

# Networking Agency

## Classicism and Post-Classicism in Multiverse Time Travel Films

by Peter Labuza

In Rian Johnson's *Looper* (2012), Joe (Joseph-Gordon Levitt) stands in a field with a shotgun, waiting for a victim coming from the future to appear before him. The first time Johnson presents this event, Joe recognizes his potential victim as his future self (Bruce Willis). The older Joe outwits his younger self and knocks him out. However, Johnson returns to this same event again in the plot, except now Young Joe is able to successfully kill his future self. The event is then repeated a third time from the same visual perspective of the second event, except Young Joe is knocked out once again. Which event is *right*? Which event actually happened? Or perhaps, did they all occur?

Time travel as a plot device in contemporary Hollywood has undergone a significant paradigm shift in the last decade. Save for the adaptation of H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* in 1960, time travel was never a major genre trope of the classical science fiction cinema. As science fiction grew in popularity from B-movie genre to blockbuster, time travel narratives became a more common but an always "tricky" genre. Time travel films that follow hard science fiction (meaning rigorous logic conveyed to its audience as part of its world-building methodology) must lay down a set of "rules" that the narrative must adhere to. For many of the first major time travel films, the rules followed those of a linear timeline model, meaning one cannot change what has already happened, and worked through ramifications of such a universe.

However, a new paradigm is taking precedent in many of the major Hollywood releases: a multiverse theory in which past events can be changed to fix the present. An event can be observed multiple times with very different outcomes, and it is the goal of the protagonist to repeat and alter the past as necessary to create the desired outcome. Many of these films have been faulted by audiences and critics for indulging in such a conception, finding them logically problematic, as well "cheating" or "too easy." And yet, the most popular Hollywood time travel films of the last half decade have used this model. Why is Hollywood giving audiences something they do not necessarily want?

Thomas Elsaesser proposes Hollywood currently operates in a Post-Classical mode, and many films willingly "play" with this knowledge: "From the perspective of their production, films stand in a tradition: they have mastered the codes of the classical, and they are not afraid to display this mastery as 'play,' in the way they are able to absorb, transform, and appropriate also that which initially opposed the classical."<sup>1</sup> And yet, because time travel in Hollywood cinema has only existed as a phenomenon of Post-Classical Hollywood, this new paradigm suggests one might have to theorize about a Post-Post-Classical Hollywood cinema.

While such categorizations are ultimately arbitrary, by examining the films *Déjà Vu* (Scott, 2006), *Source Code* (Jones, 2011), and *Looper*, my goal is to propose how new types of time travel films use and adapt both Classical and Post-Classical elements of filmic narratology to ultimately assert a viewpoint of how to adapt to 21st century forms of society. I will first contextualize the history of time travel theory in the films, and demonstrate how the new paradigm subscribes strongly to the classical model of narrative. However, I will argue their modes and methodology of time travel ultimately work through anxieties of 21st century network societies, giving us a form of a productive pathology that proposes a new way that one can see and operate in the digital utopia. Each of these films will ultimately demonstrate how to embrace our future instead of our wallow in the past.

One of the major tenets of linear time travel philosophy is the "Infinite Banana Peel Theory." As silly as the name sounds, it is actually one of the most salient axioms for understanding how one could conceive of linear time travel as a possibility. Propose that one uses a time machine with the intention to go back and kill Hitler when he was a child (killing Hitler is always a popular example for time travel philosophers). One would get in his or her time travel machine, arrive in 1890s Germany and then find and shoot the young child (or whatever purposeful method of child killing one prefers). But if the universe exists on a linear timeline, it is considered often impossible to do that—every event that the traveler "changes" has in fact already occurred! The Infinite Banana Peel theory proposes that in the traveler's attempts to kill the child, he or she will run into an infinite number of "banana peels," or pre-determined events that stop the traveler from killing the child. Discussing the case of auto-infanticide (better known as The Grandfather Paradox), Nicholas J. J. Smith explains this further: "Perhaps his gun jams; perhaps he slips on a banana peel; perhaps he has a cardiac arrest. Nothing more than such ordinary occurrences is required to stop the time traveler killing his younger self. Hence backward time travel does not imply the truth of contradictions, even in the absence of chaperones."<sup>2</sup>

When Hollywood films began using plots involving time travel to the past (films where movie characters travel into the future never run the risk of contradiction), these science fiction productions also originally employed this paradigm. The first notable example is *Escape from the Planet of the Apes* (Taylor, 1971), the third film in the successful Charlton Heston franchise. Throughout the narrative, it becomes clear that the fact that the ape Caesar returned to the 1970s from the post-apocalyptic future is the cause of the eventual ape takeover. Because his parents go back in time to warn the humans, this inevitably causes the future to occur, which leads to the decision to go back into the past...and so on. This is called a *causal loop*, where the cause and the effect are one in the same.

