

## A Thin Line between Sovereign and Abject Agents: Global Action Thrillers with the Sci-Fi Mind-Game War on Terror

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**Seung-hoon Jeong,**

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**Abstract:** Seung-hoon Jeong discusses in his paper global action thrillers about the war on terror. He highlights the biopolitical abjection of counterterrorist agents from their state agencies. This abjection ends up either self-reaffirming in the manner of a sovereign agent (the *Bond* series) or terrorizing their sovereign system (the *Bourne* series), while both are trapped in the vicious cycle of terror and counterterror. More notable is the "mind-game" sci-fi genre. *Source Code*, among others, stages a loop of a traumatic counterterrorist mission with retroactive causality, a closed circuit of neoliberal productivity and pathological abjection in a video-game narrative. The time-travel motif here, however, ultimately "undoes" sacrifice, problematically sacrificing the ethics of sacrifice. Finding no exit from the sovereign system, the abject agent against it embraces the perpetual present of actions including undoing traumas. This reinforced reaffirmation of sovereign agency underlies Hollywood's new ideology as seen in many other post-*Source Code* films.

**Seung-hoon JEONG**

## **A Thin Line between Sovereign and Abject Agents: Global Action Thrillers with the Sci-Fi Mind-Game War on Terror**

### **Sovereignty, abjection, and agency: Hollywood action thrillers and spy films**

Globalization is not just about making a planetary market of transnational neoliberalism, social networking, and multicultural harmony. It also concerns how to protect this system of inclusion from its symptoms of exclusion, inassimilable remnants or catastrophic risks such as terrorism. Consequently, the war on terror has been the salient operation of the global system's sovereign power to expel and eradicate the fundamentalist "axis of evil" in the name of "infinite justice." Globalization thus involves globalized *sovereignty* in the biopolitical rather than political sense. It directly affects biological lives in the globally same way of judging their eligibility for citizenship and detaining or deporting people detected as useless or dangerous. Refugees or terrorists are even degraded to "bare life" like animals, in Giorgio Agamben (1998)'s terms, to *homo sacer* who is cast out of law, and whose murder is thus not a crime to punish. Any government is ready to realize this "state of exception" to the rule of law. In other words, supralegal sovereignty underlies law itself. It can make anyone a *homo sacer* just as ordinary people are presumed to be potential terrorists when passing an airport security checkpoint.

Let me reframe this biopolitical "desubjectivation" in terms of *abjection*.<sup>1</sup> As widely known by Julia Kristeva, abjection means one's act of casting off something disgusting or threatening from oneself for self-protection or ego-formation. While it is essential to establish a stable identity with the self/other boundary, the abject is not reduced to a mere thing but lingers in the limbo state between subject and object, self and other, life and death. By extension, an individual subject becomes an abject by being cast out of its community. Imogen Tyler (2013) addresses such social abjection in the system of neoliberal globalization and sovereignty. If global citizens are normal subjects granted sociopolitical rights and subjectivity, the abject are global "non-citizens" bereft of them. They are often debased and stigmatized as repulsive or harmful, easily targeted by all sorts of sovereign violence. They are near-neocolonial others of the global system, economically included in and legally excluded from it like illegal immigrant workers. This "internal exclusion" of the abject resonates with the status of *homo sacer* who is "included in the juridical order solely in the form of exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)" (Agamben 8).

However, this ambivalence implies potentialities for change. As they try to regain subjectivity, the abject are not mere passively victimized bare lives but have *agency*: the causative force to act and the capacity to perform a task in the transitory mode of being-in-action. Agency performs "becoming-other" at the moment of its activation, challenging fixed identity and enabling the performative, constructivist notion of identity: not an a priori entity but an effect produced through abjection (which itself is an agentic act). It is culturally articulated, yet also contesting preconstructed forms of identity in "the necessary scene of agency" (Butler 201). In short, agency is the abject's mode of subjectivity, temporary and transitional, performative and modulable. The abject are, then, *agents*. They return to their former community like the living dead or "undead" and act to fulfill a mission, mainly resubjectivation. "Abject agency," however, is also motivated by vengeance, sacrifice, saving or killing people. Terrorists are "abject agents" as well, who attack the sovereign system by appropriating sovereignty in their self-proclaimed state of exception to law even at the cost of their lives. The terror-counterterror loop implies the global struggle for sovereign power between the system and the abject.

Cinema presents this loop and struggle, above all, through "professional" agents of "institutional" agencies like military or secret agents in state organizations. They are "sovereign agents" who exert supralegal sovereignty with a "license to kill" for global policing as well as patriotic service. Post-9/11 Hollywood action thrillers are full of such agents, who are not only loaded with counterterror missions but undergo transformative challenges and (self-)abjection. Especially notable is the recent trend of combining sci-fi motifs such as time travel and parallel universes with the agents' war on terror; the trend that has been increasingly visible with its cutting-edge visual technology in the 2010s since *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011). I will investigate this seminal film and touch on related others. Before that, however, let me note a precursory trend by comparing recent segments of the Bond series and the Bourne films, a 21<sup>st</sup>-century gamechanger in the spy genre.

