Trust in the world?

Complex Storytelling in Memento and Inception

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Contents

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Complex Storytelling in *Memento* and *Inception*

Josef Früchtl[1]

Abstract: This article defends the thesis that aesthetic experiences encourage us to act as if we could trust in the world in an ontological sense. This specifically holds for an aesthetically successful and complex film. This article wants to demonstrate this argument in an exemplary way by referring to Christopher Nolan's films 'Memento' (2000) and 'Inception' (2010). These films are examples of complex storytelling insofar as the narration of the story becomes so multifaceted that it culminates philosophically in epistemological and ontological issues. 'Memento' confronts us with the proposition that one only believes what one wants to believe. Its strength lies in the experience of the reversal of time: it is as if the protagonist had not acted. The strength of 'Inception', on the other hand, lies on a pragmatically dissolved scepticism. Reality is not a matter of theoretical certainty; but neither is it simply a matter of faith. The real is what we are forced to believe from trust.

Unsurprisingly, a person who writes a book entitled: *Trust in the World. A Philosophy of Film* should expect some fairly surprised reactions.[2] Film in general, and then specifically modern film, is to instil trust, and then in the world? And if that author has visited the Frankfurt School both intellectually and academically, the surprised reactions grow to become scepticism. Did Theodor W. Adorno not repeatedly teach us that authentic art expresses negativity and thus profound mistrust in so-

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2   Cf. Josef Früchtl, *Vertrauen in die Welt*. E*ine Philosophie des Films*, München: Fink 2013; English edition: T*rust in the World. A Philosophy of Film*, transl. by Sarah L. Kirkby, New York & London: Routledge 2018.

cietal circumstances? And now art – if one is prepared to grant film the honour of being deemed art – is instead to be ontologically affirmative? Would that not be a new, maybe even more perfidious variant of the affirmative character of culture dissected by Herbert Marcuse in the 1930s?

If this were the case – we can answer this point without further ado – then the affirmation would have to include a moment of the negative and the critical. And, indeed, ultimately I would like to claim this. The cinematic-aesthetic experience offers us an experience of trust in the world which, like all trust, not only necessarily remains as fundamental as it is uncertain, but which in turn makes this duplication experienceable. Following on from Kant, philosophical aesthetics addressed this as a theme using the shorthand *as if*. Evidently, aesthetic experiences encourage us to act *as if* we could trust in the world in an ontological sense. They reinforce the attitude of the as-if that belongs to trust. And this specifically holds for an aesthetically successful film. And even more specifically for an aesthetically successful and complex film.

In order to demonstrate this within the framework available here, the most obvious procedure would be exemplary. In other words to focus on a film or films which are not chosen at random but as individual examples of a universal phenomenon. I have chosen two films by Christopher Nolan: *Memento* (2000) and *Inception* (2010). The general reason underlying my choice is that these two films provide an example of complex narration in the modern Hollywood film. This type of cinematic narration began furiously with Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), continued playfully with Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (1997), and then reached its first climax with David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997); David Fincher followed psychodramatically with *Fight Club* (1999), Spike Jonze fantastically and comedically with *Being John Malkovich* (1999), and then once again David Lynch, this time with *Mulholland Drive* (2001), the same year in which Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (2001) and Cameron Crow's *Vanilla Sky* (2001) – the remake of Alejandro Amenábar's *Abre los ojos* (1997) – also hit the big screen. Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) must also be included, and the list could go on and on.

Complexity is a term which in the last decades has acquired new meaning as a result of the so-called chaos theory. American meteorologist Edward Lorenz coined the now famous expression that the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil can set off a tornado in Texas.[3] Computer-based weather forecasts honour in a mathematical-scientific way what common sense has long been aware of in its own way, namely that little causes can have big effects. Smallest deviations strengthen themselves by positive feedback and lead to large-sized effects. Weather is chaotic because just a small, unforeseen element can make everything turn out differently; it is chaotic and cannot be predicted for sure because the interrelationships are too complex. Saying that a phenomenon is complex means in this context – not only in meteorology but also in medicine (brain research), economics and other disciplines – that prognoses are very difficult and always remain uncertain. To take another simple example, it is impossible to predict when the next traffic jam will occur at a particular motorway intersection, and also when it will ease again. Thus, though chaos and complexity research like all empirical research allows a glimpse into the future by (more or less realized) forecasts, after all the principle is that everything could be different.

Formulated in more general terms, we call something complex – the weather, a situation, a person – when it is not easy to explain or understand. An easy explanation would be reductionistic and causal-linear. In contrast, philosophers since Plato have made a distinction between *nous* and *diánoia*, between the contemplative recognition of ideas as that which truly is, and methodical analysis or progressive thinking. This distinction translates into Latin as the distinction between *intellectus* and *ratio*, and into German as the difference between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*. Until Kant, *intellectus*, or *Verstand*, or in English the intellect or understanding mind, was considered the superior faculty; Kant reversed this order, elevating *ratio*, or *Vernunft*, or in English reason or the rational mind, to superiority.

