Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema
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“[Harry:] Tell me one last thing [...] Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?” [...] [Dumbledore:] “Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?”

J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows
(Rowling 2007: 579)

11 Not Knowing My Self, or: Being One’s Own Evil Deceiver

Did you ever wake up from an adventure or romantic night which seemed to be so real – but then realised it was just a dream? The good news about it is that you still have another reality to go on with. But what if your entire life is just a dream, what if the only one there is... is actually just you, living in a dream world? The solipsistic solitaire is a minor yet recurring figure in the history of literature; the narrative games with dream worlds find their most recurrent intense expression in cinema, the narrative dream machine par excellence. Chapter 5.1 already sketched a trajectory, ranging from early to contemporary cinema, of films in which the borders between reality and illusion become blurred; films in which the characters wonder whether they are dreaming or awake, whether their experiences relate to facts or only to self-generated fiction. Unlike the protagonists of external world skepticism films, the dream-world characters here are under the spell of internal, self-induced deception.

Unsurprisingly, then, dream scenes belong to the standard filmic narrative devices. They are frequently used in dramas, thrillers, or crime films, introducing characters which wake up from nightmarish chase scenes or utterly romantic encounters. Filmmakers early on used the dream vs. reality theme as an overarching structural-narrative element. In films such as SHERLOCK JR (Keaton and Arbuckle, 1924) or THE WIZARD OF OZ (Fleming et al., 1939), the ultimate question is whether the adventures of the main character actually happened – or whether they were only dreamt up. In such ways, filmmakers gratefully take up the narrative twist of Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland (Carroll 2001 [1863]): While Alice eventually wakes up in the garden, allowing more traditionally inclined readers to assume that she only dreamt up her adventures with the white rabbit and the Cheshire cat, in THE WIZARD OF OZ little Dorothy wakes up from her Technicolor adventures in the wonderland of Oz to the black-and-white environment of Kansas, surrounded by her aunt and uncle and the farm workers whose faces became acquainted to the audience as the Cowardly Lion, the Tin Man and the Scarecrow. The tornado has simply knocked her unconscious instead of transporting her to Oz, it seems – or has it?
One of the most popular contemporary dream vs. reality debates surrounds the TV series LOST (TV series, 2004-2010), a pop-cultural phenomenon in its own right. Across six seasons, LOST follows the struggles of the survivors of a plane crash on a mysterious island somewhere in the South Pacific. The episodes reveal piece by piece that the island harbours a mysterious source of energy which gives rise to a number of supernatural phenomena, spawning parallel realities, time travel, immortal persons and other phenomena not explainable by common sense. The sixth and final season (2010) reunites the main characters in a metaphysical realm reminiscent of the afterlife, a realm where they come to terms with their troubles and sins before being able to “move on” (season 6, episode 17) to a kind of afterlife.\textsuperscript{346} The fan community since then heatedly debates the possibility whether everything happening in the show is actually the near-death or afterlife experiences of one or all of the characters after the plane crash.\textsuperscript{347} Throughout the seasons, various characters, frequently encountering people they believed to be already dead, and confronted with the unlikeliness of surviving a devastating plane crash, are asking themselves exactly the question whether they are still alive or not.

From a film character’s perspective, answers to such questions are questions about self-knowledge. Asking “where am I?” or “when am I?” are parts of the main question of self-knowledge: “Who am I?”\textsuperscript{348} A person’s place in (historical) time partially shapes who that person is.\textsuperscript{349} Someone who does not know where she is (e.g., in a dream world) or does not know when she is (e.g., living in a past world after a time-travel experience) also does not know who she is.

11.1 Personal Identity

The previous section introduced dream scenarios which render their dreamers as in a crucial respect ignorant about themselves. However, the most straightforward philosophical discussion of self-knowledge concerns questions of personal identity. Philosophers discuss various criteria for a person’s claim to be person she claims she is, and to persist in being the same person throughout a certain stretch of time (e.g., from birth to death). Reductionist approaches, for instance, stipulate either physical continuity or psychological continuity as deciding criteria. Psychological continuity is constituted, for instance, when someone can claim as his own memories of things he (and not someone other) has experienced in the past. Such reductionist approaches can be criticised for relying on ‘naturalist’ criteria which neglect that personal identity rather stems from a specific form of self-understanding, from the ability to diachronic self-ascriptive of meaningful experiences, and to enmesh these in a kind of “biographical

\textsuperscript{346} The producers call this parallel timeline the “flash-sideways,” as the entire series already has made use of flashbacks (to the characters’ lives before the plane crashes) and flash forwards (to the characters’ lives after they returned from the island).

\textsuperscript{347} LOST’s main writer, Damon Lindelof, has explicitly refuted those theories and stated that everything happening on that island actually took place (fictionally). See the interview with Lindelof on theverge.com (Lagomarsino 2012).

\textsuperscript{348} John Locke (Terry O’Quinn) asks the question “when am I?” in season 5, episode 1, when he already knows that he and other fellow ‘Losties’ are travelling through time in the wake of an electromagnetic explosion.

\textsuperscript{349} Again, LOST touches upon that issue – not only in the flash-sideways where the main characters follow different life paths. In the flash-sideways, the character Sawyer (Josh Holloway), for instance, has become a police officer instead of a criminal con man.
process”. This controversial discourse opens the door for a rich variety of thought experiments that contribute to a clearer understanding of the problem at stake.

Unsurprisingly, many films play with borderline cases of personal identity. For instance, Carl Reiner’s comedy ALL OF ME (1984) exploits a variety of the mind-body problem: What happens if a mind/soul is transferred into another body? With the help of a Tibetan guru, the mortally ill millionaire Edwina Cutwater (Lily Tomlin) wants to transfer her soul into the body of Terry Hoskins (Victoria Tennant). But something goes wrong: Cutwater’s soul accidentally ends up in the body of her lawyer Roger Cobb (Steve Martin), where it occupies the right half of his body, while Roger’s soul remains in control of the other half. The film tracks their muzzled attempts to transfer Cutwater’s soul into the intended body, and exploits the comedic potential of the tension between the competing co-habitation of the same body by two souls, but simultaneously relates to the more serious Cartesian idea of a fundamental difference between mind and body.

