The Symbolism of Synthetic Space in *Cube* (1997): Postmodern SF Film as Consensual Hallucination

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This paper analyzes the symbolism of the fictional space of *Cube* (1997) in the wider context of postmodern science fiction literature and film criticism. Its main point is that the movie's imaginary setting is a complex symbolic and metaphoric element whose ambiguous nature and connotative meaning enhances interpretation. The cube is a multiple metaphor that allows for the fictional exploration of the territory of the unconscious, of the contemporary social and political coordinates and of the general framework of reality. As a fictional space that reproduces the postmodern vision of reality through an artistic elaboration, the film can be read as a 'consensual hallucination', i.e. a virtual reality where real elements are transformed and reinterpreted and which is experienced by viewers simultaneously in order to achieve a deeper awareness of the 'real' world. In this sense, the movie epitomizes the role of science fiction film in postmodern culture, for it creates a virtual (fictional) reality that reveals the complex meanings and hidden structures of contemporary reality in Western technological societies.

Keywords: postmodern; science fiction; film; *Cube;* 'consensual hallucination'; symbolism.

Este artículo analiza el simbolismo del espacio de la película *Cube* (1997) en el contexto de la crítica de la literatura y del cine de ciencia-ficción posmodernistas, y tiene como objetivo principal mostrar que el escenario fantástico en que se desarrolla la acción es un elemento simbólico y metafórico complejo cuya naturaleza ambigua y numerosas connotaciones favorecen la proliferación de lecturas distintas e incluso contradictorias. El cubo es una metáfora múltiple que permite la exploración en la ficción del territorio desconocido del subconsciente, de las coordenadas políticas y sociales contemporáneas y de la concepción posmodernista de la realidad. Dado que se desarrolla en un entorno ficticio que reproduce dicha visión a través del arte, la película puede ser interpretada como una 'alucinación colectiva', esto es, como una realidad virtual donde los elementos reales se transforman y se reinterpretan y que los espectadores experimentan de manera simultánea para alcanzar una visión más profunda de lo que es el 'mundo real'. En este sentido, el filme resume el papel del cine de ciencia-ficción en la cultura posmoderna, ya que crea una realidad virtual (ficticia) que revela los complejos significados y las estructuras implícitas existentes en la concepción de la realidad dominante en las sociedades avanzadas occidentales.

Palabras clave: posmodernismo; ciencia-ficción; cine; *Cube*; 'alucinación colectiva'; simbolismo.

Since 1998, when it was awarded first prize in the best movie section of the Sitges fantasy and science fiction film festival, the film *Cube* (1997) has established itself as a milestone in the science fiction (SF) and horror genres. A low-budget movie, produced outside the Hollywood industry channels that launched comparable postmodern SF films like *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995), *Gattaca* (Andrew Niccol, 1997) and *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) and interpreted by virtually unknown actors, Vincenzo Natali's work has already inspired two sequels, *Cube²: Hypercube* (Andrzej Sekula, 2002) and *Cube Zero* (Ernie Barbarash, 2004), which, using a similar setting and plot, exploit some of the questions raised by the first film. *Cube* is an innovative movie in many aspects: the characters are decidedly postmodern in the sense that they have no history and there seems to be no initial relationship among them; the plot is minimal and there is no 'mystery' to be solved, and as a result, no final interpretation of the film's strange fictional space. Its most valuable asset, however, both from a conceptual and an aesthetic point of view, seems to be the setting: a huge maze consisting of virtually identical steel cells shaped as cubes. Like the characters, the spectator experiences the loss of spatial and temporal coordinates inside the structure, and leaves the cube with no answer to the confusion generated by the construction. The film does not attempt to reduce this confusion; like other postmodern literary and cinema productions, it requires the spectator to guess what is really happening, to ruminate what the meaning of fiction is, and, in short, to take part in the interpretation process. Nevertheless, the numerous symbolic and metaphoric meanings generated by the nightmarish interior universe of *Cube* should not be rejected or underestimated as a pure imaginary exercise; in fact, as this paper will try to show, its fictional nature and undefined character respond to advanced postmodern aesthetic and conceptual principles. *Cube* raises several issues that are essential to understand the contemporary postmodern experience of and attitude towards reality, as well as postmodern anxieties about the nature of contemporary social relations, the purpose of political structure, and the consequences of the predominance of capitalistic economy as the organizational principle of human relations. This paper thus aims to analyze *Cube* as the metaphoric representation of a 'consensual hallucination', a notion that seems to describe how contemporary postmodern audiences envision their position in relation to reality. This essay will argue that the movie epitomizes the main motifs of postmodern SF film, and that it is also a fundamental work in a wider context of postmodern literary and critical theory, due to the rich metaphoric value of its main element—the cube—and to the problematic relationship between reality and fiction it establishes. The conclusions will contribute to the construction of a more general outlook of the function and relevance of postmodern SF film in contemporary Western technological societies.

