Breaking through – Staying Inside: Imagining the End of the World as a Place

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Abstract
The *end of the world* is usually understood as the *end of time*, being the catastrophic event which ends the world in which we live in. But what if we imagine the end of the world as a *place*? What kind of place might that be – the end of space? Is there emptiness, or an outside? Apart from the inflationary images of catastrophe and mass destruction, I would like to take a look back at this old, seemingly naive idea about *the end*, which we initially find in children's and fantasy literature. An iconic depiction is the engraving from Camille Flammarion's book *L'atmosphère* (1888) called 'Wanderer at the Edge of the World', which shows a flat earth bounded by a solid sky with a man reaching to the other side. I will trace how this image of reaching the end and breaking through has been returning in contemporary mainstream cinema, especially in connection with the idea that the world we experience is a simulation (*The Truman Show, Dark City, The 13th Floor, The Matrix*). Furthermore, I will explore how this gesture of breakthrough is gendered and what other images of dealing with the edge we can find. At that point, time, history and politics reappear in this spatial concept of the *end of the world*.

Key Words: End of the world as a place, children's literature, Flammarion engraving, cinema, wall / screen, inner space / outer space, gendered space, *The Truman Show*, *Dark City*, *The 13th Floor*, *The Matrix*, *The Wall.*

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1. Through the Looking Glass

When spending time on images and stories dealing with the end of the world, it is impossible to miss the saturation of the never-ending final catastrophe. There is a certain fatigue which accompanies the inundation of meteor collisions and alien invasions, zombie epidemics and terminator machines, nuclear wars and super tsunamis. I experienced this in 2012, when I gave a course entitled 'The end of the world as we know it', which required watching a lot of disaster movies with the students. It inspired me to consider a different approach, which seems to be more simple-minded but, on the other hand, just as complex: imagining the end of the world as a place.

The idea for this literal spatial turn is a bit more obvious in German language: here you would call a far off place 'am Ende der Welt' ('at the end of the world'), while in English it is rather 'in the middle of nowhere' or, more colloquially, 'at the back of beyond'. However, there are various geographical locations around the

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globe known as 'The End of the World'. We can find them for example in China, Argentina, Portugal and Norway. There is an interesting one in Germany as well, in the Castle Garden of Schwetzingen. It is a perspective painting, a tunnel construction with a trompe l'oeil on the rear wall. Significantly it is not possible to reach this end: visitors are walking through a pergola but then there is a fence keeping them away, they can just look through a rockhole onto a far-off, paradisiac landscape.

Image 1: Perspective painting 'The End of the World' in Schwetzingen, Germany © 2013 by Nohrett Photography. Used with Permission

As for the fictional places, the end of the world can appear as an abyss,[1] a desert, a mountain or a solid wall. In a broader sense, the alleged *end* is often presented as a permeable gate into another world, which is a well-known traditional religious and spiritual concept. Yet, the idea of a place where the world ends is somewhat childlike – we find it in children's books, and it is known that children's books can be quite instructive.

The work of the German author Michael Ende (ironically, his surname actually means 'end') is a good example. In his early novel *Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver* (1960), the protagonists are travelling through a desert where there is an oasis called 'End of the World'. However, it is not their final destination but just a stopover on their journey. His later work *The Neverending Story* (1979) has been

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strongly influenced by surrealism and by anthroposophical ideas – and, as the title indicates, it deals with the philosophical problem of infinity. It has been criticized for its esoteric content and its escapism, while at the same time impressing a whole generation of children and young adults.[2]

The novel tells about a boy named Bastian, a shy avid reader who finds a book entitled 'The Neverending Story'. In this book, a land called Fantastica is slowly destroyed by the 'Nothing' (a somewhat classic apocalypse, albeit less spectacular.) A hero named Atreju is chosen to go on a great search and look for a helping human in the 'Outer World'. Bastian learns that the 'Nothing' is caused by humans losing their dreams and fantasies, and that he is the one to save this world with his imagination. So he starts to cross the border to Atreju and Fantastica, and at one point, a mirror is the place where the worlds get closest to each other:

> The Magic Mirror gate [...] is both open and closed. Sounds crazy, doesn't it? It might be better to say: neither closed nor open. Though that doesn't make it any less crazy. The point is that this gate seems to be a big mirror or something of the kind, though it's made neither of glass nor of metal. What it is made of, no one has been ever able to tell me. [3]

The idea of the mirror as a gate appears much earlier in the classic children's book by Lewis Carrol, *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), which is the sequel of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Carrol was a lecturer in mathematics at Oxford University, and there are many sophisticated references to logic and science included in his books. He wrote them for Alice Liddell, a daughter of the Dean of Christ Church College in Oxford. In the first book, Alice falls into a rabbit hole leading her to Wonderland, while in the second book it is a mirror in her house that becomes an entry to the other side:

> Now, if you'll only attend, Kitty, and not talk so much, I'll tell you all my ideas about Looking-glass House. First, there's the room you can see through the glass – that's just the same as our drawing room, only the things go the other way. I can see all of it when I get upon a chair all but the bit behind the fireplace. Oh! I do so wish I could see that bit! [...] Let's pretend there's a way of getting through into it, somehow, Kitty. Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through.[4]

Apart from child-oriented adaptations such as the Disney movie in 1951, Alice's trips have been broadly received in the psychedelic movement of the 1960s and 1970s. An obvious link is Alice's consumption of mushrooms and cookies which make her larger and smaller, sung about in the Jefferson Airplane hit *White*

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Rabbit (1967). The writer Aldous Huxley, who studied in Oxford just like Lewis Carrol,[5] introduced the term 'psychedelic' in 1953. In his essay *The Doors of Perception* (1954), he describes the effects of mescaline and raises philosophical questions about the function of the mind. The text opens with a quote by William Blake: 'If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.'[6] It was this quote that inspired the band name *The Doors*, founded by Jim Morrison and Ray Manzarek in 1965. Their first album was called *The End* (1967), and the title of their first single release was *Break on through to the Other Side*. This particular title seems an apt description for the image I will focus in the next section.

