THE JUNKIES OF PLATO'S CAVE: *INCEPTION*, MINDBENDING, AND COMPLEX NARRATION IN THE SHADOW OF PHILIP K. DICK

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What's the most resilient parasite? A bacteria? A virus? An intestinal worm? An *idea.* Resilient, highly contagious. Once an idea's taken hold in the brain it's almost impossible to eradicate. A person can cover it up, ignore it – but it stays there. (*Inception* shooting script, pp. 2–3)

In a world of corporate warfare and psychic espionage, Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) is the premier extractor of hidden information from high-powered business "targets" whose minds he infiltrates while they are dreaming and unsuspecting, by employing with the help of his associate Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) a dream-within-a-dream strategy to access the innermost secrets. These are metaphorized as confidential documents lying in a safe. Tested and hired by the powerful Japanese magnate Mr. Saito (Ken Watanabe), Dom is lured into one last heist, a mission impossible, namely not to extract, but to perform the opposite, an "inception:" to implant – like a virus gradually penetrating through the layers of the mind to full bloom in consciousness as an original thought – the idea in the head of Saito's main business competitor to break up his father's monopolistic energy conglomerate. As a reward for which Dom, on the run since being charged with the murder of his wife Mal (Marion Cotillard) and haunted by her dream presence and efforts at sabotage ever since, is promised the safe return home to America, freed from all charges, and to reunite with his children.

That is the basic premise. But the plot of Christopher Nolan's heist-action film *Inception* is so intricate that most discussions of it are bound to just try to figure out what happens on the purely referential level of meaning, in this labyrinth of mind invasions, shared dreams within dreams, projections of deep-seated memories, and dreams as reality, almost all of it framed in flashback. One has to agree with critic Roger Ebert that the film's "story can either be told in a few sentences, or not told at all."1 Significantly the viewer is forced to concentrate on the process of the moment by moment narration with its striking images of dream architecture of trompe l'oeil mazes, Euclidian space turned upside down and gravity defied, gunfights and chase scenes evocative of the Jason Bourne and James Bond films, real-time and sloweddown dream-time, and four dream levels down to "limbo," a state of "raw subconsciousness," where a few seconds of real time can last decades or even an infinity. As we descend we simultaneously go deeper in chronological reverse into Dom's past, finding out more and more about his traumatic backstory wound. Yet even at the level of limbo, which could be said to stand for the Lacanian real, there is the positivity of representation: the ocean's shore, the crumbling debris of collapsing highrises reminiscent of 9/11 and dystopian, postapocaplytic science fiction – such as *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968) –, as well as a Japanese temple by the sea. This version of the real is in contradistinction to both Freudian and Jungian thought, for which the core of the unconscious, to use this clinically more accepted term, remains fundamentally inaccessible and unrepresentable, and which is, in Lacan, nothing but a fissure or split.

Fredric Jameson has noted that the heist film is "always in one way or another an inscription of collective non-alienated work that passes the censor by way of its rewriting in terms of crime and sub-generic entertainment."2 By this token *Inception*, in its futuristic take on the genre, 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 (or superficially) 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. Yet it is the instrumentalization of this desire which makes it possible to realize the heist mission's goal of "turning an emotion into a business strategy," namely leading the target Robert Fischer (Cillian Murphy) from his dying father's wish for him to be his own man to splitting up the inherited business empire. This, of course, is also the very business model which cinema is based on: producing emotions which translate into profits.

The "actual" reality level in *Inception* means being located as an upmarket passenger in the mundane and socially non-committal, modern settings of transient and geographically non-specific tourist spaces, as on a high-speed train somewhere in Japan, as a first-class passenger on a Boeing 747 in flight between Sydney and Los Angeles, or inside an airport's arrival area. As is borne out by the main characters in the end conspiratorially exchanging passing glances at one another as in a peculiar kind of *déjà vu*, or, as it were, half-remembered dream, these are places where you might fleetingly fantasize about your co-travellers being secret agents, allies and enemies, just like in the plot of a cheap paperback which you bought at one of the airport shops to pass the time. And who is to tell who your seemingly innocuous neighbour might really be, in this age of flexible global marketplace competition? The desire to connect and bond is the more intense the deeper the film's main characters consciously move through vertical levels of lucid dreams-within-dreams. The task of implantation, however, just like the actual target, functions merely as a pretext for the total immersion of the on-screen characters in their various dream levels, and, by extension, the spectator in the film. Thus, total physical and fictional immersion actually stands for the genuine utopia of a fully *human* "immersion."