The Meaning of Science Fiction's Fiction

The path towards the academic recognition of SF as a non-marginal literary (and, consequently, film) genre seems to have been connected to the realization that the imaginary worlds it presented were not necessarily careless fictional exercises, but alert responses to the cultural and historical context.[1] The earliest critical approaches to the genre carried out by Amis (1960), Blish (1964) and Philmus (1970) struggled to provide a description of the problematic relationship between SF's imaginary worlds and reality. Critics perceived a difference in the attitude towards the real world between SF and realistic fiction, as well as between SF and fantasy, but did not agree on how its description could be articulated. One of the most famous SF writers and critics, Brian W. Aldiss, proposed that the separation between SF and the fantastic genre had to consider the fact that the latter was mainly focused on the past as a consequence of the influence of the Gothic. In his definition of SF, Aldiss emphasized the genre's adaptation to the consolidation of the scientific world-view and its proximity to contemporary issues in opposition to the appeal of the medieval in fantasy.[2] Consequently, Aldiss made a brief but illuminating announcement, "[s]cience Fiction is NOW, not Then" (Aldiss 1986: 27). Aldiss's definition of the genre thus required the presence of a coherent scientific framework or some technological element, and rejected works where these were not evident. A similar view was expressed some years later by Darko Suvin in what is considered to be one of the first systematic approaches to the genre, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979). Suvin acknowledged the importance of scientific and technological elements, but considered, as Samuel Delany had suggested, that the definition of the genre was too dependent on "things extra-literary" (Delany 1977: 51). Thus Suvin sought to define the genre in purely linguistic/literary terms, and suggested that SF was a "metaphysical" genre (meaning non-realistic) whose essential characteristic was what he called a "cognitive estrangement" or "novum" (Suvin 1979: 4), that is, the introduction of something new as the source of the fictional universe. This element had to be possible, credible or coherent with the technological and scientific world-view. Isaac Asimov (1981: 18) also considered that the presence of this technological element marked the border between fantasy and SF. This critic saw both genres as non-realistic (although he used the term "surrealistic" [Asimov 1981:

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[1] The main point of the following discussion is that SF developed first as a literary genre and it was only later that SF was incorporated into films. As a consequence, SF film has lagged behind the literary genre's ideological and aesthetic evolution, which means that SF film has absorbed changes in literature some years later. It could thus be argued that SF film of the 1950s and 1960s corresponds to the literary productions of the 1930s and 1940s and so on. Literary SF became postmodern in the mid-eighties (William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, published in 1984, is generally considered the first novel of the new aesthetic) and with a few exceptions (perhaps Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* [1982] and David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* [1982]) postmodern SF film consolidated mainly in the 1990s.

[2] The whole definition runs: "Science fiction is the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science), and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mode" (Aldiss 1986: 25). Aldiss's study of SF first appeared in 1973 as *Billion Year Spree*. This is the reason why its definition is placed first in this discussion, although the book used here is, for obvious reasons, the revised second version, *Trillion Year Spree* (1986).

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17]), and argued that the basis for the growth of SF could be found in the technological development of Western civilization which "discover[s]" the concept of historical change, and consequently, the notions of progress and "future" (1981: 18). This tendency to associate the genre with the fictional exploration of what is to come has stuck, and novels and films set in the future are still automatically included in the SF genre, independently of whether those futures are connected with some present issues or set in far future (or past) eras that are exercises of pure fantasy.