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3   Edward N. Lorenz, *Predictability: Does the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?*, Lecture during the 1972 conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in: Science, Issue 320 (2008).

In this tradition, in the mid-15th century Nikolaus von Kues described God as a *complexio* or *coinicidentia oppositorum*, only comprehensible to the *intellectus*, coining a term which was also to play a role beyond philosophy – Hegel's "dialectic" being the most famous formulation – in the depth psychology of Carl Gustav Jung and the political philosophy of Carl Schmitt.[4]

We can summarise that the philosophical-scientific tradition uses the term complexity to refer to the unity of a plurality made up not only of numerous and diverse elements, but of links between the elements which are also numerous, differing, and in extreme cases opposing.[5] Expressed in everyday language: something is complex if it consists of many, different and yet simultaneously often interconnected elements ("like an intricate network of different channels"). Admittedly, from a scientific-theoretical perspective, we can add that complexity does not any longer mean "the old complexity (*Unübersichtlichkeit*) based on many variables and a consequent multiplicity of possible developments" but the result of "the non-linearity of laws of development". "What is clear (*überschaubar*) and simple, can be chaotic."[6] The affinity of theories of the humanities and the social sciences to such a kind of research may not surprise because it seems as if – in the broadest meaning of the term - critical theory has reached the natural sciences: Behind the smooth façade of order there is the trouble causing principle of disorder.

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4   Carl Gustav Jung and his School brought popularity to the term 'complex' in a psychological sense: to "have a complex" means to be neurotic. A complex is a complexio oppositorum in the sense that it is an affect-laden association of ideas experienced as ego-dystonic (cf. Albert Wellek, article „Komplex", in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Bd. 4: I-K, ed. Joachim Ritter & Karlfried Gründer, Basel/Stutggart: Schwabe & Co, 1976, S. 936); on Schmitt cf. his work *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form* (1923), in which he describes the Catholic church as a complexio oppositorum, as an all-encompassing unity of contradictions.

5   Cf. regarding this definition the – familiarly complicated – article by Niklas Luhmann, „Komplexität", in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Bd. 4: I-K, a.a.O., S. 939-942.

6   Günter Küppers, *Chaos: Unordnung im Reich der Gesetze*, in: id., (ed.), Chaos und Ordnung. Formen der Selbstorganisation in Natur und Gesellschaft, Stuttgart: Reclam 1996, p. 173; as to disorder behind order cf. p. 149.

Correspondingly, we can call films complex when they complicate the telling of the story through a (quantitatively) multiple and (qualitatively) unusual connection of the basic elements (plot, images, music, sound) characterized by the principle of non-linearity. "Complicate" means to make it more difficult, entangled, untransparent. The narrative structure of a movie consists of the specific and non-linear, gradually holistic connection of these elements. Each of them is significant in the literal sense. Films are complex when they complicate the telling of a story to the extent that they become entangled to the point of opaqueness. In other words, the narration of the story becomes so multifaceted that it culminates philosophically in epistemological and ontological issues, that is in questions about how we can know what we know; what we can know at all; and how we can be certain about our world, about being in general, and about the existence of others. Film theory has proposed different names for such complex storytelling: *modular* narrative, puzzle *film*, mind game *film* and, especially popular on the internet: *mind(fuck) film* or, more recently, *mind-tricking narrative*.[7] They are all concerned with audience deception and the logical confusion arising from paradoxes and incongruities. How can a film of this kind instil trust in the world?

The particular reason for my choice of *Memento* and *Inception* is that

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7 Cf. Allan Cameron, *Modular Narratives in Contemporary Cinema*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2008; Warren Buckland (ed.): *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, Oxford: Wieley-Blackwell 2009; Thomas Elsaesser: *The Mind-Game Film*, in: Buckland, Puzzle Films, a.a.O., S. 13-41; Jonathan Eig: *A beautiful mind(fuck): Hollywood structures of identity*, in: Jump Cut. A Review of Contemporary Media, 46, 2003. Online at: ULR: http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc46.2003/eig.mindfilms/index.html; Cornelia Klecker: *Mind-Tricking Narratives: Between Classical and Art-Cinema Narration*, in: Poetics Today 34 (2013), S. 119-146. - Concerning Buckland's term 'puzzle film', it should be noted that for him this term is the superlative after the 'simple' and the 'complex' film: „not just complex, but complicating and perplexing" (p. 3). Buckland is variously criticised, however, for being no less vague in his definition of puzzle than in that of complex (cf. in summary: Miklós Kiss & Steven Willemsen, I*mpossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema*, Edinburgh University Press 2016, p. 19-20). – Maria Poulaki has written an extended study about the theoretical potential of a systemtheoretical understanding of complexity that I only use