The two most popular examples of linear time travel in science fiction Hollywood films are *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984) and *12 Monkeys* (Gilliam, 1995). Both these films have an extremely rigorous logic (or give the appearance of it) in using causal loops to explain the protagonist's engagement with the past. In *The Terminator*, the machine's goal to kill Sarah Connor is what leads to the appearance of Kyle Reese to prevent it, which also leads to Connor's impregnation with the future leader of the resistance. In Gilliam's remake of *La Jetée* (Marker, 1962), James Cole (Bruce Willis) realizes that his entire mission to the past did not change any of the events he was sent to prevent, discovering his only destiny is having his younger self become a witness to his own murder.

While based in classical three act structures, both of these films pose questions of narrative agency that counter classical assertions of protagonist-driven causal action. Elena Gomel argues that in these types of narrative, "S/he is not a rebel against oppressive master- narratives but their obedient slave as s/he trades the limitations of history for the stasis of myth. The postmodern subject's a-temporality is not as glorious liberation

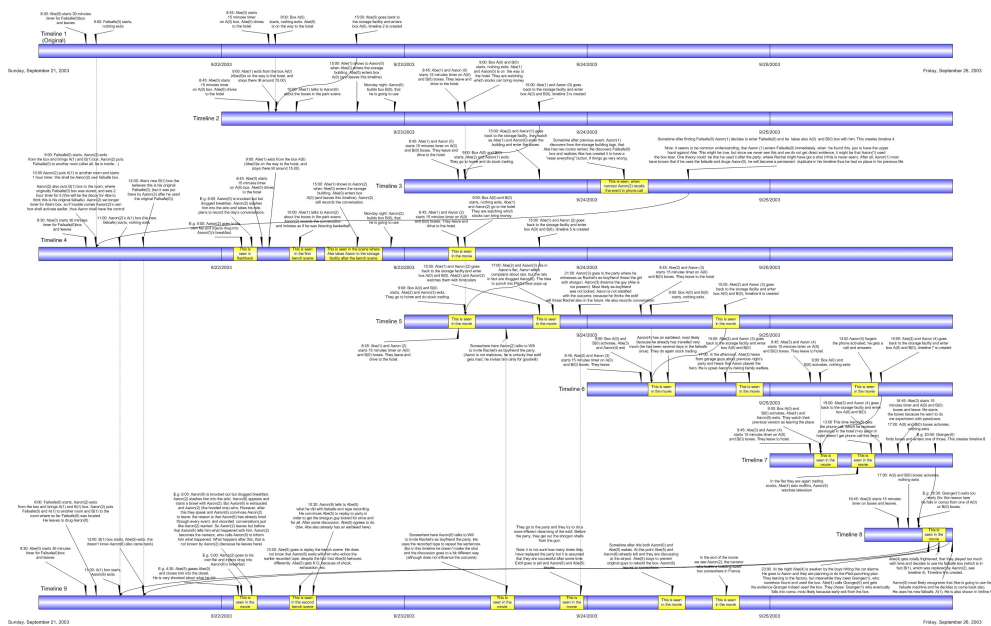
from the confines of chrono- loigic, but a slavish submission to an alternative logic of deterministic spacetime.<sup>73</sup> We can see this as a form of "play" in the post-classical tradition proposed by Elsaesser: both *The Terminator* and *12 Monkeys* knowingly play with our understanding of how these causal loops work. The characters' actions, which appear of their own volition, are only fulfilling an unavoidable destiny.

