Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema
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Comparative Analysis of MATRIX, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, and THE TRUMAN SHOW

10.1 So you Wanna Be A Reality TV Show Star? On A Pervasive Illusion In Contemporary Media Society

Who would not want to be the hero of his own film or TV show? Such desire drives the Buster Keaton character of SHERLOCK JUNIOR (Keaton and Arbuckle, 1924) beyond the barriers of the silver screen, albeit only in his dreams; such desire drives teenagers into casting shows such as AMERICA’S GOT TALENT (TV show, 2006-), or GERMANY’S NEXT TOP MODEL (TV show, 2006-); such desire drives ex-stars or wannabe celebrities into self-exploiting reality shows such as BIG BROTHER (TV show, 1999-) or I’M A CELEBRITY – GET ME OUT OF HERE! (TV show, 2002-). As many of those who tried to rise to stardom can tell, the celebrity status comes along with a number of discomforts – not the least of them the awareness of being under constant surveillance, which can have effects on one’s public behaviour.\textsuperscript{312}

The reality show is an old idea in the Western fiction universe, and metaphorically is one of the undercurrents of almost all systems of religious thought: There might be a Deity watching you, someone who imposes trials and challenges on you in order to see how well you cope with them. Greek mythology is a kind of gigantic reality show for the entertainment of the Olympic Gods, who are watching their human guinea pigs from the Olymp. Where the Christian, Jewish or Islamic God is still a normative force that tests the moral character of his creations, the Greek Gods are more alike to contemporary television audiences: They tune into the ‘reality games’ for sheer pleasure, since not

\textsuperscript{310} Nietzsche 1972: 35. Trans. Walter Kaufmann: “Now the Olympian magic mountain opens itself before us, showing us its very roots. The Greeks were keenly aware of the terrors and horrors of existence; in order to be able to live at all they had to place before them the shining fantasy of the Olympians”.

\textsuperscript{311} This chapter is a rewritten and thoroughly expanded version of chapter 4 of my Amsterdam MA thesis.

\textsuperscript{312} This, of course, is the central thought of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon: If in a prison you install a central observation post which potentially overlooks all areas of the prison, this steers the prisoner’s behavior. As is well-known, Michel Foucault adapted Bentham for his concept of modern disciplinary societies (see Foucault 1975). Foucault’s ideas are even more pertinent in the context of the current data surveillance scandals exposed.
always do the ancient human trials result from a normative impetus, or from power struggles among the Olympians.

While the Olympic shows still take place in what humans beings regard as the ‘real’ world, Platonism and religious-spiritual traditions like Gnosticim have shaped or inspired belief systems according to which the world of concrete and human flesh is only a non-real environment, a dream or a metaphysically inferior world as compared to the world of forms (Plato) or the spiritual world (Gnosticism).\(^{315}\)

This idea of a world which is in some significant respect not ‘good enough’ is counterpart to the skepticist idea that the world as we experience it might not be the world there really is. Where the skeptic wants to get out of the world as she knows it into the world as it is, the metaphysical escapist, once she has gained insight into the illusory nature of the material world, wants to get away from the world as it is (i.e. the world she naturally inhabits) into the world as it should be.\(^{314}\)

Casting show or reality show competitors are aware of at least one factor: That she deliberately enters a fake, controlled environment under surveillance by an audience. As seen in chapters 4 and 7, skepticist thought experiments radicalise the idea of living in fake or even simulated environments by asking questions such as “what if I do not know I am the star of a daily reality show? What if I do not know that I am living in a simulated environment which is observed and created by its creators?”\(^{315}\)

The present chapter focuses on three films which play with varieties of the idea of non-deliberately living in simulated or fake worlds: MATRIX (A. and L. Wachowski, 1999), THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR (Rusnak, 1999), and THE TRUMAN SHOW (Weir, 1998). While MATRIX presents a prototypical version of a skepticist thought experiment – envatted brains unknowingly immersed in computer-simulated worlds – the other two films introduce philosophically interesting variations: THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR tells the story of the computer expert Douglas Hall who develops simulated environments which are populated by self-conscious computer algorithms, which in turn are not aware of being only programmed and simulated. Eventually the film reveals that Hall himself is a computer program in a computer-simulated world observed by a programmer on a higher level of reality. The evil deceiver is in a deception situation as well.

In effect, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR replaces MATRIX’ model of a corporeal being mentally immersed in a computer-generated environment with the model of a disembodied self-conscious algorithm embedded in a computer-generated environment. In contrast to such cyberworld films, THE TRUMAN SHOW operates on the basis of a physically real yet fake environment. Only the main character Truman Burbank is ignorant about his predicament, while all the other inhabitants and observers of that environment – the actors, staff, producers and audience of the show – are aware of it.

Of these three films only THE TRUMAN SHOW operates with such an extreme form of epistemic asymmetry. In MATRIX most of the inhabitants of the simulated world are

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\(^{313}\) Plato’s Theory of Forms is addressed in chapter 4.

\(^{314}\) The latter idea gives rise to a certain perverted version of Gnosticism: That the skeptic, without knowing it, already inhabits the world as it should be, or some film characters in the Matrix this is exactly the point: It is a world for those who prefer the computationally enhanced taste of a steak to the way it actually tastes.

\(^{315}\) Television show like SURPRISE, SURPRISE (1984-2001, German title: VERSTEHEN SIE SPAß?) play with a limited version of the idea of surveillance ignorance by exposing their victims to hidden camera situations. An ethico-political version of limited surveillance is elaborated in so-called “conspiracy films” (see footnote 250 in chapter 7).
equally ignorant about their predicament but in turn actually interact with each other, albeit in a virtual manner. The Thirteenth Floor complicates epistemic (a-)symmetry because the film characters move between three reality levels which reality status is known in some cases, yet unknown in others. Nevertheless, the social interactions in The Thirteenth Floor can be characterised as actual yet disembodied interaction between self-conscious computer programs.

Another group of interaction between characters is represented by Vanilla Sky (Crowe, 2001) and Abre Los Ojos (Alejandro Amenábar, 1997): The films suggest that there is actually no interaction between the main character David/César and the other inhabitants of his phenomenological world; the latter are only mental projections within David’s/César’s cryogenic dream state.316 The solipsistic solitaires of Vanilla Sky and Abre Los Ojos present cases of self-deception, as chapter 11 will argue. The characters themselves are responsible for the deception they are subjected to, not some external force.

Being produced at roughly the same time within the Hollywood system, Matrix, The Thirteenth Floor, and The Truman Show explicate a shared idea in different ways: They are structured around the idea of moving between different levels or layers of reality but choose different narrato-aesthetic strategies for hiding and sharing the deception scenario from and with the film characters and the film audience. The films are configurations of skepticist thought experiments which, like traditional philosophical literature, explore various skepticist possibilities (see chapter 4.4).

Plot summaries and background information for each film prepare the in-depth analysis in the subsequent sections (chapter 10.2), followed by an analysis of the films’ ontological structure (chapter 10.3) and narrato-aesthetic strategies of conveying it (chapter 10.4). Chapter 10.5 will then address other audio-visual aspects of the films which are interesting from a philosophical point of view (chapter 10.5). A preliminary summary concludes the chapter (chapter 10.6).

10.2 Plot Summaries and Background Information

10.2.1 Matrix

Plot summary: Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves), a computer programmer for a large software corporation, leads a double life as a hacker named ‘Neo’. All the while suspecting that there is something wrong with the world he lives in, and trying to find out what the mysterious ‘Matrix’ is, he follows an invitation to meet Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), the leader of an underground rebel group. Morpheus reveals to him the truth about this world and the Matrix. Anderson is asked to choose between a blue and a red pill:

“You take the blue pill – the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill – you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember, all I’m offering is the truth – nothing more.” (Matrix, scene 7; see fig. 10.67 and 10.68)

316 The films are analysed in chapter 11.
After Neo has swallowed the red pill, he is connected to computer instruments. The rebels literally unplug him and show him the real state his world is in: A nuclear war between mankind and machines which have risen to artificial intelligence has devastated the earth’s entire surface. The humans lost the war and are now used by the machines as a living source for generating the energy required for their survival. The Matrix is a computer-generated simulation of the world as it existed before the war, built in order to keep the humans unaware of their present situation. Only a few humans, among them Morpheus and his crew, managed to escape from the simulation. Now they are trying to rescue the rest of humankind and lead them to an underground city called ‘Zion’. In order to achieve their mission, the rebels repeatedly return into the simulated environment with the help of special devices on their rebel ship ‘Nebuchadnezzar’. Morpheus believes that Neo is the One, a Jesus-Christ-like saviour, who was foretold to free humankind from the Matrix. While he learns the skills necessary for surviving the upcoming confrontation with the agents – dangerous and powerful surveillance programs within the Matrix – Neo falls in love with Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), a member of the rebel team.

