

STAY BROKEN: NIETZSCHE, BADIOU, AND *THE LEFTOVERS*' NIHILISM

Patrick O'Connor (Staffordshire University)

Existing debates within film-philosophy are grounded on an opposition between film as a vehicle for explaining philosophical ideas and film-as-philosophy, where film directly enunciates thinking itself. The problem of nihilism potentially disrupts this debate since film risks inherent nihilism due to the medium's separation from reality. However, this does not preclude the possibility film and televisual art can challenge, disturb, and even exceed epistemological and moral nihilism. While film-philosophers need to acknowledge the mediated nature of film as well as its separation from reality, a more sustained account of film and television as a metaphysical art is required to confront nihilistic motifs. The rationale for this research is that *The Leftovers* stages exactly this.

Nihilism, generally understood, concerns the collapse of moral values.¹ However, this basic understanding does not explain nihilism as a philosophical theme. Nihilism as a philosophical concept takes ontological absence as its necessary condition: that is, reality itself is without foundation. This proposition has attendant consequences for other major branches of philosophy. If existence has no foundation, then moral principles themselves are groundless, since anything which *is* includes moral activity. Moral nihilism overlaps with psychological nihilism. If there are no moral foundations, the content of any subjective consciousness—thoughts, emotions, will—must also be bereft of meaning. Psychological collapse and alienation become a chronic subjective norm. The outgrowth of these various strands of nihilism is political cynicism. Since all existence, subjectivity, ideals and values are as equally valid as each other, consequently, no political project—conservative, socialist or liberal—has any value, because if existence is without foundation, any political organisation of that reality is equally valueless. Furthermore, aesthetics, the branch of philosophy concerning art and creation, is thus inherently undermined since any act of creation is implicitly destructive. Hence, what is at stake in the discourse of nihilism is the possibility of philosophy itself.

The Leftovers (HBO, 2014-2017) addresses all these primary philosophical themes.² To understand *The Leftovers*' contribution to philosophy and popular culture it is necessary to examine how the HBO series offers alternatives to epistemological and moral nihilism. Its importance resides in showing how film and television are not a mere surface art of figures,

perspectives, and semblances, but instead can screen forms of truths, and ethical alternatives transcending the series' own mediated nature. My aim herein is to use *The Leftovers* to explain how metaphysical film and television are conceivable. *The Leftovers* is a particularly instructive example as it continually screens—through character development, *mise-en-scène*, editing—a desire for encountering the real, epistemologically, aesthetically and ethically. I use the term “real” in a prosaic sense, referring to things which exist or occur in fact, as opposed to something imaginary or supposed.

While film and television series are certainly art-forms, and not real in the same sense as the objects one encounters in everyday life, they still, if only minimally, indicate reality, which is to say a film's object of concern is at least minimally existent. This claim is crucial for film-philosophy, since if this position is not assumed from the outset, the whole discourse becomes unintelligible. As such, filmed and televisual artworks which directly confront nihilistic themes, such as *The Leftovers*, are implicitly well-placed to tackle the question of reality as well as the dearth of the real which nihilism implies. Filmic representations of nihilism are especially cognisant of their own conditions of intelligibility since they tackle more directly whether the filmic representation is a candidate that accounts for real things, and consequently, whether this representation may have any purpose or value. In the context of film-philosophy, the reason we should assess films and television series with nihilistic motifs is obvious. Since nihilism precludes the possibility of thought, it also precludes the possibility that films can engender any philosophical reflection.

My argument herein is that the significance of *The Leftovers*, as a form of film-philosophy, offers a distinctive style of metaphysical art. As such, *The Leftovers* provides a type of “spiritual realism,” blending both materialist and metaphysical themes without recourse either to a crass secularism or to supernaturalism, the upshot of which is an articulation of ethical, psychological and political renewal. This article will begin by situating *The Leftovers* in the context of nihilism in film and television, as well as explaining how it reflects conventional epistemic debates within film-as-philosophy. Once I establish how *The Leftovers* aesthetically foregrounds an absence of the real, I will assess the ways in which it offers an alternate confrontation with nihilism, specifically responding to what Friedrich Nietzsche calls in *The Will-to-Power* the ways of “self-narcotization.”³ The importance of *The Leftovers* rests in its effort to represent the human ability to think beyond the idiosyncrasies of character psychology or any yearning for individual emotional resolution, which I will elaborate more fully in the third section's account of the core characters. *The Leftovers* is noteworthy because of its attempt to screen a philosophical rejection of subjective interpretation as the ground of truth. In addition, the series makes an argument for constructing more universal and egalitarian responses to grief and trauma against a backdrop anxiety of sameness and replication. *The Leftovers* diagnoses the effects of nihilistic “deadening” in line

with Nietzsche's death-of-god philosophy but does not adopt the Nietzschean alternative. I will draw on Alain Badiou's philosophy of cinema to assess the extent to which *The Leftovers* offers a cogent response to nihilistic malaise and metaphysical collapse.

1. NIHILISTIC PRECURSORS

That *The Leftovers* directly tackles nihilism begs the question of other cinematic or televisual precursors. Quantitatively, filmic treatments of nihilism are innumerable, ranging from Wallace McCutcheon's silent film *The Nihilist* (1905), to the existential vacuity of the central protagonist of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), the aimless existential meanderings of Generation X movies like *Reality Bites* (Ben Stiller, 1994), or the scatological humour of animations like *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* (Trey Parker, 1999). Also, filmic representations of nihilism are not restricted by genre. For example, see the hateful nihilism of Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in John Ford's western *The Searchers* (1956), or the comedic excoriation of nihilists in the Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski* (1998). Nihilism is even broached in the gritty urban realism of *Naked* (Mike Leigh, 1993), the suburban ennui of *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), and the collapsing political metropolis of *Joker* (Todd Phillips, 2019).

