

Revelations of the Dream

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*In the following, we explore the interplay between the movies *Inception* (Nolan 2010) and *eXistenZ* (Cronenberg 1999) and the biblical *Apocalypse of John* (Book of Revelation). In each of these, inescapable, labyrinthine, and finally unmanageable dreams or virtual realities both undercut the reader's sense of reality and challenge the dominant modernist epistemology, for which the fantastic must always be secondary to waking reality. This intertextuality – a widely noted characteristic of much postmodern art and narrative, but also an important feature in John's *Apocalypse* – profoundly unsettles ideology's certainties.*

1. DREAMS OF INCEPTION

The underlying fundamental problem [is] the relation between existential realms, and the role of the dream as a tissue of potential connectivity ... (Shulman and Strousma 1999: 13)

Like a dream, revelation has no beginning

Nevertheless, it still starts somehow. Christopher Nolan's film *Inception* begins near the end of its story as a man named Cobb awakens on a beach and is hauled before a powerful, aged Japanese businessman, Saito. Abruptly, the movie cuts from Cobb and the old Saito to Cobb and his associate Arthur trying to sell a much younger Saito their dream-security services. The audience only gradually learns that they themselves are two dream levels away from the primary cinematic reality (if there is one) at this point. This learning process unsettles the audience's epistemological certainties, as each viewer often finds him/herself in a dream unaware in *Inception*.

Cobb leads a team that raids people's dreams using powerful sedatives and advanced computers in order to discover their secrets. People can intrude in or invade these previously personal "spaces", and dreams can merge.¹ International corporations and powerful individuals pay well for this service and also for training in self-defense against such raids.

Cobb has a troubled past. He is wanted for the murder of his wife, Mal, and therefore he cannot go home again to be with his children. One great danger of the dream manipulation technology is that talented dream "architects", such as Cobb and Mal, can become lost in dreams within dreams and no longer distinguish dreams from reality. Thinking herself in a dream, Mal had believed that suicide was the only way "home", since if you die in a dream (so they believe) then you wake up in reality. However, Mal was not dreaming, and she jumped to her death, leaving evidence that Cobb murdered her.

The younger, apparently non-dreaming version of Saito offers to help clear up Cobb's legal problems in return for a dangerous service – the implanting of an idea, or "inception", into the mind of the heir of Saito's greatest business rival. That rival is dying and the heir will inherit everything. The idea is the breakup of the rival's giant corporation. In order to do this, Cobb's team enters a dream within a dream within the heir's dream, leaving a conscious member of the team behind at each of the first two dream-levels to facilitate the return of the others. Their plan fails, and they

must enter a fourth dream-level, where Cobb and another team member, the appropriately-named Ariadne, meet Mal. That Mal reappears frequently in the movie is quite troubling epistemologically, and she and their two young children serve as ghost figures that haunt Cobb's dreams and reality. This dream world then falls apart catastrophically, but Cobb stays with Mal amid the crashing rubble in order to complete the inception and to rescue Saito who otherwise may be lost forever in a dream. This adventure returns Cobb (and the audience) to the beach of the opening scene and to Saito as a very old man. This return to the film's beginning adds to the sense of interlocking dreams and increases the epistemological confusions.

After the successful inception, Saito returns Cobb to his family, cleared of all charges. However, in the movie's final scene, Cobb leaves a top spinning on a table. This top is Cobb's totem, which he always carries with him so that he can distinguish between reality and dreams. In a dream world, the top will spin continuously. In reality, it will eventually stop. In this final scene, the top slows and stops, but before it stops, the movie fades to black. Is Cobb awake, or is he still dreaming?² In fact, he may not care. He sets the top spinning and walks away toward his family without looking back, leaving his totem unprotected and unread. Only the audience is still watching the totem-top. Significantly, the music that the team had used to force themselves to wake up from their dreams begins to play in that last scene and continues through the closing credits. Does that music wake the audience from their movie-dream?³ Or has this movie-top now been passed on to the audience to become their unreliable totem?

That the top was originally Mal's totem further unsettles epistemological certainties. In the dreamnauts' code, one does not allow one's totem to fall into the hands of others for fear that one will become lost in dreams. In a flashback, the audience learns that Mal locked the top in a safe, while she and Cobb lived in a dream world. To convince her to leave this dream world, Cobb incepted the idea that this world is not real by placing the still spinning top in her safe. Cobb's guilt stems from the fact that her subsequent uncertainties about reality led to her suicide. In the movie's main action, however, the top is Cobb's totem. Whose totem is it then and is it at all useful for identifying reality, or are Cobb and Mal dreaming each other, like Lewis Carroll's Alice and the Red King (see below)?

2. THE PRIMACY OF REALITY

For dreams have deceived many, and those who put their hope in them have perished.
(Sirach 34: 7)⁴

The characters' dreams in *Inception* differ from the "natural" dreams of unconscious persons, which are beyond normal rational control, but our interest in this essay lies in the intertextuality found in the experience of such cinematic or literary dreams – or in interactive games, vision reports like John's, or dream-like narratives--not in "natural" dreams. Yet, this distinction cannot be absolute, as the "reason" that is evident in these narratives often has much in common with the irrationality of the natural dream. Nevertheless, unlike the dreamer the reader or viewer of such narratives is not unconscious.

