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Dream Worlds and Cyberspace
Intersubjective Tertiary Reality in Fantasy and Science Fiction

What is real? Or rather, is that which we perceive with our senses 'real', in the sense that it objectively exists? This question has kept philosophy and literature busy for centuries. An obvious answer is mirrored by language: The German verb 'Wissen' for instance, as well as the English 'to wit', derive from Proto-Germanic *witanan, 'to have seen':[1] We know that which we have seen. Equivalent verbs in Romanic languages derive from Latin 'sapere', 'to taste, have taste'. Sensory input determines our knowledge of the world – a practical truth proven also in scientific experiments.[2]

For Plato, of course, it wasn't so simple. In his allegory of the cave, he shows that 'to see' doesn't necessarily mean 'to know' in the sense of 'to have a correct view of objective reality'. His cave dwellers perceive only shadows of artificial objects on a wall, while the true light of reality remains outside, unseen and unknown. Their knowledge of 'the world' is an illusion, a fiction existing only in their (and the fiction-makers') heads – a shared sensory experience misleading to a limited, distorted and conventional view of reality. Because we're bound to the physical world by the limitations of our bodies, sensory experience is no valid proof for its ultimate reality.

Dream Worlds and Fantasy Worlds:
Tolkien's *On Fairy-Stories* and Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*

The potentially problematic relationship between sensory experience and knowledge or interpretation of the world is a favourite subject not only in hard science and epistemology, but also in fantastical texts. Cervantes *Don Quixote* or Carroll's *Alice*-novels are classical examples that deal with epistemological uncertainty. In these texts, as in many others, *delusion* or

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[1]   *Online Etymology Dictionary*. http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term= wit (19.03.2014).

[2]   Cf. the famous sensory deprivation experiment described in C. Blakemore, G.F. Cooper: "Development of the brain depends on the visual environment", *Nature* 228 (1970), p. 447–448.

dreams are used as framework for the fantastical content.[3] Defining approaches to the fantastical, Tolkien in *On Fairy-Stories* distinguished "the machinery of Dream"[4] and 'Fantasy', stating that the latter should be "independent of the conceiving mind" and "be presented as 'true'".[5]

However, it is not always easy for the reader to determine whether or not this is the case. As early as 1858, in *Phantastes,* George MacDonald undermined his dream world's ontological status by inserting a three-day gap in the 'real world' his protagonist wakes up to. More recently, in Stephen R. Donaldson's *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever,* the anti-hero believes that he is dreaming, while the text suggests to the reader that what the protagonist experiences is in fact a trip to a parallel, fantastical world.

While Tolkien's distinction between dream worlds and fantasy worlds is thus often open to interpretation, it lately appears to have been weakened further by the phenomenon of *intersubjective tertiary realities*[6] – worlds of the mind that can be inhabited or simultaneously experienced by more than one character. The concept is already inherent in Plato's allegory of the cave. If one takes the allegory not as philosophy, but as literature, it is possible to distinguish three fictional worlds, or levels of reality:

- The reality of the reader, in Tolkien's term, "primary world".[7] On this level, Socrates and Glaucon talk about the cave.[8]
- The reality of the characters, or 'secondary world' – the cave and its inhabitants, including the shadow-makers.
- The world of the mind, or *tertiary reality*, which, according to perspective, may be either the display of shadows on the wall or the world of light outside experienced by the prisoner who manages to escape the cave.

Now, the question I'd like to explore, using the cave-allegory as a model, is which ontological status is assigned to the tertiary reality in some recent fantastical texts. Is the world of the mind, to ask with Harry Potter, 'real', or is it 'only happening inside the characters heads'? Is it depicted as the exit of the cave of physical existence, leading into another reality, or merely as a shared sensory experience? Does it, in other words, objectively exist?

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[3] Cf. John Grant, John Clute: *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. New York: St. Martin's Press 1997, p. 264, 297.

[4] J.R.R. Tolkien: „On Fairy-Stories". In: *Tree and Leaf. Smith of Wootton Major. The Homecoming of Beorthnoth*. London: Unwin Paperbacks 1975, p. 11–79, p. 20.