It must be pointed out, of course, that the use of the lay expression "subconscious" throughout the film signals that we're certainly not dealing with a psychoanalytic conception of dreaming, through which the unconscious can only ever be known partially and indirectly, and never in any full positivity. In Nolan's "elevator film,"3 by contrast, the Freudian interpretation of our unkown inner terrain and confrontation with an unrepresentable real is displaced by the projection of three-dimensional immersive spaces of global tourism, such as a luxury hotel, each of which a dream level embedded in a higher one. There also are, quite literally, floor levels traversed by an old rusty elevator descending into Dom's past. In reality, the lucid dreamer as extractor, just like the proverbial accidental tourist or, for that matter, metaphorically also the cinema spectator, is situated immobile in a chair and wired to a computer which generates the dream programmed with architectural mazes to be filled out by the "subject," the unsuspecting target unaware of being in a dream, and who is drugged into ever deeper dream levels. These designs, of course, are nothing but – within the fiction's overall imaginary – stunningly spectacular simulacra on which the blockbuster narrative of *Inception* hinges and is driven by. Thus in the end, when the successful efforts of Dom are finally rewarded by him being able to return home to America as a free man and

to reunite with his children, whose faces we finally see for the first time, reality itself might only be yet another dream, as is duly signposted to the audience by his "totem," a spinning top, which originally was Mal's totem: as long as it continues to spin, Dom is in a dream. The film ends on the dubious image of the totem wobbling, but still swivelling. Thus, he may be inescapably trapped and, also metaphorically, framed by the closed world of the mind, as is allegorized onscreen by enclosed spaces and images. The question is left open whether Dom, while embracing his children and facing away from his totem, himself knows he might only be dreaming, as he and his team members collectively do while switching dream levels before and during their main assignment. Thus it is the viewer who is the ultimate target of the "inception," with the gnawing suspicion taking hold that the ontological status of reality as the "highest" level within the film is itself unreliable and might have lost all external reference, leading to a self-enclosed system. But of course we are used to the fact that in mindbender cinema there cannot be an unequivocal, unambiguous happy ending in the sense of a breaking out into the freedom of an open world. We may well be stuck in Plato's cave of illusions, but unlike the classical allegory's cave dwellers – who really believe in the reality of the shadows they see – and in keeping with cynical reason, we knowingly suspect and enjoy it, as if to prolong the movie ride.

"Total immersion" originally refers to being submerged under water, as one of the rites of baptism signifying entry into the Christian Church. In *Inception*, total immersion takes on a new reflexive quality, while still retaining the Christian link to water. On one level, the film is about the total immersion of spectator. On another, this immersion is fully present in the diegetic story-world: the protagonist at the film's beginning being washed up amid crashing waves and semi-unconscious on the beach in limbo, accompanied by Hans Zimmer's massive and dramatically enclosing score of a two-note motif; or Dom tied to a chair over a bathtub as a "kick" tips him backwards into the cold water to make him wake up from a lower dream level (this is vaguely reminiscent of the CIA's waterboarding torture methods). The dream levels in themselves are not hermetically sealed off from one another, as there is seepage between them. One closed ontological world can have effects on another. While still dreaming, Dom perceives his drop into the bathtub as spraying water shooting through the roof and walls of Saito's Japanese temple in the second sequence, as his particular reality begins to collapse. Shifts in gravity, concussions, vibrations and jolting movements of the dreamers produce and translate into lower-level disturbances. And there is, like an effective alarm clock going off, the music which simultaneously echoes through all dream levels, Edith Piaf's "*Non, je ne regrette rien.*"