Since its inception, film has flirted with the unstable boundary between reality and dreams. While many theorists have remarked on the inherent dream-like quality of film, mainstream American films have typically employed visual, editorial, and narrative elements to create a comfortable sense of verisimilitude, which reaffirms the projected audience's sense of the real. Even horror movies, which often make much of the device of the dream or nightmare, commonly reveal at the end of the movie that the story seen was "simply" a dream.⁵

Nolan's film presents a radical challenge to this affirmation of the primacy of reality; and, in recent years, mainstream film has rediscovered unsettling dreams and the cinematic possibilities of

virtual realities. Nevertheless, as these movies reflect the multiple realities, simulations, and epistemological anxieties of our late capitalist world, many of them still typically reaffirm their projected audience's "hold" on their own sense of reality. According to Brian McHale, the worlds within worlds of recent movies realistically reflect the experience of everyday life in advanced industrial societies, a life that "is pervaded by the 'miniature escape-fantasies' of television and the movies" and by the multiple virtual worlds of the Internet and virtual social networking (1987: 128). As movies offer quite temporary fantasies of other worlds, these movies are "mythic" for their projected audience. Through their "escapes", they support the reality construct of that audience.⁶

The Wachowski brothers' film *The Matrix* (1999) is a well-known example. Its premise is that intelligent machines have taken over the human world after a battle in which humans "scorched" the sky to cut off the machines' power. Recouping, the machines now use human bodies as batteries to create power for their world and have created a virtual reality to trap the minds of the human batteries. A rebel band of humans, led by Morpheus, frees the hero Neo who then learns to navigate the virtual reality of the Matrix and begins to defeat the machines. *The Matrix* reverses the typical polarities of modern fantasy, in which characters discover a fantastic realm adjacent to primary reality.⁷ Instead, the characters in the Matrix discover that a world that resembles the initial audience's 1990s world is an illusion and the reality of Morpheus and his rebel band is the truth.⁸ Nevertheless, the movie privileges reality over illusion. Despite critiquing a world like that of the audience as illusion, not reality, and offering a more fantastic reality as a replacement, the movie is quite conservative epistemologically. In one sense, the movie is little more than a heroic fantasy for computer nerds, allowing them to see themselves temporarily as Neos while they are in fact so many cogs in the machine of capitalist bureaucracy that dominates the modern world. This fantasy does not fundamentally challenge the audience's understanding of reality; instead, it merely helps the audience to escape temporarily from that world.

Josef Rusnak's *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999) works in a similar manner. In that movie, a user "jacks" his mind into a computer-simulated world replicating Los Angeles circa 1937, taking over the body of a virtual character while leaving his/her body behind in the apparent primary reality of the present-day world. The murder of one of the simulation's creators, Hannon Fuller, creates a mystery that his partner, Douglas Hall, must solve. Hall jacks into the virtual world as the character John Ferguson in order to solve the crime. Unsuccessful in his attempt to retrieve a letter left for him in that world by Fuller, Hall returns to "reality" where he is arrested for Fuller's murder. Released through the intervention of Jane Fuller, Hannon's daughter, Hall goes back to the simulation where he meets another character who has learned through Fuller's letter that he and his entire world are simulated.

Upon returning to his reality, Hall realizes the pointlessness of a letter from Fuller telling him about the simulated nature of their computer world and concludes that it is his own world that is yet another simulation. He also realizes that Jane is from yet another world, and he confronts her. She tells him that he is innocent of the murder, but that her husband in her reality, David, had jacked into Hall's world and used his body to kill Fuller.

Thus there are at least three "worlds" in *The Thirteenth Floor*, and this opens the potential for more play than does *The Matrix's* dualism. However, neither the third world nor Jane's admission that there are thousands of other simulated worlds subverts the fundamental illusion-surmounted-by-reality structure. Even though both movies offer a reproduction of 1990s America as the illusion from which the central character must "wake up", neither movie ultimately challenges the viewer's sense of reality (or American cinematic mythology).⁹ The "real" Jane affirms Hall's own reality by declaring that he has a soul (compare Ariadne's "therapy" for Cobb in *Inception*) because he has broken with the computer programming and "done his own thing".¹⁰ Of the many simulated worlds, only his world, through him, has created yet another level of simulation.

Like *The Matrix*, then, *The Thirteenth Floor* is fundamentally conservative about reality. Further, the movie portrays transgressions of realities as dangerously chaotic. Most of the people who transgress reality-levels act immorally. Hannon is a womanizer in the 1930s, and David is a murderer in the 1990s. Such transgressions indicate the movie's fundamental uneasiness with notions of multiple levels of reality. Ultimately, *The Thirteenth Floor*, like *The Matrix*, suggests the illusory character of the audience's world only to affirm its own ultimate reality. That *The Thirteenth Floor* is essentially a murder mystery solved by a detective is an important clue to the movie's epistemological conservatism. Despite subterfuge, lies, and illusion, a truth remains for the detective to find.¹¹ Reality rules.