these two films exhibit a kind of – let us say – intricate experimental arrangement of memory and self-identity, a test of the idea of truth, and a game between dream and reality which revolves around the key philosophical question of whether, and if so how, the spheres of truth and falsity or reality and dream can be distinguished at all, let alone sharply. This question has pursued us since Descartes' *Meditations* (1641), but we have been aware of the concomitant philosophical position, namely scepticism, since the Ancient Greeks. How can we know for certain that what appears to us as real is real? How can we be sure that we are not dreaming? In addition, this philosophical-epistemological question links *Inception* with the cultural-philosophical motif of homecoming, archetypically dictated in the Western tradition by Homer's Odyssey. Homecoming as a narrative topic is, of course, also powerfully present in the cinema of Hollywood.[8] In the case of *Inception*, however, this topos acquires a medial self-reflexive turn, asking whether film, analogue to dreaming, is the only medium in a position to fulfil the homecoming desire, and thereby not really fulfilling it. In other words, whether film, like all art, does not crystallise its own form of wish fulfilment, a practical, trust-based form which has learnt its scepticistic lesson.

Memento, or:
One only believes what one wants to believe

But first let us take a look at *Memento*. This film is another demonstration of scepticism. If the only appropriate response to scepticism is to replace the illusion of certain knowledge with an attitude of epistemic belief or trust, then *Memento* demonstrates, on the one hand, the human or all-too-human danger underlying this attitude, namely self-deception, and yet

in a preliminary way: Before or Beyond Narrative? Towards a Complex Systems Theory of Contemporary Films (Dissertation University of Amsterdam 2011).

8   Cf. Elisabeth Bronfen, *Heimweh. Illusionsspiele in Hollywood*, Berlin: Volk und Welt Verlag 1999; on the Odyssean narrative motif in Inception cf. Sebastian Lederle, *'Welcome home, Mr. Cobb!' Imaginäre Heimkehr und Skepsis in Christopher Nolans Inception* (unpublished manuscript).

also, on the other hand, the ambivalence of this attitude: if not dissolved one-sidedly, in self-deception, it offers a solution, albeit a precarious one.

Memento tells the story of an act of revenge, starting at the end. Each sequence relates a piece of what has gone before. The "and then… and then…" narrative structure so familiar to us is reversed to give a structure of "and before that… and before that...". To this extent, the continuity of narration is still maintained, just that its direction is reversed. These sequences are shown in the film in colour, but they are interrupted by and compensated with black and white footage which plainly and counter-directionally follows the conventional narrative structure and – in part incorporating flashbacks of the protagonist – reveals background events, hints at true events, peu à peu.[9] These two or (if we count the flashbacks separately) three ways of dealing with time narratively and cinematically are framed by a fourth component, namely the time the audience has to complete this experience, the film of course having a beginning and an end.

At the beginning of the film we see the protagonist Leonard shooting a man called Teddy and by the end of the film we know fairly precisely how this came about. Teddy apparently (in this film we can never be completely certain) confronts Leonard with the truth that Leonard took his revenge on the man who raped and (allegedly) murdered his wife, but that he forgot all of this due to memory loss caused by the trauma.

9 The narrative structure can be outlined as follows: Credits, 1, V, 2, U, 3, T, 4, S, 5 ..., whereby the capital letters stand for the scenes in colour, in other words the chronologically reversed scenes, and the numbers stand for the black and white chronological scenes. Cf. Andy Klein, „Everything you wanted to know about ‚Memento'" (https://www.salon.com/2001/06/28/memento_analysis/). - The film critic Michael Althen points out that Nolan's retrograde narrative, although it is unique in its consequence, does have precursors in Harold Pinter's theatre play Betrayal (1978), which was made into a film in 1983 (directed by David Jones, in the main male roles Jeremy Irons and Ben Kingsley), and in Martin Amis' novel Time's Arrow: or The Nature of the Offence (1991) (http://michaelalthen.de/texte/themenfelder/filmkritiken/memento/). Whereas for Pinter the background was Marcel Proust's In Search of Lost Time, Amis' work and Nolan's Memento are driven by the psychoanalytical significance of trauma.

