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## From subject-effect to presence-effect

*A deictic approach to the cinematic*

Pepita Hesselberth

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The late 1990s and first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw the release of a number of films that are decidedly self-referential about time and invoke a sophisticated media-literacy on the part of the viewer. In these films past, present, and future are often portrayed as highly mutable domains that can easily be accessed, erased, (re)designed, or modified. Examples include: *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011), *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010), *Sherlock Holmes* (Guy Ritchie, 2009), *Next* (Lee Tamahori, 2007), *Déjà Vu* (Tony Scott, 2006), *The Butterfly Effect* (Eric Bress & J. Mackye Gruber, 2004), *Paycheck* (John Woo, 2003), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004), *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001), and many more. As theoretical objects, these cases stand out for the ways they deploy their own artistic potential to foreground, articulate, and conjure critical thought about their own temporality and the modes of existence they afford. These films can be called post-classical to the extent that they resist classical modes of cinematic storytelling in favor of what Warren Buckland has called ‘puzzle plots’ – i.e., they are films in which the ‘arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing’.<sup>1</sup>

In many early reflections, these films and others like them were often placed against the backdrop of classical modes of cinematic storytelling. Their narratives have been referred to as ‘parallel’,<sup>2</sup> ‘forked’,<sup>3</sup> and ‘networked’,<sup>4</sup> to name but a few. However, in more recent discussions a number of scholars, in a more thought-provoking vein, have opted for a terminology that defies such a normative view that sets these films off against cinematic narrative proper. They introduce notions like the ‘mind game film’,<sup>5</sup> ‘narratography’,<sup>6</sup> ‘the cinema effect’,<sup>7</sup> and a ‘data base aesthet-

ics';<sup>8</sup> or, they consider the films against the backdrop of what they refer to as the 'neuro-image'<sup>9</sup> or 'post-cinematic affect'.<sup>10</sup> Such terms speak to the different aspects and workings of the films, but they all suggest, in one way or another, that we need to come up with ordering principles other than (or at least in addition to) narrative if we want to come to grips with the complexity of contemporary cinematics and the kind of viewer engagement it demands. In this essay I propose the notion of presence, the paradigm of deixis, and the deictic terms 'here', 'now', and 'me', as one such alternate ordering principle.

I will unpack these notions of presence and deictics in part by relating them to the key term 'tangibility'. I argue that a focus on presence, or on the tangibility-effect that is produced in our encounter with the cinematic, challenges us to rethink our understanding of its materiality, thereby forcing us to expand our conception of the cinematic as such. An emphasis on deictics offers us a framework for the analysis of such a presence or tangibility-effect, as it redirects our attention away from the processes of sense-making (without refuting their relevance) towards the bodily-spatial or affective aspects of our engagement with the technologies of sound and vision that valorise our being in the world. After briefly sketching the theoretical outlines of the model of analysis I propose, I will bring these terms to bear on one of the aforementioned films: *Source Code*, a film that actively contributes to this discussion via its renegotiations of the (linear) time of narrative, of the position of the viewer, and of the different networks of mediation in which it partakes.

## Presence, tangibility, materiality

In the discussions on mediated environments, the notion of presence is often defined as the subjective experience of 'being there', commonly understood as the 'perceptual illusion of non-mediation' during a technologically mediated experience.<sup>11</sup> According to this view, presence is provided by suitable technologies (often associated with notions like immersion, perceptual realism, and interactivity) that allow for a narrative, physical, or social involvement with a mediated world.<sup>12</sup> The problem with this understanding of presence is that it builds on an ontological view that is firmly rooted in Cartesian dualisms between mind and body, between subjective and objective space, despite its emphasis on the relation between them. An alternative and more philosophically grounded view of presence can be found in several more recent reflections on imaging technologies (and particularly

in the realm of computation) that favor the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and the ecological psychology of J. J. Gibson as points of reference.<sup>13</sup> Presence here is understood not in reference to metaphysics but as being within reach, tangible for our bodies, of what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has referred to as the ‘materialities of communication’.<sup>14</sup> It is this being-in-touch-with-the-world, this tangibility-effect afforded by contemporary cinematics that I am interested in and that I wish to address.

A focus on presence challenges us to rethink a deeply-rooted disorientation caused by what Mary Ann Doane has called ‘trauma of scale’, as well as the arguable dematerialisation of the moving image through luminous projection: its ‘larger than life’ appearance, its (lack of) indexical grounding, its event-like status, and its dependence on the illusion of movement and light itself.<sup>15</sup> According to Doane, the fact that the dematerialisation of the image (especially in its classical cinematic incarnation) is seen as controversial has to do with cinema’s struggle with a fundamental indecisiveness about the location of the image. This is what disorients the viewer in terms of time, space, and vision. Doane writes that

the screen intercepts a beam of light, but the perception of the moving image takes place somewhere between the projector and screen, and the temporary, ephemeral nature of that image is reaffirmed by its continual movement and change.<sup>16</sup>

Whereas classical cinema can be seen as an attempt to resolve this disorientation by domesticating scale from within, thus providing ‘an abstract space populated by virtual bodies’, *Source Code* renegotiates a position for the viewer that explicitly abandons the screen/frame paradigm. Instead, it confronts the anxiety of dematerialisation associated with luminous projection head-on by resuscitating the body as a measure of scale and materiality.