In many ways, one can see this temporal slavery as the ultimate extension of the conspiracy and paranoia paradigm of the 1970s. As Timothy Melley notes, "Numerous postwar narratives concern characters who are nervous about the ways large, and often vague, organizations might be controlling their lives, influencing their actions, or even constructing their desires."<sup>4</sup> In the linear time travel film, the "organization" is replaced with the most abstract and vaguest of possible narrative agents: spacetime itself. Both these films lead the characters to accept their identities as agentless characters, which we can propose as a working through of the trauma of 1970s (one only needs to note the first item of clothing worn by Schwarzenegger's character is the olive-green military jacket associated with Vietnam veterans). *The Terminator* ends with a gas attendant telling Sarah Connor about an approaching thunderstorm. Collected and calmly, she responds, "I know" and drives straight toward the storm, accepting to move with the trauma instead of against it.

It is via this context that I argue that the new paradigm of the multiverse time travel film should be viewed as a response to the problematic issue of narrative agency and control. The multiverse theory has precedents in Hollywood, notably popularized in two comedies: Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* (1985) and Harold Ramis's *Groundhog Day* (1993). Both films play with the idea that the past can be repeated and changed as necessary: Marty McFly returns to his present to find his mother and father as completely different people and yet seems quite fine with the result. *Groundhog Day* never explains why Phil is even stuck in his Sisyphus-structured time loop, forced to relive the titular day; he is there until he can perform the day in a way that satisfies "being a good man," only explained by the conventions of classical Aristotelian storytelling.

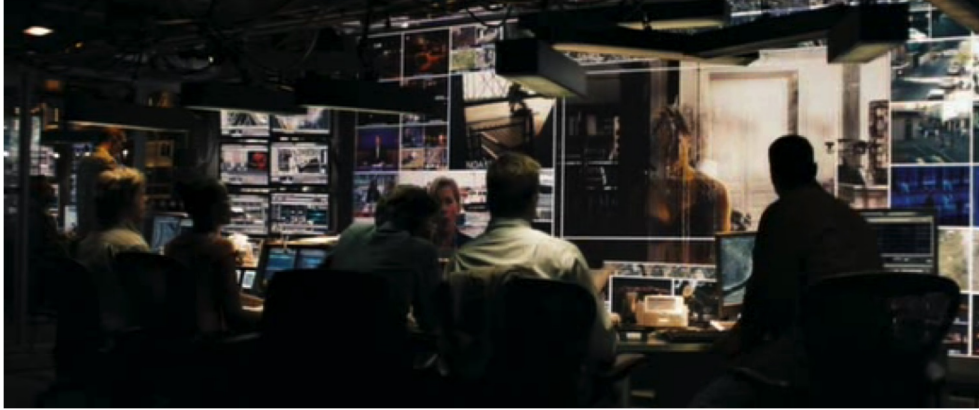
Many time travel theorists reject multiverse theory on the basis of the ability to reprimand it with the "true" present—to send someone back in time to kill Hitler leads to an alternate universe free from Nazism, but also a timeline irrelevant to the person who still must live in the one where the Holocaust still occurred. Comedies popularize multiverse theory because unlike the expectations of hard science fiction, they are not subservient to "rules" and scrutiny by obsessive science fiction fans. Problems thus arise in multiverse time travel films that sell themselves as hard science fiction. Because there are no longer strict rules of narrative agency or rigorous logic puzzles to be worked out, audiences reject multiverse theory because it is "too easy" and lacks the complexity of the "mind game film" paradigm proposed by Elsaesser.

Why has this switch occurred in recent hard science fiction films? Certainly one can point to the theories of pop science figures like Stephen Hawking and Brian Greene, who have argued for a multiverse as a very real possibility.<sup>5</sup> David Wittenberg notes, "Within physics itself, the once-benighted 'fantasy' of time travel has experienced a surprising renaissance, and is now widely considered to be both a valuable logical exercise and a potential physical experiment."<sup>6</sup> More importantly, one can point to two cases of independent "cult" films that demonstrated how multiverse time travel films could be just as "serious" and rigorous in its philosophical and theoretical conceits as linear time travel models: *Donnie Darko* (Kelly, 2001) and *Primer* (Caruth, 2004). These two films—both which received little support on their original release but grew followings via DVD—propose how multiverse films can also engage with the question of agency. Donnie does not die when the jet engine crashes onto his home and thus enters the alternate, "tangent" universe. His "mission" in the tangent timeline becomes to ensure that the jet engine will crash, go through the wormhole, and actually kill him in the "central" universe—he is forced to accept a lack of agency. *Primer* is even more ambitious, and certainly became noted for its production history: Shane Caruth made the film, which follows two men who travel through nine parallel timelines to return to an event again and again to "get it right," for a very small sum of \$7,000. The film's extremely scientific dialogue and "impossible to follow" plot has often been heralded as a paragon of mind game films. Elsaesser regards these films as partially a reflection of the growing non-theatrical market, as it is the type of film "that requires or repays multiple viewings; that rewards the attentive viewer with special or hidden clues; that is constructed as a spiral or loop."<sup>7</sup> *Primer*'s astronomically erudite narratology has rewarded its fans via multiple viewings and certainly become a precedent for Hollywood to adapt its multiverse logic into a more classical narrative.<sup>8</sup> I would also argue that we can see this as a special type of Elsaesser's concept of "Access for all."<sup>9</sup> These films allow themselves to work for multiple types of spectators: (a) huge science fiction "nerds" who are actively interested in time travel speculation and (b) more casual fans of film who simply want to watch a good yet playful story.