During the attack on him and his wife, he was hit on the head so hard that he can still remember what happened before the event, but is unable to form any new memories (anterograde amnesia). Just a few minutes later he can no longer remember a conversation he has just had, for example. He therefore has to write everything down and attach it to photos of the people involved. The most important information of all he has tattooed to his body: "John G. raped and murdered my wife." And in mirror writing: "Find him and kill him!" Leonard does not believe Teddy and notes the momentous sentence on a Polaroid photo of his so-called friend: "Do not believe his lies!" The course is thus set. Leonard will no longer believe Teddy. Once he has written down a sentence, he never questions it again. He holds fast to the conviction, has to hold fast to the conviction that once he has written something down, or in Biblical terms: once it is set in stone, it is a fact. This is his tragic error. Leonard makes a conscious decision in this scene to write down this sentence, even though he at least suspects that Teddy could be right, and that Leonard is only doing what we would all do: namely closing his eyes to unpleasant truths and looking for a reason to keep on living. Leonard does not want to believe Teddy's words and brands them as lies because he suspects that they pronounce the post-traumatic lie he himself has been living.

In a short scene with his wife, we see Leonard with a bare torso. Surprisingly, he already has a tattooed chest, so that we have to ask ourselves whether the tattoos really were a reaction to the rape and death of his wife. Maybe she was not murdered at all. The film shows that she was still alive following the rape, and Teddy confirms this in his narrative. Moreover, the film suggests that Leonard's wife had diabetes and that she died from an insulin overdose, administered by Leonard himself after she wanted to test whether his amnesia would really stretch so far as to kill his own wife because he could give her an injection and then forget just a few minutes later and give her another one. This is precisely the same story Leonard himself tells of a man, an insurance agent, whom he suspected of simulating memory loss, the same disease he is now suffering from himself. This parallel amnesia

story could be a rationalising invention of Leonard's, an unconceded variant of his own story.

How can we be sure of ourselves and the world around us? *Memento* plays through this philosophical question and attempts to clarify it by drawing upon an extreme example. How can we be sure of ourselves and the world around us if we do not have at our disposal a functioning memory, the mental ability to hold on to time and thus to a continuum of self-identity? The practical solution is to take pictures (photos) of people and things and label them with comments. But at the same time, the film shows us that comments cannot be taken as set in stone. "Memories are irrelevant…", the protagonist says with utter empiristic conviction, "…if you have the facts". But the film shows how easily they can be manipulated or unluckily confused.[10] We write something down and in so doing establish something – like a truth. A lesson to be learned from *Memento*, however, would have to be that when we are forced to write something down, we do so in the form of a few words containing different views which are competing for the truth. There has to be a continual and flexible form of self-assurance and assurance in the world – as there is in a detailed text, a novel or indeed a film or screenplay. *Memento* shows us how the protagonist tries to piece together the puzzle of his world, strewn across his hotel bed as photos and notes, like a mosaic. And shows us how a great deal of detailed work, patience, criminalistic acumen and happy coincidence are required in order to piece it together correctly.

The film therefore not only leaves us in a state of epistemological doubt, close to desperation regarding our ability to perceive and remember, but also reinforces with a Kantian undertone the underlying idea of truth, or with a Hegelian undertone the theory that what is true is the whole – albeit an idea which cannot be fulfilled (and this is precisely what makes it an "idea"), a whole which cannot be had; just as necessary as it is impossible. The film reinforces both – the necessity and the

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10 A good example of this is multiple confusion regarding the car number plate, where a number 1 becomes a capital I and vice versa. „SG13 7IU" becomes „SGI3 7IU" and finally „SG13 71U".

impossibility. In the light of this absurdity, we could extol paradoxicality in the manner of recent French (post)modernism. Or we could interpret *Memento* as a demonstrative example of the Deleuzean "time images" which, due to their negation of chronological and causal linearity, no longer permit a distinction between true and false.[11] I believe this to be a dearly held intellectual cliché, however. Deleuze seems to be more aware than his obedient pupils that the field beyond true and false is that of *fiction*, described since the mid-18th century by philosophers, and primarily by aestheticians, not only as the field of deception but also as a separate field outside the alternative of true or false. Scientists speak here of a hypothesis, a statement not (yet) deemed true, but in principle capable of being true. Kant reserves for this the term "idea", a reasoning term referring to an object which is not real, but certainly possible. Finally, both Nietzsche and Heidegger highlight the metaphor as a linguistic-literary medium for this fiction, as the "opening" or "disclosing" of a truth field, as the introduction of a new candidate for literal or propositional truth. The "truth" of art and aesthetical philosophy is accordingly one which is hinted at, which appears possible, which is not yet there; one which – if all goes well – is a truth in the making. Deleuze finds a correspondence to this with his description of philosophy as a kind of *science fiction*, moving within an *interim* area located between – please note – knowledge and non-knowledge.[12] It is that third area which is the most interesting one because it is here where productive thought, "revolutionary science" (Thomas Kuhn), the inventing of the new takes place.

