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Session 142 (59) “This Planet is Doomed”: on the entanglement of science fiction and technoscientific artefacts

**A design for living:**

**Metaleptic devices and trends of Gnostic imagination in contemporary science-fiction**

**Work in progress – please do not cite or quote without permission.**

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**Metaleptic devices and trends of Gnostic imagination**

**in contemporary science-fiction**

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Abstract:

As a narrative pattern and a cultural motif, the confusion between fictional worlds and reality traditionally leads to metaphysical arguments about liberty and destiny. Despite their drawing heavily on scientific imagination and technoscientific artefacts, science fiction movies exploring that theme never really broke with the way it has been treated since Calderon de la Barca’s *Life is a dream*: the hero’s quest leads him to doubt his own identity and dispute the ontological status of the world he lives in, leaving him and the viewer perplexed as to the ultimate nature of things. Yet, in the last fifteen years, an increasing number of science-fiction movies renewed that interrogation, notably by placing the issue of *design* at the centre of the plot: fictional worlds are not only denounced as fictional, but also shown as works in progress, literally rebuilt according to the plan of not-so-hidden designers acting as demiurges. In *Dark City*, *Vanilla Sky* or, more recently, *Inception* and *The Adjustment Bureau,* the emphasis on design and architecture together with the use of computational metaphors result in the promotion of one particular world to the status of “reference” universe, to be held as more “real” than other, fabricated and computed worlds made accessible by sophisticated devices operating as metaleptic instruments (such as Neo’s cable plug or the “bio-ports” in *ExistenZ*). This paper wishes to explore this shift towards “gnostic", *Matrix*-like science-fictional narratives, particularly in relation to the dramatic development of networking and surveillance capabilities that occurred during the same period.

Good morning to you all, my name is Frederic Claisse and I am very happy to be here in Copenhagen to discuss serious matters such as science fiction and the end of the world. I realize the title of my paper is a bit cryptic, especially with the combination of notions like “metaleptic devices” and “Gnostic imagination”, but hopefully it will be clearer in seventeen and a half minutes.

I have been building a corpus of science fiction movies that share interesting similarities in terms of plot dynamics. The collection comprises titles such as *The Matrix*, *Dark City*, *The Truman Show*, *Vanilla Sky* or *ExistenZ*. I trust that most of you saw at least one of these movies, and probably two, three or more of them, so I will not get into the details of the plots (if you didn’t, I have to warn you that my presentation contains major spoilers!). Of all these movies, *The Matrix* is by far the most renowned, also the most commented on, and can serve as a kind of paradigm to the whole “genre”. The corpus does not claim to be completed, it is still opened and waiting for new entries, so I will gladly take any suggestion you might have. With the exception of one, all movies listed here were produced after 1990.

The pattern at play in these movies is the following: the hero lives a more or less ordinary life, before a succession of slight irregularities, otherwise trivial incidents, break his daily routine, so that he eventually questions the very reality of the world he lives in and comes to realise it is “actually” “just an illusion” of some kind. The hero cannot trust his senses or his memories anymore. His friends or his relatives have become enemies. He doesn’t know who or what is worthy to be relied on. In some movies, eg. in *Total Recall*, he finds out he isn’t even the person he thinks he is and has to discover his own true identity. In other cases, he learns he is literally trapped in a world that is, eg., a projection of his own mind, as in *Vanilla Sky*, or a simulated, computer-generated environment, as in *The Matrix* naturally, but also in *The Thirteenth Floor* or *ExistenZ*.

In other words, our heroes share the same feeling of existential insecurity. Once they have suspected something is going wrong, their quest amounts to discovering the “true” nature of the world they inhabit (*Inception* is somewhat of an exception in the corpus, though the question does become central to the plot as the story unfolds – I will get back to it later). Most of these movies can thus be watched as “metaphysical investigations”: to what reality does the hero belong? what is the real status of his world? who is he? can he only escape his world? is there any way out? It is the hero’s thirst for knowledge and ability to gather scattered, strange pieces of information that drive the plot.