Many fans of *Primer* attempted to trace the film's various timelines. This is one of the most popular deconstructions, perhaps for its very complication. (Original Source and Author Unknown)

It is this interest in the second group that concerns my first reading the multiverse paradigm—the new films appears much more interested in embracing narrative classicism. Both *Déjà Vu* and *Source Code* have strikingly similar narratives that foreground the tension between multiverse and linear time travel models, eventually staking a claim in the former model to allow for the protagonist to regain narrative agency. Doug Carlin (Denzel Washington) and Colter Stevens (Jake Gyllenhaal) repeatedly question the limitations of the military devices that allow them to see the past. Both are tasks with only *observing* the past in order to identify a terrorist and prevent them from causing a future crime. The creators of their various devices repeatedly tell the protagonists that there is no way to possibly change what has already happened “You cannot alter this reality while *inside* the source code,” Stevens is told; when multiverse theory is proposed in *Déjà Vu*, the character is mocked as a “radicalist.” In both cases, the protagonist falls in love with a woman who appears within the “simulation,” and each eventually abandons their original universe for the simulation, which turns out to be instead a multiverse. Once made aware of this, the protagonist takes complete agency to prevent the original crime, never returning to the original timeline. Instead of seeing time as the ultimate causal agent that *prevents* narrative agency for the protagonist, it actually allows a new form of ‘play’ that *asserts* it instead.



**An image from *Deja Vu* (Scott, 2006), where the time travel “surveillers” look into the past. The filmmakers have constructed the set to resemble a contemporary video editing bay.**

I would like to argue that this aspect of the ‘play’ is actually a return to classical forms of narrative. David Bordwell argues, “Multiple-draft storytelling promises to abandon the classic ‘linearity’ of Hollywood storytelling, but the promise is largely a tease. The convention gestures toward unruly complication, but it tends to reinstall linearity, sorting everything out and making the final stretch of the film seem a logical consequence of what went before.”<sup>10</sup> Certainly, *Déjà Vu* and *Source Code* are strong examples of Bordwell’s proposition—if it is impossible for Doug Carlin to save the 500 lives and especially the woman he is in love with, the film’s classical resolution becomes impossible. Thus, the initial capture of the terrorist (Jim Cavizel) makes for the false ending to the film at the end of the second act—the film’s climax is instead Doug preventing the ferry bombing via the multiverse timeline.

Many fans appear upset that a function of this multiverse theory allows for the “simple” Hollywood endings reinforce this classicism. NPR’s Scott Tobias writes, “The last 10 or 15 minutes of *Source Code* feel like bad studio notes followed to the letter, with all that careful, rigorous sci-fi world-building tossed out and replaced by another lame paean to the transcendent power of free will.”<sup>11</sup> Viewing *Déjà Vu*, Nathan Lee in the *Village Voice* argues that Scott “heads into the third act with relative restraint.”<sup>12</sup> These critics see the fact these narratives privilege a multiverse but also embrace of a more classical Hollywood narrative structure as fundamentally contradictory.

*Looper* is somewhat of an anomaly, as it was heralded by a number of critics despite its use of a multiverse theory timeline. This is because *Looper* introduces the concept of the multiverse theory without making it explicitly clear—the film simply operates that the past, present, and future are all entirely malleable entities that create real time effects. The film sets up these rules in a sequence in which Seth (Paul Dano) refuses to “close his loop,” meaning kill his future self. The mob captures his younger self, and begins mutilating his body parts—as soon as each body part is removed, the older Seth immediately loses his limbs as well. This recalls the same logic behind Marty’s inexplicable family picture in *Back To The Future* where his brother and sister fade in and out—events happen in a simultaneity not possible in the linear model.

