

Article

“Cinematic Repetition and Neoliberal Subjectivity”

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Abstract

The central thesis of this paper is that what underlies contemporary popular films with convoluted plots and highly complex spatio-temporal structure is neoliberal subjectivity. Particularly in Hollywood films, the omnipotence of the individual and the spreading of multiple identities together reveal the fundamental ambivalence of such subjectivity. Although a number of films should be discussed to explore fully the cinematic articulation of neoliberal subjectivity and its multifaceted quality, the primary object of analysis in this paper is the film *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011). The puzzle like quality of this film owes much to its articulation of ambiguous relationships between the present and the past, reality and simulation, this world and alternate worlds, all making the audiences extremely confused and spatio-temporally disoriented. *Source Code* therefore belongs to a new critical genre variously called “puzzle films,” “irreality films,” “mind-game films,” “complex films,” and “atemporal cinema.” These categories greatly overlap each other, yet do not necessarily refer to the identical group of films or signify the same idea. The paper first attempts to clarify what theoretical assumptions underlie each of these notions, and reexamine them as a symptomatic manifestation of cinematic neoliberal subjectivity. In the rest of the paper, the fundamental ambivalence of *Source Code* is scrutinized. On one hand, *Source Code* can be interpreted as a utopian film presenting, contrary to the central tenet of neoliberal rationality, a possibility of imagining alternative or another world. On the other hand, the complexity of the film heavily draws on the constitutive features of the neoliberal system, according to which there is absolutely no alternative. *Source Code* therefore deserves a close critical scrutiny not because it offers a utopian alternative to neoliberalism but because it helps us cognitively map the neoliberal present.

This paper argues that what underlies contemporary popular films with convoluted plots and highly complex spatio-temporal structure is neoliberal subjectivity. Particularly in Hollywood films, the omnipotence of the individual and the spreading of multiple identities together reveal the fundamental ambivalence of such subjectivity. Although a number of films should be discussed to explore fully the cinematic articulation of neoliberal subjectivity and its multifaceted quality, the primary object of analysis in this paper is the film *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011), which “has become,” in Garrett Stewart’s words, “a minor litmus test in current writing about the posthuman in cinema—not because it is better than other films in this cyborgian vein, or because it offers their compendium, but rather because, in stretching out of shape its time-travel premise by a detective trajectory, then bending it back recursively on itself, it takes any such conjoined logic both to an extreme and to pieces at once.”¹ A science fiction movie with complex narrative, *Source Code* features the hero Colter Stevens—played by the actor Jake Gyllenhaal—who is repeatedly sent back to an about-to-be-bombed commuter train during the exact same eight minute period in the past in order to discover enough clues to prevent another—and far more devastating—terrorist attack on the city of Chicago. The puzzle like quality of the film owes much to its articulation of ambiguous relationships between the present and the past, reality and simulation, this world and alternate worlds, all making the audiences extremely confused and spatio-temporally disoriented. *Source Code* therefore belongs to a new critical genre variously called “puzzle films,” “irreality films,” “mind-game films,” “complex films,” and “atemporal cinema.” They greatly overlap each other, yet do not necessarily refer to the identical group of films or signify the same idea.

Puzzle films are, according to Warren Buckland, identified by such characteristics as narrative complexity and intricacy, fragmentary presentation of episodes, ambiguous boundaries separating reality and dream, multi-leveled reality, gaps in narration, non-transparency of narrative logic and structure, difficulty to disentangle complicated narrative threads.² Constructed like complex puzzles, these films defy conventional expectations and categorizations (e.g., a distinction between popular movies and art films is virtually meaningless vis-à-vis the notion of puzzle films), and stimulate the viewers’ curiosity and desire in new ways. A main problem with the discourse on puzzle films is that the characteristics just mentioned are posited as the attributes of the non-classical narrative; that is, they are perceived in terms of their difference or deviance from the classical norm. To this extent, the notion of puzzle films tends to domesticate the significance of new forms and the historical changes underlying those forms. Although it is quite useful to highlight and critically analyze many contemporary films, the notion of puzzle films needs to be employed cautiously in order not to get bogged down in empty debates on what makes films “classical” or “non-classical.”