As a projectable property then, presence – understood as the perception of self-existence, of ‘me’ – arises from the embodied interactions afforded within a given environment, in real-time and real-space. I contend that a focus on presence intimates a conception of materiality that is more in sync with the cinematic project as a whole, as it picks up where the fear of the dematerialisation of the image associated with luminous projection has left us: at the loss of the image’s indexical grounding in a material object – be it celluloid or, as in the case of the optical toy, in the ‘afterimage’.

The title of Gumbrecht's treatise, *The Production of Presence*, suggests as much. Besides noting that presence refers to that which is 'in reach of and tangible for our bodies', the author further explains that

if *producere* means, literally, 'to bring forth', 'to pull forth', then the phrase 'production of presence' would emphasize that the effect of tangibility that comes from the materialities of communication is also an effect *in constant movement*.<sup>17</sup>

Crucial for our purpose here is Gumbrecht's insistence on tangibility as *effect*. The production of presence (of being in touch with the world) that is induced by media technologies thus includes a spatial as well as a specific temporal dimension. I – it refers both to physical closeness and to the process of emergence. If tangibility is something that is effectuated by the 'materialities of communication' and cannot be fixed in time, then materiality must be understood as something other than mere objecthood. Put differently, the idea of presence intimates a conception of materiality as process, as a coming into being, a 'becoming'. More specifically, materiality then refers to the specific ways in which sound and imaging technologies physically manifest themselves to the participating viewer in the event of the encounter. Following this line of reasoning, it can be argued that the cinematic, as an experiential category, emerges when the thickening of time becomes tangible to our bodies in the event of our encounter with sound and imaging technologies.<sup>18</sup>

In this essay, I wish to pick up on this understanding of presence and propose the following generalisation: it is more productive to contemplate the cinematic in terms of the tangibility or presence-effect it produces in the participating viewer than in terms of the subject-effect it is said to fabricate. A focus on presence helps clarify how, within our contemporary media-saturated world, technologically mediated times and spaces are transformed into constitutive categories of identity via their intensification of the participating viewer's sense of being 'here', 'now', and 'me'. The key to understanding this intensification is the bond established and confirmed in an ongoing process, between cinematic time-spaces and the viewer who engages with them. This bond is built up and maintained through a form of indexicality, specifically through a structure that linguistic theory calls 'deixis'.<sup>19</sup> In the next section I will expand on this notion of (a bodily spatial) deixis by placing it against the backdrop of the classical film theoretical dispute between Francesco Casetti and Christian Metz on the topic of filmic

enunciation, after which I will turn to *Source Code* in order to explore the theoretical ramifications of the paradigm shift I seek to capture.

## A deictic approach

Deixis is a linguistic term that refers to the study of indexical references, or deictics, that require the presence of the participants and the specific spatio-temporal context of their expression in order to make sense; the 'this' of a pointing finger, or words such as 'here', 'now', 'I', and 'you'. What is striking about deictics is that they involve what American pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce called a 'dynamical coexistence' of sign and referent in order to become meaningful.<sup>20</sup> That is to say, in deixis the referent, rather than being made available by an expression's semantic conditions, is achieved by means of contextual support. Stephen C. Levinson writes that '[t]his contextual support is provided by the mutual attention of the interlocutors and their ability to reconstruct the speaker's referential intentions given clues in the environment.'<sup>21</sup> Deixis thus has intentional as well as attentional features that depend on what the psychologist and linguist Karl Bühler has called the *deictic origo* (i.e., the spatio-temporal frame of the articulation), centered on the interlocutor at the time and place of the utterance.

In cinema studies, the concept of deixis was picked up in the 1980s by Francesco Casetti, who used it in *Inside the Gaze* to develop his rigorous theory of filmic enunciation based on personal pronouns.<sup>22</sup> In the book, Casetti departs from the psychoanalytical and ideological approaches of his contemporaries, including Metz (to whom I will turn below), who conceived the spectator as a pre-given entity within a self-enclosed system, a divided subject unified through cinematic suture. To account for the ways that a film orients itself towards the actual viewer in the auditorium, Casetti proposes a semiotic framework of analysis based on a face-to-face model of communication. For Casetti, film viewing always involves three deictic categories: an 'I' (i.e., the enunciator, or filmmaker), a 'you' (i.e., the addressee, or spectator), and a 'he' (a character or a thing, i.e., the film itself). From this, he derives a typology of shots, each indicating a different way that a film can say 'you', thus demarcating a place to be filled in by the spectator. Yet, as Buckland has pointed out, despite his interest in the actual spectator, Casetti pursues his research primarily on the formal level of the film. That is to say, he is mostly concerned with the ways a film pre-scribes the spectator's position through its particular mode of address.<sup>23</sup>

Casetti's use of personal pronouns and deictic terms was fiercely criticised by Metz, who wrote his final work, 'The Impersonal Enunciation, or the Site of Film', largely in response to Casetti.<sup>24</sup> For Metz, deixis is not adequate to describe the reality of film, because in the cinema no 'I' (filmmaker, character) speaks directly to a 'you' (viewer). Filmic enunciation is impersonal, he states, therefore there can be no analogy between film and natural languages. Rather, film displaces the enunciation from the actual place and time of the enunciator; its reality is recorded and produced before the actual viewer engages with the film. As a result, the relation between enunciator and addressee is always asymmetrical and mediate rather than immediate, as in dialogue.<sup>25</sup>

What is important for our purpose here is that Metz rejects the use of deictic terms to describe the reality of film because he conceives film as *histoire* rather than *discourse*, in Emile Benveniste's sense of the terms (where *histoire* is 'defined by the absence of deictic markers'). As Buckland states, '[i]n rejecting the presence of deixis in film, Metz limits his discussion of filmic enunciation to the articulation of space and time *within* narrative films.'<sup>26</sup> In the famous essay 'Story/Discourse (A Note on Two Kinds of Voyeurism)', Metz had already used Benveniste's distinction between *discourse* and *histoire* to argue that the cinematic situation is inherently voyeuristic (and thus, *histoire*) because it lacks the deictic markers that acknowledge the viewer's presence.<sup>27</sup> The viewer can look into a filmic world, but the film does not look back because it cannot; it is impersonal.