This might suggest a very new approach to thinking about the causality of events, but *Looper*’s narrative is ultimately classical, relying on a sort of flip on the genre tropes of film noir: Young Joe must stop his future self from making an irreconcilable action that he will not be able to live with, while Old Joe is attempting to amend for his own past mistakes that he cannot accept. Both in a way recall the memorable line by the Swede in *The Killers* (Siodmack, 1946) when he justifies his upcoming death as “I did something...once.” *Looper* uses the simultaneity theory to flip this premise around: the action that must be reprimanded is not one of the past but of a possible future, what Elsaesser calls “retroactive anticipation.” The film thus embraces a classical model in many ways, as both the protagonist and antagonist are given full agency to change events that have already occurred. The film’s resolution is thus another form of ‘play’ on the classical model: it reverse the model presented at the beginning of the film in order to create a resolution—suicide by way of homicide becomes homicide by way of suicide. The film can only “complete” its narrative by eliminating the antagonist by way of eliminating the protagonist, while also suggesting that the sacrificial act will prevent the young child Cid from growing up into the ultimate antagonist. *Looper*’s success with critics as compared to the more ambivalently received *Déjà Vu* and *Source Code* might be tied into the film’s structured ambiguity regarding its temporal logic. Elsaesser argues that a post-classical Hollywood film “aims at a textually coherent ambiguity, the way that poetry is said to aim at maximizing the levels of meaning that specific words or works carry, thus extending interpretation while retaining control over the codes that make interpretation possible.”<sup>13</sup> *Looper*’s ambiguity comes in terms of its scientific logic—it carefully hides its multiverse structure inside a narrative that appears to work as a linear timeline as well (additionally, characters openly admit the contrivance of time travel philosophy in order to ask the audience to avoid these questions as well). All three films thus use post-classical approaches to narratology to secure a very classical goal—Wittenberg argues that in multiverse films, “(narrative) conservatism remains the governing trend.”<sup>14</sup>

Is multiverse time travel thus a conservative form of narrative that actually asserts Hollywood’s continued

classicalism? It certainly appears so in terms of the films' relation to narrative agency, allowing each of these characters to achieve their goals without having to work through the impossibility of a linear causality. However, even if the films assert classical agency, what they perhaps suggest is that given new relationships to time and space, we can once again reclaim narrative agency. If the linear time travel films of Post-Classical Hollywood suggest we will always inevitably be subservient to causal systems outside of our control (government, culture, ideology), the new paradigm suggests that agency and autonomy are once again within grasp. I would propose that these films work through new relationships between the individual and the network society—often seen as a more alienating form of society—suggesting that we can once again take control of our agency via new technologies.

Not all contemporary Hollywood films suggest a utopic possibility, instead wallowing in ambivalence about how networks affect agency. A good example would be the cases of network narratives—films that forgo a protagonist for a multitude of characters whose lives accidentally link together in ways where they can no longer control what happens to them. In *Syriana* (Ghagan, 2005), the CIA agent played by George Clooney rushes to intersect his narrative with Prince Nasir to stop an impending attack on him. But as the two meet, he realizes he cannot do anything to prevent the impossible, and his actions have only resulted in his own death. Each protagonist in a network narrative loses agency to change his or her own path, becoming more subservient to the causal actions of the other protagonists they collide against.

This ambivalence also appears in films that work through digital landscapes and new forms of movement—In Michael Mann's *Miami Vice* (2006), two 20<sup>th</sup> Century professional cops are challenged by the new forms of 21<sup>st</sup> Century society: go boats, international capitalists, flows of money and information (but never actual drugs), and digital surfaces (one of the first major Hollywood films to embrace the format) all seem to be speeding past them. During a key sequence, Crockett and Tubbs watch a hostage video in which the criminals also show a weather report, so they can make sure they comprehend what is happening is in the here and now. Events in *Miami Vice* simply move too fast for the cops to keep up with time itself (One character relays the Chinese proverb, "Time is luck"), and the constant speed digital network society leads to the film's ambivalent ending where both the girl and the cartel leader get away, leaving the two heroes as marginal figures in a much larger narrative they have failed to comprehend.