3. VIRTUAL EXISTENZ

For in dreams we believe in the dream as though it were reality, that is to say we regard our hypothesis as completely proved. (Nietzsche 1986: 18 [section 13])

Unlike *The Matrix* or *The Thirteenth Floor*, *Inception*'s ending apparently leaves its viewers still in the middle of a dream. Nevertheless, *Inception* still seems to posit a basic, "waking" level of relatively indubitable reality – namely, the level in which Mal is truly dead and Cobb and Arthur contract with Saito to attempt an inception. If one doubts even that "base" level of reality because of the spinning top – in other words, if the *entire story*, from beginning to end, is a labyrinth of dreams within dreams – then *Inception* becomes something more like David Cronenberg's film, *eXistenZ*.

eXistenZ's creation of epistemological uncertainties depends upon the device of interactive gaming rather than interlocking dreams. The movie opens in what appears to be a former church that is now used for product-testing of a new interactive virtual reality game called "eXistenZ". The game is a realistic computer simulation like those in *The Matrix* or *The Thirteenth Floor*, but with dream-like, unsettling elements (such as a lizard with two heads). As one character says, it is "like real life, with just enough [free will] to make it interesting". This game also operates on multiple levels of virtuality, as in *The Thirteenth Floor* and not unlike the dream-levels of *Inception*.

In the movie, Allegra Gellar and Ted Pikul find themselves involved with "realist" and "anti-realist" militants at war with each other. A murderous "realist" apparently aborts the product testing by shooting Allegra, who is the game's creator, with an organic gun that fires human teeth. Numerous other verbal and visual clues scattered throughout the movie also suggest that even this "base reality" is virtual. For example, Allegra touches everything in what the viewer initially takes for reality sensuously and curiously, as Ted later does when he "enters" eXistenZ, where he marvels at the game's verisimilitude.

Wounded by the tooth-bullet, Allegra escapes with Ted, who is a marketer for the game. She convinces Ted to play her game so that she can determine what is wrong with her bio-port. The bio-port is a socket that has been surgically implanted on her spine, and to which the game-pod must be attached for play. The pod itself throbs and appears to be alive, and it attaches to its human user through an umbilical-like cable. When Allegra and Ted pass between virtual reality levels, they find that the infected bio-port has followed them, and this allows "reality" to "bleed through". The war between realists and anti-realists follows them, and finally Allegra kills Ted, exploding his bio-port, after which she asks no one in particular (since no one else is there) whether she has won the game.¹²

The scene then gradually reassembles itself (like reality breaking in on a dream) into the church of the film's opening, but with important differences. Allegra, Ted, and the others are revealed to be "only" virtual game characters. What initially appeared to be the "base" reality of the movie was itself a virtual level in an entirely different game called "transCendenZ". At this point, the plot twists yet again. As a focus group starts to discuss transCendenZ, Allegra and Ted shoot the game's creator

and marketer (who are now different characters) to protest their “effective deforming of reality”. The others watch passively, and as the movie ends, yet another character asks, “Are we still in the game?”

As in *Inception*, the movie’s plot returns to its beginning, yet we do not “know the place for the first time”. Far more so than *Inception*, Cronenberg’s movie has rendered it impossible to distinguish fiction or game from reality. These multiple realities can be and are transgressed promiscuously in every “direction”, and without end. The possibility that there is no non-virtual reality opens up. The viewer is given no Archimedean point upon which to stand and declare a single perspective to be the ultimate truth or reality. Nor does the viewer move from illusion to reality or from reality to some adjunct fantasy. She simply moves from one virtuality to another. This experience portrays the postmodern condition. As Jean-François Lyotard puts it, the metanarratives of modernity – the liberation of humanity (as in *The Matrix* and *The Thirteenth Floor*) and the speculative unity of all knowledge (Hegel, the Enlightenment) – have given way to a “paralogy of little stories” (1984: 31-32, 60-61). *eXistenZ* (and *Inception* to a slightly lesser degree) reflects this irresolvable multiplicity far more precisely than movies like *The Matrix* or *The Thirteenth Floor*, which are more interested in massaging epistemological uncertainties. For the modernist mindset, the endless play of *eXistenZ* (like the endless dream/s of *Inception*) is sheer horror. For the postmodern mentality, it is bliss (see Barthes 1975).

As *Inception*’s top spins in its last scene, the movie teeters on the edge between modern and postmodern fantasy. If the top stops, Cobb and the audience have arrived at last at reality’s firm ground after fantastic adventures. His justification and his reunion with his family satisfy modernist beliefs and popular desires for a happy ending. If the top keeps on spinning, the dream may still be afoot. Further, the epistemological play may include the audience as well, for no character in the movie watches the spinning top. Only the audience watches. The more subversive *eXistenZ* provides no convenient totems to mark the difference between its games and reality, and no one is left to “wake us up” so that we can return to reality. Accordingly, we too may find ourselves eternally lost in dreams or virtualities with no certain ground and with our melodramatic (and epistemological) desires unrealized. We too may merely move from one virtuality to another, not from illusion to truth, as Alice says in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*:

Now ... let's consider who dreamed it all. ... [I]t must have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course – but then I was part of his dream, too! (Dodgson 1982: 175)

4. DREAMING JOHN’S APOCALYPSE

Can the dream dream the dreamer? Is the dream internal to the dreamer, or to his god? (Shulman and Strousma 1999: 7)

In films such as *Inception* or *eXistenZ*, the line between reality and dream or games is insecure. The characters desire something to mark this line, and some act violently to secure the line, but that something is unreliable or unavailable. Slavoj Žižek speaks of “the Lacanian thesis that it is only in the dream that we come close to the real awakening – that is, to the Real of our desire” (1989: 47). It is through fantasy – and dreams – that ideology is ultimately encountered. Dreams are political as well as personal places and can spill wildly into our conscious reality.

