English and Film Studies Faculty Publications   English and Film Studies

9-2013

Camera Arriving at the Station: Cinematic Memory as Cultural Memory

Russell J A Kilbourn
Wilfrid Laurier, rkilbourn@wlu.ca

Recommended Citation
Kilbourn RJA. Camera Arriving at the Station: Cinematic Memory as Cultural Memory. Societies. 2013; 3(3):316-331. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc3030316

Article

Camera Arriving at the Station: Cinematic Memory as Cultural Memory

Russell J. A. Kilbourn

Department of English and Film Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3C5, Canada; E-Mail: rkilbourn@wlu.ca; Tel.: +1-519-810-0710

Abstract: This paper explores the modern metropolis as an ironically concrete metaphor for the collective memory and the mourning of cinema's passing, as it—the "city"—is digitally constructed in two recent, auteur-directed, special effects-driven blockbuster films, *Inception* and *Hugo*. The modern city, and mass media, such as the cinema, as well as modes of mass transport, especially the train, all originate in the 19th century, but come into their own in the early 20th century in their address to a subject as the mobilised citizen-consumer who, as Anne Friedberg makes clear, is also always a viewer. Additionally, as Barbara Mennel has recently shown, the advent in Europe of trains and time zones, in their transformation of modern time and space, paved the way for cinema's comparably cataclysmic impact upon modern subjectivity in its iconic reproduction of movement within illusory 3D space. Both films, thus, in their different ways employ cinematic remediation as a form of cultural memory whose nostalgia for cinema's past is rendered with the latest digital effects, hidden in plain sight in the form of subjective memories (as flashback) and dreams. While a version of this reading has been advanced before (at least for *Hugo*), this paper goes further by connecting each film's status as remediated dream-memory to its respective dependence upon the city as a post-cinematic three-dimensional framework within which locative and locomotive desires alike determine a subject whose psyche is indistinguishable from the cityscape that surrounds him.

Keywords: city film; subjectivity; cultural memory; remediation; digital cinema

"The city which cannot be expunged from the mind is like an armature, a honey-comb in whose cells each of us can place the things he wants to remember…"

—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* [1]

1. Introduction: The Cinematic City, Identity and Cultural Memory

In this paper, I explore the modern metropolis as an ironically concrete metaphor for the collective memory and the mourning of cinema's passing, as it—the 'city'—is digitally constructed in two recent, auteur-directed, special effects-driven blockbuster films, *Inception* [2] and *Hugo* [3]. The modern city, alongside mass media, such as the cinema, and modes of mass transport, especially the train, originate in the nineteenth century, but come into their own in the early twentieth century in their address to a subject as a mobilised citizen-consumer who, as Anne Friedberg makes clear, is also always a *viewer*. Focusing on the "mobilised virtual gaze" conditioned by cinema under late capitalism, Friedberg describes an "increasingly" late modern subjectivity, produced at the price of a "diminished capacity to retain the past" [4]. Arguably, though, this subject emerges even earlier. Standardised time was first proposed in 1884 by Sir Sanford Fleming, sealing the effects of increased urbanisation and the industrialisation of labour—pre-conditions of the emergence of the alienated subject of modern leisure. The advent in Europe and North America of trains and universal time zones transformed modern time and space, paving the way for cinema's comparably cataclysmic impact upon modern subjectivity in its iconic reproduction of movement within illusory three-dimensional space, e.g., [5].[1]

Both *Inception* and *Hugo* in their different ways employ cinematic remediation as a form of cultural memory whose nostalgia for cinema's past is rendered with the latest digital effects, hidden in plain sight in the form of subjective memories (as flashback) and as dreams or what "one normally thinks of as the most private and mental of events" [7] These films exemplify the tendency in contemporary cinema to externalise a character's interior topography through a naively literal allegorization of her/his environment. (Where *Hugo* contains a key flashback and dream scenes, *Inception* can be read as either one long dream scene or one long flashback [6], or both at once.) Additionally, while *Hugo*'s nostalgia for cinema's past has been much remarked upon, as has *Inception*'s allegorization of the filmmaking process [8–10], I go further here by connecting each film's status as remediated dream-memory to its respective dependence upon the *city* (a specific city, but also "the city" in general) as a post-cinematic three-dimensional framework within which locative and locomotive desires alike determine a subject whose psyche is indistinguishable from the cityscape that surrounds him.

2. Locative and Locomotive Subjects

I construe the *locative* axis of modern cinematic subjectivity in terms of real or metaphorical location or *locus*.[2] As I argue elsewhere, the relations between memory and built space so relevant for current film scholarship are connectible to classical theories of artificial memory [11]. Cities are comprised, in large part, of built space—both public and private—and buildings, architectural structures are among the oldest metaphors for memory in occidental culture; indeed, "the building is one of the classical models for systems of memory" [12]; the relation was not always metaphorical.

---

[1]   Anders Bergstrom observes that, despite their many differences as films, in both *Inception* and Wong Kar-wai's *2046*, "Trains become the metaphor for the transversal of the temporal rather than the spatial, or for the spatialization of time" [6].

[2]   As opposed to even *less* agential technologies; *i.e.*, whereas you need to know how to read a map or use a compass in order to locate yourself, devices with GPS do the work for you, telling you where you are.

The classical art of memory is a mnemonic system predicated on highly developed visual-spatial faculties in a culture (like that which dominates today) that privileged *sight* over the other senses; see [12,13].