Metz' rejection of deixis is thus founded on specific material grounds. He argues in 'Story/Discourse' that one of the material conditions of cinema is its positing of a radical 'segregation of spaces' between the viewer and the screen.<sup>28</sup> Rather than referring to an external reality, in his view, cinema thus constructs a reality of its own. A film is a world opened up through projection, separated from the real world by means of the frame. Hence his subtitle: 'the site of film'. This leads Metz to conclude that reference in film is necessarily meta-linguistic and anaphoric rather than deictic. More importantly, Metz suggests that a cinematic work acknowledges the spectator only to the extent that it constructs an absent centre on the other side of the screen, i.e., a subject position that offers the viewer a point of entry into the filmic space by means of identification and mirroring.

I share Metz' view that the filmic enunciation is impersonal, but I am critical of his rejection of deixis and the radical segregation of spaces he proposes. The impact of Metz' theory of filmic enunciation cannot easily be overestimated. Film theory has most commonly dealt with the duplicitous relationship between seeing and being seen in terms of variations of

the mirror, with an emphasis on the classic voyeuristic position of the observer. We tend to understand our own involvement in these terms. However, more recently we can observe a shift in attention in film theory away from the centrality of vision and voyeurism towards attentiveness to the body and embodiment. For example, scholars such as Gilles Deleuze, Vivian Sobchack, Laura Marks, and Giuliana Bruno have each theorised the cinematic in terms of its affective, embodied, tactile, or haptic appeal, thus foregrounding embodiment and engagement as one of the axes alongside which the registers of the cinematic need to be, can be, and to some extent already have been revised and redefined.<sup>29</sup>

In line with these writings, I contend that the concept of deixis helps to foreground the relation between cinematic environments and the participating viewer in terms of the specific experience of being here, now, and me that it affords. The cinematic now confronts us in all kinds of places no longer dependent on the screen/frame paradigm of projection. Therefore, the old paradigm of the mirror, of reflexivity and the dominance of the eye, seems no longer to hold. Within the ever-expanding field of contemporary cinematics, the old registers of perception – organised around the image as framed view, experienced at a distance by a seated viewer, and channeled exclusively through the eye and ear – no longer necessarily apply. They need to be replaced with a different register that, for the purposes of this essay, I will call the affective encounter, a term I borrow from philosopher and social-political theorist Teresa Brennan.<sup>30</sup>

Focusing on the body and embodiment enables a different understanding of deixis, one that cannot be reduced to linguistic forms of discourse. As Bühler, who used the term deixis in the 1930s to theorise how [human] beings orient themselves in relation to their environment, writes, an individual '*senses his body, too, in relation to his optical orientation, and employs it to point. His (conscious, experienced) tactile body image has a position in relation to visual space*'.<sup>31</sup> Kaja Silverman in *The Threshold of the Visual World* has referred to this tactile body-image as the individual's 'proprioceptive frame of reference', thus stipulating the importance of the constant wavering back and forth between body and space that is entailed by vision.<sup>32</sup> Cultural theorist Mieke Bal uses the term *wavering*, in turn, to refer to our dialogic relation to visual space, expanding on Silverman and calling attention to the proprioceptive base of deixis.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, even though we may be speaking, to a certain degree, about the different kinds of mirroring afforded by contemporary cinematic environments, as well as about the position of the viewer within them, it is important that we no longer place these terms in a classical cinema setting.

From the viewpoint of visuality, looking both emanates from and points back to a body. Deictics, in this sense, do not contribute to the propositional content derived from a given context but rather serve to slot in an element of that context – i.e., the referent, in the proposition expressed, so as to validate its being. In other words, the act of looking is part of the object (or that which is looked at), so that any movement in or of the observer necessarily triggers movement in or of the world observed and vice versa, here and now. This principle of co-variance radically differs from the principle of co-dependence fundamental to Renaissance perspective and the ocular-centric models of cinema it inspired. It is different because it does not place the viewer at a distance from the world observed, and by the same token does not consider the object as given or fixed. For, ‘what can subject-centredness be,’ asks Bal, ‘when the subject is by definition a wavering double I/you subject that is impossible to pin down at any moment in any one spatial position.’<sup>34</sup>

It is this bodily-spatial form of deixis that I adhere to, but it entails two provisos. First, it is imperative to grant that in the bodily-spatial studies of deixis proposed above, the environment is recognised as an agent in the construction of meaning and in processes of self-validation. Second, and significantly, the wavering just described is a temporal process. ‘Where space meets the body,’ writes Bal, ‘time is involved.’<sup>35</sup> This wavering between our body and the world imbues visuality with a temporal thickness. Key to this thickening is actuality, and actuality is the time of discourse. What sets apart the cinematic, I argue, is its potential to intensify this temporal thickening, and so to intensify our sense not only of ‘now’ but also of ‘here’ and ‘me’. Elsewhere, I trace this thickening of time across different spatio-temporal configurations of the cinematic that are, in part, situated outside of the realm of the movie theater: e.g., a multi-media exhibition, the aesthetics of the handheld camera, and a large-scale interactive urban media installation. Here, I will revert to an example of contemporary mainstream Hollywood cinema as a way to expound on the artistic and theoretical implications of the paradigm shift that I seek to elucidate.

