Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema
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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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Translation: “‘Aber schließt du eben nicht vor dem Zweifel die Augen, wenn du sicher bist?’ – Sie sind mir geschlossen.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophische Untersuchungen. (Wittgenstein 2005: 192 [PI II, xi])

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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Simulacra and Simulation} as an instance of a philosophy of irreality, or, rather, of “the hyperreal”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{236} Even though\textit{ MATRIX} closely follows the goal-oriented narrative formulae of Classical Hollywood Cinema, the film plays with audience expectations.\textsuperscript{237}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{matrix-simulated-world.png}
\caption{MATRIX}
\end{figure}

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

\textsuperscript{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 explication of the historical genesis of the concept and its use in social theory can be found in Uta Gerhardt’s study \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{235} Baudrillard 1994: 1ff.

\textsuperscript{236} Compare the in-depth analysis in chapter 10.

\textsuperscript{237} See Rodowick 2007a: 181ff.; and Bordwell 2006. For the narrative and stylistic conventions of classical Hollywood cinema see also the canonical text \textit{The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960} by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985).
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 is exemplary for this, since it is at heart an updated and radicalised, 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 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...
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).241 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).242 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.243

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 skepticist 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 set to screen under the name 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 Spielberg 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).
Varieties of Skepticism Films

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 Lilijom (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. 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 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 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. [...] The 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

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

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244 Walters is less interested in films such as THE DEPARTED (Scorsese, 2006) or 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.

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 computed, 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

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 Catalun capital as it is possibly perceived by tourists. For Alan A. Stone, “[t]he film is a sunlit tourist travelogue of the city of Gaudi’s architecture and Miró’s art.” (Stone 2008). 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 pair 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)
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.

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.250

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.251

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.252 They present a vision of societies (or social groups) that are confined to isolated

250 ‘There is a group of films which circles 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 still 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 Fruchtli raised my awareness of the resemblances between skepticism films and conspiracy films in personal conversations. An introduction to conspiracy films can be found in Barna 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 *Meditationes 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 recognize 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 Every/Day 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

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\(^{254}\) 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 contain portions of chapter 5 of my Amsterdam MA thesis.
Fig. 7.2: Davidson’s three varieties of knowledge

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.

Fig. 7.3: Basic Varieties of Skepticism films

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.\textsuperscript{256}

\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).

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\caption{The Truman Show}
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\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

\textsuperscript{256} 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.
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 utopias.

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 breeded 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.

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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). IDENTI TY 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.

CYPH E R 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. CYpher 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 SimOne (Rachel Roberts) who becomes the shooting star of his films. The film audiences (in the film’s diegesis) believe that SimOne 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 SimOne’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 SimOne says is controlled by Taransky. He is the one actually talking during the interviews; a voice transcoder transforms his voice into SimOne’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 SimOne at once. Instead of being an artificial intelligence, SimOne 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 asGattaca (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. 262

S1MONE 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. S1MONE 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.263

S1MONE 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 S1MONE and on Cristof in THE TRUMAN SHOW. Niccol acknowledges the intricate mirroring relation between both films in an interview, where he agrees that “S1MONE 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 S1mOne it was about a fake person living in the real world”.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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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 ironize the proverbial directorial ambition to turn his or her actors into his creations, being entirely dependent on and obedient to the director’s will.

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).

264 See Jacobs 2005. In terms of the current thesis, StimOne 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 SimOne 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 tended 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 SimOne 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.