Before film, apocalyptic dreams were described in words and imagined by hearers or readers, or they were drawn or painted. The “paper” of dreams is malleable, a postmodern space that can be played with, like digital text. Either God or the individual’s subconscious is the “architect”. In *Inception*, the dreamscape is designed in advance by a human architect, such as Cobb, Mal, or Ariadne. There would probably be good money in that for entertainment alone, let alone graft.

Some millennial groups have taken their end time dreaming to extremes; group members enter the charismatic leader's dream of the millennial dream (of John on Patmos, or someone else). They try to dream ancient dreams, and the loop continues, picking up dangerous residue on each returning journey of the (eternal) myth.

An example of the dream taken to extremes is the Jonestown mass suicide; they ingested the dream of God's kingdom to tragic ends, for their utopian dream remained unfulfilled. As for an apocalypse on paper, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins are the most notable examples of using the Apocalypse of John as a palimpsest, scraping off the biblical vision and rewriting it with their own. They also are architects, or at least pretenders, and they are not the only ones, or the first, to put the biblical text under erasure or to alter the dream with their own. Should there be a warning on John's Apocalypse, like those that Cobb gives Ariadne about the dangers of dream voyages in *Inception*? Each entry into the dream/s holds the greater risk of getting caught with no way out. That may be a reason why many Christian lectionaries avoid the gore. But is the dream of the throne room or the New Jerusalem any less risky? LaHaye and Jenkins and all readers of the Apocalypse of John are apocalyptic dreamnauts stuck in endless end-dreaming, never reaching Paradise.

We fear the void between realities, the void that is neither this nor not-this, or as Julia Kristeva describes it, "the unthinkable of metaphysics" (1982: 209).¹³ Presumably a void would be no-thing but yet as John warns us, the abyss in his story houses monsters and who knows what other horrors. Even though the abyss is under an angel's lock and key, there remains the possibility that the monsters can fool their keeper and escape. Or even worse, we might slip and fall in. Suddenly the lock seems flimsy, an inadequate prison with insufficient guards, and the warden is far away.

The Apocalypse of John, like the films by Nolan and Cronenberg, shows us how captivating dreams can be. "John" the Revelator claims to have visions, not dreams, but his literary enactment of those visions has a dreamlike quality, which he invites the reader to share: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near" (Apoc 1: 3). As in a dream, John transcends and transgresses space and time.¹⁴ John Hanson clarifies: "With the Apocalypse of John ... one encounters both literary and theological development of the dream-vision report. Here the report has become a genre, if it is recognized that the whole work is a single dream-vision report, which begins with the scene-setting in 1: 9-10. The dream-vision proper begins in 1: 11 and continues until 22: 7" (1980: 1422). Read, hear, keep, but also "dream with me" is John the Inceptor's call. But beware: "Dreams are often the direct path to heresy" (Shulman and Strousma 1999: 5). Reading the dream aloud and in community makes the dream more "real" and the future possibilities more obvious and tenable.

However, the dream continues past Apoc 22: 7, for Jesus, the Spirit, and the Bride all have things left to say to John. John's dream is messy and open-ended, a virtual cycle of dreaming because once you arrive at "The End" (or an end, which is always open in this text), you have to gear up for the beginning all over again, because the promised ending is not-yet. Like a dream, revelation has no beginning ... but also no ending. The angel instructs John: "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy" (22: 10-11). The dream predicts the (near) future, yet it remains unfulfilled, stuck in its own dream world. Many apocalyptic dreamers have followed, entering into the text attempting either to raid the dreams or to implant (incept) their own dreams into John's, so much so that every time we enter John's dream, it is littered with the echoes and ghosts of these other dreams.

Yet, John claims a certainty beyond ordinary dreams. He tells us what he *saw* and how he saw it: "And this is how I saw the horses in my vision... " (9: 17). He also tells us of his interactions with the characters of his vision, with deities, angels, elders, and voices from heaven. But, is not such "seeing" like a dream? According to W.C. Dement, "When dreaming the mind takes on a different

consciousness, inhabits a new world that is as real as the world it experiences when awake” (quoted in Flannery-Dailey 2004: 2). John reports that he is awake for these visions, “in the spirit” or trance space. He is taken, in the spirit and the body, to several geographical locations. He eats the scroll (10: 8-11), like Ezekiel (2: 8-3: 3), in order to fully ingest the words of prophecy. He is able to eat, to get indigestion, to write, to measure, to worship, to feel (fear, awe, stomach acid, and so forth -- although he seldom comments on his response to all this violence), to converse, to wander from scene to scene, crossing borders. But are these physical or visionary (that is, dreamlike) actions? John’s report of these visionary dreams creates a dream world like *Inception’s* interlocking dreams and *eXistenZ’s* games within games.¹⁵ Like Cobb, Mal, Ted, and Allegra, it is not at all clear that John ever steps out of the dream. John is forever damned to eat the sickening scroll.