When Neo meets the Oracle, a female prophet able to see the future, he starts doubting whether he is really the One. But then Morpheus is captured by Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving). Neo decides to go back into the Matrix and rescue Morpheus, although nobody survived a direct confrontation with the agents before. The rescue mission ends in a showdown between him and Agent Smith, during which Smith kills Neo. Neo miraculously resurrects when Trinity confesses her love to him on the rebel ship and kisses his lifeless body. This resurrection is final proof that Neo is the One, and with his newly acquired powers he successfully battles Agent Smith. The film ends with Neo’s acknowledgement that he is the One and that his task is to free humankind from the Matrix.

Background Information: The Wachowski siblings’ second feature film was produced with a budget of 63 million US-$, grossing a worldwide 463 million US-$.

The Matrix films are paradigmatic examples for a transmedial franchise in an age of media convergence: Under the Wachowski’s direction, the story-world is explored in video games, graphic novels, anime short films, and other media outlets. Like a typical high concept film, MATRIX is a kaleidoscope of pop-cultural phenomena, with references to cyberpunk, film noir, Manga, Anime such as AKIRA (Otomo, 1987) and GHOST IN THE SHELL (Oshii, 1996), superhero graphic novels, Martial Arts films, and science fiction films such as the TERMINATOR quadrilogy and the ALIEN films. Not by coincidence, Neo becomes a flying virtual Superman. The frequent references to graphic novels culture is not surprising, considering that the Wachowskis started their career as comic book artists at Marvel Comics. The rooftop

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The film’s success at the box office secured the production of two sequels, MATRIX RELOADED (A. and L. Wachowski, 2003) and MATRIX REVOLUTIONS (A. and L. Wachowski, 2003). The MATRIX films are paradigmatic examples for a transmedial franchise in an age of media convergence: Under the Wachowski’s direction, the story-world is explored in video games, graphic novels, anime short films, and other media outlets.

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chase scene and title sequence are homages to the prologue and opening credits of \textit{Vertigo} (Hitchcock, 1958) (see fig. 10.1).

![Fig. 10.1 and 10.2: \textsc{Matrix}](image1)

The \textsc{Matrix} franchise plays with pop-cultural references to such a high degree that it has repeatedly been understood as a postmodern film, as a “mixed-genre film” (Kinght and McKnight 2002: 188), as a film “which function[s] as a kind of Rohrschach test” (Zizek 2002: 240), or simply a youth phenomenon (Barg 2004).

One of the most visible influences is William Gibson’s \textit{Neuromancer} trilogy (Gibson 1998 [1984]) – cyberpunk novels which pop-culturally coined the very term “Matrix” as a reference to virtual worlds. The protagonists of the first novel, Case and Molly, are blueprints for Neo and Trinity. Case is a wrecked computer hacker, Molly a tough professional killer who, thanks to special implants in her head and body, is in command of almost supernatural skills. Like Trinity, she wears a tight leather dress. The characters manoeuvre through a cyberspace that generated artificial intelligences (AI) with an own personality. The AI are now trying to create an own environment which, at the end of the book, also contains human beings who are not aware of actually living in a simulated reality. The parallels to the \textsc{Matrix} films are evident.

![Fig. 10.3 and 10.4: \textsc{Matrix}](image2)

Other cyberpunk references are Harlan Ellison’s short story \textit{I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream} (Ellison 2001, compare fig. 10.2 and scene 5), and the work of Philip K. Dick, specifically the stories \textit{Time Out of Joint} (Dick 2002 [1959]) or \textit{The Crack in Space} (Dick 2005 [1966]).

There are massive allusions to the Bible and other religious traditions, in the first place Neo’s function as a Jesus-Christ-like saviour who at the end of the film even resurrec...
power (seq. 2); in \textit{MATRIX RELOADED} Morpheus steps in front of the inhabitants of Zion like a prophet announcing the return of the Messiah.

Last, but not least, Lewis Carroll’s \textit{Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland} (Carroll (2001 [1863])) figures prominently in the film. In sequence II, Neo is lured into a nightclub with the onscreen message “follow the White Rabbit”. Shortly thereafter, he notices the tattoo of a white rabbit on the shoulder of a girl that belongs to a group of people who invited him to go out with them (fig. 10.4). The references to Carroll’s stories are very explicit: For instance, during the first meeting in sequence 4, Morpheus asks Neo: “I imagine right now you’re feeling a bit like Alice, tumbling down the rabbit-hole?” Subsequently, he says to him “If you take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes” (see scene 6).\textsuperscript{321}

This limited selection shows that the \textit{MATRIX} films (and the other films which will be addressed in the following sections) explicitly invoke a vast reservoir of (pop-)cultural motifs and themes that play with the blurry boundaries between reality and illusion. By doing so, they screen the rich web of narrative and aesthetic reflection on the skepticist tradition.

\subsection{10.2.2 The Thirteenth Floor}

\textbf{Plot summary:} Software specialist Dr. Hannon Fuller (Armin Mueller-Stahl) and his team are secretly working on a computer-generated simulation of Los Angeles as it was in 1937. It is inhabited by sentient computer programs who believe they are living in a real environment. Using an augmented reality device, Fuller regularly enters the virtual world, there inhabiting his virtual counterpart Grierson. When Fuller is found stabbed in an alley, his assistant and sole inheritor Douglas Hall (Craig Bierko) is the primary suspect. Mysteriously, around the same time, Fuller’s previously unknown daughter Jane (Gretchen Mol) appears and claims the heritage. Hall and Jane quickly fall in love with each other. With the help of his colleague Whitney (Vincent D’Onofrio) Hall tries to prove his innocence. In the hope of finding a message that Fuller left for him in the simulation shortly before his death, Hall jacks in to the simulated world, where he assumes the identity of John Ferguson. He quickly discovers that Fuller led a double life — inside the simulation, the respected head of a large software company was a wealthy playboy. Finally, Hall discovers what Fuller had to pay for with his life: Even the apparently real world at the end of the 20th century that Hall lives in is only a simulation, controlled from a higher reality level by the malevolent, run-amok computer programmer David. It turns out that Jane is David’s wife and is trying to rescue Douglas, David’s better digital counterpart, from her crazy husband. In a dramatic showdown, Jane manages to elevate Douglas to the next level of reality — at the welcome cost of David’s death. The film ends with a gold-coloured establishing shot of the two lovers looking at a 2024 version of Santa Monica beach. Before the end credits begin to roll, the

\textsuperscript{321} In \textit{Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland} Alice follows a white rabbit into a rabbit hole that hides a tunnel through which she literally tumbles into Wonderland. \textit{MATRIX} takes up this motif: When Neo is unplugged, the camera zooms into his open throat as if into the real world where he wakes up in a vat filled with fluids. When the fluid is suctioned, he tumbles into the sewers through a tube. That scene is a rip-off from the end of \textit{STAR WARS – EPISODE V: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK} (Kershner, 1980), where Luke Skywalker falls through a tube system after his failed fight against Darth Vader.
shot is ‘turned off’ like an old-fashioned television tube apparatus (see fig. 10.36 and fig. 10.37).

Background Information: THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, a co-production between Roland Emmerich and Michael Ballhaus directed by German director Josef Rusnak, is an adaptation of the novel Simulacron-3 by Daniel F. Galouye (Galouye 1964) and, although very different in style and story-structure, a remake of Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s adaptation of the novel, Welt am Draht (Fassbinder, 1973). Like MATRIX, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR uses various references to cyberpunk literature, which is not surprising since Galouye’s book is part of that literary genre.

Rusnak’s film most probably derives its title from the circumstance that many buildings in the USA (as well as in other countries) officially do not have a thirteenth floor, since folk wisdom holds that the number 13 brings bad luck. The simulated world(s) in the film do not exist materially. The film combines elements of a Hitchcockian detective story – innocent crime suspect has to discover the truth about the murder – with neo-noir elements. The simulated world of 1937 is situated in a time period which immediately precedes the rise of film noir in Classical Hollywood Cinema in the 1940s.

THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR was released two months after MATRIX and, in comparison, failed at the box office. This can in part be explained by the fact that the former film’s production budget of 16 million US-$ almost equaled the marketing budget of MATRIX. Also, the well-crafted special effects of THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR pale in comparison to the action scenes presented in the Wachowski-Brothers vehicle – a significant factor in the marketing of a film.

