Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema
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8 Skepticism Films as Complex Narratives

8.1 Complex Narratives, Mind-Game Films and Skepticism Films

Contemporary skepticism films are not only configurations of skepticist ideas and part of a storytelling tradition which involves alternative, imagined or other worlds. They also are a part of a broader tendency in contemporary cinema towards “complex narratives” (see Poulaki 2011). These films experiment with complex narrato-aesthetic strategies and try to refine or reformulate the straightforward storytelling conventions of (Hollywood-dominated) mainstream cinema. This tendency produces films which are not always completely transparent during a first viewing and must be re-experienced in order to be properly understood. As Maria Poulaki remarks, film scholars have developed a richly varied terminology for conceptualising the tendency toward complex narratives (see Poulaki 2011: 12). Of these terms, Warren Buckland’s “puzzle films” (Buckland [ed.] 2009) and Thomas Elsaesser’s “mind-game films” bear a particularly close relation to skepticism films – not the least because some skepticism films can be called ‘mind-game films’ or ‘puzzle films’ as well. The present chapter will try to outline similarities and differences between these types of films (or rather, areas of intersections in the analytical description of a range of selected films with the help of these terms). This will help understanding better the usefulness and scope of the term “skepticism films” for describing and analyzing the development and mutual interaction between contemporary films. As we will see, there are notable similarities and differences between the cinematic phenomena mentioned above.

Elsaesser is careful not to describe mind-game films as yet another film genre. Instead, he assesses them as a “phenomenon” (Elsaesser 2009a: 14 and 39f.) which reveals “how the cinema itself has mutated: rather than ‘reflecting’ reality, or oscillating

266 For the concepts of alternative, imagined or other worlds, see Walters 2008 and chapter 7.2.
267 Elsaesser 2009a. See also Hesselberth and Schuster 2008.
268 The growing market share of the home entertainment market favours films which are complex enough to incite the audience to re-spectate theatrical releases on DVD, Blu-ray or video streams, because a single viewing is insufficient for grasping all intricacies of the plot. Producing a puzzle film thus means designing it for multiple viewings (see also Elsaesser 2009a: 38f.). However, James Walters convincingly argues that Hollywood has always had a “history of producing stories where ambiguity, symbolism and complexity feature as traits that attract us as audience members, drawing us back to the films in an attempt to better appreciate the themes and issues represented in their narratives.” (Walters 2008: 218). In his book, he analyses THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW (Lang, 1944), BRIGADOON (Minelli, 1954) NORTH BY NORTHWEST (Hitchcock, 1959) and SHERLOCK JR. (Keaton, 1924).
and alternating between illusionism/realism, these films create their own referentiality” (Elsaesser 2009a: 39). Their “switches between epistemological assumptions, narrational habits, and ontological premises draw attention to themselves, or rather, to the “rules of the game”” (Elsaesser 2009a: 39), i.e. to the sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit sets of rules which are “conditions for spectatorship” (Elsaesser 2009a: 37). Mind-game films, Elsaesser argues, play with (parts of) these normative rules and replace them with others. By doing so, they self-referentially draw (or even force) the audience’s attention to their habit of rule-breaking.⁶⁶⁹

Elsaesser distinguishes two types of mind-game films: films in which characters are being played games with and films in which the audience is being “played games with, because certain crucial information is withheld or ambiguously presented” (Elsaesser 2009a: 14). This corresponds to the traditional difference between the narrative structure of a film and its narration, in which the latter concerns the mode of audience address. A significant group of mind-games films such as David Fincher’s THE GAME (Fincher, 1997) merely play games with the impression of reality of basically mentally sane characters, and in that way are close to the narrative patterns of skepticism films (which feature basically mentally sane characters subjected to deception situations).