There is also, however, *seepage of ideas*. And it can be fatal, as we find out when Dom finally confesses to dream architect Ariadne (Ellen Page) his primordial crime: having performed inception on his wife Mal, namely that life in her dream, the world of limbo which for her was her and Dom's shared reality, wasn't real, by locking her totem in her safe, where it would continue to spin. The idea of the dream's unreality didn't go away, though, with Mal waking up into reality, which she now believed was still only a dream, thus fatally leading her to commit suicide, in the hope of finally waking up to genuine reality. This also raises the question of whether any of our thoughts are truly original and self-generated. Aren't all our ideas derived from somewhere else, floating around through the most variegated channels of communication, taking hold in our brains somewhere without us knowing where they came from, and suddenly appearing as if spontaneous, while in fact recalled from our pre- or unconscious somewhat like a half-remembered dream? Can we really trust our own thoughts? Thus the parental admonition of learning to "think for oneself" as part of growing up may mean realizing that we're in fact nothing but a conglomerate of

received ideas. By the same token we find that *Inception* is absolutely filled with allusions to other films, a treasure trove of derivative cinema history, with every dream level almost like in a film in itself, not sequentially, but vertically aligned, so that Nolan actually gives us four films for the price of one. It's the *combination* of ideas that matters. Hence there is no copyright in simple ideas, only in David Hume's composite ideas, which are also, of course, the basic definition of fiction.

That reality and dream may ultimately be impossible to separate testifies to the film's powers in enclosing, engulfing, and overwhelming us. If every new medium initially engenders a theoretical discourse on its capacity to fully engage, envelop and immerse an audience,4 cinema in the last twenty years or so has been challenged by the widespread emergence of "3D computer-generated interactive environments" (virtual reality, or VR) and new digital media on the one hand, and their convergence on the other so that today film has lost cinema as its privileged site of reception, instead being able to be watched on computer screens, various platforms and social media on the internet, on digital tv, mobile phones, and tablets, to name but the most prominent instances of such "play stations". In the last twenty or so years of this development, contemporary filmmaking has met, countered and incorporated this challenge by redefining and reemphasizing the cinema as the premiere site of a boosted physical, fictional and emotional immersion, as first indicated by 90s science fiction films as diverse as *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990), *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995), *The Thirteenth Floor* (Josef Rusnak, 1999), *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers, 1999), *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999), and others. Marshall McLuhan put forward the idea that as one traditionally dominant medium comes to its historical close, it begins to let us peek into the next dominant medium following it. It is precisely at this moment that the medium explicitly is the message. So maybe *Inception*'s dream levels and the characters' immersion therein can be read in yet another way as standing for our daily involvement in cyberspace. As Slavoj Žižek observes:

One cannot miss the uncanny resemblance between Leibniz's "monadology" and the emerging cyberspace community in which global harmony and solipsism strangely coexist. That is to say, does our immersion into cyberspace not go hand in hand with our reduction to a Leibnizean monad which, although "without windows" that would directly open up to external reality, mirrors in itself the entire universe? More and more, we are monads with no direct windows onto reality, interacting alone with the PC screen, encountering only the virtual simulacra, and yet immersed more than ever into the global network, synchronously communicating with the entire globe.5

What we he have simultaneously witnessed in the last decade is the increasing spread of the "DVD-enabled film" (Thomas Elsaesser) by virtue of what has been called "forking-path narratives" (David Bordwell), "multiple draft narratives" (Edward Branigan), "puzzle films" (Warren Buckland), "mind-game films" (Elsaesser), or, finally, "complex or modular narratives" (Janet Staiger),6 ranging from Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) via *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004) to *Oldboy* (Park Chan-wook, 2004) and beyond. And since the 90s, also, unreliable narration has made a major comeback in frequently noir-tinted science fiction cinema. So while theatrical exhibition in toto has become the crucial first-run exploitation of this newer kind of cinema, the narrative and aesthetic properties of the films in question virtually demand multiple viewings, especially being watched a second or third time on DVD or Video on Demand (VoD), which accounts for the major share of the marketing chain. With this dispersal of film across an entire range of digital viewing options, the message of the medium is to find new ways of attracting and

binding viewer attention through increased and totalized immersion. *The Matrix* led the way in presenting us with the scenario of the entire world being nothing but VR, a computer program of complete reality simulation, with entire diegetic spaces and images broken down into pure strings of numbers and digital code.