Ironically, in their respective mises-en-scène, both *Hugo* and *Inception* fetishize the book and the culture based thereon, especially the physical architectural spaces—bookstores, libraries, university lecture halls—symptomatic of this (fast-disappearing) world. The contrast in either case, of course, is between a culture of the printed word and that of the moving image, where the latter necessitates its own unique urban spaces, both physical and virtual. Barbara Mennel identifies the affinity between the modern city and cinema: "Like cities, films engage in processes of production and reproduction of social relations in spatial configurations" [5]. Modern and postmodern notions of personal and social identity are elaborated within the largely visually determined subjective and objective spaces of what Fredric Jameson calls the postmodern cultural dominant [14]. These spaces become the contemporary *hypomnesic*—artificial or prosthetic—equivalent of classical mnemonic *loci* (locations or spaces), the *milieux de memoire* (environments of memory) or cinematic cityscapes comprised of specific *topoi*, the conventional onscreen "topics" or places, the urban settings—streets, buildings, rooms, exteriors, interiors—often corresponding to conventional shots or sequences, specific formal-stylistic devices and special effects. These are the specific *lieux de memoire* (to appropriate Pierre Nora's phrase), the *context* for the figural *content* of memory, whether individual or collective. The city in cinema is the imaginary urban three-dimensional space constructed onscreen that provides a shared mental streetscape; the illusory architectural framework in which meanings are stored and retrieved, social practices legitimised and naturalised, identities produced and consumed, desire satisfied and renewed—all at once are removed. The cinematic city is a simulacral locus of a public, "social" memory and, therefore, of specific, historically sedimented, collective identities.[3] The cinematic city is a repository of memory: subjective interiority objectified, exteriorised, projected onto the cityscape onscreen, a kind of postmodern pathetic fallacy and a significant translation into visual-spatial terms of the (mostly vulgar) Freudianisms that still determine the popular, romanticised ideals of individual identity populating cinema screens in Hollywood and beyond.

To return, then, to the intersection of the locative and the *locomotive* axes of modern cinematic subjectivity, it may be said that the history of film begins in Paris, with the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès. In partial acknowledgment of this fact, *Hugo* takes place in a Paris of the imagination, but one that is no less meaningful as a result. It is also a specific *image* of 1930s Paris, evoked by Scorsese with the latest digital post-production effects to resemble the tonalities of early twentieth-century picture postcards, but also, the peculiar primary colours of Méliès' films, which were originally hand-tinted [16]. Overall, *Hugo* emulates the visual texture of the Lumière's "Autochrome" process, a turn-of-the-century technique for producing colour photographs in which cyan and light orange dominate [16].

While Paris may be the most famous of cinematic cities, the history of the *city film* arguably begins in Berlin.[4] Recall the opening scene of Act I of *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* [24]: a passenger

---

3   McNeill notes: "Cities constitute virtual mnemonic zones where a continual activity produces a collective mental life
      with its own histories" [15].
4   Regarding the city film in general, see, e.g., [17–23].

train traverses the German countryside, approaching the Berlin terminus. A rapid montage alternates between point-of-view shots of the speeding tracks and quasi-abstract close-ups of train wheels, telegraph wires and passing houses. While both train and montage slow, however, as the first approaches its destination, there is not a human being in sight; no subject, but the train itself, herald of a dynamic mechanised modernity of anonymous mass transportation. Ruttmann's film emblematises and enacts what Mennel calls the founding myth of cinema, adapting Yuri Tsivian's notion of the "train effect": naming "the reaction of panic to an approaching train on the early screen" [5]. Tsivian refers here to the likely apocryphal story of the Lumière's demonstration of the *cinematographe* on December 28, 1895, in the basement of Paris's Grand Café [5], where they screened the *actualité* of a train arriving at La Ciotat station. The audience purportedly got up and ran at the sight of the train apparently pulling into the café space. As Mennel puts it, "By conjoining icons of modernity— urbanity, speed, cinema, and the city—in one seminal moment, the often-cited myth reproduces the story that cinema tells of itself: *when the lights go off, an illusion appears and seems so real that we forget we are watching moving pictures*" [5]. This myth of the train effect is the story of the beginning of the history of film. In the same moment, according to Leo Charney, "Film became the defining art form of the temporal experience of modernity" [25]:

> The moving train [in the Lumière film] embodied the changing perception of time and space in modernity—space as urban *vs.* rural and time as modern *vs.* pre-modern. Films manipulate space and time, whereas trains collapse space and require the concept of universal time. […] "[T]rains, timekeeping and moving pictures all came together at the turn of the century to create a new image of time" [25].

In the later nineteenth century, "[t]ime and space were becoming increasingly abstract, a feature they shared with other aspects of modernity…and film provided a venue for working through these concepts and their far-reaching consequences. Therefore, "it is not surprising that moving trains are important in films that are emblematic of modernity" [5], such as Ruttmann's cinematic essay-poem to Berlin.[5]

At the same time, "cinema is a peculiarly *spatial* form of culture. […] Like cities, films engage in processes of production and reproduction of social relations in spatial configurations" [5]. Cinema has played an integral role in what Henri Lefebvre calls "the production of space" in the twentieth century—spaces within which *identities* are, in turn, produced. "Modernity" in this twentieth-century context is defined by its "ocularcentric" nature, in which vision is the "master sense" [27]. Modernity is therefore exemplified by cinema, just as it is by the city. Ever since *Man with a Movie Camera* [28], another foundational city film (Kiev, Moscow, Odessa), in which Dziga Vertov puts his cameraman right into the frame, as part of the mise-en-scène, the cinematic city is the modern locus of visuality and mobility: bodies seen and subjects looking. What gets obscured in this centrifugally dynamic scenario, however, is the question of memory. This is hardly coincidental, given the de-emphasis on the reflective recollection characteristic of a dominant strain of twentieth-century modernism. Vertov,

---

[5] Every once in a while, a new film comes along to remind us of this history and its connections to other histories; e.g., Lars von Trier's *Europa* [26] in which the train journey across Germany in 1945 is analogized with the journey into the unconscious mind effected through hypnotism. In either case, the journey terminates in death.

whose pseudonym is often translated as "spinning top", exemplifies this modern attitude of an ever-present present constantly on the move, even heretofore static space dynamised, exploded (as Walter Benjamin puts it) by the cinematic close-up and montage.