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11   Melissa Clarke, *The Space-Time Image: the Case of Bergson, Deleuze, and Memento*, in: The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2002, S. 167-181; Diran Lyons, *Vengeance, the Powers of the False , and the Time-Image in Christopher Nolan's Memento: A Note on Resentment at the Beginning of the New Millennium*, in: Angelaki 11 (2006), S. 127-135; David R. Cole & Joff P.N. Bradley, *A Pedagogy of Cinema*, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers 2016, pp. 104-108.; Manuel Zahn, *Memento – Zur Zeitlichkeit des Films und seiner bildenden Erfahrung*, in: Gerhard Chr. Buckow u.a. (Hg.), Raum, Zeit, Medienbildung. Untersuchungen zu medialen Veränderungen unseres Verhältnisses zu Raum und Zeit, Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag 2012, pp. 67-100.

12   Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, transl. by Paul Patton, New York:

In reminding us about the everyday practice of trust, I would also like to draw attention to this interim area. In this context, trust is an attitude whereby, in the light of different options (we could opt for this or that) and in intersubjective-cooperative orientation (relationships of trust become established as social practices), we believe that something which for us is desirable will occur, without being able to predict with certainty that it will actually occur.[13] Trust always means acting *as if*. Since no sure knowledge about the result of our actions exists and yet we must act anyway, we are forced to act *as if* we had such knowledge. Otherwise, we would not act at all. A film like *Memento* brings this home to us blatantly and forces us very disconcertingly to learn that trust in the world and belief in certainty are unreliable, maybe even extremely unreliable, but that as agents we must act *as if* they were reliable. Acting always means to act *as if*, but this does not mean that this fictional element is its only characteristic. We do actually do something, for example when we open the window to let fresh air into a room. But we would not do this, would not even begin to do it, if we knew beforehand that the result would be seriously opposed to our practically established expectations and that the window, if opened, would fall out of its frame.

This thematic complex does connect *Memento* with the theme of time, but differently from how the Deleuzean School would wish to see it. At the beginning of the film, during the intro, somebody waves around a Polaroid photo which has just been developed. It briefly shows a person covered in blood, and then the colour fades and the image becomes lighter, until ultimately it is as white as the undeveloped image it once was, and then it is finally sucked back into the camera. Correspondingly, a bullet flies out of the head of the corpse and back into the weapon. This scene could be the motto of the entire film: "A deed is made undone

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Columbia University Press 1994, p. XXi); regarding the concept of fiction cf. Früchtl, *Vertrauen in die Welt*, loc. cit., pp. 22 (*Trust in the World*, loc. cit., pp. 12).

13 Cf. here Martin Hartmann, *Die Praxis des Vertrauens*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2011, p. 56.

by reversing time."[14] The film enables us to see – to experience - what we can never see – experience - in everyday practice: something done being made undone. By reversing the timeline of the narrative, *Memento* attempts to do just this. It too cannot make the done, i.e. the murder, undone, but it tries to do precisely that; as if it wants with each new image to extinguish what has gone before, until ultimately the audience disappears into the black box of its own memories, selectively stored time, the starting point of the action. Like the main character, we too permanently attempt to remember what we have just seen. By the end of the film we can no longer remember (exactly) what we have seen and experienced, and so we want to see it again, albeit reluctantly. In this way, the film provides us not only with an experience analogous to amnesia, but with an ontological experience. Actually the strength of the movie lies in its experiential quality. The reversal of time implies an irrealisation of actions performed. It is *as if* the protagonist – and with him the audience – had not acted. It is *as if* this world had never existed.

Inception, or Welcome home! Welcome home?

In *Inception*, Nolan presents this same theme in a different variation. The film is a business thriller, interwoven with psychodrama and incorporating the science fiction element of dream sharing. The protagonist in the film, 'Dom' Cobb, is specialised in influencing the consciousness of others through shared dreams. During an orchestrated dream, either economically valuable information is stolen from the unconscious of the victim – so-called *extraction* – or, vice versa, information is planted in the subconscious of the victim – so-called *inception*. Cobb is hired for this purpose by a Japanese businessman, Saito, in order to influence a far-reaching decision being made by his most prominent competitor. If Cobb completes the contract successfully, he will be allowed to return home and see his children again. He had to flee after being suspected of murdering his wife. The death of his wife, however, was far more a

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14   Merten Worthmann, *Ich bin, der ich war. Aber wer war ich?*, in: Die Zeit, Nb. 51, December 13, 2001.

tragic accident. With her, Cobb had further developed the phenomenon of lucid dreaming into a technique whereby a few hours of real time appear to dreamers as years. During this long period they can construct a world in line with their wishes, based on their joint memories. When they wake up from a shared dream, Cobb's wife does not want to accept that they are no longer dreaming. Her fall from a window is thus suicide, but because she has previously lodged certain documents, her husband seems to be her murderer. Ultimately the manipulation of Saito's competitor is successful – here *Inception* presents itself in formidable action film style, presenting parallel occurrences at four different dream levels in four different time formats, while at the same time employing Edith Piaf's famous song "Non, je ne regrette rien" to show the exact and therefore in each case different time elapses of the overlapping dreams – and Cobb is able to embrace his children once more.