Equally, in what is now called "quality television," similar patterns can be detected. Some of the most lauded exemplars of quality television directly tackle nihilistic themes. For example, *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007) represents nihilistic masculine violence and hedonism, *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) examines urban social and economic decay, *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015) reflects despairing nascent cultures of advertising consumption and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013) shows Walter White's (Bryan Cranston) nihilistic descent from maladroit science teacher to narcotics mastermind. That nihilism is prevalent on screen, and given film and television's most critically lauded exemplars entertain nihilistic themes, it begs a question of film-philosophy. Is there something essentially nihilistic about film and television?

If film and television are mediated artworks rather than immediate experience, it is, as John Marmysz explains, possible to suggest the inherent nihilism of film.⁴ If a strict demarcation exists between filmed-object and immediate experience, the film is removed from the reality it represents. This demarcation corresponds to the Platonic distinction between appearance and reality. This opposition cannot be explained away easily, and has potentially nihilistic consequences since the real, truth, and meaning, cannot be present within the filmed media. Worse, the proliferation of filmed images and sounds could be argued to perpetuate nihilism. I hope to show that this is not necessarily the case, and that *The Leftovers* specifically demonstrates how epistemic and moral nihilism can be challenged within the medium.

However, it should be acknowledged that film and television, as much as any other artform, work with an epistemic gap, since what filmed objects refer to is simply not immediately present.

Debates in film-philosophy tend to replicate the Platonic distinction between appearance and reality. The debate anchors on a basic opposition between films as representations or instructive examples of philosophical problems, and the idea of film-as-philosophy. On one hand, we have the appearance of particular films as useful, but ultimately secondary representations of reality, and on the other, we have film-as-philosophy, which considers films as an actualisation of reality itself. Typical exemplars of the latter approach are Daniel Frampton and Gilles Deleuze. However, the extent Deleuze and Frampton's methods can confront nihilism is unclear as both still endorse a separation between the real and the appeared, even if couched in different terminology.

Frampton's filosophy is less concerned with the technical organisation of the material processes of film production—editing, acting, performance, shot selection—and more with the totality of movement constituted through the filmic object.⁵ Frampton's approach is expressly valuable when interpreting the organic movement of a film-object's unfolding thinking, reasoning and ideas, and where criticising psychological models of film analysis i.e. films as analogous to mental processes.⁶ Still, for Frampton, there is a deeper reality at work beyond the viewer in the ontological reality the film occasions.

Frampton's most direct philosophical precursor, Gilles Deleuze, has a comparable problem. For Deleuze, if a film-object generates affects, these should not be indexed to the psychology of individual viewers.⁷ The film-object self-generates its own possible world, one not restricted by the material processes of film-making such as shot selection, montage, screenplay, character arc and so forth. In Deleuze, we find an opposition between the reality occasioned by the film-object and the localised emergence of particular films or, in Deleuzian terms, a relation between the virtual and the actual.⁸ There is no other way of really classifying Deleuze and Frampton's approach than as a form of pan-psyche realism, where films have minds of their own which are instances of a broader reality. We are therefore left with the same gulf between the real and the apparent. Consequently, the epistemic gap between appearance and reality remains intact. These methods thus do not surmount the nihilistic absence of the real.

This epistemic gap should not suggest that particular films or television series automatically endorse moral or epistemological relativism due to the simple fact of their existence. It is far more productive to suggest that where film or television directly tackles nihilistic themes—the negation of value, truth and meaning—they recognize the epistemic gap between appearance and reality, and thus bring the question of reality into view. If the real is of concern, if it matters, then for every nihilistic gap between the real and what appears, there

is also a promise that reality does exist. By forcing questions of absence, lack, and nihilism to the forefront, art implicitly makes a claim for the real. This is more than just an avant-garde meta-reflection on artifice; filmed art-objects indicate the metaphysical. This impulse is evident in *The Leftovers*' constant imposition of philosophical questions on its audience about perspectival uncertainty, hallucination and reality, the effects of simulation, the moral consequences of absence, and meaninglessness itself. *The Leftovers* foregrounds metaphysical absence in order to reveal things that matter. In *The Leftovers*, mattering matters.⁹ What make the series philosophically unique is its commitment to showing a fragmentation and clash of perspectives which the departure announces, and on the other hand, its effort to reconstruct a sense of possibility and newness out of the traumatized fragments left behind after the departure. *The Leftovers* confronts the segmentation and relativity of reality itself. If everything is broken and meaningless, then there is no philosophy. *The Leftovers* valiantly attempts to think otherwise. It is thus necessary to draw on a different set of thinkers and concepts, namely Badiou and Nietzsche, to grasp the metaphysical possibilities of film and television as demonstrated in *The Leftovers*.