3. The Optical Unconscious, Shared Dreaming and Memory

Of those critics associated with the Frankfurt School, Benjamin exemplifies the productive extension of psychoanalytic theorems to the study of modern urban spaces (in his case, both Paris and Berlin) inflected by new technologies, especially cinema. Benjamin's reflections on modernity also complicate any reductive understanding of modernism as an anti-reflective "shock of the new". In his 1935 essay on the "Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility", Benjamin considers the possibility of the "redemption" of the filmic image via what he calls the "optical unconscious" [29]; *i.e.*, cinema's *potential* to undo the amnesia constitutive of commodification by changing not just what we *do* with images, but *how* we see them in the first place:

> Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split-second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. [29].

How far have we traveled, cinematically speaking, since Benjamin wrote these words? The long expository first act of *Inception* provides an interesting contemporary example. In this scene, Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) mentors the subtly named Ariadne (Ellen Page) on the niceties of what the film rather nostalgically calls "shared dreaming". A sound bridge over a straight cut transitions to the two having coffee in a Paris café. The scene progresses at first in a conventional shot-reverse shot sequence. Cobb asks Ariadne: "You never really remember the beginning of a dream, do you? You always end up right in the middle of what's going on". Ariadne reluctantly agrees; he persists: "Think about it, Ariadne: how did you get here?" Shift to close-up as Ariadne ponders Cobb's point, then another cut to the master shot of the café, extra-diegetic music swelling ominously. Cut back to the close-up of Ariadne as Cobb informs her that they are actually asleep in the workshop and that she is sharing a dream with him. Suddenly, a series of explosions burst around them, as the digitally composited Paris streetscape is inexplicably destroyed. Cobb's question hangs in the air: how *did* they get to this cafe? Here, the mechanics of dreaming (as explained by Cobb) are conflated with the most basic narrative cinematic techniques: they got there—as in all the film's dream sequences—by means of a straight cut, and they leave the same way, as the neighborhood explodes around them in radically slow-motion (achieved with high-speed HD cameras, capable of shooting up to 1,000 fps [30]). In one important sense, we have come very far since Benjamin wrote his famous essay, a distance measured by the word "digital". However, what has the filmic image brought to light, to consciousness, in terms of the different subjects it constructs, both on and in front of the screen?
Benjamin continues:

> Clearly, it is another nature [that] speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. "Other" above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is

involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all what happens during the split second when a person actually takes a step. This is where the [film] camera comes into play, with all its resources… It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. [29].

It was only with the invention of photography that the mechanics of walking became visible to the human eye, for example, in the famous mid-nineteenth-century motion studies of Eadward Muybridge, echoed in 1912 by Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase"—the former anticipating cinema, the latter displaying its impact on ways of seeing and representing. After all, it was only with Benjamin's—and before him, Baudelaire's—*flâneur* that the *aesthetics* of walking became visible. The so-called optical unconscious is not merely a matter of making visible what was heretofore invisible, however. As Adorno and Horkheimer remind us, in a sentence that is significant, even more powerfully today than when *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* first appeared in 1944: "all reification is a forgetting" [31]. Alison Landsberg argues that, for Benjamin, "the camera has the capacity to make visible that which, through repression and reification, remained inaccessible to the naked eye" [32]. In other words, the film camera works to *restore* memory; but is this really a matter of the undoing of some kind of *optical* repression? Beyond the fact that it literally has no negative, digital cinema could be said to represent the apotheosis of Benjamin's optical unconscious, insofar as digital seems to represent the possibility of showing and, therefore, seeing anything that can be imagined. As Florian Brody puts it: "Why take the trouble to dream when you can so easily consume that which has already been visualised?" [33].[6] Theorists continue to quantify the implications of the digital transformation of the heretofore analog film image: "Computer graphics now make it possible to introduce into animation [for instance] a consistent Hollywood-style camera technique, a movable and shifting perspective" [34]. *Hugo* offers a stunning example of this tendency in its much-lauded opening shot, a likely homage to the opening of Ruttmann's *Berlin Symphony*. Annett quotes Robert Kolker, who says: "While the mise-en-scène of [Scorsese's] films is incredibly detailed, the camera often moves through it quickly, using tracking shots or unusual framings to draw attention not only to what is seen but also to the act of watching itself. A particular feature of [Scorsese's] style is the long tracking shot that traces a character or the camera's point of view through a space in a single take" [8]. Beginning with the image of Paris as a vast clockwork mechanism [7], this shot "blurs the boundaries between aerial, crane, and tracking shots by moving between them without cuts. And it flaunts the fact that there is no physical track by showing the virtual camera gliding…over luggage and benches right up to the clock" [8]. The shot concludes with the close-up of Hugo (Asa Butterfield) looking out at the world of the station, which is what he spends most of his time doing when not maintaining its many clocks. This opening thus eloquently announces what Annett calls the film's ironically "nostalgic remediation" of cinema's past by means of the latest digital technology [8]. Yet, for all its digital showiness, this shot is no more typical of *Hugo* than any number of conventional pre-digital techniques and transitions, the intensified style David Bordwell identifies as the dominant idiom in contemporary popular cinema the world over [35].

---

[6] There is always also the counter-argument, of course, that the digitalisation of the moving image restricts the bounds of human imagining to an unforeseeable degree—but this is not the place to explore this critique.

Historically, "fictional films are *live-action* films", and behind film's often-noted function as a *narrative* medium is its function as a *recording* or capturing medium: "Cinema is the art of the *index*", insofar as the objects onscreen were really present before the camera in order to be photographed [36]. Digital cinema, by contrast, can be called the art of *iconicity*; of illusory realism, of *simulation*—where the object onscreen was never in front of a camera, because there was never a camera there; the object is *constructed* on the computer. Whereas *Hugo* flaunts its digitally produced artificiality, presenting a world that is "created rather than bound to reality" [16], the digital dimension of *Inception* manifests most meaningfully in terms of specific special effects blended as carefully as possible with the (generally) live action footage, which is not captured digitally, but shot on actual film: 65 mm widescreen combined with closer shots in 35 mm [30]. According to Nolan, achieving "photographic realism" was "the touchstone" for cinematographer Wally Pfister; hence their rejection (for the most part) of digital. The assumption is that the indexically bound analog image is somehow ontologically closer to extra-cinematic reality, even if that "reality" is a dream: "The underlying idea is that dreams feel real while we're in them, which is actually a line in the film. [...] We didn't want to have dream sequences with any superfluous surrealism. We didn't want them to have any less validity than what is specified as being the real world" [37].