Todd McGowan’s idea of “atemporal cinema” also refers to types of films whose complex narrative—regarded as a product of digitalization—seriously challenges the viewers’ cognitive ability. Atemporal cinema is defined by its temporal complexity, or more specifically, distortion of

chronological time. Distorted time in atemporal films does not move forward in a linear fashion. McGowan stresses that the non-linear temporality of atemporal cinema has basically nothing to do with the represented content of a film. “The atemporal cinematic mode,” writes McGowan, “does not distort forward-moving time simply because of the demands of story, as is the case with science fiction. Its distortions are instead formal ones.”³ The viewers of atemporal cinema actually experience a temporal complexity, distortion, or confusion rather than watch the representations of distorted time in the story which is conventionally narrated in observance of chronological temporality. But McGowan’s insistence on the absolute necessity to distinguish between form and content is, as he himself implicitly acknowledges, arbitrary and untenable in the end because the recurrent motifs of time travel, branching time, and alternate histories in science fiction films can never be reduced to the thematic content of the story. Since the 1990s, they have engendered highly complex modes of film narration and temporality at a formal level. As is clear from his following remark, McGowan tries to preserve the conceptual integrity of atemporal cinema by acknowledging the existence of ambivalent films: “[David] Lynch’s films both belong and don’t belong to the atemporal cinematic mode because the atemporal discourse is the result of the exigencies of specific stories that involve the distortion of time.”⁴ Lynch’s films are, however, hardly an exception. Furthermore, the complexity of contemporary films cannot be reduced to the question of time. For these reasons, the notion of atemporal cinema has limited critical efficacy for the purpose of elucidating a connection between cinema and neoliberal subjectivity.

Irreality films, a category used by Sean Cubitt, include such films as *Déjà Vu* (Tony Scott, 2005), *Next* (Lee Tamahori, 2007), *Wanted* (Timor Bekmambetov, 2008), *Knowing* (Alex Proyas, 2009), *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010), *The Adjustment Bureau* (George Nolfi, 2011), and *Source Code*. What is commonly found in these films is, according to Cubitt, the basic idea that “the world is itself a data construct or can be treated as such.”⁵ In *The Matrix* (Andy and Lana Wachowski, 1999) and other similar films which problematize the status of reality, characters are originally “immersed in a virtual reality,” but eventually awaken to the fact that reality exists somewhere else. While reality and virtual reality are clearly distinguished in these films, irreality films present stories in which what is at stake is not the difference between reality and virtual reality. For in irreality films, “it is reality itself that is unreal.”⁶ Conceptually, the idea of irreality films is quite clear and not marred by any logical inconsistency or critical shortcomings. But it does not say too much about the questions of narrative ambiguity and spatio-temporal complexity of contemporary cinema.

Another frequently used concept, the mind-game film, is proposed by Thomas Elsaesser.⁷ Mind-game films play games with both characters and audiences. Characters are put in a situation where they are played games with but have access to little information on who is playing the game based on what rules for what purpose. Mind-game films also often feature pathological or mentally unstable characters as protagonists, who are uncertain of their identities, experiences, and worlds.

These films “‘play games’ with the audience’s (and the characters’) perception of reality: they oblige one to choose between seemingly equally valid, but ultimately incompatible ‘realities’ or ‘multiverses’”⁸ Deceptions, misleading information, and audio-visual ambiguities abound, but the audiences frequently cannot see through many of these disorienting elements as they appear on the screen. Mind-game films refuse to offer a secure cognitive position for spectators, yet it is precisely because of this lack of a privileged perspectival position that the audiences are drawn into a film’s mind game as its active participants. Elsaesser argues that in mind-game films,

the most intriguing and innovative feature is this insistence on temporality as a separate dimension of consciousness and identity, the play on nonlinear sequence or inverted causality, on chance and contingency, on synchronicity and simultaneity and their effects on characters, agency, and human relations: we are in worlds that often look just like ours, but where multiple time-lines coexist, where the narrative engenders its own loops or Möbius strips, where there may well be a beginning, a middle, and an end, but they certainly are not presented in that order, and thus the spectator’s own meaning-making activity involves constant retroactive revision, new reality-checks, displacements, and reorganization not only of temporal sequence, but of mental space, and the presumption of a possible switch in cause and effect.⁹

All these features certainly constitute intricate puzzles at a certain level of spectators’ engagement with mind-game films. If Elsaesser nonetheless avoids using the term “puzzle film,” it is probably because the puzzle film as a concept is too static, and as such fails to foreground a dynamic process in which film works on audiences, and audiences on films. More importantly, the idea of puzzle has been closely associated with narratological approaches centered around the notion of classical narrative; that is, these approaches tend to reduce everything to the question of narrative structure, leading to a futile debate on whether puzzle films do not fundamentally change or introduce some minor variations into the so-called classical narrative system or paradigm. By selectively focusing on a partial aspect of contemporary films, the narratological intervention may be able to show that it is “business as usual.” It yields, however, a highly skewed and banal view on contemporary cinema.

