed from the film characters as well as the film audience in different ways – and this affects the overall evaluation of how a given film can be understood as a cinematic skepticist thought experiment. For instance, skepticist thought experiments generally are based on (self-)deception scenarios. In the film, these sooner or later will be revealed or not. A further complicating factor is the multiple audience address of these films. There are always two groups of persons which can be discoverers of a deception situation: On the one hand characters of the film which are situated within or outside of the deception situation. On the other there are the spectators in the movie theatre or home cinema, which try to decipher the ‘real’ events of the film. Sometimes filmmakers may also decide to directly present their audiences with the fact that there is a deception scenario at play in the film (or not) from the outset. (In mainstream cinema, there will most likely always be answers to these film-ontological questions since Hollywood strongly relies on the principle of closure in its rendering of stories.) These ways of dealing with deception situations are interesting because they can be compared to variations of philosophical thought experiments.

Consequently, philosophical implications are not understood as mere by-products of a film’s narrative. Instead, it is argued here, such plot elements can and should be understood as integral parts of a film and be discussed as such. As a consequence, the logical structure, and coherence of a given skeptical possibility in a film should be examined, in part because the narrative structure of a skepticism film is influenced by the logical structure of skepticist thought experiments, as claimed in chapter 7. One could say that skepticism films follow a “narrative mode of reasoning” (Poulaki 2011:13). Narrative affects the visual dimension, the second area of analytic focus, for instance the choice of camera strategy and the mise-en-scène. Mise-en-scène is here pragmatically understood as the staging of everything that happens in front of the camera: “setting, costume and lighting; second, movement within the frame” (Hayward 2013: 239).

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304 I here follow Wollen’s distinction between single and multiple diegesis (see Walters 2008: 29).
305 The following definitions follow Sinnerbrink 2009: 46ff. Plot is the ordered structure of what is narrated; story is the narration of what happens chronologically. Style is the historical evolution of norms and cinematic technique used to order and structure (that is, to plot) the manner in which the story is narrated. So, style pertains to how plot is articulated.
Camera and sound strategies are then the way in which the mise-en-scène is orchestrated.\(^{307}\)

The third analytic focus is on aurality, i.e. on film sound as the fusion of dialogue, sound design, and music. All elements of sound can assume a narrative function: Apart from conveying basic information about story and plot, dialogue contributes to the characterisation of characters; sound elements contribute to the flow of events as well as to the characterisation of the environment the film characters are located in; and music can shape the mood of the film as experienced by the spectators. Music also is frequently used as a narrative device for the development of the story.\(^{308}\)

The fourth and final focus of analysis is on montage as the ordered temporal arrangement of the audio-visual material. Of course, montage is interrelated with all the other foci of analysis but is the crucial expressive strategy of film which allows, for instance, entangling different plot lines.\(^{309}\) In skepticism films, this is relevant because the way in which the film switches between plans of reality, between scenes with deceiving characters and scenes with deceived characters (or not) reveals details about the film’s narrative mode of reasoning. Also, montage is the quintessential tool for juxtaposing the other expressive dimensions of film and thereby bears a high philosophical potential. Chapter 1.4.1, already introduced Pudovkin’s idea of an “ideal-philosophical concatenation” (Pudovkin 2001: 76, my translation) which works with the expressive potential of contradictory information on the image and sound track of a film.

This fourfold distinction, even though facilitating analysis, again bears the pitfall of underestimating the complex fusion of all these elements of a film. For instance, sound is part of mise-en-scène because it allows including diegetic and non-diegetic sources which are not (yet) visible on-screen; montage is already an element of camera strategy due to decisions about what is visible or audible when in a given scene; camera strategies can be influenced by sound, for instance when they track the source of a sound heard off the frame; and dramaturgy as well as character development are co-dependent on the film’s entire audio-visible spectrum and vice versa. In short, even though the categories of film analysis are supposed to facilitate the process of analysis, they should not be understood as mutually exclusive categories. Analytic results in each dimension need to be brought into dialogue with each other.

\(^{307}\) Bordwell and Thompson 2013: chapter 4 and 5 extensively summarise common cinematographic strategies.

\(^{308}\) The film-historically best-known example perhaps is the scene in CASABLANCA (Curtiz, 1942), when the former lovers Rick (Humphrey Bogart) and Elsa (Ingrid Bergmann) meet each other again after years when Sam (Dooley Wilson), the pianist in Rick’s bar in Casablanca, plays their common song “As time goes by” at Elsa’s request, inciting an infuriated Rick to come down to the bar from his office (timecode 00:32:08-00:36:15).

\(^{309}\) For an overview of editing techniques and styles, see Bordwell and Thompson 2013: chapter 6; and Kurwinkel and Schmerheim 2013: chapter 3.2.4. Béla Balázs nicely circumscribes some of the possibilities of montage: “Das Eigenartige an den rhythmischen Gebilden der Montage ist, daß die Elemente der verschiedensten Sphären zueinander kontrapunktiert werden. Nicht, wie in der Musik, nur Melodie zu Melodien, nicht, wie in der Architektur, nur Form zu Form. In der Montage werden Tempus und Formen, Bewegungen und Richtungen und inhaltliche Akzente noch dazu aufeinander abgetönt und zu einem ornamentalen Bewegungsgebilde komponiert. Die Elemente gehören also fünf verschiedenen Sphären und Dimensionen an. Das, was in der Synthese entsteht, ist etwas sechstes, ganz Neues und Besonderes. Ein rhythmisches Gebilde, das optisch erlebt wird und doch nicht sichtbar ist. Eisenstein nennt diese Wirkungen die ’Obertöne der Montage’, die wie Quinten in der Musik für feine Ohren zuweilen hörbar werden, ohne zu klingen.” (Balázs 2001 [1930], S. 53)
(Not) Knowing My World: External World Skepticism Films

Comparative Analysis of MATRIX, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, and THE TRUMAN SHOW

10.1 So you Wanna Be A Reality TV Show Star? On A Pervasive Illusion In Contemporary Media Society

Who would not want to be the hero of his own film or TV show? Such desire drives the Buster Keaton character of SHERLOCK JUNIOR (Keaton and Arbuckle, 1924) beyond the barriers of the silver screen, albeit only in his dreams; such desire drives teenagers into casting shows such as AMERICA’S GOT TALENT (TV show, 2006-), or GERMANY’S NEXT TOP MODEL (TV show, 2006-); such desire drives ex-stars or wannabe celebrities into self-exploiting reality shows such as BIG BROTHER (TV show, 1999-) or I'M A CELEBRITY – GET ME OUT OF HERE! (TV show, 2002-). As many of those who tried to rise to stardom can tell, the celebrity status comes along with a number of discomforts – not the least of them the awareness of being under constant surveillance, which can have effects on one's public behaviour.

The reality show is an old idea in the Western fiction universe, and metaphorically is one of the undercurrents of almost all systems of religious thought: There might be a Deity watching you, someone who imposes trials and challenges on you in order to see how well you cope with them. Greek mythology is a kind of gigantic reality show for the entertainment of the Olympic Gods, who are watching their human guinea pigs from the Olymp. Where the Christian, Jewish or Islamic God is still a normative force that tests the moral character of his creations, the Greek Gods are more alike to contemporary television audiences: They tune into the ‘reality games’ for sheer pleasure, since not

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310 Nietzsche 1972: 35. Trans. Walter Kaufmann: “Now the Olympian magic mountain opens itself before us, showing us its very roots. The Greeks were keenly aware of the terrors and horrors of existence; in order to be able to live at all they had to place before them the shining fantasy of the Olympians”.

311 This chapter is a rewritten and thoroughly expanded version of chapter 4 of my Amsterdam MA thesis.

312 This, of course, is the central thought of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon: If in a prison you install a central observation post which potentially overlooks all areas of the prison, this steers the prisoner’s behavior. As is well-known, Michel Foucault adapted Bentham for his concept of modern disciplinary societies (see Foucault 1975). Foucault’s ideas are even more pertinent in the context of the current data surveillance scandals exposed.
always do the ancient human trials result from a normative impetus, or from power struggles among the Olympians.

While the Olympic shows still take place in what humans beings regard as the ‘real’ world, Platonism and religious-spiritual traditions like Gnosticism have shaped or inspired belief systems according to which the world of concrete and human flesh is only a non-real environment, a dream or a metaphysically inferior world as compared to the world of forms (Plato) or the spiritual world (Gnosticism).313

This idea of a world which is in some significant respect not ‘good enough’ is counterpart to the skepticist idea that the world as we experience it might not be the world there really is. Where the skeptic wants to get out of the world as she knows it into the world as it is, the metaphysical escapist, once she has gained insight into the illusory nature of the material world, wants to get away from the world as it is (i.e. the world she naturally inhabits) into the world as it should be.314

Casting show or reality show competitors are aware of at least one factor: That she deliberately enters a fake, controlled environment under surveillance by an audience. As seen in chapters 4 and 7, skepticist thought experiments radicalise the idea of living in fake or even simulated environments by asking questions such as “what if I do not know I am the star of a daily reality show? What if I do not know that I am living in a simulated environment which is observed and created by its creators?”

The present chapter focuses on three films which play with varieties of the idea of non-deliberately living in simulated or fake worlds: MATRIX (A. and L. Wachowsk, 1999), THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR (Rusnak, 1999), and THE TRUMAN SHOW (Weir, 1998). While MATRIX presents a prototypical version of a skepticist thought experiment – envatted brains unknowingly immersed in computer-simulated worlds – the other two films introduce philosophically interesting variations: THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR tells the story of the computer expert Douglas Hall who develops simulated environments which are populated by self-conscious computer algorithms, which in turn are not aware of being only programmed and simulated. Eventually the film reveals that Hall himself is a computer program in a computer-simulated world observed by a programmer on a higher level of reality. The evil deceiver is in a deception situation as well.

In effect, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR replaces MATRIX’ model of a corporeal being mentally immersed in a computer-generated environment with the model of a disembodied self-conscious algorithm embedded in a computer-generated environment. In contrast to such cyberworld films, THE TRUMAN SHOW operates on the basis of a physically real yet fake environment. Only the main character Truman Burbank is ignorant about his predicament, while all the other inhabitants and observers of that environment – the actors, staff, producers and audience of the show – are aware of it.

Of these three films only THE TRUMAN SHOW operates with such an extreme form of epistemic asymmetry. In MATRIX most of the inhabitants of the simulated world are

313 Plato’s Theory of Forms is addressed in chapter 4.
314 The latter idea gives rise to a certain perverted version of Gnosticism: That the skeptic, without knowing it, already inhabits the world as it should be, or some film characters in the Matrix this is exactly the point: It is a world for those who prefer the computationally enhanced taste of a steak to the way it actually tastes.
315 Television show like SURPRISE, SURPRISE (1984-2001, German title: VERSTEHEN SIE SPAß?) play with a limited version of the idea of surveillance ignorance by exposing their victims to hidden camera situations. An ethico-political version of limited surveillance is elaborated in so-called “conspiracy films” (see footnote 250 in chapter 7).
equally ignorant about their predicament but in turn actually interact with each other, albeit in a virtual manner. The Thirteenth Floor complicates epistemic (a-)symmetry because the film characters move between three reality levels which reality status is known in some cases, yet unknown in others. Nevertheless, the social interactions in The Thirteenth Floor can be characterised as actual yet disembodied interaction between self-conscious computer programs.

Another group of interaction between characters is represented by Vanilla Sky (Crowe, 2001) and Abre Los Ojos (Alejandro Amenábar, 1997): The films suggest that there is actually no interaction between the main character David/César and the other inhabitants of his phenomenological world; the latter are only mental projections within David’s/César’s cryogenic dream state. The solipsistic solitaires of Vanilla Sky and Abre Los Ojos present cases of self-deception, as chapter 11 will argue. The characters themselves are responsible for the deception they are subjected to, not some external force.

Being produced at roughly the same time within the Hollywood system, Matrix, The Thirteenth Floor, and The Truman Show explicate a shared idea in different ways: They are structured around the idea of moving between different levels or layers of reality but choose different narrato-aesthetic strategies for hiding and sharing the deception scenario from and with the film characters and the film audience. The films are configurations of skepticist thought experiments which, like traditional philosophical literature, explore various skepticist possibilities (see chapter 4.4).

Plot summaries and background information for each film prepare the in-depth analysis in the subsequent sections (chapter 10.2), followed by an analysis of the films’ ontological structure (chapter 10.3) and narrato-aesthetic strategies of conveying it (chapter 10.4). Chapter 10.5 will then address other audio-visual aspects of the films which are interesting from a philosophical point of view (chapter 10.5). A preliminary summary concludes the chapter (chapter 10.6).

10.2 Plot Summaries and Background Information

10.2.1 Matrix

Plot summary: Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves), a computer programmer for a large software corporation, leads a double life as a hacker named ‘Neo’. All the while suspecting that there is something wrong with the world he lives in, and trying to find out what the mysterious ‘Matrix’ is, he follows an invitation to meet Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), the leader of an underground rebel group. Morpheus reveals to him the truth about this world and the Matrix. Anderson is asked to choose between a blue and a red pill:

“You take the blue pill – the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill – you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember, all I’m offering is the truth – nothing more.” (Matrix, scene 7; see fig. 10.67 and 10.68)
After Neo has swallowed the red pill, he is connected to computer instruments. The rebels literally unplug him and show him the real state his world is in: A nuclear war between mankind and machines which have risen to artificial intelligence has devastated the earth's entire surface. The humans lost the war and are now used by the machines as a living source for generating the energy required for their survival. The Matrix is a computer-generated simulation of the world as it existed before the war, built in order to keep the humans unaware of their present situation. Only a few humans, among them Morpheus and his crew, managed to escape from the simulation. Now they are trying to rescue the rest of humankind and lead them to an underground city called 'Zion'. In order to achieve their mission, the rebels repeatedly return into the simulated environment with the help of special devices on their rebel ship 'Nebuchadnezzar'. Morpheus believes that Neo is the One, a Jesus-Christ-like saviour, who was foretold to free humankind from the Matrix. While he learns the skills necessary for surviving the upcoming confrontation with the agents – dangerous and powerful surveillance programs within the Matrix – Neo falls in love with Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), a member of the rebel team.

When Neo meets the Oracle, a female prophet able to see the future, he starts doubting whether he is really the One. But then Morpheus is captured by Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving). Neo decides to go back into the Matrix and rescue Morpheus, although nobody survived a direct confrontation with the agents before. The rescue mission ends in a showdown between him and Agent Smith, during which Smith kills Neo. Neo miraculously resurrects when Trinity confesses her love to him on the rebel ship and kisses his lifeless body. This resurrection is final proof that Neo is the One, and with his newly acquired powers he successfully battles Agent Smith. The film ends with Neo's acknowledgement that he is the One and that his task is to free humankind from the Matrix.

**Background Information:** The Wachowski siblings’ second feature film was produced with a budget of 63 million US-$, grossing a worldwide 463 million US-$.

The film’s success at the box office secured the production of two sequels, *MATRIX RELOADED* (A. and L. Wachowski, 2003) and *MATRIX REVOLUTIONS* (A. and L. Wachowski, 2003). The *MATRIX* films are paradigmatic examples for a transmedial franchise in an age of media convergence: Under the Wachowski’s direction, the story-world is explored in video games, graphic novels, anime short films, and other media outlets.

Like a typical high concept film, *MATRIX* is a kaleidoscope of pop-cultural phenomena, with references to cyberpunk, film noir, Manga, Animes such as *AKIRA* (Otomo, 1987) and *GHOST IN THE SHELL* (Oshii, 1996), superhero graphic novels, Martial Arts films, and science fiction films such as the *TERMINATOR* quadrilogy and the *ALIEN* films. Not by coincidence, Neo becomes a flying virtual *Superman*. The frequent references to graphic novels culture is not surprising, considering that the Wachowskis started their career as comic book artists at *Marvel Comics*. The rooftop

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318 THE TERMINATOR (Cameron, 1984), TERMINATOR 2: JUDGEMENT DAY (Cameron, 1990), TERMINATOR 3: RISE OF THE MACHINES (Mostow, 2003), TERMINATOR SALVATION (McG, 2009)
319 In MATRIX RELOADED, Link (Harold Perrineau) sarcastically remarks that Neo is “doing his Superman thing”.
chase scene and title sequence are homages to the prologue and opening credits of VERTIGO (Hitchcock, 1958) (see fig. 10.1).

The MATRIX franchise plays with pop-cultural references to such a high degree that it has repeatedly been understood as a postmodern film, as a “mixed-genre film” (Kight and McKnight 2002: 188), as a film “which function[s] as a kind of Rohrschach test” (Zizek 2002: 240), or simply a youth phenomenon (Barg 2004).

One of the most visible influences is William Gibson’s Neuromancer trilogy (Gibson 1998 [1984]) – cyberpunk novels which pop-culturally coined the very term “Matrix” as a reference to virtual worlds. The protagonists of the first novel, Case and Molly, are blueprints for Neo and Trinity. Case is a wrecked computer hacker, Molly a tough professional killer who, thanks to special implants in her head and body, is in command of almost supernatural skills. Like Trinity, she wears a tight leather dress. The characters manoeuvre through a cyberspace that generated artificial intelligences (AI) with an own personality. The AI are now trying to create an own environment which, at the end of the book, also contains human beings who are not aware of actually living in a simulated reality. The parallels to the MATRIX films are evident. Other cyberpunk references are Harlan Ellison’s short story I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream (Ellison 2001, compare fig. 10.2 and scene 5), and the work of Philip K. Dick, specifically the stories Time Out of Joint (Dick 2002 [1959]) or The Crack in Space (Dick 2005 [1966]).

There are massive allusions to the Bible and other religious traditions, in the first place Neo’s function as a Jesus-Christ-like saviour who at the end of the film even resurrects from the dead. Names such as ‘Trinity,’ ‘Zion,’ or ‘Nebuchadnezzar’ also allude to the Biblical world. The name tag of the ship Nebuchadnezzar bears a reference to a passage in the evangelion of Mark, III, 11 (fig. 10.3).320 In the waiting room of the Oracle, there is a little Buddhist boy with the ability to bend spoons by sheer mind-

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power (seq. 2); in MATRIX RELOADED Morpheus steps in front of the inhabitants of Zion like a prophet announcing the return of the Messiah.

Last, but not least, Lewis Carroll’s ALICE’S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND (Carroll (2001 [1863]) figures prominently in the film. In sequence II, Neo is lured into a nightclub with the onscreen message “follow the White Rabbit”. Shortly thereafter, he notices the tattoo of a white rabbit on the shoulder of a girl that belongs to a group of people who invited him to go out with them (fig. 10.4). The references to Carroll’s stories are very explicit: For instance, during the first meeting in sequence 4, Morpheus asks Neo: “I imagine right now you’re feeling a bit like Alice, tumbling down the rabbit-hole?” Subsequently, he says to him “If you take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes” (see scene 6).321

This limited selection shows that the MATRIX films (and the other films which will be addressed in the following sections) explicitly invoke a vast reservoir of (pop-)cultural motifs and themes that play with the blurry boundaries between reality and illusion. By doing so, they screen the rich web of narrative and aesthetic reflection on the skepticist tradition.

10.2.2 The Thirteenth Floor

Plot summary: Software specialist Dr. Hannon Fuller (Armin Mueller-Stahl) and his team are secretly working on a computer-generated simulation of Los Angeles as it was in 1937. It is inhabited by sentient computer programs who believe they are living in a real environment. Using an augmented reality device, Fuller regularly enters the virtual world, there inhabiting his virtual counterpart Grierson. When Fuller is found stabbed in an alley, his assistant and sole inheritor Douglas Hall (Craig Bierko) is the primary suspect. Mysteriously, around the same time, Fuller’s previously unknown daughter Jane (Gretchen Mol) appears and claims the heritage. Hall and Jane quickly fall in love with each other. With the help of his colleague Whitney (Vincent D’Onofrio) Hall tries to prove his innocence. In the hope of finding a message that Fuller left for him in the simulation shortly before his death, Hall jacks in to the simulated world, where he assumes the identity of John Ferguson. He quickly discovers that Fuller led a double life – inside the simulation, the respected head of a large software company was a wealthy playboy. Finally, Hall discovers what Fuller had to pay for with his life: Even the apparently real world at the end of the 20th century that Hall lives in is only a simulation, controlled from a higher reality level by the malevolent, run-amok computer programmer David. It turns out that Jane is David’s wife and is trying to rescue Douglas, David’s better digital counterpart, from her crazy husband. In a dramatic showdown, Jane manages to elevate Douglas to the next level of reality – at the welcome cost of David’s death. The film ends with a gold-coloured establishing shot of the two lovers looking at a 2024 version of Santa Monica beach. Before the end credits begin to roll, the

321 In Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland Alice follows a white rabbit into a rabbit hole that hides a tunnel through which she literally tumbles into Wonderland. MATRIX takes up this motif: When Neo is unplugged, the camera zooms into his open throat as if into the real world where he wakes up in a vat filled with fluids. When the fluid is suctioned, he tumbles into the sewers through a tube. That scene is a rip-off from the end of STAR WARS – EPISODE V: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK (Kershner, 1980), where Luke Skywalker falls through a tube system after his failed fight against Darth Vader.
shot is ‘turned off’ like an old-fashioned television tube apparatus (see fig. 10.36 and fig. 10.37).

Background Information: THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, a co-production between Roland Emmerich and Michael Ballhaus directed by German director Josef Rusnak, is an adaptation of the novel Simulacron-3 by Daniel F. Galouye (Galouye 1964) and, although very different in style and story-structure, a remake of Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s adaptation of the novel, Welt am Draht (Fassbinder, 1973). Like MATRIX, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR uses various references to cyberpunk literature, which is not surprising since Galouye’s book is part of that literary genre.