In his comments, Nolan seems to forget that the vocabulary of surrealism in the visual arts, from painting to cinema, is predicated upon a clearly "legible" realism as a basis upon which its most impressively uncanny effects have been constructed. Witness the paintings of Dali and Magritte, and the films of Dali and Bunuel, as well as Cocteau. That Nolan may have bought a little too deeply into his own screenplay's philosophy is suggested by at least two separate conversations in the film, both involving Cobb and Ariadne, his ingénue "dream architect". As she remarks while on a walking tour of a dream-Paris—an amalgam of University College, London and the real city [37]—in which Baron Haussmann's famed boulevards fold back upon themselves (a digital effect, *pace* Nolan, to which the term "surreal" readily applies): "I guess I thought that the dream space would be all about the visual but, it's more about the *feel* of it". This, after her earlier training session, where she worries "How could I ever acquire enough *detail* to make them think its reality?"—the "them", here, ambiguous enough to include the viewer. Cobb replies: "When you're in it, it *feels* real". For what it's worth, this "feeling" (to take both film and director at their word), is achieved by shooting with film rather than digital cameras [37]. Ariadne, as dream architect, plies her trade in a manner as mysterious as the specific functioning of the technology that facilitates shared dreaming in the film. Such technical ambiguity is typical of much cinematic science fiction, concerned with depicting things not yet possible. However, Ariadne's role as a kind of set designer-cum-cinematographer speaks to the film's unconscious (and by no means unique) privileging of the visual. Ariadne's job, after all, is to plan and realise dream worlds concrete enough to convince the subject that s/he is indeed dreaming; in other words, they need to seem authentic ("real" in the film's parlance) as dreams, so as to ensure the unadulterated operation of the subject's "subconscious", her/his innermost desires. Such is the key to successful inception, according to the film's internal logic. This privileging of the visual has enormous implications for *Inception*'s depiction of not only dream, but also memory, as the film acknowledges. Tellingly, Cobb, the master of dream inception, is as suspicious of memory as he is of trains ("I don't like trains", he remarks), admonishing Ariadne when she draws on her own memories of Paris while building a practice dream world that strongly resembles…Paris: "Never recreate places from your

memory; always imagine new places", he says. When she asks why, he responds: "Because building a dream from your real memories is the easiest way to lose your grasp on what is real and what is a dream", the underlying assumption being that memories connect the subject to her/his past as "reality", albeit one no longer present (except in the form of flashbacks, such as Cobb's of Mal, his dead wife), whereas dreams are, at bottom, unreal and ontologically suspect. The confusion between real and unreal, memory and dream becomes greatest in the film's version of a dream-limbo of memory in the key of regret. (If it were about happy or nostalgic memories instead, it would not be limbo, but heaven. After all, the song chosen to initiate the "kick", the violent transition from one dream level to the next higher one (and, ultimately, to waking reality), is the Edith Piaf version of "Non, je ne regrette rien".) Once one loses oneself in limbo—like Mal does permanently and Sato temporarily—then one loses one's certainty as to the distinction between waking reality and "merely" dream, which is to say merely memory. Memory and, not dream, thus emerges by the film's end as the real problem, a double-edged sword for any subject in Cobb's position; this is why the ending's intentional ambiguity has the force it does.

This interpenetration of dream and memory is not a new idea. Freud's early interest in memory and dreams alike[7] indirectly influences the representation of both phenomena in *Hugo* and *Inception*. Most relevant here is Freud's notion of "dream memory", as opposed to waking memory: where the latter is constitutionally forgetful, a continuous interplay of amnesia and anamnesis, repression and recollection; the former "forget[s] nothing" because (according to Freud) there is no negation in the unconscious [38]. Freud goes so far as to claim that dreams are "hypermnesic", able to "summon memories…unavailable to waking consciousness" [38]. If we take Freud literally here—and there seems no reason not to, since the whole of contemporary popular culture is predicated upon just this sort of naive pop-psychoanalytic literalism—it is possible to discern in *Inception*, for instance, the extension of this idea to the prospect of dreams summoning forth memories of things the subject never actually experienced, things that were planted there, in the subject's "*sub*-conscious" (note the term), but which are taken for the deepest, most intimate of personal truths. Of course, where, in actuality, our only access to dream memory is via waking memory,[8] in *Inception*'s science fictional scenario, dream memory content is directly accessible and eminently *visible*, because (in the film) it looks more or less the same as waking reality. (This is also true of *Hugo*'s dream scenes, which, by comparison, are far more conventional, insofar as they represent a character's "normal" dream state. Although—as in the Paris café scene in *Inception*—they begin without preamble; therefore, neither the protagonist nor the viewer at first realises that what s/he is experiencing or viewing is not "reality"…)

In the concept of "shared dreaming", however, *Inception* has a built-in rationale for all of its spectacular special effects, whether created in camera or added digitally in post-production. Ironically, Nolan invokes this key story element in defense of the film's overall aesthetic, which militates against the dominant trends, so pleasingly exemplified in *Hugo*—"ironically" because the contemporary viewer would be forgiven for expecting a film about dreams to be laden with digital special effects.

---

7   See, e.g., Freud's *Outline of Psychology* (1895) [38].

8   Additionally, waking memory is no more forgetful than in the transition from dreaming to waking, or awakening: "the occasion of a massive loss of memory" of the dream itself [38].