In *Inception*, the process of filmic engulfment and immersion is of course allegorized by the heist crew members entering into dreams, and dreams within dreams. These purely imaginary psychic spaces, as already mentioned, are rendered as fully accessible, three-dimensional physical spaces. As the unsuspecting dreamer becomes aware of being in a dream, the latter's reality begins to break down, and this is presented through spectacular images of the walls of enclosed spaces quaking and threatening to collapse, penetrated by aggressive forces from without, or simply and most effectively, as all forms of material structure exploding. Instead of revealing the originary digital code they're ultimately made up of, we are presented with slow-motion images of the disintegration of all physical matter. Sitting with Dom in a Parisian bistrot, Ariadne, the team's new dream architect and the film viewer's pretty "totem" that provides continuous exposition about where we are and on which level of reality, is told by Dom that one can never really remember the beginning of a dream, making her and us as spectators suddenly realize she is only dreaming, in a neat little moment of narrative unreliability revealed. As she nervously becomes aware of the lucid dream's unreality, first their table and coffee cups begin to tremble, followed by bookstalls, flower stands, windows, façades, chairs and tables and streets all around erupting and exploding, with myriad particles flying through the air in slow motion, with the two protagonists unperturbed in its midst. The spectacle uses the choreographic "bullet time" eruptions of debris, an allusion to the great foyer shootout scene in *The Matrix* – significantly a Joel Silver production which elaborates on the "flying-glass school" of shattered and blasted windows as inaugurated in the equally Silver-produced action classic *Die Hard* (1988). It's a visually beautiful and poetic moment vaguely reminiscent of the exploded consumer goods in slow-motion at the end of Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970), and of the explosion art pioneered by Jean Tinguely and Niki de Saint Phalle, as in their *Study for an End of the World No. 2* of 1962 in the desert outside Las Vegas, a performance in which they publicly detonated consumer culture's artistically reassembled detritus. Here, of course, the explosions seem completely depoliticized for purely aesthetic enjoyment, a special-effects orgy of *l'art pour l'art.*

The probably most memorable image of the entire film comes a little later, with Ariadne fully exercising her new-found powers to create reality on the go, as we see entire streets of houses rising up, Paris literally rolling back and folding in on itself, and, somewhat like a collapsible bed, forming a rooftop in lieu of the sky, with passengers and traffic continuing upside down. Traffic defying gravity is another visual déjà vu, recalling, among other examples, Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002), which in turn draws heavily in its cityscape architecture on Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). With this spatial enclosure, gravity and Euclidian space are suspended, allowing Dom and Ariadne to walk up a street in a ninety-degree angle, not quite, but almost like Frank Poole (Gary Lockwood) jogging around the Ferris wheel structure of the spaceship in Kubrick's *2001 – a Space Odyssey* (1968). Of course, there's also Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly to keep in mind, dancing up the walls. Recall that Dom and Ariadne are basically just two American tourists, sojourning in Americans' favourite foreign city by remapping it according to their own grandiosity. Isn't this precisely the effect of the imposition of US-led global capitalism – ruthlessly and irreverently turning everything upside down and completely refashioning the geopolitical and social landscape with utter disregard for all existing local traditions and institutions?

There is an intriguing and very remarkable visual motif early on in the film, in the second sequence, when Dom and his partner Arthur try to extract vital information – a confidential, safe-kept document the content of which remains unknown to us – from their target, Saito. As Dom's dead wife Mal appears in the embedded dream, represented by an enclosed room in dark brown and amber within a Japanese temple, to sabotage the heist, Dom is forced to shoot Arthur in the head to wake him up. Thereby also destabilising the dream architecture, this is followed by a switch to the "higher" dream level of Saito's secret love nest somewhere in an unspecified Middle Eastern country. What is interesting is what we see happening there through a window outside in the streets. In a timely if coincidental anticipation of the Arab Revolution of 2011, we seem to be in the midst of a popular uprising, with an angry mob of demonstrators converging on Saito's house and setting cars on fire with petrol bombs. The situation appears very threatening and to escalate completely out of control, but as it turns out all it really signifies is that the reality of *this* upper dream level is becoming unstable, with the protesters and revolt on the streets outside nothing but a metaphorical simulation, just an immaterial image without consequence to the "real" reality, which is Dom's crew and the sleeping Saito safely located on a train in Japan. Doesn't this correspond to the way in which we experience world news on television? We see images of events happening far away in some other country, and know on one level that that's reality, but aren't genuinely affected by them, because they are simply images and in this sense not quite real. What we know about the world, we know through the mass media, as Niklas Luhmann states.7 Yet we consume these pictures as infotainment, somewhat cynically aware of their fabrication by the media as stereotypically newsworthy, as they ephemerally pass us by just like the landscape rushing past a high-speed train, the passengers of which indifferent and profoundly separated by an insulated window from the reality outside, which cannot make any claims of responsibility on us whatsoever.