Rusnak’s film most probably derives its title from the circumstance that many buildings in the USA (as well as in other countries) officially do not have a thirteenth floor, since folk wisdom holds that the number 13 brings bad luck. The simulated world(s) in the film do not exist materially. The film combines elements of a Hitchcockian detective story – innocent crime suspect has to discover the truth about the murder – with neo-noir elements. The simulated world of 1937 is situated in a time period which immediately precedes the rise of film noir in Classical Hollywood Cinema in the 1940s.

THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR was released two months after MATRIX and, in comparison, failed at the box office. This can in part be explained by the fact that the former film’s production budget of 16 million US-$ almost equalled the marketing budget of MATRIX. Also, the well-crafted special effects of THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR pale in comparison to the action scenes presented in the Wachowski-Brothers vehicle – a significant factor in the marketing of a film.

10.2.3 The Truman Show

Plot summary: Insurance salesman Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) is the unwitting star of a documentary reality TV show. The small town of Seahaven he lived in his entire life actually is a gigantic television studio set, and everybody except him is an actor hired by the production company. Even his mother, his wife Meryl, and his best friend Marlon are hired actors. While Truman is entirely ignorant of his predicament, the film reveals Truman’s predicament to the film audience from its very beginning. The plot spans four days in Truman’s life during which he gradually realises that his entire life has been staged. On the first day shown in the film, a headlight crashes down from the sky in front of Truman, and subsequently he accidentally catches a radio frequency on which the show’s coordinators give each other notes on Truman’s whereabouts.

While in town, he accidentally runs into his father, whom he believed to be dead since 22 years. Before the two can talk, the old man is abducted by a group of mysterious men. To add to the series of strange events, Truman’s wish to go on holiday to the Fiji

322 The phrase “Welt am Draht” could approximately be translated as “world on a wire,” an allusion that computer-simulated worlds depend for their existence on electricity. Ballhaus was the Director of Photography for Fassbinder’s television version and owns the film rights to the novel. The information on THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR in this paragraph was derived from the film’s profile on imdb.com (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0139809/).


324 See the imdb.com profile.
Islands, where he hopes to find his secret love Sylvia (Natasha McElhone), meets a number of inuperable obstacles. Although the TV show’s director Cristof (Ed Harris) is trying to keep up control over his life, Truman finally manages to escape from Seahaven in a boat.

Out on the ‘sea,’ Truman survives a gigantic storm raised by Cristof, who in the world of the TV studio possesses almost God-like powers. It is only when the sailing boat finally crashes into the wall which separates the TV studio from the world outside that Cristof tells Truman the truth about his world and his life. Although Cristof urges his star to stay inside his world, Truman decides to leave the studio into a new life. The film ends with Truman leaving the studio set through a dark door.

Background Information: With a world-wide gross of 264 Mio. US-$325, THE TRUMAN SHOW is based on a screenplay by Andrew Niccol, who initially wanted to direct the film himself but was turned down because no studio wanted to hand over a 60-million-dollar-budget production to a newcomer. At that time, Niccol, who earned his first credentials in the British advertising film industry, had never directed a feature film.326 Instead, Peter Weir was eventually assigned as a director. In collaboration with Niccol, Weir made many changes to the initial screenplay while keeping its core ideas intact. E.g., the location was changed from metropolitan New York to the idealised small-town setting of Seahaven (see Bliss and Weir 1999: 6).327 Film production began some years after MTV aired its first episodes of THE REAL WORLD (TV show, 1992-), but was finished before Endemol started its BIG BROTHER reality show in 1999.

With the exception of the film scenes which take place in the observation room of Cristof, the film was shot on location in Seaside, Florida, a pre-planned community which is actually inhabited by wealthy families. Ironically, the ‘fake’ sky that supposedly is the painted dome of the giant TV studio is actually the ‘real’ sky above Seaside.328

326 In a self-ironical foreword to the published shooting script edition, Niccol answers the question how he came to write such a screenplay with “[i]t is because I suspect it is true. Who amongst us has not had the feeling that our friends, acquaintances, or even certain family members are acting? In my experience, they are overacting. There are obvious giveaways. Occasionally an ‘extra’ in your life – mailman, chiropractor, priest – will attempt to enlarge his role by launching into some melodramatic speech or in some other way try to upstage you. And the continuity errors in this long-running production are there for all to see. The same background players and traffic keep cropping up over and over. You wander into a store on a whim and discover that the actors are not prepared for your arrival and know next to nothing about leather goods. [...] However, my biggest criticism of the stage play people insist on calling ‘real life’ is the script – varying between the mundane predictable and the wildly implausible. Who writes this stuff?” (Niccol 1998:ixf.)

It is interesting to see how Niccol here plays with the language of filmmaking. His little thought experiment – of everyday life being in fact a long-running ‘Truman Show’ – also shows that skepticist ruminations are basically radical imaginings of everyday experiences: There are people in one’s everyday life who are acting, or overacting; an ordinary life in fact consists of the same cast and extras which turn up around oneself every day. Thus, it actually only takes one step to imagine up the idea that one is the star of one’s own personal reality show.

328 THE TRUMAN SHOW was almost entirely shot on location in the city of Seaside, a master-planned community in Florida (see the city’s website Seaside, http://www.seasidefl.com/). Only the scenes involving Cristof and the audience reaction shots were shot in a studio. In Niccol’s original screenplay, the story took place in a TV studio version of Queens, New York, resulting in a much darker, film-noir-esque atmosphere of the story (see Niccol 1998). The setting was changed to the picture-perfect town of Seahaven at the request of Peter Weir. The corresponding statements about the shooting procedure and the setting changes, see HOW’S IT GOING TO END? THE MAKING OF ‘THE TRUMAN SHOW’ (Mefford and Young (producers), 2005).
As Slavoj Zizek notes, THE TRUMAN SHOW is loosely inspired by (or based on) a story by Philip K. Dick, Time Out of Joint (see Zizek 2002: 385). Actually, THE TRUMAN SHOW is even simply one variation of a plethora of books, films and television shows based on the idea that a character’s entire life is constantly filmed. An early example for a film that centres on the issue of media exploitation is THANKS FOR EVERYTHING (Seiter, 1938). More recently, in the 1960 episode of THE TWILIGHT ZONE: A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE (Ted Post, 1960) the protagonist Arthur Curtis (Howard Duff) finds out “that his entire life has merely been someone else’s movie”. The episode was written by science-fiction author Richard Matheson (known for his novel I Am Legend). Similarly, in the episode “Special Service” of the THE NEW TWILIGHT ZONE series (Randy Bradshaw, 1989) the main character John Selig discovered that he spent his past five years as the unwitting star of his own reality television show. In the half-hour long short film THE SECRET CINEMA (Bartel, 1967), a director secretly films every minute in the life of a woman and shows the footage in theatres. For the Docudrama TV show AN AMERICAN FAMILY (A. and S. Raymond, 1973), a family allowed filmmakers to film their life for nine months. Another topical predecessor is the British television series THE PRISONER (TV series, 1967) about a former spy who is held captive in a village surrounded by other people who, pretending to be regular village inhabitants, try to reveal his secrets.

Slightly different, but based on the life of a real person, is TV JUNKIE (Radecki and Cain, 2005), a reconstruction of the private life of Rick Kirkham, a well-known American journalist, who was obsessed with producing video diaries of almost everything he did, thought and felt. When Kirkham died, he left more than 3.000 pieces of video footage. For their documentary, Radecki and Cain try to reconstruct Kirkham’s life with the help of this video material. Other films with a similar topic are MIRIS POLJSKOG CVECA (Karanovic, 1978), HOME MOVIES (De Palma, 1979), REAL LIFE (Brooks, 1979), LA MORT EN DIRECT (Tavernier, 1980), LOUIS XIX, LE ROI DES ONDES (Poulette, 1994), EDTV (Howard, 1999), and MY LIFE IS A MOVIE (Bacon, 2003).

That being said, the repeated claims of the cast and crew of THE TRUMAN SHOW that the film was ahead of its time in presenting a reality show scenario are misleading marketing statements. What THE TRUMAN SHOW actually does is introducing the basic story pattern to a larger, mainstream audience. For that reason, the film’s philosophical benefits do not rest on its innovatory properties. However, as the subsequent analysis will show, the film treats its topic manner in an exceptionally well-crafted, and ultimately philosophically rewarding, way.

10.3 Ontological Differences: Living on Different Planes of Reality

Even though all three films share the basic premise of a multi-layered diegesis, they use different diegetic ontologies: While MATRIX and THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR at least

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530 International counterparts of AN AMERICAN FAMILY are: in the UK THE FAMILY (Roddam and Watson, 1974), in Australia SYLVANIA WATERS (producers: Watson and Wilson, 1992).
531 The statements can be witnessed in the two-part background documentary HOW’S IT GOING TO END? THE MAKING OF ‘THE TRUMAN SHOW’.
initially contrast one or more simulated worlds with one outer layer or level of physical reality, The Truman Show contrasts an isolated part of physical reality (the TV studio) with the rest of the physical world as we know it: A film-within-the-film world in which people assemble in front of their TV screens in order to watch fictional and pseudo-real worlds.

The three Matrix films work with two categorical levels of reality, i.e. the real world on the one hand (R), and hierarchically dependent levels of simulated reality (S and S[c]) on the other hand (see fig. 10.5). Simulated reality here is represented by the two mutually independent interactive simulation programs of the Matrix (S) and the Construct (S[c]), a simulated training environment based on the Matrix’ program code but located outside of the Matrix mainframe and therefore only accessible via R.

Fig. 10.5: Diegetic structure of Matrix

The first Matrix film clearly distinguishes reality from simulation. Only the characters’ minds can travel from reality level to reality level. Their bodies always remain located on the level of reality R– conscious, enclosed in a tank with nutritious fluids, or motionless on a chair on board of the Nebuchadnezzar. These apparently free-wheeling inter-diegetic mind travels bring to mind Platonic notions of the immortality of the soul or dualist notions of the division of body and mind.

Matrix introduces a form of indispensable mind-body connection: “The body cannot live without the mind,” Morpheus says in scene 13 without further explanation. This suggests that if the mind dies in the simulation, so does the body. In the film, Neo is the only exception to this rule (apart from Trinity, who dies in the second film but is subsequently reanimated by Neo). Also, all humans in the film are tied to the one body they were born with, unlike the various computer programs that inhabit the Matrix, in particular Agent Smith: Not possessing any ‘real’ body outside of the Matrix, he is able to literally hijack any simulated body within the Matrix. He does not seem able to inhabit any of the rebels’ simulated bodies because they jack into the Matrix from an external access point.

The Matrix franchise as a whole blurs this clear-cut distinction between reality and simulation: In the second film, the Architect, the apparent creator of the simulated world, explains to Neo that there have been five prior versions of the Matrix, which all
ultimately failed due to an inherent anomaly of the computer program. Even though not stated explicitly, Zion can be, but need not be, interpreted as just another simulated environment within the Matrix mainframe, even though it appears to belong to the real world. Any deletion of the current Matrix program version would then also lead to the deletion of the Zion environment. MATRIX RELOADED supports this interpretation with a number of examples. At the end of the film, Neo is able to use his superhuman powers in the ‘real’ world as well when he stops attacking Sentinels with a protective gesture of his hands; Agent Smith materialises in the body of one of the crew members. The film also shifts to issues of ‘choice’: Neo and the other characters constantly have to make potentially fatal choices. This supports the hypothesis that the MATRIX franchise is less concerned with questions of reality but questions of choice: Freedom of choice becomes more important than questions of reality. At the end of the third film, Neo negotiates a truce between man and machines: Both species accept their mutual dependence and share the worlds they inhabit. Neo signs this truce by ‘sacrificing himself’ via immersion into the Matrix mainframe where he then beats Agent Smith, who has become a control program run viral. The question of ‘what is real’, so prominently posed by Morpheus in the first film (scene 10), loses significance. Following the truce, no species controls the other, and everyone can freely choose where to live.

The three-level reality structure of THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR is analogous to the MATRIX films (see fig. 10.6). It contains physical reality R (presented only at the end of the film, sequence 7), and two simulated worlds contained within it, of which S(1) (L.A. in the 1990s) contains S(2) (L.A. in the year 1937). S(2) is thus a simulation within a simulation (and not a simulation parallel to the other simulation). As in the MATRIX films, the end of the film introduces the possibility that even R – Los Angeles in 2024 – is just another simulated world enclosed within other worlds R(+n).

While in MATRIX the virtual world characters are mental projections of body-dependent minds, Rusnak’s film operates with integrated mind-body entities on each reality level. Migrating from one reality level to the other requires a ‘mental swap’: When Douglas Hall jacks into the simulation of 1937, his mind replaces that of his virtual

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333 Compare the dialogue between Neo and Smith during their final confrontation, where Smith asks “You can’t win. It’s pointless to keep fighting. Why, Mr. Anderson? Why? Why do you persist?” – a question to which Neo gives an existentialist reply: “Because I choose to”. Choice is here presented as an essentially human trait.
counterpart John Ferguson, while Ferguson’s consciousness is ‘parked’ in Hall’s body for the duration of the transaction. Consequently, whoever is located on a higher reality level can control the body his counterpart on a lower reality level, i.e.: David controls Douglas while Douglas controls John. It is not possible for the controller to directly manipulate his counterpart’s behaviour from the higher level of reality, but he can jack into the former’s (virtual) body at any time he wishes. This ontological logic allows David-as-Douglas to kill Fuller without Douglas’ awareness. While the higher-level hacker inherits the ‘body’ of his lower-level counterparts, his body is suspended in a motionless and unconscious state, analogous to the simulation travellers in the MATRIX films.334 There is one notable exception: If the controller dies within the simulation while he is jacked in, his body stays alive on the higher level of reality but is then inhabited by the consciousness of its virtual counterpart. For beings on a lower level of reality, this is the only way to gain access to a higher reality level. At the end of the film, Janet uses this possibility to elevate Douglas into her world in 2024 (scene 25). THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR thus varies Morpheus’ dictum that “the body cannot live without the mind”: The mind cannot live without a body and will therefore inhabit any body available to it.

Comparing the films’ ontological structures reveals philosophically interesting variations on the mind-body debate, dualism, and issues of personal identity. After initial astonishment, the characters quickly become comfortable with their new identities and exhibit notably different character traits from level to level, even though they are all modelled on one basic character version (e.g., John is modelled after Douglas after David). In the THIRTEENTH FLOOR simulation, Hannon Fuller is a rich playboy, while in 1998 he is an introverted faithful husband. Where Whitney embodies the best friend who would die for you, his virtual counterpart Ashton is an unscrupulous bartender constantly looking for his own advantage.

MATRIX and THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR operate with a model of intersubjective simulation (not with a model of solipsistic simulation): The simulation inhabitants interact and share their world with others persons who are in basically the same epistemic situation. Douglas Hall shares his initial belief of living in the real world of Los Angeles in 1998 with most co-inhabitants of that world. Neo shares the basic belief that he is living in a real world with almost all the other people who are, like him, living in the Matrix, even though his belief in the reality of the world is already instable at the beginning of the film (see scene 2). Both films rely on simulated shared worlds. In that respect, they differ from Descartes’ solipsistic evil genius hypothesis. They address varieties of skepticism by asking “how do we know that we live in a real world?” (and not “how do I know that I live in a real world?”).

THE TRUMAN SHOW does not contrast reality and simulation but reality (R) and an isolated part of it, the fake/artificial environment of the television studio R(F) (see fig. 10.7). R(F) varies a solipsistic deception scenario: Truman Burbank is alone in a world

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334 This reminds of the time-travel phenomenon in the LOST series, which features most prominently in season 3 and season 4. Due to exposure to electromagnetism in 2004, Desmond David Hume (Henry Ian Cusick) suddenly awakes in the year 1996, living there for a certain period of time with knowledge of the things that will happen in his ‘future,’ before eventually being ‘transported’ back to his present. In season 4, Hume’s mind time-travels in the opposite direction: First travelling back from 2004 to 1996, Desmond’s 1996 mind subsequently is transported into his 2004 body. Other notable recent mental time travel films are DONNIE DARKO (Kelly, 2001) and BUTTERFLY EFFECT (Bress and Gruber, 2004) (see chapter 8.3).
which has been built and populated in order to keep him under the illusion of living in a real world.

Truman’s world exists physically; his sense impressions correspond to objects in the material world, and not to stimulations of his sensory-perceptual system. The beach consists of real sand, the streets and cars around there are physically real, while other objects in that world are (physically manifested) props. The elevator in a nearby financial building is a fake (scene 15), the blue sky is a painted surface on the dome of the TV studio, and the sun is only a giant headlight. But most importantly, nobody he shares this world with is what s/he pretends to be. Everyone but Truman is an actor paid for participating in the televised documentary soap ‘The Truman Show’. The ontological premise of THE TRUMAN SHOW resembles O.K. Bouwsma’s paper-made world, though it does not go to the extremes of faking the physicality of the performing actors (see chapter 4.4).

In skepticist terms, Truman shares the skepticist predicament he is in with no one else in his world. There is an epistemic asymmetry between him and the other inhabitants of Seahaven, because he is the only one who does not know that the world he lives in is only a television studio. In contrast to skepticist scenarios which subject collectives to systematic deception about the world they live in, Truman Burbank is deceived by everyone he shares his life with. This adds a socio-epistemological twist to the film.

In Truman’s world, the role of the omnipotent Cartesian evil deceiver is played by the television director Cristof (Ed Harris), whose deception game is supported by a large production crew and cast. Cristof’s powers over his self-created world, his power to control the elements of wind, rain and sunshine as well as the behaviour and dialogues of every stage-acting character are God-like. But his powers are simultaneously more limited than those of the creators of the Thirteenth Floor and Matrix simulations because, for instance, Cristof is unable to completely change the TV studio’s environment in one fell swoop, and his powers of total control extend to only one person: Truman Burbank. (Cristof’s degree of control over the other studio inhabitants does not surpass those of a company executive.) In the other two films, deception control is exerted over large collectives of sentient beings. These differences in the epistemic position of world inhabitants (i.e., epistemic symmetry between inhabitants of

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335 Elsaesser writes that in THE TRUMAN SHOW “the eponymous hero leads an entire life that for everyone else is a game, a stage-managed television show, from which only Truman is excluded.” (Elsaesser 2009a: 14)
a simulated world vs. an epistemic asymmetry between a deceived person within such a world and other inhabitants of that world) put constraints on the genesis of such a world, and on the self-understanding of deceived persons.

10.4 Narrative Structure: Reality Revealed

The previous section outlined the basic ontological structures of the films’ diegeses. The sections in the current chapter 10.4 will focus on selected skepticism-related aspects which result from these ontological structures: The question what is actually so bad about living in such an environment (chapter 10.4.1); the narrato-aesthetic representation of ‘glitches’ in the fabric of the simulated or fake worlds, which eventually reveal their true character (chapter 10.4.2); the dramatisation of the film characters’ encounter with the borders/limits of their worlds (chapter 10.4.3); and the double audiences present in the films (chapter 10.4.4).

10.4.1 What Is So Bad About Living In A Non-real Environment?

The skepticist thought experiments introduced in chapter 4 revolved around the question whether a victim of deception would be able to realise being in a skepticist predicament. In traditional philosophical literature, this is the point of departure for arguments for and against the possibility of discovery (or the possibility of being in such a predicament at all). The three films under discussion in this chapter provide answers: All protagonists eventually realise that they have been living in a world which is not real. This is not surprising since all three films are part of mainstream cinema, and are therefore prone to Hollywood cinema’s principle of closure cinema that demands that a film answers the questions it raises.

A simple philosophical interpretation of the films would then claim that they are moving images of skepticism because they “screen” (Wartenberg 2007: 279) a skepticist situation, but at the same time claim to overcome the standing threat of skepticism, since the characters ultimately realise their skepticist predicament and have therefore found a way of recognising their actual position in the world. However, all three films subvert such a straightforward interpretation. As the preceding sections outlined, the MATRIX films and THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR end with ambiguous scenes, raising the possibility that even the higher level of reality accessed by the characters is actually just another non-real layer of reality. THE TRUMAN SHOW does not operate with such a model, since at the end of the film, Truman actually manages to leave the TV studio, but in their first and final conversation at the end of the film, Cristof is careful to claim that “there’s no more truth out there than in the world I created for you – the same lies and deceit. But in my world you have nothing to fear” (scene 29, see also Niccol 1998: 106). Like a sophisticated NSA officer or neo-conservative politician, Cristof effectively asks Truman to trade in security for freedom.

The actor Marlon (Noah Emmerich), performing as Truman’s best friend, even presents a reversed perspective on Truman’s reality TV environment: “It’s all true. It’s all real. Nothing here is fake. Nothing you see on this show is fake. It’s merely controlled.” (timecode 00:01:55-00:02:05) Marlon echoes his show’s director who claims that “it’s
not always Shakespeare but it’s genuine. It’s a life” (timecode 00:00:43). Hannah Gill, acting as Meryl (Laura Linney), conceives of Truman’s world as a “lifestyle,” a world in which one lives a “public life” as contrasted to the “private life” in the real world (timecode 00:01:18-00:01:36). These three accounts of what Truman’s world is or means open the film THE TRUMAN SHOW and therefore provide the audience with a set of possible interpretations of the ensuing events of the film: The hero lives in a partially counterfeit world, but he is a genuine character; Truman’s life is one lifestyle among others (“a truly blessed life,” as Hannah alias Meryl claims), it is merely lived in public rather than in privacy; and the environment is not fake, it is “real” even though “merely controlled”.

THE TRUMAN SHOW thus re-evaluates the skepticist predicament. While still raising the question whether Truman will be able to detect his skepticist predicament, the audience is presented with the views (or self-delusional interpretations) of those who are on its deceiving side. The skepticist question asked in THE TRUMAN SHOW is not a merely epistemological one, it is an ethico-epistemological one: “What is so bad about being in a deception situation?” The rest of the film is devoted to giving an unanimous answer to that question: A life subjected to external control cannot be a good (or even “noble” or “blessed” life). It is a miserable life because a controlled environment sooner or later needs to suppress the innermost desires of those who are under control. Freedom trumps security.