Although this is now changing,[9] historically, post-production is the stage in which computer-generated effects are constructed, in a combination or elision of cinematographic and *mise-en-scene* elements. According to Manovich, the kind of digital cinema that dominates today represents "a new kind of realism, which can be described as 'something [that] looks exactly as if it could have happened, although it really could not'" [36]. Initial reviews and interviews make it clear, however, that, with a few exceptions, *Inception*'s major special effects were all achieved in camera, on set, at great cost and effort. Yet, thematically, even philosophically, the film exemplifies the now-dominant digital vision: as Cobb remarks to his father, dream architecture represents "the chance to create…things that don't exist, that couldn't exist, in the real world".

As Annett notes, *Hugo* is representative of a current trend in popular cinema to reflect nostalgically, even elegiacally, upon cinema's past and to engage with "cinema's historical memory through…*nostalgic remediation*" [8]. According to Annett, *Hugo* clearly illustrates the "negotiations between media, memory, and history [as a 'post-cinematic adaptation' of a work] which reflect[s] explicitly on cinema's photographic and psychological qualities": Brian Selznick's 2007 graphic novel *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* [8]. However, the film's nostalgia is also bound up with its appropriation and remediation of the life and films of pioneer Georges Méliès. *Why* did Méliès start making movies? "No one really knows" is the film's initial answer, but later, *Hugo* provides a fictional pretext with a familiar story: the Lumière brothers' 1895 screening in the Grand Café of their film "The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat" [39]. Scorsese appropriates the myth of audience members mistaking the moving train for reality and running from the room in panic, crossing it with Méliès' autobiography to produce a new myth of cinema's origins. This moment is foreshadowed earlier in the film, however, when Hugo has a dream (actually, a dream-within-a-dream). The scene begins as Hugo goes to bed, his eyes on his father's watch, the automaton in the background: key symbols in the film of what Hugo has lost and what he will ultimately recuperate, regret and hope converging in cinematic intertextuality. As in *Inception*, a straight cut leads into the next set piece, in the main hall of the station, an unintelligible voice announcing departures and arrivals,[10] the camera observing Hugo as he spies the heart-shaped key—the key to fixing the automaton and to solving his own mystery: "Cabret et fils, Horlogers [sic]" is inscribed thereon. In a blatant crossing of the axis of action (aligned with the tracks), he jumps down to track level to retrieve the key; suddenly, the rails begin to vibrate as an arriving train approaches. Cuts to close-ups of train wheels and the engineer evoke Vertov and Ruttmann's early city films. Train's-eye-view shots alternate with a panicking driver, intercut with the as yet unsuspecting Hugo, in an impossible dilation of time that is justified not merely as the cinematic rendering of a dream, but also by crosscutting conventions to create suspense. Redundant, but dynamic, Eisensteinian close-ups of the speeding train alternate with Hugo and the driver as the latter fails to stop the locomotive, which not only runs right over little Hugo, but continues, speed unabated, off the end of the track and through the concourse, smashing everything in its path and nearly killing scores of people, crashing through the wall-sized window at one end of the station and, final, coming to rest nose-first on the street one story down, in a perfect re-enactment of an actual train wreck at the Gare Montparnasse in 1895 [7]. There is also a graphic allusion in these last shots to Méliès' 1904

---

[9]   James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) is a case in point.

[10]   A nod, perhaps, to the opening of Jacques Tati's *M. Hulot's Holiday* (1953).

film, *The Impossible Voyage* [40], in which a group of explorers travel around the world, both underwater and flying through the air, on a magical passenger train. The latter's wondrous dream, however, is here transformed into a literal nightmare, as Hugo's personal fears and desires are translated into the remediated images of film history. The sequence ends as Hugo awakens from the nightmare into a reality that is shortly revealed to be yet another dream. At this point, it is worth recalling Méliès' words to the youthful René Tabard in the latter's flashback-memory of watching the filmmaker at work, at the height of Méliès' career at the turn of the nineteenth century: "If you've ever wondered where your dreams come from, you look around: this is where they're made". The theme of film-as-dream and of movie studio as dream factory, while hardly original in its pandering to Hollywood's founding myth, should not cause one to overlook its correlative: that dreams in film have their own logic and vocabulary, which is more cinematic than oneiric; or rather, the second is subsumed by the first.

4. Post-Cinematic Nostalgia: The Arrival of a Train

Hugo and *Inception* are "post-cinematic" films insofar as they both exemplify the new norm of digital, post-celluloid cinema. "Post-cinematic", therefore, refers to both the total *diffusion* of the cinematic as culturally dominant, but also, its transcendence via new digital technologies, which by now affect *every* phase of our engagement with cinema—production, post-production, distribution, reception and evaluation—to the extent that even when we view non-digital films now, we do so by and large through digital means. Indeed, *Hugo* and *Inception* both constitute a meditation on the very nature of the post-cinematic moving image, of which each is a distinctive example. This intensely self-conscious, self-reflexive tendency is nothing new in the history of film, but it is arguable that even more is now at stake in the face of its structural disavowal.

Hugo and *Inception* are both special effects-driven blockbusters that often seem to put spectacle before narrative and which might represent the return of what Tom Gunning calls a "cinema of attractions". (Bolter and Grusin invoke this term in their elaboration of the often hybridised, hypermediate qualities of contemporary narrative cinema [34].) Nostalgia is not the most accurate term for the dominant affective tone in *Inception*, even though cinema history also plays a key role in this film. As in *Hugo*, the film's psycho-allegorical dimension emerges out of the conjunction of trains and cinema in the modern or post-modern city, here, not one, but many: Tokyo; Paris (played in part by London); Mombasa (actually Tangiers); Los Angeles. Major action set pieces take place not only in urban spaces, but also in distinct architectural structures, specific to an individual character's dream: Saito's Japanese castle; Eames's "snow fortress" (based on the Geisel Library at UC San Diego [41]); Cobb's own LA home; *etc.* (The two types of built space, city and individual building, come together in the "limbo city" constructed by Cobb and Mal in the film's backstory; not so much a city as a surreal juxtaposition of separate "dream homes".) The film's self-reflexivity intersects with the development of Cobb as the protagonist, avatar of a specific contemporary masculine subject. *Why* does Cobb say that he does not like trains? What is *Inception* really *about*, in the end? If dream, then a dream inflected and structured by memory; if memory, then a memory determined in its appearance and function by cinema. The same holds for dreams (as we have seen in *Hugo*), but then, this is not an original observation on my part any more than it is an original idea on the film's part. I would argue,

though, that there is more to be said of *Inception* as a film *about* film—and memory and dreams—just as there is much to be said about its use of visually realised, digitally and non-digitally constructed urban spaces in the representation of subjective interiority: the literalised "subconscious" spaces in which much, if not all, of the film's action takes place.[11]