Inception explores the issue of reality using its counter-concept of dreaming. It is especially concerned with the so-called clear dream or lucid dreaming. In other words, the phenomenon whereby the dreamer knows that he is dreaming and can therefore consciously control the dream. This phenomenon has been described since the late 19th century and is researched today in so-called sleep laboratories, sometimes also with contact to Buddhist meditation practices. *Inception* takes great pleasure in dismantling the seemingly paradox curiosity of wake-induced dreaming. As a film, it is able to show what film and only film can, namely the transferral or that which is thought or imagined to realistic images, a delight not only for cineasts, but also for radical constructivists. A lucid dream, just like digitally animated cinema, fulfils the dream of the radical constructivist to replace objectivity with subjectivity. What we call the world is in each case a subjective creation. Paris, for example, may seem to us to be an elegant city proudly presenting itself in pastel colours; but in a film I can fold it in on itself like a grey egg box.

Inception adds an element to the phenomenon of lucid dreaming, however, which goes far beyond the empirical research available to date, namely so-called dream sharing. From the Ancients to the present day,

it has been assumed that we only inhabit a shared world when we are awake, and our own private world when sleeping and dreaming,[15] but *Inception* gives this distinction short shrift, with of course far-reaching ontological and epistemological consequences. If it is possible to dream together, to act together within a dream, then dreams can no longer be distinguished from (waking) reality. In order to have a distinguishing feature, *Inception* introduces the so-called totem, a small object known in its significance only to its owner. In Cobb's case it is a spinning top: if it spins ceaselessly, Cobb is in a dream, or more precisely in someone else's dream; if it stops spinning and falls over, Cobb is not in someone else's dream, but either in his own dream or in (waking) reality.

(In-)distinguishability between dreaming and reality assumes an additional appeal when a parallel is drawn to (in-)distinguishability between film and reality. *Inception* does this in several ways. Shared dreaming can be taken as a literal description of cinema as the so-called dream factory. We sit with others in the cinema auditorium and dive together (mentally and psychologically) into the dream world presented on the big screen. But this parallel obviously has its limitations. Usually we remain fully aware of the world we are occupying spatially and temporally, in other words: of reality.

Another aspect now assumes even greater urgency, however. Cinema is partly called the dream factory because – according to psychological-political criticism – it is capable of planting thoughts in the subconscious of its recipients and of generating ideological awareness through skilful manipulation. When cinema manages to do this, classical Critical Theorists believe that the last residue of negativity disappears from the affirmative character inherent to bourgeois-autonomous art. Should *Inception* be included in this judgement?

The question of how ideas can be planted into the heads of others is a fundamental question in philosophy, educational science and psycholo-

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15   Cf., with recourse to Ancient sources, Kant's formulation from Anthropologie and the Träume eines Geistersehers: Reinhard Brandt, Kritischer Kommentar zu Kants Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht (1798), Hamburg: Meiner 1999.

gy, especially when linked to political, consumer-aesthetic or indeed any other instrumental motives. *Inception* explains such planting by helping itself to well-known psychoanalytical theorems, such as repression or the Oedipus complex. For example, Cobb's team uses a bad father-son relationship in Saito's competitor in order to plant the idea of a solution to this relationship problem in the head of the son. The redeeming idea has to appear *as if* the son had arrived at it autonomously. The best manipulation is one which is not seen through; and it is not seen through if it merges into the subjective conviction of the object of that manipulation. The best manipulation is the one which is believed to be an idea of one's own; *as if* it had emerged from one's own thoughts; *as if* the act of heteronomy had emerged from the autonomy of the person being manipulated.

Transferred to the level of cinema and an audience, we as cinema-goers can identify ourselves as objects of *inception*. How does the film try to plant a mental seed in us? Which idea, which thought experiment does it try to make attractive? Philosophically speaking, the answer would probably have to be: the film tries to trigger an *experience*, in other words to condense individually the epistemic elements of the experience – affection, perception, imagination, cognition, and emotion linking everything else[16]. A conception of film that emphasizes the character of experience, in this context makes it plain again that the narrative content of a movie can never be given by the cognitive element alone. But, of course, this answer is not specific enough. It becomes specific when we take the end of *Inception* as our point of reference.

In *Inception*, the scene which grants us access to the metanarrative is not the first, as in *Memento*, but the last. "So do you want to take a leap of faith?", Cobb asks Saito at the end, at the deepest level of the dream process, a level which the film calls limbo, presumably in reference to Catholic theology, where it refers to a place at the "edge" (Latin: *limbus*) of

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16 Cf. Josef Früchtl, *Communicating Emotions. On the Rationality of Aesthetic Judgements*, in: Beate Söntgen/ Stephanie Marchal (eds.), Judgement Practices in the Artistic Field (forthcoming 2019).