[5] Ibid.

[6] My term.

[7] *On Fairy-Stories,* 50 f.

[8] The fictional dialogue is actually once removed from the implied reader's reality. For simplicity's sake, dialogue and primary reality are here treated as one.

Positivism vs. Dualism: *Pan's Labyrinth* and *Harry Potter*

This question is the central to the plot and interpretation of Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*, a film that perfectly illustrates the opposition of dream world and fantasy world and the platonic frame of reference I'm suggesting.

The viewer is presented with two interdependent storylines. The first tells the story of the orphaned girl Ofelia during the Spanish Civil War; the second tells a fantasy in which Ofelia encounters fantastical beings and finds out that she is really a fairy-princess lost in the mortal world that must pass the portal of death in order to return to her underground kingdom. There has been some critical discussion, and it isn't easy to determine on a first viewing, whether Ofelia's fantasy is presented as objectively 'real' in the film. While there are hints as to which interpretation is 'right' on the level of text,[9] here it is more important that the film uses the opposition of subjective dream world and objective fantasy world in order to discuss different levels of 'reality': the opposition of a physical world of the body, and a spiritual world of the mind accessible with the help of literature.[10]

In Plato's terms: If Ofelia's fantastical fairy-world is merely a vivid dream, a function of her physical brain, then there is no way out of the cave and we're 'positively' (in the sense of positivism) stuck with the grim world of the realistic Spanish Civil War story. In this case, the fantastical shadows on the wall are mere escapist reflections of the heroine's excessive reading. And outside the entrance, which is physical death, only the void awaits.

If, on the other hand, the historical world is the platonic cave we're locked in by the limitations of our physical existence, then the tertiary reality portrayed in Ofelia's fantasy is the exit,[11] the 'true world' of the mind we may escape to through the portal of death, thanks to the power of imagination, thus transcending the limitations of the physical universe. The ambiguity 'dream world' vs. 'fantasy world' in the plot thus reflects the ambiguity of materialist positivism and ontological dualism – of a world-view that includes only the physical or also a (playfully represented) metaphysical reality.

The same opposition appears in a central scene in the *Harry Potter*-series, namely Harry's encounter with the deceased Dumbledore and Voldemort's crippled soul in the dream-version of King's Cross station.

9   Michael Guillen: *Pan's Labyrinth – Interview With Guillermo Del Toro*. http://twitchfilm.com/2006/12/pans-labyrinthinterview-with-guillermo-del-toro.html (9/8/2013).

10 It is Ofelia's intimate knowledge of fairy stories that enables her to see ordinary objects as fantastical ones. Cf. note 32.

11 – which ironically leads into a cave: a tip of the hat to Plato, who is often referenced in fantastical texts.

Harry, who had given himself up to be killed, explicitly questions the onto-logical status of his experience, and Dumbledore answers him: "'Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?'"[12]

With this post-modern statement, Rowling resolves the ambiguous 'either or' of the opposition between subjective dream world and objective fantasy world into an ambivalent 'both are true'-statement:[13] Seeing *is* knowing, even if what you see doesn't physically exist. Dumbledore is dead, and remains so, in the secondary reality of the wizard world. His apparition therefore implies a fundamental change of perspective: Harry, in terms of Plato's analogy, gets a glimpse of the non-physical world out-side the cave. While the secondary wizard world corresponds to the cave setting, the tertiary, dreamlike reality experienced in King's Cross corre-sponds to the prisoner's *vision* – in both senses of the word – of ideal real-ity outside the cave. Like Plato's freed prisoner, Harry is enlightened and, with his 'outside' knowledge, free to return to the cave, if he wishes, where he alone is now able to correctly interpret the shadows on the wall that the others think of as 'real' – and thus to finally overcome Lord Voldemort.