In the first MATRIX film, the character Cypher (Joe Pantoliano) assumes the role of questioning the absolute value of living in the ‘real’ world. Cypher is one of the crew members of the Nebuchadnezzar and has grown dissatisfied with the scarce and uncomfortable life in the real world. He negotiates a deal with Agent Smith: For betraying the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar, he is reinserted into the comfortable virtual reality of the Matrix as a rich man (scene 18). Cypher values the illusion of a good life over an uncomfortable life in the real world, and expresses this by lamenting: “Why oh why didn’t I take the blue pill?” (scene 18) Again, the epistemological question of knowing the world is transformed into an ethico-epistemological one.

In order for such environments to work, the films need to convince spectators that their scenarios are conceivable, that it would be at least temporarily possible to uphold a skepticist deception scenario. Of the three films, THE TRUMAN SHOW is particularly thorough in explicating the narrative logic of the hypothetical reality TV show life situation. The film devotes a considerable portion of screen time to the presentation and explanation of the working mechanisms of the veil of deception thrown over Truman. For instance, the claim is carefully introduced that Truman’s world is the result of continuous expansion. What started as a one-camera reality show starring an infant in the cradle only years later resulted in the largest TV studio ever built. There are also minor details which reveal that Peter Weir and Andrew Niccol devoted a lot of intellectual energy in making conceivable and probable the thought that it could be possible to subject a human being to life-long total deception. For instance, Truman Burbank has never been exposed to actual sunlight because the ‘sun’ of the TV studio is a gigantic headlight. Thus, he needs a different source of vitamin D, which is provided in

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336 Cristof’s little speech is preceded by a more nuanced account of Truman’s world: “While the world he inhabits is in some respects counterfeit, there is nothing fake about Truman himself. No scripts, no cue cards.”
the form of pills Truman has to take every morning during breakfast as the result of some alleged “condition [that] runs in the family” (Niccol 1998: 27, compare fig. 10.8). This necessity of countering possible objections against details of a thought experiment distinguishes cinematic dramatic imaginings from a mere hypothetic imagining of a thought experiment.

Presenting a kind of working logic is, however, only one aspect of the films’ narrato-aesthetic configurations of skepticist thought experiments. Another is the introduction of ‘glitches’ in the ontological façade; out-of-place moments which hint at the deceptive character of the environment. In all three films, the appearance of glitches is a narrative tool that ultimately leads to the discovery of the ‘truth’ about the film characters’ world. The films stage this discovery as encounters between the main characters and the end or limit of their world.

10.4.2 Glitches in the Matrix

THE TRUMAN SHOW, scene 1 and 2: Truman Burbank is just about to start another picture-perfect day in his not-so-picture-perfect everyday life. After imagining up yet another imaginary adventure trip in front of the bathroom mirror, the young insurance salesman steps out of his house, ready to start just another day in his life – day 10,909, as an intertitle lets the fictional and extra-fictional audience of the TV show/film know. What then happens initiates a chain of events which will, four days after, result in Truman’s self-liberation from the world Cristof created around him:

“Truman is about to climb into his car when he is distracted by a high-pitched whistling sound. Suddenly, a large spherical glass object falls from the sky and lands with a deafening crash on the street, several yards from his car. […] Truman investigates. Amidst a sea of shattered glass are the remains of a light mechanism. […] A label on the light fixture reads, ‘SIRIUS 9 (9 Canis Major).’” (Niccol 1998a: 3; see scene 2 of the film and fig. 10.9)

The backstage production team quickly announces – on the radio, on TV, in the Seahaven newspapers and magazines – that an airplane crossing the Seahaven skies has lost a headlight. But the damage is already done. Truman Burbank starts becoming suspicious of his own life. Even though there have been glitches before in the show (see Niccol 1998: 72ff.), Truman now wakes up from his life as an Everyman who simply does as he is told. He starts asking questions and realises that his own wife is acting strange towards him. He accidentally runs into his own father, who he long believed to be dead, but before he can talk to him the old man is abducted by mysterious people (subsequence 10). The elevator in the bank building next to Truman’s office turns out to be a prop (subsequence 15), and ultimately Truman starts questioning why all of his
attempts to leave the city for a journey to the Fiji islands are sabotaged by unforeseen catastrophes: The next available plane flight to Fiji is one month away, the Greyhound bus to Chicago suffers a gear breakdown, he suddenly becomes stuck in a traffic jam out of nowhere, and a nuclear plant fire on the other side of the bay blocks the only exit road out of Seahaven (subsequences 19 to 21). Finally, having realised that his entire life seems to be staged for him, Truman is looking into the bathroom mirror again, performing one of his usual adventure routines while using a piece of soap for painting cartoons on the mirror. When he’s done, he grins shortly, sarcastically says “this one's for free,” as if addressing an audience, and vanishes into his basement, which has become his sleeping room after a fall-out with his estranged wife (subsequence 25). It takes the TV show producers a couple of hours to discover that Truman finally planned his escape, and when Cristof discovers him again Truman is already out on the ocean in a sailboat, the same sailboat on which his father apparently died 22 years ago (subsequence 27).

Throughout the entire film, the extra-fictional film audience is aware of Truman’s predicament, because Peter Weir decided to start the film with the film-within-the-film prologue which outlines the basic premises of the reality television show called ‘The Truman Show’ (see chapter 10.4.1 above). The audience is therefore supposed to feel suspension about when and how Truman will discover the truth. The glitches in Truman’s Matrix therefore remind the audience of what they already know, and they make it wonder whether the most recent glitch finally is sufficient for making Truman realising the truth.

The MATRIX films are more reluctant in revealing the ontological status of the diegesis even though they, too, introduce glitches, such as the white rabbit or a digitally distorted black cat at the beginning of the film (scene 1). In THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, the glitches are revealed mostly through aberrant character behaviour (in the wake of being used by higher-level persons) and in the encounter with the boundaries of the world (see next chapter section).

10.4.3 Encounters with the Boundaries of the World

In all three films the characters ultimately discover the truth about their worlds, and the moment of discovery represents plot points, a dramaturgic climax in each of them. As remarked before, in each film the moment of discovery comes at a different time in the film’s overall structure. While the audience is informed about the actual state of the world from the beginning, Truman only discovers the truth at the end of the film, when he crashes his boat into a wall of concrete which is painted as the sky of his world (scene 28 of 29). Neo is confronted with the world as it exists today at the end of the exposition (scene 7, timecode 00:31:09). Douglas Hall is literally confronted with the outer boundaries of his world in scene 20 of 26 of the film (timecode 01:06:30).

In MATRIX the discovery functions as the starting point for the future events. Neo’s purpose in the overall structure of the film is not to find out that he was only living in a simulation, but to accept his destination as the One. The final climax of the first film is Neo’s death and resurrection in scene 29. In THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, the world’s simulatedness is revealed close to the end of the film in scene 21 and precedes the
unmasking of Fuller’s murderer. Hall’s discovery that his world is a simulation is an important plot twist at the end of the film.337

The TRUMAN SHOW systematically builds toward the moment in which Cristof reveals to him what Truman unconsciously already knew.338 This turns the film into an awakening plot similar to MATRIX, although in these films the discoveries steer the characters into different directions. Both Neo and Truman need the entire film for arriving at their final realisation: Neo realises that he is the One who has the potential to free mankind from the Matrix. Truman realises his status as the star of the world’s biggest TV show. Both discoveries reorient the characters’ outlook for the future, but Truman’s discovery does much more serve to put his entire past life into perspective. Truman’s realisation is about his past, Neo’s is about his future.

The way in which the films stage the encounter is aesthetically interesting. Neo gains an insight into the code and therefore underlying structure of his simulated world; Truman Burbank and Douglas Hall encounter the limits or boundaries of their worlds, echoing the ancient mythic journey of Jason and the Argonauts. In THE TRUMAN Show, this encounter is carefully orchestrated: When his ship literally bumps into the wall that marks the world’s confines, Truman experiences a haptic encounter with the borders of his world (fig. 10.10). He leaves the boat and touches the wall with his hands (fig. 10.11), before he temporarily breaks down under the emotional shock of his discovery. Non-diegetic music underscores the emotional impact of the scene, while no diegetic sound is heard anymore.

In contrast, Douglas Hall drives his car through the desert outside of Los Angeles to the point where his simulated world dissolves into a mere arrangement of green vector lines (fig. 10.12). There he merely gazes and wonders at the graphic display in front of his eyes (fig. 10.13). He is literally standing at the end of his (simulated) world. A long-scale shot frames Hall standing in the centre of the lower base of the frame, a small silhouette, barely noticeable. The visible vectors barely outline the shape of the objects they are supposed to represent, such as mountains in the background or a bird flying through the frame.

MATRIX does not provide exact information about the extension of the Matrix frame, even though all scenes playing in the simulated world take place in a city that structurally resembles Chicago, Illinois (the city maps and street names of the city are structurally identical copies of Chicago). At the end of the film (scene 30), a POV shot reveals how Neo, after his resurrection, gains the ability to visualise the Matrix code underlying the virtual environment (fig. 10.14). Its spatial structures as well as the agents are illustrated in the form of columns of the Matrix code (with which the audience is already familiar from the computer screens of the Nebuchadnezzar). The code vertically runs down the screen like raindrops. Instead of travelling to the spatial limits of the

337 Hall’s discovery echoes José Luis Borges’ short story “The Circular Ruins” whose protagonist dreams up a human being into existence, when he discovers that “he, too, was but appearance, that another man was dreaming him.” (Borges 1998a: 102).
338 Compare Peter Weir’s remarks that in his heart Truman had to know his entire life that he was at the centre of something, even if he did not know what exactly this ‘something’ was. Living in an environment in which all the people around him would try to become friends with him, trying to be in frame with him, trying to play a larger, more lucrative role in the show, cannot be without effects on the young unwitting star of the world’s largest television show. See HOW’S IT GOING TO END? THE MAKING OF ‘THE TRUMAN SHOW’.
simulation, Neo gains an insight into this world’s invisible core, its structure consisting of bits and bytes.

Following their aesthetic logics, MATRIX as well as THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR display program codes in green colour, as strings of green letters (MATRIX) or vectors of green lines that sketch the structure of the textures the simulation environment is made of (THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR). This again shows how the films rely on established filmic and cultural metacodes. In the 1980s, the first computers on the market, such as the Amstrad CPC or the first IBM PC 5151, displayed on-screen command lines as green letters on black background.

10.4.4 A Double Film Audience: Film Reception in The Truman Show

In reading philosophical literature on skepticism, the reader is invited to imagine the skepticist scenario described, filling the blanks of the hypothetic thought experiment while she reads along. However, recipients are involved differently when the thought experiment is screened and dramatised cinematically. It is then rather analogous to witnessing a crime scene from a safe distance, being involved and simultaneously observing from a distance. Spectators of skepticism films become an audience of the game of deception performed in the film.
The *Truman Show* explicitly plays with this aspect of audience involvement by creating a double audience: the extra-fictional audience – i.e., the real-world audience for which the film has been produced – and a heterogeneous inner-diegetic audience-within-the-film. The latter observes Truman's life within the diegesis of the film *The Truman Show* by watching the televised daily reality show ‘The Truman Show’. The *Truman Show* also introduces two other types of spectators. First, there are Cristof, a veritable man in the moon, and his crew. They observe and control the events of the TV shows (see fig. 10.15). Second, there are the actors which are paid for playing inhabitants of Seahaven. Not being involved in the events at the epicentre of the show, they, too, observe Truman’s life from a position within the diegesis of *The Truman Show* (see fig. 10.16).³³⁹

The differences between these audiences can be compared to the differences between a theatre and a film audience as described by Stanley Cavell in *The World Viewed* (Cavell 1979b: 25ff.). Cavell maintains that film audiences are “mechanically absent” (ibid.: 25) from the film characters and events on screen. Due to its temporal and ontological absence, a film audience is unable to enter the screen or the production lot on which the film scenes have been created (see chapter 5.2). The extra-fictional real audience of Peter Weir’s film as well as the fictional TV audience within this film are both technologically barred from accessing Truman’s world, and the hermetically isolated TV studio dome that contains Truman’s world is an additional shield – or screen – against any audience access. In contrast, the TV crew and the actors of the television show ‘The Truman Show’ both are in the position of a participating theatre audience: They are able to enter the theatre stage; in fact, the very play they witness is created by their very presence and interaction. While Cristof’s crew would have to move from the backstage area of the show into Truman’s world, the actors that surround Truman on a daily basis are able to at least temporarily interrupt the show that is played around Truman. These attempts are evident in the frequent attempts of outsiders to invade Truman’s world in order to either get screen time or to warn Truman about his predicament.

The use of sound in *The Truman Show* underscores the visually established double audience structure. The narrational sound perspective track is often aligned with the perspective of the diegetic spectators of Cristof’s television show ‘The Truman show’ (just as suggested by the use of hidden cameras described in chapter 10.5.1). The audience of Peter Weir’s film even hears the same soundtrack music as the television audience. One example: In scene 23, Truman reunites with his ‘father’. In this scene, *The Truman Show* constantly switches between the setting at the bridge and Cristof’s control room inside the artificial moon, where sound technicians and keyboarders

³³⁹ There are, of course, many other films which play with the idea of a double audience, including *Running Man* (Glaser, 1987) and the German TV film *Das Millionenspiel* (Toelle, 1970). Strictly speaking, every film in which somebody is systematically observing an unwitting person has a minimal double audience: The film audience and the person(s) observing the observed protagonist, *Oldboy* (Chan-wook Park, 2003) is an example for this; also *Dark City*, where an alien species is constantly observing the behaviour of a human population that is used as material for an experiment. *The Truman Show* is more radical in that it also gives the film two audiences: a real one and a fictional one. The most recent popular example is the Suzanne Collins adaptation *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012), in which 24 teenagers are put into an isolated battleground environment where they are forced to fight against each other until only one of the participants has survived.
produce the non-diegetic live music of the television show (which, for the audience of THE TRUMAN SHOW, thereby becomes diegetic) (see fig. 10.17 and 10.18).

*Prima facie*, THE TRUMAN SHOW uses the fictional audience for showing typical audience reactions. But the reaction shots which register the diegetic audience’s emotional involvement with Truman’s life also show that the audience, too, is subjected to a form of control: Just as every step in Truman’s life is being observed and controlled, some of the audience members seem to spend their entire days watching ‘The Truman Show’. They suspend their own life in order to watch Truman living an entirely controlled life.

Only two of the audience inserts during the film are located in an outdoor surrounding. Most of the diegetic spectators watch the show within the closed confines of their living rooms or bath rooms, or, in another example, in a small security office of a parking garage. Only a (inner-diegetic) trailer for the show shows a large and depersonalised audience which assembles for a screening on a sunny day at the beach in front of a huge screen (fig. 10.19). In another shot, the Truman TV show is on display on Manhattan’s Times Square at night (fig. 10.18). The only outdoor shots are again controlled by Cristof. In contrast, Truman spends a lot of time under a (fake) ‘open’ sky. One of the final shots of Truman, while he is sailing the sea in his small boat, shows him in a “heroic image” (Niccol 1998: 102) under a bright blue sky (fig. 10.20). But also one of the first shots (fig. 10.21, scene 2) already makes reference to the sky, foreshadowing Truman’s later literal insight that indeed ‘the sky is the limit’ – the wall of his studio world.
Peter Weir’s arrangement of these shots is ironic: The omnipresent bright blue sky in Truman’s television studio suggests freedom and happiness, while the confinement of the real-audience members into small rooms and apartments (fig. 10.22 to 10.28) suggests isolation (fig. 10.26) or a lack of such freedom. This feeling of confinement is broken up a little by the fact that many audience members are following the ‘Truman Show’ together with family and friends (fig. 10.22-24, 10.27 and 10.28).

The apparent paradox holds. Deception game victim Truman Burbank, isolated in a fake environment with fake friends, spends his days under an apparently sunny blue sky, while the audience of his TV show seems to be more spatially confined than he is, even though actually Truman is ontologically isolated from the rest of the world.

The film’s representation of a double audience is obviously intended as a comment on the social impact of contemporary capitalist screen culture. Even after Truman leaves ‘his’ show, some of the audience members introduced earlier remain in their self-inflicted imprisonment in the world of television. The last line of the film, spoken by one of the parking garage security guards, is “What else is on? Where’s the TV Guide?” (fig. 10.28, scene 29, timecode 01:32:18). The addictive regime of television remains intact, and the film extends the scope of its cinematic skepticist thought experiment into the realm of social and media criticism.

The presence/absence of natural environments in all the three films is quite interesting: While Truman’s Seahaven certainly builds on impressions of naturality (beach, ocean, sunrise and sunset, a bright moon in the night sky, etc.), in the other two films nature is peculiarly absent. In THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, even the ocean view of the final shot seems strangely unnatural. In the MATRIX trilogy, too, there is no sign of a natural world: The scenes take place within man-made structures and rooms – until the last scene in MATRIX REVOLUTIONS, where the Oracle and the Architect meet on a park bench with a view of Melbourne, Australia while the sun is rising (fig. 10.29). This
‘sunrise’ scene is dramaturgically prepared earlier in the film: While Neo and Trinity are flying towards the Machine city in order to save mankind, they break through the clouds for a short moment, like a fish jumping against the stream, and catch a short glimpse of sunlight (fig. 10.30).

With this sort of ending, the MATRIX trilogy confirms Sean Cubitt’s observation in his book *The Cinema Effect* that in recent films the external world “is posited no longer as the transcendental source of the system but as an integral element of it” (Cubitt 2004: 39). In films like *The Truman Show*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, or *Matrix*, “there is no exterior to the fiction except, perhaps, another stage set” (Cubitt 2002: 234). The film worlds on display in such so-called neo-baroque films are not “a description of the real but its ordering in free-standing semantic structures whose reference is to other semantic structures” (Cubitt 2004: 233). Many contemporary films play such a ‘postmodern’ game of difference: Their various elements refer to one another in a closed circuit without external reference points, and they constantly postpone the question which of these many layers could be fundamentally real. And this, of course, can be understood as a cinematic commentary on the problem of skepticism.

### 10.5 Aspects of Style

#### 10.6 Visual Narration – Philosophical Uses of Colour

In his essay “The Mind-Game Film,” Thomas Elsaesser writes that “Films such as *The Matrix*, *Donnie Darko*, and *Fight Club* present their parallel worlds without marking them off as different by superimposition, soft focus or any of the other conventional means by which films indicate switches of register or reference.” (Elsaesser 2009: 20). At least with respect to MATRIX, this claim is not correct. The film (as well as *The Thirteenth Floor*) uses visual, aural and other ontological markers for distinguishing different levels of reality.

The clearest indicator that the films aesthetically distinguish different reality levels is their use of different colour tonalities. In MATRIX, scenes that play in the ‘real’ world of 2199 are visualised with cold, bluish, desaturated colours (fig. 10.33), while scenes which take place within the computer-generated world of the Matrix have a Greenish, more saturated colour tonality (fig. 10.31). The scenes playing in the Construct are colour-graded neutrally (fig. 10.33). *The Thirteenth Floor* operates with a structurally analogous colour grading pattern: Scenes playing in 1937 are coloured in Sepia (fig. 10.32), scenes set in 1998 are graded in a cold Bluish colouring (fig. 10.34), and the final scene 25 of the film, located in 2024 and apparently located on the outer layer of reality, is presented in a strikingly Golden colouring (fig. 10.36). As stated in the plot summary, this scene is literally switched off like a television set, indicating that it takes place on yet another computer-generated environment (fig. 10.37).

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340 It is correct, however, that this narrato-aesthetic distinction between reality levels does not imply that there is one ultimate “outermost layer” (Müller 2003b: 56, my translation) of reality.

341 The German DVD edition contains an alternative ending with a different plot twist: Hall and Jane are standing in front of a window. The camera slowly zooms in on Douglas, who looks at what he sees (whatever he is) in joyous excitement. Then, his facial mimic gets confused, and the shot fades out while his face assumes the grim expression visible on David’s face earlier. This version of the film thus suggests that either David against all odds managed to transport himself back into his body, or that another user from a higher reality level now occupies...
The Wachowski siblings and their cinematographer Bill Pope also systematically apply different depth of focus in the scenes set in different reality levels. Scenes set in computer-generated environments appear as having less depth than those set in the real world. The characters resemble two-dimensional figures in a two-dimensional space, resulting in a reduced impression of spatiality (see fig. 10.38). They achieved that look by using different focal length for the different reality levels. Spatiality impressions function as ontological markers which follow a common cultural code: While physical reality is usually regarded as existing ‘in’ space, computer-generated simulations are simulations of space which rely on non-spatially-extended algorithms of a computer.
program. Objects within a simulation are not located within a three-dimensional space but as specific points or codes in two-dimensional array of the program code.

MATRIX makes use of its colour strategy right from the beginning. Contrary to then established rules, the ‘Warner Bros. Pictures’ and ‘Village Roadshow Pictures’ logos that begin the film are Green, while the background of the Warner Bros. logo does not consist of the usual white clouds in a blue sky but of dark thunderstorm clouds (fig. 10.39 and 10.40). Using the classical logo (like fig. 10.48) would have disrupted the movies attempts to literally lure its audience into the ‘rabbit hole’ of the Matrix. It would have indicated that ‘it’s only a movie, anyway’, while the transformation of the logos visually introduces an extra-diegetic reference: The film studios are part of the Matrix system, too.

The paratext becomes part of the diegesis, and the film already establishes part of its colour code by introducing Green as one of the predominant grading colours: First, we see an example of the Matrix code, running down the screen vertically (fig. 10.42). Next we see the film title “Matrix”, in capital green letters (fig. 10.43). Then a detail shot of the blinking command line of a computer screen appears. The letters in that command line are Green, resembling the colour of monochrome screens of old computers in the 1980s. According to the writing on screen, a “trace program” is running. The next shot presents a screen full of rotating numbers, which are gradually reduced to what apparently is a telephone number. Meanwhile, the camera zooms in to the numbers on the upper left side of the screen and then dives ‘through’ the number zero through a tunnel of green patterns (fig. 10.44 to 10.47). Next we see a white spot in complete darkness, which turns out to be the spotlight of a police officer (figs. 10.48 and 10.49).