Hell, or right before it, popularly known as being "in limbo". In philosophy, Kierkegaard argued in favour of such a leap, giving reasons why we reach the limits of justification and have to leap over into the realm of faith. In the film, both agents take this leap, and the audience have to take it with them. It is a leap into reality, or what we think is reality, in which Cobb would finally like to return home with Saito's help. Death is helpful here. Dying in a dream usually means waking up in (waking) reality, but it could merely be in another dream, another reality. Saito reaches out for the revolver lying on the table on which Cobb's spinning top is ceaselessly turning. A cinematic cut abruptly catapults us into a different world. Cobb opens his blue eyes. He is back on the aeroplane where the manipulative act began with the aid of the dream sharing technique. He looks around himself somewhat incredulously. His crew is there. Saito is also there, picking up his telephone in order, we may assume, to make that call which for Cobb is all-important. In the following scene Cobb is already approaching a customs officer, who inspects his passport. "Welcome home, Mr. Cobb!" are his redeeming words. For Cobb it seems difficult to believe in what is happening. He moves like in a dream, in a hovering and slowed temporality, carried by orchestral music, synthesizer sounds, interwoven with suffering, but increasingly celebratory. In the very last scene he is then at home. Still apparently unsure, he sets his totem to spin on a tabletop, but then immediately allows himself to be distracted when his children greet him with joyous smiles. The camera pans back to the spinning top. It is still turning, but seems to wobble slightly. At precisely this point the final cut comes; the film is over.

This ending comes like a kick, catapulting the audience straight back into everyday reality. In order to wake up from a dream, Cobb's crew always uses some kind of "kick", for example a sensation of falling, or of diving into cold water. The final cut has the same function for the audience. It transports us abruptly into a state of uncertainty, cutting us off with no warning from our chance to discover whether or not the spinning top will fall over. The criterion which could provide us with certainty can no longer fulfil its function. And so we do not know, in the

strict sense, whether Cobb really has arrived in waking reality or (only) in a new dream reality of his own.

There are clues in favour of both the one and the other theory.[17] But ultimately, and philosophically speaking, we have to admit that we are back in a state of sober scepticism. Here Stanley Cavell offers what I believe to be a convincing solution, namely not only that we should take a leap into a non-theoretical certainty, following on from Hume, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and others, but that film provides us with a useful model in this respect. Each new film proves to us as viewers that we are excluded from its reality through an ontological difference, through our different system of space and time coordinates, and therefore also through our inability to take part in the action; but we perceive this reality mentally and affectively *as if* we were not fundamentally separated from it. The *as if* is crucial here. Every time we go to the cinema and every time we watch a film at home, we accept that we cannot refute the scepticism theoretically, with proof, but can only encounter it practically, with trust. Without making a big fuss about it, we live the precarious certainty always threatened by uncertainty. We call this (non-religious) faith or, less open to misinterpretation, trust.

Criticism of *Inception* cannot be all positive, however. The film certainly expands upon the phenomenon of lucid dreaming as a thought experiment, and to this extent presents itself as a science fiction film, but it fails to shake off the traditional scientific model. The rationality it extols is ultimately not that of another, dream-like order, but is far more

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17	Painstaking analysts have found out, however, that Cobb's totem to differentiate between dreaming and waking reality is actually his wedding ring: in all dream scenes he is wearing it, but in the final scene – if you look very carefully – he is not. Also, the body language of the children playing is slightly different from that in previous scenes when we also briefly see them. And at the end they turn to face their father for the first time. (cf. http://www.inceptionending.com/theory/revolvingdoorproject-inception-wait-what-happened/). Somewhat different is the interpretation that Cobb, towards the end of the film, finally and with a clear conscience takes leave of his dead wife and then stops wearing his wedding ring, both in dream reality and in waking reality (cf. http://felixonline.co.uk/articles/2013-1-18-inception-the-theory-of-the-ring/).

concerned with extension of the dominant causal-logical order. In this it follows a frequently unconceded and yet general intention of dream theory.[18] Thus the albeit action-laden, yet very sedate surrealism of *Inception*. In the dream worlds of this film, time is extended in formidable and fantastic ways, accelerating and decelerating, but otherwise everything remains exceedingly familiar. The film offers neither a threateningly unnerving image-affective surrealism à la David Lynch, nor a puzzling existentialistic (and funny) surrealism à la Luis Bunuel. The complexity of *Inception* is transparent.