In the rest of this paper, instead of settling on one notion as the definitive concept and consistently employing it to the exclusion of all others, I will use such terms as mind-game films, puzzle films, irreality films, and complex films relatively freely and often interchangeably. For each term has its own merits and demerits, so that depending on what is specifically examined, which term is most appropriate or productive for analysis would change. But the lack of one standardized term should not be interpreted as a sign of scholarly deficiency; that is, it is not

because there is not enough accumulation of scholarship on and critical insights into puzzle films that partially overlapping categories coexist. As Elsaesser argues, the films we are interested in analyzing do not constitute a genre or a sub-genre. They should be regarded instead as a certain tendency or more broadly as a phenomenon,¹⁰ the significance of which goes beyond the domain of film. The difficulty of agreeing on one concept to refer to an increasingly conspicuous cultural phenomenon does not signify a failure of scholarship. On the contrary, this difficulty itself is part of the phenomenon.

In his discussions on mind-game films, Elsaesser points out that the viewers are “confronted with odd objects or puzzling details that do not ‘add up’ —even though the overall experience ‘makes sense’.”¹¹ The coexistence of these two features are extremely important. Complex films are obviously very complex, and give the audiences disorienting experiences. Yet the narratives of these films are not simply convoluted and undecidable; that is, depending on how we watch them, they often appear quite conventional and even banal. *Source Code*, for instance, apparently has an easy-to-predict happy ending with the formation of a heterosexual couple consisting of the hero and the woman whose life he finally succeeds in saving. *Déjà Vu*, another “litmus test” film in critical discussions on complex puzzle like films, also follows a virtually identical narrative pattern. The film’s protagonist is ATF’s special agent Doug Carlin (Denzel Washington), who investigates a terrorist bombing of a ferry in New Orleans carrying US Navy sailors and their families. During the investigation, the body of a young woman washes up on the shores of the Mississippi. She is initially regarded as one of the bombing victims by the authorities, but Doug quickly realizes that this woman, Claire Kuchever (Paula Patton), is not killed by a bomb, and somehow thinks that her murder holds the key to solve the case of terrorist bombing. When he joins a secret group of government investigators, Doug is introduced to the high-tech surveillance apparatus called “Snow White.” Drawing on the power of seven GPS satellites, Snow White works as a time shifting magic mirror, which enables Doug and others to go back in time to the world of four days and six hours ago, and observe any events or actions as they unfold in real time. It turns out, however, that what is supposed to be a passive surveillance apparatus is actually a time travel machine. The large screen in the secret operation room does not show the images of the “recorded” past; the present and the past are connected to each other in real time by the screen functioning as an interface. This retroactive revelation of the true nature of Snow White fundamentally changes the nature of Doug Carlin’s mission. Like *Source Code*’s Colter Stevens, Doug tries to rescue a woman who was brutally murdered rather than simply investigate an already happened crime to find its culprit. And as in *Source Code*, he “succeeds” in saving her. While another time loop film *Edge of Tomorrow* (Doug Liman, 2014) likewise suggests that the main character William Cage (Tom Cruise) does get a girl (Emily Blunt) in the end, *Oblivion* (Joseph Kosinski, 2013), a science fiction film whose narrative is structured around the motif of human cloning, ends with a hopeful scene where the husband (Tom Cruise) and the wife (Olga Kurylenko) are reunited. Despite the

multiple layers of ambiguities embedded in the puzzle-like narrative, each of these films is a cognitively challenging yet quite intelligible work of entertainment. The lack of precise answers to narrative enigmas or the lapse in narrative logic do not automatically prevent the audiences from enjoying the complex film as a narrative spectacle. This is why, as Elsaesser points out, some prominent scholars of film narration and storytelling “tend to perceive mind-game films either as occasions for refining existing classifications or as challenges to prove that there is nothing new under the sun when it comes to storytelling.”¹²