Nevertheless, the association between SF and future narrative settings may be frequent, but it is not essential, as Fredric Jameson argued in his essay "Progress vs. Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?" (1982). Jameson suggested that the drive to set a narrative in some future time was similar to the impulse to narrate past events, and responded to the discursive construction a concept of the present as a different, separate entity. According to this critic, both the historical novel and SF originated from the same ideological context and are related to issues extracted from the contemporary context in the same manner: by establishing a difference with the present that reinforces the teleological view of history supported by the capitalist notions of change and progress (1982: 148-49). In fact, Jameson believed that SF took over precisely where the historical novel had concluded, "the moment in which the historical novel ceases to be functional is also the moment of the emergence of SF, with the first novels of Jules Verne…." (1982: 150).

After Jameson, it had become clear that the particular relationship between SF's imaginary worlds and reality could not be reduced to narrative time displacement or to the use of some conventional technological or scientific motifs. In their search for a definition of the genre that did not depend on external or non-literary considerations, writers and critics began to explore the philosophical and critical context and found that developing postmodern theories could be exceptionally useful. One of the main projects of postmodernism was the revision of the traditional role of narrative as a transparent means of linguistic representation. For postmodern criticism, the validity of the division between texts whose 'truth' value can be justified by objective, 'scientific' means and those which are simple exercises of the imagination became problematic. The traditional literary conventions whereby a (fictional) text could be 'realistic' or 'fantastic' are not applicable to the postmodern mind; furthermore, even the difference between the textual strategies of the literary use of language and those used in disciplines like philosophy, anthropology, sociology and history (which are supposedly supported by their correspondence to reality) are doubted. As Brian McHale would put it some years later, "instead of narrative being the object of narratological theory, it is theory that has become the object of narrative…." (1992: 4). In the postmodern world-view, then, telling stories contains a strong cognitive component: composing a narrative about some world was to construct a theory about it; human experience is an accumulation of stories, including those told by SF.

In this context, SF's 'imaginary' worlds no longer had to justify their connection with 'reality'. They were simply a part of the complex and countless number of interrelated texts that constitute 'reality'. The term 'myth', which had

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been previously used to describe SF's oblique narrative relationship with the 'real' world (Philmus 1970; Clareson 1977; Warrick 1980) was substituted by the ideologically and theoretically loaded concepts of symbolism and metaphor, which in the poststructuralist and postmodern context have a cognitive nature; like narrative, they are means by which humans experience their world(s).[3] Delany, who pioneered the introduction of poststructuralism into SF criticism, used these terms with epistemological and cognitive connotations to explain SF's nature (1977: 197; 334). In later studies critics speak of the symbolic and metaphoric nature of SF in relation to cognition, epistemology and perception (Brin 1992; Slusser 1992; Broderick 1995; Parrinder 2000). In order to emphasize the difference from the traditional notion of metaphor (which accepted a change in linguistic reference but left unvaried the 'metaphysical' conceptual structure of reality), postmodern critics have suggested other terms to explain the problematic position of SF in relation to what is conventionally considered as the 'real' world. Brian McHale proposed the term "zone" (1992: 250) to describe how postmodern SF's imaginary worlds function as complex symbolic and metaphorical spaces that "actualize" (1992: 246) alternative models of reality.[4] SF narratives can thus be understood as elaborated but indeterminate approaches to the description of the 'real' world according to postmodern theoretical propositions, where conflicting interpretative structures clash. This collision generates what Jameson has called the "cognitive map" (1995: 51), which can be defined as the ideological (theoretical) gap with the 'real' world that a fictional space generates in the reader's mind.[5] In my opinion, this notion describes appropriately the relationship between a science fictional world and reality as it is understood in postmodernism. The interpretative challenge does not lie in the confrontation between reality and a possible or credible (but fictional) world, but in the dialogue between two different structures of meaning constructing a coherent view of experience: real and fictional texts would thus stand at the same level as legitimate narratives of 'reality'. Some critics have even questioned this balance and have inverted this relationship between SF fictive worlds and reality. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, for instance, has argued that the "real" world has become utopian and that fictional models provide an experience of what reality has actually turned into (Baudrillard 1991: 310-11). Baudrillard's postmodern reading of the relationship between SF's imaginary worlds and reality would thus be the (perhaps extreme) culmination of this tendency towards the analysis of the genre as a means of scrutinizing the social and cultural context.

