Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema
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Coda. From Doubt to Acknowledgement, or: The Philosophical Significance of Skepticism Films revisited

We have come full circle now. Starting with the observation that a number of contemporary mainstream films address philosophical doubt about our ways of knowing the world, this dissertation first formed a general position on the relation between film and philosophy: films can, but need not be philosophical. The philosophically most rewarding approach is to understand films as potentially autonomous expressions of philosophical thought whose philosophical value can be appreciated independently of the question whether they express philosophical thought in the same way as traditional, linguistic works of (academic) philosophy do. If one wants to implement films in philosophical discourse, then Wartenberg’s account of interpretive illustration is one of the most rewarding couplings: films can then be understood as cinematic philosophical thought experiments, dramatic imaginings of the hypothetical thought experiments and ideas of the philosophical tradition which – invoking Cavell and Mulhall – reorient what (traditional) philosophy had to say about issues such as skepticism.

The dissertation then approached skepticism in film from two angles: Part II investigated the role of skepticist ideas in philosophical reflection on the medium of film, prepared by a general overview of skepticist motivation, concepts, ideas and varieties of skepticist thought experiments. Part III and IV then explored varieties of skepticism films.

The first major influential thinker of skepticism in film under scrutiny was Stanley Cavell, whose bold thesis that “film is a moving image of skepticism” (Cavell 1979a: 1988) turned out to be inspired the “revelationist tradition” (Turvey 2008) of classical film theory. André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer were singled out as exemplary forebears of Cavell’s film ontology. Cavell’s thesis proves to be correct in relation to analog cinema: the medium stages a kind of double of the primordial conundrum of the skepticist. Cinema presents a screened, i.e. projected version of the world which, as Cavell roughly puts it, satisfies our normal senses as a kind of reality-world which is present to our sensorial capacities, but at the same time this reality-world is unavailable because inaccessible to us. Film stages a projection of a world, but as film spectators we
cannot interact with this projection, i.e. we cannot influence the course of that world.\textsuperscript{373}

Experiencing a film is structurally analogous to the prototypical situation in skepticist thought experiments.

As a discussion of D.N. Rodowick’s updated version of Cavell’s film ontology showed, digital screen culture reformulates the moving-image-of-skepticism thesis: Digital cinema is a “different expression” (Rodowick 2007a: 175) of skepticism. It turns the focus away from our (indexical) relation to the world and opens up a field of reflection on skepticism about ourselves and other minds. One major reason for this is the fact that digital moving-image culture is a highly interactive culture: Large parts of our current interactions with the world become mediated, and therefore more indirect. Simultaneously, the knowledge that ‘matters’ is increasingly stored in database format, which has the effect that in principle

“[o]ur disappointment in failing ever to know the world or others now becomes the perpetual disappointment of failing to attain the more nearly perfect (future) knowledge of computers and computer communications, whose technological evolution always seems to run ahead of the perceptual and cognitive capacity to manipulate them for our own ends. It is the failure to arrive at what always comes ahead.” (Rodowick 2007a: 176)\textsuperscript{374}

In the digital world, more than ever I cannot entirely stay an observer or recipient of the world I happen to be thrown into; I am always already its user and manipulator. In the digital world, I can (but need not) tailor the world according to my desires and tastes – and because of that the skepticist question as it is posed from a Cartesian perspective recedes into the background.

The second major thinker of skepticist ideas in film is Gilles Deleuze, even though he does not advance an explicit epistemological agenda. His thesis that modern cinema can restore belief in the world is, however, deeply rooted in the tradition of Western thought since it, unlike Cavell’s notion of acknowledgement, expresses a “call for salvation” (see Früchtl 2013: 37) from the onto-epistemologically insecure situation of man in the world. The belief restoration thesis is on the one hand a quasi-historical thesis, since it claims that the link between man and world was broken after the atrocities of the two world wars, and on the other hand it is an expression of the existential power of cinema. From a Deleuzian perspective, cinema is a medium that makes present to us the fact that there is a world, but simultaneously it also presents projections of how the world can be. In both ways, it affects us within the confined environment of the screening situation. Cinema’s affective powers restore the link between man and world. Cinema is never mere projection of a random world, it is “a cinema of modes of existence” (Deleuze 1989: 172).

\textsuperscript{373} It is in this sense I would claim, that for Cavell the world screened and projected by film cannot bridge the gap between man and world, as classical film theory hoped.