Simulations, counterfeit worlds, the *mise-en-abîme* of worlds within worlds, parallel and disintegrating realities, programmed identities, the intricate paradoxes of time travel and invasions of one mind by another, the whole question of what is reality and what does it mean to be human – this is of course the very stuff that the stories of science fiction cult author Philip K. Dick (1928–1982) are made of. Unknown to a mass film audience prior to the first movie adaptation of his work, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982, based on the 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*), over the last thirty years "PKD" has become the science fiction author most frequently adapted in film. Beyond that, contemporary cinema displays a distinct Dickian legacy. Unlike most other writers in his field, Dick is less interested in the scientific and physical verisimilitude of the architecture, machines and gadgets that his paranoid scenarios of ontological conspiracy are made up of. His arsenal of futuristic apparatuses and objects serves merely as a pretext – like the ubiquitous vidphones, the feel-good censored newspapers known as homeopapes, the flying cars called squibs or flapples, or the colonies on Mars. There, as in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965)*,* after a postapocalyptic "Terra" has become all but inhabitable, recruited settlers use "Perky Pat" layouts to play virtual games of lovemaking with the help of the drug "Can-D" as their only solace to make life bearable. This is before a far more potent substance, "Chew-Z," is introduced to the solar system, which turns its users into solipsistic monads whose realities are henceforth inhabited by the haunting and shapeshifting presence of the God-like and fearsome returning space-traveller Palmer Eldritch, with his victims realizing that they are continuously stuck in simulated worlds of Eldritch's making and control. This is a fantasy both as nightmarish as it is hilariously funny (as when Leo Bulero, one of the book's most colorful characters, appraises his predicament: "Jeez, he thought. I'm licked"). The whole superficial physical makeup of Dick's fictional worlds only serves to

provoke into being recurring existential philosophical conundrums and paradoxes in the form of a second-order *phantomatics,* which one might say are paranoid and schizophrenic visions become real. His counter-cultural science fiction derives much of its power from a profound humanism, the fact that even in the face of reality and the known world collapsing, his protagonists – often slyly subversive mechanics, such as tire regroovers – remain basically unchanged, retaining their ordinary "Good Joe", small-business and tradesman identities. Following an observation made by Stanislav Lem, this has led Slavoj Žižek to quip that while we may nowadays well imagine the end of the world, nonetheless somehow the free market will survive. Yet it is to Dick's credit in having precisely envisioned such a paradox, with its implicit political critique of contemporary society. The world, and reality as such, is fundamentally split.

Dick's utopian vision is perhaps nowhere more poignant than in *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), a historical what-if scenario in which the Allies have lost World War II and the United States is occupied in the West by Japan and in the East by the Nazis, while there is an underground cult book in circulation which fantasizes a historical outcome in which the Allies are the victors of the war, though without this version being identical with history as we know it. It is the mild-mannered Japanese official Mr. Tagomi, who in the face of unbearable Nazi atrocities is afforded a glimpse into the possibility of an alternate and, perhaps, more humane reality. That, as Jameson has noted, "the future of Dick's novels renders our present historical by turning it into the past of a fantasized future,"8 is also radically evident in *Ubik* (1969), one of Dick's most celebrated novels. Set in the futuristic year 1992 and in a "North American Confederation" governed by corporations with employees who possess psychic abilities, the story begins with an expedition to the moon by a group of agents of Glen Runciter's "prudence organization" to protect a client's lunar installations from a rival company's "telepaths." The mission turns out to be a trap and Runciter is apparently killed in a bomb explosion. As protagonist Joe Chip and his fellow psychics return to Earth with their boss in cryonic or "cold-pack" storage, they start experiencing strange shifts in reality, as Runciter's face appears on coins and they receive cryptic messages from their deceased boss in writing and on tv. It now seems that Runciter is in fact alive, while it was the group that was killed on the moon and is itself stored in the suspended animation of half-life. As the present and all its material objects curiously begin to revert back in time to the year 1939, only the mysterious, commercially advertised and universally applicable spray can "Ubik" – derived from "ubiquitous," it is both the ultimate consumer product and the principle of the divine – can prevent the deterioration of reality and the irretrievable deaths of the group members. However, in the living world, Runciter suddenly encounters coins depicting Joe Chip's face on it. As the novel ends, he suspects that this is "just the beginning." We are left with the undecidability over which reality is "really real" or whether there are parallel worlds existing simultaneously.