10.2.3 The Truman Show

Plot summary: Insurance salesman Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) is the unwitting star of a documentary reality TV show. The small town of Seahaven he lived in his entire life actually is a gigantic television studio set, and everybody except him is an actor hired by the production company. Even his mother, his wife Meryl, and his best friend Marlon are hired actors. While Truman is entirely ignorant of his predicament, the film reveals Truman’s predicament to the film audience from its very beginning. The plot spans four days in Truman’s life during which he gradually realises that his entire life has been staged. On the first day shown in the film, a headlight crashes down from the sky in front of Truman, and subsequently he accidentally catches a radio frequency on which the show’s coordinators give each other notes on Truman’s whereabouts.

While in town, he accidentally runs into his father, whom he believed to be dead since 22 years. Before the two can talk, the old man is abducted by a group of mysterious men. To add to the series of strange events, Truman’s wish to go on holiday to the Fiji

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322 The phrase “Welt am Draht” could approximately be translated as “world on a wire,” an allusion that computer-simulated worlds depend for their existence on electricity. Ballhaus was the Director of Photography for Fassbinder’s television version and owns the film rights to the novel. The information on THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR in this paragraph was derived from the film’s profile on imdb.com (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0139809/).


324 See the imdb.com profile.
Islands, where he hopes to find his secret love Sylvia (Natasha McElhone), meets a number of insuperable obstacles. Although the TV show’s director Cristof (Ed Harris) is trying to keep up control over his life, Truman finally manages to escape from Seahaven in a boat.

Out on the ‘sea,’ Truman survives a gigantic storm raised by Cristof, who in the world of the TV studio possesses almost God-like powers. It is only when the sailing boat finally crashes into the wall which separates the TV studio from the world outside that Cristof tells Truman the truth about his world and his life. Although Cristof urges his star to stay inside his world, Truman decides to leave the studio into a new life. The film ends with Truman leaving the studio set through a dark door.

**Background Information:** With a world-wide gross of 264 Mio. US-$, THE TRUMAN SHOW is based on a screenplay by Andrew Niccol, who initially wanted to direct the film himself but was turned down because no studio wanted to hand over a 60-million-dollar-budget production to a newcomer. At that time, Niccol, who earned his first credentials in the British advertising film industry, had never directed a feature film. Instead, Peter Weir was eventually assigned as a director. In collaboration with Niccol, Weir made many changes to the initial screenplay while keeping its core ideas intact. E.g., the location was changed from metropolitan New York to the idealised small-town setting of Seahaven (see Bliss and Weir 1999: 6). Film production began some years after MTV aired its first episodes of THE REAL WORLD (TV show, 1992-), but was finished before Endemol started its BIG BROTHER reality show in 1999.

With the exception of the film scenes which take place in the observation room of Cristof, the film was shot on location in Seaside, Florida, a pre-planned community which is actually inhabited by wealthy families. Ironically, the ‘fake’ sky that supposedly is the painted dome of the giant TV studio is actually the ‘real’ sky above Seaside.

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326 In a self-ironical foreword to the published shooting script edition, Niccol answers the question how he came to write such a screenplay with “[i]t is because I suspect it is true. Who amongst us has not had the feeling that our friends, acquaintances, or even certain family members are acting? In my experience, they are overacting. There are obvious giveaways. Occasionally an ‘extra’ in your life – mailman, chiropractor, priest – will attempt to enlarge his role by launching into some melodramatic speech or in some other way try to upstage you. And the continuity errors in this long-running production are there for all to see. The same background players and traffic keep cropping up over and over. You wander into a store on a whim and discover that the actors are not prepared for your arrival and know next to nothing about leather goods. [...] However, my biggest criticism of the stage play people insist on calling ‘real life’ is the script – varying between the mundane predictable and the wildly implausible. Who writes this stuff?” (Niccol 1998a:ixf.)
327 It is interesting to see how Niccol here plays with the language of filmmaking. His little thought experiment – of everyday life being in fact a long-running ‘Truman Show’ – also shows that skepticist ruminations are basically radical imaginings of everyday experiences: There are people in one’s everyday life who are acting, or overacting; an ordinary life in fact consists of the same cast and extras which turn up around oneself every day. Thus, it actually only takes one step to imagine up the idea that one is the star of one’s own personal reality show.
329 THE TRUMAN SHOW was almost entirely shot on location in the city of Seaside, a master-planned community in Florida (see the city’s website Seaside, http://www.seasidefl.com/). Only the scenes involving Cristof and the audience reaction shots were shot in a studio. In Niccol’s original screenplay, the story took place in a TV studio version of Queens, New York, resulting in a much darker, film-noir-esque atmosphere of the story (see Niccol 1998). The setting was changed to the picture-perfect town of Seahaven at the request of Peter Weir. The corresponding statements about the shooting procedure and the setting changes, see HOW’S IT GOING TO END? THE MAKING OF ‘THE TRUMAN SHOW’ (Mefford and Young (producers), 2005).
As Slavoj Zizek notes, THE TRUMAN SHOW is loosely inspired by (or based on) a story by Philip K. Dick, *Time Out of Joint* (see Zizek 2002: 385). Actually, THE TRUMAN SHOW is even simply one variation of a plethora of books, films and television shows based on the idea that a character’s entire life is constantly filmed. An early example for a film that centres on the issue of media exploitation is *THANKS FOR EVERYTHING* (Seiter, 1938). More recently, in the 1960 episode of *THE TWILIGHT ZONE: A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE* (Ted Post, 1960) the protagonist Arthur Curtis (Howard Duff) finds out “that his entire life has merely been someone else’s movie”. The episode was written by science-fiction author Richard Matheson (known for his novel *I Am Legend*). Similarly, in the episode “Special Service” of the *THE NEW TWILIGHT ZONE* series (Randy Bradshaw, 1989) the main character John Selig discovered that he spent his past five years as the unwitting star of his own reality television show. In the half-hour long short film *THE SECRET CINEMA* (Bartel, 1967), a director secretly films every minute in the life of a woman and shows the footage in theatres. For the Docudrama TV show *AN AMERICAN FAMILY* (A. and S. Raymond, 1973), a family allowed filmmakers to film their life for nine months. Another topical predecessor is the British television series *THE PRISONER* (TV series, 1967) about a former spy who is held captive in a village surrounded by other people who, pretending to be regular village inhabitants, try to reveal his secrets.

Slightly different, but based on the life of a real person, is TV JUNKIE (Radecki and Cain, 2005), a reconstruction of the private life of Rick Kirkham, a well-known American journalist, who was obsessed with producing video diaries of almost everything he did, thought and felt. When Kirkham died, he left more than 3,000 pieces of video footage. For their documentary, Radecki and Cain try to reconstruct Kirkham’s life with the help of this video material. Other films with a similar topic are MIRIS POLJSKOG CVECA (Karanovic, 1978), *HOME MOVIES* (De Palma, 1979), *REAL LIFE* (Brooks, 1979), *LA MORT EN DIRECT* (Tavernier, 1980), *LOUIS XIX, LE ROI DES ONDES* (Poulette, 1994), *EDTV* (Howard, 1999), and *MY LIFE IS A MOVIE* (Bacon, 2003).

That being said, the repeated claims of the cast and crew of THE TRUMAN SHOW that the film was ahead of its time in presenting a reality show scenario are misleading marketing statements. What THE TRUMAN SHOW actually does is introducing the basic story pattern to a larger, mainstream audience. For that reason, the film’s philosophical benefits do not rest on its innovatory properties. However, as the subsequent analysis will show, the film treats its topic manner in an exceptionally well-crafted, and ultimately philosophically rewarding, way.

### 10.3 Ontological Differences: Living on Different Planes of Reality

Even though all three films share the basic premise of a multi-layered diegesis, they use different diegetic ontologies: While *MATRIX* and *THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR* at least

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530 International counterparts of *AN AMERICAN FAMILY* are: in the UK *THE FAMILY* (Roddam and Watson, 1974), in Australia *SYLVANIA WATERS* (producers: Watson and Wilson, 1992).

531 The statements can be witnessed in the two-part background documentary *HOW’S IT GOING TO END? THE MAKING OF ‘THE TRUMAN SHOW’*. 
initially contrast one or more simulated worlds with one outer layer or level of physical reality, The Truman Show contrasts an isolated part of physical reality (the TV studio) with the rest of the physical world as we know it: A film-within-the-film world in which people assemble in front of their TV screens in order to watch fictional and pseudo-real worlds.