If *Syriana* and *Miami Vice* are examples of films that leave the issues of agency in the network society unsolved, I would propose that *Déjà Vu*, *Source Code*, and *Looper* work through these issues and propose that by viewing time and space in a way concurrent with new networks and technologies, narrative agency can be reclaimed. Michael J. Anderson, writing on *Déjà Vu*, proposes, "Carlin's act is framed less in the naïve terms outlined heretofore than as an act of faith – in the possibility that the physical laws of the universe could be suspended, that a miracle could occur."<sup>15</sup> What I would instead propose is these three films argue that miracles are not just imaginary possibilities, but tangible realities made possible by the new forms of network—what was thought to be lost in linear forms of time can finally be reclaimed. They are no longer the possibility of a higher power beyond our control but simply must be framed and accessed via new technologies.

However, not every character in these films is able to see these new forms of spacetime that networks create, and I would argue each of these protagonists has a new form of sight that qualifies in terms of Elsaesser's model of a productive pathology: "Even though the films identify them as 'conditions,' the fact that these characters' point of view is usually privileged over all others (and thus functions as the spectator's guide) is more than a 'trick': it points to a peculiar aspect of their mental state, namely that it suspends our usual categories of sane/insane, as well as those of victim and agent."<sup>16</sup> While none of these characters is truly scarred (except for Stevens's half-charred body) or seen as having a problematic condition, there is a sense that their eyes have a particular form of seeing that is essential to resolving the narrative.

In *Déjà Vu*, it is no accident that the room Doug and the FBI team observe the past resembles a 21<sup>st</sup> century cinema editing bay, suggesting a relationship between the spectator viewing the film and the film's protagonist. The screens can be directed in any motion as observed by Doug, and he is chosen to join the FBI agents specifically because of his ability to observe. In an early sequence, Scott highlights Doug's eyes with a purple hue as he views Clare's dead body, suggesting that his eyes have a special quality that his colleagues do not. He is brought in because he must tell the FBI crew what to look for in the footage of the past, and then both "directs" the camera, as well as ventures out wearing the "goggle rig" in which each of his eyes views a separate spacetime, colliding into his vision.

In *Source Code*, Stevens is not sent into the "simulation" to stop the criminal, but only observe the passengers in order to identify the terrorist. In the machine back in the "present," Stevens views the governmental officials via a screen. Additionally, between his visits to the Source Code and his return to the "present," Stevens has constant visions of the Cloud Gate sculpture in downtown Chicago, which is revealed at the end of the film to be his destiny in the parallel timeline he ends up in. Bordwell posits, "Are they Colter's premonitions of a future to come? That assumption seems confirmed at the end when Colter, staring at the sculpture, asks Christina if she believes in Fate."<sup>17</sup> His ability to see and observe beyond his mission is what leads to his own redemption.

*Looper* builds on this motif as well, as Joe lives in a society where everyone uses a drug that is literally dropped into the eyes, clouding his vision. When Old Joe first appears to Young Joe, Johnson emphasizes the fact that he is able to look into his eyes (as opposed to the way the men usually arrived with hoods) in a close-up, which is why he does not immediately kill him. The gang leader Abe mentions that he rescued Joe as a teenager because he had "one eye looking at me, and I could see the bad version of your life like a *vision*." This dialogue is repeated at the end of the narrative in which Joe sees Cid, who is able to control his powers when he stares into the eyes of his mother, and has a vision of what will happen unless Joe gives up his own life.

All three films emphasize the protagonist's ability to see events differently from others in the narrative, and thus make choices to reclaim their narrative agency. Frederic Jameson suggests that the conspiracy theory film is about a failure of "cognitive mapping" or being able to properly see the big picture, what he calls "the impossible vision of totality."<sup>18</sup> While singular time travel films continue this paradigm by viewing the network in this same perspective, the multiverse time travel film instead gives us characters who are gifted via their sight, and are able to properly understand the new forms of network-spacetime. The films emphasize their ability to *look* and comprehend the network in a way at odds with those who have invented the devices that allow for time travel, embracing the digital network.