2. IN PURSUIT OF DEAD GODS

In G.W.F. Hegel's famous defence of art, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, he explores the regenerative capacities of art with an apocalyptic tone. For Hegel, the fact that early-1800s German art had become an object of philosophical speculation and criticism, was equivalent to an announcement of the end of art. Art could no longer be considered a universal phenomenon entwined with the ethical substance of a culture, as it was for the Homeric oral traditions of Ancient Greece.¹⁰ If art is not entwined with the totality of life, then single artworks are valuable solely as items of criticism. As such, Hegel prefigures the question of nihilism. If understanding an artwork is restricted to specific objects, it no longer matters, since it is not embedded in broader historical, cultural, or spiritual processes. *The Leftovers*, in its unique interrogation of secular apocalypticism, confronts a similar problem. While Hegel is obviously not a film-philosopher for chronological reasons, *The Leftovers* retains a sense of Hegel's desire for aesthetic substance to overcome a world of fragmented identities, whether individual, familial or national.¹¹

The Leftovers is ostensibly a direct response to epistemological and moral nihilism. The deployment of the Rapture trope ingeniously enables the screening of a Nietzschean thought-experiment. What happens when all human life is universally affected by a mysterious absence? The departure leaves the world grief-stricken and broken, with populations scrambling for alternative identities to alleviate the trauma. For a series as emotionally over-determined as *The Leftovers*, what fascinates is the way it undermines its own affectional tone

with a more capacious accommodation of metaphysical questions. As Noël Carroll suggests, obviously moving-pictures generate distinct feelings, intuitions and emotions; however, such affective tonality is a sufficient but not necessary condition of a film's philosophical propositions.¹² To understand *The Leftovers* metaphysically, the series needs to be situated as combining Nietzsche's diagnosis of the nihilism of perspectives and identities, and Badiou's effort to explain transformative and new events as an antidote to a nihilistic morass of fragmented identities.¹³

That the "reality" presented in the series is fragmented, broken, and disjointed places us squarely in a confrontation with nihilism. The most obvious philosophical index is Nietzsche's treatment of nihilism. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche warns of the unleashing of nihilistic forces after the death of God.¹⁴ With no eternal foundation, humans are left to cope with a multiplicity of epistemological and moral alternatives, each as valid as any other. Nietzsche accepts this reality as the truth, whilst repudiating an unthinking nihilistic relativism. In *The Leftovers* we find a similar situation. The Rapture-like event that disappears two percent of the world's population subtracts broader historical purpose from individuals and groups, leaving only a discordant clash of perspectives and identities. All identities become homogenous and unworthy of distinction.

If nihilism demands a "restoration of belief" due the world no longer being comprehensible as stable or permanent, the converse is equally true.¹⁵ Nihilism is not nothingness, but rather a plurality of beliefs, since after the death of God there exists a multiplicity of competing alternatives of veneration. The adoption of prosthetic belief systems requires, for Nietzsche, a denial of the inherently perspectival nature of life. Due to a frightening abyss between the chaos of reality and our subjective perception, we cling to various God-substitutes or idols to stave off the chaos. Instead of adopting a healthy scepticism, we revert to veneration and idolatry. As Kevin Stoeher puts it, nihilists who end up clinging "to a fixed perspective, as though it were the *only viewpoint* possible, also deny their own opportunity for self-transformation and life-enhancement."¹⁶ Thus, nihilism entails a projection of value onto an absent world.

As Nietzsche argues in *The Anti-Christ*, the primary consequence and danger of nihilism is ego, or the self which projects its interior life as if it were all reality.¹⁷ For Nietzsche this is a baleful outcome, one where personal immortality envisages all other perspectives as one's own. Counter to common interpretations of Nietzsche as a radical subjectivist, it is rather the case that Nietzsche's critique of nihilism requires a radical depersonalization. Depersonalization is particularly relevant to *The Leftovers*, where Matt (Christopher Eccleston), Kevin (Justin Theroux) and Nora (Carrie Coon) all embark on divestiture of their own self-conception. *The Leftovers* directly offers a metaphysical alternative to nihilistic self-absorption and cynicism. The primary characters, as I will argue, do not find their own

individual salvation; it is rather that they become *anybody*. Their grief is not personal, introspective or idiosyncratic; it is impersonal, common and placeless. Thus, they exemplify Nietzsche's distinction between active and passive nihilism.¹⁸ Passive nihilism, for Nietzsche, denotes the grief, resentment and resignation that is a response to a universe of fragmented perspectives. The departure condemns characters to inwardness and introspection, and they allow themselves to be passively constructed by a momentous historical event. In contrast, active nihilism denotes the construction of concrete acts of renewal despite the metaphysical absence which pervades *The Leftovers*, in opposition to the false gods and idols proliferating throughout it, for example, Wayne Gilchrist (Paterson Joseph) or the sex party lion-worshippers in the episode "It's a Matt, Matt, Matt, Matt World" (S3E5).

The levelling of perspectives noted above is underlined in the first season through numerous examples of replacement idols. We are informed that a variety of celebrities and notables of varying political persuasions are among the departed: Adam Sandler, Anthony Bourdain, the Pope and Vladimir Putin. Thomas Hibbs underlines this point, arguing that nihilism undermines the heroic since heroes no longer have worthwhile nemeses or a claim to moral superiority.¹⁹ Elsewhere, the levelling of perspectives is evidenced by the untethering of religious and scientific worldviews from their epistemological foundation. For example, the religious, such as Matt Jamison, have the substance of their faith eroded, as they occupy a world where they are not among the "saved." Rationalists, scientists and atheists also have their world evacuated of meaning as they must now scramble to explain a world in which a quasi-miraculous event is possible. The show's multiplicity of competing perspectives leads to a drive towards absorption within identities.