James Bond in *Skyfall* (Sam Mendes, 2012), for example, is deserted by his secret agency MI6 at the beginning, but the supralegal role of MI6 is also put into question and nearly cast out of the

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<sup>1</sup> I concisely rephrase my elaboration of abjection and agency published elsewhere (Jeong, "Introduction").

government. That is, both the sovereign agent and agency face abjection, a symbolic death. The rest of the film shows how they strive to restore their imperiled identity until their possible real death—films on abjection typically unfold in this narrative of the double death: symbolic and real. Their counterterror operation is then a kind of “qualifying exam” to test their necessity. This self-reaffirmation is made against Silva, an ex-agent abandoned by MI6 and cyberterrorist who hacks and debunks the agency. In sum, the global sovereign system produces the abject from within, who may then become either a sovereign agent back (Bond) or a radical terrorist agent (Silva). Bond’s unusually aging, suffering body materializes his precarious subjectivity like a “bare life,” barely defeating his doppelgänger-like enemy to reclaim his identity. The boundary between the sovereign agency and the terrorist abject is indeed blurred in Daniel Craig’s new millennial Bond films including *Casino Royale* (2006) and *Spectre* (2015). There is only a thin line between subject and abject, between sovereign and abject agents.

It is the Bourne series that both revised and influenced the Bond series. In his continuous saga, Jason Bourne appears as the enemy of his former agency CIA. But if Silva pursues pure revenge for capital and power, Bourne turns from a counterterror warrior into a potential terrorist only to find hidden truths. The series starts with his failure in a mission, his being shot and turning amnesiac. All the rest chronicles his nomadic struggle to recover his memory and discover dirty operations of the CIA that involved and now target him. Again, the beginning is the end of the hero’s normal life, his symbolic death as traumatic abjection from his agency. His quasi-dead body floating in the sea visualizes a rootless *homo sacer* that sovereign CIA agents want to eliminate outside the law. Never dying, however, he reconstructs himself with his abject agency while resisting the unjust and corrupt state power that abuses suprallegal violence. He feels guilty for (possibly) killing (decent) people and pursues atonement by paying off this guilt as ethical debt. Both a product and byproduct of the CIA, he is thus a justifiable version of Silva. The film series fuses “Bond’s efficiency” with “Noam Chomsky’s politics” (Douthat) in the age when the global war on terror inevitably causes collateral damage and even normalizes emergency without ending terrorism.

It is clear where Bond and Bourne meet and part. Secret agencies as a protective gear of global systems entail symptoms of precarious bare life; sovereign agents can turn into hackers or whistleblowers. But Bond, though abjected, restores his sovereign agency and destroys terrorist abject agents. This triumphant elimination of the villains is always reaffirmed in the 007 series. On the contrary, Bourne’s traumatic abjection puts him under harsher conditions of bare life in a radically normalized emergency. Bourne’s struggle with his lost memory, against the CIA, makes him an ethical abject agent terrorizing the unethical system that trained him. The continuation of each franchise, however, indicates that the sovereign system and the abject agent are inseparable and their antagonistic hide-and-seek has no outside. This “infernal affair” of terrorism and counterterrorism allegorizes the impossibility of one’s ultimate release from the global system, leaving only the fantasy of choice: Bond or Bourne? A blue pill or a red pill?

### **Source Code: sci-fi mind-game and video-game in control society**

*Source Code* complicates the question above in a more fresh and thought-provoking setting. It is not a spy film but a clever combination of an action thriller, a sci-fi, and a “mind-game film.” The last, according to Thomas Elsaesser (2009, 2018), plays games with a character who does not know what is going on (*Silence of the Lambs*, *Se7en*, *The Truman Show*, etc.) or with the audience from whom crucial information is withheld until the end (*Fight Club*, *Memento*, *The Sixth Sense*). Main characters usually have an extreme mental condition or a psychic disorder, playing games with other characters’ or viewers’ perception of reality (*A Beautiful Mind*, *Donnie Darko*, *Oldboy*). Common motifs include the suspension of causality, the delusion between reality and imagination, alternative timelines, parallel universes, trauma and emotional disturbances, identity as contingency and fate as chance. Consequently, storytelling is as complex as its diverse terminology: “forking-path,” “multiple-draft,” “modular,” “fractal,” “puzzle” narratives—various of which terms I shall examine later on.<sup>2</sup> No wonder a mind-game film stimulates a philosophical “thought experiment,” raising ontological doubts about other minds or worlds and epistemological questions about how we know what we know.

*Source Code* plays games with both the protagonist and the audience by centering on “time travel,” another significant motif in the mind-game genre linked to many of the issues above as we will see. The film begins with U.S. pilot Colter Stevens waking up on a train for Chicago without knowing why and how because his last memory was of being on a mission in Afghanistan. More perplexingly, the woman

<sup>2</sup> For an overview and various cases studies of complex narratives, see, among others, Warren Buckland’s edited volumes on puzzle films (2008, 2014).

sitting opposite Colter calls him Sean. This is Christina, a teacher colleague of Sean—whose face Colter sees in the mirror instead of his own. Suddenly, the train explodes like a bolt out of the blue and everyone dies. However, Colter again wakes up, this time in a dark cockpit, where someone called Captain Goodwin appears on a screen and orders him to identify the train bomber before another bomb hits Chicago in six hours—as per a warning given by the bomber. This mission to identify the train bomber is conducted inside the "Source Code (SC)," a time travel device which can repeatedly send Colter back into the last eight minutes of a passenger compatible with him racially and physically, namely Sean, so that he can collect more and more clues regarding the identity of the terrorist. The underlying logic is that postmortem memory lasts for eight minutes, during which Colter, though killed as Sean on the train, can deliver the clues to Goodwin from the cockpit. That said, he has to die and resume his extremely frustrating eight-minute lifespan over and over until completing the mission. It later turns out that Colter was nearly killed in Afghanistan, losing most of his body, and has since been comatose for two months on life support in the SC chamber beside Goodwin's office. Only his brain and upper torso is alive, hooked up to neural sensors to communicate with Goodwin in the brain-projected cockpit on the one hand and combined with Sean's body to act for the mission on the train on the other.