The majority of Dick adaptations stem from his short stories rather than his novels, and have mostly been disappointing, due to their superficial treatment of the story material, with the main exceptions to date probably being *Blade Runner, Minority Report* and the independently produced *A Scanner Darkly* (Richard Linklater, 2006), the latter using the animation technique of rotoscoping in postproduction to capture the novel's sense of a drug-induced unreliable and shapeshifting reality.9 The most recent PKD adaptation, George Nolfi's phantastic romance *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011), is again derived from an early short story, "Adjustment Team," first published in 1954. In many ways more interesting, however, are a host of films indicative of and displaying the Dickian universe *in spirit:* Peter Weir's media satire on 24/7 live tv, *The Truman Show* (1998), but also *The Matrix*, bear

strong resemblances to Dick's novel *Time Out of Joint* (1959), with the protagonists in all three works discovering that they have been living in fabricated worlds controlled from without. *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993) and *Twelve Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995) – although the latter is directly inspired by Chris Markers experimental short *La Jetée* (1962) – feature Dickian time-loop and time-travel concerns; while Vincenzo Natali's identity-switching sci-fi thriller *Cypher* (2002) has been described as "the finest screen adaptation of a story never written by Philip K. Dick;"10 finally, both *Abre los ojos/Open Your Eyes* (Alejandro Amenábar, 1997) and its remake, *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2001), as well as Michel Gondry's phantastic romance from a script by Charlie Kaufman, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), are either inofficially based on – as in the former instance – or else indirectly influenced by *Ubik* and its effect of a disintegrating present reality. Kaufman's directorial debut, *Synecdoche*, New York (2008), about a convoluted *mise-en-abîme* of life and theater can be added to the growing list of films with a Dickian point of reference, which last but not least also includes the work under consideration here, *Inception*.11

It is instructive in this context to consider the classical narratological distinction between narration, plot, and story. While Dickian plots – their actual arrangement of story events – appear fairly straightforward and simple, the philosophical implications of his stories as chronologically linear and causal narratives tend to be complex. But we are still led by the narration to construct a story. By comparison, in contemporary complex film narratives we find the opposite tendency toward, on the one hand, basically simple, generically stereotypical stories with, however, complicated plots: once we have figured out the serialized algorithm of *Memento*'s alternating reverse (color) and forward (black and white) movement, the film reveals itself to be simply a story of revenge, which, as the final twist implies, could go on forever (in keeping with the concept of the DVD-enabled film). On the other hand, we observe that some narratives disallow the construction of any coherent story altogether, where we remain stuck at the level of plot in all its vexing complexity, as in *Abre los ojos/Open Your Eyes*. Just as Charlie Kaufman (Nicolas Cage) in *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002) realizes that having written himself into his own screenplay makes him into Ouroboros, the mythological snake eating its own tail, we are here dealing with a tendency of contemporary film narrative to vampirize itself, to take itself as its own object and to diegeticize its reflexivity in forms of *mise-en-abîme.* The shift from the modernist dominant of epistemology to the postmodernist dominant of ontology,12 from realism to constructivism, or from objectivity to subjectivity, is accompanied by a change from open to closed worlds in which external reference is lost and narratives become self-referential. Hence what *Memento* is really about is cinematic storytelling and the process of watching a movie. The self-referentiality is perhaps best exemplified by Cronenberg's *eXistenZ*, where the naive security guard and computer nerd Ted Pikul (Jude Law) asks the celebrated game-pod designer Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh), what the purpose of the virtual-reality game is they're playing. "You have to play the game to find out why you're playing the game," is her tellingly cryptic answer.