2. The Edge of the World

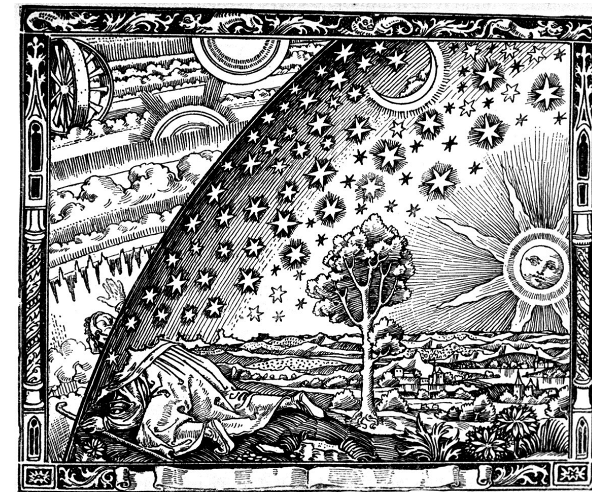

Image 2: Illustration in *L'atmosphére. Météorologie populaire* (1888) by Camille Flammarion. No copyright. Public Domain

The original caption of the image reads: 'A missionary from the middle-ages tells that he has found the place where the sky touches the earth.' In later reproductions it was sometimes called 'Wanderer at the Edge of the World'. What makes this work so very interesting is that it has been reprinted over and over – yet it is surprisingly unexplored. As popular as it is enigmatic, it has been used in many different contexts, but until today there is no certainty about its author and its time of origin. There are hypotheses that differ around 300 years from 16th century

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(Copernican revolution) to 19th century. Most people estimate it originates from the Middle Ages or the Renaissance period, but they are probably wrong.

The image first appeared in 1888, in the second edition of the book *L'atmosphére. Météorologie populaire* by the French astronomer Camille Flammarion.[7] Although there are no earlier recorded appearances, reprints continued to label it a medieval picture. This allegation was propagated through time without any solid evidence or source material from which such a conclusion could be drawn. Today, the hypothesis considered most likely is that the engraving dates from 1888, the time of the book production, and that probably Flammarion created it himself.[8]

So, what do we see on the picture, and what could have been the purpose of making it medieval? The environment it shows is a miniature landscape on a flat earth which is bounded by a solid sky. Thus the picture became part of the popular myth that during the Middle Ages people still considered the earth a flat disc.[9] This is absolute myth, as even the ancient Greeks thought about the spherical shape of the earth, as they watched ships disappearing at the horizon. Another common misconception is the view that only Copernicus was the one to reveal earth as a sphere. In fact, his actual proposal was merely the suggestion of the heliocentric model (sun as the centre of the universe) replacing the geocentric model (planets evolving around the earth). The other paradigm shift from the Middle Ages to Modernity was the one from a finite to an infinite conception of the universe, which was indeed a fundamental change in the notion of space.[10] But neither was there a medieval belief in a flat earth, nor a sudden enlightenment after centuries of scientific stagnation.

If the engraving was indeed made in 1888, it is interesting to consider how it might have been part of a propaganda campaign dissociating Enlightenment and modern science from the dark Middle Ages. However, this is mere speculation on my part, as I am neither an art historian, nor a mediaeval expert. The two main points I wish to draw attention to are: 1. the recurrent use of the image as a symbol for a paradigm shift or at least a radical change in viewing the world, an apocalypse in the literal sense of revelation. 2. the interesting circumstance that we do not know the origin of the work, since this knowledge is usually considered necessary to interpret an image adequately.

Whilst the picture does not have a clearly defined place in history, at the same time its frequent reproduction implies that it expresses an archetypical fantasy. Of course, this fascination results not only from the environment described (the flat earth universe), but also from the figure: a man reaching the edge of the world. He is not only reaching the sky, but breaking through it with his hand and his face, like from an old world to a new world. The image implies a new significance of individual insight and knowledge, and it is not coincidental that the figure is a *man:* progress, enlightenment and rationality, as well as the conquering of space,

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have been associated with male subjectivity, which claims to represent *mankind* universally.

We look at the man, under what appears to be a glass cover in a laboratory, and simultaneously we can see the *other side* with its mysterious wheelwork. Cybernetically speaking, we might call it a front-end/back-end system or, if you want, a pre-digital, mechanical version of *The Matrix* (1999). Going back to ancient philosophy, the wanderer can be understood as the freed prisoner in Platos Allegory of the Cave, in which the other prisoners stare fixedly at shadows on a wall, without being able to see what causes the shadows. This allegory has often been associated with the situation of the cinema spectator, and remarkably, we can find variations or almost re-enactments of this picture in several movies, especially in a number of them produced around the millennium.

3. The End of the Road

Film as a medium literally brings in another *point of view*, which differs from the configuration in the Flammarion image. It is the central perspective, which established from the Renaissance period on and is strongly connected with optical media like Camera Obscura and – later – cinema. This perspective emphasizes the subjective view of the individual and also pulls the beholder into spatial depth. There is a specific image which underlines central perspective and traces back to Romanticist paintings: a single man (again it is usually a man) seen from the back, walking on a centred path towards the horizon. As the horizon marks infinity as well as a potential *end*, this picture is used quite often in films dealing with the end of the world – at least if they are operating with classical narration and classical shot breakdown of the filmic space.