What does this new sight allow for exactly? What I would argue is the most salient feature is this new paradigm time traveler is able to see everything in the *here and now*—to not see physical entities as separated but all part of a continual connected chain with immediate effects. They see no difference between past and future; here and there. In the network society, everything collides into information moving past each other at speeds

that destroy classical conceptions of time and space—these films use the multiverse to dispose of our conceptions of 20<sup>th</sup> Century forms of time and space and show how characters can properly interact with this new technological society to achieve their desires.

In *Déjà Vu*, Doug discovers that the "surveillance footage" they are watching is not a screen but the actual past, which can be physically manipulated (unlike the actual surveillance footage of the bridge Doug observes at the beginning of the film). While the rest of the crew refuses to interact, Doug sees this as a necessary corrective—to go back and prevent the attack. One could argue this as a political critique by Scott, a questioning of whether the Patriot Act has successfully foiled terrorist acts. But more than that, the film simply how screen links societies together. The spatiotemporal entities collide next to each other, which Scott emphasizes in the shot-reverse shots of Claire and Doug where the light from each "separate time" bleeds into the other image. Anderson notes this "connote the two-way process that Claire's returned gaze makes explicit. The image does not seem to be 'strictly one way' in the terms of Scott's visual rhetoric."<sup>19</sup> As the physicist explains again, they are viewing "a single trailing moment of the *now*" (calculated to the very nanosecond!). Doug eventually decides to become part of the past in order to fix a different past, allowing for an alternate timeline in which the woman he loves continues her life. His interest in what happens to the "other" timeline becomes negligent in his eyes, as he views it one connected network that does not separate between past and present.

*Source Code* presents a similarly complex relationship between the Stevens's missions and his tangible reality. While the narrative no doubt shows the influence of video games with Stevens's ability to "replay" the mission (all it lacks is the necessary "Game Over. Want to Try Again?"), Stevens's revelation by the end of the film is that *Source Code* does not just create a simulation of the past, but an entire parallel and tangible universe. Stevens is the only one who embraces this possibility, pleading with his officers to allow him to complete the simulation by not just preventing the terrorist, but making amends with his father and successfully romancing the girl he has grown to love. He pleads to become one with the virtual network instead of embrace his disfigured tangible reality, accepting that a virtual world is just as "real." In embracing the virtual, he is rewarded with an entire new life, suggesting that embracing the network society can reward one as much as embracing the "real" world.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, *Looper* works via a simultaneity theory as described before, suggesting a time in which actions have instant effects instead of delayed effects. The film's immediate look of combining retroactive old school aesthetic (most of the cars have a 1960s vintage quality; Joe is chastised for dressing out of time) with a futuristic society already suggests a clashing of various temporal realities. Early in the film, Johnson quotes the swirling coffee cup from Jean-Luc Godard's *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her* (1967), where Godard narrated his concerns about the growing spaces between societies. Johnson's film challenges Godard's anxieties about falling into nothingness by embracing a society where actions have immediate and connected effects. The deal the Loopers take themselves is essentially one that re-establishes their relationship to time—they are given 30 years of guaranteed life; no less and no more. *Looper* also reflects a network "memory" in many ways, where historical events are not only plastic but the memory of them is as well—Jim Emerson notes that "if somebody in the future changes the past, it changes future persons' memories of the past accordingly."<sup>21</sup> Thus, Old Joe continually has to check his pocket watch to make sure the photo of his dead wife is still there. While *Looper* does present an ambiguous ending (we have no idea whether Cid will in fact grow up to be the Rainmaker), what is essential is that Young Joe embraces the fact that events are malleable no matter what and no event can be made with certainty except those within his own existence. Old Joe thus embraces this malleability by allowing ambiguity and plasticity of events to exist.

This leaves us, for lack of a better word, with a paradox. Not like the Grandfather paradox, but how to exactly read these multiverse time travel films and their engagement between Classical and Post-Classical affectations in Hollywood. It is clear to me that these three films all center on protagonists who are able to engage with new forms of time and space and thus become one with the network society instead of reject it—accepting spaces as all belonging to a simultaneous here and now. The films ask its spectators to work through these new forms of sight, to betray the classical rules of linear causality, and embrace the new technologies that will dominate the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But as all time travel films open up new branches, they ultimate close them in. All three films feature characters who reclaim narrative agency and perform it for very classical forms of Hollywood narrative: three act structure, romantic subplot, defeat of an antagonist, and an eventual change in affect with a happy (or at least happier) ending. But as Elsaesser has suggested, this is a perfect example of how Hollywood "adapts to stay the same," where new forms of network and digital life are balanced with traditional ways of storytelling. While earlier Post-Classical films produced anxieties about the network society—the failure of cognitive mapping to produce agency—multiverse films embrace new technology in order to produce classical narrative agents. Events of our new society might seem more daunting in their malleability, but simply viewing them with new eyes will lead to a reclamation of our own agency.