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[3] The cognitive nature of metaphor and of metaphoric relations has been a topic poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida has dealt with extensively in his work. See for instance "Le rétrait de la métaphore" in *Psyché: Inventions de l'autre* (1978). See also Ricoeur 1975.

[4] Although McHale used this concept as an equivalent to his own notion of postmodern "ontological dialogue" (1994: 28), other terms have been used for these science-fictional alternative realities, like Samuel R. Delany's 'paraspace' (cf. Bukatman 1993: 105-81), and even William Burroughs 'interzone' (in *The Naked Lunch* [1959]).

[5] Jameson also speaks about the mimetic dissimilarity of fiction in relation to this notion of "cognitive map". In turn, Brian McHale considers that the "otherness of the fictional world" (1994: 28) creates an "ontological dialogue", that is, a "gap between two worlds" (1994: 79-80). Both notions are quite similar and explain how the imaginary 'zone' functions.

The proliferation of 'zones' in postmodern SF therefore indicates the ideologically and structural instability of the postmodern notion of reality, and epitomizes the continual quest for fictional worlds that could provide some interpretative coordinates in the confused postmodern condition. These 'zones' appear in postmodernist mainstream narrative (Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs, Kurt Vonnegut) as well as in the most widely acclaimed forms of postmodern literary SF, cyberpunk (William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Pat Cadigan, Neal Stephenson). They also have consolidated in a series of SF films that have been clearly influenced by the type of characters, settings and plots that define postmodern SF literature. Although *The Matrix* (1999) would certainly stand out as the most popular example, other movies with similar aesthetics and ideological frameworks should be considered: *Strange Days* (1995), *Virtuosity* (Brett Leonard, 1995), *Cube* (1997), *Gattaca* (1997), *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999), and more recently *Code 46* (Michael Winterbottom, 2003) and *Primer* (Shane Carruth, 2004).[6] Like their literary counterparts, these movies add their own 'zones' to the number of postmodern fictional models of 'reality', thus contributing to generate a complex symbolical, metaphorical and cognitive connection with the 'real'. In this context, the fictional universe presented by *Cube* creates its own 'zone', that is, its own signifying structure of contemporary technological society, and establishes a productive dialogue not only with reality, but also with the other 'zones' in the search for conceptual coordinates. In this sense, the film's main symbol, the cube, substitutes (and constitutes) the universe in terms of characters, setting and plot, and the discussion of its symbolic and metaphorical meanings (no 'rational' or 'objective' signification is evident) becomes the characters' as well as the spectators' task. The analysis of the peculiar characteristics of this metaphorical structure and of its ambiguous and undetermined relation to 'reality' should therefore produce a critical picture of postmodern experience which, contrary to what happens in literature, where reading is primarily an individual activity, contains a strong social component, for cinema is originally a collective event.[7] As a result, it would be possible to argue that postmodern SF films challenge audiences' beliefs by making them experience the consensual hallucination they present in fiction; the use of image instead of words allows the spectators a more direct access to the 'zone', thus increasing the confusion between the 'imaginary' and the 'real' world. The symbolic connection between motif (in fiction) and its effect (in reality) becomes therefore complex but inevitable.

The Cube: Inner Space, Steel Architecture and Cognitive Structure

1. Inner Space: The Maze of the Unconscious

In the first film adventure of the TV characters created by Gene Roddenberry, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Robert Wise, 1979), the Earth is visited by an enormous alien entity that threatens to engulf it. In a desperate effort to defend

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[6] This list does not intend to be comprehensive or to establish a value-based hierarchy, but to give an idea of the consolidation of postmodern SF film during the 1990s.
[7] See for instance Annette Kuhn (1990: 10).