BEING JOHN Malkovich (Jonze, 1999) turns its title actor-character into a kind of psychic zoo: For whatever reason other people can incorporate John Malkovich’s body for 15 minutes, entering it from a mysterious entrance point on the seven-and-a-halfth floor of an office building. During these 15 minutes, they have control Malkovich’s body and experience the world through his eyes. Meanwhile, the spectators of the film can hear a desperate Malkovich, who is reduced to a mere co-spectator in his own body (because the will of the 15-minute intruder assumes complete power over Malkovich).

While ALL OF ME and BEING JOHN Malkovich are straightforward dramatic imaginings of the mind-body problem, the films do not address skepticist questions about self-knowledge. These are more explicitly addressed in a number of noiresque science fiction films which tackle the issue of personhood of non-human characters. Steven Spielberg’s Kubrick project ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE – A.I. (Spielberg, 2001) is about a little humanoid robot boy called David (Haley Joel Osment) who has real feelings and emotions. He is programmed to feel undying love for his ‘mother’ Monica (Frances O’Connor), who buys him as a substitute for her son, who is put into an artificial coma until a cure can be found for his disease. When the doctors discover such a cure for her real son, Monica abandons David. Yearning to gain his mother’s affection, David, like Carlo Collodi’s Pinocchio, now attempts to become a real human being.

The Philip-K.-Dick adaptation BLADE RUNNER (Scott, 1982) screens a world in which androids do mining work which ‘real’ human beings find too unpleasant. Even though sentient and capable of emotions, the androids are not acknowledged as persons. The film’s different endings raised discussions whether Deckard (Harrison Ford), the headhunter relentlessly chasing renegade androids, is unbeknownst to himself an android as well. BLADE RUNNER THEREBY screens the idea that being a person need not mean being human, and that some persons might be ignorant about not being human. In A.I. the (android) characters know they are persons but yearn for being acknowledged as

\[350\] In this paragraph, I follow Quante and Prechtl 1999.
\[351\] For an overview of personal identity discourse, see Olson 2010, Quante 1999, and Parfit 1984.
\[352\] See chapter 2 for Murray Smith’s discussion of the film. See also Shaw 2008: 106 f.
\[353\] Daniel Shaw provides a fine discussion of the philosophical merits of the film in his article “On Being Philosophical and Being John Malkovich” (Shaw 2006).
\[354\] A recent screening of the idea of robots as household mates is the Swedish TV series REAL HUMANS (TV series, 2012).
such; in BLADE RUNNER, Deckard’s humanhood is questioned. This is why the latter film can be interpreted as a skepticism film of the self-knowledge variety: The characters (initially) do not know who they are, and the events in the film teach them about their ignorance. But what exactly do such characters supposedly not know? External world skepticism films teach their characters about their unfortunate ontological position – being someone who does not live in a (physically) real environment. Self-knowledge skepticism films teach their characters who, or in what position, they actually are contrary to what they believed before. They apply an internal perspective instead of an external one.

Contemporary examples abound: In TOTAL RECALL (Verhoeven, 1990; Wiseman, 2012), the protagonist is forced to find out whether he is just a construction worker being chased as an alleged spy by the government, or whether he actually is a double agent who erased his previous identity from his memory.355 In THE BOURNE IDENTITY (Liman, 2002), an amnesiac man who washes up in the ocean gradually discovers that he was part of an elite super-soldier government program; in CYPHER (Natali, 2002), a spy brainwashes himself into believing that he is just an ordinary salesman, because this is the only way in which he can infiltrate a sinister security organization which stores a dataset with compromising information about the woman he loves. Finally, IDENTITY (Mangold, 2003) tells the story of a man with multiple personality disorder, whose seven personalities fight to the death among themselves.356 All these films follow the same pattern: The main character initially is ignorant about his real identity and gradually discovers who he really is.

Another variant of self-knowledge skepticism films revolves around characters who encounter a gulf between the world as they believe it is and the world as it is. In “post-mortem cinema” (Elsaesser 2009, my translation), for instance, the protagonists are initially ignorant about the fact that they are actually already dead, or hallucinating in a near-death state. Examples: THE SIXTH SENSE (Shyamalan, 1999), THE OTHERS (Amenábar, 2001), GHOST (Zucker, 1990), JACOB’S LADDER (Lyne, 1990), WAKING LIFE (Linklater, 2001), or SOURCE CODE (Jones, 2011)357

In INCEPTION (Nolan, 2010), ABRE LOS OJOS (Amenábar, 1997), or VANILLA SKY (Crowe, 2001), the characters discover that they are dreaming at least significant portions of their entire life and that they are not interacting with real persons but only dream projections of persons in a non-shared world. In other variants, the protagonists are hallucinating rather than dreaming, such as in DAS CABINET DES DR CALIGARI (Wiene, 1920), SHUTTER ISLAND (Scorsese, 2010), MULHOLLAND DRIVE (Lynch, 2001), or INLAND EMPIRE (Lynch, 2006).358

Again, these films address questions of self-knowledge because the source of deception is no external deceiving force, no genius malignus, but the deceived person herself. The characters are searching for their position in the world. The two-world ontology of these films slightly differs from external world skepticism films: There are multiple worlds, but the difference consists between the world as it supposedly is and

355 See also chapter 6.
356 For CYPHER and IDENTITY, see also chapter 7.5.2.
357 Jacob’s Ladder in particular is inspired by Ambrose Bierce’s short story “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (Bierce 2003 [1891]).
358 More examples for hallucination films can be found in chapter 7.
the world as imagined up by the character. The most radical films of such films in which characters dream and hallucinate can be termed solipsism films, because they show the “metaphysical solitude” (Gabriel 2008: 22, my translation) of their characters: “Like the solipsistic subject, in dreams we are alone with our dream images, even though apparently we are communicating with others.” (Markus Gabriel 2008: 22, my translation)359

These, then, are varieties of self-knowledge skepticism films. The next two sections will analyse VANILLA SKY, ABRE LOS OJOS, and INCEPTION as self-knowledge films about the complex relation between dreamers and the dream world they inhabit. As we will see, dream worlds as self-generated forms of simulated or fake worlds have tremendous potential for self-deception (chapter 11.2 and 11.3). Chapter 11.4 will conclude with an analysis of MOON, a film which raises interesting aspects concerning skepticism about personal identity as a specific form of self-knowledge.