Other mind-game films, however, “put the emphasis on ‘mind’: they feature central characters whose mental condition is extreme, unstable, or pathological” (Elsaesser 2009a: 14), such as most major characters in David Lynch films or the schizophrenic mathematical genius John Nash (Russell Crowe) in the biographical film A BEAUTIFUL MIND (Howard, 2001). The plot pattern of Martin Scorsese’s thriller SHUTTER ISLAND (Scorsese, 2010) is structurally similar to Robert Wiene’s classical expressionist film DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI (Wiene, 1920). In both films the protagonist turns out to be hallucinating the film’s events: In DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI, the mad, murdering Dr. Caligari (Werner Krauss) is eventually revealed as (apparently) being the doctor of the schizophreniac Francis (Friedrich Feher) who merely imagined the events the audience witnesses on screen.⁷⁷⁰ In SHUTTER ISLAND, the main character Teddy Daniels (Leonardo DiCaprio) turns out to be one of the delusional patients of the high-security sanatorium where he allegedly conducted a criminal investigation as a federal detective. His partner Chuck Aule (Mark Ruffalo) is revealed as being Daniels’ therapist, and the alleged villain Dr. Cawley (Ben Kingsley) is actually a doctor committed to the well-being of his patients.

Adapting Elsaesser’s typology to the concerns of the present dissertation project, in plot-terms skepticism films are a part of the mind-game variety: In deceiving their characters about the actual ontic status of their environment, and by (partially) misleading the audience about it as well, skepticism films certainly play games with their characters and audience. However, just as Elsaesser does not want to define mind-game films as a subset of complex narratives, skepticism films remain a cinematic phenomenon in their own right. The relation between mind-game films and skepticism films is one of

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⁶⁶⁹ This self-referentiality, however, is not a new cinematic development. Experimental films (e.g. by Maja Deren), art films or European avant-garde films such as L’ANNÉE DERNIÈRE À MARIENBAD (Resnais, 1961) have already formed a well-established tradition of explicit cinematic self-referentiality which complex narratives of the mainstream variety willingly make use of.

⁷⁷⁰ David Robinson provides a critical introduction to this classical film (Robinson 1997).
a family relation with partial overlapping areas (concerning similar aesthetic and narrative themes).

One difference between both phenomena is that the main instances of skepticism films – simulation films and fake environment films – put a strong emphasis on the exploration of filmic ontologies. They introduce levels of reality, but not necessarily layers of world perception. Second, the narrative structure of most skepticism films is surprisingly conventional. MATRIX (A. and L. Wachowski, 1999) and THE TRUMAN SHOW (Weir, 1998), for instance, are textbook examples of films which follow the narrato-aesthetic rules of Classical Hollywood Cinema. Mind-game films, and complex narratives in general, are supposedly much more willing to experiment with established conventions.271

For instance, in typical skepticism films the characters’ perception of reality stays coherent, even though they tend to question their mental sanity as they discover the ‘true’ nature of their world. The characters of David Lynch’s films, by contrast, often lose their ability to perceive reality as such: as films like INLAND EMPIRE (Lynch, 2006) or MULHOLLAND DRIVE (Lynch, 2001) proceed, these characters increasingly confuse reality-induced impressions with self-generated illusions of reality.

In SHUTTER ISLAND, Teddy Daniels conducts a criminal investigation on an isolated island where dangerous criminals with psychological disorders are treated at Ashcliffe Hospital. The longer the investigation takes, the more Daniels is convinced that Shutter Island is used for secret psychiatric experiments with human beings, and that the doctors, in particular the director Dr. Cawley and his Nazi-style superior Dr. Naehring (Max von Sydow), try to prevent him from further investigating the matter by exposing him to various hallucinatory drugs. As the film progresses, Daniels increasingly finds himself unable to distinguish between real events and imagined ones, in particular because he is haunted by traumatic memories of concentration camps in World War II and of his dead wife who allegedly died in a house fire caused by one of the island’s inhabitants. The film eventually reveals that Daniels himself is one of the patients of the hospital who killed his depressive wife (Michelle Williams) after she drowned their three children. The film represents the confused state of mind of its main character through the use of various aesthetic, visual as well as auditive, means of expression.272

As argued in chapter 7, the conventional use of narrative structure is a prerequisite by which skepticism films raise doubts about the epistemological stability or reliability of our “standard” or normal perception of reality in the first place. Mind-game films, in contrast, play with non-standard conditions of reality perception. Skepticism films aim at exposing the vulnerability of ordinary reality perception to externally or self-induced

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271 On the narrato-aesthetic conventions of Classical Hollywood Cinema, see Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985; and Bordwell 1985. In the more recent book The Way Hollywood Tells It Bordwell argues that even apparently innovative films which seem to subvert or reform traditional Hollywood storytelling do eventually adhere to the traditional formulae (see Bordwell 2006).