Of course the scene in King's Cross is also an image for fantastical texts in general: They, too, present things that claim to be 'real' and impinge on objective reality, although these things don't occur in the primary world. By inserting tertiary worlds of the mind into the secondary world of the story, fantastical texts mirror the recipients' experience with secondary realities: Characters are shown to see and believe unreal but still meaning-ful things. The message, in short, is: Really important isn't what appears to be real, but what one chooses to believe in.[14] This is basic post-modern thinking: Because sensory perception and indeed life itself may be an illu-sion based on preconceptions, conventions, madness or magic, it's best to put your trust in your mind's eye, your outsider-perspective, strength of will or metaphysical values – for the simple reason that 'it helps us to make sense of the world and our lives.'[15]

Intersubjective Tertiary Reality: Cyberspaces and Collective Dream Worlds

The ambivalence of dream and fantasy and the importance of imagination and belief become central themes in intersubjective fantastical worlds –

[12] J. K. Rowling: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. London: Bloomsbury 2007, p. 579.

[13] On ambiguity and ambivalence cf. Peter V. Zima: *Roman und Ideologie: Zur Sozialgeschichte des modernen Romans*. München: Fink 1986, p. 20 f.

[14] Cf. Frank Weinreich's description of Fantasy as 'Metaphysik mit einem Augen-zwinkern' (in *Fantasy. Einführung*. Essen: Oldib Verlag, p. 12).

[15] Cf. Victor Gijsbers: *Against the Realism Debate*. http://lilith.gotdns.org/~victor/writings/0079NonRealism.pdf (12/08/2013): "Seeing does not quite equal believing. We believe in tables because believing in tables helps us make sense of the world and our lives. We believe that some apparent oases do not in fact exist because that helps us make sense of the world and our lives. [...]"

tertiary realities based on the possibility to consciously enter, control and share a world of the mind.[16] These intersubjective tertiary worlds can be divided into two categories, namely *collective dream worlds* and *cyberspaces*. The former are accessed *mentally*, by means of magical power or some talent innate to the character or donated by a superior being; the latter *physically*, by means of technologically or drug induced sensory input.

This difference corresponds to the modes of fantasy and science fiction: In the playfully metaphysical collective dream worlds of fantasy, the mind, soul or consciousness appears as a separate entity existing on a different level of reality. It can function independently of sensory input and is separable from the body. The world, in short, is not matter, but thought. In cyberspaces, on the other hand, the basic idea of the world is positivistic: The mind is a matter of the brain, and consciousness a function of the firing of neurons.

It follows that, ontologically, cyberspaces resemble Tolkien's 'classical' dream worlds: Neither exist objectively; the action takes place exclusively inside the characters' heads. Collective dream worlds, on the other hand, are basically portal fantasies with sleep serving as the portal and the illogical structure of dreams as a model for the fictional world. [17]

We shall see, however, that the distinction between cyberspaces and collective dream worlds – as between classical dream worlds and fantasy worlds – is frequently undermined by the texts themselves.

Collective Dream Worlds: *The Wheel of Time* and *Inception*

The range of collective dream worlds is best illustrated by Robert Jordan's *Tel'aran'rhiod* in the *Wheel of Time* Fantasy series and by the complex dream-in-dream-construction portrayed in Christopher Nolan's film *Inception*.[18] Both exist only 'in the head' – within them, real is only what a character imagines to be so. The mutable world of dreams within the *Wheel of Time*-universe does, however, have objective existence.[19] It surrounds and mirrors the physical universe and can even be entered in the flesh, although that is considered evil – presumably because it makes you

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[16] – Inspired by a variety of philosophical concepts such as Berkeley's 'cosmic mind' or the 'brain-in-a-vat'-argument. Cf. Stephen Thornton: *Berkeley's Theory of Reality*. http://www.minerva.mic.ul.ie//vol1/berkel.html (24/03/2014) and Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: *The Brain in a Vat Argument*. http://www.iep.utm.edu/brainvat/.

[17] Cf. table I.

[18] Cf. Auston Habershaw: *In Dreams Born*. http://aahabershaw.wordpress.com/2013/05/15/in-dreams-born/ (20.02.2014).