Prophets are dangerous people, for they venture into or at least toward the void, or voids, as the Bible’s apocalyptic texts would suggest, and call on their readers to follow. There is a certain horror/terror to these vision quests: the horror of being in liminal space, of not being able to return to one’s normal life, or even that this normal life is really not what it appears. It is the horror of not being able to return to one’s “right mind”, trapped like *Inception’s* Mal, so that the way “back home” is lost forever in the labyrinth with no Ariadne to help us find the way.

John’s dream of the End will not end. The story loops back on itself (22: 10-11), spiralling out of control as it picks up traces of other dreams (for example, Doré’s, Blake’s, Nolan’s, and so forth). In biblical dreaming, it is one thing to dream of symbols and prophecy to come, and it is another actually to enter into another realm within the dream, a dream world within a dream world. In the Apocalypse, John wanders into Daniel’s dreams, and these dreams weave their way through John’s in an endless loop. Even mainstream scholars and believers fuel this looping, giving John’s dream (buffeted by Daniel’s dream) authority and status. As a liturgical text the Apocalypse of John promotes violent dreaming in the liturgy. We enter the wakeful dreaminess with John, afraid to wake up to the realities of war. We are caught in the apocalyptic war with its torture of the earth and its peoples and hatred of women (and men) who resist this dream. Often we are captured in/by this dream and we do not even realize it. How do we emerge from this dream, and shut it down? Or are we doomed, like John, to be always in the dream of apocalypse – or on the verge of this dream?

It becomes impossible to know where the dream/s begin and end. At one point in *Inception*, Cobb advises Ariadne that one can know he/she is “in a dream”, by asking how he/she came to this (dream) situation. Because dreams always start in the middle, the dreamer will not be able to find a generating sequence of events. Cobb’s certainty sounds a bit like the philosopher Thomas Hobbes:

when I consider that in dreams I do not often nor constantly think of the same persons, places, objects, and actions, that I do waking; nor remember so long a train of coherent thoughts, dreaming, as at other times; and because waking I often observe the absurdity of dreams, but never dream of the absurdity of my waking thoughts; I am well satisfied, that being awake, I know I dream not, though when I dream I think myself awake (1962: 25).¹⁶

John claims a similar certainty, but many readers of the Apocalypse have diagnosed John as having been on hallucinatory drugs, if not completely insane. In his discussion of madness in the fifteenth century, Michel Foucault comments:

Apocalyptic dreams are not new ... the end has no value as passage and promise; it is the advent of a night in which the world’s old reason is engulfed. It is enough to look at Durer’s Horsemen of the Apocalypse, sent by God Himself: these are no angels of triumph and reconciliation; these are no heralds of serene justice, but the disheveled warriors of a mad vengeance. The world sinks into universal Fury. Victory is neither God’s nor the Devil’s: it belongs to Madness (2006: 19-20).

Is it certainty or uncertainty then that leads to the abyss – or Foucault’s “universal Fury”?

5. APOCALYPTIC CERTAINTY

... for God comes in dreams most discretely. (Husser 1999: 124)

In the Apocalypse of John, the narrator travels, as in a dream, to the realm of his visions: for example, to the throne room, to the war-torn landscapes, to the heavenly city. His hallucinations motivate his writing, or as Jacques Derrida notes in his discussion of Freud's *Traumdeutung*: "Hallucination as speech and hallucination as writing" (1999: 197). Derrida acknowledges, "The dreamer invents his own grammar", which may explain some of the rhetoric and bad Greek grammar of the Apocalypse (1999: 209). John is writing dreams and his writing itself is a dream; "John" is therefore lost in dreams that frame and permeate the Apocalypse.

Despite the book's mad wildness, many scholars read the Apocalypse of John as far less playful than *Inception* and *eXistenZ* and at least as epistemologically conservative as *The Matrix* and *The Thirteenth Floor*. Such readings often claim that the seer's dreams, like the story in *The Matrix*, reveal that the imperial reality in which the sectarian apocalyptic community (or communities) lives is illusory, or at least temporary, and that the divine sovereignty revealed in the apocalyptic dreams is the "really real". This common reading often claims that the apocalyptic community experiences the dreamed "really real" in communal worship (see the references to community worship in Apoc 1-3; 22: 8-21).¹⁷ On such a reading the sect's communal worship is a precursor of the apocalyptic finale and a means by which they access both the "reality" of the seer's dreams and the heavenly power (chapters 4-5) that liberates the community from the illusory powers of beasts and harlots (compare *The Matrix's* machines).

Critics do not have to accept these apocalyptic claims themselves in order to be epistemologically conservative. The mere belief that one knows what the (original) apocalyptic communities believed, whatever one's stance on the truth of their beliefs, grants the critic enormous certainty, as well as mastery over what then becomes a rather domestic text. This type of critical reading tames the wild dreams of the Apocalypse and prevents critical interpreters from losing themselves in those dreams and from the illusions of more popular readings in which the reader's reality and those of the Apocalypse are less distinct.