272 Here I disagree with Elsaesser’s general assessment that in mind-game films, the characters’ “ways of seeing, interaction with other characters, and their ‘being in the world’ are presented as normal. The films […] oblige one to choose between seemingly equally valid, but ultimately incompatible ‘realities’ or ‘multiverses’” (Elsaesser 2009a: 14f.). I would rather argue that mind-game films early on insert narrative and aesthetic clues about the eventual revelation of the characters’ distorted view of reality. M. Night Shyamalan’s famous narrative twist device at the end of THE SIXTH SENSE (Shyamalan, 1999) is an example for this: in an elliptical montage sequence, the film reviews all the clues about Dr. Malcolm Crowe’s (Bruce Willis) erroneous assumption that he still is alive which were already open to view for the audience before. However, Elsaesser is certainly right in identifying the representation of characters’ world views as being seemingly normal as a trait of many mind-game films.
illution, but both cinematic tendencies share a common idea: they introduce the notion of possible alternative worlds or alternative world views - sometimes only for the audience, sometimes for the film characters as well.

8.2 Alternate and Possible Worlds: Skepticism Films as Multiple-Draft Narratives

Part of the effect of cinema on its audiences is based on the audience’s implicit awareness that it is a projection of a non- or pre-recorded (part of the) world. A narrative fiction film’s credibility depends on the willingness of its audience to make-believe that the screened film is set in a counterfactual or alternate world that presents a “possible state (or history) of the world” (Kripke 1980: 48, fn15), e.g. a “counterfactual course of history” that resembles “the actual course in some respects but not in others” (Kripke 1980: 6). Counterfactual history books and films put this assumption to the extremes when they, for instance, imagine a world in which Nazi Germany has won the Second World War, such as the film adaptation of Robert Harris’ novel Fatherland or Philip K. Dick’s The Man in the High Castle.

Apart from envisioning a different course of history, possible worlds in film can also be governed by different laws of nature or by phenomena believed to be mystical, improbable or impossible in our world: teleportation (the STAR TREK franchise), time travel – e.g., TIME BANDITS (Gilliam, 1982), BUTTERFLY EFFECT (Bress and Gruber, 2004) or the presence of talking animals in ANTZ (Darnell and Johnson, 1998), FINDING NEMO (Andrew Stanton, Lee Unkrich, 2003), WHO Framed Roger Rabbit? (Zemeckis, 1988). Horror films also imagine a possible world governed by phenomena we would call ‘supernatural’ – for instance by introducing Undead beings in BRAM STOKER’S DRACULA (Coppola, 1992), NOSFERATU, EINE SYMPHONIE DES GRAUENS (Murnau, 1922), NOSFERATU: PHANTOM DER NACHT (Herzog, 1979), VAMPYR (Dreyer, 1932), THE MUMMY (Sommers, 1999), NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD (Romero, 1968), or WARM BODIES (Levine, 2013). Such film worlds, however, need to appear coherent enough (or cover logical flaws up sufficiently) in order to be accepted as a possible fictional world at least for the duration of the audience’s immersion in the film.

Narrative fiction films, then, present possible worlds, alternative states of reality. The concept of possible worlds used in this chapter is derived from Saul Kripke’s theory of direct reference which can fruitfully be adapted for conceptualising the relation of films to the world their audience is part of. Kripke’s account, which is primarily aimed at