The millennium was one of the recurrent occasions cumulating apocalyptic fantasies and films, similar to the 2012, the year of the Mayan prophecy. Short before 2000, there was a new wave of Hollywood disaster movies (*Armageddon, Deep Impact, Independence Day* and many more), but also a number of mainstream films dealing with virtuality and the revelation of fake worlds. It began with *The Truman Show* and *Dark City* in 1998 and continued with *The Matrix* and *The 13th Floor* in 1999. In film critique and studies, they have been analyzed in varying combinations,[11] discussing concepts like simulation and immersion. What I am concerned with is how they refer to the Flammarion image.[12]

In *The Truman Show,* the protagonist of the film is the protagonist of a TV show, and the whole world around him, an artificial island called Seahaven, is part of a vast TV studio, designed to let him believe. Slavoj Žižek states that 'Sloterdijk's "sphere" is here literally realized, as the gigantic metal sphere that envelopes and isolates the entire city.'[13] Jan Kristian Wiemann describes the set with regard to the changing notion of space through the history of science:

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> For Aristotle, heaven is the peak of a finite hierarchy that remains almost untouched until the 17th century, when it is replaced by the notion of infinite space. Newton's absolute space is infinite and independent of the bodies it contains; it establishes an existence of its own (being) which, however, is still founded on the existence of God. [...] While with Aristotle and Kepler the cosmos is limited by the empyrean, this is no longer the case with Newton. The heaven of religion and the profane sky take up one and the same space. Truman's world, like the world in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, is a limited, Aristotelian world.[14]

Still, in Truman's world everything is physically *real*. Moreover, at the beginning of the film, staged as an advertisement for the TV show, the authenticity of Truman is ironically emphasized: 'There is nothing fake about Truman himself', says the presenter. The people around Truman are acting, but they are real flesh – an effort which already seems like an anachronism, considering the virtual versions of this story released at the same time.

Truman is born within this world, and he is the only one who does not know about the fake (an interesting reversal of *the one who knows* like Neo in *The Matrix*). The TV series director Christof decides what should happen next, and the actors influence and control his behaviour, especially dissuading him from leaving his hometown. Truman is characterized as an anxious, somewhat childlike man who feels safe in the matrix of Seahaven. Appropriately, and with a certain Kafkaesque flourish, he works in the insurance business.

However, after several irritating events he grows suspicious against his perfect environment, and dares to get away from his home - during the night and leaving a sleeping avatar (a puppet) as a camouflage against the surveillance cameras. He has to break through several street barriers around the town, then he ventures out on the sea with his boat. It is significant that the seafaring has such a prominent role, as it is historically symbol of discovery spirit and scientific curiosity. Ironically, Truman already knows that the earth is a sphere – during the film he is often presented looking at a globe –, but now he will find out that the world he lives in is flat and finite.

> When Truman says he wants to become an explorer like Magellan, his teacher shows him a map of the world and explains that there is 'nothing to explore'. Still, towards the end of the film, he embarks, like Christopher Columbus on the Santa Maria, to discover new territories. Pursuing his plan, he penetrates the borders of the world as he knows it, (Truman's World), and goes on to explore the broader environs. In regard to American history, that which characterises the new environment, (Christof's World), shapes Truman's new identity.[15]

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Finally his boat reaches the horizon, which is a solid wall, painted as sky. Truman touches it and pushes against it, which cites the gesture from the Flammarion image. He is not successful – but then he discovers a stair and climbs onto it, literally entering Jacob's ladder. There is a door in the wall, an entrance for the TV series cast and crew, which now becomes the door onto the outside world. Though the (god)father-director tries to put him off doing it, Truman finally leaves through this door. And consequently, the end of his (old) world is the end of the TV show, as well as the end of the film.

Wiemann, who connects *The Truman Show* to theoretical concepts as Focaults Panopticon as well as to projects like 'Biosphere 2', closes his text with the remark that 'in the case of The Truman Show, heavenly monitoring fails and allows man to break through to knowledge and insight.' So he sees the film as a 'reflection of the project of enlightenment'.[16] However, Slavoj Žižek raises the question:

> This final shot of *The Truman Show* may seem to enact the liberating experience of breaking out from the ideological suture of the enclosed universe into its outside, invisible from the ideological inside. However, what if it is precisely this "happy" denouement of the film (let us not forget: applauded by the millions around the world watching the last minutes of the show), with the hero breaking out and, as we are led to believe, soon to join his true love (so that we have again the formula of the production of the couple!), that is ideology at its purest? What if ideology resides in the very belief that, outside the closure of the finite universe, there is some "true reality" to be entered?[17]

4. The Truth about the Other Side

Dark City (1998) by Alex Proyas seems like a dark twin of *The Truman Show*. Different from Truman's world Seahaven, which is shiny and bright and without disturbance, *Dark City* is – unsurprisingly – dark. And here, it is not only one man unknowingly manipulated by an external force, but the whole population. Correspondingly, this external force is not centralized in one person (like the TV director in *The Truman Show*): it is an anonymous, terrifying crowd simply called 'The Strangers'. They put the inhabitants to sleep every midnight and experiment with them by exchanging their memories and, as they call it, 'tuning' the architecture of the city. This 'tuning' serves as a narrative vehicle to demonstrate the contemporary new skills of digital film technology: morphing the buildings, letting them grow, transform and disappear.