[19] Cf. *Understanding Tel'aran'rhiod: A Theoryland Collaboration*. http://www.theoryland.com/studies.php?page=unseenworld (10/9/13).

lose your humanity, which consists precisely in having a body and a soul each belonging to their own level of reality.

The consciously designed dreams in *Inception*, on the other hand, are not universal, but rather idiosyncratic constructions of an individual's subconscious. They are neither real nor objective. Each dreamer creates his or her own dream world that other characters may share or enter with the help of technology and sedation. This setting makes the dream world of *Inception* a de facto cyberspace based on lucid dreaming.[20]

In spite of this ontological difference, the two tertiary worlds have a lot in common – most importantly the idea that 'belief' or strength of imagination is more substantial than 'reality'. In fact, both dream worlds are shaped and controlled by the dreamers' thoughts. Appearances generally depend on their ability to control their subconscious. Consequently, the tertiary world appears mutable or instable. In *Inception,* buildings bend, decay and crumble, and in the course of the plot, some characters' subconscious influences the designed dreams, which causes other characters to suffer a virtual death. In *Tel'aran'rhiod,* unchanging things like rocks or buildings are comparatively solid, but transitory things like letters suddenly appear and disappear. The dreamer's appearance, too, changes with his feelings and moods, though experienced dreamers are able to control this phenomenon. They can also move anywhere at will and even 'will' unpleasant or dangerous things out of existence. Whether or not one suffers an injury or (virtual) death in *Tel'aran'rhiod* is thus largely a question of mental or willpower: As long as you believe hard enough in the existence – or non-existence – of something, even of death, in *Tel'aran'rhiod* it becomes true. Imagined injuries or virtual death, on the other hand, physically affect the sleeper's body. In *Tel'aran'rhiod,* 'real' is not what you see, but what you imagine – and in fact the word *Tel'aran'rhiod* translates as 'the unseen world'.

Limbo

'Seeing' then, in the dream world, equals 'knowing' only if you have the imagination and strength of mind to control the dream, to correctly interpret the illusions created by other dreamers or by your own subconscious. This ability is linked to a topos found in many fantastical worlds, namely 'limbo': a transitory, dreamlike world of the mind (or the unconscious), located some place between death or eternity and the physical world. Proficient 'dreamwalkers' in *The Wheel of Time*, for instance, may enter a "gap

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[20]   There are in fact four dream worlds that influence each other hierarchically. Cf. Charlie Jane Anders: *Want to Understand Inception? Read the Screenplay!* http://io9.com/5625031/want-to-understand-inception-read-the-screenplay (12/09/2013).

situated between reality and *Tel'aran'rhiod"*,[21] where people's dreams float around like little stars in a black space. A similar concept appears in Kerstin Gier's unfinished YA-fiction *Silber,* where the dreamer enters a 'corridor of dreams' with fancy doors leading into individual sleepers' dreams.

These 'in-between' spaces are similar to *Harry Potter's* King's Cross Station or, to take another example, to the train station where Neo is trapped in *Matrix Reloaded,* in that within them, the mind or soul is temporarily and consciously dissociated from physical existence, waiting or able to choose whether to return to its own body and/or the waking world.[22] Time is distorted, and death, if it occurs in this in-between-space, is usually final. The soul cannot be re-incarnated, and the body falls into a coma. In terms of the cave-analogy, limbo could be described as a place just inside the entrance to the cave, with a view outside. Like dualistic fantasy worlds, it is ontologically 'real' – a metaphysical level of reality separate from the physical world inside the cave, but nonetheless connected to it.

Now, what about *Inception*? Here, as in most cyberspaces, the physical world is the ultimate reality, while the world of the mind is an illusion. The designed dreams are shadows on the wall, with the inception-team as shadow-makers. Virtual death is the way out of the cave, into a higher-level cave or ultimately into the outside world, the 'real' physical reality the dreamers awake to.