The three MATRIX films work with two categorical levels of reality, i.e. the real world on the one hand (R), and hierarchically dependent levels of simulated reality (S and S[c]) on the other hand (see fig. 10.5). Simulated reality here is represented by the two mutually independent interactive simulation programs of the Matrix (S) and the Construct (S[c]), a simulated training environment based on the Matrix’ program code but located outside of the Matrix mainframe and therefore only accessible via R.

![Fig. 10.5: Diegetic structure of MATRIX](image)

The first MATRIX film clearly distinguishes reality from simulation. Only the characters’ minds can travel from reality level to reality level. Their bodies always remain located on the level of reality R—conscious, enclosed in a tank with nutritious fluids, or motionless on a chair on board of the Nebuchadnezzar. These apparently free-wheeling inter-diegetic mind travels bring to mind Platonic notions of the immortality of the soul or dualist notions of the division of body and mind.

MATRIX introduces a form of indispensable mind-body connection: “The body cannot live without the mind,” Morpheus says in scene 13 without further explanation. This suggests that if the mind dies in the simulation, so does the body. In the film, Neo is the only exception to this rule (apart from Trinity, who dies in the second film but is subsequently reanimated by Neo). Also, all humans in the film are tied to the one body they were born with, unlike the various computer programs that inhabit the Matrix, in particular Agent Smith: Not possessing any ‘real’ body outside of the Matrix, he is able to literally hijack any simulated body within the Matrix. He does not seem able to inhabit any of the rebels’ simulated bodies because they jack into the Matrix from an external access point.

The MATRIX franchise as a whole blurs this clear-cut distinction between reality and simulation: In the second film, the Architect, the apparent creator of the simulated world, explains to Neo that there have been five prior versions of the Matrix, which all...
ultimately failed due to an inherent anomaly of the computer program. Even though not stated explicitly, Zion can be, but need not be, interpreted as just another simulated environment within the Matrix mainframe, even though it appears to belong to the real world. Any deletion of the current Matrix program version would then also lead to the deletion of the Zion environment. MATRIX RELOADED supports this interpretation with a number of examples. At the end of the film, Neo is able to use his superhuman powers in the ‘real’ world as well when he stops attacking Sentinels with a protective gesture of his hands; Agent Smith materialises in the body of one of the crew members. The film also shifts to issues of ‘choice’: Neo and the other characters constantly have to make potentially fatal choices. This supports the hypothesis that the MATRIX franchise is less concerned with questions of reality but questions of choice: Freedom of choice becomes more important than questions of reality.333 At the end of the third film, Neo negotiates a truce between man and machines: Both species accept their mutual dependence and share the worlds they inhabit. Neo signs this truce by ‘sacrificing himself’ via immersion into the Matrix mainframe where he then beats Agent Smith, who has become a control program run viral. The question of ‘what is real’, so prominently posed by Morpheus in the first film (scene 10), loses significance. Following the truce, no species controls the other, and everyone can freely choose where to live.

The three-level reality structure of THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR is analogous to the MATRIX films (see fig. 10.6). It contains physical reality R (presented only at the end of the film, sequence 7), and two simulated worlds contained within it, of which S(1) (L.A. in the 1990s) contains S(2) (L.A. in the year 1937). S(2) is thus a simulation within a simulation (and not a simulation parallel to the other simulation). As in the MATRIX films, the end of the film introduces the possibility that even R – Los Angeles in 2024 – is just another simulated world enclosed within other worlds R(+n).

333 Compare the dialogue between Neo and Smith during their final confrontation, where Smith asks “You can’t win. It’s pointless to keep fighting. Why, Mr. Anderson? Why? Why do you persist?” – a question to which Neo gives an existentialist reply: “Because I choose to”. Choice is here presented as an essentially human trait.
counterpart John Ferguson, while Ferguson’s consciousness is ‘parked’ in Hall’s body for the duration of the transaction. Consequently, whoever is located on a higher reality level can control the body his counterpart on a lower reality level, i.e.: David controls Douglas while Douglas controls John. It is not possible for the controller to directly manipulate his counterpart’s behaviour from the higher level of reality, but he can jack into the former’s (virtual) body at any time he wishes. This ontological logic allows David-as-Douglas to kill Fuller without Douglas’ awareness. While the higher-level hacker inhabits the ‘body’ of his lower-level counterparts, his body is suspended in a motionless and unconscious state, analogous to the simulation travellers in the MATRIX films. There is one notable exception: If the controller dies within the simulation while he is jacked in, his body stays alive on the higher level of reality but is then inhabited by the consciousness of its virtual counterpart. For beings on a lower level of reality, this is the only way to gain access to a higher reality level. At the end of the film, Janet uses this possibility to elevate Douglas into her world in 2024 (scene 25). THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR thus varies Morpheus’ dictum that “the body cannot live without the mind”: The mind cannot live without a body and will therefore inhabit any body available to it.

Comparing the films’ ontological structures reveals philosophically interesting variations on the mind-body debate, dualism, and issues of personal identity. After initial astonishment, the characters quickly become comfortable with their new identities and exhibit notably different character traits from level to level, even though they are all modelled on one basic character version (e.g., John is modelled after Douglas after David). In the THIRTEENTH FLOOR simulation, Hannon Fuller is a rich playboy, while in 1998 he is an introverted faithful husband. Where Whitney embodies the best friend who would die for you, his virtual counterpart Ashton is an unscrupulous bartender constantly looking for his own advantage.

MATRI...
which has been built and populated in order to keep him under the illusion of living in a real world.

Fig. 10.7: Diegetic structure of THE TRUMAN SHOW

Truman’s world exists physically; his sense impressions correspond to objects in the material world, and not to stimulations of his sensory-perceptual system. The beach consists of real sand, the streets and cars around there are physically real, while other objects in that world are (physically manifested) props. The elevator in a nearby financial building is a fake (scene 15), the blue sky is a painted surface on the dome of the TV studio, and the sun is only a giant headlight. But most importantly, nobody he shares this world with is what s/he pretends to be. Everyone but Truman is an actor paid for participating in the televised documentary soap ‘The Truman Show’. The ontological premise of THE TRUMAN SHOW resembles O.K. Bouwsma’s paper-made world, though it does not go to the extremes of faking the physicality of the performing actors (see chapter 4.4).

In skepticist terms, Truman shares the skepticist predicament he is in with no one else in his world. There is an epistemic asymmetry between him and the other inhabitants of Seahaven, because he is the only one who does not know that the world he lives in is only a television studio. In contrast to skepticist scenarios which subject collectives to systematic deception about the world they live in, Truman Burbank is deceived by everyone he shares his life with. This adds a socio-epistemological twist to the film.

In Truman’s world, the role of the omnipotent Cartesian evil deceiver is played by the television director Cristof (Ed Harris), whose deception game is supported by a large production crew and cast. Cristof’s powers over his self-created world, his power to control the elements of wind, rain and sunshine as well as the behaviour and dialogues of every stage-acting character are God-like. But his powers are simultaneously more limited than those of the creators of the Thirteenth Floor and Matrix simulations because, for instance, Cristof is unable to completely change the TV studio’s environment in one fell swoop, and his powers of total control extend to only one person: Truman Burbank. (Cristof’s degree of control over the other studio inhabitants does not surpass those of a company executive.) In the other two films, deception control is exerted over large collectives of sentient beings. These differences in the epistemic position of world inhabitants (i.e., epistemic symmetry between inhabitants of

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335 Elsaesser writes that in THE TRUMAN SHOW “the eponymous hero leads an entire life that for everyone else is a game, a stage-managed television show, from which only Truman is excluded.” (Elsaesser 2009a: 14)
a simulated world vs. an epistemic asymmetry between a deceived person within such a world and other inhabitants of that world) put constraints on the genesis of such a world, and on the self-understanding of deceived persons.

10.4 Narrative Structure: Reality Revealed

The previous section outlined the basic ontological structures of the films’ diegeses. The sections in the current chapter 10.4 will focus on selected skepticism-related aspects which result from these ontological structures: The question what is actually so bad about living in such an environment (chapter 10.4.1); the narrato-aesthetic representation of ‘glitches’ in the fabric of the simulated or fake worlds, which eventually reveal their true character (chapter 10.4.2); the dramatisation of the film characters’ encounter with the borders/limits of their worlds (chapter 10.4.3); and the double audiences present in the films (chapter 10.4.4).

10.4.1 What Is So Bad About Living In A Non-real Environment?

The skepticist thought experiments introduced in chapter 4 revolved around the question whether a victim of deception would be able to realise being in a skepticist predicament. In traditional philosophical literature, this is the point of departure for arguments for and against the possibility of discovery (or the possibility of being in such a predicament at all). The three films under discussion in this chapter provide answers: All protagonists eventually realise that they have been living in a world which is not real. This is not surprising since all three films are part of mainstream cinema, and are therefore prone to Hollywood cinema’s principle of closure cinema that demands that a film answers the questions it raises.