A turning point occurs when Colter learns about his physical abject state that is used to test the SC with no chance of recovery. Angry, he demands to be disconnected from life support once the mission is fulfilled, and Rutledge, the SC designer, agrees. Colter finally identifies the bomber, has him caught by the authorities, and thus prevents the second explosion in Chicago. However, he is betrayed by Rutledge, who orders Goodwin to wipe Colter's memory for future missions—only for Goodwin, out of sympathy, secretly to accept Colter's request for euthanasia and to help him put into action a new plan, namely to go back to the train one final time in order to prevent the first explosion and to save every passenger on the train, this in spite of Rutledge's insistence that such past events cannot be altered. After fulfilling this plan, Colter uses the bomber's phone to send an email to Goodwin and to call his estranged father in order to reconcile with him under the guise of a fellow soldier (i.e. Sean). Colter then kisses Christina at the moment when eight minutes have passed, and Goodwin takes him off life support. He dies in the SC chamber, but he survives in the new alternate timeline in which the train arrives safely into Chicago. Colter, now as Sean, enjoys a romantic walk with Christina around the city center while Goodwin, in this new timeline, receives Colter's email that says they have changed history thanks to the excellent performance of the SC. The film ends with a chamber scene; Colter is lying there, still comatose, waiting for his first mission yet to come.

What makes *Source Code* a unique mind-game film is its extreme video-game structure. As typically seen in *Run Lola Run* (1998)—Lola's 20-minute rush to save her boyfriend repeats three times until the final success—some video-game features have been adapted for complex film narratives: a serialized repetition of actions, multiple levels of adventure, mastering the rules and accumulating points, immediate punishment and rewards, feedback loops and deadlines (Buckland, "Source" 187). In each *Bourne* film too, discrete action sequences are comparable to increasingly challenging levels that Bourne completes while exploring unknown places. This double game logic of "leveling-up" and "navigation" also applies to the entire series and characterizes the protagonist/player not only as an agent but even a "system": an autopoietic feedback process of making itself in interaction with the environment. Bourne's body is a powerful sensorimotor system of speedy perception and action with the self-backup function (curing himself after hurting, thus restarting like a game character); his mind is a self-investigating cerebral system for restoring damaged memory and lost identity. His cognitive-kinetic mapping of subjective time and global space is a pathological human system's struggle for self-orientation in the dangerous world.

*Source Code* upgrades and complicates all these game features, using a double-layered, self-reflexive "play station." It is crucial that Colter's mind is not solely injected into Sean's body but mediated in the form of his whole figure confined within the cockpit (unlike the paraplegic hero in *Avatar* whose mind directly connects to his avatar). This cockpit itself is a virtual space where Colter as a projected image makes some "rotation adjustments" and "pattern recognition" first to orient himself and identify Goodwin (Hesselberth). Said otherwise, Colter's brain on life support plays a preliminary "mind-video" game and organizes a virtual psychosomatic system to cope with a new situation and learn from it. This mechanism is extended into the main "mind-video" game in which Colter sees himself as Sean, his avatar to control in a much more complicated situation. The film then "replicates a role-playing game" by going back and forth between the player in the cockpit (game room) and his performance in the train (game world) (Buckland, "Source" 195). Not to mention this game world has the structure of "leveling-up" and "navigation," reviving Colter's eight-minute life eight times. Each time he collects pieces of information, explores the train, tests different options, and forms relations with Christina and Goodwin. He thus

builds himself up as an efficient cognitive-kinetic mapping system that accumulates data and takes actions in the feedback loop of human and technological interactions, especially learning from his own failures. Apparently, nobody could better personify Samuel Beckett's dictum: "Fail again. Fail better"<sup>3</sup> (see fig. 1)



Figure 1: Source Code

*Source Code* also shows a "modular narrative" that presents "forking paths" (Cameron and Misek). Each train sequence is a module, or rather, the unseen last minutes of Sean's life is the first module that continues to be modulated with differences. David Bordwell (2008), however, argues that although forking-path narratives display alternative worlds or parallel histories, they are not that complex but still conventionally comprehensible. A key convention is "psychological continuity" that the protagonist retains in visiting different futures, growing knowledge and even modifying personality through the accumulated experience of the "past" futures as Scrooge does classically (182). That is, different branches of a forking-path narrative do not strictly show incompatible "parallel" worlds as they are linearly arranged and traversed, and therefore, the last branch becomes "the fullest, most satisfying revision" of the past ones (184). *Source Code* is no exception. Moreover, the modulation of the original reality is like refining the selfsame draft instead of writing a totally new one. The mind/video game indeed presumes the gradual development of the mind through the deadline-bound progress of action toward a conventional happy ending. The primary rule of the game is no other than that of classical Hollywood narrative: character-driven, goal-oriented, problem-solving continuity.