Once the true nature of things has been revealed, what are the possibilities for the hero? In “genuine” Gnostic plots such as *The Matrix* or *Dark City* (and I will later explain what I mean by Gnostic), the hero acts as a messenger, some kind of Messiah coming down to redeem humanity. Sometimes, he eventually finds a way out but only redeems himself (*The Thirteenth Floor, The Truman Show*). In other situations, the hero is stuck in the fabricated world (*Vanilla Sky*), so there is no exit.

These elements roughly define the kind of plot I am interested in. As opposed to stories of parallel or possible worlds, which revolve around other sequences – traveling through dimensions of space and time, with gateways to navigate from one world to another, etc. –, the stories in my corpus always imply some kind of hierarchical relation between the worlds: the hero assumes that his environment is a fabrication and searches for the upper level (or levels) of reality in which it was created. Ontological subordination is the key here.

*Design and performativity*

Another common feature of these movies is that they show the fabricated world not only as a fabrication, but in a **perpetual process of fabrication**. Think about the architectural sequences in *Inception*: you can see the city of Paris literally folding on itself, while the character of Ariadne, the “dream architect”, creates entire streets and rebuilds the city according to her fantasy. But this was already true of *Dark City*, in which similar sequences show the city being reconfigured by its creators, with blocks of buildings emerging from the ground and others shifting back in the wings. Think also about *The Truman Show* and its insistence on showing us the trickery of the television studios with all the props and stage effects. The green lines of digital code in *The Matrix* have the same function: the fictional world you are being proposed as a spectator is actually performed as it is computed, right before your eyes. [A comparable representational trick had been used in a lesser known movie that was produced at the same time as *The Matrix*, *The Thirteenth Floor*: a green grid showing the uncharted zone at the edge of the simulated world.]

In a way, these movies represent the ultimate dream for a social-constructivist theorist: nothing resists performativity. The fictional worlds in the corpus are “designed” in both senses of the word: first as a detailed drawing of the object or building before it was made, and second as an intention behind the creation of the material. These worlds make the distinction between these two meanings of design practically inscrutable: as if drawing a building were enough to make it exist. This is exactly what performativity is about.

There are, of course, many variants possible, depending on the way the subordinate, fabricated level of reality is designed and produced. As a first approach, I propose two categories, each of which comprises two modalities, in order to describe and then explore a space of variations.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **One reference world** (two-tier metaphysics)**« Gnostic » stories** | **Multiple worlds** (regression to the infinite)**« Baroque » stories** |
| **Subjectivist****worlds** | *Total Recall* (1990 + 2012)*Truman Show* (1997)*Vanilla Sky* (2001) + *Abre los Ojos* (1997)*Paycheck* (2003)[*Jacob’s Ladder,* 1990][*Identity*, 2003][*Shutter Island*, 2010][*Memento*, 2000] | *Inception* (2010) |
| **Objectivist****worlds** | *Matrix* (1999)*Dark City* (1998)*The Thirteenth Floor* (1999) + *World on a Wire* (1973) | *ExistenZ* (1999)*The Adjustment Bureau* (2011) |

*“Subjectivist”* vs. *“objectivist” worlds*

The first category opposes “subjectivist” to “objectivist” worlds. For example, *Vanilla Sky* belongs to the subjectivist kind: the hero, David Aames (played by Tom Cruise) finds out that what he experienced as reality is actually only a “lucid dream” induced by the state of cryonic sleep he has been put in for 150 years. As a result, David is the only person to have that experience. All the persons he “meets”, all the objects he “touches”, the whole world offered to his “perception” (quotation marks required), is but a mental projection. This is a rather extreme version of subjectivity; it would amount to solipsism if, in the “real” world, the body and brain of David didn’t continue to exist, as a material container for this mental experience. Like in a variety of thought experiments used in philosophy, he is reduced to being the proverbial “brain in a vat”.