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their home planet, Captain Kirk and his subordinates attempt to establish contact, only to discover that at the center of this complicated spaceship lies the Voyager 1, the first human probe to be sent outside the solar system in search of extra-terrestrial civilizations. The probe has traveled around the galaxies looking for its maker: Man. This episode may be read as a naïve and unimaginative, even conservative example of how humankind's continuous search for the Other can often be translated as the search for the Same. However, it is representative enough of what the exploration of outer space in SF is frequently about: humans looking for an otherness that justifies their existence and provides a definition of what it is to be human by opposition. It is thus not by chance that Brian Aldiss describes SF itself as "the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe…." (1986: 25). *Star Trek*'s fictional conclusion has marked a general trend in the development of the genre, which has progressively moved from the remotest regions of the universe and faraway planets to focus on earthen landscapes and on the limits of the human body itself. Therefore, instead of traveling for several light-years to meet the power of the unconscious as it happens, for instance, in the movie *Forbidden Planet* (Fred McLeod Wilcox, 1956), postmodern SF film and literature have preferred to set their plots in not-so-future terrestrial cities, apocalyptic and post-technological landscapes and oppressive artificial environments. The typical setting of cyberpunk, the urban sprawl, shares its main characteristics with the apocalyptic Los Angeles of *Strange Days* or the post-technological "desert of the real" in *The Matrix*. The setting of *Cube* is no exception. It is a self-enclosed space, lacking a centre, radically separated from any external reality and governed by its own rules. It may be interpreted as a universe (or a model of the universe) in itself, where the main coordinates are not outside but inside: the exploratory journey typical of SF has "inner space" as destination in *Cube*.

British SF writer J.G. Ballard suggested the term 'inner space' to describe the complex relationship between the landscapes of his novels and the exploration of the unconscious.[8] However, the term and concept have proved useful to designate the genre's tendency towards closer (in both senses of the word) settings and to emphasize the role of landscapes as highly symbolic and iconic elements in SF. The cube in Natali's movie is one of these inner spaces, whose symbolic and metaphoric content is enhanced by the fact that it is minimalist, repetitive and irresponsive. The characters have to fill the gaps with their own ideas. The cube is also post-technological, for it is oppressive and aggressive (some cells are trapped); it is hard, cold and mathematical, in opposition to soft and warm human bodies and to irrational and often unpredictable human minds (Holloway is a paranoiac, Quentin a psychopath, Worth a nihilist, Kazan an autistic mathematical genius). The association of this claustrophobic and meaningless space with the unconscious is evident because, free from social conventions and regulations and devoid of material objects, the characters can analyze themselves and explore their most hidden feelings and desires, from Quentin's homicidal tendencies to the origins of

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[8] This term was used by Ballard himself in his essay "Time, Memory and Inner Space" (1984: 100-101).

Holloway's hysteric and paranoid feminism (whose assumptions ironically turn out to be sane).

The implications of this association between the cube and the unconscious, however, will not be the object of a detailed analysis in this paper, because this work has already been done by Shelia Kunkle in her essay "Lacan's life, the Universe, and Vincenzo Natali's *Cube*". Kunkle calls the structure a "pure signifier" (2000: 282) and argues that "the cubes offer us a metaphor for the virtual structure of Lacan's metonymous signifying chain" (2000: 283). In short, this critic's reading reinforces the symbolic and metaphoric referential nature of the film's inner space, and eventually suggests a series of ideas that would fit perfectly into a typical postmodern interpretation. She argues, "[w]hat *Cube* demonstrates, finally, is the inadequacy of and confining nature of the terms used in traditional physics and philosophy, which are based on merely physical ontologies and rationalized epistemologies" (2000: 293). Other contemporary films could be interpreted similarly, like *Gattaca*, which presents a conflict between a strictly scientific view of human beings and one where there is a freer interpretation of humanity, and *The Matrix*, where mechanical and scientific control is opposed to human particularity and freedom. Literally and metaphorically, postmodern SF tends to explore inner space in these catastrophic, claustrophobic, artificial and even virtual landscapes.