Paradoxically, the postclassical newness of *Source Code* comes out of the very continuity that Colter's undamaged sober mind retains. Though physically comatose, he as the game player has no common pathologies among mind-game films such as amnesia, paranoia, and schizophrenia. But as his inherent brain can adequately function, he is under extreme pressure to maximize its capacity for figuring out a puzzle in an insanely stressful situation set up by a ticking bomb. He suffers not from his mental condition but from this external environment in which his performance, unless correctly done, gets him punished by death again and again in his continuous mind. Traumatic are not only the flames of the explosion that engulf him but also this helpless re-experience of being annihilated like a repeated torment by an unforgettable terrible memory. What becomes complex is thus the narrative of double death mentioned earlier; Colter, symbolically dead in a coma, struggles to survive until real death, but this struggle in abjection itself is punctuated with multiple "deaths" which are both actual (in the train) and virtual (in the SC). That is, within the limbo stage between two deaths, he dies several times and prepares for revivals in the cockpit—his posthumous limbo in which he is neither really dead nor alive, thus abject by definition. There are abjections within abjection.

Of course, Colter is not biopolitically abjected by his sovereign military system. From his physical abjection, he is instead retrieved to work as an unprecedented sovereign agent who has to tackle all the more challenging emergency, which no passenger in the train knows actually. The states of normalcy

<sup>3</sup> This is often quoted as an entrepreneurial mantra to embrace failure as an essential step for lucrative self-fulfillment. But such positive motivation has nothing to do with Beckett's view of failure expressed in *Worstword Ho!*: the inevitable defeat of every human endeavor and communication (Schlottman). Beckett's edging to full failure is co-opted as the progress toward full success in neoliberal capitalism.

and exception coexist here on the brink of destruction. This dangerous, precarious condition both requires and enables him to optimize the use of all his abilities and skills trained in the system including the SC. Although he has no pathology, his agency with this maximal efficiency evokes "productive pathologies" of mind-game film heroes (Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game" 28)—just as Bourne's amnesia boosts his activity. The notion of agency implies this ambivalence: it is motivated by a goal in certain restricted circumstances which inhibit its achievement but would dissipate if it is achieved. The agent is then impeded and empowered at once by constitutive constraints of action. Deterministic conditions enable the performative activation of free will. Colter's traumatic, claustrophobic train ride is a "closed circuit" with no end, no exit, but his desperate acts open up unknown choices to make (see figure 2).



Figure 2: Source Code

Notable is the sociohistorical backdrop of the type of agency that Colter reflects, which broadly resonates with the turn of modern "disciplinary society" to postmodern "control society" (Deleuze). If the Foucauldian notion of discipline is a long-term process of subjectivation in a set of different, confining, coercive institutions with central systems of plans, rules, surveillance and punishment, Gilles Deleuze contrasts it with his somewhat ironic idea of "control." The society of control does not govern individuals from the top down but promotes self-control with the flexible agency, the capacity for continuous self-modulation through numerous short-term projects as well as endless lifetime education. Individuals are encouraged to be "free choosers" responsible for their choices, internalizing entrepreneurship and adjusting to de-centered environments of information high-ways, boundless networking, and the free circulation of capital. Control is thus a name for agency optimized for postindustrial cognitive, emotional, and financial capitalism (see Hardt and Negri 2000). Capital exists as immaterial assets overwhelming material ones: intellectual properties, affective services, financial goods. Its agents are required to acquire knowledge and foreknowledge, relational and communicative skills, and technical adaptability to high-speed data processing. We are in fact all such agents, often distracted with information overload during our daily practices of digital multitasking. Mind-game films, then, appear "as disciplinary machines to re-format the body in view of tasks/affordances that control society requires from its dysfunctional functioning members" (Elsaesser, "Contingency" 33). The new society disciplines us in this new way of controlling—or forcing us to control—new cognitive-kinetic skills.

This late-capitalist society is inseparable from neoliberal globalization. While work becomes flexible in the free market of people, goods, services, and capital without borders, workers become easily hurt, casualized, fired, and dehumanized in an economic "war of all against all." In this new Hobbesian state of Nature, the safety net to protect precarious labor from aggressive capitalization disintegrates to the extent that abjection is no longer exceptional but normalized. The abjection, as well as all dangers that Bond and Bourne undergo, allegorizes this working condition. Colter's case is all the more traumatic as he loses not his job but his life, and he needs not just self-healing but self-rebooting with continuous upgrading. Moreover, his temporary work under a pressing deadline leaves no second for leisure. He has to rapidly adjust to unpredictable situations while reinforcing cognitive power, mapping ability, corporeal tenacity, flexible mobility, and other qualities demanded in a globally expanded workspace and competitive market. He is, namely, a casual worker who works like an entrepreneur, "resolving the

quandaries generated by vexingly volatile and constantly changing circumstances" in the age that Zygmunt Bauman (2006, 3–4) dubs "liquid times"—the current postpolitical age when social structures, welfare systems, solidarity, and long-term plans, all decompose and melt.