Our mind is certainly stimulated by the puzzle-like structure of a film. At the same time, we are not completely disoriented because the narrative complexity is compensated by what appears to be the conventional happy ending in which a heterosexual couple is formed. But this observation needs to be further scrutinized. When these films are examined more closely, it becomes less certain if the ending can be simply dismissed as too old-fashioned or convenient for the plot. Do they really conclude with a happy ending? Do they even have a narrative resolution in the most conventional sense? Although many recent Hollywood movies may seem to present the same old formula, the ending—and therefore the entire narrative—is conventional in appearance only. The hero often overcomes what appears to be an insurmountable obstacle, i.e., his own death. But does this constitute a happy ending? Even if it does, for whom is it a happy ending? In *Déjà Vu*, Doug travels to the past, the day the ferry was bombed by a sociopathic—home-grown—terrorist, and successfully saves Claire. Meanwhile, he himself is trapped inside a pickup truck under water, and loses his life. Although her ordeal has just ended, Claire gets all shook up, sobbing in the midst of a chaotic situation on the ground. Then, a man approaches her to ask questions about the thwarted terror attack. To her surprise, the man talking to her is none other than Doug Carlin. This is of course not the Doug who has travelled from the future and just drowned in the Mississippi while saving her, but an ATF agent Doug Carlin who, along with the Claire who has survived the terrorist’s murderous assaults twice, belongs to the altered reality of the past world. The one who saves Claire and dies in the penultimate scene and the one who asks Claire “Have we met?” and drives away with her at the end of the film are both Doug Carlin. At the same time, they are not exactly the same person either. Similarly, what *Oblivion* presents as a happy ending is problematic. Whereas in *Déjà Vu* it is time travel and branched time that simultaneously produce and problematize a narrative resolution, human cloning creates an analogous effect in *Oblivion*. In comparison to these two films, *Source Code* is not only more ambivalent but much more radically disjunctive; that is, it highlights the non-identity of the protagonist far more explicitly. Warren Buckland, for instance, discusses this aspect of *Source Code* in relation to the idea of multiple disguises:

Colter is not only disguised as schoolteacher Sean Fentress, his avatar. While in this disguise, he takes on other disguises: on one serialized repetition, he

pretends to be a transport security officer in order to try to persuade everyone to switch off their phones and, when phoning his father, he pretends to be a friend of Colter. Although these changes are minor, Colter has at least some scope to customize his avatar.¹³

Although what Buckland points out above is not necessarily wrong, his comment makes it more difficult to understand—rather than further clarify—what is really at stake in the figuration of the main character. In the two examples mentioned by the passage, Colter Stevens does not go through any kind of physical transformation. He appears as Sean Fentress to the train’s passengers but not to us, the film’s audiences; instead, we consistently see Colter Stevens played by the actor Jake Gyllenhaal. When he announces himself as a security officer to search for a suspicious electronic device, nobody on the train believes what he says because he does not change either physically or in terms of his outfit. To them, he consistently remains the school teacher Sean Fentress. When Colter finally has a chance to call his father, he talks to the father simply by pretending to be somebody else who was supposed to be with him at the time of his death. Again, we see the same Jake Gyllenhaal making a phone call in this scene. All these minor details only reconfirm the rigidity of Colter/Sean identity rather than demonstrate the flexibility of self/avatar relationship. But it is precisely this rigidity that creates narrative conundrums.

Before *Source Code*, the director Duncan Jones made another film *Moon* (2009). It is worth comparing these two films because they are both similarly concerned with the question of non-identity and yet differ from each other in some crucial points. The central thematic motif of *Moon* is the clone or what W. J. T. Mitchell calls “chronophobia,” which encompasses “a host of anxieties, from the specter of the uncanny double and the evil twin to the more generalized fear of the loss of individual identity.”¹⁴ “The fear of difference, of the stranger, the monster, the alien is what might be called a “rational” fear, or at the very least, a fear that has a determinate object or image....But the true terror arises when the different arrives masquerading as the same, threatening all differentiation and identification. The logic of identity itself is put in question by the clone.”¹⁵ Human cloning films (e.g., *The 6th Day* [Roger Spottiswoode, 2000], *The Island* [Michael Bay, 2005]),¹⁶ where a confrontation between the original person and his or her clone occurs, can be seen as a technologically updated version of films dealing with doubles and doppelgängers. Human cloning remains an important motif in *Moon*, too, yet it is neither the relationship between original and copy nor the digital multitude that is featured as a central narrative focus. As a critical response to chronophobia, *Moon* shows how unethical it is to use clone technology for the purpose of maximizing capital accumulation. Clone or not, each person has its own “unique” identity and individual rights. The presumed lack of uniqueness and individual identity does not make human clones any more disposable as labor power than their original human model.