11.2 Being One’s Own Evil Deceiver: ABRE LOS OJOS and VANILLA SKY

As seen in chapter 7, skepticism films predominantly work with mentally stable characters. In the context of the present chapter, the Spanish science fiction drama ABRE LOS OJOS and its Hollywood remake VANILLA SKY are the films which perhaps most clearly are based on that premise.360

Both films tell the story of a young rich womanizer (César [Eduardo Noriega] in ABRE LOS OJOS, David Aames [Tom Cruise] in VANILLA SKY) whose face is disfigured after a suicidal car accident caused by one of his former lovers. Shortly before the accident, he falls in love with Sofia (Penélope Cruz), a beautiful woman who accompanied his best friend Pelayo (Fele Martínez)/Brian (Jason Lee) to César’s/David’s birthday party. Since the doctors are unable to reconstruct his face, César/David starts leading a reclusive life. But he still misses Sofia and convinces her to meet her again. Accompanied by Pelayo/Brian, Sofia meets César/David in a nightclub, but the evening goes awry. Drunk and devastated about his disfigurement and estrangement from his friends, César/David passes out outside of the nightclub. When he awakes the next morning, Sofia is sitting next to him and tells him that she loves him. Shortly thereafter, his doctors find a way to restore his face. All of a sudden, César/David’s life seems to be on track again, but this new happy life gradually starts falling apart. César/David is plagued by nightmares in which he is disfigured again, and one morning it is not Sofia who is lying next to him, but Nuria (Najwa Nimri)/Julie Gianni (Cameron Diaz), the woman who caused the suicidal car accident, and who he

359 German original text: “Im Traum sind wir wie das solipsistische Subjekt mit unseren Traumbildern allein, obwohl wir scheinbar mit anderen kommunizieren.”

360 Tom Cruise bought the remake rights for his production company C/W productions after seeing the ABRE LOS OJOS at the Sundance film festival (see documentary “Prelude to a Dream” on the DVD edition). Hollywood frequently produces remakes of foreign films because US-American mass audiences are reluctant to watch foreign films with non-Hollywood actors. Apart from VANILLA SKY, examples for US-remakes are: INSOMNIA (Christopher Nolan, 2002) with Al Pacino and Robin Williams in leading roles, a remake of the Norwegian film INSOMNIA (Skjoldbjærg, 1997); Martin Scorsese’s THE DEPARTED (Scorsese, 2006) is a remake of the Hong Kong thriller INFERNAL AFFAIRS (Lau and Mak, 2002); THE RING (Verbinski, 2002), is a remake of the Japanese horror film RINGU (Nakata, 1998). This is not a new tendency. THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN (Sturges, 1960), is effectively a remake of Akira Kurosawa’s THE SEVEN SAMURAI (Kurosawa, 1954), set in the Wild West instead of 16th-century Japan. Sometimes, both versions are directed by the same director. For instance, Michael Haneke directed both FUNNY GAMES versions (1997/2007).
believed to be dead. Convinced that she has taken Sofia’s life hostage, César/David abuses Julie/Nuria, who claims to be the Sofia, and later even strangles her in the heat of the moment when she transforms from Julie/Nuria into Sofia and back. In a bar, where César/David ponders the strange events, a stranger approaches him, telling him that his entire new life is a lucid dream, a dream created by César/David himself, a dream which he can control by mindwill.

Faced with murder charges, César/David is put in a psychiatric prison ward, where the prison psychiatrist Antonio (Chete Lera)/Colin McCabe (Kurt Russell) tries to figure out what actually happened (compare fig. 11.1 and 11.2). The conversations between César/David and his psychiatrist are rendered through a flashback structure: In an intra-diegetic frame story, César/David tells the story of his life to Antonio/Colin which frequently intercuts the pre-/post-lucid-dream plot lines. He eventually remembers that he went to a company which provides a ‘Life Extension’ service. The frame story now transforms into the main plot line (sequence V in both films): César/David convinces Antonio/Colin to accompany him to the company’s offices. There, one of the ‘Life Extension’ managers explains the nature and purpose of the life extension program: The customers are put in cryostasis, i.e. their bodies are suspended in a coma-like state at extremely low temperatures, until their disease can be cured at some point in the future. While in cryostasis, the customers are mentally immersed in a
The lucid dreamer as solipsistic solitaire

Structurally and thematically similar films

Crowe’s pop-cultural approach

The lucid dream program in which they experience their life according to their own design. Their memory is erased to such an extent that they cannot remember dying and having joined the ‘Life Extension’ program.

Horrified by the revelation, César/David runs away and eventually ends up on the roof of the office building. There, César/David encounters the man in the bar again, the “tech support” of the lucid dream. According to him, César/David spent the last 150 years in a lucid dream and never saw Sofia and Pelayo/Brian again after the evening at the nightclub. César/David is now faced with a choice: Either he continues living his lucid dream, which is – for better or worse – entirely controlled by his own desires and mindwill, or he can be woken up and continue his life in the future. César/David chooses life in the future and jumps from the roof. Both films show César/David falling down, but they do not show the impact. The last shot is a black/white screen while a female voice gently repeats the sentence “open your eyes” (see fig. 11.3 and 11.4).³⁶¹

The films tell the story of a man faced with the possibility that he is only a solipsistic solitaire, a prisoner of a world of dreams which has been designed according to his desires to reconcile with the woman he loved and the best friend he has lost. So, if one subscribes to the solipsistic solitaire interpretation, both films are self-knowledge skepticism films.

Structurally and thematically, both films follow similar trajectories, even though the big-budget production VANILLA SKY is much more tailored to the taste of a mainstream audience. The setting is different (Manhattan instead of Madrid), and most of the Spanish actors have been exchanged for well-known Hollywood stars – except for Penélope Cruz, who plays Sofia in both films. While César’s deceased father is the owner of a successful restaurant empire, David Aames’ father is the founder of a large media corporation and thus an alignment to the overarching theme of mediated realities. VANILLA SKY also marks transitions between its various plot blocks more explicitly (see below) and adds scenes that provide additional information about David’s biography and his troubled relation to “The Seven Dwarfs,” the company’s board of directors which controls the minority stakes of David’s company (scenes 6 and 22).

This is an example for the ‘pop-cultural approach’ taken by director Cameron Crowe, a former music journalist. VANILLA SKY contains a plethora of audiovisual pop-cultural references which sometimes directly refer to the film’s overarching “reality vs. dream life” theme. In the Brothers Grimm’s fairy tale version the Seven Dwarfs stand guard at Snow White’s “transparent coffin made of glass” (Grimm 2010: 266, my translation), believing her to be death while she actually is only in a coma after biting into the red apple. In contrast, the ‘seven dwarfs’ in VANILLA SKY are David Aames’ corporate adversaries, but their name is a premonition of David Aames’ future, semi-comatose, cryostatic future (see scene 7).