However, it is crucial that the "liquid" condition of life and work—which are now indistinguishable—is sustained by the "solid" sovereign system of global capitalism, its security apparatuses for the automated surveillance and suprallegal intervention. This system, as well as American cinema reflecting it, adapts "the working population to the social technologies that promise their economic survival, maintain civic cohesion, and assure America's hegemonic position in the world" (Elsaesser, "Contingency" 33). Superhero-like secret agents are harbingers of the "new normal" that applies to us in this context (14). Subjects are thus still ideologically reproduced in this postideological era, but only as self-contradictory agents like "CEO-workers." They embody the anarchic notion of control, self-making freedom and free-floating autonomy, which is virtually controlled by the system that constantly tests their workability or disposability — this ambivalence colors Colter as an apparently sovereign yet potentially abject agent. What matters for the system is not his selfhood based on memory but his action to perpetuate even at the cost of his memory. He at best makes a deal for euthanasia, which the system unilaterally breaches. He is thus less than a mercenary, enslaved forever and deprived of dignity, unable to kill himself yet forced to die endlessly.

**Source Code: time travel, performative agency, the sacrifice of sacrifice**

Obviously, Colter's agency is defined as nothing but functionality. Time travel—or "time reassignment" in Rutledge's expression—is mobilized to optimize his counterterrorist function. I elsewhere noted three narrative forms of the sci-fi disaster genre (Jeong, "The Apocalyptic" 75–76): (1) A disaster occurs early and the rest of the story focuses on postcatastrophic redemption (*Jurassic Park*, *Independence Day*); (2) The story unfolds precatastrophic efforts to prevent a predicted disaster (*Armageddon*, *Dark City*); (3) Combining these two, time travel is used to send the protagonist from a postcatastrophic situation back to a precatastrophic time in order to prevent the assumed disaster (*Terminator*, *Twelve Monkeys*). We can examine the third case in light of America's growing obsession with what Richard Grusin (2004) calls "premediation," namely the "remediation" of the future. It is that U.S. media have been trying to prevent the immediacy of such traumatic shocks as 9/11 by replaying their images and anticipating possible contingencies so that one could be better prepared for any catastrophe, which "would always already have been premediated" (8–16). Sci-fi films upgrade this premediation to imaginative prevention. The "Precrime" system in *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002) foreshows impending crimes, which agents rush to stop from happening. Proactive premediation promotes precatastrophic preemption. *Déjà Vu* (Tony Scott, 2006) buckles down to time travel even to defuse a past terrorist bombing. An agent travels back four days into the past utilizing a space-folding device to forestall the bombing and the murder of a woman with whom he fell in love only through the surveillance "time-warp" screen. What has already happened appears as what should/could have been averted and even turns into what has not happened. The sovereign agent sutures the trauma by "undoing" the terror.

The desire to undo a past event emerges in the tense of the "if-only": if only I had done not "A" but "B" to prevent it! This regret begins with Freudian "retroaction," the "deferred action" of looking backward in time to detect causes for later effects. I belatedly understand that "A" was the real cause of the event in the way of positing "A" in a causal chain hitherto unknown to my mind. Causality is thus less an objective relation of events than a subjective inference drawn by the observer. That is why historians describe historical events as if they necessarily had to happen from the present perspective and a narrative "'configures' what would otherwise be a simple succession of events into a 'meaningful whole'" of causes and effects (Simons 121–22). Likewise, one can overcome trauma by articulating its fragmented memories in a lucid narrative. It is the symbolic process of facing and accepting the cause of the trauma, thereby leaving the past behind and moving toward the future—like the psychoanalytic turn from "melancholia" to "mourning." This retroactive causality implies our potential to change the past if not actually but at least etymologically and ethically: I do not merely find "A" in the past but insert "A" into the past, which thus changes into a new past, and I choose "A" as the determinant cause of the fatal event. The causality, paradoxically, loses its fateful force then because I embrace the given as chosen of my own free will. My freedom breaks the closed circle of determinism, realizing Nietzschean *amor fati*: Love your fate and you'll be freed from it! This freedom is in truth Kantian, neither entirely determined by preceding causes nor dependent on pure contingency. Although I am determined by various causes, I am free "to retroactively determine which causes will determine me" including causes I can posit in the past. Not opposing determinism, freedom thus takes on retrospective determinism, a self-determined necessity that is recognized, constituted, and assumed after the fact. "The effect is

retroactively the cause of its cause" in this *après-coup* (Žižek 202–04). Retroaction enables a cognitive time travel to cause an unthought cause of the present effect.

Sci-fi time travel physically realizes this retroaction, literally going back to the past and engaging in some causes for future effects. That is to say, I see not only "A," the cause of my trauma, but also a new possibility of having chosen "B" that would not have caused the trauma. Not limited to accepting the only option, my free will then turns into "freedom of choice" among different options. Not loving my fate, I want to cancel it and make a new one. Not moving on to mourning for the dead, I will carry my melancholia until eradicating its cause and saving the dead back in the past. This potential for changing the actual past stimulates sci-fi time travel for precataphoric prevention. *Source Code* realizes it to "reverse castration in the aftermath of 9/11, for a veteran's severed body and Homeland Security" (Stewart 172). There occur even multiple time travels with new choices of C, D, E, F... The film multiplies a cinematic equivalent of "virtual history," pivoting around a fork of the "if-only" that branches off to multiple "what-if" situations. The past is repeatedly rewritten with newly posited causes. From the cognitivist viewpoint, the past is indeed a palimpsest overwritten with "nearly true hypothetical points" that may have been elided yet still present within the mind (Branigan 109–10). Such points are explicitly arranged in multiple-draft films, especially in "the repeated action plot" that shows a character growing "by enlightenment" at each repetition as do *Run Lola Run* and *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993) (Berg 30–31).