This seems to be the same situation for Neo, the character played by Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix*: as you probably know, Neo’s “real” body has been placed in a sort of vessel and fed with nurturing liquids by intelligent machines that took control of the Earth and reduced humanity to servitude. In this story, the world as we know it can also be said to be a sort of mental projection, but in the form of a simulated reality shared by all the brains connected to the superstructure known as the Matrix. The only purpose of the Matrix is to maintain the bodies in the vessels alive, so that they can be used as an energy source by the intelligent machines. But, as I just said, even if it is nothing but an illusion held as reality thanks to cables and electrical impulses, it is nonetheless a shared reality, a common world for those who inhabit it. In other words, what makes the subjectivist or objectivist character of a world is not its “illusory” nature – all these stories involve that argument anyway –, but the fact that we share it with others or not. However illusory may the Matrix be, it does not depend entirely on an individual’s will, does not reflect his moods or preferences, and is objective enough to have effects in the real world as well (if you die in the Matrix, your plugged body in the vat dies as well).

To take another example, in *Jacob’s Ladder*, the hero, Jacob (played by Tim Robbins), is a US soldier who, on his return from Vietnam, cannot cope with his past and his memories. He can’t stop reliving the same war episode in which he and his unit go inexplicably berserk, the scene always ending with him being stabbed with a bayonet by a soldier whose face remains unseen. He suffers from bizarre hallucinations that get scarier and scarier and slowly turn his life into hell. During his investigations, he finds out that the soldiers of his unit were used as subjects for an experiment with a drug named “the Ladder”, created to increase aggression. Instead of attacking the enemy, the US battalion just happened to have massacred each other. In the end, as the hallucinations get worse, Jacob’s son, who had supposedly died in a car accident before Jacob went to Vietnam, suddenly appears to his father. He gently takes him by the hand to a bright, white light. The spectator then sees Jacob’s body lying on a table in an Army triage tent, as he just died. Apparently, the entire sequence of events shown in the movie was just a sort of hallucination, either caused by the drug or by the coma, a dilated state of consciousness that subjectively gave him the realistic impression of living his life back home, while he was actually deadly wounded and had never left Vietnam. This is clearly the same pattern as in *Vanilla Sky*, though it doesn’t involve any science-fiction argument or technology (except for the experimental drug, of course).

The same goes for movies like *Identity* (2003, with John Cusack), *Shutter Island* (2010), or even *Memento* (2000), which are not science-fiction movies (hence the brackets around these titles in the table), but present many similarities with *Vanilla Sky* or *Jacob’s Ladder*. It makes the subjectivist category a bit disparate, but not any less relevant. All these movies work as metaphysical investigations within the mind of the hero, so that the subordinate world is entirely a mental projection.

In the case of *Shutter Island* or *The Truman Show*, the illusory world does not exist only in the hero’s mind: it obviously has an objective character, it is shared by other people, but only in the sense that they are accomplices and have a role to play in the creation of the illusion. The subordinate world is staged; it is a theatrical production. In these cases, it is hard to tell whether we have to deal with a subjectivist or an objectivist world. It actually depends on the focalisation – i.e., in narratological terms, the perspective through which the narrative is presented. Truman’s world is only real to him, but it involves thousands of actors and technicians, and is universally known to be a huge candid camera show. In other words, the subjectivist nature of the subordinate world is best seen in terms of narrative worlds – the key question remaining, “is the subordinate world shared as an illusion by other people who have a material counterpart in the real world?”. This also explains why science fiction is not necessary to elaborate a plot of the subjectivist kind (the movies in brackets could be described as psychological thrillers, or even better, as psychiatric thrillers). Conversely, it explains why an objectivist world more or less necessarily requires complex technological artefacts and absolute demiurgic power, as in *The Matrix* or *Dark City*.