VANILLA SKY’s pop-cultural references sustain the impression that David Aames is actually living in a double dream world tailored to his tastes and desires: There is the lucid dream world he experiences during cryostasis, but there also is the ‘real’ world in which he, knowingly or not, controls the lives of the persons around him. As Sofia tells

³⁶¹ Both films resemble yet another Philip K. Dick novel: In Ubik (Dick 1991 [1959]), the main characters struggle to discover whether they are actually alive or kept in a cryogenic “half-life,” semi-unconscious state.
him after the party scene, “it must be difficult controlling all those people’s lives. Everyone at that party is connected to you for survival.” (scene 12, timecode 00:28:30).

References to other films abound: Apart from the manifest presence of film posters in David Aames’ apartment (fig. 11.9), VANILLA SKY includes or re-enacts scenes from films such as SABRINA (Wilder, 1954) and TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD (Mulligan, 1962) (fig. 11.10 and 11.6) in the setting. The most prominent manifestation of pop-culture in VANILLA SKY is the soundtrack. Non-diegetic and diegetic songs from bands and musicians like Radiohead, R.E.M., Sigur Rós, Paul McCartney, John Coltrane, The Beach Boys, Bob Dylan, or The Rolling Stones are omnipresent. Even though the songs do not assume explicit narrative functions, they shape the mood and ‘feel’ of the film as taking place within a dream world which has been built out of the dreamer’s pop-culturally shaped imagination.

This is precisely how the concluding scenes of VANILLA SKY explain the narrative and aesthetic function of the pop-cultural references (scene 40 and 41). In the elevator to the rooftop, the tech support person explains that in David’s lucid dream,

“All of this, everything, is your creation. […] We erased everything that really happened from your memory. Replaced by a better life, under these beautiful, Monet-like skies.’ David: “My mother’s favourite.” Tech support: ‘A better life because you had Sofia. You sculpted your lucid dream out of the iconography of your youth. An album cover that once moved you […] A movie you once saw once that showed you what a father could be like… or what love could be like’” (scene 40, timecode 01:50:45-01:52:45)

As the tech support speaks, the film intercuts his claims with images from previous film scenes and excerpts from other films: The album cover that moved David is from Bob Dylan’s The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan (compare fig. 11.7 and 11.8), the movie that shows David what a father could be like is the Harper Lee adaptation TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD with Gregory Peck, and the film that showed him what love could be like is François Truffaut’s JULES ET JIM (Truffaut, 1962), which features prominently as a blueprint for the love scenes and as a film poster in David’s bedroom (scene 29; scenes 3 and 8; see fig. 11.9).

Crowe’s pop-culturalism instantiates the ‘postmodernist’ pastiche approach of contemporary Hollywood cinema. Crowe’s voice-over commentary in the special features documentary PRELUDE TO A DREAM of the DVD edition clearly states that he consciously tried to make the film accessible on several levels:

“The goal was a movie filled with clues and signposts, like the cover of Sgt. Pepper [a Beatles album, PS]. Every time you looked at it you might see something different. […] Vanilla Sky isn’t obvious. It’s a movie to be watched closely. But it’s also a movie you can let wash over you. It’s a story, a puzzle, a nightmare, a lucid dream, a psychedelic pop song, a movie to argue over. And most of all, a movie that extends an invitation. Wherever you want to meet it, it will meet you there”

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Both films extensively rely on masks, not only as a literal veil over César/David’s disfigured face, but also as an allusion to the janus-face of the world the protagonist has created for himself (see fig. 11.14 and 11.15).

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD is frequently shown in the background during the scenes between David and Curtis McCabe as an explicit reference that McCabe is a projection of a father figure for David. See fig. 11.1 and 11.2.
This expresses the working mechanisms of Hollywood: Even complex narratives are structured and designed in such a way that even the intellectually inattentive portion of the film audience can enjoy the film. As in the MATRIX films and THE TRUMAN SHOW, the intellectual/philosophical value of a mainstream film is not supposed to come at the cost of excessive complexity.

Both films take up similar themes and motifs for honing in on the “real life vs. virtual life” theme without marking these different ontological realms too obviously. Even though both films eventually offer an explicit ‘official’ interpretation of the film’s events, their narrato-aesthetic design leaves room for interpretation. Similar to the explanations offered in MATRIX by Morpheus, and by the Architect in MATRIX RELOADED (see
chapter 10.3), the tech support revelations need not be taken at face value by the audience; they can be understood as one of various possible interpretations. ABRE LOS OJOS and VANILLA SKY mix two chronologically ordered plot lines which are cross-cut with each other: a frame story (César talking with his therapist in prison), and memory flashback scenes with César/David's attempts to come to terms with his own life story.

Because of the way in which the films are edited, the audience is not immediately aware that the films in principle proceed chronologically. This forces the audience to puzzle together the succession of events, and it mirrors the main character’s own mental process. VANILLA SKY much more explicitly than ABRE LOS OJOS marks the psychiatric ward dialogue scenes as intra-diegetic frame story by using non-diegetic voice-overs. The dialogues between César/David and Antonio/Colin constantly begin or end before and after they are seen on-screen. They either lead from a flashback scene to the frame story, or from the latter to a flashback scene (see transition from scene 6 to 7, and transition from scene 34 to 35).

If all the scenes prior to David’s arrival at the psychiatric ward are actually memory flashbacks, then César/David is the narrator of his own life, and the reliability of the screened events depends on the reliability of César/David as a narrator. The flashback structure eventually comes to an end in the last two scenes of the films which take place at the Life Extension offices (scene 37 in both films, see also fig. 11.12 and 11.13).

Again, such narrative structures correspond to Hollywood’s principle of closure, which demands the resolution of the story that has been told. Simultaneously, however, the ambiguity of both films (concerning the reliability of César/David as a narrator) is another instantiation of cinema’s ability to offer its spectators more than one way of understanding the screened story, even though it offers an official, straightforward one. While novels also frequently use non-linear and unreliable narration as a narrative tool, film scenes which are explicitly marked as subjective narrations by a (diegetic or non-diegetic narrator) also can undermine one possible interpretation via their audio-visual design, or by cross-cutting between story lines which supplement or contradict each other.