Source Code is quite different from *Moon* because it seriously problematizes the ideas of

individual and identity. How *Source Code* puts these ideas into question can be elucidated by examining its ending closely. Many different interpretations of the ending of *Source Code* have been presented by various critics. Here is for instance how Warren Buckland describes the ending of the film:

The film ends by going back to the beginning of the day, with a series of unusual events: Colter is still attached to the source code technology; Colleen reads Colter's text message; and Rutledge watches a new report of the bomber being arrested in Chicago, saying that his source code technology will one day have its moment. Equilibrium is reestablished in this final scene, and a major series of narrative transformations have taken place involving the creation of parallel universes....¹⁷

In contrast, according to Catherine Zimmer, rather than hinting the existence of parallel universes or alternate worlds, *Source Code* constructs a temporal loop; that is, "we are now endlessly trapped within the disjuncture of the source code that is *Stevens's* last eight minutes of life—an eight minutes in which he has saved the girl and stopped the terrorist attack, and thus prevented himself from ever being sent back to find the bomber."¹⁸ The validity of this assessment largely depends on what the pronoun "we" in her description exactly refers to. According to Sean Cubitt, the film's ending is utopian in appearance only: "*Source Code* is a fiction masquerading as a utopia. As pseudo-utopia, it tells us of a future that already exists, a program awaiting execution."¹⁹ Furthermore, Cubitt is critical of the film's individualism, that is, "its conviction that individuals are the only moral agents," and "that individual actions matter to the extent that the whole world can be rewritten on the basis of one person's acts and that this can be morally justifiable."²⁰ Cubitt is absolutely right about the fundamental limitation of *Source Code* and other similar films where one or a very small group of individuals can radically change the course of events or even the fate of human civilization on one's own will and action. At the same time, it is not completely clear if the film's ending simply celebrates a triumph of individualism.

In the film's last scene, Colter and Christina happily walk around a park in downtown Chicago. They stop in front of Anish Kapoor's sculpture *Cloud Gate*, on the curved surface of which their images are reflected. Although the man facing the sculpture is Colter Stevens, the reflected image is not him but schoolteacher Sean Fentress. There is nothing particularly surprising about these split images because they seem consistent with the basic premises of the narrative: i.e., *Source Code* allows Colter's mind to merge into Sean's body and let Colter experience the eight minutes period immediately preceding the bomb explosion which killed Sean, Christina, and other train passengers. Nonetheless, there is something unnerving about the film's ending. Colter finally succeeds in his mission of preventing the first terrorist attack on the commuter train, so that

Christina, along with everybody else on the train, does not have to die. But this means that Sean Fentress also does not die. If Sean is alive, then, where is he? The person standing right next to Christina in front of *Cloud Gate* is not Sean Fentress. He has the appearance of Sean but inside is Colter Stevens. What makes it possible for Colter's mind to take over Sean's body is, first, the invention of the Source Code apparatus, and second, Sean's death. Sean must be dead because that is the absolutely necessary condition for Colter to be in the alternate world in the first place. Without Sean as his avatar, he would not be on the doomed train, looking for clues to identify the bomber and the target of the more devastating second bomb attack. Of course, Dr. Rutledge and his staff can choose another passenger as Colter's avatar, but in that case, the narrative development would be radically different from the version presented in the film. Does this mean that there is an apparent contradiction or impossibility in this last scene? The answer is yes if we only focus on the logical consistency of this alternate world as a closed system. However, when examined from a wider perspective, the happy ending of the film shows that history is inerasable. Even though alternate narrative developments are repeatedly shown, there is one fact that remains unchanged: it is only through the action of Colter Stevens that those alternate chains of events are produced. What makes this possible is of course Source Code, which connects the functioning part of half-dead Colter Stevens's brain to the afterglow of now-dead Sean Fentress's consciousness. No matter how or how many times the story is rewritten, the kernel of truth never changes: Sean Fentress died of a terrorist bombing, and Captain Colter Stevens was fatally injured during his mission in Afghanistan and declared dead officially. Stevens is omnipotent and at the same time completely powerless. Infinite variations and possibilities can be generated by the technology of Source Code and Colter's "action," and yet nothing in the end changes. Colter and Christina may enjoy their stroll together in the park; however, as far as she and everybody else is concerned, the man walking with her is without a shadow of doubt "Sean Fentress," not Colter Stevens, whose head and upper torso remain preserved inside a capsule at a US military base. Undoing of terrorist violence through Source Code requires the death of Sean Fentress as a victim of that terrorist violence in the first place. This conundrum seems to be solved when Colter Stevens successfully demonstrates that history can be rewritten; that is, in the final version of alternate history, "Sean" is alive because there is no bomb explosion. But this also means that there is no need to activate Source Code to capture a terrorist bomber who fails to carry out his plan. Precisely because Colter Stevens so successfully averts the terrorist bombing, "Sean Fentress" and Christina safely arrive in Chicago and stroll together in the park. Meanwhile, a Colter Stevens of this alternate world remains to be deployed as part of the Source Code program when a terror attack happens in the near future. Thus, the film's ending, where Stevens is finally liberated yet at the same time permanently entrapped, signifies that history can be rewritten only to the extent that it remains unchanged.