2. Ideology Recycled as Architecture: The Steel Maze

The minimalist and virtually objectless nature of the cube promotes its interpretation in the symbolic and metaphorical realms, as we have seen. Nevertheless, the cube has also a clearly-defined and repetitive physical structure. It consists of individual cubic cells that multiply to form the overall structure; the final edifice contains 26 rooms per face, which means that there are 17,576 different cells. The shape, the materials (steel) and the composition of the cube correspond neatly to the aesthetic parameters of modern architecture: massive, repetitive, and constructed with new materials according to mathematical proportions and factory efficiency, the cube could be identified with a block of flats, if seen from the outside. The similarity may be unintended, but it is extremely significant, for the criticism of the aesthetic and ideological principles of modern architecture has had a strong influence on the development of postmodern criticism in general.

As F. Jameson explained, postmodern architecture provided the first articulation of the aesthetic and ideological features of what would later be called postmodernism (1995: 2).[9] Postmodern architects scrutinized and rejected the aesthetic, symbolic and ideological implications of modern designs namely because they were based on principles like standardized production, ideal and neoclassical lines, rationalism and mechanism, which postmodernists read as totalitarian and alienating. As a result, architects like Aldo Rossi, Robert Venturi, Charles A. Jencks, Rem Koolhaas and Paolo Portoghesi read the

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[9] See also Hassan (1975: 49, 54) and Hutcheon (1995: ix).

famous modern buildings designed by architects like Le Corbusier, Gropius, Mies Van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright as alienating environments which reflected the capitalistic exploitation and scientific modeling of the human.

The structure of the cube is similarly (or better, uncannily) aggressive against human bodies (the traps are state-of-the-art technology and produce horrible deaths by brutal scientific means), as well as extremely alienating and standardizing (the fact that the characters wear uniforms is quite significant). Its design is devoid of human coordinates and traditional architectural elements such as doors, windows or ornaments, and, for all its apparent mathematical ordered simplicity (a cube), it becomes a maze due to its repetitive nature, as well as the lack of spatial references and a centre.[10] It is also significant to notice that, contrary to what happens in most horror movies and in the Gothic tradition, where the menacing elements reside in old castles or houses, swamps and forests, the aggressive elements in *Cube* are all technological.[11] The architecture of the cube therefore enhances the characters' impression of alienation, and increases the ideological implications of the story. The negative depiction of modern architecture in SF film goes as far back as *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926), and has been an essential element in the iconography of SF in general (cf. Wolfe 1979). To mention just an example of alienating buildings to be found in contemporaneous films, *Gattaca*'s exterior setting corresponds to the Marin County Civic Center (San Rafael, California), designed by Modernist architect Frank Lloyd Wright.[12]

This interpretation of the cube as a stylized modern architectural design reinforces its symbolic and metaphorical potential, which up till now had been associated with the unconscious ('inner space'), and releases a number of latent social implications which are in fact present in the film. If, as Aldo Rossi argued, architecture is a space where individual and communal messages collide (1970: 12), the cube is to be understood not only as the locus of the quest for self-knowledge, but also as the place where the clash between the individual and society is reenacted symbolically. The cube represents not only a challenge to the unconscious circumstances of the subjects (Rennes's individuality, Quentin's aggressive macho pose, Holloway's feminist distrust, Leaven's juvenile disinterest, Worth's depreciation of the value of life), but also a test of long-established Western assumptions about social dynamics. Self-sufficient, patriarchal or individualistic attitudes like Quentin's and Rennes's may have been traditionally promoted as the basis of social development in the

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[10] The importance of the notion of center as the origin and conclusion of a structure was emphasized by J. Derrida's seminal essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" (first published in English in 1966). The cube's lack of center thus metaphorically represents the instability of the concept of reality in postmodernism.

[11] Even in a movie that is a landmark of the confluence between horror and SF, *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), the technological is mixed with the organic in the alien threat, and the setting is a mixture of spaceship and Gothic castle, whose curved spaces and non-linear corridors recall "female" spaces (cf. Sobchak 1990).