Each of the film's second-act dream sequences, or rather levels, carefully intercut in order to maximise narrative suspense, while maintaining continuity, are completely different from the others in its mise-en-scène, colour scheme, *etc*. This is in large part because each discrete sequence is designed to invoke a particular film genre: science fiction, heist film, spy film. (For example, the "Snow Fortress" sequence is meant to recall the 1969 James Bond film, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* [43]. Again, dream and cinema are indistinguishable—although this also has the practical narrative value of making it easier for the viewer to not get confused during all the cross cutting. At intervals, these dream sequences are punctuated or disrupted by the motif of an on-rushing train. According to Bergstrom, "Cobb's first extraction job takes place while they are sleeping on a train. The train *later* becomes a mechanism for moving between time-spaces, as Mal and Cobb lay their heads on a train track in order to perform the 'death' that will return them from 'limbo' to their actual world. Later in the film, a train becomes a destructive force in the dreamscape" [6], appearing abruptly in the midst of inappropriate contexts, in a powerfully anti-realist effect. Most spectacularly, one diesel train engine crashes through busy downtown traffic in a rainstorm, in an effect achieved without digital intervention by encasing a double semi-trailer truck inside a facsimile of a train exterior. (The most comparable moment in the far more digitally dependent *Hugo*, ironically, is the scene of the automaton drawing the picture of the moon and rocket from Méliès' film [44]. This was also achieved in-camera, without any CGI (computer-generated imagery) [7]. The irony lies in the fact that today, such impressive feats of analog filmmaking should be indistinguishable from the digital surround, audiences justifiably assuming that every anti-realist or spectacular effect must be constructed on a computer.) Where do *Inception*'s trains originate? There are at least two answers: First, as in *Hugo*, they originate in film history and myth [6]. Second, as in *Hugo*, some or, perhaps, all of the trains originate in Cobb's subconscious mind. That in the end these are the same place becomes clear when we consider the significance of Nolan's choice of this term, "subconscious", instead of the other option, the "unconscious". It seems obvious that "unconscious", as in Benjamin's "optical unconscious",[12] is a better translation of Freud's *das Unbewusste* than 'subconscious'. In his topographical model of consciousness, Freud used the terms *Bewusstsein* (consciousness), *Vorbewusste* (pre-conscious) and *Unbewusstsein*. (As far as I know, there is no 'Unterbewusstsein'.) 'Subconscious' has clear spatial connotations, which *Inception*'s screenplay deliberately emphasises. This is evident in the fact that the 'limbo' scenes take place in what is described as a kind of psychic sub-basement, reachable in Cobb's case by means of an

---

[11] Computer-generated visuals play a large role in the bottom-most 'limbo' cityscape level of the final long shared dream. For this sequence, Nolan wanted "Something glacial, with clear modernist architecture, but with chunks of it breaking off into the sea like icebergs" [42]. The only way to achieve this was to digitally augment footage of the California coastline, near Los Angeles.

[12] I acknowledge Benjamin's significance as an influential thinker of modern memory in markedly spatial terms. According to Darby, Benjamin's immediate goal in this aspect of his work is to liberate memory from "the temporal—and even more importantly, the chronological—conception of memory inherent in received traditions of autobiography" [45].

old-fashioned elevator with noisy metal cage doors. (In limbo, anything is possible: on one floor of this multi-level basement, yet another train goes roaring past.) In this regard, the film manifests a nostalgia for older, 'analog' technologies, such as the train itself, which, as a mode of mass transportation hearkens back to the nineteenth century and, as a link between Cobb's subconscious and conscious mental spaces, is analogous to those old-fashioned hardline telephones in the original *Matrix* film; *i.e.*, conscious reality may be digital now, but the subconscious, like the past, but *unlike* dreams, is pre-digital. Of course, it is not this simple, as everything in these films arrives within an overarching digital framework, even if this is invisible to the inattentive eye. More than one irony is produced as a result. For instance, Kristin Thompson notes, approvingly, a close-up shot, late in the film, in which Méliès constructs a signature analog stop-motion special effect, succinctly displaying, first, his abilities as a film editor [7] and, second, Scorsese's understanding of film history.

A major difference with *Hugo* emerges here insofar as Cobb's itinerary as hero is so much more complicated than Hugo's, at least in the literal spatial-geographical terms: where Hugo rarely leaves his Parisian station, Cobb follows two distinct, but complementary, axes: the horizontal axis of his international travels as mercenary dream manipulator hiring himself out to shadowy corporations, like Cobol, and the vertical axis of his inter-psychic travel through other people's dreams, where he plies his trade. The first is properly spatial-geographical, whereas the second would seem to be more a question of the complex temporal relationship between and among the different levels of a set of interconnected dreams. In the end, because of the nature of the medium, the latter spaces are just that: spaces both like and unlike all the real-world spaces in the film's first half and in its coda. However, the ending casts doubt irremediably upon any conclusive understanding of the difference between reality and dream within the film as a whole.