In *Untimely Meditations*' "Schopenhauer as Educator," Nietzsche argues that a distinguishing feature of nihilism is the misguided temptation to understand the human being as having a distinct essence.²⁰ This perspective is mistaken because it presupposes humans can be essentially complete.²¹ Here, the human cannot become anything other than what they are now, i.e. their currency. For Nietzsche, the nihilistic are actually devoted beings, condemned eternally to experiment with idols of religion, hedonism, economics and politics, vainly attempting to fill the metaphysical absence. Likewise, *The Leftovers* sees characters erecting idols in faith, science, anger, hedonism or the simulations of technology to help them cope with a meaningless world. We find characters embedded in, or on the cusp of, identarian entrenchment, pursuing prosthetic salvation for the metaphysical absence at the core of their reality. For example, Wayne Gilchrist, Tom Garvey (Chris Zylka) and Laurie Garvey (Amy Brenneman) experiment with cultic indoctrination. Jill Garvey (Margaret Qualley) seeks meaning in the blunted hedonism of communal sex, self-harm and death rituals: "Mind if I jerk off? Be my guest" (S1E1). As Sophie Gilbert shows, even Nora Durst, a more rationally inclined character, seeks solace in idolising games, simulations and technology, by soliciting a

sex-worker to shoot her while she wears a bullet-proof vest, simulating sex with a macabre doll, and her eventual adoption of the LADR technology.²²

The Leftovers shows identities and tribes as prosthetic idols for alleviating the affective deadening created by grief. In *The Will-to-Power*, Nietzsche reflects on the psychological effects of nihilism.²³ The psychological iteration of nihilism is specifically attained when one voluntarily asserts perspectives, beliefs, and ideologies as absolute: “Nihilism as a psychological state is reached when one has posited a totality, or a system.”²⁴ *The Leftovers* reflects Nietzsche’s concern about nihilism: our historical age is defined as a world where only our specific perspectives count. At the heart of *The Leftovers* is a Nietzschean reflection on a world where specific identities are forced to be true. It should be noted that this nihilistic relativism differs from an acknowledgement of the truth of multiplicity itself, which is Nietzsche’s deeper point. First, we accept the nihilistic condition. However, accepting the contingency of identity is radically different to accepting a particular identity as true. *The Leftovers* too makes a claim for metaphysical reality rather than the relativisms of fragmented identities. All its characters desire a passage to the new, the future, or a real world where things make sense again. As Nora says at the end of the first season (S1E10): “There is no going back. No fixing it. I’m beyond repair. Maybe we are all beyond repair...I have to move towards something. Anything.”

The metaphysical absence the departure precipitates locks individuals into multiple entrenched identities condemned to a purgatorial cyclic repetition of past mistakes, anxieties, and trauma. There is a reason a *Looney Tunes* episode plays while Jill Garvey attends a house party. Wile E. Coyote’s futile cycle of death and rebirth mirrors the perpetual inability of the series’ main characters to escape the concrete particularity of their immediate trauma and grief. Jill’s experimentation with hedonism foreshadows Kevin Garvey’s own ceaseless deaths and rebirths to restore the basic family unit, his sanity, and the social harmony of Mapleton and Miracle (Jarden). Thus, all characters are constrained within particular identities, whether familial, psychological, or tribal, confined between a past ‘now’ they wish to return to, and a future ‘now’ they aim to get to. We find clear examples with Laurie Garvey and John Murphy (Kevin Carroll): Laurie in her absorption into the tasks and activism of the Guilty Remnant; John in his frantic vigilantism to ensure Miracle remains the same. The various characters of *The Leftovers* hence find themselves trapped in a particular identity. The departure achieves a world where humans only view themselves in preordained roles and perspectives, incapable of a transformative encounter with the new, as is especially underscored in the absence of departed children. Children function as an avatar of futurity and newness; their loss denotes a world without possibility. Thus, each episode of the first season begins with references to children, and the season closes with the revelation of Laurie’s departed foetus.

If the metaphysical absence pervading *The Leftovers* defines the reality of the world, then does this leave the viewer in a state of nihilistic absurdity? For Nietzsche, that there is no ground beneath our feet is simultaneously debilitating and liberating. Liberating, as we are free to adopt any perspectival alternative we choose; debilitating in the sense that existential meaning remains provisional. The latter points lead towards what Nietzsche calls the “ways of self-narcotization.” Self-narcotization unleashes the deadening effects of whichever idols we adopt to cope with metaphysical absence. The effect, for all denizens of *The Leftovers*, is anaesthetic rather aesthetic, numbed and present rather than creative. If everything is broken, all that is left is to turn to siloed splinters of opinion, perspective, and tribal entrenchment. As such, the emptiness is not “let be,” as the theme song (“Let the Mystery be” by Iris DeMent). Characters, religious and scientific groups all try to name and explain the void. And as Nietzsche suggests, when we attempt to fill the void, we only do so through aping absent gods.

The prison the departure inflicts on the world is one in which opinions, beliefs and identities are all equally valid. It is unclear whether the departed are dead or alive; those who remain are unclear as to whether they are saved or damned. *The Leftovers* challenges us with the null and void itself. Rather than accepting atomisation and entrenchment of identities, the series makes a claim for a discomfiting but necessary metaphysical truth. Metaphysical absence haunts characters and intra-dramatic groups with the question of universalism. Those left behind are neither exceptional nor different in their suffering. The affective deadening induced by the departure is no different to any other disappeared population, whether it is those who died in 9/11, the Disappeared of Chile, those lost to Covid-19, or the dead and missing of the Troubles in Ireland. *The Leftovers*' departures reveal that meaning is elsewhere, and is not found in clinging to identity, whether psychological in Kevin's confrontation with himself, provincial in Miracle's desire to preserve its immunity from outside events, or religious in the case of Matt's dogmatic faith.