This is arguably also the point of *Inception*, its teleological heist storyline notwithstanding. Here dreams as the definition of closed worlds go hand in hand with total immersion and the overwhelming audiovisual spectacle of the contemporary blockbuster movie. In narratology, it is well-known that there are fundamental differences between screen time, plot time, and story time. Sidney Lumet's courtroom chamber drama *12 Angry Men* (1957) is a good case in point: its screen time, the time of its narration to unfold, is 96 minutes (at 24 frames per second). Its plot time of on-screen represented action takes place during a single day, in which one juror (Henry Fonda) is skeptical of the guilt of a young Hispanic accused of

murder and tries to persuade his fellow jurors to share his point of view; while the story time evoked in the heated deliberations through dialogue and referring to off-screen events covers weeks, even months. There is a parallel here to *Inception*. As the "subconscious" works faster than waking consciousness, and five minutes in reality are multiplied times twenty one dream down, and again by that amount for each successively deeper level, the actual heist with its four ontological dream worlds allegorizes filmic storytelling through the different narrative speeds and layers of time in a vertical and hence simultaneous arrangement. It is in this self-referential sense that *Inception* provides a new twist on the age-old metaphor of film as dream.

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NOTES

1 Roger Ebert: "*Inception*," *Chicago Sun-Times,* July 14, 2010.

2 Fredric Jameson: *The Geopolitical Aesthetic. Cinema and Space in the World System.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992, pp. 14–15.

3 See Murray Pomerance: "Neither Here Nor There. eXistenZ as 'Elevator Film'". In: *Quarterly Review of Film & Video,* 20(1), 2003, pp. 1–14.

4 See Jörg Schweinitz: "Totale Immersion und die Utopien von der virtuellen Realität. Ein Mediengründungsmythos zwischen Kino und Computerspiel". In: Britta Neitzel, Rolf F. Nohr (eds.): *Das Spiel mit dem Medium. Partizipation – Immersion – Interaktion.* Marburg: Schüren, pp. 136–153, especially pp. 136–141.

5 Slavoj Žižek: *How to Read Lacan.* London: Granta, 2006, p. 55.

6 For an overview of these different approaches to complex storytelling in film, see Charles Ramírez Berg: "A Taxonomy of Alternative Plots in Recent Films. Classifying the 'Tarantino Effect.'" In: *Film Criticism* 31(1-2), 2006, pp. 5–60; and Jan Simons: "Complex Narratives." In: *New Review of Film and Television Studies,* 6(2), August 2008, pp. 111–126.

7 See Niklas Luhmann: *Die Realität der Massenmedien.* Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2004, p. 9. First published 1996.

8 Fredric Jameson: "Philip K. Dick, In Memoriam." In: *Archaeologies of the Future. The Desire Calld Utopia and Other Science Fictions.* New York: Verso, 2005, p. 345.

9 Among other adaptations are, in chronological order, Total Recall (Paul Verhoeven, 1990),

Screamers (Christian Duguay, 1995), Impostor (Gary Fleder, 2001), Paycheck (John Woo, 2003), and Next (Lee Tamahori, 2007).

10 Mark Kermode: "Reality Check. Mark Kermode on a Sci-Fi Adaptation of a Story Philip K. Dick Never Got Round to Writing." In: *New Statesman,* vol. 132, 25th August 2003 (http://www.newstatesman.com/ 200308250026) (19/04/2011).

11 Other examples to be mentioned in this context are Gattaca (Andrew Niccol, 1997), Dark City (Alex Proyas, 1998), Being John Malkovich (Spike Jonze, 1999, based on a Charlie Kaufman script), Fight Club (David Fincher, 1999), Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000), Adaptation (Spike Jonze, 2002, based on a script by Charlie Kaufman), and Spider (David Cronenberg, 2002).

12 See Brian McHale: *Postmodernist Fiction.* Reprint. London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 3–25. First published 1987.