Once again, the stance is analogous to the modern notions of fantasy reflected in *The Matrix* and *The Thirteenth Floor*. Unfortunately for such critical readings, the text of the Apocalypse is notoriously fluid and its symbols are meaningless apart from some larger intertextual context. Even the notion that this book is an apocalypse is a scholarly convention, the creation of a genre, intended to limit the Apocalypse epistemologically and to confine its Protean wildness. Even notions that John's visions are dreams are often attempts to form, to manage, or to control the visions.¹⁸ But, John's dream report explodes such management designs because the Apocalypse does not "know" how to begin or to end. Hence, its borders are uncertain and it is quite dream-like. As Cobb advises Ariadne in *Inception*, one cannot find the beginning or the "from whence" of a dream.

The Apocalypse of John opens with a claim to present the futuristic revelation of Jesus Christ (1: 1), but then blesses the one who reads the work and those who keep its words (1: 3) without specifying immediately and precisely how one keeps the words of a prophecy. The Apocalypse then segues to John's letters to the churches (1: 4) but interrupts that movement with an authorizing vision for John from Jesus Christ (1: 9-20) before continuing with the letters, which finally specify an apocalyptic ethic (chapters 2-3). Only then do the futuristic revelations begin (chapters 4-5). But most of this section still speaks of a present heavenly, not future, sovereignty. In addition to this beginning with "fits and starts", the Apocalypse also features a bewildering array of introductory speakers, including a third-person narrator, an angel, "I John", the Alpha and Omega, and a trumpet-like voice.

The end of the book is no more definite. After the angel's revelation of the heavenly Jerusalem and New Eden (Apoc 21: 1-22: 5), the angel authorizes his own revelation (22: 6; compare 1: 1-2). An angel or Jesus Christ announces his imminent arrival and blesses those who keep the words of the book (22: 7; compare 1: 3). John then authorizes his own visions (22: 8) and tries to worship the apocalyptic angel (22: 8-9; compare 1: 17). The angel instructs John not to seal the book (22: 10-11). The angel or Jesus again announces his imminent arrival (22: 12-13; compare 1: 8) and blesses the martyrs (22: 14-15; compare 1: 3). Jesus then declares himself the source of the angelic messages (22: 16; compare 1: 1, 17-20). The Spirit and the bride invoke the imminent end (22: 17; compare the references to the spirit in 1: 4, 10). An "I" (John? Jesus?) warns "everyone" not to add or detract from the book (22: 18-19; contrast the command to leave the book open in 22: 10-11). The "testifier" claims he is coming soon and the narrator seconds this claim (22: 20) before blessing the saints (22: 21; compare 1: 3).

Despite the stuttering nature of this "finale" and the bewildering catalog of speakers, it seems fairly clear that the Apocalypse's end, like those of *Inception* and *eXistenZ*, returns to its beginning. This results, as in *Inception* and *eXistenZ*, in an Ouroboros-like text that calls attention to itself, rather than providing convenient reference to an external reality that would enable any reader to master it.¹⁹ The text is a trap that snares the reader, like the dreams of *Inception* and the games of *eXistenZ*. While the text gestures at a finalizing future, that future does not arrive. The repeated "comes" of Apoc 22: 7-20 are themselves testimony to the book's non-finality (see Derrida 1982: 85, 90-95). So too is the narrator's anxiety about sequels:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book (22: 18-19).

The tension, or even contradiction, between this exhortation and the angelic demand to leave the book unsealed (22: 10) further erodes finality and certainty.

The Apocalypse's "middle" is no more manageable and hopelessly nonlinear. In fact, a reader soon finds material quite like *Inception's* dreams within dreams, or like a series of Chinese boxes or Russian dolls. After something like an epistolary introduction (chapters 1-3), one soon encounters heavenly worship (chapters 4-5), then a series of judgments (6: 1-11: 19), and finally the apocalypse (or apocalyptic conflict) proper (12: 1-20: 10), which one leaves in reverse order through judgments (20: 11-15), worship (21: 1-22: 5), and an epistolary conclusion (22: 6-21). This can be little more than a "sense", however, because worship and judgments bleed through the various levels, like *Inception's* theme song/wake-up call, *Non, je ne regrette rien*, or the bleeding of reality in *eXistenZ*.

That the purported "end" of the book's dream – the victorious, apocalyptic descent of the heavenly sovereignty to earth – comes before the uncertain end of the text makes "worlds" overlap and generic mastery elusive (compare the effect of the placement of Mark 13 on the reading of that book). In fact, the narrator's attempts to control future interpretations of the Apocalypse (1: 3; 22: 7, 10, 18-19), as well as the presence of a still-sealed scroll (10: 4) in the Apocalypse's purportedly "open" book (22: 10), makes the Apocalypse both a threat to the reader's "reality" and itself a character in its own story, as in some postmodern fiction.²⁰

The end then either does not come or it comes in the wrong place, but it also comes repeatedly. At least, any of the three series of seven judgments (seals, 6: 1-8: 5; trumpets, 8: 6-11: 19; bowls, 15: 1-16: 21) seems to be a world-ending series of catastrophes. Further, the seventh item in each of the three series seems a final theophany ushering in the kingdom of God (8: 1-5; 11: 14-19; 16: 17-21). Nonetheless, more destruction, conflict, and judgment follow after each of them. Even the infamous Armageddon is not the end or is simply another end, for Apocalypse 20: 7-10 repeats it, too. If a construct of God stands behind these repeated ends, it is difficult not to see this deity as a serial

killer, delighting in the terrible, obsessive repetition of the world's "end". Clearly, the Apocalypse is a never-ending story (Pippin 1999: 1, 87), or, given its content, a never-ending, inescapable dream.²¹

6. LIVING THE DREAM

Dreams are like life, only more so. (Chesterton, quoted in Strousma 1999: 191)

For this reason, some interpreters see the text of John's book as a gaping maw about to swallow everything, including the interpreter herself (see Pippin 1999). Surely, as these nightmares loom and threaten to engulf us, we sense the lure of certainty, finality, mastery – the sanity of modern fantasy.