*“Gnostic”* vs*. “Baroque” stories*

The second category (in columns) opposes movies in which a “real” world serves as a stable reference point by which the subordinate world is judged and denounced as illusory, to movies in which the reality of the reference world is in turn suspected to be deceitful, leading to a possible regression to the infinite if it happens there is no reference world to be found. In short, on the one hand: one reference world, a “two-tier metaphysics”, with worlds strictly subordinated; on the other hand: multiple worlds, none of which being able to claim the status of reference world. The baroque metaphor of the world as a stage applies perfectly to this second category of narrative worlds: our world may be a stage, but it is unclear whether the theatre itself wouldn’t be another stage within that stage, or a dream within a dream within a dream, etc. [One could also think of another baroque motive, the notion of “possible world”, or the obsession for folds in baroque paintings and sculptures.]

To the opposite, stories belonging to the “two-tier metaphysics” category do not question the reality of the reference world: once it has been established that the world we thought was real is “actually” nothing but an illusion, a fabrication constructed in the “real” world, at a higher level of reality, the reality of this higher level reality is not questioned anymore. Phase one of the quest stops and the question becomes: can the hero access this higher level of reality, can he leave the illusion behind and move on to the real world? This is where the notion of Gnosticism comes in.

*Why “Gnostic”?*

The term is still used by historians and theologians to describe heterogeneous, syncretic sets of beliefs shared by different religions and civilizations during the Antiquity, but especially in early Christian times. Gnostic systems are heavily dualistic: our material world is not the perfect creation of God, but the flawed product of an inferior, false God, a demiurge who is only a degenerated emanation of the true God. It is a malevolent deity who is either ignorant or opposed to the true God. He keeps our souls trapped in the world as in a prison [of matter and flesh], whereas the true God remains remote and alien to this world. Gnostics feel that they do not belong to the world: they have only been “thrown in” down here and aspire to ascend back to their true creator. The road to salvation passes through *knowledge*: the revelation of the illusory nature of our world and of our true divine nature is the first step towards self-liberation. This is also the first meaning of the term “Gnostic”: a Gnostic is a learned person who manages to free himself through knowledge. These bits of knowledge and information have to come from the outside, e.g. alien messengers or emanations of God, such as Christ or Sophia.

You will already have noted similarities with the main story lines of the movies in my corpus. Gnosticism is a questionable category when it comes to describing actual beliefs of religious communities during Antiquity, but is a very convenient word to describe contemporary, secularized imaginaries. It has been used in that sense by political philosophers such as Hans Jonas and Eric Voegelin to depict a specific, existential attitude towards the world, in a pejorative sense. To be clear, I do not support the view that the movies in the corpus activate some kind of universal Gnostic “archetype”; I do not claim to be a Gnostic scholar either: what interests me is the possibility to name what appears to be a structurally coherent and socially significant imaginary world.

In *The Truman Show*, for example, there is only one world, yet the dynamics of the narrative structure is much comparable to Gnostic stories: Truman’s environment, the city of Seehaven, has been fabricated by television producers acting as demiurges, keeping Truman in ignorance. Christof, the producer of the show, loves his creation so much that he is ready to defend it at all costs. Since total control over the production is impossible, glimpses of the truth inevitably start to leak though. As in all Gnostic myths, **knowledge** is the key. The first crack occurs when Truman falls in love with the wrong person, Lauren, instead of Meryl, the character intended to become his wife. Lauren tries to warn him but is soon thrown out of the show. Once Truman finds out that his world is only a stage, his only wish is to get out and access the real world. After having tried different ways to escape, he finally manages to sail away on a small boat, determined to reach the horizon and test the edges of his universe. His bow pierces through the painted sky of the dome, and a flight of stairs nearby leads to a door marked “exit”. Then, for the first time, Christof speaks directly to Truman and tries to persuade him to stay in his artificial world, claiming that what lies outside is no less artificial than Seehaven. But it is already too late: redemption started with the knowledge that Truman’s world was artificial and that he only inhabited a degenerated, counterfeited reality.

[*Dark City* is based on a similar argument: instead of television producers, the demiurges are extraterrestrial entities, called the “Strangers”, who have been experimenting with humans to analyze their race in the hope that it would help their endangered race to survive. The “dark city” itself turns out to be a kind of space habitat built by the Strangers thanks to their psychokinetic powers. As in *The Truman Show*, our artificial reality happens to be only a stage. Knowledge also comes from outside: the hero, John Murdoch (played by Rufus Sewell), discovers that he actually has psychokinetic powers, which, at the end of the movie, allow him to defeat the demiurges, redeem humanity and literally reset the world.]