[12] Not only in *Gattaca*; in *The Matrix*, the power of economic, technological and governmental power is associated with skyscrapers, like Mr Anderson's software company and the building where Morpheus is interrogated. It is significant to notice the difference between the negative depiction of architecture in these movies and the hygienic, rational buildings (designed according to Modernist aesthetic principles) of films like *Forbidden Planet*, and the galactic capital cities described in Asimov's *Foundation* series or in the *Star Wars* movies.

West, but are ill-adapted to the postmodern social context. In the late-capitalistic and highly technological contemporary societies, collective success does not depend on old-fashioned myths of class or race superiority, drawn from the adaptation of Darwin's survival-of-the-fittest theories to sociology, but on the acquisition and communication of knowledge. Elitist and nihilist behaviors like Worth's, or self-pitying non-collaborative stances like Holloway's are therefore considered detrimental for social development. To survive, the characters of *Cube* have to collaborate and incorporate everyone's specialized knowledge, including the abilities of those who do not seem fit for competition in Darwinian terms. For instance, autistic Kazan's role turns out to be essential to escape death in the cube, although Quentin would readily have abandoned him due to his mental disability. Reading the cube as architecture thus reveals the film's awareness of the tensions generated by the new relationship between the individual and society in the postmodern world, where, as it happens inside the cube, there are no obvious general goals that work as the center of people's lives. The small society of the film is involved in a quest for a new kind of social relations based not on principles like rationality and economic efficiency but on values like commitment, solidarity and equality.[13]

3. The Signifying Maze: The Cube as a Cognitive Structure

As a metaphor of social and political order, the cube represents modern architectural and ideological principles, which means that the characters'—and the spectators'—interpretation is mainly dystopian. The cube is a closed universe that, as a consequence, should have a definite meaning; it is also a complicated mathematical (scientific) structure, but cannot be explained scientifically: although Leaven is capable of deciphering how it works, she is unable to elucidate why it was built in the first place. The cube is also a prison, an apartment block (and as such a representation of society as beehive), and a nightmarish space. All the characters are part of this reduced society, for they all seem to know something about the cube. However, none of them wants to know all of it, as Worth states: "Nobody wants to see the whole picture". This sentence casts a shade of doubt over the attempts to find an overall meaning, a purpose, or explanation of the cube, but the characters continue to build theories about why it was created. Their answers correspond to stories/theories that are influenced by social and political discourses and are typically postmodern. One of them thinks that they are inside a structure built by the industrial-military complex, with the acquiescence of the government itself. They also hint they may be the object of an experiment by aliens, and that they may be in a dream or, to put it differently, in a consensual hallucination, or a videogame constructed by some pervert or psycho. None of these answers is proved right; the characters are at a loss. It is also significant that they have no memory of how they got there. Their theories are thus elusive but non-

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[13] As a result of reading architecture as a means of communication between the individual and socio-political order, philosophers like Michel Foucault have applied the concept of "discourse" to architectural analysis. Foucault argues that architecture, as the organization of space, constitutes a discourse on social and political organization (1989: 259).

exclusive, and represent postmodern responses to the social, economic and political organization of Western societies in late technological capitalism. Governmental conspiracy is a relatively common motif in postmodern fiction (both mainstream and SF), used frequently by writers like Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, or Bruce Sterling; its culminating expression was perhaps the famous TV series *X-Files*. Reading the cube as an alien experiment is an example of how SF is essential in the postmodern representation of reality; this interpretation interprets the cube as a 'zone' inside the cultural imaginary continuum and gives the movie a metafictional turn. If the cube is understood as a common dream or a hallucination shared by a group or people, the idea of 'matrix' and of virtual reality immediately comes to mind; the characters' lack of memory could be interpreted as Jameson's description of the loss of historicity in the postmodern *zeitgeist* (1995: x).