Therefore, it is necessary to rethink Cubitt's criticism of *Source Code* as a utopian film whose potential is marred by a Hollywood cliché, i.e., a convenient assertion of banal individualism.

It is debatable, for instance, whether the protagonist of *Source Code*, whose mind and body are permanently split, can still be called an individual. Some critics even claim that he is not human. “The so-called *subject under surveillance*,” writes Stewart, “is wholly objectified. By contrast, the subject reduced in its own right to surveillance conduit (...the...hero of *Source Code* as computerized scanner rather than inhabited body) is an online info bank.”²¹ Allan Cameron and Richard Misek “suggest that the film...evokes the digital processes associated with image playback....Each time Stevens relives the memory of the train’s eight minutes, he moves along an eight-minute video track that plays within his head. Indeed, Stevens himself could perhaps be regarded as a metaphoric play-head, moving forward and backward along the passageways of the train’s compartments, trapped within a sequence that he is himself generating.”²² These are both intriguing ideas, yet we still need to deal with the fact that inhabited or not, Colter Stevens appears as a character with human body rather than as a non-anthropocentric image.

If the audiences enjoy watching *Source Code* and get pleasure out of their viewing experience, why they do so cannot be explained “by the classical theories of identification, or even of alignment and engagement.”²³ In other words, the conventional model of spectatorship is not of much help here. Subjectivity in *Source Code* is produced by a permanently dispersed and endlessly proliferating process of reproduction. Colter Stevens exists everywhere and at the same time nowhere. Not a clone but a digitally serialized character without the origin, he is a counterpart to the digital multitude.²⁴ He overcomes an initial sense of total disorientation and gradually adjusts himself to his surrounding worlds (i.e., a commuter train and a simulated cockpit) by accepting a deictic mode of cinematic experience, which is characterized by, according to Pepita Hesselberth, “the relationality between cinematic environments and the participating viewer in terms of the specific experience of being here, now, and me that it affords.”²⁵ What matters is not who he really is but the fact that he as an embodied person exists here and now. The sense of reality is not produced by the objective status of the world but by the dynamic relationship between the world and the observer who is situated inside the world being observed. The spatio-temporal context is an essential component of this cinematic experience, the subject of which is not a structural effect but an embodied viewer “I” existing “here” and “now.” It is precisely through this deictic mode of cinematic experience that enables Colter Stevens to regain his sense of self and also allows the viewers of *Source Code* to see him as the film’s “hero” in a conventional sense. At the same time, precisely because they are highly context dependent, deictics are open-ended indexical markers which do not have fixed meanings or objects of reference. The environment at any given moment may make sense to Stevens through deixis; however, this does not mean that what he experiences over a certain duration of time guarantees the consistency of “here,” “now,” and “me” or the identity of the subject of experience, i.e., that of Stevens himself.