Another reason why Gnosticism is a relevant category to describe the imaginary developed in these stories is that it allows to establish a strong connection with the works of American science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick. While only three of the movies, *Total Recall*, *Paycheck* and *The Adjustment Bureau*, are explicit adaptations from short stories he wrote, all have a distinct and recognizable “phildickian” flavour. As a writer, Dick was fascinated by the idea that our world was maybe just an illusion, a simulacrum designed by evil deities to fool us. His stories explore all the variations possible of this narrative structure: it is relatively easy to find works that fit the four sections of the table.

Moreover, Dick experienced what he described himself as a Gnostic revelation: in 1974, he claimed he was struck by a ‘pink beam’ of ‘pure information’ coming from a superior, alien form of intelligence. He started to believe he was actually living two parallel lives, one as himself and the other as a Christian persecuted by the Romans. In a special diary named the *Exegesis*, he wrote literally thousands of pages to make sense of what happened to him. He also used these hallucinatory experiences in his later work, known as the *Divine Trilogy*, in which he makes an extensive use of Gnostic cosmologies and references.

*A typology*

With all these elements at hand, it is now much easier to broaden our initial typology. First, as we have already noticed, the **nature of the demiurges** may differ a lot from one storyline to another:

* intelligent machines in *The Matrix*;
* television producers in *The Truman Show*;
* psychic extraterrestrials facing extinction in *Dark City*;
* simulator programmers in *The Thirteenth Floor* and *ExistenZ*;
* dream architects in *Inception*.

In more subjectivist worlds, where the hero is trapped within his own mind, there are no demiurges in the strict sense of the word, but the role still exists in the narrative structure: the road to gnosis is paved with obstacles generated by the hero’s obsessions and anxieties, until he finds some relief in the final revelation.

Secondly, as we saw, the **modes of fabrication** of the subordinate world vary a lot as well. This is where the opposition between objectivist and subjectivist movies proves the most useful – since the mode of fabrication determines the ontological status of the entities it is composed of. We may organize the movies in three categories:

* The first one comprises **computer-simulated worlds**; they all belong to the objectivist side of the table (*Matrix*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, *ExistenZ*).
* The second one groups the **theatrical productions** (*Truman Show*, *Dark City*, [*Shutter Island*]), split between subjectivist and objectivist sides, depending on the individual or collective character of the target to be deceived.
* The third category contains the **drug-induced worlds** and other altered states of consciousness (*Vanilla Sky*, *Inception,* [*Jacob’s Ladder*], [*Identity*]), which all belong to the subjectivist side of the table.

Finally, once the mode of fabrication is determined, we can establish how the worlds are made **accessible** – i.e., whether and how it is possible to pass from the subordinate world to the reference world and vice versa. This is where the notion of “**metalepsis**” becomes useful. In narratology, especially in the terminology of Gérard Genette, a metalepsis is a transgression of the boundaries between narrative levels. This is typically what happens when an external narrator begins to interfere with the characters or addresses the reader, as in Diderot’s *Jacques the Fatalist*. But other kinds of transgressions are also possible between two fictional worlds – for example, when the hero discovers he has the power to enter the world of the novel he is reading (like in the series created by Jasper Fforde, starring the literary detective Thurdsay Next, and notably in the first episode, *The Eyre Affair*); or, conversely, when, for example, animation characters within the main narrative world come across the screen and interact with the “regular” characters, as in *Who framed Roger Rabbit*.

The relation between the subordinate and the reference worlds in the fictions of my corpus is also metaleptic by nature. In some movies, it even implies a logical and ontological leap. When Douglas Hall, for example, the simulation-programmer in *The Thirteenth Floor*, eventually escapes his own world after he had found out it also was nothing but a virtual world, analogue to the one he programmed, and when he reaches the ultimate level of reality, he does not only crosses the line between two narrative worlds, but between two modes of existence: he manages to take control of a human body in the real world, so that he is granted a material existence, but before that, he only existed as lines of code in a computer programme. In comparison, Neo’s “unplugging” from the Matrix and awakening in his vat seems almost natural.