This journey into the Matrix occupies 90 seconds of screen time. By using the Green colour scheme from the very beginning, the film anticipates the issues that will come up during the rest of the film: Reality is just an illusion and controlled by a dream factory. As Thomas Wartenberg writes, MATRIX screens philosophy here (see Wartenberg 2007: 279).

The dark, rain-soaked clouds in the background of the transformed Warner Bros. logo are exactly the clouds we see when Morpheus introduces Neo to “the desert of the real” in scene 10 (compare fig. 10.51 and 10.52). In this way, the film establishes yet another connection between the world of the Matrix and the viewer’s world. By transforming the production company’s logos, the film already posits skepticist questions, if only in a modest form: Does not Hollywood produce a world view for you that does not correspond to the world as it really is? The more radical version is, of course: Is our world, too, only a simulation?

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342 The following analysis of the exposition of MATRIX follows Wartenberg 2005 and Wartenberg 2007.

343 Subsequently, a lot of films, such as the HARRY POTTER heptalogy or INCEPTION, used such changed logos as introductions into their fictional worlds.

344 The code is a combination of Japanese Katakana signs and Arabic numbers. See Richard Donovan’s article “The Shadow of the Matrix” (Donovan 2013). Donovan remarks that the signs are mirror images of Katakana signs, as if mirrored or seen from behind the screen they are projected on. He suggests that this could mean that we, as viewers, are inside the Matrix, unaware that we are looking out (through the cinema screen into the film’s world).

345 This tracking shot reminds of the space travel scene in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001 – A SPACE ODYSSEY (Kubrick, 1968) and the opening credits sequence in Hitchcock’s VERTIGO (Hitchcock, 1958).
Thomas Wartenberg convincingly argues that the film’s narrato-aesthetic strategies succeed in posing the skepticist question which Neo asks himself (“how do I know that the world I live in is real?”) for the film audience as well, particularly by misleading them about the ontological status of the fictional world of the film during the first 22 minutes (sequence I and II). It is no accident that the Matrix simulates the state of the Western world at the end of the 20th century: Because Neo and the members of his world experience an environment whose structure resembles the one the film audience actually inhabits, it confronts the audience with the question of how they know that the situation of the human inhabitants of the Matrix is not identical with their own. (Wartenberg 2005: 279)

Wartenberg observes: “The Matrix has screened an analogue to Descartes’ evil genius hypothesis. Both the film and Descartes’ thought experiment are attempts to render the deception hypothesis compelling” (Wartenberg 2005: 279). Wartenberg here argues that MATRIX does more than merely illustrating Descartes’ evil genius hypothesis: The film is a screening of skepticism. It uses cinema’s capacity to control the audience’s epistemic position with regard to the film diegesis. In screening the film’s plot from Neo’s limited epistemic position, we are actually taken in by the deceptive world of the Matrix as fully as he is – only we are deceived about the nature of a fictional world while he is about his real world. Wartenberg argues that we thus participate not only in the deception but also its subsequent removal. (See Wartenberg 2005: 281)

With this strategy, the film succeeds in establishing the philosophical question of skepticism, because “[p]lacing a person in an epistemic situation where they are made to wonder whether a certain belief or action is justified is, of course, a mark of the philosophical.” (Wartenberg 2005: 281). In this way, MATRIX genuinely philosophises.

Unlike the other two films, THE TRUMAN SHOW opts for a more subtle colour contrast. The world of Seahaven is dominated by pastel colours under a bright blue sky(light) and has the flair of an updated version of a late Technicolor television show. The set is lit in high key, there are no discernible shadows, everything is, in other words,
apparently open to view. Seahaven’s inhabitants wear clothes in the style of the 30s and 40s, and only Truman’s clothing style deviates somewhat from the otherwise perfected combinations. This is no surprise, since Truman is the only one who is not dressed entirely by the TV show’s costume department. The bright white paint on all houses competes with the strikingly saturated blue sky of Florida. Truman’s world is designed according to Cristof’s ideals about ‘the way the world should be’ (see Weir 1998: xvf.). In contrast, the interior shots of Cristof’s production headquarter reveal a basically functional, technicised environment.

10.6.1 Framing Truman’s World
While not overtly using colour tonalities as ontological markers, the lenses and camera angles used for THE TRUMAN SHOW are employed in a way that reveals where the TV producers placed their 5,000 cameras within the TV studio. Almost all angles are distorted and the cameras placed in unusual positions (fig. 10.53-66), most of the shots are clearly identifiable as such (i.e., there is no attempt to hide the fact that the show is filmed by cameras, see fig. 10.53, 10.57-61). There are no tracking shots, and the editing relies on reaction shots or axis mirroring (if Truman is shown from one POV, the next shot delivers a complementary POV which lies on the same axis) (see fig. 10.54 and 10.55; 10.62 and 10.63).

The cameras in principle function like surveillance cameras, i.e. they record live occurrences within the fictional world of THE TRUMAN SHOW, and sometimes the events in the show surprise the supervising director. A good example is the flashback scene 13, in which Sylvia and Truman escape from the library to the beach. The POV of a surveillance camera of the exit section of a library is partially blocked by a column. Instead of exiting from left to right behind the columns, as the other visitors do, Truman and Lauren rush off to the left as soon as they are behind the column and therefore shortly invisible to the camera operators. The camera temporarily loses track of them (see fig. 10.64). In the following shot, an establishing shot of the entire beachside road, the camera searches and pans for a short while until the directors spot the runaway couple. The camera then zooms in to the appropriate position (fig. 10.65 and 10.66).

With the help of these visual instruments the film establishes the theme that Truman’s world is a controlled artificial environment – a theme which guides the film’s narrato-aesthetic logic. Along with the decision to use reliable narration and consequently to keep the audience informed about Truman’s predicament from the very beginning, it offers the audience an intriguing spectatorial position: Not only the contents shown in the film become important, but also the manifold ways in which they are shown. Because the spectators know what is happening to Truman, they are not only informed about his subsequent discoveries, but also about the ways an evil deceiver would have to conceive in order to film the object of his deceptions. The countless distorted and otherwise unusual camera perspectives, as well as the careful, coordinated, but far from perfected, assemblage of the shots constantly remind the audience of Truman’s predicament. At the same time, the slight imperfections in this total observation of a human being’s life make the scenario even more plausible. In short: by establishing a narrato-aesthetics of control, THE TRUMAN SHOW presents a recorded skepticist world.
This status of being a recorded world leads to another peculiar feature of Peter Weir’s film: It is as much a film about the way in which its main character discovers his skepticist predicament as it is a psychological study of an evil deceiver, of the perils and discomforts of being one. While Truman is involuntarily subjected to the deception game, Cristof chooses a voluntarily life of seclusion, since he seems to spend his entire life within the confines of the TV studio. THE TRUMAN SHOW also hints at the consequences which being part of this megalomaniac reality show has on the other actors’ lives, and it shows the levels of addiction and confinement inflicted on the worldwide TV audience-within-the-film. As outlined in the preceding sections, THE TRUMAN SHOW adds a pragmatic and conceivable configuration of a ‘real-life’ skepticism scenario to the long list of existing skepticist thought experiments. It does not simply present a skepticist deception situation but fleshes out in more detail a life lived under the spell of a deception situation. Hence it contributes to a more profound understanding of the scope of skepticist scenarios in the way claimed in chapter 1.3.2.
10.7 Preliminary Summary

As shown in this chapter, MATRIX, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, and THE TRUMAN SHOW are elaborated configurations of skepticist thought experiments. Despite being based on slightly different scenarios, the films share a number of structural features and audio-visual strategies. They address the glitches in the fabric of deception imposed on its victims; they ultimately present encounters between the main characters and the boundaries of their worlds, and they play with the possibilities of multiple audience which the medium of cinema allows. All three films use the plot-inherent contrast between reality levels as narrative and aesthetic devices which not only fulfil a dramaturgic purpose but are also ways of adhering to the internal logic of the chosen variety of the skepticist thought experiment.

Last but not least, the three films present their protagonists as well as the film audience with an (imaginary) choice, which has found its iconographic expression in the first MATRIX film (see fig. 10.67 and 10.68): Should one swallow the blue pill, and thereby continue living in the cosy virtual reality, or should one swallow the red pill and confront the harshness of the real world? MATRIX seems to give a clear answer in its first instalment, an answer which is subverted in the next two films. THE TRUMAN SHOW, however, stays firmly attached to the red pill, even though Cristof tries to convince Truman (and the film audience) to the contrary.
11 Not Knowing My Self, or: Being One’s Own Evil Deceiver

Did you ever wake up from an adventure or romantic night which seemed to be so real – but then realised it was just a dream? The good news about it is that you still have another reality to go on with. But what if your entire life is just a dream, what if the only one there is... is actually just you, living in a dream world? The solipsistic solitaire is a minor yet recurring figure in the history of literature; the narrative games with dream worlds find their most recurrent intense expression in cinema, the narrative dream machine par excellence. Chapter 5.1 already sketched a trajectory, ranging from early to contemporary cinema, of films in which the borders between reality and illusion become blurred; films in which the characters wonder whether they are dreaming or awake, whether their experiences relate to facts or only to self-generated fiction. Unlike the protagonists of external world skepticism films, the dream-world characters here are under the spell of internal, self-induced deception.

Unsurprisingly, then, dream scenes belong to the standard filmic narrative devices. They are frequently used in dramas, thrillers, or crime films, introducing characters which wake up from nightmarish chase scenes or utterly romantic encounters. Filmmakers early on used the dream vs. reality theme as an overarching structural-narrative element. In films such as SHERLOCK JR (Keaton and Arbuckle, 1924) or THE WIZARD OF OZ (Fleming et al., 1939), the ultimate question is whether the adventures of the main character actually happened – or whether they were only dreamt up. In such ways, filmmakers gratefully take up the narrative twist of Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland (Carroll 2001 [1863]): While Alice eventually wakes up in the garden, allowing more traditionally inclined readers to assume that she only dreamt up her adventures with the white rabbit and the Cheshire cat, in THE WIZARD OF OZ little Dorothy wakes up from her Technicolor adventures in the wonderland of Oz to the black-and-white environment of Kansas, surrounded by her aunt and uncle and the farm workers whose faces became acquainted to the audience as the Cowardly Lion, the Tin Man and the Scarecrow. The tornado has simply knocked her unconscious instead of transporting her to Oz, it seems – or has it?
One of the most popular contemporary dream vs. reality debates surrounds the TV series LOST (TV series, 2004-2010), a pop-cultural phenomenon in its own right. Across six seasons, LOST follows the struggles of the survivors of a plane crash on a mysterious island somewhere in the South Pacific. The episodes reveal piece by piece that the island harbours a mysterious source of energy which gives rise to a number of supernatural phenomena, spawning parallel realities, time travel, immortal persons and other phenomena not explainable by common sense. The sixth and final season (2010) reunites the main characters in a metaphysical realm reminiscent of the afterlife, a realm where they come to terms with their troubles and sins before being able to “move on” (season 6, episode 17) to a kind of afterlife.346 The fan community since then heatedly debates the possibility whether everything happening in the show is actually the near-death or afterlife experiences of one or all of the characters after the plane crash.347 Throughout the seasons, various characters, frequently encountering people they believed to be already dead, and confronted with the unlikeliness of surviving a devastating plane crash, are asking themselves exactly the question whether they are still alive or not.

From a film character’s perspective, answers to such questions are questions about self-knowledge. Asking “where am I?” or “when am I?” are parts of the main question of self-knowledge: “Who am I?”348 A person’s place in (historical) time partially shapes who that person is.349 Someone who does not know where she is (e.g., in a dream world) or does not know when she is (e.g., living in a past world after a time-travel experience) also does not know who she is.

11.1 Personal Identity

The previous section introduced dream scenarios which render their dreamers as in a crucial respect ignorant about themselves. However, the most straightforward philosophical discussion of self-knowledge concerns questions of personal identity. Philosophers discuss various criteria for a person’s claim to be person she claims she is, and to persist in being the same person throughout a certain stretch of time (e.g., from birth to death). Reductionist approaches, for instance, stipulate either physical continuity or psychological continuity as deciding criteria. Psychological continuity is constituted, for instance, when someone can claim as his own memories of things he (and not someone other) has experienced in the past. Such reductionist approaches can be criticised for relying on ‘naturalist’ criteria which neglect that personal identity rather stems from a specific form of self-understanding, from the ability to diachronic self-ascription of meaningful experiences, and to enmesh these in a kind of “biographical

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346 The producers call this parallel timeline the “flash-sideways,” as the entire series already has made use of flashbacks (to the characters’ lives before the plane crashs) and flash forwards (to the characters’ lives after they returned from the island).
347 LOST’s main writer, Damon Lindelof, has explicitly refuted those theories and stated that everything happening on that island actually took place (fictionally). See the interview with Lindelof on theverge.com (Lagomarsino 2012).
348 John Locke (Terry O’Quinn) asks the question “when am I?” in season 5, episode 1, when he already knows that he and other fellow ‘Losties’ are travelling through time in the wake of an electromagnetic explosion.
349 Again, LOST touches upon that issue – not only in the flash-sideways where the main characters follow different life paths. In the flash-sideways, the character Sawyer (Josh Holloway), for instance, has become a police officer instead of a criminal con man.
process". This controversial discourse opens the door for a rich variety of thought experiments that contribute to a clearer understanding of the problem at stake.

Unsurprisingly, many films play with borderline cases of personal identity. For instance, Carl Reiner’s comedy ALL OF ME (1984) exploits a variety of the mind-body problem: What happens if a mind/soul is transferred into another body? With the help of a Tibetan guru, the mortally ill millionaire Edwina Cutwater (Lily Tomlin) wants to transfer her soul into the body of Terry Hoskins (Victoria Tennant). But something goes wrong: Cutwater’s soul accidently ends up in the body of her lawyer Roger Cobb (Steve Martin), where it occupies the right half of his body, while Roger’s soul remains in control of the other half. The film tracks their muzzled attempts to transfer Cutwater’s soul into the intended body, and exploits the comedic potential of the tension between the competing co-habitation of the same body by two souls, but simultaneously relates to the more serious Cartesian idea of a fundamental difference between mind and body.

BEING JOHN Malkovich (Jonze, 1999) turns its title actor-character into a kind of psychic zoo: For whatever reason other people can incorporate John Malkovich’s body for 15 minutes, entering it from a mysterious entrance point on the seven-and-a-halfth floor of an office building. During these 15 minutes, they have control Malkovich’s body and experience the world through his eyes. Meanwhile, the spectators of the film can hear a desperate Malkovich, who is reduced to a mere co-spectator in his own body (because the will of the 15-minute intruder assumes complete power over Malkovich).

While ALL OF ME and BEING JOHN Malkovich are straightforward dramatic imaginings of the mind-body problem, the films do not address skepticist questions about self-knowledge. These are more explicitly addressed in a number of noiresque science fiction films which tackle the issue of personhood of non-human characters. Steven Spielberg’s Kubrick project ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE – A.I. (Spielberg, 2001) is about a little humanoid robot boy called David (Haley Joel Osment) who has real feelings and emotions. He is programmed to feel undying love for his ‘mother’ Monica (Frances O’Connor), who buys him as a substitute for her son, who is put into an artificial coma until a cure can be found for his disease. When the doctors discover such a cure for her real son, Monica abandons David. Yearning to gain his mother’s affection, David, like Carlo Collodi’s Pinocchio, now attempts to become a real human being.

The Philip-K.-Dick adaptation BLADE RUNNER (Scott, 1982) screens a world in which androids do mining work which ‘real’ human beings find too unpleasant. Even though sentient and capable of emotions, the androids are not acknowledged as persons. The film’s different endings raised discussions whether Deckard (Harrison Ford), the headhunter relentlessly chasing renegade androids, is unbeknownst to himself an android as well. BLADE RUNNER THEREBY screens the idea that being a person need not mean being human, and that some persons might be ignorant about not being human. In A.I. the (android) characters know they are persons but yearn for being acknowledged as

350 In this paragraph, I follow Quante and Prechtl 1999.
352 See chapter 2 for Murray Smith’s discussion of the film. See also Shaw 2008: 106 f.
353 Daniel Shaw provides a fine discussion of the philosophical merits of the film in his article “On Being Philosophical and Being John Malkovich” (Shaw 2006).
354 A recent screening of the idea of robots as household mates is the Swedish TV series REAL HUMANS (TV series, 2012).
such; in **BLADE RUNNER**, Deckard’s humanhood is questioned. This is why the latter film can be interpreted as a skepticism film of the self-knowledge variety: The characters (initially) do not know who they are, and the events in the film teach them about their ignorance. But what exactly do such characters supposedly not know? External world skepticism films teach their characters about their unfortunate ontological position – being someone who does not live in a (physically) real environment. Self-knowledge skepticism films teach their characters who, or in what position, they actually are contrary to what they believed before. They apply an internal perspective instead of an external one.

Contemporary examples abound: In **TOTAL RECALL** (Verhoeven, 1990; Wiseman, 2012), the protagonist is forced to find out whether he is just a construction worker being chased as an alleged spy by the government, or whether he actually is a double agent who erased his previous identity from his memory. In **THE BOURNE IDENTITY** (Liman, 2002), an amnesiac man who washes up in the ocean gradually discovers that he was part of an elite super-soldier government program; in **CYPHER** (Natali, 2002), a spy brainwashes himself into believing that he is just an ordinary salesman, because this is the only way in which he can infiltrate a sinister security organization which stores a dataset with compromising information about the woman he loves. Finally, **IDENTITY** (Mangold, 2003) tells the story of a man with multiple personality disorder, whose seven personalities fight to the death among themselves. All these films follow the same pattern: The main character initially is ignorant about his real identity and gradually discovers who he really is.

Another variant of self-knowledge skepticism films revolves around characters who encounter a gulf between the world as they believe it is and the world as it is. In “post-mortem cinema” (Elsaesser 2009, my translation), for instance, the protagonists are initially ignorant about the fact that they are actually already dead, or hallucinating in a near-death state. Examples: **THE SIXTH SENSE** (Shyamalan, 1999), **THE OTHERS** (Amenábar, 2001), **GHOST** (Zucker, 1990), **JACOB’S LADDER** (Lyne, 1990), **WAKING LIFE** (Linklater, 2001), or **SOURCE CODE** (Jones, 2011). In **INCEPTION** (Nolan, 2010), **ABRE LOS OJOS** (Amenábar, 1997), or **VANILLA SKY** (Crowe, 2001), the characters discover that they are dreaming at least significant portions of their entire life and that they are not interacting with real persons but only dream projections of persons in a non-shared world. In other variants, the protagonists are hallucinating rather than dreaming, such as in **DAS CABINET DES DR CALIGARI** (Wiene, 1920), **SHUTTER ISLAND** (Scorsese, 2010), **MULHOLLAND DRIVE** (Lynch, 2001), or **INLAND EMPIRE** (Lynch, 2006).

Again, these films address questions of self-knowledge because the source of deception is no external deceiving force, no *genius malignus*, but the deceived person herself. The characters are searching for their position in the world. The two-world ontology of these films slightly differs from external world skepticism films: There are multiple worlds, but the difference consists between the world as it supposedly is and

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555 See also chapter 6.
556 For **CYPHER** and **IDENTITY**, see also chapter 7.5.2.
557 Jacob’s Ladder in particular is inspired by Ambrose Bierce’s short story “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (Bierce 2003 [1891]).
558 More examples for hallucination films can be found in chapter 7.
the world as imagined up by the character. The most radical films of such films in which characters dream and hallucinate can be termed solipsism films, because they show the “metaphysical solitude” (Gabriel 2008: 22, my translation) of their characters: “Like the solipsistic subject, in dreams we are alone with our dream images, even though apparently we are communicating with others.” (Markus Gabriel 2008: 22, my translation)\footnote{German original text: “Im Traum sind wir wie das solipsistische Subjekt mit unseren Traumbildern allein, obwohl wir scheinbar mit anderen kommunizieren.”}

These, then, are varieties of self-knowledge skepticism films. The next two sections will analyse VANILLA SKY, ABRE LOS OJOS, and INCEPTION as self-knowledge films about the complex relation between dreamers and the dream world they inhabit. As we will see, dream worlds as self-generated forms of simulated or fake worlds have tremendous potential for self-deception (chapter 11.2 and 11.3). Chapter 11.4 will conclude with an analysis of MOON, a film which raises interesting aspects concerning skepticism about personal identity as a specific form of self-knowledge.

