Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema
Schmerheim, P.A.

Citation for published version (APA):
Schmerheim, P. A. (2013). Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (http://dare.uva.nl)

Download date: 16 Dec 2018
The dissertation “Skepticism Films. Knowing and Doubting the World in Contemporary Cinema” examines ‘skepticism films’ as configurations of philosophical ideas and thought experiments in contemporary cinema – films which address philosophical doubt about our ways of knowing the world by developing film plots that situate film characters within deception situations of various sorts: simulated/fake environments, blurred boundaries between layers of reality, systematic self-deception, or externally induced deception by other members of a shared world. After a general discussion of the relation between film and philosophy, the dissertation approaches skepticism in film from two angles: Part II investigates the role of skepticist ideas in philosophical reflection on the medium of film, exemplified by a critical discussion of the positions of film-philosophers such as Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze. The parts III and IV then explore varieties of skepticism films in the context of case studies.

**Part I**

Part I, “Thinking through Cinema,” provides the theoretical framework for understanding possible relations between film and philosophy. Drawing on current film-philosophical scholarship, predominantly written by Anglo-American philosophers such as Carroll, Constable, Mulhall, Mullarkey, Sinnerbrink, Smith, or Wartenberg, this part develops a systematic account of film as expression of philosophical thought. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the historical switch in film-philosophy from the justification of film as art to the justification of film as philosophy. On that historical foil, the chapter develops a typology of possible relations between film and philosophy. Broadly drawing on the distinction between ‘films as objects of philosophical thought’ and ‘films as expressions of philosophical thought,’ the chapter proposes to understand films as potential configurations of philosophical thought. Chapter 2 focuses on the philosophical potential of narrative fiction film. Using Rorty’s account of narrative philosophy, and Nussbaum’s philosophical appreciation of style, this chapter argues for a consensus position according to which films can be philosophically significant as screened thought experiments. On that basis, chapter 3 investigates the more radical position that films can be audiovisual expressions of philosophical thought in their own right. The chapter suggests a transmedial perspective on philosophy: All expressions of philosophical thought, even traditional ‘linguistic’ philosophy, are historically contingent and media-dependent figurations of philosophical ideas.

**Part II**

Part II focuses on the general role of skepticism in film philosophy by exploring the works of Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze. Chapter 4 outlines the function of skepticist ideas and thought experiments in traditional philosophical discourse, particularly in Cavell’s works, and uses Donald Davidson’s model of triangulation – which distinguishes knowledge of the world, self-knowledge, and knowledge of others as mutually indispensable varieties of (empirical) knowledge – as a pragmatic way of coming to terms with the varieties of knowledge and doubt. Chapter 5 critically investigates Cavell’s well-known proposition that “[f]ilm is a moving image of skepticism” (Cavell 1979a: 188) and accounts for the influence of classical film theorists such as Bazin and Kracauer on Cavell’s film philosophy. The fate of Cavell’s film ontology under the significantly altered conditions of digital screen culture is discussed by drawing on D.N. Rodowick’s book The Virtual Life of Film (Rodowick 2007). Chapter 6 turns to Deleuze as the other Godfather figure of current film-philosophy, and to his thesis that “[r]estoring our belief in the world […] is the power of modern cinema” (Deleuze 1989: 166) as a quasi-metaphysical variation of skepticist doubt. Based on Josef Früchtl’s book Vertrauen in die Welt (Früchtl 2013), the chapter outlines resonances between Deleuze and Cavell and sketches four ways of understanding the belief restoration thesis. Giuseppe Tornatore’s childhood nostalgia film NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO (1989) is used for exemplifying the claim that the broken link
between man and world diagnosed by Deleuze is a kind of temporary, passing anomaly of ordinary life instead of a metaphysical rupture. Concluding the chapter, Patricia Pisters’ concept of the “neuro-image” (Pisters 2012) contributes to understanding the continuation of Deleuze’s belief restoration thesis into the era of digital screen culture.

Part III and part IV conclude the trajectory of this dissertation and provide a typology and evaluation of skepticism films. While part III develops the typology, part IV contains in-depth case studies of selected films. Chapter 7 uses a wide range of film examples for developing the typology of skepticism films, which adapts Davidson’s model of triangulation and broadly distinguishes between external world skepticism films, self-knowledge skepticism films, and other minds skepticism films. The chapter systematically outlines the themes, narrative structures, and aesthetic strategies shared by these varieties of skepticism films. Chapter 8 discusses how skepticism films fit into the broader current cinematic tendency towards complex, non-conventional narratives by drawing on recent scholarly contributions by David Bordwell, Edward Branigan, Warren Buckland, Thomas Elsaesser, and John Walters.

Part IV analyses selected skepticism films in detail by focusing on external world skepticism films (chapter 10) and self-knowledge skepticism films (chapter 11). The goal is to understand better the literary and filmic influences as well as narrative and aesthetic choices the chosen films make for playing with the general idea of skepticism. Chapter 9 outlines the methodology used for the philosophical film analysis in the subsequent chapters by drawing on methods of systematic film analysis. Chapter 10 exposes structural and narrato-aesthetic similarities and differences between the external world skepticism films of the MATRIX trilogy, THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, and THE TRUMAN SHOW. Chapter 11 turns to self-knowledge skepticism films in which the protagonists become their own genius malignus (VANILLA SKY, ABRE LOS OJOS, INCEPTION), or are fundamentally unaware of certain unpleasant truths about themselves (e.g., of being a clone, as in MOON).

The coda wraps up this dissertation’s journey through the fascinating relation between film, philosophy and skepticism. In lieu of a conclusion, and as a call for continuing film-philosophical reflection, it takes up Stanley Cavell’s metaphor of “cities of words” (Cavell 2004) and claims that philosophy and film are in the middle of an on-going, hierarchically equal, and open-ended dialogue, in which skepticism films exemplify the presence of philosophical ideas in contemporary popular culture.