A simple philosophical interpretation of the films would then claim that they are moving images of skepticism because they “screen” (Wartenberg 2007: 279) a skepticist situation, but at the same time claim to overcome the standing threat of skepticism, since the characters ultimately realise their skepticist predicament and have therefore found a way of recognising their actual position in the world. However, all three films subvert such a straightforward interpretation. As the preceding sections outlined, the MATRIX films and THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR end with ambiguous scenes, raising the possibility that even the higher level of reality accessed by the characters is actually just another non-real layer of reality. THE TRUMAN SHOW does not operate with such a model, since at the end of the film, Truman actually manages to leave the TV studio, but in their first and final conversation at the end of the film, Cristof is careful to claim that “there’s no more truth out there than in the world I created for you – the same lies and deceit. But in my world you have nothing to fear” (scene 29, see also Niccol 1998: 106). Like a sophisticated NSA officer or neo-conservative politician, Cristof effectively asks Truman to trade in security for freedom.

The actor Marlon (Noah Emmerich), performing as Truman’s best friend, even presents a reversed perspective on Truman’s reality TV environment: “It’s all true. It’s all real. Nothing here is fake. Nothing you see on this show is fake. It’s merely controlled.” (timecode 00:01:55-00:02:05) Marlon echoes his show’s director who claims that “it’s
not always Shakespeare but it’s genuine. It’s a life” (timecode 00:00:43).336 Hannah Gill, acting as Meryl (Laura Linney), conceives of Truman’s world as a “lifestyle,” a world in which one lives a “public life” as contrasted to the “private life” in the real world (timecode 00:01:18-00:01:36). These three accounts of what Truman’s world is or means open the film THE TRUMAN SHOW and therefore provide the audience with a set of possible interpretations of the ensuing events of the film: The hero lives in a partially counterfeit world, but he is a genuine character; Truman’s life is one lifestyle among others (“a truly blessed life,” as Hannah alias Meryl claims), it is merely lived in public rather than in privacy; and the environment is not fake, it is “real” even though “merely controlled”.

THE TRUMAN SHOW thus re-evaluates the skepticist predicament. While still raising the question whether Truman will be able to detect his skepticist predicament, the audience is presented with the views (or self-delusional interpretations) of those who are on its deceiving side. The skepticist question asked in THE TRUMAN SHOW is not a merely epistemological one, it is an ethico-epistemological one: “What is so bad about being in a deception situation?” The rest of the film is devoted to giving an unanimous answer to that question: A life subjected to external control cannot be a good (or even “noble” or “blessed” life). It is a miserable life because a controlled environment sooner or later needs to suppress the innermost desires of those who are under control. Freedom trumps security.

In the first MATRIX film, the character Cypher (Joe Pantoliano) assumes the role of questioning the absolute value of living in the ‘real’ world. Cypher is one of the crew members of the Nebuchadnezzar and has grown dissatisfied with the scarce and uncomfortable life in the real world. He negotiates a deal with Agent Smith: For betraying the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar, he is reinserted into the comfortable virtual reality of the Matrix as a rich man (scene 18). Cypher values the illusion of a good life over an uncomfortable life in the real world, and expresses this by lamenting: “Why oh why didn’t I take the blue pill?” (scene 18) Again, the epistemological question of knowing the world is transformed into an ethico-epistemological one.

In order for such environments to work, the films need to convince spectators that their scenarios are conceivable, that it would be at least temporarily possible to uphold a skepticist deception scenario. Of the three films, THE TRUMAN SHOW is particularly thorough in explicating the narrative logic of the hypothetical reality TV show life situation. The film devotes a considerable portion of screen time to the presentation and explanation of the working mechanisms of the veil of deception thrown over Truman. For instance, the claim is carefully introduced that Truman’s world is the result of continuous expansion. What started as a one-camera reality show starring an infant in the cradle only years later resulted in the largest TV studio ever built. There are also minor details which reveal that Peter Weir and Andrew Niccol devoted a lot of intellectual energy in making conceivable and probable the thought that it could be possible to subject a human being to life-long total deception. For instance, Truman Burbank has never been exposed to actual sunlight because the ‘sun’ of the TV studio is a gigantic headlight. Thus, he needs a different source of vitamin D, which is provided in

336 Cristof’s little speech is preceded by a more nuanced account of Truman’s world: “While the world he inhabits is in some respects counterfeit, there is nothing fake about Truman himself. No scripts, no cue cards.”
the form of pills Truman has to take every morning during breakfast as the result of some alleged “condition [that] runs in the family” (Niccol 1998: 27, compare fig. 10.8). This necessity of countering possible objections against details of a thought experiment distinguishes cinematic dramatic imaginings from a mere hypothetic imagining of a thought experiment.

Presenting a kind of working logic is, however, only one aspect of the films’ narrato-aesthetic configurations of skepticist thought experiments. Another is the introduction of ‘glitches’ in the ontological façade; out-of-place moments which hint at the deceptive character of the environment. In all three films, the appearance of glitches is a narrative tool that ultimately leads to the discovery of the ‘truth’ about the film characters’ world. The films stage this discovery as encounters between the main characters and the end or limit of their world.

Fig. 10.8 and 10.9: *The Truman Show*

### 10.4.2 Glitches in the Matrix

*The Truman Show*, scene 1 and 2: Truman Burbank is just about to start another picture-perfect day in his not-so-picture-perfect everyday life. After imagining up yet another imaginary adventure trip in front of the bathroom mirror, the young insurance salesman steps out of his house, ready to start just another day in his life – day 10,909, as an intertitle lets the fictional and extra-fictional audience of the TV show/film know. What then happens initiates a chain of events which will, four days after, result in Truman’s self-liberation from the world Cristof created around him:

“Truman is about to climb into his car when he is distracted by a high-pitched whistling sound. Suddenly, a large spherical glass object falls from the sky and lands with a deafening crash on the street, several yards from his car. [...] Truman investigates. Amidst a sea of shattered glass are the remains of a light mechanism. [...] A label on the light fixture reads, ‘SIRIUS 9 (9 Canis Major)’.” (Niccol 1998a: 3; see scene 2 of the film and fig. 10.9)

The backstage production team quickly announces – on the radio, on TV, in the Seahaven newspapers and magazines – that an airplane crossing the Seahaven skies has lost a headlight. But the damage is already done. Truman Burbank starts becoming suspicious of his own life. Even though there have been glitches before in the show (see Niccol 1998: 72ff.), Truman now wakes up from his life as an Everyman who simply does as he is told. He starts asking questions and realises that his own wife is acting strange towards him. He accidentally runs into his own father, who he long believed to be dead, but before he can talk to him the old man is abducted by mysterious people (subsequence 10). The elevator in the bank building next to Truman’s office turns out to be a prop (subsequence 15), and ultimately Truman starts questioning why all of his
attempts to leave the city for a journey to the Fiji islands are sabotaged by unforeseen catastrophes: The next available plane flight to Fiji is one month away, the Greyhound bus to Chicago suffers a gear breakdown, he suddenly becomes stuck in a traffic jam out of nowhere, and a nuclear plant fire on the other side of the bay blocks the only exit road out of Seahaven (subsequences 19 to 21). Finally, having realised that his entire life seems to be staged for him, Truman is looking into the bathroom mirror again, performing one of his usual adventure routines while using a piece of soap for painting cartoons on the mirror. When he’s done, he grins shortly, sarcastically says “this one’s for free,” as if addressing an audience, and vanishes into his basement, which has become his sleeping room after a fall-out with his estranged wife (subsequence 25). It takes the TV show producers a couple of hours to discover that Truman finally planned his escape, and when Cristof discovers him again Truman is already out on the ocean in a sailboat, the same sailboat on which his father apparently died 22 years ago (subsequence 27).

Throughout the entire film, the extra-fictional film audience is aware of Truman’s predicament, because Peter Weir decided to start the film with the film-within-the-film prologue which outlines the basic premises of the reality television show called ‘The Truman Show’ (see chapter 10.4.1 above). The audience is therefore supposed to feel suspension about when and how Truman will discover the truth. The glitches in Truman’s Matrix therefore remind the audience of what they already know, and they make it wonder whether the most recent glitch finally is sufficient for making Truman realising the truth.

The MATRIX films are more reluctant in revealing the ontological status of the diegesis even though they, too, introduce glitches, such as the white rabbit or a digitally distorted black cat at the beginning of the film (scene 1). In THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, the glitches are revealed mostly through aberrant character behaviour (in the wake of being used by higher-level persons) and in the encounter with the boundaries of the world (see next chapter section).