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But there is *the one* who awakes and breaks out, because his mind resists the manipulations of The Strangers. And again the vanishing point of escape fantasies is the sea. The hero has a place in his mind called 'Shell Beach', assuming it is a place of his childhood, but as we know it is only an implanted memory. He tries to get there as he flees with a boat on the canals of the city. But everything he finds is a wall: a billboard with just an advertising picture of Shell Beach, revealing that it is a fake and the place does not *really* exist.

He eventually breaks through the wall, which has no door but he furiously tears the bricks down, breaking a hole. Behind it, on the *other side*, he is confronted with the terrifying emptiness of outer space: the town is just a small (flat) island floating in space, without a connection to the earth or elsewhere. While he beholds that, The Strangers arrive and tell him 'Now you know the truth'. It is remarkable that scenes featuring such a breakthrough always contain a dialogue about 'truth' or 'reality' as the crucial point. At the end of *The Truman Show*, Truman's first question to the director is: 'Was nothing real?' The answer is 'YOU were real.'

In *Dark City* there is a new twist: the protagonist who has the same tuning abilities like The Strangers (similar to Neo in *The Matrix*), starts to create a new world. He lets the sun rise over Dark City, and he also uses his implanted memory of Shell Beach to make it a real place. And, of course, opening the gate of Dark City and stepping out onto the beach, he meets the woman of his dreams and unites with her. So it seems the problem here was not the *fake*, the artificiality of the old world, but just that it was not a comfortable one. It is replaced by another artificial world, which is *his* creation, similar to *The Neverending Story*, where the protagonist has to give birth to his own new 'Fantastica'. Yet, it is an obvious fantasy of omnipotence.

Compared to the previously mentioned films, which radicalize the construction by referring to virtual, computer-generated worlds, it is interesting how they negotiate the idea of reality. *The 13th Floor* (1999) opens with Descartes' sentence 'I think therefore I am', and the film may be read as a consequent illustration of that quote, but as an ironic invalidation as well. It is an adaptation of the novel *Simulacron-3* (1964) by Daniel Galouye, just like its early predecessor, Fassbinders visionary *World On Wire* (1973).[18] In this story, a company creates a virtual simulation of a city, for marketing research purposes. The virtual inhabitants have a consciousness of their own, but no idea that they are just part of a computer programme.

The 13th Floor makes the simulating computer a time machine and stages the simulated world in 1937 – 60 years back from the present time of the film, which is Los Angeles in the late 1990s. When the company owner Fuller is murdered, the scientist Hall is accused of murder, without being able to remember anything. While trying to find out was has happened, he falls in love with Fuller's daughter. Looking for a mysterious message Fuller has left for him, he enters the simulation. The transforming of his mind into a 1937 avatar is visualized by green rays

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wrapping his immobilized body, and a tunnel zoom into his eyes. The 1990s setting is overall dominated by green colour (conventionally associated to early computer screens), while the 1930s world is marked with sepia tone, imitating the familiar look of old photographs.

The message that Hall finds in Fuller's letter is that he should got to a place he 'would never go to', without stopping for anything, 'not even barricades'. When Hall, back in his 1990s reality, follows this demand, he finds out that he lives in a simulation himself. After breaking through a barrier with an 'end'-sign, he leaves his car, staring at the scenery in front of him. The reverse shot is a landscape that is disappearing at the horizon, reduced to a wireframe-model as used in 3D computer graphics.[19] There is no clearly located wall anymore (and no gate as well) – space is just dissolving.

Again, a protagonist has to learn that his original environment was a fake. In this case, it is an inversion of his own position, because he is watching another simulation – so he is both creator and creation. Hall learns that his 1990s world was programmed in another time, where he is the husband of Fullers *real* daughter. When his avatar gets killed in 1937, his mind is transmitted into the body of the other man, and he awakes in 2024, reuniting with his woman. Whether this setting is a simulation as well, remains unclear – a mise-en-abyme, which is potentially infinite (a 'Neverending Story') and gives the alleged breakthrough an ambivalent character. The lesson of *The 13th Floor* is one that, apart from its radical constructivism, obviously reflects the structure of computer games: there is no such thing as a false world on the one hand and a real one on the other hand – the *other side* is maybe only the next level.

5. The Pearly Gates to Reality

The problem for *The 13th Floor*, apart from its narrative weaknesses and its old-fashioned look, was the simultaneous release of *The Matrix* (1999), which became the far more successful movie. The main reasons were its stylish production design, its action sequences and its innovative special effects. But moreover, the film managed to develop a strong intellectual appeal by offering a mash-up of philosophical references. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, *The Matrix* functions like a Rorschach Test, 'setting in motion the universalized process of recognition'.[20] It was connected to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Adorno's 'Kulturindustrie', Lacan's Psychoanalysis and many more. There have been lectures, conferences and an incredible amount of publications evolving around the film.[21]

This is the reason why I will refrain from adding to much more to this discussion. I merely wish to draw attention to one aspect of *The Matrix*, which was another important reason for its appeal. It is a simple formula, a dialogue line that became the catchphrase of the film: 'Welcome to the desert of the real'. This is, in fact, a quote from Jean-Paul Baudrillard's treatise *Simulacra and Simulacron* (1981), which Slavoj Žižek later used as a title for his book about September 11. In

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the film, it is the first sentence spoken by the resistance leader Morpheus, after he has unplugged Neo from the matrix. He explains to him that the real world has been devastated in a war against intelligent machines, who keep humans trapped in a simulation, but a group of rebels fights to release them. While the matrix is a seemingly intact environment, the deserted reality makes it hard to survive and (least of all) to enjoy living in this world.