However, to briefly recall the plot, because of heavy sedation, in the deepest dream levels of *Inception* virtual death suddenly changes status and results in a descent into 'limbo' – a strangely objectified, dreamlike place where ten hours last a century, and where the character may be trapped until death. In limbo, the protagonist Dominic Cobb encounters a projection of his dead ex-wife who years ago committed suicide in the belief that life in limbo was the true reality and that physically dying would wake her to it, thus taking Plato literally. She encourages Cobb to stay in the dream world and live an ideal life of the mind together. When he refuses to do so, and allows his ex-wife to be virtually killed, he apparently wakes up to a reality where suddenly his greatest, impossible dream comes true.

Now, the problem in *Inception*, for viewer and characters alike, is the old platonic one of having to determine whether the protagonist really is awake or still dreaming – whether what he perceives is 'real' or 'only hap-

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[21]   Robert Jordan, Brian Anderson: *A Crown of Swords*. New York: TOR 1996, p. 229.
[22]   *Tel'aran'rhiod* is also identified as the place where souls go to between rebirths, and as the 'wolf-dream', where, as in *Twilight,* some people transform into their true animal nature.

pening inside his head'.[23] The solution offered by the ending, too, is similar to the ambivalence suggested by Dumbledore: Even if it may be happening only inside Cobb's head, why should that mean it isn't real? As long as he believes it and is happy, the ontological status of the world of the mind is ultimately irrelevant. When seeing, imagining and believing are one, illusion may in fact be preferable to reality.[24] Accordingly, in the end the protagonist doesn't check the spinning top he carries with him to determine whether or not he's in fact back in the physical world, and the film, like *Pan's Labyrinth,* leaves the viewer to puzzle it out by himself.

Unlike *Harry Potter,* however, *Inception* starts out not as a fantasy, but as a science fiction story where one character is plugged into the mind of another. Ontological dualism therefore is not implicit – there is really no way out of the cave, no objectively existing spiritual world for the mind to live in. Accordingly, the choice in limbo is either to return to a precarious physical reality, or to become one's own shadow-maker, to stay within a projection of one's own mind that resembles physical reality but entails physical death.

This choice is symbolized, as in *The Wheel of Time* and *Harry Potter,* by the motif of the body falling into a coma – a motif that weaves together the ideas of sleeping, dreaming and dying. Interestingly, this motif appears also in many cyberspace plots.

Cyberspaces: *The Matrix, Otherland* and *Avatar*

Cyberspaces belong to the mode of science fiction: Characters enter them by technological gateways and sensorially experience them while being physically connected to some kind of virtual reality device. More importantly, while collective dream worlds are created 'independently of the conceiving mind' by an extra-diegetic sub-creator located *outside* the world of the story, cyberspaces are maintained by some kind of physically existing, technological or neural network or mastermind located *within* the story or fictional world.[25]

The post-modern cave-world of *The Matrix* provides an obvious example. Neo, like Plato's prisoner, realizes that what he sees isn't real, since most of humanity is in fact unconsciously locked in a complex virtual world. However, once the fetters are removed that bind him to the simulated reality

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[23] On the similarity to Plato's analogy cf. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein: *Inception and Philosophy: Ideas to Die for.* Chicago: Open Curt Pub Co 2011 and David Kyle Johnson, William Irwin: *Inception and Philosophy: Because it's never just a Dream.* Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons 2011.

[24] This message is prefigured in a key-scene showing dream-addicts dozing in their virtual realities, fleeing the nightmare of reality.

[25] Cf. table II, which includes Seliwanova Ewgenijas categories *rational/irrational* und *irreal/real* (Cf. Ewgenija: "Die Rolle und Funktionen des Oneiroraums in der deutschsprachigen Literatur" in this volume).

and he's free to leave the cave, the real world outside turns out to be somewhat more dystopic than the one in Plato's allegory. In fact, humanity has survived only inside a literal cave deep below the destroyed surface of the earth. In the matrix, on the other hand, which Neo consciously re-enters and, much like Harry, learns to control thanks to his outside-experience, he eventually becomes able to bend nature's laws and to manipulate the shadows.