However, unlike a common belief, *Source Code* does not adequately present a branching multiverse of ontologically distinct worlds parallel to the actual one. The eight-minute train time is a segment of the past that Colter virtually revisits while actual time still passes in the present, in which another bomb is ticking and to which he comes back after every virtual death to talk to Goodwin. The repetition-with-differences of his action does not bring any actual alternative reality insofar as the loop of the past remains reassigned by, derived from, and thus subordinated to, the present. The only way to create a new reality is to break the linear connection between the past and the present by changing not small details in the self-closed circuit but its constitutive condition itself. That is, "if only" the train had not been bombed in the first place, the SC would not have been used and reality would have been different. To change this fundamental cause of the present situation, to "undo" the train bombing, is what Rutledge prohibits—who privileges testing his program to saving passengers—but what Colter finally pursues as an authentic big cause at the cost of his life. The sovereign agent then turns into a self-abjected agent of a self-imposed mission against the sovereign system. Likewise, phoning his father and growing a romantic attachment to Christina are unexpected outcomes of his performance that go beyond the rules of the game. Evoking and updating Bourne, Colter embodies "abject agency" to resist his sovereign system that exploits his abject body and wants to "abject" the passengers for its self-sustaining mechanism. He does so by abjecting himself from the system while saving the passengers from being abjected by it.

Nevertheless, did Colter really sacrifice himself to save the passengers including Sean, or does he actually sacrifice Sean to date with Christina in the alternate timeline? The director approves of the latter (Brevet), but it entails the contradiction that Colter's mind resides in both Sean's body and his vegetative body still alive in the new reality; how could he then work as an SC agent (whose mind plugs into someone's body) without conflicting with his mind inside Sean? Although time travel itself is paradoxical, the film's otherwise entirely realistic diegesis could be consistent on the assumption that the mind-body unity is retained and sustains one's identity even if one's mind takes another's body in a virtual time loop. It would thus be reasonable to consider that Colter's mind died in the train when his life support was switched off, and Sean's mind, which was replaced by Colter's but held in a sort of coma, comes back to his body in the new timeline. It would also make sense that along with Colter's death, the original timeline is closed—we don't see it anymore—because its changed past (no train explosion) cancels the premise of the present (using the SC). In effect, it cannot but be closed somehow once the train is saved because of this linear causality. The new timeline is the only actual reality, and there are no multiple, parallel worlds. Even if Colter had not chosen to die, he would have disappeared with the entire postterror situation getting "undone." Moreover, though seemingly self-sacrificial, his death is a case of euthanasia for his own "rest in peace" as well as a kind of "suicidal terror" against the inhuman sovereign system. It is not a self-sacrificial death.

His sacrifice is made nonetheless, not with the choice of death but with the choice of undoing the bombing. The latter terminates his life as just said and resurrects the dead passengers including Sean, who may then become Christina's boyfriend on behalf of Colter. Telling is the penultimate scene of Colter and Christina reaching the sculpture Cloud Gate in Chicago. Its earlier imagery appears in the flash-forwards that flash across Colter's mind upon his repetitive virtual death, just like "an unconscious scene

of desire (almost subliminal in its fragmentation) getting realized by dint of heroic faith and persistence" (Stewart 81). To put it another way, he may have unconsciously inserted a new "effect" (enjoying Chicago) in the future and finally chooses the "cause" (saving the train) that would bring this effect. Not retroactive but "proactive" causality works here, just as Christina's ironic words right before the first explosion, "everything is gonna be ok!" promote his performative quest for an alternative future in which "everything should be ok." Facing the sculpture, Colter—now Sean as reflected on its warped surface—recognizes it and asks Christina, "Do you believe in fate?" This sense of *déjà vu* may imply a residual unconscious link between Colter's and Sean's mind, an uncanny ethical feeling that one is somehow mediated by and indebted to the other. This connection is mutually beneficial: Christina finds Sean (Colter) more than usually active and attractive in the train and falls in a romantic mode in Chicago; Colter finally reconnects with his father by consoling him on his own (impending) death in the name of Sean as if Sean ventriloquized Colter. The time-travel action adventure thus entails a romantic/family subplot of remasculinization and reconciliation. Colter helps Sean to be a charming man, and Sean helps Colter to be a good son (see figure 3).



Figure 3: Source Code

The ending is open to yet another hermeneutic turn. Garrett Stewart touches on the possibility that the SC might have programmed the flash-forwards as "appeasing free-associations of potential escape, anodyne images (u-topic, place-less)" (181) to unconsciously reward Colter for each traumatic death "with an erotic afterlife, the secular correlative of a jihadist's harem in the sky" (177). Although this sounds like a conspiracy theory, it is not unlikely that the system could inject into its agents the illusory hope for escaping from it, a sort of "cruel optimism" that enslaves them to make any escape impossible. But more crucially, it must be noted that Colter reappears as a potential sovereign agent in the new reality, and in his email to Goodwin, he praises the SC and asks her to tell this comatose double of himself, "everything is gonna be ok!" Despite his suicidal resistance to the system, he thus eventually endorses the system and reclaims his recyclable agency in it. Escaping into another reality ends up with the same system and job, but now, this is "okay." The abject agent is replaced by/reset as another sovereign agent, who might work better under the "okay" sign and even feel "okay" about the traumatic cycle of virtual death. This self-reaffirmation of sovereign agency, as well as the dream of liberation from the system, indeed sustains the system that has no utopian outside. If each Bourne film ends with Bourne fleeing from the CIA (though he always returns in the sequel), Colter's death as the ultimate nirvana rather brings back his life in the new reality with the same old system. That is, he is not really sacrificed. Not only the train bombing but also his self-sacrifice to undo it are undone. Time is rewound and the past is rewritten, but the virtual loop of this process itself is undone. Nothing happened, nobody died, and the entire reality including Colter's sacrifice disappeared. Not another parallel Colter but the same Colter who was lying in the chamber before the train explosion is still lying there after the train's safe arrival.