Objectivist worlds in my corpus are rich in “metaleptic” devices that allow the passage from one world to another: the most emblematic of these devices is the system used by the rebellion to connect to the Matrix – a cable plugged in a special port physically installed in the neck of the subject. A similar system called a “bio-port” is used in *ExistenZ* so that the players can connect to the virtual world of the game. Nothing really new here actually: the same kind of device was already used in 1973, in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *The World on a Wire*, the first movie adaptation of the novel (*Simulacron 3*) on which *The Thirteenth Floor* is also based.

It is more difficult to find comparable devices in subjectivist stories. This is rather understandable if we remember that these worlds are often mere mental projections of a dying or sick individual. In *Jacob’s Ladder*, death is the only metalepsis possible; at the end of *Vanilla Sky*, it is also the hero’s choice to commit suicide in his virtual world to wake up in the real world. In *The Truman Show*, the exit door at the top of the flight of stairs can be seen as a symbol for the final metaleptic leap into reality. However, as a general rule that applies to all the fictions in the corpus, knowledge has, in itself, a metaleptic effect. As in the Gnostic myths, it even has a performative character: the only fact of hearing the myth and receiving it as a revelation is already a form of liberation in itself and a first step outside the subordinate world.

All in all, I think the notion of metalepsis is very useful to understand accessibility relations between fictional worlds that would otherwise be confused and difficult to compare.

*In conclusion : imaginary shifts*

There is a last problem. As you probably have noticed, the left column of the table is largely overrepresented. The proportion of “Gnostic” fictions in the corpus, compared to “baroque” fictions, is clearly in favour of the first category. Why is it so? Of course, we may think that if the big studios privilege simple metaphysics over contorted, multi-tiered, borgesian universes, it is because the former are more easily understandable, hence less scary to watch and invest money on. But the recent success of films like *Inception* or even *Source Code* tends to prove that the audience can indeed cope with complex and intricate stories.

I will risk another explanation. It is very tempting to think that these fictions gained prominence during what can be described as a major crisis of representation. It is significant that most of these movies were produced at the turn of the twenty first century, when the proliferation of virtual realities was not only a source of excitement, but of anxiety and a matter of concern.

All things considered, these movies have indeed a very ambivalent relationship to representation. In appearance, they address crucial metaphysical issues, like the ultimate nature of reality, but they do so only to restore the spectator’s belief in the stability of a reference world that eventually remains unquestioned and uncontaminated by fiction. We are never really lost in the plot of these movies: we know at every moment that we are dealing with a constructed reality, and that it is a bad thing to get caught in it. In this respect, a movie like *Inception* marks a spectacular return to a more baroque tradition: at the end, doubt remains, we won’t know whether the hero is still trapped within a dream or could get back to reality – or even if it is still relevant to speak of “reality” at all. This is all the more true of Philip K. Dick’s best novels, like *Ubik* or *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*.

Apart from *Inception*, it would seem that, during the last twenty years, science fiction studios developed stories which, though some of them draw heavily on technoscientific artefacts and simulation technologies, are nostalgic for times when reality was not simulated and could be experienced more directly. One of the side effects of the technologies of simulation and communication that emerged during the last two decades is that they reinforce our awareness of the constructed, “designed” character of our environment. Yet there is nothing tragic or anti-mimetic in that statement: this, after all, was also the attitude of the social sciences during the same period, and particularly in the field of STS studies. A decrease in the number of “*Matrix*-like” movies in the next years could be interpreted as a sign that this crisis of representation has been overcome. Paradoxically, the ability to play with multiple universes, instead of dualistic metaphysics, without the need of reaffirming the existence of a reference world that could be lost forever, could demonstrate a more confident relation to reality. Maybe the time for Gnostic fictions has gone.