Neo's choice to consciously return to the cave and re-enter the cyberspace is important in that it transforms both the hero and the virtual reality: For Neo, the matrix is now no longer the shadow on the wall, taken for reality by the unknowing prisoners – instead, it becomes the exit of the cave, the ultimate reality, a dangerous, wonderful world of the mind where everything is possible as long as you can think it, and where the hero, who has become super-human, even transcends death.

This suspension of the laws of nature, and especially the transcendence of death, is something a lot of tertiary realities have in common. In Tad William's novel *Otherland*, for example, the characters consciously enter into and are then trapped inside a network of lifelike, more or less fantastical virtual realities, including a copy of Tolkien's Shire.[26] A plug provides sensory input, connecting the characters' brains to the cyberspace, which is controlled by the 'Other' – a mysterious operating system that is eventually revealed to be a telepathic human child with extraordinary brainpower. This child was enslaved by the rich and mighty owners of the network in order to insert their consciousnesses into the virtual reality and thus to overcome death. And in fact, although they fail, by the end of the novel a terminally ill character's consciousness continues to live on in the virtual Shire after his body has died in the 'real world'.

With this twist of the plot, the mode of *Otherland* changes from science fiction to fantasy, and the tertiary world changes ontological status. Initially the positivistic virtual reality-network is merely an escapist dream, a show of shadows on the wall that the prisoners, bound bodily into their VR-tanks, cannot but watch. In the end it becomes a dualistic fantasy where the soul finds a non-physical home in an ideal world of the mind. This change of status occurs in the moment of physical death: With the severing of the bodily ties, the consciousness is shown to be a separate entity able to choose its spiritual home, and this home is modelled on, not only literature, but Tolkien.

A similar change of status takes place in James Cameron's *Avatar*. Here, sensory input is provided in wireless mode. While asleep in a machine that looks half CT, half coffin, the crippled protagonist's consciousness enters a genetically engineered body. This process enables him to gain first hand sensory experience of an exotic, fantastical world that – like the wizard world in *Harry Potter* – has unusual physical laws, but unquestionably exists in an objective, physical way. Sleep serves as portal between

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[26]   A lot of the *Otherland* VRs are based on literature or popular fiction.

the worlds and bodies: When the protagonist's consciousness returns to his real body, the Na'wi avatar becomes comatose, and vice-versa. Within this basically positivist world, however, the hero encounters the dreamlike Tree of Souls, a neural network rooted in nature itself, which eventually shelters his soul and enables him to permanently move into the glorious artificial body, and thus to overcome the limitations of his physical existence and, again, transcend death.

Comparable scenes of transcendence occur in many fantastical texts and films, including – astonishingly, since it implies a dualistic world-view – in overtly positivistic science fiction. In *The Matrix*, it is only after Neo has virtually died and his comatose body is revived by Trinity's kiss that he fully discovers his supernatural powers and is able to manipulate the virtual reality. In *Harry Potter,* the hero survives yet again Voldemort's killing curse while his spirit is sojourning in King's Cross. In the end of *Pan's Labyrinth,* Ofelia is welcomed as fairy princess while her mortal body bleeds to death. *The Wheel of Time*'s crippled and dying hero is rewarded for his suffering by being instantaneously reincarnated after having finally defeated 'The Dark One' – and so on.[27] It seems fair to say that in stories dealing with the world of the mind, regardless of mode or genre, the transcendence of physical reality, and ultimately of death, is a central issue that ties in with the concept of different levels of 'reality': with the dualistic opposition of a physical world of the body and a spiritual world of the mind accessed not by our senses, but by our imagination, and determined by our choices and beliefs.[28]

Conclusion

Cyberspaces and collective dream worlds have a lot in common. Both are intersubjective non-physical worlds existing in the characters' minds only; both use the motifs of the out-of-body experience in limbo and of (virtual) death as a portal between levels of reality; both deal with the opposition and often present a synthesis between the world of matter and the world of the mind. So what, if any, is the difference between them, with regard to the question of how reality is defined?