\textsuperscript{374} Thomas Elsaesser also steers attention to this changing trajectory of onto-epistemology in the contemporary media world: “If the epistemological question in the humanities during the 1970s and 1980s was above all prompted by the negative assumption about the impossibility of secure knowledge and thus was the expression of a radical skepticism, where every ontology and every ‘order of things’ was owed to or based on a historically, ideologically, or technologically determined ‘episteme,’ then one might have to reverse Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge and argue that every epistemology, every form of knowledge today, already presupposes mediated reality as ‘evidence’ and as ‘given.’ Conversely, if cinema is our way of being on the way to a new ontology, then of course this would be the best proof that the cinema is also our episteme, in Foucault’s sense, and that the new ontology of the cinema would define our way of knowing and of not knowing the world.” (Elsaesser 2011: 12 fn17)
Patricia Pisters’ concept of the “neuro-image” (Pisters 2012) introduces a continuation of Deleuze’s belief restoration thesis under the conditions of digital cinema, a concept that hones in on contemporary cinema’s *potentiae* for exploring and quasi-directly (affectively) presenting the mind-worlds of characters which “grow and spread rhizomatically with other parts of culture” (Pisters 2012: 177). Film is forced to leave the confines of the movie theatre: It becomes part of (and, one can say, it generates) an overarching audiovisual screen culture.

The dissertation concluded with a typology of varieties of skepticism films (external world skepticism films, self-knowledge skepticism films, and other minds skepticism films), and with a selection of case studies which analysed common narrato-aesthetic strategies of cinematically expressing the philosophical implications of skepticist scenarios. One result of these studies was that skepticism films distinctly *update* and transform skepticist scenarios; they radically tie the perennial skepticist worries to the potential of contemporary technologies for manipulating our impressions of our *Lebenswelt*. In this context, it is remarkable that most of the distinctly skepticist contemporary films belong to the genre of (fantastic) science fiction: MATRIX, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, THE TRUMAN SHOW, VANILLA SKY, ABRE LOS OJOS, INCEPTION, MOON – all these films under analysis combined a vision of everyday life as it seems to be today with the impact of futuristic means of manipulating our impressions of reality. Only a limited number of film scenarios – in THE SIXTH SENSE, THE OTHERS, THE VILLAGE, or WAKING LIFE – are not deeply tied to such potentially manipulative technology.375

This allows claiming that skepticism films do not only *discover* audiovisions of perennial philosophical themes; they also *invent* them.376 And this is one of the ways in which films can contribute philosophical insights. But this innovatory potential of cinema also reveals something about philosophy itself. In her introduction to the philosophy of Cavell, Elisabeth Bronfen expresses the “basic premise” (Grundprämisse) of Cavell’s philosophical approach by addressing the relation between philosophical aesthetics and works of art:

> “Philosophy is not the opposite of works of aesthetics. Rather, in the dramas of Shakespeare, in opera, and in Hollywood cinema it leaves distinctive traces which make one feel the continuing effect of philosophy in everyday life. The cultural imaginary reveals how a culture reflects on itself, in the sense of a philosophical self-reflection.” (Bronfen 2009: 11, my translation)377

375 Mike Sandbothe expresses this insight by saying that questions of reality nowadays can only be answered by recurring to the medial component of the relation between man and world: “Die Grundfragen der modernen Philosophie nach den Bedingungen der Möglichkeit von Welt, Wahrheit und Wirklichkeit erscheinen bei Spielberg und den Wachowskis nicht länger als Fragen, die auch eine mediale Komponente haben, sondern vielmehr als Fragen, die sich einzüg und allein im Rekurs auf das Medium Mensch und seine Hard- und Softwarestrukturen beantworten lassen.” (Sandbothe 2004)