Audiovisual ontological markers offer (ambiguous) clues to an audience, as addressed in the preceding chapter. Like the external world skepticism films, VANILLA SKY and ABRE LOS OJOS employ different colour tonalities. The film title VANILLA SKY alludes to the film’s virtual reality setting, since “vanilla sky” is a term which refers to impressionist unnatural sky colours in Claude Monet paintings (see scene 40). When César/David wakes up after the night at the night club, both films include a low-angle shot of Sofia in front of, literally, a ‘vanilla sky’ (see fig. 11.16 and 11.17, scene 26 [VS], scene 40 [VS]).

In the audio commentary, Crowe claims that there are “four specific ways” of interpreting VANILLA SKY: “One of them is ‘listen to Edmund Ventura. He is telling the truth’ […] A popular [interpretation] was that the movie occurs in the coma after the accident. […] Another one is spurred by the sticker that's on the Mustang and the voice of Sofia at the beginning. That points to the fact that the whole thing could be a dream. […] Then there’s my secret one […] The whole movie could be Jason Lee’s novel written about his friend, who got all the good girls until a crucial event that allowed his friend to realise his own mortality.” (timecode 01:53:30-02:05:50). Crowe himself states that he is closest to the straight-on interpretation that the tech support person is telling the truth.

These voice-overs have the character of what Michel Chion calls “iconogenic voice” – “[a] voice that seems to conjure up the images that then 'illustrate’” (with greater or lesser fidelity—even contradicting) the words spoken.” (Chion 2009: 478)
scene 23 [AlO]) The vanilla sky is also clearly visible in the final scene (see fig. 11.18 and 11.19)

This effect is more clearly visible in Crowe’s film. Since in scene 26 this colour tonality appears for the first time in the film (prepared by the lighting of dream scene 17), it is an ontological marker: It marks the beginning of the lucid dream plot line. VANILLA SKY plays with the dream vs. reality theme in other scenes: For instance, a shot of a surveillance screen during the surgery contains coded messages such as “Do not wake him up” for the “procedural overlay,” and “sweet dreams” (see fig. 11.20, scene 27). Ontological markers are a reminder that philosophically ambitious films can either synchronise any number of their multimodal means of expression – or use them as vehicles for introducing ambivalence. The narrato-aesthetic design of both films here supports the ‘official’ interpretation but simultaneously leaves room for divergent ones.

I agree with Daniel Shaw, pace Murray Smith, that the philosophical quality of a film does not necessarily depend on its ability to present a clear-cut, non-ambiguous
‘position’ or interpretation of the events of the film. Shaw claims that the “fact that a movie raises more questions than it answers is, to my mind, a point in its favour, both philosophically and aesthetically (especially given the demand for closure in traditional Hollywood films).” (Shaw 2008: 108). For Shaw, an ambiguous film resists attempts to understanding it as a mere illustration of philosophical theories. Hence, ambivalence is a sign of resistance against oversimplification, i.e., against oversimplifying the film as well as against oversimplifying the philosophical themes in question. Indeed, I would claim, the philosophical ‘value’ of both films derives from the degree of ambiguity they allow for, the presence of an ‘official’ interpretation notwithstanding.

ABRE LOS OJOS and VANILLA SKY differ from external world skepticism films since here the protagonist is his own source of deception. Until the end of the film, César/David does not know that he is living a dream life he created for himself. While the diegetic universe of external world skepticism films by and large is controlled by an external deceiving power, the main character of VANILLA SKY and ABRE LOS OJOS could exert mind control over every aspect of his dream world. It is his own subconscious which turns the lucid dream into a nightmare; he secretly desires to finish the dream and continue a life in the ‘real’ world of the future. This desire, and the feeling of guilt of actually having lost Sofia, causes so many ‘glitches’ in his lucid dream that he ultimately discovers the truth, and is granted the option of re-starting his life. By living in a dream world, César/David has learnt enough about himself to know that he prefers continuing his life in the ‘real’ world, even though it is a life without his ‘imago’ of Sofia. César/David is no Cypher: He prefers to swallow the red pill, after having lived in both worlds.

11.3 Shared Dreams and Illusions: INCEPTION

Christopher Nolan’s heist thriller INCEPTION (Nolan, 2010) varies the dream vs. reality theme. It is based on the idea of shared dream worlds instead of solipsistic ones which nevertheless can become indistinguishable from reality as well. In INCEPTION, the main characters, with exceptions, know exactly what they are doing when they enter the shared dream world. In external world skepticism films, the protagonist is a victim of deception; in INCEPTION, Dom Cobb (Leonardo Di Caprio) is a criminal mastermind who constructs shared dream worlds before entering them.

INCEPTION is a noiresque yet futuristic heist thriller with futuristic elements: Relying on an elaborated technology, the industrial spy Dom Cobb and his team infiltrate the dreams of their victims in order to extract valuable secrets and ideas. According to the film’s logic, the targeted subject will create something like a vault or a safe where it hides these ideas, which can then be accessed by the infiltrators. When an assignment goes wrong, the Industrial magnate Saito (Ken Watanabe) forces Cobb to accept a highly dangerous mission: Cobb is supposed to plant rather than extract an idea in the mind of his main competitor Robert Fischer (Cillian Murphy). Saito wants Fischer, the heir of a powerful energy corporation, to split up the company, which would reduce its influence on the market. In return, Cobb, who is wanted in the United States for allegedly killing his wife Mal (Marion Cotillard), will be able to return home and see his children again.
Cobb assembles a team: Eames (Tom Hardy), who develops the narrative of the dream levels and later incorporates a mental projection of Fischer's closest person of trust in the dream-share; the talented dream architect Ariadne (Ellen Page), who designs three different dream levels which are necessary for implanting the idea in Fischer's mind; the chemist Yusuf (Dileep Rao), who develops a sedative which is strong enough to support access to multiple dream levels; and Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), who coordinates the work of the other team members. Saito, who finances the mission, insists on participating in the dream share as well.\footnote{This character constellation resembles a film production crew, with Fischer as the audience of the production. While Nolan recognises the analogy, he claims that he initially was not aware of it (see Nolan 2010: 19).}

Using multiple dream levels, however, is dangerous; the deeper the dream level, the more unstable it becomes, and experienced time there increases about ten to twenty times with each level. The deepest dream level of the unconscious is called “limbo”. For the dreamer, the time spent in limbo corresponds to a lifetime (even though in reality it only lasts for a couple of hours), and the dreamer eventually loses the ability to determine whether he is dreaming or not.\footnote{INCEPTION works with the assumption that the mind works faster in a dream. An hour in reality corresponds to several hours of experienced time in the dream – “twenty times the normal” (Nolan 2010: 103) in the Fischer inception heist, and “when you go into a dream within that dream, the effect is compounded” (Nolan 2010: 103). In the Fischer heist, the ten hours spent on the plane correspond to about one week in the first dream level, six months in the second dream level, and ten years on the third dream level.} The dream-sharers can only wake up when the effect of the sedative wears off, when they die within the dream, or when they are woken up by a “kick,” such as dropping from a building or being tossed into a water basin.