273 See chapter 5.
274 See Harris 1992 and Dick 1992 [1962]. Dick’s novel is interesting since its characters imagine the possibility that history could have been different; that the Allies instead of the Nazis have won the war (see also Taylor 2012). Harris’ novel was adapted as the film FATHERLAND (Menaul, 1994). Harris’ and Dick’s novels belongs to the literary genre of alternate history, which despite its cross-references is distinct from “counterfactual history”. The latter is a sub-discipline in history and the Social Sciences which evaluates the importance of certain historical events and persons by developing alternative outcomes of these events, or different acting personalities involved in the historical process. One of the first scholars to establish virtual history as a legitimate branch of the humanities and social sciences is Geoffrey Hawthorn in books like Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences (Hawthorn 1991). Another influential collection of essays on Virtual History. Alternatives and Counterfactuals is provided by Niall Ferguson (Ferguson [ed.] 1999).
275 This statement is valid for documentary films as well. Even though they claim to represent events and states that actually occur in the world, this claim must be confirmed by the audience.
solving a range of philosophical problems about the reference of proper names, identity, and other issues in the philosophy of language and metaphysics, is also well-suited for describing the peculiar ontology of skepticism films.\footnote{The key concept employed by Kripke is “fixing the reference”: “There is a certain referent which we have fixed, for the real world and for all possible worlds, by a contingent property of it, namely the property that it’s able to produce such sensations in us.” (Kripke 1980: 132). Fixing a reference is not the same as giving a definition: With the help of expressions we fix the reference of names, which allows us to identify the object we want to refer to among a given set of objects. It is in this sense that the expression is used for fixing the reference in all possible worlds. While the set of expressions which allow identifying an object can be different from possible world to possible world, the world of the speaker is the area of reference which is the starting point for the identification of objects.}

In Kripke’s account, thinking about fictional objects and persons, and about counterfactual states of reality implies that human beings neither invent a new language nor a completely new world in thinking about possible worlds and counterfactual scenarios. They rather adapt the language and the world they already use and experience to the requirements of the alternative scenario. Put differently: We think about other worlds, such as the possibility of multiple levels of simulated reality, in terms which are derived from the world as it actually appears to us.

Possible worlds as conceived by Kripke are thus not “like a foreign country” (Kripke 1980: 43), “a distant country that we are coming across, or viewing through a telescope”. They are rather “given by the descriptive conditions we associate with it,” and therefore “are stipulated, not discovered by powerful telescopes” (Kripke 1980: 44). For Kripke it is essential that in thinking about alternative states of reality we do not conceive other realities from the scratch, but rather start with the world that is already present to us, and then begin to imagine certain objects or elements in it differently:

“We can refer to the object and ask what might have happened to it. So, we do not begin with worlds […], and then ask about criteria of transworld identification; on the contrary, we begin with the objects, which we have, and can identify, in the actual world. We can then ask whether certain things might have been true of the objects.” (Kripke 1980: 53)\footnote{Such an account avoids the objection often raised against modal accounts that they require the identification of “counterparts” in possible worlds. For Kripke, instead of looking for the “counterpart relation” (Kripke 1980: 45, fn13) between an object in the actual world and its counterpart in the imagined possible world, a speaker can “simply […] ask whether certain things might have been true of the [already known, PS] object[…].” (Kripke 1980: 53) in the possible world.}

Applied to cinema, Kripke’s account allows describing film worlds as projected partial transformations of the world their audience is already familiar with. However, these transformations assume a more or less radical form – a documentary transformation in films such as DARWIN’S NIGHTMARE (Sauper, 2004) or PLASTIC PLANET (Boote, 2009), a narrato-documentary in EARTH (Fothergill and Linfield, 2007) or SICKO (Moore, 2007), where a documentary topic is presented narratively. The stories told in narrative fiction films transform the world in several ways as well, ranging from quasi-historical sujets in BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN (Eisenstein, 1925), neo-realistic approaches to a story in PAISÀ (Rossellini, 1946) or ROMA, CITTA APERTA (Rossellini, 1945), up to the pseudo-realistic stories with a super-natural touch told by Hollywood action hero blockbusters such as HANCOCK (Berg, 2008). Berg’s film situates an immortal God-like superhero with supernatural powers in an otherwise realistic depiction of upper-class Los Angeles at the beginning of the 21st century. At the extreme end of this scale are alternate history films such as the already mentioned FATHERLAND.
and fantastic, science fiction, or animation films such as Alice in Wonderland (Burton, 2010), ANTZ, Men in Black (Sonnenfeld, 1997), or Avatar (Cameron, 2009).

However, all these films introduce only partial changes to the world as known to the audience. Instead of envisioning a “distant country that we are coming across,” they only change elements of the world already known, similar to a house owner who changes the arrangement of furniture in his living room or replaces his white couch with a red one.  