11.2 Being One’s Own Evil Deceiver: ABRE LOS OJOS and VANILLA SKY

As seen in chapter 7, skepticism films predominantly work with mentally stable characters. In the context of the present chapter, the Spanish science fiction drama ABRE LOS OJOS and its Hollywood remake VANILLA SKY are the films which perhaps most clearly are based on that premise.\footnote{Tom Cruise bought the remake rights for his production company C/W productions after seeing the ABRE LOS OJOS at the Sundance film festival (see documentary “Prelude to a Dream” on the DVD edition). Hollywood frequently produces remakes of foreign films because US-American mass audiences are reluctant to watch foreign films with non-Hollywood actors. Apart from VANILLA SKY, examples for US-remakes are: INSOMNIA (Christopher Nolan, 2002) with Al Pacino and Robin Williams in leading roles, a remake of the Norwegian film INSOMNIA (Skjoldbjærg, 1997); Martin Scorsese’s THE DEPARTED (Scorsese, 2006) is a remake of the Hong Kong thriller INFERNAL AFFAIRS (Lau and Mak, 2002), THE RING (Verbinski, 2002), is a remake of the Japanese horror film RINGU (Nakata, 1998). This is not a new tendency. THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN (Sturges, 1960), is effectively a remake of Akira Kurosawa’s THE SEVEN SAMURAI (Kurosawa, 1954), set in the Wild West instead of 16th-century Japan. Sometimes, both versions are directed by the same director. For instance, Michael Haneke directed both FUNNY GAMES versions (1997/2007).}

Both films tell the story of a young rich womanizer (César [Eduardo Noriega] in ABRE LOS OJOS, David Aames [Tom Cruise] in VANILLA SKY) whose face is disfigured after a suicidal car accident caused by one of his former lovers. Shortly before the accident, he falls in love with Sofia (Penélope Cruz), a beautiful woman who accompanied his best friend Pelayo (Fele Martínez)/Brian (Jason Lee) to César’s/David’s birthday party. Since the doctors are unable to reconstruct his face, César/David starts leading a reclusive life. But he still misses Sofia and convinces her to meet her again. Accompanied by Pelayo/Brian, Sofia meets César/David in a nightclub, but the evening goes awry. Drunk and devastated about his disfigurement and estrangement from his friends, César/David passes out outside of the nightclub. When he awakes the next morning, Sofia is sitting next to him and tells him that she loves him. Shortly thereafter, his doctors find a way to restore his face. All of a sudden, César/David’s life seems to be on track again, but this new happy life gradually starts falling apart. César/David is plagued by nightmares in which he is disfigured again, and one morning it is not Sofia who is lying next to him, but Nuria (Najwa Nimri)/Julie Gianni (Cameron Diaz), the woman who caused the suicidal car accident, and who he
believed to be dead. Convinced that she has taken Sofia’s life hostage, César/David abuses Julie/Nuria, who claims to be the Sofia, and later even strangles her in the heat of the moment when she transforms from Julie/Nuria into Sofia and back. In a bar, where César/David ponders the strange events, a stranger approaches him, telling him that his entire new life is a lucid dream, a dream created by César/David himself, a dream which he can control by mindwill.

Faced with murder charges, César/David is put in a psychiatric prison ward, where the prison psychiatrist Antonio (Chete Lera)/Colin McCabe (Kurt Russell) tries to figure out what actually happened (compare fig. 11.1 and 11.2). The conversations between César/David and his psychiatrist are rendered through a flashback structure: In an intra-diegetic frame story, César/David tells the story of his life to Antonio/Colin which frequently intercuts the pre-/post-lucid-dream plot lines. He eventually remembers that he went to a company which provides a ‘Life Extension’ service. The frame story now transforms into the main plot line (sequence V in both films): César/David convinces Antonio/Colin to accompany him to the company’s offices. There, one of the ‘Life Extension’ managers explains the nature and purpose of the life extension program: The customers are put in cryostasis, i.e. their bodies are suspended in a coma-like state at extremely low temperatures, until their disease can be cured at some point in the future. While in cryostasis, the customers are mentally immersed in a
lucid dream program in which they experience their life according to their own design. Their memory is erased to such an extent that they cannot remember dying and having joined the ‘Life Extension’ program.

Horrified by the revelation, César/David runs away and eventually ends up on the roof of the office building. There, César/David encounters the man in the bar again, the “tech support” of the lucid dream. According to him, César/David spent the last 150 years in a lucid dream and never saw Sofia and Pelayo/Brian again after the evening at the nightclub. César/David is now faced with a choice: Either he continues living his lucid dream, which is – for better or worse – entirely controlled by his own desires and mindwill, or he can be woken up and continue his life in the future. César/David chooses life in the future and jumps from the roof. Both films show César/David falling down, but they do not show the impact. The last shot is a black/white screen while a female voice gently repeats the sentence “open your eyes” (see fig. 11.3 and 11.4).

The films tell the story of a man faced with the possibility that he is only a solipsistic solitaire, a prisoner of a world of dreams which has been designed according to his desires to reconcile with the woman he loved and the best friend he has lost. So, if one subscribes to the solipsistic solitaire interpretation, both films are self-knowledge skepticism films.

Structurally and thematically, both films follow similar trajectories, even though the big-budget production VANILLA SKY is much more tailored to the taste of a mainstream audience. The setting is different (Manhattan instead of Madrid), and most of the Spanish actors have been exchanged for well-known Hollywood stars – except for Penélope Cruz, who plays Sofia in both films. While César’s deceased father is the owner of a successful restaurant empire, David Aames’ father is the founder of a large media corporation and thus an alignment to the overarching theme of mediated realities. VANILLA SKY also marks transitions between its various plot blocks more explicitly (see below) and adds scenes that provide additional information about David’s biography and his troubled relation to “The Seven Dwarfs,” the company’s board of directors which controls the minority stakes of David’s company (scenes 6 and 22).

This is an example for the ‘pop-cultural approach’ taken by director Cameron Crowe, a former music journalist. VANILLA SKY contains a plethora of audiovisual pop-cultural references which sometimes directly refer to the film’s overarching “reality vs. dream life” theme. In the Brothers Grimm’s fairy tale version the Seven Dwarfs stand guard at Snow White’s “transparent coffin made of glass” (Grimm 2010: 266, my translation), believing her to be death while she actually is only in a coma after biting into the red apple. In contrast, the ‘seven dwarfs’ in VANILLA SKY are David Aames’ corporate adversaries, but their name is a premonition of David Aames’ future, semi-comatose, cryostatic future (see scene 7).

VANILLA SKY’s pop-cultural references sustain the impression that David Aames is actually living in a double dream world tailored to his tastes and desires: There is the lucid dream world he experiences during cryostasis, but there also is the ‘real’ world in which he, knowingly or not, controls the lives of the persons around him. As Sofia tells

361 Both films resemble yet another Philip K. Dick novel: In Ubik (Dick 1991 [1959]), the main characters struggle to discover whether they are actually alive or kept in a cryogenic “half-life,” semi-unconscious state.
him after the party scene, “it must be difficult controlling all those people’s lives. Everyone at that party is connected to you for survival.” (scene 12, timecode 00:28:30).

References to other films abound: Apart from the manifest presence of film posters in David Aames’ apartment (fig. 11.9), VANILLA SKY includes or re-enacts scenes from films such as SABRINA (Wilder, 1954) and TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD (Mulligan, 1962) (fig. 11.10 and 11.6) in the setting. The most prominent manifestation of pop-culture in VANILLA SKY is the soundtrack. Non-diegetic and diegetic songs from bands and musicians like Radiohead, R.E.M., Sigur Rós, Paul McCartney, John Coltrane, The Beach Boys, Bob Dylan, or The Rolling Stones are omnipresent. Even though the songs do not assume explicit narrative functions, they shape the mood and ‘feel’ of the film as taking place within a dream world which has been built out of the dreamer’s pop-culturally shaped imagination.

This is precisely how the concluding scenes of VANILLA SKY explain the narrative and aesthetic function of the pop-cultural references (scene 40 and 41). In the elevator to the rooftop, the tech support person explains that in David’s lucid dream,

“all of this, everything, is your creation. […] We erased everything that really happened from your memory. Replaced by a better life, under these beautiful, Monet-like skies.’

David: “My mother’s favourite.” Tech support: ‘A better life because you had Sofia. You sculpted your lucid dream out of the iconography of your youth. An album cover that once moved you […] A movie you once saw once that showed you what a father could be like… or what love could be like” (scene 40, timecode 01:50:45-01:52:45)

As the tech support speaks, the film intercuts his claims with images from previous film scenes and excerpts from other films: The album cover that moved David is from Bob Dylan’s The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan (compare fig. 11.7 and 11.8), the movie that shows David what a father could be like is the Harper Lee adaptation TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD with Gregory Peck, and the film that showed him what love could be like is François Truffaut’s JULES ET JIM (Truffaut, 1962), which features prominently as a blueprint for the love scenes and as a film poster in David’s bedroom (scene 29; scenes 3 and 8; see fig. 11.9).

Crowe’s pop-culturalism instantiates the ‘postmodernist’ pastiche approach of contemporary Hollywood cinema. Crowe’s voice-over commentary in the special features documentary PRELUDE TO A DREAM of the DVD edition clearly states that he consciously tried to make the film accessible on several levels:

“The goal was a movie filled with clues and signposts, like the cover of Sgt. Pepper [a Beatles album, PS]. Every time you looked at it you might see something different. […] Vanilla Sky isn’t obvious. It’s a movie to be watched closely. But it’s also a movie you can let wash over you. It’s a story, a puzzle, a nightmare, a lucid dream, a psychedelic pop song, a movie to argue over. And most of all, a movie that extends an invitation. Wherever you want to meet it, it will meet you there”

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362 Both films extensively rely on masks, not only as a literal veil over César/David’s disfigured face, but also as an allusion to the janus-face of the world the protagonist has created for himself (see fig. 11.14 and 11.15).

363 TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD is frequently shown in the background during the scenes between David and Curtis McCabe as an explicit reference that McCabe is a projection of a father figure for David. See fig. 11.1 and 11.2.
This expresses the working mechanisms of Hollywood: Even complex narratives are structured and designed in such a way that even the intellectually inattentive portion of the film audience can enjoy the film. As in the MATRIX films and THE TRUMAN SHOW, the intellectual/philosophical value of a mainstream film is not supposed to come at the cost of excessive complexity.

Both films take up similar themes and motifs for honing in on the “real life vs. virtual life” theme without marking these different ontological realms too obviously. Even though both films eventually offer an explicit ‘official’ interpretation of the film’s events, their narrato-aesthetic design leaves room for interpretation. Similar to the explanations offered in MATRIX by Morpheus, and by the Architect in MATRIX RELOADED (see...
chapter 10.3), the tech support revelations need not be taken at face value by the audience; they can be understood as one of various possible interpretations. ABRE LOS OJOS and VANILLA SKY mix two chronologically ordered plot lines which are cross-cut with each other: a frame story (César talking with his therapist in prison), and memory flashback scenes with César/David’s attempts to come to terms with his own life story.

Because of the way in which the films are edited, the audience is not immediately aware that the films in principle proceed chronologically. This forces the audience to puzzle together the succession of events, and it mirrors the main character’s own mental process. VANILLA SKY much more explicitly than ABRE LOS OJOS marks the psychiatric ward dialogue scenes as intra-diegetic frame story by using non-diegetic voice-overs. The dialogues between César/David and Antonio/Colin constantly begin or end before and after they are seen on-screen. They either lead from a flashback scene to the frame story, or from the latter to a flashback scene (see transition from scene 6 to 7; and transition from scene 34 to 35).

If all the scenes prior to David’s arrival at the psychiatric ward are actually memory flashbacks, then César/David is the narrator of his own life, and the reliability of the screened events depends on the reliability of César/David as a narrator. The flashback structure eventually comes to an end in the last two scenes of the films which take place at the Life Extension offices (scene 37 in both films, see also fig. 11.12 and 11.13).

Again, such narrative structures correspond to Hollywood’s principle of closure, which demands the resolution of the story that has been told. Simultaneously, however, the ambiguity of both films (concerning the reliability of César/David as a narrator) is another instantiation of cinema’s ability to offer its spectators more than one way of understanding the screened story, even though it offers an official, straightforward one. While novels also frequently use non-linear and unreliable narration as a narrative tool, film scenes which are explicitly marked as subjective narrations by a (diegetic or non-diegetic narrator) also can undermine one possible interpretation via their audio-visual design, or by cross-cutting between story lines which supplement or contradict each other.

Audiovisual ontological markers offer (ambiguous) clues to an audience, as addressed in the preceding chapter. Like the external world skepticism films, VANILLA SKY and ABRE LOS OJOS employ different colour tonalities. The film title VANILLA SKY alludes to the film’s virtual reality setting, since “vanilla sky” is a term which refers to impressionist unnatural sky colours in Claude Monet paintings (see scene 40). When César/David wakes up after the night at the night club, both films include a low-angle shot of Sofia in front of, literally, a ‘vanilla sky’ (see fig. 11.16 and 11.17, scene 26 [VS], 364

In the audio commentary, Crowe claims that there are “four specific ways” of interpreting VANILLA SKY: “One of them is ‘listen to Edmund Ventura. He is telling the truth’ […] A popular [interpretation] was that the movie occurs in the coma after the accident. […] Another one is spurred by the sticker that’s on the Mustang and the voice of Sofia at the beginning. That points to the fact that the whole thing could be a dream. […] Then there’s my secret one […]: The whole movie could be Jason Lee’s novel written about his friend, who got all the good girls until a crucial event that allowed his friend to realise his own mortality.” (timecode 01:53:30-02:05:50). Crowe himself states that he is closest to the straight-on interpretation that the tech support person is telling the truth.

These voice-overs have the character of what Michel Chion calls “iconogenic voice” – “[a] voice that seems to conjure up the images that then ‘illustrate’” (with greater or lesser fidelity—even contradicting) the words spoken.” (Chion 2009: 478)
scene 23 [AlO]) The vanilla sky is also clearly visible in the final scene (see fig. 11.18 and 11.19)

**Fig. 11.16: VANILLA SKY**

**Fig. 11.17: ABRE LOS OJOS**

**Fig. 11.18: VANILLA SKY**

**Fig. 11.19: ABRE LOS OJOS**

This effect is more clearly visible in Crowe’s film. Since in scene 26 this colour tonality appears for the first time in the film (prepared by the lighting of dream scene 17), it is an ontological marker: It marks the beginning of the lucid dream plot line. VANILLA SKY plays with the dream vs. reality theme in other scenes: For instance, a shot of a surveillance screen during the surgery contains coded messages such as “Do not wake him up” for the “procedural overlay,” and “sweet dreams” (see fig. 11.20, scene 27). Ontological markers are a reminder that philosophically ambitious films can either synchronise any number of their multimodal means of expression – or use them as vehicles for introducing ambivalence. The narrato-aesthetic design of both films here supports the ‘official’ interpretation but simultaneously leaves room for divergent ones.

**Fig. 11.20: VANILLA SKY**

I agree with Daniel Shaw, pace Murray Smith, that the philosophical quality of a film does not necessarily depend on its ability to present a clear-cut, non-ambiguous
‘position’ or interpretation of the events of the film. Shaw claims that the “fact that a movie raises more questions than it answers is, to my mind, a point in its favour, both philosophically and aesthetically (especially given the demand for closure in traditional Hollywood films).” (Shaw 2008: 108). For Shaw, an ambiguous film resists attempts to understanding it as a mere illustration of philosophical theories. Hence, ambivalence is a sign of resistance against oversimplification, i.e., against oversimplifying the film as well as against oversimplifying the philosophical themes in question. Indeed, I would claim, the philosophical ‘value’ of both films derives from the degree of ambiguity they allow for, the presence of an ‘official’ interpretation notwithstanding.

ABRE LOS OJOS and VANILLA SKY differ from external world skepticism films since here the protagonist is his own source of deception. Until the end of the film, César/David does not know that he is living a dream life he created for himself. While the diegetic universe of external world skepticism films by and large is controlled by an external deceiving power, the main character of VANILLA SKY and ABRE LOS OJOS could exert mind control over every aspect of his dream world. It is his own subconscious which turns the lucid dream into a nightmare; he secretly desires to finish the dream and continue a life in the ‘real’ world of the future. This desire, and the feeling of guilt of actually having lost Sofia, causes so many ‘glitches’ in his lucid dream that he ultimately discovers the truth, and is granted the option of re-starting his life. By living in a dream world, César/David has learnt enough about himself to know that he prefers continuing his life in the ‘real’ world, even though it is a life without his ‘imago’ of Sofia. César/David is no Cypher: He prefers to swallow the red pill, after having lived in both worlds.

11.3 Shared Dreams and Illusions: INCEPTION

Christopher Nolan’s heist thriller INCEPTION (Nolan, 2010) varies the dream vs. reality theme. It is based on the idea of shared dream worlds instead of solipsistic ones which nevertheless can become indistinguishable from reality as well. In INCEPTION, the main characters, with exceptions, know exactly what they are doing when they enter the shared dream world. In external world skepticism films, the protagonist is a victim of deception; in INCEPTION, Dom Cobb (Leonardo Di Caprio) is a criminal mastermind who constructs shared dream worlds before entering them.

INCEPTION is a noiresque yet futuristic heist thriller with futuristic elements: Relying on an elaborated technology, the industrial spy Dom Cobb and his team infiltrate the dreams of their victims in order to extract valuable secrets and ideas. According to the film’s logic, the targeted subject will create something like a vault or a safe where it hides these ideas, which can then be accessed by the infiltrators. When an assignment goes wrong, the Industrial magnate Saito (Ken Watanabe) forces Cobb to accept a highly dangerous mission: Cobb is supposed to plant rather than extract an idea in the mind of his main competitor Robert Fischer (Cillian Murphy). Saito wants Fischer, the heir of a powerful energy corporation, to split up the company, which would reduce its influence on the market. In return, Cobb, who is wanted in the United States for allegedly killing his wife Mal (Marion Cotillard), will be able to return home and see his children again.
Cobb assembles a team: Eames (Tom Hardy), who develops the narrative of the dream levels and later incorporates a mental projection of Fischer’s closest person of trust in the dream-share; the talented dream architect Ariadne (Ellen Page), who designs three different dream levels which are necessary for implanting the idea in Fischer’s mind; the chemist Yusuf (Dileep Rao), who develops a sedative which is strong enough to support access to multiple dream levels; and Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), who coordinates the work of the other team members. Saito, who finances the mission, insists on participating in the dream share as well.\(^{366}\)

Using multiple dream levels, however, is dangerous; the deeper the dream level, the more instable it becomes, and experienced time there increases about ten to twenty times with each level. The deepest dream level of the unconscious is called “limbo”. For the dreamer, the time spent in limbo corresponds to a lifetime (even though in reality it only lasts for a couple of hours), and the dreamer eventually loses the ability to determine whether he is dreaming or not.\(^{367}\) The dream-sharers can only wake up when the effect of the sedative wears off, when they die within the dream, or when they are woken up by a “kick,” such as dropping from a building or being tossed into a water basin.

Cobb’s team approaches Fischer during a plane flight from Sydney to Los Angeles. As well-prepared as the heist is, the mission quickly is on the brink of failure: Unbeknownst to Cobb’s team, Fischer has been trained against dream infiltration. In the dream-share, the infiltrators now must defend themselves against Fischer’s ‘dream security’ personnel while keeping Fischer ignorant about the fact that he is dreaming. Since the dreamers are heavily sedated, they cannot wake up prematurely without risking falling into limbo, where they would be experientially stuck in the dream world for decades.

On each dream level, Fischer is supposed to be drawn to a specific idea:

“Eames: On the top level, we open up his relationship with his father... Say: ‘I will not follow in my father’s footsteps.’ Next level down we’ve accessed his ambition and self-esteem. We feed him: ‘I will create something myself’. Then, the bottom level, we bring out the emotional big guns... Cobb: ‘My father doesn’t want me to be him.’” (Nolan

The mission is further sabotaged by Cobb’s dream projection of his wife Mal. As it turns out, Cobb and Mal were once stuck in limbo, where they spent a lifetime together before waking up again. Because Mal lost track of reality in limbo, Cobb planted the idea in her mind that the world is not real, an idea she was unable to shake even in the real world. Convinced she would wake up in the real world, Mal eventually committed suicide. Traumatised and guilt-ridden by Mal’s suicide, Cobb spent more and more time in dream worlds with a mental projection of Mal, which now invades and sabotages Cobb’s dream missions, trying to convince him to follow her to the real world. Despite

\(^{366}\) This character constellation resembles a film production crew, with Fischer as the audience of the production. While Nolan recognises the analogy, he claims that he initially was not aware of it (see Nolan 2010: 19).

\(^{367}\) INCEPTION works with the assumption that the mind works faster in a dream. An hour in reality corresponds to several hours of experienced time in the dream – “twenty times the normal” (Nolan 2010: 103) in the Fischer inception heist, and “when you go into a dream within that dream, the effect is compounded” (Nolan 2010: 103). In the Fischer heist, the ten hours spent on the plane correspond to about one week in the first dream level, six months in the second dream level, and ten years on the third dream level.
the obstacles encountered, Cobb and his team ultimately accomplish their mission. After passing through the control points at LAX airport, Cobb returns home to his children.

_INCEPTION_relies on the assumption that dreams can become shared realities of their own. In the “dream-share” (Nolan 2010: 10), the dreamers participate in a form of online role-player game. In that way the film specifically addresses the issue of distinguishing dream reality from waking life reality. The search for distinguishing criteria is a significant element of the narrative: Before entering dream architectures for the first time, each dreamer of Cobb’s team is supposed to manufacture a totem whose characteristics remain known to its owner alone. Thus, by checking the totem, the dreamer is supposed to know whether s/he is dreaming right now or not. But this reassurance in turn depends on the assumption that, in the first place, the dreamer manufactures his or her totem in the real world.

Cobb’s totem, which originally belonged to Mal, is a spinning top which continues spinning endlessly in dream-shares. Nolan uses it for the ambiguous final scene of the film: When Cobb returns home, he spins the top on the living room table before he joyfully reunites with his children. While Cobb is rejoicing off-screen, the camera tracks in to the continuously spinning wheel and then dissolves into a black screen (fig. 11.21). The spectator is left with a choice: Will the top continue spinning – indicating that Cobb is still in the dream – or will it eventually topple – indicating that Cobb is back to reality?

Instead of focusing on such a simple yes/no question, Christopher Nolan proposes a more nuanced interpretation of the final scene. In an interview with _Wired_, he states: “Sometimes I think people lose the importance of the way the thing is staged with the spinning top at the end. Because the most important emotional thing is that Cobb’s not looking at it. He doesn’t care.” (Capps 2010)
Cobb’s emotional decision to not care anymore whether he is living in a shared dream or not is a form of self-knowing acknowledgement: Even though there is a token which can be used as external experiential criterion for distinguishing reality from shared dream worlds, Cobb does not want to know. He acknowledges his desire for seeing his children again, and thereby values that desire over the fundamentalist urge that only a life lived in the domain of the real is the right life. Like Cypher in MATRIX, Cobb prefers the taste of steak to the real thing; in the end he would choose the blue pill instead of the red pill.  