Towards the end of *Source Code*, Captain Goodwin receives a text message from Colter Stevens. There is nothing particularly noteworthy or unexpected about this incident because the

film finally reveals that Goodwin—despite “flashback” images of Steven’s failed missions—has been all along communicating with him through text messages. The short “movies” of his search for the terror suspect are repeatedly shown only to the film’s viewers; that is, Goodwin has no access to the audio-visual images or simulacra of alternate worlds. Yet Stevens’s last text message is startling because of its destination, i.e., Goodwin’s cell phone. Neither Stevens as an embodied character nor the environment in which he conducts an investigation is real, so that any message he sends should appear only on a video monitor attached to the Source Code apparatus inside the military base. Perhaps the appearance of his text message on Goodwin’s cell phone indicates that Stevens’s mind no longer exists within the closed circuit of Source Code but has become ubiquitous on networks. Consequently, the role of the screen changes in the course of the narrative: initially functioning to separate the spaces of reality and simulation, the screen in the end becomes an interface through which they become indistinguishable without necessarily merging into one.²⁶

The ending of *Source Code* is absolutely ambivalent. On one hand, it presents a utopian hope that contrary to the central tenet of neoliberal rationality (i.e., “there is no alternative”), it is still possible to imagine alternatives or “another world.”²⁷ Despite the complexity of the narrative settings and development, it is not at all difficult to accept the final development of *Source Code* as an optimistic reaffirmation of the power of an individual to change the reality and challenge what appears to be a predestined course of history. On the other hand, as examined closely above, the film’s hero Colter Stevens is hardly a conventionally individuated character. He is simultaneously omnipotent and completely powerless, present ubiquitously as simulacra and yet existing nowhere. He is in the end nothing more than part of a networked system of hegemony, and as such renders the idea of responsibility meaningless. Jean Baudrillard argues that:

Hegemony works through general masquerade, it relies on the excessive use of every sign and obscenity, the way it mocks its own values, and challenges the rest of the world by its cynicism (“carnivalization”). Classical, historical domination imposed a system of positive values, displaying as well as defending these values. Contemporary hegemony, on the other hand, relies on a symbolic liquidation of every possible value. The terms “simulacrum,” “simulation” and “virtual” summarize this liquidation, in which every signification is eliminated in its own sign, and the profusion of signs parodies a by now unobtainable reality.²⁸

Colter Stevens is a hero only to the extent that the idea of hero is emptied out as its own parody. Even if it is possible to imagine another world and create necessary changes to actualize that world, without a genuine agent of individual actions who can take responsibility for those actions, any changes would be easily appropriated as a means of reproducing the original status quo in

the form of an infinite loop. *Source Code* deserves a close critical scrutiny not because it offers a utopian alternative to neoliberalism but because it helps us cognitively map the neoliberal present.²⁹

Notes

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- 1 Garrett Stewart, *Closed Circuits: Screening Narrative Surveillance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 210.
- 2 Warren Buckland, ed., *Hollywood Puzzle Films* (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 1-6.
- 3 Todd McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 8.
- 4 McGowan, *Out of Time*, p. 9.
- 5 Sean Cubitt, "Source Code: Eco-Criticism and Subjectivity," in Carol Vernallis, Amy Herzog, and John Richardson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 485.
- 6 Cubitt, "Source Code," p. 485.
- 7 Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," in Warren Buckland, ed., *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 13-41.
- 8 Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," pp. 14-15.
- 9 Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," p. 21.
- 10 Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," pp. 13-14.
- 11 Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," pp. 15-16.
- 12 Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," p. 21.
- 13 Warren Buckland, "Source Code's Video Game Logic," in Warren Buckland, ed., *Hollywood Puzzle Films* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 194.
- 14 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 19.
- 15 Mitchell, *Cloning Terror*, p. 34.
- 16 These two films are briefly discussed by W. J. T. Mitchell in his *Cloning Terror*, p. 35.
- 17 Buckland, "Source Code's Video Game Logic," p. 192.
- 18 Catherine Zimmer, *Surveillance Cinema* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), pp. 177-178.
- 19 Cubitt, "Source Code," p. 490.
- 20 Cubitt, "Source Code," pp. 486-487.
- 21 Stewart, *Closed Circuits*, p. 210.
- 22 Allan Cameron and Richard Misek, "Modular Spacetime in the 'Intelligent' Blockbuster: *Inception* and *Source Code*," in Warren Buckland, ed., *Hollywood Puzzle Films* (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 113-114.
- 23 Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," p. 30.
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- 27 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), p. 221-222.
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