### Source Code

Like most of the previously mentioned films, *Source Code* quite explicitly challenges us to rethink our encounter with technologically-mediated sounds and images in terms of a bodily-spatial deixis by way of its particular mediations of time, space, and embodied agency. The film centers on Capt. Colter Stevens, a decorated US Army helicopter pilot played by Jake Gyllenhaal, who is forced to relive the last eight minutes of someone else’s life

just before being blown up by a bomb on a commuter train – over and over again. Stevens partakes in a military experiment called Source Code – a complex contraption that allows him to enter the body of Sean Fentress, a schoolteacher from Chicago, in the moments before his death. His mission is to obtain information to prevent a possible future terrorist attack. The premise of the film is simple: each time Stevens re-enters the body of Sean Fentress, a parallel universe is opened that ceases to exist when Stevens/Fentress dies – until, eventually, he does not.



Fig. 1 Stevens/Fentress in the mirror

The film, like so many of these mind game or puzzle films, opens *in medias res*. Stevens/Fentress awakens on the train. He does not know where he is, how he got there, or who his fellow passengers are, even though they appear to know him. His state of spatial and temporal disorientation mirrors that of the viewer, who is also denied reassurance about his or her whereabouts within the filmic diegesis. Stevens' anxiety grows even greater when he catches glimpses of his reflection in the train window and restroom mirror and realises, as does the viewer, that his projected self-image does not match the reflection that he sees, for he sees Fentress (see Fig. 1). This is the beginning of a *mise-en-abyme* of bodily projections that ends at Cloud Gate, the gigantic sculpture that Stevens/Fentress encounters towards the end of the film (located in Chicago, designed by Anish Kapoor, and known for its warped and multiplied refractions of the cityscape as well as of the visitor's projected body-image). Or arguably, it ends at (or begins with?) the viewer's own projected body-image, which, though unobservable to him or her in the encounter, is nonetheless there. Seconds later a bomb explodes.

A myriad of images pass by, including the first of many flash-forwards to Cloud Gate, before Stevens awakes for the second time in what appears to be a grim and claustrophobic flight capsule (Fig. 2). Once again he is spatially and temporally disoriented, hanging upside down, a recurring motif in many of these films. He has no knowledge of where he is, no recollection of how he got there, and no recognition of who is talking to him via the small screen and audio signal. His only memory is of being under siege in Afghanistan. It takes some ‘rotation adjustments’ and a ‘pattern recognition’ procedure before Capt. Stevens can identify the person talking to him as Capt. Goodwin (Vera Farmiga), who refers to her location and unit as ‘Beleaguered Castle’. The remainder of the film is spent shifting from scenes of Stevens/Fentress on the train, continually reliving his last eight minutes; of Stevens in the capsule, tormented by existential questions, as well as by Source Code’s continuous physical assault on his body; and of Goodwin, in what appears to be a media control room at Beleaguered Castle, growing ever more sympathetic towards Stevens’ personal quest.



*Fig. 2 Stevens in the capsule (1)*

## Here

How, then, does the film challenge us to address our encounter with the cinematic in terms of an intensified ‘here’, ‘now’, and ‘me’, and how does the concept of deixis help us understand this challenge? It is significant that the film attends to the relation between situatedness and mobility,

embodiment and projection, image and world, quite literally, through the main characters' explicit and repeated references to their bodily presence in space in terms of a 'here'. For example, when Stevens awakens in the capsule for (what appears to be) the first time, he states: 'I was on a mission, I was flying, and then I woke up on a train...now I am *here*. I need to be briefed.' When Goodwin later informs him that he has *actually* been present as Stevens/Fentress on the train, in a parallel universe, he skeptically answers: 'No, no, I am right *here*, you are talking to *me*, right *now*.'

However, Stevens does not only refer to his own presence and whereabouts in the capsule in terms of a 'here'. When he is sent back on the train for the third or fourth time, Stevens/Fentress utters in aggravation to Christina, one of the other characters on the train: 'You're still *here*.' Goodwin also repeatedly refers to her immediate surroundings as 'here'. For example, she states: '[o]ut *here*, the clocks only move in one direction'; or, when she contrasts her presence-to-the-world to that of Stevens, declaring: '[w]hat you experienced was a shadow. It was the afterimage of a victim on a train. This is real life, *here*' (to which Stevens cynically answers, '[t]he one where you are talking to a dead helicopter pilot?').

Each perceived environment thus emanates from and points back to a body, a concrete material existence, here/now/me, whether the environment is referred to as 'just a manifestation' (Stevens in the capsule), 'a shadow', an 'afterimage' but 'not a simulation' (Stevens/Fentress on the train), or 'real life' and a 'parallel universe' (Goodwin at Beleaguered Castle). In fact, the film works towards a disintegration of classifications such as 'real', 'virtual', or 'illusory'. This is underscored by the fact that, on the level of plot, none of its realms are distinguished as being more or less real or illusory than the others. The capsule is repeatedly transformed in front of our eyes, as is Stevens' presence in it. At times it looks big, at other times cramped; sometimes Stevens is fixed and seated, at other times he can walk around; at one point he wears a t-shirt, the next moment he is fully dressed in his military uniform (Fig. 2, Fig. 3). Likewise, on the train, events are continually re-wound, re-lived, fast-forwarded, altered, or frozen, while characters break up into pixel-like glitches, produce uncanny mirror-images, or die a dozen deaths. Even Goodwin's 'real-life' environment cannot be considered as such the moment we learn that she continues to exist in what is now, and was perhaps all along, a 'parallel' universe. However, regardless of the scale of (technological) mediation involved, each perceived environment is always *actual* from the point of view of the person or persons observing it, 'here'.