Conceiving of (narrative fiction) films as possible worlds that are evaluated by audiences in terms of credibility allows asking whether the world could actually be the way it is presented in the film, or whether the events presented in the film could really happen, or have happened, the way they do in the film. This assumption can be formulated more precisely: Applied to a film like JFK (Stone, 1991), which presents an account of the events leading up to the assassination of former US president John F. Kennedy that runs contrary to the official version, the question becomes ‘have things actually happened that way?’ – has Kennedy actually been murdered by a lone assassin called Lee Harvey Oswald, or has there been a conspiracy plot to kill the president? Applied to action films such as Die Hard (McTiernan, 1988), in which nationalist terrorists plot an attack on a skyscraper, the question is transformed into ‘could things happen like that?’, a question affirmed by the terrorist attacks on New York’s World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. In relation to a third set of films one might rather ask, along with James Walters, whether the plot presented by the film is conceivable, while the question of happenstance is of secondary importance.

These different meanings of conceivability play a crucial role for the analysis and evaluation of skepticism films. The skepticist scenarios presented in The Truman Show, Matrix, or The Thirteenth Floor (Rusnak, 1999) must be conceivable, i.e. coherent enough to allow at least temporary acceptance as a thought experiment worth being considered by the audience (and the philosopher relating them to the philosophical problem of skepticism). At least some of the skepticism films, however, must also answer the question of possibility: Is it possible that such a state of the world exists? Is it possible that someone spends his entire life in a gigantic TV studio without realising it?

In general, films explore implicit ‘what if?’ questions, while skepticism films address explicit ones. They explicitly present either counterfactual or alternative realities or introduce conflicting accounts of reality, e.g. between the world as understood by a deceived person and the world as it present to a deceiver. Since they play with different perspectives on the world, non-actual states of the world, skepticism films are close to another recent “certain tendency in contemporary cinema” (Elsaesser 2009a: 14): Multiple-draft narratives and forking-path plots.

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278 This is one of the reasons why alien life forms in science fiction and fantasy forms always appear so humanoid.

279 Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland use the “theory of possible worlds” in order to explain “the ontology of the digital image,” but they only use it for conceptualising the difference between the “digital image” and the (analog) “optical image”: “the digital image is not bound or limited to the actual world in the same way as the optical image” (all quotes: Elsaesser and Buckland 2003: 211).
8.3 ‘What If?’ Questions, Multiple-draft Narratives, Forking-path Plots

As we saw, narrative fiction films can generally be understood as presenting fictional or alternate realities as compared to the ‘real’ world of the audience. But there is another set of films which internalises this distinction. Such films operate on a distinction between multiple states of the film’s diegesis. David Bordwell calls them “multiple-draft narratives” (Bordwell 2002); Edward Branigan discusses them under the rubric of “forking-path plots” (Branigan 2002). These films use ‘what if?’ questions as the starting point or structuring element of their narrative. Multiple-draft narratives such as LOLA RENNT (Tykwer, 1998), SLIDING DOORS (Howitt 1998), GROUNDHOG DAY (Ramis, 1994), or IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE (Capra, 1946) envision several outcomes of narrative events, several possible paths the lives of their main characters could have taken. Thereby they allow their characters (or at least the film audience) to cast a glance at answers to the question ‘what if life had been different?’

Narratologically speaking, multiple-draft narratives explore different plot lines “seriatim” (Bordwell 2002: 89). The film audience is challenged to keep in mind the different versions of the film plot s/he is presented with one after another. In contrast, typical mind-game films such as MULHOLLAND DRIVE, DONNIE DARKO (Kelly, 2001), or ASHES OF TIME (Kar-Wai, 1994) usually present one single plot line, but do so in such a way that spectator interpretations of the film can differ to a great extent. But both film categories are not mutually exclusive. One example is the mind-game film EXISTENZ (Cronenberg, 1999), in which the characters move from one level of a (virtual reality) computer game to the next. EXISTENZ uses a kind of narrative video game logic and aims at confusing its spectators by leaving it unclear during the first viewing on which level of reality a given scene takes place (and at which level of reality the film actually starts).

IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE establishes a ‘standard’ state of the diegesis and of its characters during the first part of the film, which is subsequently altered through the introduction of counterfactual occurrences and circumstances: Faced with bankruptcy, the film’s protagonist George Bailey (James Stewart) wants to commit suicide and wishes he had never been born. God listens and fulfils this wish and sends Clarence, one of his angels (Henry Travers), to help George coming back to his hometown. However, a lot of bad things have happened in the wake of George’s absence (since in the new state of the world George was never born): His brother Harry (Todd Karns) died as a little boy because there was no George to save him from the frozen lake he once fell into. His wife Mary (Donna Reed) has become a sad and lonely woman, and his hometown, formerly a Disney-esque Home of the Brave, has changed into a small-scale version of Frank Miller’s Sin City. The film then proceeds along the lines of Classical Hollywood Melodrama, making George realise the foolishness of his wish, from which he eventually...

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280 Chapter 8.3 uses material from my article “Paradigmatic Forking-Path Films: Intersections between Mind-Game Films and Multiple-Draft Narratives” (Schmerheim 2008a).

281 Films, too, result from a series of decisions made by filmmakers during the pre-production, shooting, and post-production process. Theoretically, each release version of a film could have turned out differently, at least in minor respects: Lead roles could have been cast differently, the film could have different locations or been shot in black-and-white instead of colour. Most importantly, the entire plot of a film, or elements of it, could be different. For instance, any given film could have been shot with a different ending. The film seen and heard during a screening is only one possible result of the creative process of filmmaking. In short: each film suppresses “alternative tellings of the story, and alternate stories [...] in favour of the final version” (Branigan 2002: 107).
refrains. Coming home at the end of the movie, the entire town is already waiting for him and everybody donates money in order to save him from bankruptcy.

In IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE, a hypothetical thought – ‘what if I had never been born?’ – is temporarily transformed into filmic reality. The narrative locates a forking point of the story – George Bailey’s birth/non-birth – and elaborates two plot lines which are counterfactual to each other. Adhering to Hollywood’s narrative closure rule, the end of the film takes up the initial, non-counterfactual plot line again: George Bailey continues with his life as a bankrupt bank manager, while the alternate plot line, in which he has never been born, is closed and thereby rejected as an actual state of the world. Of the two plot lines, the first one is dominant, while the other one is reduced to a mere possibility, a conceivable world that is not actualised. This does not mean that the latter is non-existent. In Deleuzian parlance, the (diegetic) world without George Bailey is a virtual world, not an actual world (regarded from the perspective of the film diegesis). Bailey only manages to find out about another, virtual state of the world because the film’s God allows him to see it.

The difference between the two possible states of the world presented in IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE is put to screen with identical characters and locations. IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE is a filmic example of Kripke’s notion of “fixing the reference” introduced earlier: The alternative state of the world wished for by George Bailey is presented to him as a partial transformation of an already known world. To quote Kripke again, “we begin with the objects, which we have, and can identify, in the actual world. We can then ask whether certain things might have been true of the objects” (Kripke 1980:52).

In contrast to IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE, Woody Allen’s film MELINDA & MELINDA (Allen, 2004) envisions a tragic and a comic version of the life of the film’s protagonist Melinda (Radha Mitchell). In the one version she is a depressive and suicidal woman, in the other one an urbanised single who is enjoying her life. In the film, the two stories are introduced by a couple of characters who contemplate the question whether life is essentially comic or tragic during a restaurant dinner. In order to get closer to an answer, they imagine a comic and a tragic version of Melinda’s life. Accordingly, this means that the film does not privilege one of the alternate plot lines.

MELINDA & MELINDA present non-hierarchical alternative plot lines, while films such as IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE and also LOLA RENNT introduce counterfactual plot lines - counterfactual compared to a dominant, favoured plot line. The comparison of IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE to MELINDA & MELINDA also shows that multiple plot lines are no privilege of contemporary cinema, but are already present in classical Hollywood cinema.282

In the preceding sections, I used the term “counterfactual” to stress that many multiple-draft narratives rest on dominant plot lines. Bordwell uses the additional phrase “forking-path plots”, borrowing from Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “The Garden of Forking Paths”.283 At one point in that story, the narrator describes an ontological account in which every conceivable state of affairs in the world – in the past, present, and

282 David Bordwell lists a number of older films which rely on multiple-draft plotting, calling GROUNDHOG DAY (Ramis, 1993) the “prototype”. Among the older films mentioned are THE LOVE OF SUNYA (1927), THRU DIFFERENT EYES (1929), and THE I DON’T CARE GIRL (1953) (see Bordwell 2011).