The film carefully prepares Cobb’s decision to remain ignorant: Even though Cobb and Mal have spent a long time together in limbo, and even though Mal eventually decides that even life in reality is only a dream, Cobb realises that life in limbo is a life – that the life Cobb and Mal lived there lasted a life-time, and that it was – to paraphrase the Hannah Gill character in THE TRUMAN SHOW – “a lifestyle” and a “truly blessed life” because it was a life two lovers shared with each other. The material basis of this shared experience becomes insignificant, because it is experienced time that matters. This decision is facilitated because, unlike the non-real worlds of THE TRUMAN SHOW or MATRIX, life in INCEPTION’s limbo is not subject to external control. It is a dream world which is entirely created and shaped by the dream-sharers on that level of dream consciousness.

One can also question the reliability of the totem because it relies on the pre-assumption that the level of its creation is the outermost layer of reality. The film subtly suggests that a totem can be manipulated within the dream-share: Cobb urges Ariadne to not reveal the specific characteristics of her totem to anyone, but in one scene Cobb reveals the spinning top to her (scene 21, fig. 11.22), which in principle gives Ariadne the opportunity to create another dream level for Cobb from which he cannot wake up, but within which he is happy.

Interestingly, Nolan explicitly contrasts INCEPTION with the virtual reality of the first MATRIX film. While the latter “question[s] an actual reality,” Nolan claims that

“Inception […] is about a more everyday experience with dreaming. It’s about a more relatable human experience. It doesn’t question an actual reality. […] It becomes an alternate reality simply because the dream becomes a form of communication – just like using a telephone or going online.” (Nolan 2010: 9)

Indeed, INCEPTION does not „question an actual reality” – it is a film about the creation of additional, alternative shared realities and about a protagonist who obviously struggles with the fact that these alternative realities can appear just as real as the supposedly real world.

Nolan’s straightforward assessment corresponds to the film’s narrative structure: While the plot premise is very complex, and the film at certain points alternates between as much as five parallel plot lines (from limbo to the real world), INCEPTION is a linear

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368 Henry Taylor proposes a similar, yet more political interpretation of INCEPTION: “By this token Inception […] is at heart about meaningful human relationships and social commitment in a world of global corporations locked in economic warfare and resorting to conquer the ultimate frontier, the human mind. This is the next phase, in Marxian terms, of the real subsumption of labor: once the entire world has been horizontally conquered by capitalism as the prevailing mode of production, it shifts to the vertical axis of deep penetration to procure and produce the most valuable information: thoughts and emotions. Simultaneously, the desire for human bonding is the stronger the deeper we penetrate into dreamland, where dream means both what occurs during sleep and what is profoundly desired.” (Taylor 2012)
narrative, not counting the flashbacks. Unlike Nolan’s other highly complex film MEMENTO (Nolan, 2000), whose plot deliberately alternates between a chronological and reverse plot line, INCEPTION constructs a kind of extended parallel montage, each plot line being located on one reality level running parallel to and interact with each other.

As David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson claim, the different plot lines are “subplots, each with its own goals, obstacles, and deadline. Moreover, all the deadlines have to synchronize.” (Bordwell and Thompson 2010) For instance, on the first dream level Yusuf is driving his sleeping crew through the city of his dream level in a van, chased by Fischer’s dream security team. Yusuf needs to drive the van off a bridge and start playing Edith Piaf’s song “Je ne regrette rien” at a pre-determined moment. The fall and impact of the van unleashes a “kick,” which will jolt him and the rest of the crew out of their dream state (scene 36). Simultaneously, two dream levels deeper, Cobb’s crew tries to bring Fischer to a medical facility in the middle of a snow-ridden environment where he is supposed to talk with the dream projection of his father and finally form the idea to split up his company (scenes 38, 39, 44). Bordwell argues that this “modular plotting” (Bordwell and Thompson 2010) only works because the complex interrelation between the five reality levels is facilitated by the rather simple and goal-oriented structure of each subplot. Like in the other films analysed so far, the reality levels can also be distinguished easily by the setting and audio-visual presentation: The environments are different, the colour tonalities differ, and the characters are dressed differently (see fig. 11.23 to 11.26).

Piaf’s song clearly marks the interrelation between the five reality levels as well as their different temporal progression: While the song plays at standard tempo on Yusuf’s level, on the deeper levels, in which time progresses more slowly, the characters and the audience hear it in a correspondingly slower tempo. Abrupt movements on higher dream levels also correlate the subplots: When the van tips over during a chase scene, the crew on the deeper levels can feel the impact in their environment as well.

What, after all, makes INCEPTION philosophically interesting? For one, the basic idea of a shared dream, presented as an independent life world. It is also interesting that INCEPTION, like the other films discussed before, orchestrates the interplay of different reality and dream levels via the actors’ performances, different cinematographic and aural strategies, and well-planned editorial decisions. This seems to be a common trait of skepticism films which grows out of the expressive potentiae of the medium: As a performative, time-bound medium, film can experiment with spatio-temporal processes – something with purely scriptural philosophical reflections cannot do to that extent (see chapters 1 and 2).

11.4 Multiple Personalities and Virtual Identities: MOON
Because the self-knowledge skepticism films VANILLA SKY, ABRE LOS OJOS and INCEPTION immerse their characters in (virtual) dream worlds, they have an ontologically close relation to external world skepticism films. I now want to conclude chapter 11 by looking at MOON, a film which very directly explores the epistemological criteria of personal identity by using a scenario in which the main character is deceived
about who he is by an external force. In Duncan Jones’ film a solitary astronaut working on the moon discovers that he is a clone with a limited life-span of three years who is replaced after his death. The film extensively dwells on the encounters between two of the clones, Sam-6 and Sam-5 (played by Sam Rockwell), who behave in slightly different ways, even though their DNA is identical. Both Sams therefore must come to terms with the realisation that “I is an Other,” and that “an Other is Me.” Secondly, the clones in the film realise that, literally, their biographical memories are misleading: Each Sam remembers having a wife and a daughter who was born shortly before he left for the job appointment on the lunar station. They feel real affection towards their ‘family,’ but actually only the first Sam Bell, whose DNA provides the basis for the future clones, can be said to be the real father and husband.

Plot summary: Sam Bell (Sam Rockwell) is an astronaut working as the sole employee of a lunar station which harvests helium-3, a clean raw material which has solved the earth’s energy problems. Bell’s employer Lunar Industries mans the lunar station with only one employee, who spends three years on the moon before they allegedly send him home and replace him. The end of Bell’s three-year stint being only two weeks away, he is in poor health and yearns for seeing his wife and daughter again, who was born shortly before Sam left for the moon. Direct communication between moon and earth is not possible due to malfunctioning satellite-uplinks, and his only connections to the earth are pre-recorded transmissions. An intelligent, speaking computer system named GERTY (spoken by Kevin Spacey), an obvious offspring of Stanley Kubrick’s and Arthur C. Clarke’s HAL, assists Sam in maintaining the station (see fig. 11.27 and 11.28). GERTY, who seems very concerned about Sam’s well-being, is also Sam’s only direct communication partner.

 Plot summary

Fig. 11.27: MOON

Fig. 11.28: MOON

Fig. 11.29: MOON

Fig. 11.30: MOON

369 Jones claims the story credits. The screen play was written by Nathan Parker. MOON was produced with a low budget of 5 mio. US-$ The Italian filmmaker Patrick Rizzi accuses Jones of plagiarising his film EUTAMNESIA, which he had directed in 1999 and put to limited direct-to-video release (see repubblica.it 2013).

370 “I is an Other” is an expression coined by Arthur Rimbaud and used by the linguist James Geary as the title of his book I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World (Geary 2011).
When Sam leaves the station for repairing a malfunctioning harvester, he is knocked unconscious in an accident. Shortly thereafter, he wakes up again in the station, feeling very weak (see scene 6). GERTY treats him back to health and submits him to a number of cognitive tests. Since one of the harvesters is still inoperative on the moon surface, he wants to leave the station again and investigate the malfunction. However, the home basis orders him to stay inside the station. Bell disobey the order and investigates the accident site. To his surprise, he finds another astronaut, knocked unconscious, in the harvester. This astronaut looks exactly like him, albeit in very poor health, and when he regains consciousness, he claims to be Sam Bell (compare fig. 11.29 and 11.30). After further research, both Sams (later in the film termed Sam-6 and Sam-5) discover a secret chamber, which is stacked with other sleeping Sam clones. They finally discover that the station is run by clones with a three-year life-span, who are replaced with a next-generation clone when they die. The newest Sam is the sixth clone, which indicates that the station has been clone-operated for 15 years.  

Both Sams now plan their escape from the lunar surface. Sam-6 and GERTY activate a third clown who is supposed to replace Sam-5 in the harvester. Sam-5 is supposed to go back to earth in one of the capsules which are sent to earth regularly; Sam-6 intends to stay on the moon base. However, Sam-5 feels too weak for flying back and convinces Sam-6 to take his place. Eventually, Sam-5 dies, and Sam-6 enters the capsule shortly before a ‘rescue team’ enters the lunar station in order to remove all proofs of the company’s illegitimate activities.

Like Neo, Douglas Hall and Truman Burbank, but unlike Dom Cobb, Sam Bell is a victim of external deception, induced by Lunar Industries: At the beginning of MOON, he is ignorant of being one of a number of genetically identical clones, and he is ignorant about the fact that his past life as he remembers it is only an illusion, a memory of the original Sam Bell which is somehow transplanted into the clones’ minds. Bell is thus the victim of a double narcissistic mortification: He is forced accept that the Other he is confronted with is but another version of himself. But if his personal identity cannot be defined via “continuity of the body” (Quante und Prechtl 1999: 250, my translation) – who exactly is the other man? Sam-6 is not Sam-5, but simultaneously they are both Sam Bell: They have the same longing for returning to Earth and being reunited with their family.

In philosophical terms, MOON explores a synchronised version of the problem of personal identity: The temporal identity of the body is not disrupted diachronically, but synchronically. The second narcissistic mortification results from Bell’s insight of being only a clone with an expiration date, a cloned human being whose deepest emotions are only “memory implants” (timecode 00:50:45), as Gerty eventually reveals to him. This is the most devastating revelation: His family, the emotionally closest part of Bell’s self, is not his family. His wife, who he has only seen via recorded transmissions, is kind of similar to Meryl (Laura Linney) from THE TRUMAN SHOW. (One can assume, however, that the transmissions are original recordings of the conversations between the original

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571 The limited life-span of the clones is a nod to Ridley Scott’s BLADE RUNNER and Philip K. Dick’s short story “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?”
Sam Bell and his wife.) Wife and daughter are therefore definitely not part of their “biographical process of becoming” (Quante und Prechtl 1999: 251, my translation). Sam-5 discovers that there was an original Sam Bell, and Sam-6 manages to make a phone call to his wife’s house on earth; a phone call which is answered by his now 15-year-old ‘daughter’. Thus, the only Sam Bell who can really claim to actually have lived through his memories is the original Bell (who is absent in the film).

What is the connection to skepticism? Sam-5 and Sam-6 are in an epistemological-existential situation which is analogous to the one victims of external world deception are subjected to: They believe to know who they are, but in an ontologically fundamental way they do not know – just like Neo, who erroneously believed to be living in a real world before being ‘unplugged’. But Neo, unlike the two Sams, actually had the life he experienced and shared in the Matrix – it is only a life lived within a virtual world.

Interestingly, MOON is set in another extremely isolated environment. The cloned Bells lead a solitary life on the moon, Sam-5’s only conversation partner is a sentient computer program, his only communicative connections to earth are pre-recorded transmissions – until one day he is faced with another version of himself. This implies that this form of deception of the self would not be possible to such an extent in a shared Lebenswelt.

MOON does not resolve the problem of personal identity with a simple answer. Sam-5 and Sam-6 eventually accept their clonehood and integrate it into their own personality. Even though they are aware that their memories of Eve and Tess are only memory implants, the two women continue to be both men’s centre of affection. Shortly before Sam-5 dies, the two men are talking about how they ‘met’ Eve, and during the conversations Sam-6 freely switch from “You knew you had to take a chance. So you called her. You were terrified and wrote that whole speech for her answer machine” to “but I didn't need it because Tess answered the phone. And I could tell in her voice as we talked, she was thinking... ‘Why has Sam called me?’ (timecode 01:23:17-01:24:01). Both Sams come to terms with the paradoxical situation by acknowledging it without assuming a distanced position towards their feelings and fake memories. In short, they accept that, in their case, there are many “me’s”. In a positive fashion, they acknowledge Agent Smith’s sarcastic attitude that “the good thing about being me is that there’s so many me’s” (MATRIX RELOADED, timecode 01:43:00).372

11.5 Conclusion
To a higher degree than external world skepticism, self-knowledge skepticism films appear ambiguous about their ‘preferred ontological solution’. Still dependent on Hollywood’s closure principle, they certainly offer their audiences a face-value interpretation of what actually happens in the films, but they still leave enough room for interpretations to the contrary.

More importantly, however, they continue a tendency already observed in MATRIX: REVOLUTIONS: The penultimate question to be answered is not anymore whether the

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372 MOON explicitly alludes to another science fiction film about solitary men in space, who fall in love with their mental projections of a woman they once loved: SOLARIS, originally directed by Andrej Tarkovsky (1972), later remade by Steven Soderbergh (2002). For instance, at the beginning of the film, Sam-5 hallucinates a young woman sitting in a chair in a yellow dress (timecode 00:12:12) – just like in SOLARIS.
character, like Truman Burbank, manages to arrive at the most outer layer of reality. In *Inception*, *Vanilla Sky* and *Abre los ojos* the focus shifts to another question: On which kind of reality does the main character feel most at home, or on which level of reality is he most happy? The decision about this question can result in wanting to live in the real world again (*Abre los ojos* and *Vanilla Sky*), but the decision can also render the ontological status of the *Lebenswelt* irrelevant. It seems that the films analysed so far steer away from the simple question “how do I know what’s real?” to a more psychologically motivated question: “where do I feel most real?” – in the sense of “where can I live the life I most aspire to?” From that perspective, the decision to remain in a shared or non-shared dream world does not sound as such a bad decision anymore.

The results of the present chapter correlate the ambivalence of these films to more ‘professional’ philosophical debates about knowledge, reality and personal identity. The most obvious advantage of the cinematic thought experiments which were analysed so far is that they are screened and performed: By being screened (see Wartenberg 2007), they can directly address the double perspective which is always implicit in hypothetic philosophical thought experiments. They allow evaluating the philosophical consequences of a given scenario from an external perspective, and they allow evaluating the consequences of *living* under the conditions imposed by the thought experiment from a pseudo-internal perspective, a perspective which takes into account the experiential character of spectatorship and the performative quality of the film actors’ performances.
„Film […] is made for philosophy; it shifts or puts different 
lights on whatever philosophy has said about appearance 
and reality, about actors and characters, about skepticism 
and dogmatism, about presence and absence.“
Stanley Cavell, “Reflections on a Life of Philosophy. An 
Interview with Stanley Cavell”.
(Cavell 1999: 25)

Coda. From Doubt to Acknowledgement, or: The 
Philosophical Significance of Skepticism Films revisited

We have come full circle now. Starting with the observation that a number of 
contemporary mainstream films address philosophical doubt about our ways of knowing 
the world, this dissertation first formed a general position on the relation between film 
and philosophy: films can, but need not be philosophical. The philosophically most 
rewarding approach is to understand films as potentially autonomous expressions of 
philosophical thought whose philosophical value can be appreciated independently of the 
question whether they express philosophical thought in the same way as traditional, 
linguistic works of (academic) philosophy do. If one wants to implement films in 
philosophical discourse, then Wartenberg’s account of interpretive illustration is one of 
the most rewarding couplings: films can then be understood as cinematic philosophical 
thought experiments, dramatic imaginings of the hypothetical thought experiments and 
ideas of the philosophical tradition which – invoking Cavell and Mulhall – reorient what 
(traditional) philosophy had to say about issues such as skepticism.

The dissertation then approached skepticism in film from two angles: Part II 
investigated the role of skepticist ideas in philosophical reflection on the medium of film, 
prepared by a general overview of skepticist motivation, concepts, ideas and varieties of 
skepticist thought experiments. Part III and IV then explored varieties of skepticism 
films.

The first major influential thinker of skepticism in film under scrutiny was Stanley 
Cavell, whose bold thesis that “film is a moving image of skepticism” (Cavell 1979a: 
1988) turned out to be inspired the “revelationist tradition” (Turvey 2008) of classical 
film theory. André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer were singled out as exemplary forebears 
of Cavell’s film ontology. Cavell’s thesis proves to be correct in relation to analog 
cinema: the medium stages a kind of double of the primordial conundrum of the 
skepticist. Cinema presents a screened, i.e. projected version of the world which, as 
Cavell roughly puts it, satisfies our normal senses as a kind of reality-world which is 
present to our sensorial capacities, but at the same time this reality-world is unavailable 
because inaccessible to us. Film stages a projection of a world, but as film spectators we
cannot interact with this projection, i.e. we cannot influence the course of that world.  
Experiencing a film is structurally analogous to the prototypical situation in skepticist thought experiments.

As a discussion of D.N. Rodowick’s updated version of Cavell’s film ontology showed, digital screen culture reformulates the moving-image-of-skepticism thesis: Digital cinema is a “different expression” (Rodowick 2007a: 175) of skepticism. It turns the focus away from our (indexical) relation to the world and opens up a field of reflection on skepticism about ourselves and other minds. One major reason for this is the fact that digital moving-image culture is a highly interactive culture: Large parts of our current interactions with the world become mediated, and therefore more indirect. Simultaneously, the knowledge that ‘matters’ is increasingly stored in database format, which has the effect that in principle

“[o]ur disappointment in failing ever to know the world or others now becomes the perpetual disappointment of failing to attain the more nearly perfect (future) knowledge of computers and computer communications, whose technological evolution always seems to run ahead of the perceptual and cognitive capacity to manipulate them for our own ends. It is the failure to arrive at what always comes ahead.” (Rodowick 2007a: 176)

In the digital world, more than ever I cannot entirely stay an observer or recipient of the world I happen to be thrown into; I am always already its user and manipulator. In the digital world, I can (but need not) tailor the world according to my desires and tastes – and because of that the skepticist question as it is posed from a Cartesian perspective recedes into the background.

The second major thinker of skepticist ideas in film is Gilles Deleuze, even though he does not advance an explicit epistemological agenda. His thesis that modern cinema can restore belief in the world is, however, deeply rooted in the tradition of Western thought since it, unlike Cavell’s notion of acknowledgement, expresses a “call for salvation” (see Früchtl 2013: 37) from the onto-epistemologically insecure situation of man in the world. The belief restoration thesis is on the one hand a quasi-historical thesis, since it claims that the link between man and world was broken after the atrocities of the two world wars, and on the other hand it is an expression of the existential power of cinema. From a Deleuzian perspective, cinema is a medium that makes present to us the fact that there is a world, but simultaneously it also presents projections of how the world can be. In both ways, it affects us within the confined environment of the screening situation. Cinema’s affective powers restore the link between man and world. Cinema is never mere projection of a random world, it is “a cinema of modes of existence” (Deleuze 1989: 172).

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373 It is in this sense I would claim, that for Cavell the world screened and projected by film cannot bridge the gap between man and world, as classical film theory hoped.
374 Thomas Elsaesser also steers attention to this changing trajectory of onto-epistemology in the contemporary media world: “If the epistemological question in the humanities during the 1970s and 1980s was above all prompted by the negative assumption about the impossibility of secure knowledge and thus was the expression of a radical skepticism, where every ontology and every ‘order of things’ was owed to or based on a historically, ideologically, or technologically determined ‘episteme’; then one might have to reverse Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge and argue that every epistemology, every form of knowledge today, already presupposes mediated reality as ‘evidence’ and as ‘given.’ Conversely, if cinema is our way of being on the way to a new ontology, then of course this would be the best proof that the cinema is also our episteme, in Foucault’s sense, and that the new ontology of the cinema would define our way of knowing and of not knowing the world.” (Elsaesser 2011: 12 fn17)
Patricia Pisters’ concept of the “neuro-image” (Pisters 2012) introduces a continuation of Deleuze’s belief restoration thesis under the conditions of digital cinema, a concept that hones in on contemporary cinema’s potentiæ for exploring and quasi-directly (affectively) presenting the mind-worlds of characters which “grow and spread rhizomatically with other parts of culture” (Pisters 2012: 177). Film is forced to leave the confines of the movie theatre: It becomes part of (and, one can say, it generates) an overarching audiovisual screen culture.

The dissertation concluded with a typology of varieties of skepticism films (external world skepticism films, self-knowledge skepticism films, and other minds skepticism films), and with a selection of case studies which analysed common narrato-aesthetic strategies of cinematically expressing the philosophical implications of skepticist scenarios. One result of these studies was that skepticism films distinctly update and transform skepticist scenarios; they radically tie the perennial skepticist worries to the potential of contemporary technologies for manipulating our impressions of our Lebenswelt. In this context, it is remarkable that most of the distinctly skepticist contemporary films belong to the genre of (fantastic) science fiction: MATRIX, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, THE TRUMAN SHOW, VANILLA SKY, ABRE LOS OJOS, INCEPTION, MOON – all these films under analysis combined a vision of everyday life as it seems to be today with the impact of futuristic means of manipulating our impressions of reality. Only a limited number of film scenarios – in THE SIXTH SENSE, THE OTHERS, THE VILLAGE, or WAKING LIFE – are not deeply tied to such potentially manipulative technology.375

This allows claiming that skepticism films do not only discover audiovisions of perennial philosophical themes; they also invent them.376 And this is one of the ways in which films can contribute philosophical insights. But this innovatory potential of cinema also reveals something about philosophy itself. In her introduction to the philosophy of Cavell, Elisabeth Bronfen expresses the “basic premise” (Grundprämisse) of Cavell’s philosophical approach by addressing the relation between philosophical aesthetics and works of art:

“Philosophy is not the opposite of works of aesthetics. Rather, in the dramas of Shakespeare, in opera, and in Hollywood cinema it leaves distinctive traces which make one feel the continuing effect of philosophy in everyday life. The cultural imaginary reveals how a culture reflects on itself, in the sense of a philosophical self-reflection.” (Bronfen 2009: 11, my translation)377
Philosophy and film, then, form a dialogical community – “cities of words,” as the title of Cavell’s most recent major work on philosophy and film expresses it (Cavell 2004). Like other products of human culture, film and philosophy are in constant exchange with each other, taking up ideas and figures from each other, varying them in their own ways before passing them on again. And, as we have seen throughout the dissertation, films lead their own kind of philosophical dialogue. Even if academic philosophy and film often seem to “pass[...] one another by” (Cavell 2004: 9), as if having nothing to say to each other, they do form a dialogue, as the cultural practice of so many film-philosophers and philosophical filmmakers makes so evident.