Fig. 3 Stevens in the capsule (2)

Three 'heres' converge first and foremost in the figure and body of the participating viewer: Capt. Colter Stevens, whose existence on the train appears to emanate from his non-actual existence in Source Code (the capsule), which in turn emanates from and points back from his wired and mutilated body at Beleaguered Castle. Without Stevens' body, environments cease to exist, as in the event of his death (first in Afghanistan, then many times on the train, and eventually also at Beleaguered Castle). Significantly, Stevens' aptitude to observe is based on his ability to distinguish between his own 'being alive' and 'being dead', his presence and absence to the world, from a position which can perhaps best be described as being undead, or not dead, but not quite alive either. This distinction is the prerequisite for all of his (and our) observations, yet throughout the film it remains unobservable and incommunicable to him. Even though he is the only character who can observe the various environments from the perspective of his peripatetic and intensified 'here', he cannot observe himself as an observer – at least not in an act of self-transparency, and not while simultaneously observing himself as 'being alive' elsewhere (e.g., in the capsule, on the train). It requires a second-order observer, Capt. Goodwin, to observe and reveal his undead body to us and therewith the operation of his observation. However, her observation is dealt the same fate, as it too would require an even higher order of observation to become observable and communicable, for example by the viewer in the cinema or at home, *ad infinitum*.

In a very rudimentary manner, the film can be said to entangle us in a paradox that social systems theorist Niklas Luhmann considered to be inherent to all observation. In Luhmann's theoretically dense and complex

argument, to observe means to distinguish and to indicate – i.e., to implement a distinction, and to indicate one side of this distinction in one single, simultaneous operation. Luhmann thus upholds a purely formal conception of observation that is not limited to consciousness and goes well beyond the strictly optical or specular sense of the word. Important for our purposes here is Luhmann's suggestion that all observation necessarily produces its opposite: by indicating something, something else is simultaneously excluded, concealed. What is concealed is not observation's negative, or what Luhmann calls the 'unmarked space', i.e., that which lies beyond the frame of that which is indicated, like in our example of Stevens' 'being dead' (absent), with which his 'being alive' (present) is affectively charged. What is concealed in the act of observation, according to Luhmann, rather, is the frame of reference itself, the distinction utilised by the observer (sentient or non-sentient), whose own observation remains unobservable to him, her, or itself in an act of self-transparency.

By re-entering the distinction between presence and absence, real and illusory, actual and virtual, in the film's plot in the form of Stevens' undead present-absent, real-illusory, actual-virtual body, *Source Code* thus actively engages the participating viewer in Luhmann's paradox of observation. Via an exploration of this paradox, the film slots its viewer into its *mise-en-abyme*-like structuring of the 'here' of the encounter, in which neither viewer nor representation is held in place. According to Luhmann a communication of paradoxes is productive, precisely because it 'fixes attention to the frames of common sense, frames that normally go unattended'.<sup>36</sup> This is what keeps a system dynamic and open to transformation. Thus even if we were to subscribe to classical film theorist David Bordwell's claim that, with regards to puzzle films, their '[n]arratives are built not upon philosophy or physics but folk psychology, the ordinary processes we use to make sense of the world', we cannot but acknowledge that the film's narrativity serves precisely to 'deframe and reframe the frame of normal thinking, the frame of common sense'.<sup>37</sup>

## Now

How, then, does this expansion of the cinematic material into the thickened 'here' of the encounter intersect with the thickening of its 'now'? What is de-framed in our encounter with the cinematic today is a view on the cinematic image itself (as window, threshold, or mirror), as it is reframed in and through the body, through affect. This brings me to a second paradox

introduced by *Source Code*, pertaining more directly to the fragmented, multiple, and disconcerting ‘now’ that it negotiates: the paradox of the flash-forward. As Sean Cubitt has pointed out in his reflections on what he calls the neoclassical cinema of the 1960s, historically, flash-forwards are rare in cinema, because

[f]uture events cannot be thought, much less displayed, without betraying the secret of narrative cinema: that everything is either pre-determined (the film plays to its end) or nonexistent (the film breaks down in projection), in either case removing motivation from the diegesis.<sup>38</sup>

The use of the flash-forward in cinema thus produces a paradox in the sense that the conditions of its possibility are on par with the conditions of its impossibility. Cubitt suggests that this is so because ‘in cinema the future has either already been written – the script preexists the film – or, bluntly, does not exist’.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the future is the unmarked space that lies beyond the frame of that which is indicated, but with which the event-ness of our encounter with the cinematic is nonetheless affectively charged.

Contrary to Cubitt’s observation, today, the trope of the flash-forward is a particularly widespread phenomenon in mainstream Hollywood and beyond. Its innovative usage unites all of the aforementioned examples and links them to the HBO/ABC television series that carries its name: *Flash Forward* (2009-2010). In fact, the trope has been so popular since the turn of the millennium that it has led media scholar Richard Grusin to argue (only a few years after his renowned publication with Jay Bolter) that now *premediation*, not *remediation*, is the primary underlying logic of technologically mediated sounds and images within today’s media-saturated world.<sup>40</sup>

It is because of its paradoxical operation that the flash-forward can help us demonstrate most clearly that it is no longer tenable to think of our encounter with contemporary Hollywood films in terms of linear or consecutive time, but, rather, that this encounter needs to be reconsidered as beset with the time of affect and trauma. What the usage of the flash-forward makes explicitly clear, i.e., tangible to our bodies, is the simultaneity of mapping out time and mapping with time that is inherent to our encounter with the cinematic today. Although it can be said that this is the case for all cinematic images, its potential is taken to the extreme in the flash-forward. This is what makes the figure an exceptional theoretical object.

