Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema
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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

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.
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. 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’ Meditatioes 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 […] quamdiu 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. So, even though he is the protagonist of a new wave of

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100 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 1922 [1637]: IV.3). A Latin variant is formulated in the Principia Philosophiae: “Ego cogito, ergo sum” (Descartes 1905 [1644]: 1.0007).

101 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.\(^\text{102}\)

The Meditations 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.\(^\text{103}\) 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.\(^\text{104}\) 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.\(^\text{105}\)

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.\(^\text{106}\)

\(^{102}\) 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.

\(^{103}\) See Willaschek 2003: 99. Descartes makes a similar claim in Meditatio I.18.

\(^{104}\) See Stanley Cavell’s The Claim of Reason (Cavell 1979b: 133f.).

\(^{105}\) Such sketches of the various ways in which one can arrive at skepticist conclusions illuminate Cavell’s “frames of mind in which skepticism appears and vanishes” (Cavell 1979b: 448).

\(^{106}\) 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

\(\text{~(~Zurückweisung) of skepticism (see Carl 1994: 193). Someone who tries to refute skepticism is (in accordance with the skeptic) of the opinion that even our most general beliefs are in need of a justification, even though she believes our claims to knowledge as being justified. If one wants to eliminate skepticism, one does not even accept the legitimacy of the skeptical doubt by showing, e.g., that one (or all) of the premises of the skeptical argument are false.}\)

107 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).

108 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: 6ff.).
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.129

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: 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).

Epistemic limitations are preconditions for knowledge

Being in the world as an existential precondition

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129 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]: 36). 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 gives rise 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).112

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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112 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 Verstandesfähigkeit 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 verarbeiteten, 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 skeptic 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 in which 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

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’ Meditations 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). \(^{117}\)

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) \(^{118}\)

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 wesehaft 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 existenziellen Analytik des Daseins dienen, dann bedarf es nicht nur der Umkehrung, sondern einer neuen ontologisch-phanomenalen Bewährung seines Gehalts. Die erste Aussage ist dann: ‚sum’ und zwar in dem Sinne: ich-bin-in-einer-Welt. Als so Seiendes ‚bin ich‘ in der Seinsmöglichkeit zu verschiedenen Verhältnungen (cognitiones) als Weisen des Seins bei innerweltlichem Seienden. Descartes dagegen sagt: cogitationes 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)

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:

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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. [...] [T]he 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 abstinence 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.
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 neutralizes 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)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

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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 mit Hilfe eines Szenarios in Gang kommen, das auf dieser Ebene angesiedelt war.” More precisely: Müller argues, with Putnam, that “Putnam’s proof demolishes the half-hearted attempt at doing metaphysics with the help of concepts form natural science.” (Müller 2003b: 178) (original German text: “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.
translation) 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 scepticism (Müller 2003b: chapter VII).  

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), 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” (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” (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” (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 Cave 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 Beschränkheit 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 Wirklichkeitsganzen 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 Zahlencodes im Universalspeicher und könnte ohne den Simulationscomputer der übergeordneten Welt nicht bestehen”.

126 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 archeology 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.\textsuperscript{128} 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, reprogramming 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.)\textsuperscript{129}

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 \textsc{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

\textsuperscript{128} See Plato 2006: VII, 106 a/b; Descartes 1904: I, 12; Bouwsma 1949; Putnam 1981: chapter. 1; Nozick 1977: 43ff.

\textsuperscript{129} Obviously, this is a scenario which the inhabitants of the \textsc{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.