This dissertation, then, attempted to show that “film is no mere handmaiden to philosophy” (Mullarkey 2009: xi) and even can develop an own “audiovisual model of philosophical thinking” (Mullarkey 2009: 26) that emphasizes the importance of incorporating the aesthetics of film into the philosophical study of film. Perhaps, as Daniel Shaw claims in a Cavellian fashion, the “marriage of film and philosophy is a match made in heaven.” (Shaw 2008: 23), perhaps it is not. But it cannot be denied, I claim, that philosophers as well as filmmakers can only benefit from thinking together both areas of human culture. What both sides can learn, perhaps, is that

“[p]hilosophy is multilingual. It speaks more than one language and with more than one voice. It moves between the languages of common sense, first-person narrative, expository science, politics, morality, religion and art, to name just a few important examples. It can speak scientistically and poetically, politically and morally, autobiographically and prosaically. And I believe that it needs these languages and ways of thinking in order to balance itself out.” (Früchtl 2008: 71)

“[M]y eyes are shut,” Wittgenstein says about the bottom ground of doubt. One should rather say: As long as I keep acting in the world, my eyes stay shut, since there is left no time for doubt. As an acting person, I step out of the space of absolute doubt, because even a simulated or fake world becomes my world, because it is the world I am interacting with. The world is thus not simply something opposite of an isolated consciousness – the world I live in is co-generated by my actions, my interacting with that world. As long as I am (inter)acting, the world is, at least to a certain extent, real for me.

This perspective transforms the problem of radical skepticism; it is not an entirely epistemological problem anymore. It needs to acknowledge that our existence, our thoughts and actions are embedded in a shared world. And this is why it is so important to look at the way in which skepticism films address the problem of knowing and

sich – im Sinne einer philosophischen Selbstreflexion – nachdenkt.”

Cavell uses the cities of words metaphor in multiple ways. Most straightforwardly, it describes philosophy’s perennial attempts to articulate, with the help of words, the constituents of a moral or good life in a just society or, as Plato’s Socrates would say, the kallipolis. In that sense, philosophy builds cities of words because, out of a “disappointment with the world as it is” (Cavell 2004: 2), it tries to find the right words/concepts for describing the way the world should be – a normative impetus which Cavell terms “moral perfectionism” (Cavell 2004). In a second sense, cities of words are dialogic communities, imaginary cities formed by the thinkers, books, films, and other forms of art which, each in their own way, lead an on-going, open-ended conversation on themes such as knowledge, the just life, happiness and other “registers of the moral life” (Cavell 2004). Indeed, aware of the dialogic character of Cavell’s book and account of moral perfectionism, Maria S. Lotter, the translator of the German edition of Cities of Words, chooses the word Gesprächsgemeinschaften for translating the meaning of Cavell’s title (see Cavell 2010b).
doubting the world: They screen varieties of skepticism, and by doing so they show that, no matter how simulated, fake, or otherwise non-real or non-standard the worlds they screen may be, they are still worlds shared by the protagonists. Some might want to get out of such worlds and swallow the red pill, but they are still worlds. This is Cavell’s lesson of acknowledgement.

What remains to be done on skepticism in/and film? The focus of this dissertation was systematic rather than historical, and it used mainstream cinema as the main body of filmic works. It would be rewarding to explore deeper the ways in which skepticist ideas figured throughout the history of film – not only in Western mainstream cinema, but also in art house cinema, avant-garde film, and in the non-Western national cinemas. Also, as Cavell’s own work on Shakespeare shows (Cavell 2003), skepticist ideas naturally figure in other areas of art, in literature, theatre, photography, video games, painting, plastic arts, and so on. Specifically, the present dissertation did not have the space for exploring in more depth the influence of philosophical-skepticist notions on cyberpunk literature. Also, due to space and time limitations, the dissertation did not explore skepticism of other minds in more depth.

But such an exploration would have to be coupled even more distinctly with what I take to be the main task of future skepticism-inspired research on film and philosophy: to continue the philosophical exploration of the (globalised) digital ontologies which currently profoundly change the ways we live in our life world, the ways in which we experience it and share it with others.
Appendix

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Filmography
Sequence Protocols
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Sequence Protocols
Sequence protocol ABRE LOS OJOS

Director: Alejandro Amenábar. Screenplay: Alejandro Amenábar and Mateo Gil

(I) Exposition: The Death of a Womanizer
00:00:01 Credit sequence on black background

Subsequence 1: Introducing César
00:00:28 (01) Dream scene: César wakes up to the waking call “abre los ojos”
00:01:34 (02) Dream scene: César is driving through the deserted streets of Madrid
00:03:07 (03) César wakes up again adjacent to Nuria, this time realising he had a nightmare
00:04:19 (04) César drives through the crowded streets of Madrid
00:05:49 (05) César picks up Pelayo, driving with him through town
00:07:14 (06) César and Pelayo are playing squash

Subsequence 2: Meeting Sofia
00:08:08 (07) Frame story: A masked César talks with his psychiatrist Antonio about what he has done
00:11:25 (08) At César’s birthday party he is introduced to Sofia
00:12:20 (09) At the party, César encounters Nuria and rejects her
00:14:29 (10) César and Sofia start talking with other at the party
00:17:15 (11) Pelayo discovers César and Sofia and becomes jealous

Subsequence 3: The Consequences of Spending the Night With Sofia
00:19:57 (12) César accompanies Sofia to her apartment, where they are talking the entire night through. César sees the cryogenics video for the first time
00:25:42 (13) César wants to drive home, but a suddenly appearing Nuria convinces him to drive in her car. On the road, Nuria causes a suicidal car accident

(II) A Womanizer Disfigured

Subsequence 4: Coming to Terms with Disfigurement
00:29:30 (14) Transitional Dream scene: César meets Sofia in a sun-lit park and tells her about a nightmare he had in which he was disfigured by a suicidal car accident (first encounter in the park)
00:31:14 (15) César wakes up from the dream and encounters his disfigured face in the bathroom mirror
00:35:31 (16) Frame story: In the sanatorium Antonio tries to convince César that the doctors have already reconstructed his face
00:32:21 (17) The doctors tell César there is nothing they can do for him at this moment. The chief surgeon hands him a mask
Sequence protocol ABRE LOS OJOS

00:35:35  (18) **Frame story:** Antonio and César continue arguing about César’s face behind the mask. César demands a pen and a sketch notebook

00:37:01  (19) The disfigured César watches a pantomime Sofia from his car. Then he talks to her, trying to get a date with her (*second encounter in the park*)

00:41:52  (20) At home, César gets ready for his date with Sofia and decides to put on the mask

Subsequence 5: A Catastrophic Night

00:43:22  (21) Date with Sofia in a night club. Pelayo is there as well. César puts on aberrant behaviour

00:49:35  (22) César, Sofia and Pelayo are walking home. When Sofia leaves, the two former best friends are talking with each other for a short time before Pelayo leaves as well. César, convinced the other two are a couple now, passes out drunk on the sidewalk

(III) The Nightmare Becomes a Dream

Subsequence 6: A Dream Life

00:53:20  (23) “Abre los ojos”: Sofia wakes César, who is still lying on the sidewalk, in the morning. She confesses her love for him (*the lucid dream begins*)

00:54:48  (24) César and Sofia are walking through the park together (*third encounter in the park*)

00:55:44  (25) **Frame story:** Antonio makes César remember fragments of the Life Extension office. César tells in flashback of the miraculous surgical solution his doctors have found

01:00:17  (26) César shows Sofia that his face has been reconstructed. While they are making love, César claims to only have met her the day before

01:03:44  (27) In voice-over, César remembers moments of his happy relationship with Sofia. For whatever reason, Pelayo is not jealous

Subsequence 7: Glitches in the Lucid Dream

01:05:00  (28) **Dream scene:** In bed with Sofia. In the bathroom, he encounters his disfigured face

01:06:45  (29) César wakes up, finds himself lying adjacent to Nuria. He ties her to the bed and demands her to tell him where Sofia is

01:09:00  (30) César wants to press charges against Nuria, but the police officer claims that Nuria is in fact Sofia

01:11:15  (31) Pelayo attacks César for hurting Nuria-Sofia and claims that César has gone crazy since the accident

01:13:05  (32) In a bar, a Life Extension man approaches César and urges him to take control again of his dream life. He reveals that César is in a lucid dreaming state
(IV) Searching for the Truth

Subsequence 8: Strangling the Dream

01:15:17 (33) Frame story: Hypnotised by Antonio, César remembers talking about cryonization at the Life Extension office and remembers committing suicide (rotoscoped flashback imagery). Talking about dream vs. reality, Antonio asks César whether he remembers what he did to Nuria-Sofia.

01:19:00 (34) In Sofia’s apartment César finds only photographs of Nuria and his sketch, which also depicts Nuria. Nuria-Sofia strikes him down, believing him to be a burglar. When he wakes up again, he phantasises her being Sofia. While they are making love, Sofia turns into Nuria again, arousing him to strangle her.

01:24:29 (35) César flees from the apartment and sees himself disfigured in a mirror.

(V) The Lucid Dream Revealed

Subsequence 9: Discovering Life Extension

01:25:24 (36) Frame story: César is talking with Antonio again.

01:28:07 (37) Frame story: In the sanatorium, César sees the life Extension spot on TV. He urges Antonio to accompany him to the company office.

01:30:46 (38) Frame story: At the Cryogenics office, César is told about the working mechanisms of the Life Extension program and the ensuing memory erasure.

01:36:19 (39) Frame story: Shocked about the revelation, César gives in to Antonio’s repeated requests to remove his mask. Believing that he still is disfigured, César attempts to escape from the building, shooting several officers.

Subsequence 10: Living the Dream or Living in the Future

01:40:25 (40) Frame story: After the shootout, César and Antonio are suddenly alone in front of the building. Having noticed someone, César rushes to the roof of the skyscraper. There, the nameless Cryogenics representative reveals to him that he has been dead for over 150 years. César is faced with the choice of either continuing his lucid dream or to start a life in the future by committing suicide in the dream. After saying goodbye to Sofia one last time, he jumps from the building. Over a black screen, we hear the wake-up call “abre los ojos”.

01:52:20 (40) End Credits

01:54:06 End of film
Sequence protocol INCEPTION

Director: Christopher Nolan. Screenplay: Christopher Nolan


00:00:01 Warner Bros. and Legendary Pictures logo in black-and-white

(I) Exposition

Sequence 1: Conning Saito

00:00:40 (01) Limbo: Cobb washes up on a shore and has dinner with an old Saito
00:02:50 (02) Dream scene: Dinner with young Saito: An idea is the most resilient parasite
00:04:25 (03) Dream scene: Apartment in an Arab city: Cobb, Arthur and Saito dreaming
00:05:01 (04) Dream scene: In Saito’s dream house, Cobb tries to steal Saito’s secret but is sabotaged by Mal (from 00:09:10: Parallel montage between dream house and Arab apartment)
00:11:47 (05) Dream scene: Saito discovers the second dream level but is impressed (from 00:12:33: parallel montage between apartment and train)
00:15:20 (06) Waking up on a train to Tokyo

(II) Planning the heist

Sequence 2: Accepting the inception mission

00:15:40 (07) Hotel room: Cobb tests the spinning top. Phone call with his children, discusses plans with Arthur
00:18:20 (08) Cobb accepts Saito’s offer for an inception heist
00:21:38 (09) On a plane to Paris, Cobb and Arthur discuss Saito’s mission

Sequence 3: Preparing the heist in Paris: Recruiting Ariadne and explaining the dream-share

00:22:07 (10) Cobb visits his father-in-law Miles
00:24:42 (11) Cobb recruits Ariadne as the new dream architect
00:25:50 (12) Cobb’s team sets up the new workshop. Insert: Cobb explores dream-share with Ariadne
00:28:19 (13) Workshop: Explaining time-frame of dream-share
00:29:04 (14) Another dream-share. Cobb warns Ariadne not to build a dream-share from memory (mirror-picture of Paris)
00:33:25 (15) Workshop: Cobb’s problem and the function of totems. Ariadne backs out

Sequence 3: Preparing the heist: Cobb recruits Eames and Yusuf in Mombasa

00:35:02 (16) Mombasa: Cobb recruits Eames and escapes from Cobol Engineering agents
Sequence protocol INCEPTION

00:39:34 (17) Paris: Ariadne returns. In a dream-share, Arthur instructs her about paradoxical dream architecture
00:41:25 (18) Mombasa: Meeting Yusuf and explaining three-level architecture
00:42:33 (19) Mombasa: The lost dreamers
00:43:42 (20) Dream: Cobb has a Mal flashback

Sequence 4: Preparing the heist: Developing a strategy
00:44:30 (21) Mombasa: Cobb and Eames explain plan to Saito
00:45:47 (22) Eames observes Browning in his office. Fischer’s estranged relationship with his father / parallel montage: in the workshop, Eames explains how he will use Browning for conning Fischer
00:47:59 (23) While Ariadne builds her totem, she talks with Cobb about totems and mazes

Sequence 5: Completing the heist preparations
00:50:04 (24) Workshop/dream share: The simple idea
00:51:45 (25) Dream-share: The time structure of the three levels, planning the kicks
00:54:14 (26) Cobb is dreaming again. Ariadne follows him. Flashback inserts explain Cobb’s and Mal’s stay in limbo; Ariadne explores Cobb’s mal-dream
01:00:24 (27) Ariadne and Cobb wake up. Saito explains that he bought the airline for the Sydney-L.A. flight (voice forward)

(III) The heist

Sequence 6: Dream level 1
01:01:25 (28) At the airport and on the plane: The heist begins
01:04:08 (29) Rainy day in Manhattan. Cobb’s team kidnaps Fischer but is ambushed by his dream security
01:07:18 (30) Hiding in a warehouse, trying to keep Saito alive
01:10:32 (31) Interrogating Fischer. Fischer and Eames/Browning together
01:15:29 (32) Dream level 1 and flashback, parallel montage: Cobb explains Ariadne the danger of being in limbo; flashback to Mal’s suicide and Cobb’s flight from the US
01:22:15 (33) Fischer threatened to reveal safe number. Fleeing from dream security

Sequence 7: Dream level 2
01:25:24 (34) Cobb as Mr. Charles talks to Fischer in hotel bar, telling him he’s dreaming / Parallel montage with Ariadne and Arthur
01:28:19 (35) Saito chased / Yusuf’s problems on dream level 1 / Arthur and Ariadne try to evade attention/ Cobb tells Fischer he is in a dream
01:30:40 (36) Bringing Fischer to the hotel room – Fischer wants to shoot himself and tries to remember his other dream-share
01:33:35 (37) Planting the explosives in the hotel room/ Waiting for Fischer in front of room 528, exposing Browning, entering dream level 3

Sequence 8: Dream level 3
01:37:29 (38) Dream level 3: Winter landscape: Fighting to approach the snow fortress. Constant parallel montage with dream level 1 (Yusuf chased by dream security) and level 2 (Arthur prepares the kick and fights dream security)
01:40:39 (39) Dream level 3: Getting Fischer into the snow fortress / dream level 1: Yusuf starts the drop / dream level 2: Arthur improvises a kick
01:51:30 (40) In the fortress; Fischer shot by Mal

Sequence 9: Limbo
01:54:55 (41) Limbo: Cobb and Ariadne search for Fischer while Arthur detonates the elevator and Yusuf drives off the bridge
01:59:40 (42) Limbo: Cobb finds Mal (cont’d parallel montage) while Eames, Saito and Arthur fight dream security. The consequences of inception
02:05:37 (43) Saito falls into limbo / Ariadne gets Fischer
02:09:25 (44) Fischer meets his father / Initiating the kicks on all three levels / Cobb tells Mal they had their time together

(IV) Mission accomplished

Sequence 10: Tying the knots
02:13:54 (45) Dream level 1: Fischer decides to split his empire
02:15:23 (46) Limbo: Cobb finds Saito in limbo
02:17:24 (47) Reality: Waking up on the plane, passing immigration control at LAX
02:19:50 (48) Reality: Cobb at home, reunited with children
02:21:01 End credits
02:28:07 End of film
Sequence protocol MATRIX
Director: Andy and Lana Wachowski. Screenplay: Andy and Lana Wachowski
Year: 1999. Duration: 02:10:40 hrs. DVD edition

(I) Prologue

Subsequence 1: Prologue
00:00:00 (1) Prologue: Trinity in danger

(II) Unplugging from the Matrix

Subsequence 2: Neo Meets Trinity
00:06:21 (2) Neo: waking up, Trinity’s message, the tattoo
00:09:20 (3) In the nightclub: Trinity and Neo

Subsequence 3: Metacortech and Interrogation
00:11:29 (4) At Metacortech: Attempts to Escape, Neo is arrested
00:16:22 (5) Neo is interrogated by Agent Smith

Subsequence 4: Meeting with Morpheus
00:20:41 (6) Neo wakes up, appointment and drive to Morpheus
00:24:05 (7) Neo’s decision to unplug

(III) The World As It Exists Today

Subsequence 5: Neo Regains Health
00:31:09 (8) Neo unplugged: awakening in the tank
00:33:41 (9) Recovery on board of the Nebuchadnezzar

Subsequence 6: The World as it Exists Today
00:37:48 (10) The Construct; The world as it exists today, Neo breaks down
00:42:35 (11) Morpheus’ revelation: Is Neo the Chosen One?

Subsequence 7: Training in the Construct
00:44:43 (12) Neo’s training; combat training Neo vs. Morpheus
00:51:30 (13) Neo’s first jump

Subsequence 8: Enemies
00:53:23 (14) Trinity and Cypher
00:54:15 (15) Morpheus & Neo in the construct: the System is the enemy
00:56:37 (16) Hiding from the sentinels
00:58:41 (17) Neo and Cypher
(IV) Treason and Prophecies

Subsequence 9: Dinners
01:01:07  (18) Cypher and Agent Smith having dinner
01:02:37  (19) The Nebuchadnezzar crew’s dinner

Subsequence 10: Neo and the Oracle
01:04:24  (20) Neo visits the Oracle in her apartment

Subsequence 11: Déjà Vu
01:14:39  (21) Déjà Vu: escape, Morpheus vs. Agent Smith
01:21:37  (22) Cypher’s treason

(V) Crisis: Saving Morpheus

Subsequence 12: Smith interrogates Morpheus
01:27:44  (23) Morpheus captured, Neo’s decision to rescue him
01:33:27  (24) Agent Smith interrogates Morpheus

Subsequence 13: Saving Morpheus
01:37:00  (25) Neo and Trinity fighting in the entrance hall
01:40:04  (26) Neo and Trinity on the roof
01:43:20  (27) Saving Morpheus with the helicopter

(VI) Climax: Neo vs. Agent Smith

Subsequence 14: Showdown
01:58:21  (28) Duel of the Giants: Neo vs. Agent Smith
02:13:59  (29) Attack of the sentinels; Neo’s death and resurrection: He is the One
02:00:34  (30) Neo is the One

(VII) Epilogue

Subsequence 15: Epilogue
02:02:41  (31) ‘I am not afraid anymore’ – A World without borders
02:04:10  (32) End credits
02:10:40  *End of film*
Sequence protocol MOON

Director: Duncan Jones. Screenplay: Duncan Jones and Nathan Parker


Subsequence 1: Prologue
00:00:01 Advertisement for Lunar Industries

Subsequence 2: A Day in the Life of Sam Bell
00:01:17 (01) Sam Bell’s everyday routine at the mining base (opening credits)
00:08:32 (02) Sam Bell is frustrated, in poor health and misses his wife
00:11:03 (03) Hallucinations of his daughter

Subsequence 3: Accident with the harvester
00:13:05 (04) Erotic dreams and another boring work day. Problems with one of the harvesters
00:16:11 (05) On the moon’s surface: Accident with the harvester

(II) Sam-6 meets Sam-5

Subsequence 4: Sam-6’s disconcerting discovery
00:17:52 (06) Bell-6 wakes up in the moon base and discovers a problem with the harvester
00:23:28 (07) Lunar Industries announces a recovery team.
00:26:13 (08) Bell-6 finds Bell-5 at the broken harvester and brings him into the moon base

Subsequence 5: Bell-5 and Bell-6 meet
00:29:15 (09) Bell-5 wakes up and meets his clone
00:31:19 (10) Bell-6 watches a transmission from his wife
00:34:30 (11) Bell-5 and Bell-6 discuss the clone problem
00:36:32 (12) Struggles: Who is the original Sam Bell?