If the series were nihilistic it would revel in the atomised and insular nature of dissonant identities emerging after the departure. This is not, however, the case. While *The Leftovers* stages the passage from passive to active nihilism, it falls short of advocating nihilism outright. From the beginning, the malaise of an atomised and siloed culture is subverted. However, *The Leftovers* does not adopt the Nietzschean solution. We could not say, for example, that any characters resolve into a serene nihilism, nor is it obvious that Nietzsche's *übermensch* is advocated. So, while *The Leftovers* adopts the Nietzschean diagnosis, it does not adopt the Nietzschean alternative. Here we can see strains of Badiouian philosophy emerge.

Badiou advocates for metaphysical events. In Badiou's ontology, the event is defined by rupture and uncertainty. An event occurs when prevailing customs, convention and opinion are overturned, and subjects become confronted with the possibility of new truths. Politically, for

example, a real event is the presentation of a new solidarity, which announces meaningful equality in opposition to forces of market fragmentation, entrenched identity, competing interests, and political hierarchy.²⁵ *The Leftovers* also conforms to Badiou's argument about the power of cinema, which he says resides in film's ability to reveal the undecidable. Neither the old or the new, the discontinuous or continuous, tradition or innovation, are given precedence in *The Leftovers*. Instead, for Badiou, cinema operates as an exceptional promise, a promise that we can reconstruct ourselves and our society from the nihilistic fragments we inhabit.²⁶ *The Leftovers'* Badiouian themes show particularly in the effort to contemplate the metaphysically universal dimension of human experience.

Above the jarring clash of differences, intensive psychological breakdown, and networks of identities, the series entertains the possibility of a real equality.²⁷ This is not the homogeneity of nihilistic levelling; *The Leftovers* boldly attempts to surpass any fetishization of sectional differences or identitarianism. While this attempted address to universal humanity is, as I will show, only partially successful, *The Leftovers* should be commended for its attempt to transcend the parameters of community, state, location and province. It is not a "matter of geography," as the scientists who blithely patronise Nora say when explaining how the departure affected her disproportionately (S2E2). The point is that Nora is *not* exceptional. What is happening to her is happening to all, hence *The Leftovers'* eerie equality, its optical democracy, to borrow the words of Cormac McCarthy.²⁸ The series does not revel in a plurality of perspectives; instead, *The Leftovers* grasps that a clash of perspectives is secondary. Real equality must take place in a reconstruction of the new, wherein no one perspective, community or identity may be elevated at the expense of others.

It is important to understand that *The Leftovers'* equality does not indicate any objective social identity *per se*.²⁹ This equality is not about equality of income, economic status or social capital. Indeed, what is impressive about *The Leftovers* is the way it asserts the undecidable multiplicity of identities, projecting without judgement or preference a universal humanity without entrenchment into fractionalised identities. The emphasis on transformative encounter is shown again and again throughout. No character is defined by their adopted identity. For example, even less sympathetic characters such as Wayne, Meg (Liv Tyler) and Patti (Ann Dowd) are not roundly condemned. Meg grows weary of the bureaucratization of the Guilty Remnant for her own impish terrorism. Tom drifts from cult to cult, eventually finding a place in law enforcement. Laurie moves from successful professional, to cult member, to cult leader, to ex-cult therapist, to her last scene, where she works in a caring capacity. These character trajectories are curiously modernist, demonstrating humans' capacity to reconstruct the new out of fragments of the old.

Furthermore, no character is defined within a specific identity. Identities are contingent and thus may be otherwise. Philosophically, *The Leftovers* is refreshing due to its lack of

resolution and *telos*. The equality of the innumerable perspectives is not cast as a goal to be reached. Instead, the show inaugurates a mysterious equality. The departure reveals a radical equality, transcending differences, communal belonging and the conventions prohibiting characters from glimpsing new, transformative and meaningful encounters. The good can be taken up again and again, irrespective of group affiliation, geographical fate, class alignment or individual preference. Thus, individuals and groups are thought in terms of capacities and powers of renewal rather than in terms of what they are. Such capacities do not belong to anyone particularly, but instead unveil a common fate, a power belonging to anyone.

3. DIVESTED SUBJECTS

The Leftovers' equality is particularly evident in the narrative arcs of Matt and Kevin. What binds them is the emptying of their personal sensibilities towards a universal and generic view of humanity, rather than sinking into nihilistic identitarianism. With each character, we start with a generic type: priest and lawman. Firstly, Matt is Job, a prophet without a prophecy, willing to believe irrespective of the countless tragedies befalling him.³⁰ Throughout, Matt is divested of his religious subjectivity. The function of Wayne, or "just another asshole who thought he was God" (S1E10), is to sharpen the dramatic effect of Matt's narrative. Wayne revels in prophetic identity, with the power, status and opportunities for sexual gratification it affords him. Matt, in contrast, engages in an incremental divestiture of his religious sentiment. When we first see Matt preaching to a sparsely populated church, we observe the word "epiphany" behind him. The message could not be clearer: Matt is turning his back on revelation and realisation, to force the truth of his own religious identity. Matt demonstrates Nietzsche's point about the nihilism of personal immortality, where personal salvation and religious identity are assumed to be momentous when, in fact, religion is just one identity among many. As Christopher Eccleston, when discussing his role as Matt, suggests, the arc of Matt's story depends on his ability to put himself into question, challenge his own ego and sense of self-importance, and undermine his prudery and repression.³¹ Throughout, what Matt holds dear is drained, as he becomes undocumented and scapegoated in the second season, loses his family in the final season and, most abjectly, is finally forced into the role of an atheist refuting God.