283 See Borges 1998.
future – is extant. That is, according to the forking-path account each state of the world that we, from our position in the world, would call counterfactual, is extant, subsists somewhere else, in some other (state of the) world. Using Deleuzian terms again, according to Borges’ ‘garden of forking paths’ metaphor there are many virtual states of the world, while only some of them are, at certain moments, actual.

In Borges’ story this is visualised by the picture of the garden of forking paths. All possible states of the world(s) are contained in this garden, and each life takes place on several of the forking paths there. According to this account there is no such thing as a counterfactual occurrence, because each of these occurrences subsists somewhere. This does not mean that talking of ‘counterfactual occurrences’ does not make sense. It does, but only in relation to a favourite point of view or favourite ‘path through the garden’, or in relation to a favourite telling of the film’s story that has already been chosen by the filmmaker or spectator in advance (see Branigan 2002: 107).

Even if the ending of multiple-draft narratives tends to favour a final, definite outcome, it does not necessarily supersede the other preceding plot lines. In LOLA RENNT, a film about the young woman Lola who must find 100,000 Mark within the next 81 minutes in order to save her boyfriend’s life, Lola (Franka Potente) apparently advances in mastering her obstacles from repetition to repetition. She learns from her failures in preceding plot lines and eventually manages to save her boyfriend Manni (Moritz Bleibtreu) from certain death.284

Tykwer’s film also blurs the distinction between counterfactual and alternative plot lines: On the one hand, the non-dominant plot lines are counterfactual, since they contradict the final, favoured plot line. On the other hand they are alternative and extant, since the Lola seems to learn from her preceding failures and eventually gets the future right. In Borgesian terms, not only are all the alternative states of (our) world extant, but they even influence one another. Bordwell calls this phenomenon a “crosstalk between futures” (Bordwell 2002: 98f.).

Lola’s (unconscious) learning process is similar to the one Phil Connors (Bill Murray) goes through in GROUNDHOG DAY. Connors, a misanthropic and cynical television weather forecaster, all of a sudden finds himself waking up every morning on the same day in a hotel in the small town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, where he is scheduled to report from the annual ‘groundhog day’ festivities. He is forced to live through this day again and again and again and only manages to break the curse put on him in this filmic adaptation of the Nietzschean “Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen” by becoming a good human being and winning the heart of the woman he loves.285

BUTTERFLY EFFECT even explicitly relies on the idea that the events in one plot line influence other plot lines as well. The film’s main character, the teenager Evan (Ashton Kutcher), suffers from blackouts and cannot remember the catastrophic events that happened during these blackouts. His therapist advises him to keep a diary. Years later, as a college student, he discovers that he is able to travel back in time to these events, where his grown-up mind takes over the body of his childhood alter ego. He decides to change the horrible things that happened back then, but each time he returns to the

284 See Bordwell 2002: 100 about “getting the future right”, and Bordwell 2002: 102 about multiple-draft films’ search for the “most satisfying revision” of the plot.

285 Nietzsche most famously coined his account of eternal recurrence (“Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen”) in his Also sprach Zarathustra (Nietzsche 1989 [1883]). See, for instance, the chapter “Vom Gesicht und Rätsel”. 

Lola Rennt

Butterfly Effect
present he realises that the changes made in the past often have disastrous effects on his and his friends’ future lives. Consequently, he returns to another one of his childhood blackouts – which for the later Evan are doorways, or switch points, into the past – in order to literally get the future right. This, however, does not work: every time he manages to rescue one person, someone else has to suffer. Finally, he realises that the disastrous chain of events originated at the moment his childhood girlfriend Kayleigh (Amy Smart) fell in love with him while she was still a child. He returns to the earliest switch point he is able to find, a children’s birthday, and whispers a threat into the young girl’s ears. As a consequence, she never develops the affection for him that later would indirectly cause so many tragic circumstances. The final scene in the director’s cut is even more radical: Evan returns to the moment before he was born and strangles himself with his umbilical cord while still being in his mother’s womb. BUTTERFLY EFFECT is the clearest example of an entanglement of different plot lines and even comes close to creating a garden of forking paths, because it is easy to imagine that even small changes at any point in Evan’s life could alter its future course in important respects. This idea resembles the structure of popular chaos theory examples which also explain the film’s title: The flapping wings of a butterfly in a South American rainforest might be able to (indirectly) cause a hurricane in Florida.