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*12 Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, Universal Pictures, 1995)

*Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, Universal Pictures, 1985)

*Déjà Vu* (Tony Scott, Touchstone Pictures, 2006)

*Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, Newmarket Films, 2001)

*Escape from Planet of the Apes* (Don Taylor, 20th Century Fox, 1971)

*Groundhog Day* (Bill Murray, Columbia Pictures, 1993)

*La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962)

*The Killers* (Robert Siodmack, Universal Pictures, 1946)

*Looper* (Rian Johnson, FilmDistrict, 2012)

*The Matrix* (Andrew and Larry Wachowski, Warner Bros., 1999)

*Miami Vice* (Michael Mann, Universal Pictures, 2006)

*Primer* (Shane Caruth, ThinkFilm, 2004)

*Source Code* (Duncan Jones, Summit Entertainment, 2011)

*Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, Warner Bros., 2005)

*The Terminator* (James Cameron, Orion Pictures, 1984)

*The Time Machine* (George Pal, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1960)

#### NOTES

1. Thomas Elsaesser, *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002), 79.
2. Nicholas J.J. Smith, "Bananas enough for time travel?," *The British journal for the philosophy of science*, 48, no. 3 (1997): 366.
3. Elana Gomel, *Postmodern Science Fiction and Temporal Imagination*, (New York: Continuum, 2010), 56-57.
4. Timothy Melley, "Agency panic and the culture of conspiracy," *Conspiracy nation: The politics of paranoia in postwar America*, ed. Peter Knight (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 58.
5. Greene was also hired as a consultant on *Source Code* in order to make sure the time travel made logical sense.
6. David Wittenberg, *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 28-29.
7. Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 38.
8. Caruth served as a consultant on *Looper*, helping Johnson figure out the logics of his multiverse.
9. Thomas Elsaesser, "James Cameron's *Avatar*: Access for All," *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 9, no. 3 (2011): 248.
10. David Bordwell, "Forking tracks: SOURCE CODE," *Observations on Film Art* (blog), May 3, 2011, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2011/05/03/forking-tracks-source-code/>.
11. Scott Tobias, "'Source Code': Win Or Die Trying (Repeat As Needed)," *NPR Movies* (blog), March 31, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/04/01/134926809/source-code-win-or-die-trying-repeat-as-needed>.
12. Nathan Lee, "Tony Scott, Trailblazer," *The Village Voice*, Nov 14, 2006, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2006-11-14/film/tony-scott-trailblazer/>.
13. Elsaesser, "James Cameron's *Avatar*," 248.
14. Wittenberg, *Time Travel*, 171.
15. Michael J. Anderson, "Resurrecting the Rube: Diegesis Formation and Contemporary Trauma in Tony Scott's *Déjà Vu* (2006)," *Tataville* (blog), Nov 12, 2010, <http://tataville.blogspot.com/2010/11/resurrecting-rube-diegesis-formation.html>.
16. Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," 26.
17. Bordwell, "Forking tracks: SOURCE CODE."
18. Frederic Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 79.
19. Anderson, "Resurrecting the Rube."
20. Which perhaps reads as the antithesis proposed by *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999).
21. Jim Emerson, "Looper: Dig That Crazy Cloud," *Scanners* (blog), Oct 3, 2012, <http://www.rogerebert.com/scanners/looper-dig-that-crazy-cloud>.



**Author bio:**

Peter Labuza is a PhD student in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California and a member of the Visual Studies Graduate Certificate program. His dissertation will examine the transition of live television directors to Hollywood filmmaking in the late 1950s and 1960s, using extensive archival evidence to examine modifications in corporate structures, legal contracts, publicity firms, and stylistic strategies. Labuza also works as a critic and essayist, and has published in *Variety*, *Sight & Sound*, *Filmmaker Magazine*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The AV Club*, and [RogerEbert.com](http://RogerEbert.com) among many others. He is the host of the popular podcast *The Cinephiliacs*, and serves as a booklet editor for *Masters of Cinema*.

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