Thinking back to the children's books mentioned earlier, the longing for the real world is a bit surprising. *The Neverending Story* advocates and romanticizes the protagonist's journey to Fantastica, and there are countless other tales of crossing the border to a tempting fantastic world, like *Alice in Wonderland*. In *The Matrix* and the other films, it seems to be exactly the other way round: the phantasm is about breaking out of a fictional world and achieving reality. Claiming the real behind the illusion becomes an obsession.

At the same time of the film release in 1999, the physicist and science writer Margaret Wertheim published *The Pearly Gates to Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to Internet*.[22] She proposes that cyberspace is replacing a religious sphere, that 'the new digital domain is as an attempt to realize a technological substitute for the Christian space of Heaven.'[23] Her argument is that due to the mechanistic understanding of the world, which reduced space to its physical aspect, the spiritual part became an empty position. To put it another way, the modern universe leaves no room for spirituality because of its infinity.

> What is critical here is that with the physical universe being finite one could imagine (even if, strictly speaking, in a metaphorical sense) that there was still room available behind physical space. Precisely because the medieval cosmos was limited in its extent, this vision of reality could also accommodate *other kinds of space*. In particular it accommodated a vast region of "heavenly space" beyond the stars. [...] In the scientific world picture, however, physical space became to occupy the *whole of reality*. [...]
>
> No matter how often materialists insist that we humans are nothing but atoms and genes, there is clearly more to us than this. [...] This omission is also a crucial factor in the appeal of cyberspace, for it is this immaterial "I" that cyberspace, in some sense, provides a "home" for.[24]

However captivating this argument may be, the question remains: If the virtual sphere corresponds to a heavenly one, why is it then that our cinematic avatars seem to look for the gate *out* of cyberspace and not into it? The Pearly Gate, the door in the sky that Truman passes does not lead to Heaven, but to the profane real

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world. And while 'Dream!' would be the imperative of *The Neverending Story*, 'Wake up!' is the imperative of *The Matrix* – it is the first readable instruction to Neo on his computer screen, and the title of the end credits song by *Rage Against the Machine*. The real world may be deserted, dark and dirty, but it is the desired one.

One explanation is that the films reflect the fear of simulations, of a rendered world that is *too perfect*, which evokes Freud's notion of The Uncanny. In this logic, imperfectness is the distinctive mark of reality, dirty places and mortal bodies are signs of authenticity. A corresponding aspect lies in the medium itself, which shifted to digital film at that time: the longing for the *real* can be read as a struggle for existence of analogue cinema, defending its privileged indexical relation to the world. As Wheeler Winston Dixon formulates in his apocalyptical statement 'Twenty-five reasons why it's all over': due to the 'mechanical perfection' of computer-generated images, the assumed 'veracity of the moving image has been hopelessly compromised'.[25]

At the same time, it does not seem that the perception of cyberspace has developed towards a heavenly or divine sphere. The term 'cyberspace' itself has nearly come out of use, as well as 'virtual reality'. The dominant feeling towards the digital world is maybe not so much fear, but more disillusion. The internet has become a common part of everyday life, and it is widely commercialized and occupied by large companies, damaging the myths about the free space of the net.

Another possible view on the narrative level of the films is that the presumed *real world* and the trip into this world is a fantasy itself. The second instruction that Neo gets after 'Wake up!' is 'Follow the white rabbit!', an obvious reference to *Alice in Wonderland*. It is plausible that the whole story about the matrix might be a dream, or even a drug trip – after all, he takes a pill from Morpheus before the *real* is revealed. Likewise, perhaps *The Truman Show* is not about the involuntary hero of a TV show, but about a madman being so narcissistic (or paranoiac) that he starts imagining himself as a star (or a prisoner), with the whole world evolving around him. In the end, it might all be a matter of perception.

Arguing with Siegfried Kracauer, such a twist can be considered a reactionary turn. In *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947), Kracauer examines *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). In his interpretation, the original screenplay clearly outlines Caligari as the embodiment of an authoritarian force. The framing story, which was later added, denounces this claim as the paranoid idea of a lunatic. Thus 'a revolutionary film was turned into a conformist one.'[26] However, it was probably this twist (which is not so unambiguous) that made the film successful as one of the first mindgame movies.

Whether or not one agrees with the case of Caligari, Kracauer is unarguably one of the major theorists who have shaped our way to look at films and draw conclusions from them on the state of a society (especially from the ones that are commercially successful with a mass audience). *From Caligari to Hitler,* often

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criticized for its speculative nature, is about reading films from a political and sociological point of view. Kracauer's later publication, *Theory of Film* outlines a more complex relation between film and reality, which is not just meant as a naive mirror of reality, but grounded on perceiving the material side of things, without knowing about their ideology before. At this point, I will briefly bring up some aspects of how film theory has associated the fictional and the real world, relating to the motif of the gate.

6. A Wall Is a Screen

If a book can be described as a gate into another world – as *The Neverending Story* does – it is no surprise that film has likewise been imagined as such a gate, much earlier than the virtual worlds dealt with in *The Pearly Gates to Cyberspace*. The entrance to another dimension is frequently a central motif, as seen in the films described here or, for example, in Stanley Kubricks *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) – especially in the famous Stargate sequence.