(III) Searching for answers

Subsequence 6: Finding answers
00:42:45 (13) Bell-6 starts looking for the secret chamber and fights with Bell-5
00:47:12 (14) Gerty reveals the truth to Bell-5
00:52:02 (15) Both Bells form a plan
00:54:32 (16) Both Bells find satellite stations on the moon surface. Bell-5 does not feel well
00:58:12 (17) Bell-5 back at the base, in very poor health

Subsequence 7: The secret chamber
(18) Bell-5 searches through the database and finds records of the former Bells
(19) Bell-5 finds the burning coffin and the secret chamber
(20) Bell-6 returns and enters the secret chamber with Bell-5

Subsequence 8: The dead wife
(21) Bell-5 goes to the satellite uplink, makes a video call to his daughter and finds out that his wife is dead
(22) Bell-5 returns to the station and falls ill, Bell-6 sees the video call

(IV) The escape
Subsequence 9: Dying
(23) Bell-6 activates another clone and plans their escape. Bell-6 is supposed to escape while Bell-5 stays back
(24) Waiting for the clone to come alive, Bell-5 decides to remain on the moon
(25) Bell-5 and Bell-6 drive to the accident site, where Bell-5 dies

Subsequence 10: Escape
(26) Bell-5 erases Gerty’s memory bank and prepares to escape
(27) Bell enters the tube and activates self-destruction while the “rescue unit” arrives. A voice-over narrates the events on earth after Bell-6’s arrival

(40) End Credits
End of film
Sequence protocol THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR  
*Director: Josef Rusnak. Screenplay: Josef Rusnak and Ravel Centeno-Rodriguez  
Year: 1999. Duration: 01:36:55 hrs. DVD edition*

(I)  **Exposition**
- 00:00:00  Title sequence
- 00:01:03  (1) Fuller in the Hotel

(II)  **Douglas Hall, murder suspect**
- 00:06:22  (2) Fuller is killed in 1998
- 00:08:23  (3) Hall notified about Fuller’s death. Conversation with McBain
- 00:11:29  (4) At the company. First meeting with Jane
- 00:14:24  (5) Douglas and Whitney
- 00:17:37  (6) Douglas Hall is Fuller’s heir
- 00:19:31  (7) Douglas is the primary murder suspect

(III)  **Search for Fuller's message**
- 00:21:34  (8) Douglas jacks in to the simulation of 1937
- 00:24:44  (9) Visit to Grierson
- 00:30:41  (10) At the Omnihotel. Meeting with Ashton and Bridget
- 00:36:46  (11) Back to 1998
- 00:38:21  (12) Tom Jones tries to blackmail Douglas

(IV)  **The investigations continue**
- 00:40:21  (13) Douglas and Jane come closer to each other
- 00:43:29  (14) Douglas is imprisoned and released due to Jane’s alibi
- 00:45:52  (15) A second visit to Grierson
- 00:49:42  (16) Douglas and Grierson at the Omnihotel
- 00:53:32  (17) Fight between Douglas and Ashton
- 00:59:30  (18) Whitney saves Douglas

(V)  **The truth about the world**
- 01:00:48  (19) Searching for Jane and meeting Natasha
- 01:06:30  (20) At the end of the world
- 01:09:35  (21) The truth about the world

(VI)  **Climax: The worlds merge**
- 01:14:00  (22) Whitney dies in 1937
- 01:17:11  (23) Ashton dies in 1998

(VII)  **Coda**
- 01:30:41  (25) Douglas wakes up in 2024
- 01:33:24  (26) *End credits*
- 01:36:55  *End of film*
Sequence protocol THE TRUMAN SHOW
Director: Peter Weir. Screenplay: Andrew Niccol

(I) Exposition: A Day in the Life of Truman Burbank. Day 10909 (00:00:19-00:13:50)
00:00:19  (01) Opening: Cristof, Meryl, and Marlon are talking about “The Truman Show”; Truman does stand-up comedy in front of the bathroom mirror
00:02:22  (02) A headlight falls from the sky in front of Truman’s house
00:03:32  (03) Truman on his way to work, buys a magazine, talks with the twin brothers
00:05:10  (04) In his office Truman secretly explores the fashion magazine
00:07:28  (05) Truman misses his external appointment on the other side of the bay because of his fear of water
00:09:06  (06) After work: working in the garden
00:09:49  (07) Truman and Marlon play golf, Truman speaks of his desire to go to Fiji
00:11:14  (08) Truman alone at the beach, thinking of his father’s drowning during a boat trip (flashback). Truman becomes the victim of a strange rainfall
00:12:49  (09) Truman and Meryl talk with each other about her planned pregnancy; closing extra-TS-diegetic shot on the parking lot security officers in front of their TV screen

(II) Frictions of Everyday Life. Day 10910 (00:13:50-00:28:33)
00:13:50  (10) On his way to work Truman sees his father, whom he believed to be dead
00:15:44  (11) Truman tells his mother that he saw his father
00:16:55  (12) In his basement, Truman thinks of Lauren/Sylvia
00:18:45  (13) Flashback: Truman meets Lauren/Sylvia for the first time in college

(III) Frictions of trust to the people one lives with. Day 10911 (00:28:33-00:37:40)
00:28:33  (14) Accidentally, Truman listens to the studio’s radio frequency which gives detailed accounts of everything he does
00:29:39  (15) Having become suspicious, Truman strays from his usual paths, thereby causes chaos and discovers a fake elevator
00:33:33  (16) Truman turns to Marlon for help. Both end up at the beach watching the sunset, where Truman talks again of his desire to go to Fiji
00:35:32  (17) In the evening, Truman looks at photo albums with Meryl and his mother. He discovers that Meryl crosses her fingers on one of the supposedly romantic wedding pictures

(IV) The Limits of the World. Truman’s Desire to Travel. Day 10912 (00:37:40-01:07:40)
00:37:40  (18) The now mistrusting Truman follows Meryl to her workplace in the hospital
00:41:02  (19) In a travel agency, he unsuccessfully tries to book a flight to Fiji
(20) Even the bus to Chicago has a motor damage.

(21) Sitting in his car, Truman becomes aware that some people in his neighbourhood are on a loop around the block. He tries to drive away from Seahaven in his car, hijacking Meryl. A road blockage because of a leak at the power plant stops him.

(22) Back home again, Truman and Meryl quarrel. Meryl’s facade breaks down, and Marlon comes for Meryl’s rescue.

(23) While he and Truman are sitting together again, Marlon presents Truman with his long-believed-to-be-dead father, who supposedly was the cause for all the strange events that occurred during the last days.

(24) **Insert:** A TV interview with Cristof explains the background history of the TV show. After a heated telephone discussion with Sylvia, Cristof announces the next developments in his reality show ("a new romantic interest is introduced," “TV’s first on-air conception”)

(V) **Early Sunrise. Truman Vanishes. Day 10913 (01:07:40-01:32:07)**

(25) This work day goes by in a time lapse. Vivian is introduced to Truman.

(26) In the evening, Truman has vanished all of a sudden. A hectic search begins, and the sun rises prematurely.

(27) Cristof finds Truman sailing out on the sea. He raises a potentially lethal storm in order to stop Truman.

(28) Truman miraculously survives the storm. He continues on his journey and soon reaches the (literal) end of his world.

(29) Cristof reveals the secret of his life to Truman, but he does not manage to convince him to stay. Eventually, Truman leaves his show and his former life through a door.

(30) **End Credits**

01:38:40  **End of film**
Sequence protocol VANILLA SKY

Director: Cameron Crowe. Screenplay: Cameron Crowe

(I) Exposition: The Death of a Womanizer
00:00:01 Aerial shots of Manhattan

Sequence 1: Introducing David
00:00:56 (01) Dream scene: David wakes up to the waking call “open your eyes”
00:02:06 (02) Dream scene: David is driving through the deserted streets of Manhattan
00:04:00 (03) David wakes up again adjacent to Julie Gianni, realising he had a nightmare. While David prepares for work, Julie is in the kitchen
00:06:07 (04) David drives through the crowded streets of Manhattan and picks up Brian. Intercut with shots of Julie in the kitchen. Non-diegetic voice-over about David’s background
00:05:49 (05) César picks up Pelayo, driving with him through town. Arguing about love and life, they almost have a fatal car accident
00:09:00 (06) David arrives late at a board meeting at his company. A non-diegetic voice-over by David comments on his company’s board of trustees

Sequence 2: Meeting Sofia
00:10:31 (07) Frame story: In the psychiatric ward, McCabe asks David whether he is aware of why he is in custody. David denies the murder charges, both are talking about David’s biographical background
00:14:33 (08) Birthday party at David’s penthouse. David and Sofia meet for the first time
00:18:32 (09) David rejects Julie, who attends the party uninvited
00:20:27 (10) David and Sofia talk about “the saddest girl to ever hold a Martini”
00:22:43 (11) Brian finds David and Sofia and shows that he is jealous

Sequence 3: The Consequences of Spending the Night With Sofia
00:25:56 (12) David accompanies Sofia to her apartment, where they are talking the entire night through
00:29:22 (13) Frame story: David and McCabe discuss flirt strategies.
00:30:40 (14) Still in Sofia’s apartment, David and her are painting caricatures of each other. David sees the Cryogenics video for the first time on TV. Before David leaves, they kiss each other
00:36:19 (15) David leaves the house in the morning. In front of it Julie Gianni confronts him and invites him into her car
00:38:35 (16) While they are driving through Manhattan, Julie Gianni confesses her love for David and then drives off a bridge
(II) A Womanizer Disfigured

Sequence 4: Coming to Terms with Disfigurement
00:41:51 (17) Dream scene: David and Sofia meet each other in a park. David tells her about his nightmare. Non-diegetic voice-over already foreshadows the next scene (transition starts at 00:45:20)
00:45:41 (18) Frame story: Conversation between McCabe and David about the pain and psychological side-effects after the disfiguring accident
00:47:43 (19) David tries to participate in his company’s business decisions again
00:41:52 (20) David follows Sofia on the street
00:49:34 (21) David has a frustrating conversation with his doctors. They hand him the mask

Sequence 5: A Catastrophic Night
00:52:37 (22) David plans his comeback (non-diegetic voice-over) and meets Sofia in her dance school
00:55:06 (23) At home, David gets ready for his date with Sofia and decides to put on the mask
00:56:53 (24) The date at the night club turns into a rather unpleasant evening
01:03:56 (25) David is walking home alone after first Sofia, then Brian say goodbye, Convinced that Brian and Sofia are a couple, David passes out drunk on the sidewalk

(III) The Nightmare Becomes a Dream

Sequence 6: A Dream Life
01:07:53 (26) “Open your eyes”: Sofia wakes David, who is still lying on the sidewalk, in the morning. She confesses her love for him (the lucid dream begins)
01:10:09 (27) Frame story: David makes sketches of Sofia while he imagines her. McCabe is talking with David about her, then asks him whether he remembers “Ellie”. McCabe claims that David’s face has already been reconstructed.
Flashback to the surgery scene (cross-cutting, start 01:12:25)
01:14:30 (28) Sofia sees David’s new, reconstructed face
01:17:14 (29) Happy relationship: David and Sofia are making love, walking through the city together, stay at a bar with Brian. There, David sees the Life Extension employee for the first time

(IV) Searching for the Truth

Sequence 7: Glitches in the Lucid Dream
01:20:34 (30) Nightmare scene: David wakes up adjacent to Sofia and sees his disfigured face in the mirror
01:21:36 (31) David wakes up from his nightmare and is horrified to see Julie in his bed
01:25:18  (32) David in custody for attacking Julie. His lawyer manages to get him released
01:27:22  (33) Exiting the prison, Brian attacks David for hurting Julie
01:29:16  (34) In a bar, a Life Extension man approaches David and urges him to take control again of his dream life. He reveals that David is in a lucid dream state. Non-diegetic voice-over prepares next scene
01:31:28  (35) **Frame story:** David remembers that he signed a contract with Life Extension

**Sequence 8: Strangling the Dream**
01:32:43  (36) David is struck down in Sofia’s apartment. There he has sex with Sofia/Julie. When Sofia turns into Julie, he kills her (*cross-cutting with memory flashbacks*)
01:38:15  (37) **Frame story:** César flees from the apartment and sees himself disfigured in a mirror. Cross-edited with conversation between David and McCabe about the upcoming trial. David sees the Life Extension spot on TV

**(V) The Lucid Dream Revealed**

**Sequence 9: Discovering Life Extension**
01:42:20  (38) **Frame story:** At the Cryogenics office, David is told about the working mechanisms of the Life Extension program and the ensuing memory erasure
01:48:50  (39) **Frame story:** Shocked about the revelation, David wants to wake up and flees from the office. In the building lobby he calls for Tech Support
01:50:10  (40) **Frame story:** In the elevator, the tech support person (Edmund Ventura) tells David everything about the nature of his lucid dream and his former life
01:56:48  (41) **Frame story:** On the rooftop, David has to decide whether to stay in the dream or to start a new life in the future. David decides to jump after he says goodbye to “dream Sofia”. Then he jumps. Shortly before the impact (*cross-edited with memory flashbacks*) the film fades into a white screen

**Epilogue: Waking from the Dream**
02:04:01  (42) Extreme close-up on an eye which suddenly opens. A female voice says “open your eyes”
02:04:08  (40) *End Credits*
02:10:25  *End of film*
English summary

The dissertation “Skepticism Films. Knowing and Doubting the World in Contemporary Cinema” examines ‘skepticism films’ as configurations of philosophical ideas and thought experiments in contemporary cinema – films which address philosophical doubt about our ways of knowing the world by developing film plots that situate film characters within deception situations of various sorts: simulated/fake environments, blurred boundaries between layers of reality, systematic self-deception, or externally induced deception by other members of a shared world. After a general discussion of the relation between film and philosophy, the dissertation approaches skepticism in film from two angles: Part II investigates the role of skepticist ideas in philosophical reflection on the medium of film, exemplified by a critical discussion of the positions of film-philosophers such as Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze. The parts III and IV then explore varieties of skepticism films in the context of case studies.

Part I, “Thinking through Cinema,” provides the theoretical framework for understanding possible relations between film and philosophy. Drawing on current film-philosophical scholarship, predominantly written by Anglo-American philosophers such as Carroll, Constable, Mulhall, Mullarkey, Sinnerbrink, Smith, or Wartenberg, this part develops a systematic account of film as expression of philosophical thought. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the historical switch in film-philosophy from the justification of film as art to the justification of film as philosophy. On that historical foil, the chapter develops a typology of possible relations between film and philosophy. Broadly drawing on the distinction between ‘films as objects of philosophical thought’ and ‘films as expressions of philosophical thought,’ the chapter proposes to understand films as potential configurations of philosophical thought. Chapter 2 focuses on the philosophical potential of narrative fiction film. Using Rorty’s account of narrative philosophy, and Nussbaum’s philosophical appreciation of style, this chapter argues for a consensus position according to which films can be philosophically significant as screened thought experiments. On that basis, chapter 3 investigates the more radical position that films can be audiovisual expressions of philosophical thought in their own right. The chapter suggests a transmedial perspective on philosophy: All expressions of philosophical thought, even traditional ‘linguistic’ philosophy, are historically contingent and media-dependent figurations of philosophical ideas.

Part II focuses on the general role of skepticism in film philosophy by exploring the works of Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze. Chapter 4 outlines the function of skepticist ideas and thought experiments in traditional philosophical discourse, particularly in Cavell’s works, and uses Donald Davidson’s model of triangulation – which distinguishes knowledge of the world, self-knowledge, and knowledge of others as mutually indispensable varieties of (empirical) knowledge – as a pragmatic way of coming to terms with the varieties of knowledge and doubt. Chapter 5 critically investigates Cavell’s well-known proposition that “[f]ilm is a moving image of skepticism” (Cavell 1979a: 188) and accounts for the influence of classical film theorists such as Bazin and Kracauer on Cavell’s film philosophy. The fate of Cavell’s film ontology under the significantly altered conditions of digital screen culture is discussed by drawing on D.N. Rodowick’s book The Virtual Life of Film (Rodowick 2007). Chapter 6 turns to Deleuze as the other Godfather figure of current film-philosophy, and to his thesis that “[r]estoring our belief in the world […] is the power of modern cinema” (Deleuze 1989: 166) as a quasi-metaphysical variation of skepticist doubt. Based on Josef Früchtl’s book Vertrauen in die Welt (Früchtl 2013), the chapter outlines resonances between Deleuze and Cavell and sketches four ways of understanding the belief restoration thesis. Giuseppe Tornatore’s childhood nostalgia film NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO (1989) is used for exemplifying the claim that the broken link
between man and world diagnosed by Deleuze is a kind of temporary, passing anomaly of ordinary life instead of a metaphysical rupture. Concluding the chapter, Patricia Pisters' concept of the “neuro-image” (Pisters 2012) contributes to understanding the continuation of Deleuze’s belief restoration thesis into the era of digital screen culture.

**Part III** and **Part IV** conclude the trajectory of this dissertation and provide a typology and evaluation of skepticism films. While **part III** develops the typology, **part IV** contains in-depth case studies of selected films. **Chapter 7** uses a wide range of film examples for developing the typology of skepticism films, which adapts Davidson’s model of triangulation and broadly distinguishes between external world skepticism films, self-knowledge skepticism films, and other minds skepticism films. The chapter systematically outlines the themes, narrative structures, and aesthetic strategies shared by these varieties of skepticism films. **Chapter 8** discusses how skepticism films fit into the broader current cinematic tendency towards complex, non-conventional narratives by drawing on recent scholarly contributions by David Bordwell, Edward Branigan, Warren Buckland, Thomas Elsaesser, and John Walters.

**Part IV** analyses selected skepticism films in detail by focusing on external world skepticism films (**chapter 10**) and self-knowledge skepticism films (**chapter 11**). The goal is to understand better the literary and filmic influences as well as narrative and aesthetic choices the chosen films make for playing with the general idea of skepticism. **Chapter 9** outlines the methodology used for the philosophical film analysis in the subsequent chapters by drawing on methods of systematic film analysis. **Chapter 10** exposes structural and narrato-aesthetic similarities and differences between the external world skepticism films of the **MATRIX** trilogy, **THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR**, and **THE TRUMAN SHOW**. **Chapter 11** turns to self-knowledge skepticism films in which the protagonists become their own **genius malignus** (**VANILLA SKY**, **ABRE LOS OJOS**, **INCEPTION**), or are fundamentally unaware of certain unpleasant truths about themselves (e.g., of being a clone, as in **MOON**).

The coda wraps up this dissertation’s journey through the fascinating relation between film, philosophy and skepticism. In lieu of a conclusion, and as a call for continuing film-philosophical reflection, it takes up Stanley Cavell’s metaphor of “cities of words” (Cavell 2004) and claims that philosophy and film are in the middle of an on-going, hierarchically equal, and open-ended dialogue, in which skepticism films exemplify the presence of philosophical ideas in contemporary popular culture.
Nederlandse samenvatting

Vanuit de constatering dat een aantal hedendaagse ‘mainstream’ films de wijze waarop we de wereld menen te kennen bevragen, onderzoekt het proefschrift “Skepticism Films. Knowing and Doubting the World in Contemporary Cinema” zulke ‘skepticism films’ als bewerkingen van filosofische ideeën en gedachte-experimenten in de hedendaagse cinema, die zich baseren op film plots die de film personages situer en in verschillende misleidende situaties: gesimuleerde/namaak omgevingen, vervaagde grenzen van werkelijkheidslagen, systematisch zelfbedrog, of de misleiding veroorzaakt door anderen binnen de fictionele wereld. Na een uiteenzetting van de relatie tussen film en filosofie zal dit proefschrift scepticisme in films vanuit twee perspectieven benaderen: Deel II onderzoekt de rol van de ideeën van scepticisme in de filosofische benadering van het medium film, in het bijzonder een kritische uiteenzetting van de theorieën van film-filosofen uiteenlopend van Stanley Cavell tot Gilles Deleuze. Deel III en IV zullen vervolgens diverse ‘skepticism films’ analyseren in de context van case studies.

Deel I


Deel II

richt zich op de algemene rol van scepticisme in film filosofie via de werken van Stanley Cavell en Gilles Deleuze. Hoofdstuk 4 beschrijft de functie van vormen van scepticisme en gedachte-experimenten binnen het traditionele filosofische discours, in het bijzonder de werken van Stanley Cavell, en gebruikt Donald Davidsons model van triangulatie – dit model onderscheidt kennis van de wereld, zelfkennis, en kennis van anderen als onmisbare vormen van (empirische) kennis – als een pragmatische manier om de vormen van kennis en twijfel te beschrijven. Hoofdstuk 5 onderzoekt Cavells bekende stelling “[f]ilm is a moving image of scepticism” (Cavell 1979a: 188) en beschrijft de invloed van klassieke filmtheoretici als Bazin en Kracauer op Cavells film-filosofie. Op basis van D.N. Rodowicks boek The Virtual Life of Film (Rodowick 2007) beschrijft dit hoofdstuk het lot van Cavells film ontologie onder de significante veranderde condities van de digitale beeldcultuur. Hoofdstuk 6 richt zich op de andere peetvader van de hedendaagse film-filosofie, Gilles Deleuze, en zijn these “[r]estoring our belief in the world […] is the power of modern cinema” (Deleuze 1989: 166) als een quasi-metafysische variant van sceptische twijfel. In de lijn van Josef Früchtls boek Vertrauen in die Welt (Frücht 2013) benoemt dit hoofdstuk de resonanties tussen Deleuze en Cavell en schetst het vier manieren om de ‘belief restoration thesis’ te begrijpen. Giuseppe Tornatore’s nostalgische film NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO (1989) wordt gebruikt als voorbeeld van de claim dat de verbroken
relatie tussen mens en wereld niet een metafysische breuk is, zoals Deleuze claimt, maar juist een tijdelijke en passerende anomalie van het dagelijks leven. Tenslotte zal Patricia Pisters’ concept van de “neuro-image” (Pisters 2012) worden besproken om bij te dragen aan een voortzetting van Deleuze’s ‘belief restoration thesis’ in het tijdperk van de digitale beeldcultuur.


De coda concludeert de reis van dit proefschrift door de fascinerende relatie tussen film, filosofie en scepsis. In plaats van een conclusie, en als een oproep voor de voortzetting van filmfilosofische reflectie, neemt het Stanley Cavells metafoor van “cities of words” (Cavell 2004) over, en beweert het dat filosofie en film onderdeel zijn van een aanhoudende, hiërarchisch gelijke dialoog zonder einde, waarin ‘skepticism films’ de aanwezigheid van filosofische ideeën in de hedendaagse populaire cultuur bewijzen.

Vertaling: Daan Vermeulen