10.4.3 Encounters with the Boundaries of the World

In all three films the characters ultimately discover the truth about their worlds, and the moment of discovery represents plot points, a dramaturgic climax in each of them. As remarked before, in each film the moment of discovery comes at a different time in the film’s overall structure. While the audience is informed about the actual state of the world from the beginning, Truman only discovers the truth at the end of the film, when he crashes his boat into a wall of concrete which is painted as the sky of his world (scene 28 of 29). Neo is confronted with the world as it exists today at the end of the exposition (scene 7, timecode 00:31:09). Douglas Hall is literally confronted with the outer boundaries of his world in scene 20 of 26 of the film (timecode 01:06:30).

In MATRIX the discovery functions as the starting point for the future events. Neo’s purpose in the overall structure of the film is not to find out that he was only living in a simulation, but to accept his destination as the One. The final climax of the first film is Neo’s death and resurrection in scene 29. In THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, the world’s simulatedness is revealed close to the end of the film in scene 21 and precedes the
unmasking of Fuller’s murderer. Hall’s discovery that his world is a simulation is an important plot twist at the end of the film.\textsuperscript{337}

The \textsc{The Truman Show} systematically builds toward the moment in which Cristof reveals to him what Truman unconsciously already knew.\textsuperscript{338} This turns the film into an awakening plot similar to \textsc{Matrix}, although in these films the discoveries steer the characters into different directions. Both Neo and Truman need the entire film for arriving at their final realisation: Neo realises that he is the One who has the potential to free mankind from the Matrix. Truman realises his status as the star of the world’s biggest TV show. Both discoveries reorient the characters’ outlook for the future, but Truman’s discovery does much more serve to put his entire past life into perspective. Truman’s realisation is about his past, Neo’s is about his future.

The way in which the films stage the encounter is aesthetically interesting. Neo gains an insight into the code and therefore underlying structure of his simulated world; Truman Burbank and Douglas Hall encounter the limits or boundaries of their worlds, echoing the ancient mythic journey of Jason and the Argonauts. In \textsc{The Truman Show}, this encounter is carefully orchestrated: When his ship literally bumps into the wall that marks the world’s confines, Truman experiences a haptic encounter with the borders of his world (fig. 10.10). He leaves the boat and touches the wall with his hands (fig. 10.11), before he temporarily breaks down under the emotional shock of his discovery. Non-diegetic music underscores the emotional impact of the scene, while no diegetic sound is heard anymore.

In contrast, Douglas Hall drives his car through the desert outside of Los Angeles to the point where his simulated world dissolves into a mere arrangement of green vector lines (fig. 10.12). There he merely gazes and wonders at the graphic display in front of his eyes (fig. 10.13). He is literally standing at the end of his (simulated) world. A long-scale shot frames Hall standing in the centre of the lower base of the frame, a small silhouette, barely noticeable. The visible vectors barely outline the shape of the objects they are supposed to represent, such as mountains in the background or a bird flying through the frame.

\textsc{Matrix} does not provide exact information about the extension of the Matrix frame, even though all scenes playing in the simulated world take place in a city that structurally resembles Chicago, Illinois (the city maps and street names of the city are structurally identical copies of Chicago). At the end of the film (scene 30), a \textsc{POV} shot reveals how Neo, after his resurrection, gains the ability to visualise the Matrix code underlying the virtual environment (fig. 10.14). Its spatial structures as well as the agents are illustrated in the form of columns of the Matrix code (with which the audience is already familiar from the computer screens of the Nebuchadnezzar). The code vertically runs down the screen like raindrops. Instead of travelling to the spatial limits of the

\textsuperscript{337} Hall’s discovery echoes José Luis Borges’ short story “The Circular Ruins” whose protagonist dreams up a human being into existence, when he discovers that “he, too, was but appearance, that another man was dreaming him.” (Borges 1998a: 102)

\textsuperscript{338} Compare Peter Weir’s remarks that in his heart Truman had to know his entire life that he was at the centre of something, even if he did not know what exactly this ‘something’ was. Living in an environment in which all the people around him would try to become friends with him, trying to be in frame with him, trying to play a larger, more lucrative role in the show, cannot be without effects on the young unwitting star of the world’s largest television show. See \textsc{How’s It Going to End? The Making of ‘The Truman Show’}.
simulation, Neo gains an insight into this world’s invisible core, its structure consisting of bits and bytes.

Following their aesthetic logics, MATRIX as well as THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR display program codes in green colour, as strings of green letters (MATRIX) or vectors of green lines that sketch the structure of the textures the simulation environment is made of (THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR). This again shows how the films rely on established filmic and cultural metacodes. In the 1980s, the first computers on the market, such as the Amstrad CPC or the first IBM PC 5151, displayed on-screen command lines as green letters on black background.

10.4.4 A Double Film Audience: Film Reception in The Truman Show

In reading philosophical literature on skepticism, the reader is invited to imagine the skepticist scenario described, filling the blanks of the hypothetic thought experiment while she reads along. However, recipients are involved differently when the thought experiment is screened and dramatised cinematically. It is then rather analogous to witnessing a crime scene from a safe distance, being involved and simultaneously observing from a distance. Spectators of skepticism films become an audience of the game of deception performed in the film.
THE TRUMAN SHOW explicitly plays with this aspect of audience involvement by creating a double audience: the extra-fictional audience – i.e., the real-world audience for which the film has been produced –, and a heterogeneous inner-diegetic audience-within-the-film. The latter observes Truman’s life within the diegesis of the film THE TRUMAN SHOW by watching the televised daily reality show ‘The Truman Show’. THE TRUMAN SHOW also introduces two other types of spectators. First, there are Cristof, a veritable man in the moon, and his crew. They observe and control the events of the TV shows (see fig. 10.15). Second, there are the actors which are paid for playing inhabitants of Seahaven. Not being involved in the events at the epicentre of the show, they, too, observe Truman’s life from a position within the diegesis of THE TRUMAN SHOW (see fig. 10.16).339

The differences between these audiences can be compared to the differences between a theatre and a film audience as described by Stanley Cavell in The World Viewed (Cavell 1979b: 25ff.). Cavell maintains that film audiences are “mechanically absent” (ibid.: 25) from the film characters and events on screen. Due to its temporal and ontological absence, a film audience is unable to enter the screen or the production lot on which the film scenes have been created (see chapter 5.2). The extra-fictional real audience of Peter Weir’s film as well as the fictional TV audience within this film are both technologically barred from accessing Truman’s world, and the hermetically isolated TV studio dome that contains Truman’s world is an additional shield – or screen – against any audience access. In contrast, the TV crew and the actors of the television show ‘The Truman Show’ both are in the position of a participating theatre audience: They are able to enter the theatre stage; in fact, the very play they witness is created by their very presence and interaction. While Cristof’s crew would have to move from the backstage area of the show into Truman’s world, the actors that surround Truman on a daily basis are able to at least temporarily interrupt the show that is played around Truman. These attempts are evident in the frequent attempts of outsiders to invade Truman’s world in order to either get screen time or to warn Truman about his predicament.

The use of sound in THE TRUMAN SHOW underscores the visually established double audience structure. The narrational sound perspective track is often aligned with the perspective of the diegetic spectators of Cristof’s television show ‘The Truman show’ (just as suggested by the use of hidden cameras described in chapter 10.5.1). The audience of Peter Weir’s film even hears the same soundtrack music as the television audience. One example: In scene 23, Truman reunites with his ‘father’. In this scene, THE TRUMAN SHOW constantly switches between the setting at the bridge and Cristof’s control room inside the artificial moon, where sound technicians and keyboarders

339 There are, of course, many other films which play with the idea of a double audience, including RUNNING MAN (Glaser, 1987) and the German TV film DAS MILLIONENSPIEL (Toelle, 1970). Strictly speaking, every film in which somebody is systematically observing an unwitting person has a minimal double audience: The film audience and the person(s) observing the observed protagonist, OLDBOY (Chan-wook Park, 2003) is an example for this; also DARK CITY, where an alien species is constantly observing the behaviour of a human population that is used as material for an experiment. THE TRUMAN SHOW is more radical in that it also gives the film two audiences: a real one and a fictional one. The most recent popular example is the Suzanne Collins adaptation THE HUNGER GAMES (Ross, 2012), in which 24 teenagers are put into an isolated battleground environment where they are forced to fight against each other until only one of the participants has survived.
produce the non-diegetic live music of the television show (which, for the audience of THE TRUMAN SHOW, thereby becomes diegetic) (see fig. 10.17 and 10.18).