This is much more than a motif within a film, it is about the status of cinema itself. Cinema reflects its role as a dream machine and as a window to the real world – aspects which have been differently emphasized (and connected) in film theory. The contradictions between them are not as clear as the dialectic distinction between realism and formalism claims. What meets in the cinema is not primarily reality and fiction, but the world of the film and the world of the spectator. In the compendium *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (2010), Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener choose this very relationship as a basis for the structure of their book, instead of merely telling a chronological history of film theory. The first three chapters are entitled 'Cinema as Window and Frame', 'Cinema as Door' and 'Cinema as Mirror and Face', each keyword distinguishing the theoretical approaches. While characterizing cinema as a *frame* corresponds with a formalist, two-dimensional view, the concept of the *window* strengthens the connection of the spectator and the outside world with the film – however, both still express distance. Describing film as a *gate* reinforces the pull into the pictures, into the imaginary depth of space:

> If one conceptualizes the cinema experience as the entrance into another world, then the distance that was the basis of the idea of the cinema as window and frame diminishes. The spectator finds himself between two poles, projection and identification [...] a liminal situation, a not-quite-here but also not-quite-there-configuration, an in-betweenness of sorts in which film functions as a threshold and a space of passage, or – to use an expression from anthropology and Cultural Studies– as a "liminal space".[27]

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This passage to another world (or between two worlds) in the cinema is not a physical movement, but taking place while the spectator is immobilized in a seat. Hitchcocks *Rear Window* (1954), featuring a protagonist in a wheelchair watching his neighbours from his window, has often been described as a metaphor for the cinema situation itself. The motif of somebody immobilized in a seat while connecting to another world is repeated and radicalized in films like *The Matrix*. Since this world is directly implanted into the brain of the viewer, something is missing here: the screen.[28]

The screen, 'the real interface in the auditorium, the material border between spectator and film',[29] is at the same time connecting and dividing. In the first instance, it is not a door or a gate, but a two-dimensional wall that changes only through projection. The process of projection (understood in a technical sense, but also as the activity of the spectator) can seemingly make it transparent or even permeable. These features resemble the concept of the *magic mirror* in the children's tales. They lead to another world, but also back to the spectator. Going through a mirror means literally going into oneself – to the 'innermost nature',[30] as it is described in *The Neverending Story*. Elsaesser/Hagener point to another aspect of the screen, which is an etymological one:

> The word "screen" developed in the early fourteenth century from the old Germanic term "scirm" which opens up a rich semantic field. [...] the screen can mean the exact opposite of displaying something, making something visible or bringing something closer, but refers instead to safe distance.[31]

These two aspects of being at a safe distance from the story, but at the same time, being harshly reverberated to one's own inner space, are important in the following story.

7. Accepting the Wall

The novel *The Wall* (1963) by Marleen Haushofer is one of the very rare narrations about a last woman standing, a female hero in a post-apocalyptic scenario. She is the only human being in an isolated place, accompanied just by animals, thus her story is a *Robinsonad*e. However male this topos of surviving in the wilderness may be, the book was received as specifically female – on the front cover of the English edition, Doris Lessing is cited that 'only a woman could have written this book […][32] Indeed, the novel enjoyed its largest success only after the author's death in 1970. In German speaking countries, it became a bestseller during the 1980s, when the feminist movement as well as the ecological and pacifist movement discovered its radical, alternative concept. It was translated into English in 1990.

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The Wall tells the story of a woman on vacation in a lodge in the Alps. One day, when her hosts do not return, she looks for them only to find that the surrounding area is blocked by an invisible wall. Closed off from the rest of the world, it appears that all humans outside the wall are dead, making her the only survivor. Without knowing what has happened, she deals with the situation and organizes her life in the nature of the mountains, with a dog, a cat and a cow. To overcome her loneliness, she starts to write a diary, so the novel is her inner monologue.

The lack of interaction and dialogue is one of the reasons why the book was considered to be hardly adaptable for the screen. It was only in 2012, that the Austrian director Julian Pölsler completed his (not very venturous) version. A major problem for the film was, of course, to visualize the invisible wall, which has a more or less metaphorical quality in the book. It is interesting that Haushofer's wall is described as transparent but impenetrable, again resembling the cinema screen. It provides a gaze to the other side, a world which is familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, however it is not a gate. The protagonist can look through the wall, but she is unable to *go* through – or she does not *want* to go through.

> I beat on the wall with my fist. It hurt a little, but nothing happened. And suddenly I no longer felt any desire to break down the wall separating me from the incomprehensible [...][33]

Another view is that she is already on the *other side* and does not want to return to the old world. However, due to this apparently resigning gesture of staying inside, the wall has often been interpreted as a metaphor for a depression. At the same time, the protagonist's reaction of secluding herself, staying inside the limits and coping with them, corresponds with a traditional gendering of space, in which women are associated to the inner / private sphere and men to the public sphere. The wall has an ambivalent role, it isolates and excludes the woman, but on the other hand it provides a shelter, for developing her own world with her own rules. However, this unwillingness to resist has been received ambivalently. Elfriede Jelinek, who was strongly impressed by Haushofer, dedicated the last one of her five 'Princess Dramas' to her and called it *The Wall*. One line says:

> Listen, you know there was another woman before us who conjured up a little wall of her own – one said to have been completely invisible! And that is where you'd have finally found your reason for not taking leave. You'd have been able to stay there because you simply couldn't pull yourself away. There was no need to voyage out in life because there was no there there![34]

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The screen adaptation of *The Wall* is not the only recent film that connects apocalyptic events to the depression of a female protagonist. Another one is *Melancholia* (2012) by Lars von Trier, which picks up this neuralgic point of resignation. Similar to the woman in *The Wall*, the woman in *Melancholia* is in a state of mind which separates her from the world, yet she is not too sad about the loss of this world. Differently from Haushofer's surviving heroine, she does not create a *world of her own*: the apocalypse is literally the end of the earth, extinguishing her in the same way as everybody else. Somehow, she embraces that end, which can be construed as a manifestation of her mind. Once again, apocalyptic imaginary in film seems to shift from outer space to inner space – or, as in *Melancholia*, incorporate the first to the latter one. With this shift to inner spaces, it is all the more indicated to consider the film 'resolutely political',[35] as Milo Sweedler does:

> If *Melancholia* offers no viable alternative to the decadent world it portrays on the screen, if the only solution it proposes to the dead-end of post-history is a makeshift deus ex machina that engulfs the world, this lack of political imagination may itself be a sign of the times.[36]

8. Leaving the Train

To conclude, I would like to propose this more political view on the *end of the world* and on the gendered gestures of *breaking through* vs. *staying inside*. One final film to consider is the recent South Korean blockbuster *Snowpiercer* (2013) which includes a bold, but useful metaphor. This post-apocalyptic movie is staged within a mobile environment. It is a train running round the globe, and the last survivors on earth are passengers on board. After the earth has frozen in a new ice age, the train has to be kept in perpetual motion, whilst its inhabitants are kept in a relentless class system.

The poor people from the rear section start to revolt, moving forward through the different train compartments and breaking the barriers between them, like completing different levels of a computer game. They are accompanied by the door constructor and his daughter. Finally the leader of the revolt arrives at the locomotive head, where he meets the inventor of the engine, the ruler of the train. He learns that the revolution was scheduled for purposes of population control, and that he is meant to replace the aged ruler, taking responsibility for the whole train in which everybody has an allocated place.

It is a very graphic illustration about failing revolutions and the passing on of patriarchal power, which always installs the same structure. The protagonists only try to change places within the train, but they keep it running and never doubt the premise that the train may not be left. The train is a system which claims to be inescapable and without alternative, like the 'dead-end of post-history', as Milo

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Sweedler puts it.[37] Since the train represents both ongoing progress and a vicious circle at the same time, it recalls Walter Benjamin's famous definition of catastrophe:

> Der Begriff des Fortschritts ist in der Idee der Katastrophe zu fundieren. Dass es "so weiter" geht, ist die Katastrophe. Sie ist nicht das jeweils Bevorstehende, sondern das jeweils Gegebene. [The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things go on as they are is the catastrophe. It is not what is imminent but what has already been fulfilled.][38]

Nonetheless, in *Snowpiercer* the door constructor and his daughter actually do blow up the wall to the outside, so in the end the train derails and explodes. It is only the woman who survives and steps into the thawing world, experiencing that life without the train is possible. A child is with her, but not the male hero to form a new family – a slight but noteworthy deviation from the classic final shot of apocalypse movies. It may be audacious construing this image as the end of patriarchal authority, but anyhow it is an interesting female variation of the *breakthrough*: leaving the train and interrupting the circle of power, without heroic gesture.

To connect the more metaphysical and the more secularistic, political aspects evoked by the images discussed here: the end of the world can be understood as the end of something that was well-known-territory, as the end of a particular view of the world – so not '*the end of the world'* as we know it, but the end of the *'world as we know it'* (though this term has been overused, especially in connection with September 11). The imagination of apocalypse is not so much about the fear of actual destruction, but the fear of changing views. The idea of just going to another *place* can help to overcome this fear. However, it is hard to escape the 'ideology at its purest'[39] (according to Žižek) that lies in this gesture itself. It might be more important to create the best possible conditions in *this* world, no matter on which side of the wall or which level.

Notes

[1] As for example in the hilarious *Erik the Viking*, Terry Jones, dir., Surrey, UK: Lee International Studios, 1989, where a ship is just falling off the (flat) earth.
[2] The German band Toccotronic released a song in 1995 called 'Michael Ende Du hast mein Leben zerstört' [Michael Ende you destroyed my life]! The producer Bernd Eichinger started his international career with an adaptation of the book, one of the most expensive films in German history.

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[3] Michael Ende, *The Neverending Story*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 101.
[4] Lewis Carrol, *Through the Looking Glass* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 9.
[5] Interestingly, Aldous Huxley wrote a script draft based on *Alice in Wonderland* for Disney in 1951, but it was rejected. See David King Dunaway, *Huxley In Hollywood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).
[6] Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954), viewed 1 March 2013, http://www.psychedelic-library.org/doors.htm. Huxley took the quote from William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2001).
[7] Camille Flammarion, *L'atmosphére. Météorologie populaire* (Paris: Hachette & Cie, 1888), 183.
[8] After C.G. Jung and others, it was especially Bruno Weber arguing for that hypothesis. Bruno Weber, 'Ubi caelum terrae se coniungit. Ein altertümlicher Aufriß des Weltgebäudes', *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* (Mainz: Internationale Gutenberg-Gesellschaft e.V., 1973), 381–408, viewed 1 March 2013, http://oncle.dom.pagesperso-orange.fr/astronomie/erreurs/flammarion/requisitoire.htm. Other scholars like Hans Gerhard Senger claim again that the original image could date from the middle ages, or that we should at least 'diesem "Weltbild" seine geheimnisvolle Ambiguität […] belassen' [leave its mysterious ambiguity to this "image of the world"']. Hans-Gerhard Senger, '"Wanderer am Weltenrand" - ein Raumforscher um 1530?', *Raum und Raumvorstellungen im Mittelalter*, ed. Jan A. Aertsen (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), 350.
[9] Aristotle wrote about it 350 B.C. in his cosmological work *On the Heavens.* See also Jeffrey B. Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth. Columbus and Modern Historians* (New York: Praege, 1991).
[10] Margaret Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace. A History of Space from Dante to Internet* (New York: Virago Press, 1999), 37.
[11] For example Mike King 'Virtual Reality and Saccharine Fantasies', *The American Cinema of Excess: Extremes of the National Mind on Film* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland 2009), 198-213. The films were part of establishing a genre later named 'mindgame films' (Thomas Elsaesser) or, more common in internet forums 'mindfuck movies'.
[12] Apart from the fictional films I am dealing with in the following paragraphs, I want to mention two recent documentary films, which look at the *end of the world* in a spatial dimension. In *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007) Werner Herzog travels to Antarctica, exploring the archaic ice landscape and the borderline experiences made there. One scene features scientists at a diving station while they are watching an apocalypse movie, reporting that they do not believe in the survival of humankind. In *The End of Time* (2012), Peter Mettler is visiting the