When Matt finally confronts David Burton (Bill Camp) as God, we have a truly remarkable scene, consistent with *The Leftovers*' effort to transcend recalcitrant perspectives. The scene emphasises the atheist's desire to act as God's confessor, revealing rational atheism as just another perspective. This scene also draws the Heavens to the earth: it depicts God as absolute nihilist, fickle, cruel, filled with malign caprice. "Because I could," he answers when questioned on the reason for the departure (S3E5). Burton confronts Matt with the egotism of

his faith, proposing that Matt's devotion is selfishly motivated. This confrontation is required to stage Matt's secular redemption in his moving final scene with Nora. Finally, Matt is robbed of certainty, moral assuredness and piety. He is no longer overlaid with the idiosyncratic burdens of subjectivity, ego, emotion, and sentiment. Instead, he can now serve someone other than himself without recompense; freed from religious tribe, judgment, and sermon, he is there to do, to be, and to reconstruct an undecidable world:

MATT: How can I ever stand in a room full of people and convince them that I have the answers when I have no idea what the fuck I'm talking about? (S3E8)

The other example of divested subjectivity in *The Leftovers* is Kevin. He is sheriff, lawman, a stern but kind patriarch motivated by returning to the normalcy of the family unit he has betrayed. Essentially, Kevin is a fragile and weak sovereign, epitomised by the paper crown he wears in the opening episode of the third season. Kevin, like Matt, is emptied of his subjective orientation as the series unfolds. Throughout, he is a weakened, brittle version of the stoic, self-reliant lawman, yearning to restore both psychic and social order. Once his psychic order is restored it should follow that worldly disorder would also be neutralized. That the fate of social and political order is synonymous with his own quest for personal salvation reveals the fragility of his self-knowledge. While Matt offers the divestiture of religious subjectivity, Kevin's character arc equally offers divestment of the subjectivity and perspective of the stereotypical patriarchal enforcer.

Kevin is submerged in the cyclical trauma of the grief-stricken. Newness is foreclosed because he cannot find a place in the world. At one point his father Kevin Garvey Snr (Scott Glenn) chides his restlessness, "Every man rebels against the idea that this is fucking it...All in search of greater purpose. You have no greater purpose, because *it* is enough" (S1E9). That Kevin struggles against replicating his father's trite conservative advice to "Be thankful for what you got," is a testament to *The Leftovers'* philosophical aspiration to contemplate the unverifiable as a source of wisdom. This is also evidenced by Kevin's fraught moves to new environments such as Miracle and Australia. Like Matt and Nora, what is important is not Kevin's place in the world, but his irreducible placelessness.

Kevin's therapy requires overcoming his sense of self. The dead Patti who haunts Kevin is a version of himself he must put to death. The sovereign must kill the sovereign. In the episode "The Most Powerful Man in the World (and His Identical Twin Brother)" (S3E7), Kevin's idealized international assassin twin provides him with the comic fantasy of an all-powerful version of himself, immune to the fragile subjectivity he clings to in waking life. Kevin's cyclical births, deaths and rebirths, manifested most obviously in his plastic bag asphyxiation rituals, show that what he truly seeks is not himself, but the negation of himself. Thus, Kevin's moral authority, political leadership and social privilege is inherently contingent, accentuated by the porosity of his domestic spaces. Kevin's quest for personal

coherence is just one more nihilistic identity or opinion, one wholly disintegrated when he kills his immortal counterpart, an act emphatically marked by the instigation of a nuclear apocalypse against the afterlife, undermining any reconciliation of reality with the destination of the departed. All that remains is effectively his thereness, the sheer fact he exists in the real, with all its attendant possibilities.

What ties Matt, Kevin and Nora together is their salvation from salvation—hence the metaphysical undecidability attached to *The Leftovers*' denouement. Nora, for example, moves from a question of “want[ing] fucking closure” to affirming metaphysical absence by resolving not to communicate with her children after her transmigration to the world of the departed (S3E6). Since children operate as a symbol for futurity, remaining tied to a previously lost future is overcome, allowing other possibilities to manifest. It is only through dissolving the self into concrete acts beyond communal affiliation and attachment that the irredeemable past, present and future become palpable, for everybody and anybody. Grief is neither exceptional, hierarchical nor sacred.

4. EQUALITY WITHOUT HIERARCHY

Throughout *The Leftovers* the question of hierarchy recurs. From the first series' opening credit sequence depicting bodies ascending upwards, to cracks in the road covered in a protective glass box in *Miracle*, to Kevin's Dante-esque submergence and descent into the underworld with his guide Virgil (Steven Williams), the questions of levels, altitude, depth and tiers are at the forefront of the show's *mises-en-scène*. The philosophical resonance of this visual thematic is interesting as it provides an aesthetic representation of an eerie equality. In *The Leftovers*, ascent and descent are undermined in favour of the mid-level. At the beginning of the second season, we witness an Edenic scene where a rockslide kills a family, forcing a pregnant woman to give birth on her own. She eventually succumbs to a snakebite from below, dying while protecting her baby. While the Biblical resonance is obvious, the philosophical point is more fascinating. Salvation is not found in the depths, nor vertically in the heavens, as framed by the shot of a bird the dying woman witnesses. Renewal is found on the material ground level. The power of this primal scene lies in the tenacity of earth-bound survival. The mother's replacement inaugurates unconditional equality, one not tied to blood, family, place or location, but as enmeshed in the possibilities of a concrete this-worldly solidarity.