Cobb’s team approaches Fischer during a plane flight from Sydney to Los Angeles. As well-prepared as the heist is, the mission quickly is on the brink of failure: Unbeknownst to Cobb’s team, Fischer has been trained against dream infiltration. In the dream-share, the infiltrators now must defend themselves against Fischer’s ‘dream security’ personnel while keeping Fischer ignorant about the fact that he is dreaming. Since the dreamers are heavily sedated, they cannot wake up prematurely without risking falling into limbo, where they would be experientially stuck in the dream world for decades.

On each dream level, Fischer is supposed to be drawn to a specific idea:

“Eames: On the top level, we open up his relationship with his father... Say: ‘I will not follow in my father’s footsteps.’ Next level down we’ve accessed his ambition and self-esteem. We feed him: ‘I will create something myself’. Then, the bottom level, we bring out the emotional big guns... Cobb: ‘My father doesn’t want me to be him.’” (Nolan)

The mission is further sabotaged by Cobb’s dream projection of his wife Mal. As it turns out, Cobb and Mal were once stuck in limbo, where they spent a lifetime together before waking up again. Because Mal lost track of reality in limbo, Cobb planted the idea in her mind that the world is not real, an idea she was unable to shake even in the real world. Convinced she would wake up in the real world, Mal eventually committed suicide. Traumatised and guilt-ridden by Mal’s suicide, Cobb spent more and more time in dream worlds with a mental projection of Mal, which now invades and sabotages Cobb’s dream missions, trying to convince him to follow her to the real world. Despite
the obstacles encountered, Cobb and his team ultimately accomplish their mission. After passing through the control points at LAX airport, Cobb returns home to his children.

**Dreams and totems**

**INCEPTION** relies on the assumption that dreams can become shared realities of their own. In the “dream-share” (Nolan 2010: 10), the dreamers participate in a form of online role-player game. In that way the film specifically addresses the issue of distinguishing dream reality from waking life reality. The search for distinguishing criteria is a significant element of the narrative: Before entering dream architectures for the first time, each dreamer of Cobb’s team is supposed to manufacture a totem whose characteristics remain known to its owner alone. Thus, by checking the totem, the dreamer is supposed to know whether s/he is dreaming right now or not. But this reassurance in turn depends on the assumption that, in the first place, the dreamer manufactures his or her totem in the real world.

Cobb’s totem, which originally belonged to Mal, is a spinning top which continues spinning endlessly in dream-shares. Nolan uses it for the ambiguous final scene of the film: When Cobb returns home, he spins the top on the living room table before he joyfully reunites with his children. While Cobb is rejoicing off-screen, the camera tracks in to the continuously spinning wheel and then dissolves into a black screen (fig. 11.21). The spectator is left with a choice: Will the top continue spinning – indicating that Cobb is still in the dream – or will it eventually topple – indicating that Cobb is back to reality?

Instead of focusing on such a simple yes/no question, Christopher Nolan proposes a more nuanced interpretation of the final scene. In an interview with *Wired*, he states: “Sometimes I think people lose the importance of the way the thing is staged with the spinning top at the end. Because the most important emotional thing is that Cobb’s not looking at it. He doesn’t care.” (Capps 2010)
Cobb’s emotional decision to not care anymore whether he is living in a shared dream or not is a form of self-knowing acknowledgement: Even though there is a token which can be used as external experiential criterion for distinguishing reality from shared dream worlds, Cobb does not want to know. He acknowledges his desire for seeing his children again, and thereby values that desire over the fundamentalist urge that only a life lived in the domain of the real is the right life. Like Cypher in MATRIX, Cobb prefers the taste of steak to the real thing; in the end he would choose the blue pill instead of the red pill.368

The film carefully prepares Cobb’s decision to remain ignorant: Even though Cobb and Mal have spent a long time together in limbo, and even though Mal eventually decides that even life in reality is only a dream, Cobb realises that life in limbo is a life— that the life Cobb and Mal lived there lasted a life-time, and that it was—to paraphrase the Hannah Gill character in THE TRUMAN SHOW—“a lifestyle” and a “truly blessed life” because it was a life two lovers shared with each other. The material basis of this shared experience becomes insignificant, because it is experienced time that matters. This decision is facilitated because, unlike the non-real worlds of THE TRUMAN SHOW or MATRIX, life in INCEPTION’s limbo is not subject to external control. It is a dream world which is entirely created and shaped by the dream-sharers on that level of dream consciousness.

One can also question the reliability of the totem because it relies on the pre-assumption that the level of its creation is the outermost layer of reality. The film subtly suggests that a totem can be manipulated within the dream-share: Cobb urges Ariadne to not reveal the specific characteristics of her totem to anyone, but in one scene Cobb reveals the spinning top to her (scene 21, fig. 11.22), which in principle gives Ariadne the opportunity to create another dream level for Cobb from which he cannot wake up, but within which he is happy.

Interestingly, Nolan explicitly contrasts INCEPTION with the virtual reality of the first MATRIX film. While the latter “question[s] an actual reality,” Nolan claims that

“Inception […] is about a more everyday experience with dreaming. It’s about a more relatable human experience. It doesn’t question an actual reality. […] [I]t becomes an alternate reality simply because the dream becomes a form of communication—just like using a telephone or going online.” (Nolan 2010: 9)

Indeed, INCEPTION does not „question an actual reality” – it is a film about the creation of additional, alternative shared realities and about a protagonist who obviously struggles with the fact that these alternative realities can appear just as real as the supposedly real world.