In *Source Code*, the flash-forward is most clearly introduced in the film’s final sequence, when Stevens has managed to create a sustainable parallel universe from which he sends a now unknowing Goodwin a text message

that informs her of a bomb explosion that has been averted before the actual occurrence of the event. This hindsight turns the whole film into an extended flash-forward masquerading as a flashback, a view of the present from the perspective of a memory of a future that does not exist. Cubitt draws on philosopher of science Mauro Dorato, who refers to this position as an 'empty view of the future'. Dorato explains that 'the essence of the present event is, not that it precedes future events, but that it quite literally has *nothing* to which it has a relation of precedence'.<sup>41</sup> Cubitt stresses that according to Dorato, therefore, 'this view is best suited for mind-independent theories of becoming'.<sup>42</sup>

However, the trope of the flash-forward has already been introduced much earlier in the film, through not only the figure of Cloud Gate but also through Stevens/Fentress' many re-entries on the commuter train, which alternately function as a flashback *and* a flash-forward for Stevens as well as the viewer. Because of his aptitude for observation and his ability to build up new memories, Stevens' know-how of the situation on the train accumulates, and this helps him to anticipate and change 'the future' with mounting accuracy – to the point that the event of the explosion itself turns out to have been nothing but a diverted future, a flash-forward. Significantly, repetition here is conflated with revision, as well as with habit, recollection, and excess. This kind of conflation has prompted media scholar Patricia Pisters to argue, in direct relation to the innovative usage of the flash-forward, that contemporary cinema is predominantly based on what Deleuze calls the third synthesis of time and to which he refers as 'the repetition of the future as eternal return'.<sup>43</sup> This is what governs the flash-forward's peculiar relation to the future: an 'empty view of the future' that presents itself as a 'repetition of the future as eternal return'.

The flash-forward cannot be caught in any one moment; to the extent that we can even speak of a flash-forward, we can do so only by virtue of the film's further narrative unfolding, at which point the flash-forward becomes a flashback. At once revealing the film's prefabrication and requiring the viewer to rerun it through the logics of a retroactive causality, the film (if only momentarily) draws us into a temporality that is other than that of linear causation. It reveals the emerging quality of each encountered (moving) image by drawing us into a discontinuous, multiplicitous, and thickened 'now' that is intimately linked to both past and future, but which nonetheless takes shape in the present, where it resists localisation. This emergent, wavering temporality is indicative of the film's narrative thrust.

It is through the limitation imposed on us in our encounter with the cinematic that this inherent futurity becomes tangible to our bodies. Therefore,

the encounter – which is in fact a mode of embodied spectatorship – can be called traumatic, not so much because the film portrays a traumatic event (Stevens forced to relive his death over and over again), but rather because it negotiates a sense of self, of ‘me’, in relation to a mediated ‘here’ and ‘now’ that is no longer necessarily knowable, as it is perceived from the point of view of a future anticipated yet not there, except as a promise of an eternal return. The film thus underscores Elsaesser’s claim that a traumatic mode of spectatorship might very well have become the default value of cinematic experience today.<sup>44</sup>

## Me

This brings me to the third and final aspect of our encounter with the cinematic that *Source Code* challenges us to address: the intensification and thickening of ‘me’. As we have seen, the film attends to the loss of the screen as a protective shield against living-presence, as a threshold that separates what is seen and heard from the viewer’s identity. As such, it challenges us to rethink projection as emanating from the body, as located in and operated by a ‘me’ that is at once situated in and mobilised by the ‘here’ and ‘now’ of the encounter. Significantly, this ‘me’ becomes tangible to Stevens only in his encounter with others (like Goodwin at Beleaguered Castle and the passengers on the train) and only by means of the technologies of sound and vision (that is, *Source Code*) that valorise his being in the world. His being is a being-with, in the sense of both being with others and being with technology.

From the outset, Stevens is seen as becoming one with himself as other, a condensed and thickened ‘me’. This becomes most clear when he confronts Fentress’ reflection on the train (see Fig. 1). In fact, Stevens has no perception of self-existence, of ‘me’, outside his mediated encounter with others through *Source Code*, despite the presence of his body at Beleaguered Castle; his sense of self-presence is wholly-dependent on his being part of a complex network of mediated interactions with other entities, sentient as well as non-sentient.

Stevens only gradually learns the conditions under which he can perform his tasks and as to why he is the only ‘viable candidate’ for his observations. He has died in Afghanistan and the military are using the memory capacity of his brain in the afterglow of his death. He is, quite literally, a body without organs: a brain in a head, with only half a trunk, held in a container on life support and physically connected to *Source Code* via a number of tubes,

wires, and data streams (Fig. 4). He is the catatonic (re)action-hero of post-classical cinema, which Elsaesser writes is haunted by a traumatic ‘failure of experience’ in the most radical manifestation of it – namely, his death.<sup>45</sup> Only when he overcomes his initial resistance to this fact does he regain his sense of agency, at which point he starts referring to himself as ‘the new me’.