377 German original text: “Die Philosophie ist Werken der Ästhetik nicht entgegengesetzt. Sie hinterlässt in den Draham Shakespeares, der Oper und dem Hollywood-Kino vielmehr jene prägnanten Spuren, die das Nachwirken der Philosophie im alltäglichen Leben spürbar machen. Im kulturellen Imaginären zeigt sich, wie eine Kultur über
Philosophy and film, then, form a dialogical community – “cities of words,” as the title of Cavell’s most recent major work on philosophy and film expresses it (Cavell 2004).\footnote{Cavell uses the cities of words metaphor in multiple ways. Most straightforwardly, it describes philosophy’s perennial attempts to articulate, with the help of words, the constituents of a moral or good life in a just society or, as Plato’s Socrates would say, the *kallipolis*. In that sense, philosophy builds cities of words because, out of a “disappointment with the world as it is” (Cavell 2004: 2), it tries to find the right words/concepts for describing the way the world should be – a normative impetus which Cavell terms “moral perfectionism” (Cavell 2004). In a second sense, cities of words are dialogic communities, imaginary cities formed by the thinkers, books, films, and other forms of art which, each in their own way, lead an on-going, open-ended conversation on themes such as knowledge, the just life, happiness and other “registers of the moral life” (Cavell 2004). Indeed, aware of the dialogic character of Cavell’s book and account of moral perfectionism, Maria S. Lotter, the translator of the German edition of *Cities of Words*, chooses the word *Gesprächsgemeinschaften* for translating the meaning of Cavell’s title (see Cavell 2010b).} Like other products of human culture, film and philosophy are in constant exchange with each other, taking up ideas and figures from each other, varying them in their own ways before passing them on again. And, as we have seen throughout the dissertation, films lead their own kind of philosophical dialogue. Even if academic philosophy and film often seem to “pass[…] one another by” (Cavell 2004: 9), as if having nothing to say to each other, they do form a dialogue, as the cultural practice of so many film-philosophers and philosophical filmmakers makes so evident.

This dissertation, then, attempted to show that “film is no mere handmaiden to philosophy” (Mullarkey 2009: xi) and even can develop an own “audiovisual model of philosophical thinking” (Mullarkey 2009: 26) that emphasizes the importance of incorporating the aesthetics of film into the philosophical study of film. Perhaps, as Daniel Shaw claims in a Cavellian fashion, the “marriage of film and philosophy is a match made in heaven.” (Shaw 2008: 23), perhaps it is not. But it cannot be denied, I claim, that philosophers as well as filmmakers can only benefit from thinking together both areas of human culture. What both sides can learn, perhaps, is that

“[p]hilosophy is multilingual. It speaks more than one language and with more than one voice. It moves between the languages of common sense, first-person narrative, expository science, politics, morality, religion and art, to name just a few important examples. It can speak scientistically and poetically, politically and morally, autobiographically and prosaically. And I believe that it needs these languages and ways of thinking in order to balance itself out.” (Früchtl 2008: 71)

“My eyes are shut,” Wittgenstein says about the bottom ground of doubt. One should rather say: As long as I keep acting in the world, my eyes stay shut, since there is left no time for doubt. As an acting person, I step out of the space of absolute doubt, because even a simulated or fake world becomes my world, because it is the world I am interacting with. The world is thus not simply something opposite of an isolated consciousness – the world I live in is co-generated by my actions, my interacting with that world. As long as I am (inter)acting, the world is, at least to a certain extent, real for me.

This perspective transforms the problem of radical skepticism; it is not an entirely epistemological problem anymore. It needs to acknowledge that our existence, our thoughts and actions are embedded in a shared world. And this is why it is so important to look at the way in which skepticism films address the problem of knowing and
doubting the world: They screen varieties of skepticism, and by doing so they show that, no matter how simulated, fake, or otherwise non-real or non-standard the worlds they screen may be, they are still worlds shared by the protagonists. Some might want to get out of such worlds and swallow the red pill, but they are still worlds. This is Cavell’s lesson of acknowledgement.

What remains to be done on skepticism in/and film? The focus of this dissertation was systematic rather than historical, and it used mainstream cinema as the main body of filmic works. It would be rewarding to explore deeper the ways in which skepticist ideas figured throughout the history of film – not only in Western mainstream cinema, but also in art house cinema, avant-garde film, and in the non-Western national cinemas. Also, as Cavell’s own work on Shakespeare shows (Cavell 2003), skepticist ideas naturally figure in other areas of art, in literature, theatre, photography, video games, painting, plastic arts, and so on. Specifically, the present dissertation did not have the space for exploring in more depth the influence of philosophical-skepticist notions on cyberpunk literature. Also, due to space and time limitations, the dissertation did not explore skepticism of other minds in more depth.

But such an exploration would have to be coupled even more distinctly with what I take to be the main task of future skepticism-inspired research on film and philosophy: to continue the philosophical exploration of the (globalised) digital ontologies which currently profoundly change the ways we live in our life world, the ways in which we experience it and share it with others.