The condition of renewal is defined by rootlessness, and thus *The Leftovers* contains a remarkably egalitarian impulse. This aesthetic logic of levels is replicated in other places. We see it in the drone strike that kills Evie (Jasmin Savoy Brown) from above, the earthquake draining the river from below, the nuclear strikes raining down on high and destroying the

immortal realm, the Millerites looking to the Heavens for salvation, and Nora who is submerged in the LADR tech. Most distinctly, the symbology of ladders in the final season highlights this equality. Rather than nihilistic segmentation, ladders draw levels together. The Millerites use ladders to climb to the roofs, Kevin Garvey Snr climbs a ladder to fix equipment, Kevin and Kevin Garvey Snr discuss the non-apocalypse on a roof, the technology Nora uses is called LADR, and there is a ladder in the final shot resting against Nora's house. The final scene (S3E8) also shows birds landing on the middle level, negating depth and ascent, while a goat departs, indicating the departure of the bestial life haunting Kevin throughout. The final scene forcefully makes a philosophical point: it repudiates both overworld and underworld in favour of a material reality pregnant with possibility and renewal. Kevin, now with a pacemaker, in a state of suspension between life and death, acknowledges mortality rather than immortality. Nora relates her forsaking of the suprasensible and otherworldly on her journey to the world of the departed. *The Leftovers* thus makes an ontological and ethical point. The ontological point is that metaphysical absence always can remain a form of thereness. The ethical point is that any effort to remain entrenched in identity misses the blunt reality of common acts of reconstruction and the mixing of perspectives. This perspectival mixing is bluntly underlined in the final episode in the slightly unusual sexual pairing of the nun and the biker and, more directly, in the serene mixture of spiritualism and materialism, science and faith they represent.³²

For all its philosophical ambition, rejection of hierarchical identity, and insight into the equality of the human condition, there are some elements of *The Leftovers* requiring pause. Kevin and Nora have a meaningful encounter, offering a unique secular ecstasis in the final shot. However, in political terms, the last frame is marked by a retreat to the domestic and private as an evacuation of the political and public. In one sense this is welcome: political opinions can be as entrenched as any other worldview. However, the absence of a political metaphysics is notable. Political life and its representatives are notably nihilistic and homogenous. When government agents assault Wayne's compound in a Waco-esque conflagration they are faceless, dismissive and removed, as we also see with the Government's drone strike on Meg and Evie. In the first season a congressman visiting Wayne to disburden his grief is equally lost. Also, in the first season, the mayor of Mapleton is sullied by the compromises and negotiations of local democratic politics, resorting to the empty rhetoric of gestural commemoration. Governmental responses to the departure are filtered through the actuarial and calculative Department of Sudden Departures (DSD). Essentially, state and political actors are deemed abstract or ineffectual.

That the political world is at a remove from the action elicits questions about class and wealth. Predominantly, the acquisition of money is never really an issue for principal characters. There are some exceptions with less central characters. For example, Virgil, a

suspected sex offender, dwells as an impoverished outcast in a trailer outside Miracle. Also, Christine (Annie Q.) alongside Tom, struggles with new motherhood in the face of poverty, and in Season Three we see Kevin Garvey Sr. scramble to appropriate the spiritual wealth of Australia's less affluent Aboriginal community. Poverty is explained away with a gambling win as Matt struggles to save his church. Nora, herself a bureaucratic functionary, receives financial compensation from the DSD as well as a windfall when her house is purchased by benefactor-scientists. There is only one significant exception to the absence of the political in *The Leftovers*, and that is through the representation of economic disparity of those within and without Miracle's gated community.³³

Outside Miracle we find a poorer community. Although not necessarily poor in monetary terms, they are certainly poor in terms of the perceived safety, security and spiritual wealth which Miracle offers. This sharp demarcation between inside and outside speaks to many political issues affecting the American *demos* with its portrayal of gated communities, a sheltered class oblivious to the plight of outsiders, immigrants and runners, documented and undocumented, a security and surveillance state with militarized police, and the general paranoia exemplified by John's erratic vigilantism. However, in the eventual overrunning of Miracle by the mob we see a destructive intermingling of classes. Intermingling and common participation is negatively coded as an anarchic and motley feudal mob. The gathering of inner and outer, the blurring of those who belong and do not belong, and the equalising of privilege and scarcity is left as it is. Letting in the mystery thus equates to political passivity. While *The Leftovers* offers compelling aesthetic, ontological and ethical alternatives to nihilism, a political response is somewhat wanting. The series does not illuminate how a multiplicity of identities might be coordinated into newer forms of solidarity or integrated action across different classes, tribal affiliations or political identities.

Despite its struggles in framing political metaphysics, *The Leftovers* does still provide a refreshing reflection on equality. As I have argued, the departure disrupts all hierarchy, leaving the left-behind with a nihilistic levelling of segmented identities and perspectives. This equality is not, however, authentic equality. The equality of nihilistic levelling only offers an appearance of equality, where every idol, perspective and subjective orientation is taken as absolute, and is thus synonymous with substitution for a lost hierarchy. Real equality must be unqualified and unconditioned, concrete, axiomatic and new, there to be taken up perpetually irrespective of to whom it belongs.

Nonetheless, the show does confront an anxiety over sameness and substitution. For example, the replacement of the baby Jesus doll reveals anxiety about a dearth of the sacred. The miraculous Christ-child, supposedly irreplaceable, is as replaceable and expendable as any commodity, which is why we also see the Christ-doll being made alongside dozens of other identical plastic "babies" in a factory production-line. Wayne's interchangeable pregnant

girlfriends also indicate a twisted inversion of spiritual maternity. Kevin too is constantly fretful at the prospect of replicating Kevin Garvey Snr's mental illness, and he ends up directly confronting a twin counterpart. Furthermore, *The Leftovers* continually riffs on prostheses, dolls, simulations, mock-ups and replications. The characters' nihilistic anxiety of sameness saturates the show with a dearth of particularity, a situation where nobody knows who they are, whether they are special or exceptional. Overcoming the anxiety of sameness is essential to *The Leftovers*' ontological and ethical repudiation of nihilism. This is particularly so with the Guilty Remnant's nihilistic levelling.