What is sacrificed is the value of sacrifice as such. This "sacrifice" of sacrifice thus poses a new ethical dilemma—albeit one that we can take as an old philosophical aporia to reflect on anew. The appreciation of sacrifice presupposes that a sacrifice "works" only insofar as it is recognized as an act selflessly done. But this recognition itself repays sacrifice even if symbolically, thus inevitably involving it in an economy of give-and-take or investment-and-return. Those who sacrifice themselves are rewarded by the

symbolic Other with indebtedness, respect, or honor, often elevated to an ethically superior or privileged position. However, sacrifice essentially implies a "holocaust" of all (*holos*) being burned (*caustos*), a selfless giving without reserve, calculation, or reward (Keenan 1). It must be "a sacrifice for nothing" by transcending all its secular values and severing links to the symbolic order that commemorates it as a sacrifice. That is, it must sacrifice the economic understanding of sacrifice. Like the Derridean notions of gift and hospitality, sacrifice is also "a work that unworks itself in *the very performance of the work*" (3). This sacrifice of sacrifice underlies Jesus' maxim: "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" and "your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (2). If any big Other exists and repays sacrifice, it is only God. However, this divine reward registers the pure sacrifice back in another secret economy. The sacrifice of sacrifice is thus doubled: the "terrestrial" economic sacrifice is sacrificed into the "deconstructive" aneconomic sacrifice, which in turn is sacrificed into the (celestial) economic sacrifice. In sum, I claim, sacrifice "overdoes" itself; it is inherently "overdone."

Colter seems to be a perfect "secret" agent of pure sacrifice; Sean has no idea of what Colter did borrowing his body, and Goodwin, the only witness to Colter's sacrifice, has no memory of it in the new reality. There is neither social recognition nor divine redemption. Nonetheless, his virtual sacrifice costs him nothing. It instead brings back his actual life, a potentially more empowered sovereign agent destined to be "okay." It is this "reassigned" life that sacrifices his sacrifice itself, not "overdoing" but "undoing" it. In yet another sense it is we, the spectators, who appreciate the ethical sublimity of his sacrifice from an Other's position that is both social—we see him as our hero—and transcendent—we don't belong to his diegesis. The film thus creates the comforting illusion of his sacrifice being remembered and given significance, even though it is skillfully canceled. In this way both the conventions of the tragedy and the happy ending work; his death causes a cathartic effect to audiences, who then feel reassured of his survival, which erases the very death just seen. The thing is that Colter is not reborn or recreated as a cyborg agent like RoboCop but restarts his life in the changed reality. The traumatic past is not overcome but undone. It serves not as the base of continuous memory but as a sample segment of time to test the potentiality of "undoable" action. This "undoability" may signal the future direction of sovereign agency. Agents could perform endless self-sacrifice in secret even without feeling embarrassed by its being undone once they accept it as their normal work. The sovereign system could not be more hegemonically served by its agents then (figure 4).



Figure 4: Source Code

### **The ideology of "undoing" in the perpetual present of action**

To recapitulate briefly, the global system of sovereign agency has been ever more monstrous in action thrillers. Bond and Bourne undergo the vicious cycle of terror and war on terror in the normalized state of exception. Their sovereign and abject agency alternate and fuse in the perpetual present of 24/7 labor and precarious life with no utopian future. Colter's traumatic loop intensifies this postpolitical neoliberal temporality while also figuring a way out of it. He pursues not postcatastrophic redemption but precatastrophic prevention by abjecting and sacrificing himself to open up a new future. However, the new world is not new but more monstrous as it is the same world waiting for (the use of the SC

against) unpredictable threats "minus" the chance and dream of leaving it.<sup>4</sup> Colter starts as a sovereign agent, then resists the sovereign system through abject agency like Bourne, but eventually reclaims sovereign agency to fight potential terrorism like Bond. A traumatic event is undone but presumed to occur anytime, to redo itself. Colter's self-abjecting sacrifice, its ethical and existential significance are all undone within this system but also could be redone whenever needed. "Undoing" does not lead to redemption but only to "redoing," which nonetheless brings the mood of a happy ending.