*Fig. 4 Steven's BWO at Beleaguered Castle*

The film thus precludes a vision of the cinematic in terms of a unified, coherent subject-position, as Stevens' ‘subjectivity’ is dispersed across the multiple flexible networks of the many mediated worlds he observes, while nonetheless being situated and singular in its very multiplicity. It is from the point of view of this renegotiation of the sense of self that we can also understand the significance of the recurring figure of Cloud Gate – the odd bean-shaped sculpture made up of transforming mirror surfaces that Stevens comes across in the film's final sequence, after he has managed to create a sustainable universe in which he survives as Sean Fentress. Stevens/Fentress faces the sculpture twice: once while standing in front of it, and once while passing through it. The first image shows Stevens facing Fentress at the center of the sculpture's fish-eye exterior with the whole of Chicago in the background, centered but not unified; the second shows Stevens/Fentress in a vertigo of refractions in the interior hall of mirrors, his reflection undistinguishable from those of his fellow city-dwellers, yet clearly projected from his situated bodily presence (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6).



Fig. 5 Stevens/Fentress at Cloud Gate



Fig. 6 Stevens/Fentress at Cloud Gate

However, the true moment of surprise in *Source Code* comes not so much when we learn that all we have witnessed so far has not yet taken place and never will, nor necessarily when Goodwin discloses Stevens' mutilated body, but rather when the film reveals to us (while still concealing) how Source Code has in fact observed Stevens, Goodwin, and the world at large. This moment occurs just before Goodwin decides to help Stevens by 'uploading' him one last time into Fentress' body on the train before unplugging his undead body from the machine.

In the brief conversation that follows, we observe Stevens sitting on the capsule's floor, his back turned to the little screen that contains Goodwin's talking head. Throughout the conversation Goodwin looks straight into the camera, seemingly at him. When Stevens asks Goodwin to send him back in, he resolutely turns to face Goodwin on what appears to be the other end of the screen/webcam (Fig. 7 – Fig. 10). 'I'm asking you,' he asks, insistently, 'I'm asking you. Send me back in. Then switch me off.' Rather than the anticipated reverse-shot over Goodwin's shoulder facing Stevens on screen, we are confronted with an elongated close-up of the webcam itself – an image that has recurred throughout the film from various angles, but up until then has never faced us directly (Fig. 11).



*Fig. 7 – Fig. 10 Facing the webcam*





The image cannot be attributed to Goodwin's point-of-view, nor to anyone else's for that matter. It is not looked at by her but looking at her, at the diegetic world, and arguably out of the diegetic world, at us. As the image tilts down to the screen she has been facing from the beginning but which has been blocked from our view by her presence, we realise that all it contains are words, a chat history saying

I'm asking you. I'm asking you.  
Send me back in.  
Then switch me off.

This is how Goodwin has observed Stevens all along – as text, a brain scan, a pulse, a temperature, an oxygen level, as data-bits and data-bases amid live-streaming of the world ‘out there’ (see Fig. 10 and Fig. 12).



Fig. 11 *The webcam*

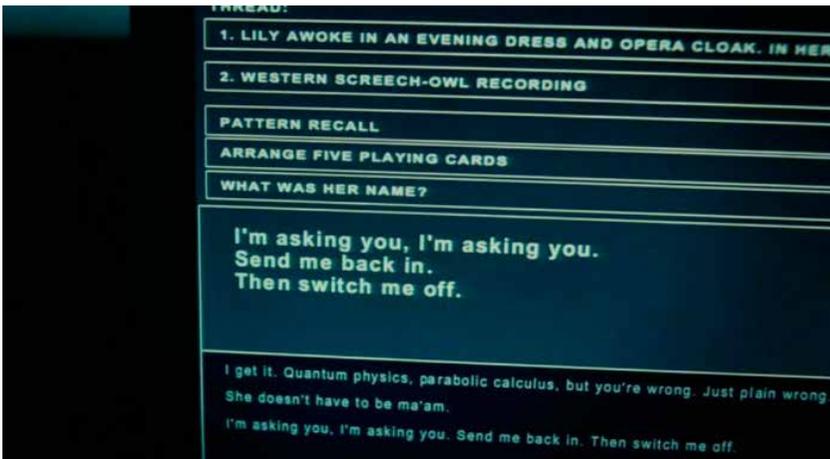


Fig. 12 *'I am asking you.'*

Even more important than this revelation is its implication – the realisation that Stevens does not so much observe *via* Source Code but rather *as* source code; whatever we have watched him ‘see’ up until then (his presence in the capsule and on the train, the audio-tracks and pattern recognition program, the news footage that is fed to him, the image-feed of Goodwin’s presence

at Beleaguered Castle), all is observable to him only as uploaded data, as algorithm. His entire perceptible existence *is* source code. In this, the true function of the depicted camera is revealed to us; its role is not to observe, nor to record, but rather to project. As media artist and critic David Rokeby states, what it projects are judgments based solely on quantifiable features, as an algorithm can only respond to and assess quantifiable data.<sup>46</sup>

This raises the question of what other kinds of tangible, artificial subjectivities the cinematic gives rise to. For if, as a projectable property, presence can be described as the pre-reflexive corporeal opening to the world, and if the ‘empty view of the future’ on which the flash-forward relies is indeed ‘best suited for mind-independent theories of becoming’ (as Dorato insists) – moreover, if the cinematic enables us ‘to enter into dialogue with autonomous affects in the system cinema’, as Cubitt concludes, then it is possible (not to say necessary) to also address the forms of subjectivity that take place on the side of technologies of sound and vision themselves.<sup>47</sup> Future studies will have to show what this kind of cinematic subjectivity amounts to and what it might tell us about the participating viewer’s own limits of self-knowledge, self-explanation, and self-presence within our increasingly media-saturated world.