5. Conclusion

Cobb's top, a dream token, is not even his; he stole it from Mal in the flashback scene in which we learn about his guilt in planting the fatal idea in her mind: the doubt that becomes her fate and that is emblematised for the viewer in the final cut to black. In this complex flashback sequence, Cobb reveals to Ariadne his abortive attempt to save Mal. He explains that she had deliberately hidden something away in a safe set into a dollhouse inside the limbo-city they built together, in a not-very subtle allegory of the process of repression. "She had locked something away, something deep inside: the truth that she had once known but chose to forget". As he says this, Mal is shown locking her token, the top, inside the safe. Among other things, this scene provides a pretext for all of the preceding hyper-kinetic action sequences, in which each character's dream is reduced to recognizable action genre: in the world of a dream, the mind and the surrounding environment are one; built space is the ground for subjectivity, identity is the "contents" contained within the form that is the city. Cobb explains that he went in search of her secret, going deep into "the recesses of her mind", where he found "that secret place"; entering Mal's childhood home, he breaks into the safe. "I broke in, and I planted an idea, a simple little idea that would change everything: that her world wasn't' real". As he says this in voiceover, he sets the recumbent top a-spinning and closes the safe's door. "Death", says Mal, as she recalls laying her head on the train tracks, "is the only escape". The train emerges as the solution to the problem represented by the top. "You're waiting for a train", intones Cobb, as if

repeating a lesson she must memorise, "a train that will take you far away". That their destination may or may not be reality, he tells her, does not matter, because they will be together there. In other words, their love transcends these petty ontological distinctions; but, if so, then why is Cobb so determined to "free" Mal from the prison of radical ontological doubt? That Cobb is the prisoner of his own circular logic is evident by the fact that in the final scene, he lets himself be distracted by the sight of his children's' faces, forgetting the top that may or may not still be spinning.

Like Hugo's, Cobb's trains recall the founding myth of film history, which is reducible to the story "that cinema tells of itself: *when the lights go off, an illusion appears and seems so real that we forget we are watching moving pictures*" [5], in direct analogy with a dream that supplants reality until the dreamer awakes. "Shared dreaming", with its dimension of lucidity, is a better analogy with what actually happens to the film viewer, fully aware that the images before his eyes are illusory, but choosing nonetheless to disavow this fact for the duration of the story. As the viewer's locus of identification, each film's protagonist is a highly ambulatory subject, but where Hugo rarely leaves the station's orbit, let alone Paris, Cobb's journey is both global and inter-subjective—or so the notion of "shared dreaming" would have us believe. When the repressed contents of Cobb's subconscious come roaring into the spaces of his, or, rather, another character's, dream-world (the very space for this kind of spectacle), some symptomatic elements are not surprising—for instance, Mal, his murderous dead wife, a true *femme fatale*, who, it can be argued, is never seen as herself, but only as Cobb sees or saw her. She is only ever, as he comes to admit, "just a shade" whose sole purpose is to try to "save" him by killing him, thereby ensuring his permanent residence with her in limbo, the land of shades. Other elements in *Inception*, by contrast, are initially more surprising, such as the trains that appear out of context. These various elements are obviously related (for Cobb, that is), and, where the ironically Eurydice-like figure of Mal has a very long history in literature and myth, the trains have a genuinely modern, cinematic history, pre-dating both Cobb's Orphic character and this film. In a philosophical perspective, Bergstrom invokes the Kiekegaardian "leap of faith", observing that the train "becomes associated with [Cobb's] inability to move past his memories. Thus, paradoxically, trains, modes of transportation, actually reinscribe the idea…that one cannot escape from memory... To be constantly moving yet never really getting anywhere seems to be the fate of those who cannot make the leap that is 'an act of trust in possibilities beyond their present comprehension'" [6].[13] Therefore, it is neither arbitrary nor merely "poetic" that Cobb should have chosen death by train (the ultimate "kick") in his suicide pact with Mal, in his fruitless attempt to "cure" her of the very idea that *he* implanted in *her* subconscious: that one can never be sure whether the reality into which one has (re-) awoken—by dying—is a "true" or final reality or merely another level of dream. (Coincidentally, Hugo suffers the very same confusion after his own kick, also the same: being crushed under the wheels of a speeding train.) Thus, in these films, the unconscious—which the "subconscious" spatially manifests—is Benjamin's optical unconscious, naming cinema's potential to make visible what had heretofore been invisible, not bringing something into existence out of nothing, but allowing the eye to see what was there all along; not the return of the repressed, so much as its unveiling.

As I have argued, *Hugo* even more than *Inception* is guilty of a certain nostalgia in terms of the relationship between old and new moving image technologies that informs each film. Each of these

---

[13] See also [46].

men-with-a-movie-camera pays homage to cinema's past in his own way. Scorsese inserts himself into his own film in a wordless cameo as a photographer taking Méliès' portrait. Nolan's approach is subtler and the film's conclusion much more ambiguous. In contrast to the closure guaranteed by *Hugo*'s final swirling tracking shot through the party in the Méliès' apartment, where each character's future seems assured, *Inception*'s ambiguity reaches a crescendo in the famous closing shot: the image of a spinning top, its possible fall forestalled by the final cut to a black screen. Dziga Vertov, for one, should be happy.

