Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema
Schmerheim, P.A.

Citation for published version (APA):
Schmerheim, P. A. (2013). Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema
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 Früchtl, 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.