Nolan’s straightforward assessment corresponds to the film’s narrative structure: While the plot premise is very complex, and the film at certain points alternates between as much as five parallel plot lines (from limbo to the real world), INCEPTION is a linear

368 Henry Taylor proposes a similar, yet more political interpretation of INCEPTION: “By this token Inception […] is at heart about meaningful human relationships and social commitment in a world of global corporations locked in economic warfare and resorting to conquer the ultimate frontier, the human mind. This is the next phase, in Marxian terms, of the real subsumption of labor: once the entire world has been horizontally […] conquered by capitalism as the prevailing mode of production, it shifts to the vertical axis of deep penetration to procure and produce the most valuable information: thoughts and emotions. Simultaneously, the desire for human bonding is the stronger the deeper we penetrate into dreamland, where dream means both what occurs during sleep and what is profoundly desired.” (Taylor 2012)
narrative, not counting the flashbacks. Unlike Nolan’s other highly complex film MEMENTO (Nolan, 2000), whose plot deliberately alternates between a chronological and reverse plot line, INCEPTION constructs a kind of extended parallel montage, each plot line being located on one reality level running parallel to and interact with each other.

As David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson claim, the different plot lines are “subplots, each with its own goals, obstacles, and deadline. Moreover, all the deadlines have to synchronize.” (Bordwell and Thompson 2010) For instance, on the first dream level Yusuf is driving his sleeping crew through the city of his dream level in a van, chased by Fischer’s dream security team. Yusuf needs to drive the van off a bridge and start playing Edith Piaf’s song “Je ne regrette rien” at a pre-determined moment. The fall and impact of the van unleashes a “kick,” which will jolt him and the rest of the crew out of their dream state (scene 36). Simultaneously, two dream levels deeper, Cobb’s crew tries to bring Fischer to a medical facility in the middle of a snow-ridden environment where he is supposed to talk with the dream projection of his father and finally form the idea to split up his company (scenes 38, 39, 44). Bordwell argues that this “modular plotting” (Bordwell and Thompson 2010) only works because the complex interrelation between the five reality levels is facilitated by the rather simple and goal-oriented structure of each subplot. Like in the other films analysed so far, the reality levels can also be distinguished easily by the setting and audio-visual presentation: The environments are different, the colour tonalities differ, and the characters are dressed differently (see fig. 11.23 to 11.26).

Piaf’s song clearly marks the interrelation between the five reality levels as well as their different temporal progression: While the song plays at standard tempo on Yusuf’s level, on the deeper levels, in which time progresses more slowly, the characters and the audience hear it in a correspondingly slower tempo. Abrupt movements on higher dream levels also correlate the subplots: When the van tips over during a chase scene, the crew on the deeper levels can feel the impact in their environment as well.

What, after all, makes INCEPTION philosophically interesting? For one, the basic idea of a shared dream, presented as an independent life world. It is also interesting that INCEPTION, like the other films discussed before, orchestrates the interplay of different reality and dream levels via the actors’ performances, different cinematographic and aural strategies, and well-planned editorial decisions. This seems to be a common trait of skepticism films which grows out of the expressive potentiae of the medium: As a performative, time-bound medium, film can experiment with spatio-temporal processes – something with purely scriptural philosophical reflections cannot do to that extent (see chapters 1 and 2).

11.4 Multiple Personalities and Virtual Identities: MOON

Because the self-knowledge skepticism films VANILLA SKY, ABRE LOS OJOS and INCEPTION immerse their characters in (virtual) dream worlds, they have an ontologically close relation to external world skepticism films. I now want to conclude chapter 11 by looking at MOON, a film which very directly explores the epistemological criteria of personal identity by using a scenario in which the main character is deceived.
about who he is by an external force.\textsuperscript{369} In Duncan Jones’ film a solitary astronaut working on the moon discovers that he is a clone with a limited life-span of three years who is replaced after his death. The film extensively dwells on the encounters between two of the clones, Sam-6 and Sam-5 (played by Sam Rockwell), who behave in slightly different ways, even though their DNA is identical. Both Sams therefore must come to terms with the realisation that “I is an Other,” and that “an Other is Me”.\textsuperscript{370} Secondly, the clones in the film realise that, literally, their biographical memories are misleading: Each Sam remembers having a wife and a daughter who was born shortly before he left for the job appointment on the lunar station. They feel real affection towards their ‘family,’ but actually only the first Sam Bell, whose DNA provides the basis for the future clones, can be said to be the real father and husband.

\textbf{Plot summary:} Sam Bell (Sam Rockwell) is an astronaut working as the sole employee of a lunar station which harvests helium-3, a clean raw material which has solved the earth’s energy problems. Bell’s employer Lunar Industries mans the lunar station with only one employee, who spends three years on the moon before they allegedly send him home and replace him. The end of Bell’s three-year stint being only two weeks away, he is in poor health and yearns for seeing his wife and daughter again, who was born shortly before Sam left for the moon. Direct communication between moon and earth is not possible due to malfunctioning satellite-uplinks, and his only connections to the earth are pre-recorded transmissions. An intelligent, speaking computer system named GERTY (spoken by Kevin Spacey), an obvious offspring of Stanley Kubrick’s and Arthur C. Clarke’s HAL, assists Sam in maintaining the station (see fig. 11.27 and 11.28). GERTY, who seems very concerned about Sam’s well-being, is also Sam’s only direct communication partner.

\textsuperscript{369} Jones claims the story credits. The screen play was written by Nathan Parker. \textit{Moon} was produced with a low budget of 5 mio. US$. The Italian filmmaker Patrick Rizzi accuses Jones of plagiarising his film \textit{Eutamnesia}, which he had directed in 1999 and put to limited direct-to-video release (see repubblica.it 2013).

\textsuperscript{370} “I is an Other” is an expression coined by Arthur Rimbaud and used by the linguist James Geary as the title of his book \textit{I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World} (Geary 2011).
When Sam leaves the station for repairing a malfunctioning harvester, he is knocked unconscious in an accident. Shortly thereafter, he wakes up again in the station, feeling very weak (scene 6). GERTY treats him back to health and submits him to a number of cognitive tests. Since one of the harvesters is still inoperative on the moon surface, he wants to leave the station again and investigate the malfunction. However, the home basis orders him to stay inside the station. Bell disobeys the order and investigates the accident site. To his surprise, he finds another astronaut, knocked unconscious, in the harvester. This astronaut looks exactly like him, albeit in very poor health, and when he regains consciousness, he claims to be Sam Bell (compare fig. 11.29 and 11.30). After further research, both Sams (later in the film termed Sam-6 and Sam-5) discover a secret chamber, which is stacked with other sleeping Sam clones. They finally discover that the station is run by clones with a three-year life-span, who are replaced with a next-generation clone when they die. The newest Sam is the sixth clone, which indicates that the station has been clone-operated for 15 years.\footnote{371}

Both Sams now plan their escape from the lunar surface. Sam-6 and GERTY activate a third clown who is supposed to replace Sam-5 in the harvester. Sam-5 is supposed to go back to earth in one of the capsules which are sent to earth regularly; Sam-6 intends to stay on the moon base. However, Sam-5 feels too weak for flying back and convinces Sam-6 to take his place. Eventually, Sam-5 dies, and Sam-6 enters the capsule shortly before a ‘rescue team’ enters the lunar station in order to remove all proofs of the company’s illegitimate activities.