Finally, the consistency of the cube as mathematical construct represents both the consolidation of the scientific world-view and its criticism: Leaven deduces that rooms marked with prime numbers are traps, but this rule seems to have its exceptions. This raises the question of the opposition between reason and randomness as the basis for the organization of reality, as Kunkle puts it: "it is mere chance that keeps the group alive … because they traverse the cubes without getting killed, not by correct calculations, but by pure luck" (2000: 288). This opposition is a frequent issue in postmodern cultural productions, after the Newtonian order of the universe was challenged by the theory of relativity and later by scientific developments like Quantum Physics and Chaos Theory.[14]

However, none of these stories/theories can be proved objectively, for all the seemingly mathematical coherence of the cube. The characters' attempts to explain the meaning of the cube end up as a succession of narratives, of elements taken from fiction, of known 'zones'. There is no end or conclusion to the narrative, which remains open, in a typically postmodern move. Neither science nor a coherent ('well-structured') narrative can be used to extract a rational or objective explanation: the characters and spectators can only rely on the symbolic connotations and the metaphoric associations of the main element of the film: the cube. This may be the reason why Kunkle calls the cube a "pure signifier" (2000: 282). The cube is a symbol with many interpretations, a metaphor for a structure without center (i.e. origin, purpose); only by using human imagination and associative leaps can the cube acquire signification. The film thus seems to argue that human cognitive capabilities are not limited to rationality, and that metaphoric cognitive qualities may lie beyond reason and consciousness, but they are also an adequate means to convey and understand human experience. In this sense, the 'zone' portrayed by *Cube* may be read as one of the stories/theories humans use to express their position in the universe both within and beyond the scientific world-view. *Cube* is therefore—like *The Matrix* and *Strange Days*—meta(science)fictional, because it is a science fiction

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[14] During the 20th century there has been what Thomas Kuhn (1962) called a 'change of paradigm' in science, which has meant that images taken from Newtonian physics have been substituted for other theories and scientific representations where relativity and chaotic systems apply better to the description of reality. This change has been used in postmodern cultural productions to express their conception of reality.

work that encourages reflection about its own role in postmodern culture, where it may function as a product of technology (like the cube) that has turned into a metaphor of the human condition when included in a work of art.

Conclusion: Postmodern SF Film as Consensual Hallucination

There is a scene in *The Matrix* where the protagonist, Mr Anderson/Neo, pulls out a CD from a copy of Jean Baudrillard's famous book *Simulacra and Simulations*. This explicit reference is quite significant and ironic, especially in a film that will proceed to depict contemporary reality as a computer-simulated environment, thus assimilating Baudrillard's notions. The film's viewers, like the main character, are 'woken up' from their experience of reality into a fictional world they envision collectively. The cinema screen thus becomes the object representing this consensual hallucination, because it is the closest thing to the experience of a virtual or alternative vision of reality. Even the use of computer-generated images and X-effects can be seen as a metaphor of the simulation. Similarly, in *Strange Days*, the camera becomes the metaphor for the SQUID thought-transmission device. Spectators are able to enter other people's minds through the camera. The cinema screen and the theatre may thus have become the perfect device and place to visualize the consensual hallucination so appealing to postmodern audiences, contrary to the individual experience of 'zones' that can be achieved in SF literature. Postmodern SF film has revealed itself as a more effective means of representing this notion for two main reasons: firstly, because film is experienced simultaneously by a group of people; and secondly, because it uses image as its main means of expression, thus actualizing the desired 'common vision' of the science fictional world. Moreover, according to F. Jameson, postmodernism privileges the visual over the linguistic as its means of expression (1995: 69).

    Cube is therefore to be understood in this context. Viewers who, like the movie's characters, have not met previously, enter the theatre, which is more or less shaped like a cube itself, its bright exit only available after a period of time, and share the characters' disorientation, fear and anxiety. Spectators also struggle to find a meaning for the cube and for the film, its main symbolic element having become the symbol for the whole movie. While in this 'zone', they confront all the major stories/theories that describe their own experience of reality and have to face the loss of centre and of clear ideological coordinates that defines the postmodern experience of reality. In the end, the viewers may simply have obtained the impression that the cube is just a symbol that comprises what the postmodern condition feels like. In this sense, the imaginary world of *Cube*, and of postmodern SF film in general, constitutes a metaphorical, complex and complete vision of reality as well as a philosophical, theoretical and ideological picture of Western capitalistic, technological societies at the turn of the 21st century.

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