Recent sci-fi mind-game films go further than *Source Code*. Once a fighter in *Edge of Tomorrow* (Doug Liman, 2014) finds out that time is supernaturally rewound to the starting point of his mission upon his death, he even takes advantage of this loop by killing himself whenever something goes wrong in his mission to stop an alien invasion. Death is no longer a trauma but a simple "game over" that enables him immediately to "start over" (as in *Groundhog Day*). It is better to die before the situation gets worse and undoing it is as easy as deleting what is just written by pressing the backspace key. With no pain or regret, he exhibits ever-upgrading practicality: correcting mistakes, enhancing performance, "edging" to tomorrow. At the climax of the film, he loses this capacity of resetting time but seizes one final chance to kill the head of the aliens at the cost of his female colleague. Then, thanks to the transference of the enemy's inherent time-reversing power to him, he awakens in the world of a day ago in which her sacrifice is undone but retroactively effective as all the aliens are mysteriously gone. It is not a parallel world but a "backspaced-then-upgraded" world. Losing nothing, he is even empowered with the time-reset button embedded in his sovereign agency. Likewise, such an unexpected happy ending closes *Oblivion* (Joseph Kosinski, 2013). Though time travel does not occur here, a security repairman on a postapocalyptic Earth discovers that the so-called aliens are not his enemies but the humans fighting against the real aliens, who colonized most of the humankind and cloned him into many sovereign agents serving the alien regime. He then joins the resistance group, that is, turns into an abject agent, and sacrifices himself to destroy the alien headquarters. The film ends with a clone of his appearing to his wife in the restored world as if he was not sacrificed and would resume his marriage.

The undead agency to undo/redo everything could not be more practically efficient but all the more ideologically dubious. This ambivalence is conspicuous in the Hollywood remake of *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017). Here too, a sovereign agent has an identity crisis. She remembers that she was orphaned by a terrorist attack and transformed into a counterterrorist cyborg, but it turns out that this memory was implanted; that she and her cyberterrorist enemy were both anarchic radicals abducted by a cybernetics company as test subjects (like 98 other failed ones); that she had taken her life while in custody before being reborn as the first successful cyborg. However, this self-discovery does not prompt her to resist or leave the sovereign system. She retrieves her former solidarity with the terrorist—now an abject agent—but refuses to merge his mind with hers. She kills the CEO of the company but rejoins her state agency. She reconnects with her original mother but returns to work as an ever-repairable sovereign agent. The film ends with her oft-repeated words: "We cling to memories as if they define us, but what we do defines us. My ghost survived to remind the next of us that humanity is our virtue. I know who I am, and what I'm here to do." In sum, her traumatic past is unearthed only to be sutured into corrected memories, which should not bother her present actions. This mourning process illusively reconciles her past leftist activism with her present sovereign operation while in effect leaving the past behind and embracing the present as the sole base of identity. It reveals the state's involvement in the dirty business of the cyborg industry, yet also legitimizes the state's sovereign agency against terrorism and punishes only the industry's ruthless exploitation of bare lives although they both work supraleghally. The sovereign system is then justified as the guardian of "humanity," in the name of which her posthuman body is reassembled whenever damaged as if nothing happened and no pain is remembered.

The self-reaffirmation of sovereign agency after self-doubt is indeed the core experience of secret agents today. It implies their positive internalization of the system's ever-increasing flexibility and inescapability at once. They are trained as subjects with free will to accept sovereign agency, however vulnerable, and focus only on actions for given missions. They embody neoliberal subjectivity that is both entrepreneurial and precarious like "CEO-workers," perpetually trapped in the present of overworking at the risk of being abjected from the efficiency-driven capitalist market. Sci-fi films further depict the technological recreation and co-option of the abject (agents) as (replaceable) sovereign

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<sup>4</sup> In light of the special theme of this journal issue, the world as "monstrous" here is not a mere metaphoric cliché. The monster is by nature deformed and repulsive due to its hybridity and abjection; that is, it is not a totally unknown thing but a mixture of different species unacceptable to their normal order. Likewise, the monstrosity of the global sovereign system implies the indistinction between normalcy and emergency, terror and war on terror, and sovereign and abject agency.

agents. Time travel or bioengineering brings cloned or reformatted agents at the end, whose memory-based identity is not that of sacrificed protagonists, but whose action-oriented mission is the same. Problematic is the intended effect that this "happy" ending seems to achieve poetic justice without sacrificing our heroes. It indicates a new level of the fictive resolution that Elsaesser (2018, 26–33) notes. He argues that mind-game films provide "imaginary solutions to real contradictions" (like the myths in Lévi-Strauss) while also exposing the "black boxes" of gaming such as time travel that create seemingly valid but ultimately incompatible realities. That is, they suggest dilemmas that have no solutions except formal, ludic ones. Devising such solutions is a productive way of "living with contradiction," but it also implies the impossibility of changing the actual situation (37). However, what is new is that the films discussed so far do not merely offer virtual solutions to the terror-counterterror cycle but instead end up assuming it as the unsolvable contradiction and shifting the focus from breaking the cycle to better preparing for its rerun by training more adaptable agents who prioritize action over memory or anything else. This shift reflects today's sovereign system and a future model of agency which could be pursued realistically even without time travel or memory implant. In short, these films premeditate somewhat feasible solutions and promote the world to pursue them.

Is cinema good for the world then? Or rather, could we welcome such a future world as prefigured on screen? Time travel and other mind games are motivated to save the past from trauma or catastrophe, but this salvation appears as if it is the minimal ethical condition for the justification of the present. Essential questions about life, sacrifice, or humanity are put aside while the sovereign system reduces ethics to a simplistic imperative of saving "innocent people" and a Manichean dualism of dividing innocence and evil based on conformity or resistance to the system itself. This moral reductionism allows nothing but action to realize it. Unless sovereign agents kill innocent people, the perpetual present of their action entailing supralegal violence is legitimized. Life is either merely innocent or eternally active. Let's ask: Is this life desirable? Does it have the sanctity of life to save? We will have to address these fundamental questions.

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