Accordingly, the typical critical interpretation tries to end the dream. However, as Derrida says, "every language on the apocalypse is also apocalyptic and cannot be excluded from its object" (1982: 90). Imitating the narrator's attempts at mastery (22: 10, 18-19), the scholarly critic attempts to stand masterfully after the text and assign it to a dead past, separating the reality of the reader and that of the text. Historical critics make this particularly clear by searching only for origins for John's Apocalypse.

This ideal of mastery or unanswerable, final truth, whose ultimate symbol is the Apocalypse's imperial God (see Keller 2005: 151 and Moore 2006: 120-21) or Foucault's "universal Fury" (2006: 19-20), is the Apocalypse's real horror, not its unending dreams. The Apocalypse's gesture at violent finality resembles but exceeds Mal and Allegra's drive for certainty. The Apocalypse is a dystopic totalitarian nightmare, a "Master-Dream", or a finalizing, imperial certainty (see n2 above). It is not a game, but rather *the* decisive totem.

By contrast, some postmodern readers are less certain that clear demarcations can be drawn between text(s) and the realities of writers or readers.²² Intertextuality includes the reader, who is always an interpreter.²³ Consequently, the reader has no definitive mastery over the text. As narrative characters – including books (or their narrators) – transgress conventional boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, and thereby approach the place of readers, they suggest that readers (and their commonsense reality) may also be narrative characters. Jorge Luis Borges muses frequently on transgressions of fictional borders: Don Quixote reading the novel of which he is a part, Hamlet staging and watching a play quite like that in which he is the protagonist, Scheherazade embarking on the tale of *1001 Nights* on one of the nights within that story, and Royce's description of a map of England so detailed that it includes the map that includes the map, and so on to infinity (1964: 193-96). For Borges, such incidents challenge readers' realities. Reflecting upon these examples, Borges concludes, "In 1833, Carlyle observed that the history of the universe is an infinite sacred book that all men write and read and try to understand, and in which they are also written" (1964: 196).

This situation is analogous to that described by a perplexed ethnographer who interviewed an ardent believer in a tribal myth of creation. The ethnographer did not understand how the tribesman could believe that the world rested on a huge turtle, so he asked the tribesman what the turtle rested upon. The response was another turtle. The easily imagined conversation persisted until finally the exasperated tribesman declared that it was "turtles all the way down". In *eXistenZ*, reality seems virtualities "all the way down". Similarly, in John's Apocalypse it is "apocalypse all the way down" (the abyss) – and also "apocalypse all the way up" (the heavenly throne room), with the dead and the damned lining the paths.

Like Allegra and Mal, we want reality, but we cannot be sure of it. Many readers, like the characters in *Inception*, see the lack of epistemological certainty as a horror, a gaping maw in the heart of "reality" to be resisted with some totem or final interpretation, but perhaps it does not

need to be so. The dreams and games' failures to end or, rather, our failure to achieve final mastery over them may be an occasion for hope. Perhaps bliss, not horror, lies in the interlocking virtualities of postmodern intertextuality, which includes the reader. What is required is to play with the dreams.²⁴ The interlocking dreams of the Apocalypse and *Inception*, the limitless virtualities of *eXistenZ*, the Apocalypse's failure to end, *Inception*'s teetering top, and *eXistenZ*'s final question all invite play, not certainty. In fact, they resist any epistemological certainty. As the character in *eXistenZ* says, "Are we still in the game?" Perhaps, the absence of totems and finality may be liberating, a (non-)sign of a comic eschatology that renders all ideologies and sovereignties finite human constructions (Crossan 1976) or even adventures in fantasy (Borges 1962: 25), like a dream, with no end ...

Ever drifting down the stream –

Lingering in the golden gleam –

Life, what is it but a dream? (Dodgson 1982: 176)

ENDNOTES

¹ Something like this happens also in the dreams of both psychiatric patients and researchers in the anime film *Paprika* (Kon 2006). Nolan acknowledges his debt to this film. See also the recent NBC show *Awake* (2012) in which a Los Angeles police detective, Michael Britten, lives in two worlds following a car crash. In one world his wife survives the crash; in the other his son has survived. The worlds overlap as they provide clues for the cases Britten works as a detective. While psychiatrists in each world try to convince Britten of the singular reality of their world, the series ends with no such resolution, and one psychiatrist explains, "It's turtles all the way down".