Acknowledgments

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Calvino, I. *Invisible Cities*; Vintage Classics: London, UK, 2002.
2. Nolan, C., Dir. *Inception* [film]; Warner Bros.: Los Angeles, CA, USA, 2010.
3. Scorsese, M., Dir. *Hugo* [film]; Paramount Pictures: Los Angeles, CA, USA, 2011.
4. Friedberg, A. *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*; University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, USA, 1994.
5. Mennel, B.C. *Cities and Cinema*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2008.
6. Bergstrom, A.J. The Traces of "'A Half-Remembered Dream': Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) and Wong Kar-wai's *2046* (2004) and the Memory Film". In *The Memory Effect: The Remediation of Memory in Literature and Film*; Kilbourn, R.J.A., Ty, E., Eds.; Wilfrid Laurier University Press: Waterloo, Canada, 2013; pp. 195–210.
7. Thompson, K. *Hugo*: Scorsese's Birthday Present to Georges Méliès. Available online: http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2011/12/07/hugo-scorseses-birthday-present-to-georges-melies/ (accessed on 31 May 2013).
8. Annett, S. The Nostalgic Remediation of Cinema in *Hugo* and *Paprika*. Unpublished work, 2013.
9. Johnson, D.K., Ed. *Inception and Philosophy: Because It's Never Just a Dream*; Wiley and Sons: Hoboken, NJ, USA, 2012.
10. Botz-Borstein, T, Ed. *Inception and Philosophy: Ideas to Die For*; Open Court: Chicago, IL, USA, 2011.
11. Kilbourn, R.J.A. *Cinema, Memory, Modernity: The Representation of Memory from the Art Film to Transnational Cinema*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2010.
12. Bolzoni, L. *The Gallery of Memory: Literary and Iconographic Models in the Age of the Printing Press*; Parzen, J., Trans.; University of Toronto Press: Toronto, Canada, 2001.
13. Yates, F. The Three Latin Sources for the Classical Art of Memory. In *The Art of Memory*; University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, USA, 1966; pp. 1–26.

14. Jameson, F. *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*; Duke University Press: Durham, NC, USA, 1999.

15. McNeill, I. Transitional Spaces: Media, Memory and the City in Contemporary French Film. In *Cities in Transition: The Moving Image and the Modern Metropolis*; Webber, A., Wilson, E., Eds.; Wallflower: New York, NY, USA, 2008; pp. 205–215.

16. Hope-Jones, M. Through a Child's Eyes. *Am. Cinematographer* **2011**, *92*, 54–67. Available online: http://ebscohost.com/ (accessed on 6 June 2013).

17. AlSayyad, N. *Cinematic Urbanism: A History of the Modern from Reel to Real*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA/London, UK, 2006.

18. Clarke, D.B., Ed. *The Cinematic City*; Routledge: London, UK/New York, NY, USA, 1997.

19. Dimendberg, E. *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA/London, UK, 2004.

20. Donald, J. The City, the Cinema: Modern Spaces. In *Visual Culture*; Jenks, C., Ed.; Routledge: London, UK/New York, NY, USA, 1995; pp. 77–95.

21. Mazierska, E.; Rascaroli, L. *From Moscow to Madrid: European Cities, Postmodern Cinema*; I.B. Tauris: London, UK, 2003.

22. Shiel, M., Fitzmaurice, T., Eds. *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*; Blackwell: Oxford, UK, 2001.

23. Webber, A.; Wilson, E., Eds. *Cities in Transition: The Moving Image and the Modern Metropolis*; Wallflower: London, UK/New York, NY, USA, 2008.

24. Ruttmann, W., Dir. *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* [film]; Deutsche Vereins-Film: Berlin, Germany, 1927.

25. Charney, L., Schwartz, V.R., Eds. *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*; University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles, CA, USA/London, UK, 1995.

26. Von Trier, L. *Europa*; Det Danske Filminstitut: Copenhagen, Denmark, 1991.

27. Jay, M. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*; University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, USA, 1994.

28. Vertov, D., Dir. *Man with a Movie Camera* [film]; VUFKU: Odessa, USSR, 1929.

29. Benjamin, W. The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility. In *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*; Eiland, H., Jennings, M.W., Eds.; Jephcott, E., Eiland, H., Trans.; Harvard University Press: London, UK, 2002; pp. 101–133.

30. Heuring, D. *Inception*. Am. Cinematographer. Available online: http://www.theasc.com/ ac_magazine/July2010/Inception/page1.php (accessed on 6 June 2013).

31. Adorno, T; Horkheimer, M. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*; Schmid Noerr, G., Ed.; Jephcott, E., Trans.; Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, USA, 2002.

32. Landsberg, A. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*; Columbia University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2004.

33. Brody, F. The Medium is the Memory. In *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media*; Lunenfeld, P., Ed.; MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2000; pp. 130–149.

34. Bolter, J.D.; Grusin, R. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*; MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA/London, UK, 1999.

35. Bordwell, D. Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film. *Film Quarterly* **2002**, *55*, 6–28.

36. Hiscock, J. *Inception*: Christopher Nolan Interview. *Daily Telegraph*, 1 July 2010. Available online: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmmakersonfilm/7866677/Inception-Christopher-Nolan-interview.html (accessed on 7 July 2010).

37. Müller-Farguell, R.W. Awakening Memory: Freud and Benjamin. In *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory*; Vervliet, R., Estor, A., Eds.; Rodopi: Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2000; pp. 291–296.

38. Manovich, L. *The Language of New Media*; MIT Press: Boston, MA, USA, 2002.

39. Lumière, A.; Lumière, L, Dir. *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* [film]; Lumière: Paris, France, 1895.

40. Méliès, G., Dir. *The Impossible Voyage* [film]; Star Films: Paris, France, 1904.

41. *Inception*'s Snow Fortress = Geisel Library. Available online: http://www.thehighdefinite.com/2010/08/inceptions-snow-fortress-geisel-library/ (accessed on 6 June 2013).

42. Russell T. How *Inception*'s Astonishing Visuals Came to Life. *Wired*, 20 July 2010. Available online: http://www.wired.com/underwire/2010/07/inception-visual-effects (accessed on 7 July 2013).

43. Jolin, D. Crime of the Century. *Empire*, July 2010, 93–94. Available online: http://www.bauer-media.com.au/empire.htm (accessed on 6 June 2013).

44. Méliès, G., Dir. *Voyage to the Moon* [film]; Star Films: Paris, France, 1902.

45. Darby, D. Photography, Narrative, and the Landscape of Memory in Walter Benajmin's Berlin. *Ger. Rev.: Lit., Cult., Theory* **2000**, *75*, 210–255.

46. Bogue, R. To Choose to Choose—to Believe in This World. In *Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze's Film Philosophy*; Rodowick, D.N., Ed.; University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2010; pp. 115–134.