Fig. 10.15 and 10.16: THE TRUMAN SHOW

Fig. 10.17 and 10.18: THE TRUMAN SHOW

Prima facie, THE TRUMAN SHOW uses the fictional audience for showing typical audience reactions. But the reaction shots which register the diegetic audience’s emotional involvement with Truman’s life also show that the audience, too, is subjected to a form of control: Just as every step in Truman’s life is being observed and controlled, some of the audience members seem to spend their entire days watching ‘The Truman Show’. They suspend their own life in order to watch Truman living an entirely controlled life.

Only two of the audience inserts during the film are located in an outdoor surrounding. Most of the diegetic spectators watch the show within the closed confines of their living rooms or bath rooms, or, in another example, in a small security office of a parking garage. Only a (inner-diegetic) trailer for the show shows a large and depersonalised audience which assembles for a screening on a sunny day at the beach in front of a huge screen (fig. 10.19). In another shot, the Truman TV show is on display on Manhattan’s Times Square at night (fig. 10.18). The only outdoor shots are again controlled by Cristof. In contrast, Truman spends a lot of time under a (fake) ‘open’ sky. One of the final shots of Truman, while he is sailing the sea in his small boat, shows him in a “heroic image” (Niccol 1998: 102) under a bright blue sky (fig. 10.20). But also one of the first shots (fig. 10.21, scene 2) already makes reference to the sky, foreshadowing Truman’s later literal insight that indeed ‘the sky is the limit’ – the wall of his studio world.
EXTERNAL WORLD SKEPTICISM FILMS

Fig. 10.18

Fig. 10.19

Fig. 10.20

Fig. 10.21

Fig. 10.22

Fig. 10.23

Fig. 10.24

Fig. 10.25

Fig. 10.26

Fig. 10.27
Peter Weir’s arrangement of these shots is ironic: The omnipresent bright blue sky in Truman’s television studio suggests freedom and happiness, while the confinement of the real-audience members into small rooms and apartments (fig. 10.22 to 10.28) suggests isolation (fig. 10.26) or a lack of such freedom. This feeling of confinement is broken up a little by the fact that many audience members are following the ‘Truman Show’ together with family and friends (fig. 10.22–24, 10.27 and 10.28).

The apparent paradox holds. Deception game victim Truman Burbank, isolated in a fake environment with fake friends, spends his days under an apparently sunny blue sky, while the audience of his TV show seems to be more spatially confined than he is, even though actually Truman is ontologically isolated from the rest of the world.

The film’s representation of a double audience is obviously intended as a comment on the social impact of contemporary capitalist screen culture. Even after Truman leaves ‘his’ show, some of the audience members introduced earlier remain in their self-inflicted imprisonment in the world of television. The last line of the film, spoken by one of the parking garage security guards, is “What else is on? Where’s the TV Guide?” (fig. 10.28, scene 29, timecode 01:32:18). The addictive regime of television remains intact, and the film extends the scope of its cinematic skepticist thought experiment into the realm of social and media criticism.

The presence/absence of natural environments in all the three films is quite interesting: While Truman’s Seahaven certainly builds on impressions of naturality (beach, ocean, sunrise and sunset, a bright moon in the night sky, etc.), in the other two films nature is peculiarly absent. In The Thirteenth Floor, even the ocean view of the final shot seems strangely unnatural. In the Matrix trilogy, too, there is no sign of a natural world: The scenes take place within man-made structures and rooms – until the last scene in Matrix Revolutions, where the Oracle and the Architect meet on a park bench with a view of Melbourne, Australia while the sun is rising (fig. 10.29). This
‘sunrise’ scene is dramaturgically prepared earlier in the film: While Neo and Trinity are flying towards the Machine city in order to save mankind, they break through the clouds for a short moment, like a fish jumping against the stream, and catch a short glimpse of sunlight (fig. 10.30).

With this sort of ending, the MATRIX trilogy confirms Sean Cubitt’s observation in his book The Cinema Effect that in recent films the external world “is posited no longer as the transcendental source of the system but as an integral element of it” (Cubitt 2004: 39). In films like THE TRUMAN SHOW, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, or MATRIX, “there is no exterior to the fiction except, perhaps, another stage set” (Cubitt 2002: 234). The film worlds on display in such so-called neo-baroque films are not “a description of the real but its ordering in free-standing semantic structures whose reference is to other semantic structures” (Cubitt 2004: 233). Many contemporary films play such a ‘postmodern’ game of différence: Their various elements refer to one another in a closed circuit without external reference points, and they constantly postpone the question which of these many layers could be fundamentally real. And this, of course, can be understood as a cinematic commentary on the problem of skepticism.

10.5 Aspects of Style

10.6 Visual Narration – Philosophical Uses of Colour

In his essay “The Mind-Game Film,” Thomas Elsaesser writes that “Films such as The Matrix, Donnie Darko, and Fight Club present their parallel worlds without marking them off as different by superimposition, soft focus or any of the other conventional means by which films indicate switches of register or reference.” (Elsaesser 2009: 20). At least with respect to MATRIX, this claim is not correct. The film (as well as THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR) uses visual, aural and other ontological markers for distinguishing different levels of reality.

The clearest indicator that the films aesthetically distinguish different reality levels is their use of different colour tonalities. In MATRIX, scenes that play in the ‘real’ world of 2199 are visualised with cold, bluish, desaturated colours (fig. 10.33), while scenes which take place within the computer-generated world of the Matrix have a Greenish, more saturated colour tonality (fig. 10.31). The scenes playing in the Construct are colour-graded neutrally (fig. 10.33). THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR operates with a structurally analogous colour grading pattern: Scenes playing in 1937 are coloured in Sepia (fig. 10.32), scenes set in 1998 are graded in a cold Bluish colouring (fig. 10.34), and the final scene 25 of the film, located in 2024 and apparently located on the outer layer of reality, is presented in a strikingly Golden colouring (fig. 10.36). As stated in the plot summary, this scene is literally switched off like a television set, indicating that it takes place on yet another computer-generated environment (fig. 10.37).

It is correct, however, that this narrato-aesthetic distinction between reality levels does not imply that there is one ultimate “outermost layer” (Müller 2003b: 56, my translation) of reality.

The German DVD edition contains an alternative ending with a different plot twist: Hall and Jane are standing in front of a window. The camera slowly zooms in on Douglas, who looks at what he sees (whatever he is) in joyous excitement. Then, his facial mimic gets confused, and the shot fades out while his face assumes the grim expression visible on David’s face earlier. This version of the film thus suggests that either David against all odds managed to transport himself back into his body, or that another user from a higher reality level now occupies

340 Colour
The Wachowski siblings and their cinematographer Bill Pope also systematically apply different depth of focus in the scenes set in different reality levels. Scenes set in computer-generated environments appear as having less depth than those set in the real world. The characters resemble two-dimensional figures in a two-dimensional space, resulting in a reduced impression of spatiality (see fig. 10.38). They achieved that look by using different focal length for the different reality levels. Spatiality impressions function as ontological markers which follow a common cultural code: While physical reality is usually regarded as existing ‘in’ space, computer-generated simulations are simulations of space which rely on non-spatially-extended algorithms of a computer.
program. Objects within a simulation are not located within a three-dimensional space but as specific points or codes in two-dimensional array of the program code.

MATRX makes use of its colour strategy right from the beginning. Contrary to then established rules, the ‘Warner Bros. Pictures’ and ‘Village Roadshow Pictures’ logos that begin the film are Green, while the background of the Warner Bros. logo does not consist of the usual white clouds in a blue sky but of dark thunderstorm clouds (fig. 10.39 and 10.40). Using the classical logo (like fig. 10.48) would have disrupted the movies attempts to literally lure its audience into the ‘rabbit hole’ of the Matrix. It would have indicated that ‘it’s only a movie, anyway’, while the transformation of the logos visually introduces an extra-diegetic reference: The film studios are part of the Matrix system, too.

The paratext becomes part of the diegesis, and the film already establishes part of its colour code by introducing Green as one of the predominant grading colours: First, we see an example of the Matrix code, running down the screen vertically (fig. 10.42). Next we see the film title “Matrix”, in capital green letters (fig. 10.43). Then a detail shot of the blinking command line of a computer screen appears. The letters in that command line are Green, resembling the colour of monochrome screens of old computers in the 1980s. According to the writing on screen, a “trace program” is running. The next shot presents a screen full of rotating numbers, which are gradually reduced to what apparently is a telephone number. Meanwhile, the camera zooms in to the numbers on the upper left side of the screen and then dives ‘through’ the number zero through a tunnel of green patterns (fig. 10.44 to 10.47). Next we see a white spot in complete darkness, which turns out to be the spotlight of a police officer (figs. 10.48 and 10.49).