**External deception**

Like Neo, Douglas Hall and Truman Burbank, but unlike Dom Cobb, Sam Bell is a victim of external deception, induced by Lunar Industries: At the beginning of MOON, he is ignorant of being one of a number of genetically identical clones, and he is ignorant about the fact that his past life as he remembers it is only an illusion, a memory of the original Sam Bell which is somehow transplanted into the clones’ minds. Bell is thus the victim of a double narcissistic mortification: He is forced accept that the Other he is confronted with is but another version of himself. But if his personal identity cannot be defined via “continuity of the body” (Quante und Prechtl 1999: 250, my translation) – who exactly is the other man? Sam-6 is not Sam-5, but simultaneously they are both Sam Bell: They have the same longing for returning to Earth and being reunited with their family.

In philosophical terms, MOON explores a synchronised version of the problem of personal identity: The temporal identity of the body is not disrupted diachronically, but synchronically. The second narcissistic mortification results from Bell’s insight of being only a clone with an expiration date, a cloned human being whose deepest emotions are only “memory implants” (timecode 00:50:45), as Gerty eventually reveals to him. This is the most devastating revelation: His family, the emotionally closest part of Bell’s self, is not his family. His wife, who he has only seen via recorded transmissions, is kind of similar to Meryl (Laura Linney) from THE TRUMAN SHOW. (One can assume, however, that the transmissions are original recordings of the conversations between the original

\footnote{371 The limited life-span of the clones is a nod to Ridley Scott’s BLADE RUNNER and Philip K. Dick’s short story “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?”}
Sam Bell and his wife.) Wife and daughter are therefore definitely not part of their “biographical process of becoming” (Quante und Prechtl 1999: 251, my translation). Sam-5 discovers that there was an original Sam Bell, and Sam-6 manages to make a phone call to his wife’s house on earth; a phone call which is answered by his now 15-year-old ‘daughter’. Thus, the only Sam Bell who can really claim to actually have lived through his memories is the original Bell (who is absent in the film).

What is the connection to skepticism? Sam-5 and Sam-6 are in an epistemological-existential situation which is analogous to the one victims of external world deception are subjected to: They believe to know who they are, but in an ontologically fundamental way they do not know – just like Neo, who erroneously believed to be living in a real world before being ‘unplugged’. But Neo, unlike the two Sams, actually had the life he experienced and shared in the Matrix – it is only a life lived within a virtual world.

Interestingly, MOON is set in another extremely isolated environment. The cloned Bells lead a solitary life on the moon, Sam-5’s only conversation partner is a sentient computer program, his only communicative connections to earth are pre-recorded transmissions – until one day he is faced with another version of himself. This implies that this form of deception of the self would not be possible to such an extent in a shared Lebenswelt.

MOON does not resolve the problem of personal identity with a simple answer. Sam-5 and Sam-6 eventually accept their clonehood and integrate it into their own personality. Even though they are aware that their memories of Eve and Tess are only memory implants, the two women continue to be both men’s centre of affection. Shortly before Sam-5 dies, the two men are talking about how they ‘met’ Eve, and during the conversations Sam-6 freely switch from “You knew you had to take a chance. So you called her. You were terrified and wrote that whole speech for her answer machine” to “but I didn’t need it because Tess answered the phone. And I could tell in her voice as we talked, she was thinking... ‘Why has Sam called me?’ (timecode 01:23:17-01:24:01). Both Sams come to terms with the paradoxical situation by acknowledging it without assuming a distanced position towards their feelings and fake memories. In short, they accept that, in their case, there are many “me’s”. In a positive fashion, they acknowledge Agent Smith’s sarcastic attitude that “the good thing about being me is that there’s so many me’s” (MATRIX RELOADED, timecode 01:43:00).372

11.5 Conclusion

To a higher degree than external world skepticism, self-knowledge skepticism films appear ambiguous about their ‘preferred ontological solution’. Still dependent on Hollywood’s closure principle, they certainly offer their audiences a face-value interpretation of what actually happens in the films, but they still leave enough room for interpretations to the contrary.

More importantly, however, they continue a tendency already observed in MATRIX: REVOLUTIONS: The penultimate question to be answered is not anymore whether the

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372 MOON explicitly alludes to another science fiction film about solitary men in space, who fall in love with their mental projections of a woman they once loved: SOLARIS, originally directed by Andrej Tarkovsky (1972), later remade by Steven Soderbergh (2002). For instance, at the beginning of the film, Sam-5 hallucinates a young woman sitting in a chair in a yellow dress (timecode 00:12:12) – just like in SOLARIS.
character, like Truman Burbank, manages to arrive at the most outer layer of reality. In INCEPTION, VANILLA SKY and ABRE LOS OJOS the focus shifts to another question: On which kind of reality does the main character feel most at home, or on which level of reality is he most happy? The decision about this question can result in wanting to live in the real world again (ABRE LOS OJOS and VANILLA SKY), but the decision can also render the ontological status of the Lebenswelt irrelevant. It seems that the films analysed so far steer away from the simple question “how do I know what’s real?” to a more psychologically motivated question: “where do I feel most real?” – in the sense of “where can I live the life I most aspire to?” From that perspective, the decision to remain in a shared or non-shared dream world does not sound as such a bad decision anymore.

The results of the present chapter correlate the ambivalence of these films to more ‘professional’ philosophical debates about knowledge, reality and personal identity. The most obvious advantage of the cinematic thought experiments which were analysed so far is that they are screened and performed: By being screened (see Wartenberg 2007), they can directly address the double perspective which is always implicit in hypothetic philosophical thought experiments. They allow evaluating the philosophical consequences of a given scenario from an external perspective, and they allow evaluating the consequences of living under the conditions imposed by the thought experiment from a pseudo-internal perspective, a perspective which takes into account the experiential character of spectatorship and the performative quality of the film actors’ performances.