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CERN near Geneva in Switzerland, a science center which has an extraterritorial status due to its important international role. It hosts the most high-powered particle accelerator in the world, the Large Hadron Collider, which is supposed to explore the state of matter shortly after the big bang, in an experimental setup named ALICE. When the collider was put into operation in 2008, there were actually speculations that it would cause a black hole and destroy the whole earth. Mettler interviews one of the physicists about the experiments and asks him about his understanding of time. The scientist replies: 'Time is a part of space.'

[13] Slavoj Žižek, 'The Matrix: or, the Two Sides of Perversion', *The Matrix and Philosophy. Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, ed. William Irwin (Chicago: Open Cour, 2005), 242. Žižek refers to the Flammarion image as well, without explicitly naming it or pointing to the problem that it is likely not medieval: 'What lurks in the background is, of course, the pre-modern notion of "arriving at the end of the universe": in the well-known engravings, the surprised wanderers approach the screen/curtain of heaven, a flat surfaced with painted stars on it, pierce it and reach beyond — it is exactly this that happens at the end of The Truman Show.' With regard to films like that he even asks if works like that 'signal that the time of the Cartesian infinite perspective is running out, and that we are returning to a kind of renewed medieval pre-perspective universe?'

[14] Jan-Kristian Wiemann, 'Frontiers of the World: A Few Reflections on *The Truman Show*', *Lasso* 1.1 (2004): 130.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 132.

[17] Žižek, 'The Matrix,' 242.

[18] This film is very different in its character and remarkably does without any special effects. The artificial acting style is characteristic for Fassbinder, at the same time it fits consequently with the subject of an artificial world. A staff link between the two adaptations is Michael Ballhaus, Fassbinders cinematographer, who acquired the film rights and is executive producer of *The 13th Floor*.

[19] This image has been the poster visual of the film as well, adding the small figure of Hall in the foreground. Again we have the motif of the rear-view figure, the single man walking towards the horizon. The grid lines from the computer graphic extremely highlight the central perspective.

[20] Žižek, 'The Matrix,' 240.

[21] Just to name a few: Matthew Kapell, *Jacking in to the Matrix Franchise. Cultural Reception and Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2004); Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz and Stefan Herbrechter, *The Matrix in Theory* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2006); Catherine Constable, *Adapting Philosophy. Jean Baudrillard and The Matrix Trilogy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

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[22] Margaret Wertheim wrote about the cultural history of physics and space in other books like *Pythagoras' Trousers: God, Physics, and the Gender Wars* (1995) and *A Field Guide to Hyperbolic Space* (2007). Together with her twin sister Christine she founded the Institute for Figuring, promoting the public understanding of science and initiating art projects like the 'Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reef'.

[23] Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, 18.

[24] Ibid., 35-40.

[25] Wheeler Winston Dixon, '25 Reasons why It's all Over', *The End of Cinema as We Know It. American Film in the Nineties*, ed. John Lewis (New York: New York Univ. Pr. 2001), 358-359.

[26] Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1947), 66-67. 'Janovitz and Mayer knew why they raged against the framing story: it perverted, if not reversed, their intrinsic intentions. While the original story exposed the madness inherent in authority, Wiene's Caligari glorified authority and convicted its antagonists of madness.'

[27] Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory. An Introduction through the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 37-38.

[28] Consequently, Robert Pepperell entitles an essay with the question 'Where's the Screen?' and seeks the answer in philosophy and neuropsychology, which is a recent tendency in film theory. Robert Pepperell, 'Where's the Screen? The Paradoxical Relationship between Mind and World', *Screen Consciousness. Cinema, Mind and World,* ed. Robert Pepperell and Michael Punt (New York: Rodopi, 2006), 181-197. Elsaesser and Hagener continue their *Film Theory* with the chapters 'Cinema as eye' and 'Cinema as skin and touch' to finally conclude with 'Cinema as brain'. In this dramaturgy, the cinema gets closer and closer to the body of the spectator, until it finally gets *into* it – but at the same time, the body seems to vanish, to merge with the mind. Here the brain itself becomes the screen.

[29] Elsaesser and Hagener, *Film Theory*, 38.

[30] Ende, *The Neverending Story*, 101.

[31] Elsaesser and Hagener, *Film Theory*, 38.

[32] Marleen Haushofer, *The Wall*, trans. Shaun Whiteside. 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: Cleis Press), 2013.

[33] Ibid., 10.

[34] Elfriede Jelinek, *Princess Dramas. Death and the Maiden*, trans. Lilian Friedberg, 2005, viewed 1 March 2013.
http://a-e-m-gmbh.com/wessely/fwand_lf.htm.

[35] Milo Sweedler, 'The End of the World of the End: Lars von Trier's Melancholia and Political Theory', *A Critical Approach to the Apocalypse*, ed. Alexandra Simon-López and Heidi Yeandle (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013), 176.

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[36] Ibid., 181.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Walter Benjamin, 'Zentralpark', *Schriften*, Vol. 1 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1955), 487.
[39] Žižek, 'The Matrix', 242.

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