This journey into the Matrix occupies 90 seconds of screen time. By using the Green colour scheme from the very beginning, the film anticipates the issues that will come up during the rest of the film: Reality is just an illusion and controlled by a dream factory. As Thomas Wartenberg writes, MATRX screens philosophy here (see Wartenberg 2007: 279).

The dark, rain-soaked clouds in the background of the transformed Warner Bros. logo are exactly the clouds we see when Morpheus introduces Neo to “the desert of the real” in scene 10 (compare fig. 10.51 and 10.52). In this way, the film establishes yet another connection between the world of the Matrix and the viewer’s world. By transforming the production company’s logos, the film already posits skepticist questions, if only in a modest form: Does not Hollywood produce a world view for you that does not correspond to the world as it really is? The more radical version is, of course: Is our world, too, only a simulation?

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342 The following analysis of the exposition of MATRX follows Wartenberg 2005 and Wartenberg 2007.
343 Subsequently, a lot of films, such as the HARRY POTTER heptalogy or INCEPTION, used such changed logos as introductions into their fictional worlds.
344 The code is a combination of Japanese Katakana signs and Arabic numbers. See Richard Donovan’s article “The Shadow of the Matrix” (Donovan 2013). Donovan remarks that the signs are mirror images of Katana signs, as if mirrored or seen from behind the screen they are projected on. He suggests that this could mean that we, as viewers, are inside the Matrix, unaware that we are looking out (through the cinema screen into the film’s world).
345 This tracking shot reminds of the space travel scene in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001 – A SPACE ODYSSEY (Kubrick, 1968) and the opening credits sequence in Hitchcock’s VERTIGO (Hitchcock, 1958).
Thomas Wartenberg convincingly argues that the film’s narrato-aesthetic strategies succeed in posing the skepticist question which Neo asks himself (“how do I know that the world I live in is real?”) for the film audience as well, particularly by misleading them about the ontological status of the fictional world of the film during the first 22 minutes (sequence I and II). It is no accident that the Matrix simulates the state of the Western world at the end of the 20th century: Because Neo and the members of his world experience an environment whose structure resembles the one the film audience actually inhabits, it confronts the audience with the question of how they know that the situation of the human inhabitants of the Matrix is not identical with their own. (Wartenberg 2005: 279) Wartenberg observes: “The Matrix has screened an analogue to Descartes’ evil genius hypothesis. Both the film and Descartes’ thought experiment are attempts to render the deception hypothesis compelling” (Wartenberg 2005: 279). Wartenberg here argues that MATRIX does more than merely illustrating Descartes’ evil genius hypothesis: The film is a screening of skepticism. It uses cinema’s capacity to control the audience’s epistemic position with regard to the film diegesis. In screening the film’s plot from Neo’s limited epistemic position, we are actually taken in by the deceptive world of the Matrix as fully as he is – only we are deceived about the nature of a fictional world while he is about his real world. Wartenberg argues that we thus participate not only in the deception but also its subsequent removal. (See Wartenberg 2005: 281)

With this strategy, the film succeeds in establishing the philosophical question of skepticism, because “[p]lacing a person in an epistemic situation where they are made to wonder whether a certain belief or action is justified is, of course, a mark of the philosophical.” (Wartenberg 2005: 281). In this way, MATRIX genuinely philosophises.

Unlike the other two films, THE TRUMAN SHOW opts for a more subtle colour contrast. The world of Seahaven is dominated by pastel colours under a bright blue sky(light) and has the flair of an updated version of a late Technicolor television show. The set is lit in high key, there are no discernible shadows, everything is, in other words,
apparently open to view. Seahaven’s inhabitants wear clothes in the style of the 30s and 40s, and only Truman’s clothing style deviates somewhat from the otherwise perfected combinations. This is no surprise, since Truman is the only one who is not dressed entirely by the TV show’s costume department. The bright white paint on all houses competes with the strikingly saturated blue sky of Florida. Truman’s world is designed according to Cristof’s ideals about ‘the way the world should be’ (see Weir 1998: xvf.). In contrast, the interior shots of Cristof’s production headquarter reveal a basically functional, technicised environment.

10.6.1 Framing Truman’s World
While not overtly using colour tonalities as ontological markers, the lenses and camera angles used for THE TRUMAN SHOW are employed in a way that reveals where the TV producers placed their 5,000 cameras within the TV studio. Almost all angles are distorted and the cameras placed in unusual positions (fig. 10.53-66), most of the shots are clearly identifiable as such (i.e., there is no attempt to hide the fact that the show is filmed by cameras, see fig. 10.53, 10.57-61). There are no tracking shots, and the editing relies on reaction shots or axis mirroring (if Truman is shown from one POV, the next shot delivers a complementary POV which lies on the same axis) (see fig. 10.54 and 10.55; 10.62 and 10.63).

The cameras in principle function like surveillance cameras, i.e. they record live occurrences within the fictional world of THE TRUMAN SHOW, and sometimes the events in the show surprise the supervising director. A good example is the flashback scene 13, in which Sylvia and Truman escape from the library to the beach. The POV of a surveillance camera of the exit section of a library is partially blocked by a column. Instead of exiting from left to right behind the columns, as the other visitors do, Truman and Lauren rush off to the left as soon as they are behind the column and therefore shortly invisible to the camera operators. The camera temporarily loses track of them (see fig. 10.64). In the following shot, an establishing shot of the entire beachside road, the camera searches and pans for a short while until the directors spot the runaway couple. The camera then zooms in to the appropriate position (fig. 10.65 and 10.66).

With the help of these visual instruments the film establishes the theme that Truman’s world is a controlled artificial environment – a theme which guides the film’s narrato-aesthetic logic. Along with the decision to use reliable narration and consequently to keep the audience informed about Truman’s predicament from the very beginning, it offers the audience an intriguing spectatorial position: Not only the contents shown in the film become important, but also the manifold ways in which they are shown. Because the spectators know what is happening to Truman, they are not only informed about his subsequent discoveries, but also about the ways an evil deceiver would have to conceive in order to film the object of his deceptions. The countless distorted and otherwise unusual camera perspectives, as well as the careful, coordinated, but far from perfected, assemblage of the shots constantly remind the audience of Truman’s predicament. At the same time, the slight imperfections in this total observation of a human being’s life make the scenario even more plausible. In short: by establishing a narrato-aesthetics of control, THE TRUMAN SHOW presents a recorded skepticist world.
This status of being a recorded world leads to another peculiar feature of Peter Weir’s film: It is as much a film about the way in which its main character discovers his skepticist predicament as it is a psychological study of an evil deceiver, of the perils and discomforts of being one. While Truman is involuntarily subjected to the deception game, Cristof chooses a voluntarily life of seclusion, since he seems to spend his entire life within the confines of the TV studio. THE TRUMAN SHOW also hints at the consequences which being part of this megalomaniac reality show has on the other actors’ lives, and it shows the levels of addiction and confinement inflicted on the worldwide TV audience-within-the-film. As outlined in the preceding sections, THE TRUMAN SHOW adds a pragmatic and conceivable configuration of a ‘real-life’ skepticism scenario to the long list of existing skepticist thought experiments. It does not simply present a skepticist deception situation but fleshes out in more detail a life lived under the spell of a deception situation. Hence it contributes to a more profound understanding of the scope of skepticist scenarios in the way claimed in chapter 1.3.2.
10.7 Preliminary Summary

As shown in this chapter, MATRIX, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, and THE TRUMAN SHOW are elaborated configurations of skepticist thought experiments. Despite being based on slightly different scenarios, the films share a number of structural features and audio-visual strategies. They address the glitches in the fabric of deception imposed on its victims; they ultimately present encounters between the main characters and the boundaries of their worlds, and they play with the possibilities of multiple audience which the medium of cinema allows. All three films use the plot-inherent contrast between reality levels as narrative and aesthetic devices which not only fulfil a dramaturgic purpose but are also ways of adhering to the internal logic of the chosen variety of the skepticist thought experiment.

Last but not least, the three films present their protagonists as well as the film audience with an (imaginary) choice, which has found its iconographic expression in the first MATRIX film (see fig. 10.67 and 10.68): Should one swallow the blue pill, and thereby continue living in the cosy virtual reality, or should one swallow the red pill and confront the harshness of the real world? MATRIX seems to give a clear answer in its first instalment, an answer which is subverted in the next two films. THE TRUMAN SHOW, however, stays firmly attached to the red pill, even though Cristof tries to convince Truman (and the film audience) to the contrary.