The strength of this film is to be found at a different level, namely that of pragmatic and aesthetically dissolved scepticism. Reality is not a matter of theoretical certainty. But neither is it simply a matter of faith.[19] Real is not simply what we believe, but what we are mentally *forced* to believe. Due to his physical injury, trauma and resulting self-delusion, the protagonist from *Memento* cannot help but pursue his own reality. From an external perspective we might have good reasons to criticise this twist, but we also have to realise that it is impossible to be absolutely sure about our reasons and the corresponding background-theory. It only appears to us as the best, most convincing, least contestable model *for the time being*. Thus, reality is – a more exact definition - what we are mentally, i.e. for good reasons, forced to believe, and reasons are good if they are intersubjectively comprehensible, because only in that case they react adequately to resistances of our experience, to the differences ("qualia"), inconsistencies and contradictions, and don't arrange these resistances at random. The real is what we are forced to believe from intersubjectively certified experience.[20] And in everyday practice we call

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18 A dream reality which one can learn to manipulate enlarges the radius of waking reality. Ultimately it is concerned with an understanding of reality aimed at unity (Petra Gehring, *Traum und Wirklichkeit. Zur Geschichte einer Unterscheidung*, Frankfurt/New York: Campus2008, S. 236f.).

19 This is the error of Michael Rennett, *Plugging in to the Experience Machine*, in: Thorsten Botz-Bornstein: Inception and Philosophy: Ideas to Die for, Chicago: Open Curt Publishing Company, 2011, p. 63 & 64.

20 This definition of reality can assure itself of a broad philosophical tradition.

this gentle coercion with concomitant uncertainty: trust. We trust as long as in a certain situation we have no reason not to. Finally, it is the special achievement of art and aesthetically successful films to *present* reality as (holistic) experience instead of analysing it like science, including complexity research, does. Nothing is more complex than the reality of a life-world (*Lebenswelt*). In the words of Marcel Proust: "An hour is not merely an hour. It is a vase full of scents and sounds and projects and climates." The philosophy of mind would say: full of qualia. "What we call reality is a certain connection between these immediate sensations and the memories which envelop us" – we have to emphasise this – "simultaneously with them – a connection that is suppressed in a simple cinematographic vision,"[21] but which might be regained, so we may add, in a complex one.

Let us finish by remembering the catchy definition by Niklas Luhmann whereby trust has the inherent social function of "reducing complexity".[22] We have trust and we need trust because what makes up our world, our context of life and meaning, presents itself as a network of uncontrollable complexity, in which very different events can take place at any point in time. But to live means to act at any certain point in time, and trust creates the possibility for action by finding good reasons to push uncertainties to one side. Cinematographic narration or the presentation of complex stories then serves, or so we might think, to increase complexity and to counter any trust in our understanding of the world. But it is more correct to say that such films test whether trust can be regained

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It ranges – to name only some prominent representatives – from Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (the real as sensually and conceptually constituted object, in German Gegenstand: that which opposes to the subject) and Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit (the methodologically elaborated „experience" that consciousness has with its „other") via John Dewey's Art as Experience (chapter 1) and Clarence I. Lewis' Mind and the World Order (introducing „qualia" as a term) to Jacques Lacan ("the real" opposes absolutely to imagination and symbolization). – I owe the reference to Lewis to Stefan Niklas.

21 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: Time Regained*, transl. by Andreas Mayor & Terence Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright, London: Vintage 2000, p. 247.

22 Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Vertrauen. Ein Mechanismus der Reduktion sozialer Komplexität*, Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius 2000 (or. 1968).

and thus reinforced. This type of narration is (only) a reflection of what film – like all art – generally does, namely to construct and deconstruct a world, a meaning – an infinite, openly holistic context of meaning which can only be configured in the experiencing of evidence – simultaneously. In such films, the ambivalence of the *as if* inherent to all art is once again elevated to an exhibitionistic gesture. *Inception* reinforces our trust in the world because the film turns its back indifferently on a theoretical refutation of scepticism and a fixation on secure knowledge. We should do as Cobb does and choose to ignore the spinning top.

The lively voice of Critical Theory

Berlin Journal of Critical Theory (BJCT) is a peer-reviewed journal which is published in both electronic and print formats by Xenomoi Verlag in Berlin. The goal is to focus on the critical theory of the first generation of the Frankfurt School and to extend their theories to our age. Unfortunately, it seems that most of the concerns and theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are neglected in its second and third generations.

We believe that the theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are still capable of explaining many social, cultural, and political problems of our time. However, in some cases, we need to revise those theories. For example, the culture industry in our time can also work with a different mechanism from that described by Adorno and Horkheimer. In our age, the majorities can access the media and even respond to the messages which they receive – this is something which was not possible in Adorno and Horkheimer's time. But this doesn't mean that the culture industry's domination is over. Thus, we may need to revise the theory of the culture industry to explain the new forms of cultural domination in our age.

Therefore, we are planning to link the theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt school to the problems of our age. This means that we are looking for original and high-quality articles in the field of critical theory. To reach our goals, we gathered some of the leading scholars of critical theory in our editorial board to select the best articles for this journal.

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