But at least from a spectator’s point of view, there are limits to the amount of changes: Bordwell argues that (mainstream) films only employ a limited amount of alternative plot lines in order to keep the film cognitively manageable by an average spectator (Bordwell 2002: 88). One of the limitations of standard multiple-draft narratives, compared to a Borgesian garden of forking paths, is that usually the alternative plot lines start from a “fixed point – the fork”, and, once the alternative plot line is finished, return to this “switchpoint”, in order to start another plot line (Bordwell 2002: 89). In addition, the plots are overall relatively stable. Unlike multiple-draft narratives, films working with the forking-path model would potentially overwhelm a spectator’s cognitive capacities.

In other words: even if conventional multiple-draft narratives are more complex than traditional narratives, they are usually designed in such a way that they do not pose demands that are above an average audience’s cognitive capacities. They do not push forward the philosophical idea of forking paths as consequently as would be possible in theory.286 For the purposes of this book, the most important function of multiple-draft narratives and forking-path plots is their explicit implementation of ‘what if?’ questions. These films entertain the idea that the world, a course of events, or persons could turn out to be different from what they are thought to be. It is this idea they share with skepticism films, the subset of films that is the main concern here. However, there are at

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286 Deleuze discusses a Borgesian story forking paths through the paradox of “contingent futures” – the apparent logical dilemma of aligning statements about the potential occurrence of a further event with the statement that the event has in fact taken place – as an illustration of the “powers of the false” by which claims to truth are substituted, since these powers “pose[…]the simultaneity of incomposable presents, or the coexistence of not-necessarily true pasts.” (Deleuze 1989: 127) Deleuze uses this for describing a “a new status of narration” (Deleuze 1989: 129) which expresses an “irreducible multiplicity” (ibid.) of outcomes of events, a form of narrating in which diverging possible courses of events of a story are seen as hierarchically equal; there is no one “true” or “truthful” account of these events anymore. Applied to Bordwell’s concept of multiple-draft films, the attempt of “getting the future right,” of trying to eventually attain a satisfying “happy end” for the film characters, loses significance.
least three typical differences between multiple-draft narratives/forking path plots and skepticism films:

First, while multiple-draft narratives present different ontologies, skepticism film typically operate with one diegetic world which, however, is subdivided into several layers or levels of reality (e.g., a ‘real’ world and a computer-simulated world) which are accessible, and recognisable, to different extents to different members of that world. Multiple-draft narratives, while typically relying on a dominant plot line that represents the diegesis as it actually, or eventually, is, explicitly mark counterfactual or alternative plot lines as such. These non-dominant plot lines hence are assigned a status comparable to the scenarios imagined in philosophical thought experiments.

Second, multiple-draft narratives and forking-path plots do not operate with deception hypotheses. They do not involve an ‘evil’ deceiver who misleads his victims about the world they actually inhabit. Interestingly enough, the main characters in multiple-draft narratives and forking-path plots are, in general, aware of their involvement with alternative or counterfactual tellings of the story (GROUNDHOG DAY, BUTTERFLY EFFECT, IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE), or the different plot lines are in the first place introduced as thought experiments, as narratological devices directly aimed at the film audience (LOLA RENNT, SLIDING DOORS, MELINDA & MELINDA).^287

Third, skepticism films concern their characters’ ability to recognise the world they are living in as what it is. While multiple-draft narratives and forking-path plots primarily address ontological questions and problems (concerning the course of life) that result from the way our world is, skepticism films infuse an additional epistemological element in the questions they raise, since they are concerned with the philosophical problem of the possibility of knowing the world as it is.

As the case studies will show clearly, skepticism films also operate with simpler narrative strategies as compared to mind-game films, forking-path films or multiple-draft narratives. The different focus such film phenomena have on philosophical issues and narrato-aesthetic strategies makes them a useful comparative backdrop for the analysis of skepticism films.

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287 However, LOLA RENNT introduces, as already mentioned, a kind of “cross-talk” between the three plot lines, since the main character Lola learns from earlier failures and avoids them in subsequent plot lines.