## Conclusion

Over the last two decades, cinema studies have sought to come to terms with the expansion, transformation, and (arguably) the loss of its initial object of inquiry: cinema. Using *Source Code* as my interlocutor, I have argued that we are in a better position to understand the extended habitat of the cinematic and the bearing it has on the participating viewer if we approach the cinematic as a lived environment that affords certain embodied interactions while prohibiting others. I have demonstrated that it is productive to build on and rethink certain classical film theoretical notions such as projection, materiality, and agency for the analysis of a case that significantly differs from what transpires in classical Hollywood cinema. Conversely, as a theoretical object, *Source Code* stipulates the limitations of such classical theories of film, such as their reliance on a strict segregation of spaces, on a unified self-enclosed notion of the subject, and on an essentialist understanding of the materiality (and therewith the specificity) of film. The film actively contributes to these discussions via its negotiations of the (linear) time of narrative, of the position of the viewer, and of the different networks of mediation in which it partakes.

An emphasis on tangibility, or the presence-effect of the cinematic, and on the three corners of the deictic triangle ('here', 'now', and 'me'), is instrumental for rethinking our encounter with the cinematic in terms of the intensified sense of space, time, and being that it brings about. This intensification, of course, partakes of a more general (critique of the) 'spatialization of time' that is a symptom of our cultural moment.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising to find such intensification across a wide spectrum of cinematic practices, as well as in the discourses that revolve around them.

Elsewhere, as previously mentioned, I have demonstrated that the model of analysis I propose here is equally apt for cinematic practices that are sited outside of the realm of the movie theater.<sup>49</sup> This is so because, from the viewpoint of a bodily-spatial deixis, each encounter with technologically-mediated sounds and images in which the thickening of time becomes tangible to our bodies and affects our sense of self-presence can be considered a cinematic environment. This is also the case when that encounter is organised around an immobilised viewer in a darkened auditorium watching a 'single-channel' linear narrative film, like the viewer watching *Source Code*.

## Notes

1. Buckland 2009, p. 3.
2. Smith 2001.
3. Branigan 2002.
4. Bordwell 2002.
5. Elsaesser 2009.
6. Stewart 2007.
7. Cubitt 2005.
8. Manovich 2001; Kinder 2003.
9. Pisters 2011.
10. Shaviro 2010.
11. Lombard & Ditton 1997.
12. For an overview of the different types and conceptions of presence along this line of reasoning, see Ijsselsteijn & Riva 2003.
13. Heidegger 1977; Gibson 1986. For a concise overview of the arguments in favor of such an alternate phenomenological/ecological view of presence, see Dourish 2004, pp. 99-154.
14. The reference here is to the edited volume Gumbrecht & Pfeiffer 1994, and to Gumbrecht 2004.
15. Doane 2009, p. 36. It is in light of cinema's increased dematerialisation that Doane points towards the optical toy as cinema's discursive or long lost 'other', marking a transition from the miniature, touchable, manipulatable, opaque, and material towards the larger-than-life, sight-based, unalterable, abstract, and immaterial projected image.
16. Doane 2009b, p. 152.

17. Gumbrecht 2004, pp. 17 (second emphasis added).
18. Elsewhere, I further develop this thickening of time thesis vis-à-vis a bodily-spatial deictics in relation to a variety of cinematic practices: the aforementioned films and the handheld aesthetics of European art house cinema, the presentation of the avant-garde films of Andy Warhol in a contemporary multi-media exhibition, and a large scale urban media installation set up in public space (see Hesselberth 2012).
19. In proposing the paradigm of deixis to rethink contemporary cinematic indexicality, as well as its renegotiations of time and being, I take my cue from Doane 2002 and 2007, as well as from Elsaesser 2004 and 2006.
20. Merleau-Ponty 1955, here quoted in Levinson 2004, p. 103.
21. Ibid.
22. Casetti 1999.
23. Buckland 2001, p. 215.
24. Metz 1991, pp. 747-772.
25. For my reflections on the dispute between Casetti and Metz, I mainly draw on Buckland 1995 and 2000, along with the writings of both Casetti and Metz.
26. Buckland 2000, p. 69 (emphasis added).
27. Metz 1986, pp. 89-98.
28. Ibid., p. 84.
29. Deleuze 1986, 1989; Sobchack 1992; Marks 2000; Bruno 2002.
30. Brennan 2004.
31. Bühler, quoted in Buckland, 2000, p. 70 (emphasis in text).
32. Silverman 1996, p. 24.
33. Bal 2001, pp. 129-164.
34. Ibid., p. 153.
35. Ibid., p. 164.
36. Luhmann 2002.
37. Bordwell 2002, p. 90; Luhmann 2002, p.81.
38. Cubitt 2005, p. 212.
39. Ibid., p. 211.
40. Grusin 2004; Bolter and Grusin 1999.
41. Dorato in *ibid.*
42. Ibid.
43. Deleuze, here in Pisters 2011, p. 106.
44. Elsaesser 2009.
45. Elsaesser 2009, p. 307.
46. Rokeby therefore speaks of 'the camera as projector' (Rokeby 2011).
47. Cubitt 2005, p. 363.
48. For a thought-provoking critique of the spatialisation of time thesis in relation to cinema, see, among others, McGowan 2011.
49. Hesselberth 2012.

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