² In Borges' "The Circular Ruins" (1962: 57-63), a priest in a ruined temple dreams into existence another priest to preside at another ruined temple. The first priest eventually learns that he himself is someone else's dream. See also Ismail Kadare's political take on dream control in his novel, *The Palace of Dreams*, in which a brutal dictatorship controls both the waking and dreams of its citizens, in search of a "Master-Dream" that will reveal the future of the totalitarian government. A bureaucratic office monitors and categorizes all dreams; state power knows no boundaries (see the discussion in Žižek 2010: 399-400).

³ The music is Édith Piaf's song, *Non, je ne regrette rien*. Marion Cotillard, the actress who plays Mal, played Piaf in Olivier Dahan's 2007 film, *La Vie en Rose*. This creates intertextual connections between the films that resemble the interlocking dream layers in *Inception*. Nolan has denied that this coincidence is deliberate.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁵ Horror can distort the audience's ordinary reality if the "horror reality" overcomes all other realities in the film. Further, as a scientist often acts as an objecting skeptic killed by or converted to belief in the horror and as the populace sees science as an authority for the definition of reality, the trope of the skeptical scientist may indicate more postmodern epistemological play. See Beal (2002) for a discussion of horror films as both support mechanism for and challenge to audiences' beliefs.

⁶ "Parabolic" or postmodern fantastic films are another matter. See n7 and further below. On the relationships of myth and parable to epistemology, see Crossan (1975: 47-62).

⁷ Modernist conceptions of fantasy support the clearly defined reality of the audience while adding a fantastic adjunct. Postmodern fantasy disrupts the idea of any clearly defined reality or realism. See Aichele (2006: 13-58).

⁸ Certain elements in *The Matrix* do challenge this simple hierarchy. For example, Morpheus, the revealer of reality, bears the name of the Greek god of sleep and dreams. That Neo wakes up at least nine times in the movie also takes one close to the Chinese-box structure of *Inception*'s dreams.

⁹ Romance – or the saving power of love – is crucial to both *The Matrix* and *The Thirteenth Floor*. It is relatively unimportant in *eXistenZ* and damning – at least in the attachments between Cobb and Mal – in *Inception*.

¹⁰ All movie quotations are transcribed from DVDs of the respective films.

¹¹ McHale asserts that detective fiction is the genre of the modern world while science fiction functions in this fashion for postmodernism (1987: 10, 59). Modernity, that is, is more certain about discovering truths about a singular reality.

¹² In Kafka's "On Parables" (1958) one character "bets" that something is a parable and another declares the character victorious, except in parable where that character has already lost.

¹³ Nietzsche relates: "The man of the ages of barbarous primordial culture believed that in the dream he was getting to know a second real world: here is the origin of all metaphysics" (1986: 14 [section 5]). Guy Strousma comments on Nietzsche's perception of the role of dreams/religious visions: "Dreaming, according to this perception, would be, to use the Marxist metaphor, an opium that lures men into abstaining from action and from revolt" (1999: 206).

¹⁴ Bernard B. Scott offers: "Eschatology is a type of dream, as witness the dreamlike language of much of apocalyptic" (1994: 127), and according to Ann Jeffers, visions in the Bible "are able to represent situations which are not bound by space and time" (1996: 143).

¹⁵ Catherine Keller notes, "But John is not dreaming, he is designing a dreamlike message" (1996: 48).

¹⁶ See also Descartes' meditation on dreams (1964: 76-80).

¹⁷ While not talking about apocalyptic specifically, Clifford Geertz claims that the communal enactment of ritual enlivens the symbols/myths of the community as the "really real" in comparison to their ordinary reality (1973: 94-108).

¹⁸ See for example the form-critical studies on biblical dreaming by A. Leo Oppenheim (1956) and Robert Gnuse (1984).

¹⁹ Compare Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1967), a highly apocalyptic novel which apparently begins with the last half of its final sentence, which itself breaks off at midpoint.

²⁰ For example: Calvino (1979), Ende (1983), Miéville (2007).

²¹ Derrida's reading of apocalyptic is a particularly good antidote to notions of original or final foundations that would end apocalyptic dreams (1982). See also Pippin (1999: 87), discussing Dieter Lenzen's notion of "apocalypsia" to describe the stuttering non-finality of apocalyptic.

²² See Frei (1974) for an argument that this is the case also for premodern Bible readers. The obsession of modern fundamentalist Christianity with the Apocalypse is another matter, strongly suggesting a desire for mastery, not postmodern bliss. As noted earlier, these readers try to incept their own dreams into John's or see John's dreams as a fantastic adjunct (a new, true reality) impinging upon their own present world and known in their esoteric interpretations or worship.

²³ It should be clear that this intertextuality is what *Inception's* interlocking dreams, *eXistenZ's* games within games, and John's engulfing, unending vision reports have in common for our analysis.

²⁴ While popular readers "know" that the definitive statement about the Apocalypse lies outside their grasp in the future, they often wrongly think they know in what specific future that finality lays waiting. An amusing scene in *The Prophecy* (Widen 1999) illustrates the tension between non-finality and finality in the Apocalypse's interpretation. A character notes the discovery of a version of the Apocalypse with twenty-three chapters. The extra chapter provides the basis for the movie's action. In contrast to that non-finality — the film engendered several sequels—another character observes that perhaps this copy is (the final answer of) "The Teacher's Version".

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