If one regards dream worlds and cyberspaces not simply as story, but as text, then it is clear that the ontological status of the world of the mind depends not only on *the way it is accessed*, but also on the question of *who*

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[27] Other examples: In *Twilight,* a legendary chief's soul survives his murder by entering into a wolf, thus creating the super-human werewolves; in Cameron Crowes thriller *Vanilla Sky*, the hero must commit suicide in the lucid-dream-universe in order to return to his body after 150 years of cryogenic sleep.

[28] Accordingly, the spiritual world needn't always be good. Cf. Wes Cravens' horror-film *Nightmare on Elm Street*, where children are killed in their dreams – until one girl chooses to disbelief in the dead Freddy Krueger.

is doing the dreaming. Collective dream worlds, like Fantasy, are 'dreamed' by someone or something *outside* the secondary fictional world – a sub-creator playfully creating a world, and within it, a parallel world of the mind. In this case the world of the mind is presented 'as true', objectively existing, meta-physical reality, implying a dualistic point of view.

Cyberspaces, on the other hand, are 'dreamed' by some kind of biological or technological mastermind situated *inside* the fictional world – be it machine, as in *The Matrix*, (telepathic) human, as in *Otherland*, or nature, as in *Avatar*. This implies a positivistic view of the world. The virtual reality is a function of one or more brains or physical networks and therefore not objectively 'real'.[29] The ultimate 'reality' in these texts is situated on the secondary level of the fictional world, which the reader is invited to enter and equate with the primary level of physical existence.

However, as we have seen, many cyberspaces undermine the positivism they are ostentatiously based on by including dualistic concepts. The platonic shadows become the exit of the cave; illusions turn into playfully conceived 'ideas', virtual realities morph into fantasy. A case in point is Dennis McKiernan's novel *Socrates Caverns,* where the characters get trapped inside a cyberspace fantasy realm. After finally escaping the virtual reality and the malevolent AI that maintains it, they discover that somehow they still possess their virtual characters' magical abilities. Fantasy here invades physical reality and literally becomes 'Truth'. Similarly, in Michael Crichton's *Sphere,* the protagonists, after being symbolically reborn inside a round, alien object that resembles a womb, and following near-death experiences underwater, acquire the (dangerous) power to alter physical reality by sheer force of imagination.[30]

One explanation for this uncertain positivistic status of cyberspace may be the fact that ontological uncertainty often drives the plot. In order to be enlightened, the hero has to recognize the shadows as such; in order to 'realize' his own vision, he has to leave his body and become one with the shadow-maker that maintains the cyberspace. This happens quite literally: Neo becomes part of the matrix (and agent Smith enters a renegade human's physical body); *Avatar's* Jake Sully becomes part of the Tree of Souls, and the dying young man in *Otherland* becomes part of the code making up the virtual world.

Another reason for ontological dualism in science fiction may be the fact that worlds of the mind are symbols of fiction itself. Both are shared experiences of a non-physical world depending on sensory data and imagination. Just like characters within a story enter fantastical tertiary worlds of

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[29] "'We have finally met the dream who is dreaming us'", remarks a character in *Otherland*, and another concurs: "'Logic is gone. We're definitely in someone else's dream' [...]." Tad Williams: *Sea of Silver Light*. New York: DAW 2002 (2001), p. 836.

[30] Cf. table II. The opposite category would be a physically accessed world of the mind maintained by an extra-diegetic 'dreamer'.

the mind, recipients of fiction enter fantastical secondary worlds of story. And just like the experience in the virtual reality results in a changed perspective and renewed life for the characters – either literally, or as enhanced capability to cope with 'real' life –, so the reader of Fantasy experiences, with Tolkien, a change of perspective that allows him to appreciate or interpret the world anew.[31]

Presenting tertiary worlds as real, then, as having some kind of 'objective' existence on a separate plane of reality, justifies the existence and underlines the relevance of fiction as 'idea' and 'true' in its own right, or, more practically, as a source of knowledge and model for life. It is no coincidence that fairy tales or legends play an important role in enlightening the heroes in *Pan's Labyrinth*, *Harry Potter*, *Otherland* or *Avatar*.[32] The world of fiction, which for Plato was only a 'shadow' thrice removed from reality, is here playfully placed on a level with platonic ideas, representing a 'true world of the mind' accessible, in fiction, dreams or fantasies, by the faculty of imagination – a reality outside the cave of physical primary reality, which in turn is shown to be nothing but a convention, a collective delusion.[33]

This may be the reason for the fact that the tertiary reality in *Inception, The Matrix, Otherland* or *Avatar* is associated with opposing values, depending on whether it is regarded from a positivistic or dualistic perspective. In *Inception*, the world of the mind can be seen as a place where illusions make a person unfit for life, or as a place where dreams come true. In *The Matrix,* it means either imprisonment and delusion, or freedom and enlightenment; in *Otherland*, both death and corruption and life and resurrection. And in *Avatar*, the Tree of Souls is both source of wealth to be exploited and a source of life capable of transforming a person.

All these statements may be taken to describe not only the tertiary world, but also fiction in general. In each case, the dualistic perspective, which regards the world of the mind as 'real' and 'true', goes hand in hand with assigning a positive value to fiction itself. Ultimately, in the texts analyzed above, fantasy is portrayed as an ideal, as enabling the recipient to behave in an altruistic, morally 'good' way, regardless of the question whether this ideal is actually 'true', whether the fantastical world of the mind actually exists or not.

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[31]   Cf. Tolkien, On Fairy-Stories, p. 57 f.

[32]   The villains, on the other hand, not being fairy-tale readers, remain blind to the immaterial world.

[33]   Compare Australian Aboriginal 'Dreamtime' and H. P. Lovecraft in *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*: "Whilst the greater number of our nocturnal visions are perhaps no more than faint and fantastic reflections of our waking experiences [...] [s]ometimes I believe that this less material life is our truer life, and that our vain presence on the terraqueous globe is itself the secondary or merely virtual phenomenon."   http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/bws.aspx (24/03/2014).

As a final point of interest, this interpretation is corroborated by scientific research suggesting that brain activity is similar while dreaming or watching a film,[34] and that 'seeing is believing' in any mental state, be it wakefulness or sleep.[35] The brain doesn't necessarily distinguish between 'what's real' and 'what's in your head', between physical sensory input, random nerve cells firing in dreams, or imagining things while being immersed in a fictional world.

This ties in with the underlying, post-modern message the analyzed texts convey, namely, that ultimately there is no clear-cut distinction between 'reality' and the mind. Our beliefs govern our world, and these beliefs are shaped not only by our sensory experiences, but also by our experiences in fictional worlds. To see physically, therefore, or to see with the mind's eye, are both equally valid ways of acquiring knowledge, of understanding and making sense of the world.

Table I: Cyberspaces and Collective Dreamworlds

Dream World	Fantasy World
subjective, 'in your head'	objective, 'real'
physical world of the body	spiritual World of the mind
World of the Mind is:	
shadow in the cave, illusion	'reality' outside the cave, truth
materialist positivism	ontological dualism
Cyberspace	**Collective Dreamworld**
Entering the world of the mind is based on:	
sensory experince, VR-plug-in	Autonomous function of the brain, Magic
Science-fiction	Fantasy
"brains in vats", "world is matter"	"universal mind", "world is thought"

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34 Cf. Jonah Lehrer: *The Neuroscience of Inception*, http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2010/07/the-neuroscience-of-inception/ (10/08/2013).

35 Stephen LaBerge: *Lucid Dreaming: A Concise Guide to Awakening in Your Dreams and in Your Life.* Louisville: Sounds True Inc. 2009 (2004), p. 15.

Table II: Intersubjective Tertiary Realities

		Tertiary Reality is created…	
	Cf. 'Oneiroraum':	**intradiegetically** *'irreal'*	**extradiegetically** *'real'*
Tertiary Reality is entered…	**physically, via sensory input** *'rational'*	**CYBERSPACE** *(Inception)*	*???*
	mentally *'irrational'*	*(Sphere)*	**COLLECTIVE DREAMWORLD** *(Wheel of Time)*