The Guilty Remnant offers the clearest exemplar of the anxiety of sameness. This striking visual cult unsettles the townsfolk of Mapleton, and latterly Miracle, by confronting their sameness and replicability with Dada-esque agit-prop. The Guilty Remnant's activism advocates sameness. That they all wear white illuminates their adherence to uniformity; that they do not respect boundaries underlines their desire to undercut markers of property, distinction and propriety; that they continually smoke indicates their worship of death as the great leveller. The Guilty Remnant are effectively accelerationist nihilists, attempting to inaugurate the mass suicide of humanity. However, as is common with death-cults, The Guilty Remnant fail to discern any possibility of renewal or transformation. Here, Badiou's distinction between false and true events is instructive.

It would be inaccurate to suggest the departure is the type of political event Badiou has in mind due to his explanation of the difference between a false and true event.³⁴ For Badiou, a real event is defined as the rupture of the new supervening existing identities. The event does not replicate existing situations; as such, it is new and inexistent.³⁵ A false event is defined by a counterfeit universalism, where a particular event is assumed to be universal and is conditioned on the continued repetition of a particular past.³⁶ Hence, The Guilty Remnant's activism remains fundamentally tied to memory. As is typical of death-cults, The Guilty Remnant are reactive, insular and reactionary, offering a façade of authentic equality in the guise of a particular hierarchy. This point is consolidated as they morph into a bureaucratic institution when Meg confronts the limitations of their administrative hierarchy. The Guilty Remnant render the metaphysical point clearer: real equality must demythologize any form of closure, whether psychological, communal or tribal. *The Leftovers* does not prescribe to the hierarchical privilege of any territory, location or identity as an alternative to nihilism. Instead, there is a refreshingly different option: "let[ting] the mystery be," as the theme song exhorts, gestures towards configuring a different type of equality, one unqualified and unconditioned, marked by the palpable possibility of newness, transfiguration and indefatigable resilience, as manifested in Kevin and Nora's final meeting.

CONCLUSION

Distinct from its evangelical pop-culture predecessors, *The Leftovers* uniquely screens a philosophical alternative to nihilism. My overall thesis in this essay is that *The Leftovers*, as a form of film-philosophy, offers a thorough and singular attempt to repudiate nihilism. *The Leftovers* addresses the different facets of nihilism as they relate to the different branches of philosophy. Aesthetically, the departure screens a representation of reality purveyed by metaphysical absence. Existentially, reality *is* absence. The programme screens a thought-experiment as to how individuals, families and social groups respond, overcome, or fail to overcome, the ethical and political malaise precipitated by this ontology—most markedly, as I have argued, in the key characters' divestiture of their own psychological identity. Even if the political dimensions of human existence are left somewhat untouched, with little offered as to how new social systems might emerge, *The Leftovers* still offers a glimpse of an alternative metaphysical life. Metaphysics is the point: the absence of the departure shows how concrete real life always reasserts itself. The programme is remarkable for its commitment to undecidability, disruption and multiplicity, without recourse to cynical self-indulgence, moral sentimentalism or identarian entrenchment. *The Leftovers* performs Nietzsche's reflection on the relativity of perspectives after the death of God. Thus, it depicts the moral and ontological consequences of a relativity of values, identity and perspectives. Thus, *The Leftovers* offers a metaphysical response to moral and epistemological absence, in its effort to construct a new reality, a new equality out of the multiplicity of fragments. Rather than succumbing to the temptations of nihilism—cynicism, hedonism, dogmatism—*The Leftovers* offers a thoughtful reconstruction of psychological, cultural, and traumatic fragments into real, meaningful events and encounters. The philosophical purchase of *The Leftovers* lies in its effort to perform the possibility of the new. And reflecting on absence is key to revealing the show's enduring desire to consider the world anew, as if for the first time. Transfiguration can come into existence even in the worst of all possible worlds. This message tentatively percolates throughout: change is possible, it is not impossible. *The Leftovers*' eerie secular ecstasis is its primary philosophical achievement, showing how film and television can convincingly and decisively tackle epistemological and moral nihilism.

¹ For a thorough account of philosophical nihilism, see Nolan Gertz, *Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

² One branch of philosophy I do not address is logic. This would be possible in the context of logical nihilism, that is where all logical propositions are meaningless. However, this would require another article entirely.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will-to-Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1968), 20. Hereafter *WP*.

⁴ John Marmysz, *Cinematic Nihilism: Encounters, Confrontations, Overcomings* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 2017), Introduction, Kindle.

⁵ Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 169.

⁶ Frampton, *Filmosophy*, 92.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 22-24.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 82-85.

⁹ Rebecca Goldstein, "Mattering Matters," *Free Enquiry* 37, no.2 (February-March 2017), <https://secularhumanism.org/2017/01/cont-mattering-matters/>.

¹⁰ Georg W. F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet (Harmondsworth: Penguin 2004), 10-12.

¹¹ Badiou makes a good fist of showing how Hegel prompted film-philosophical thinking. See Alain Badiou, "Hegel, the Arts and Cinema," *Journal of Continental Philosophy* 1, no.1 (April 2020): 97-116.

¹² Noël Carroll, "Movie-Made Philosophy," in *Film as Philosophy*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 282.

¹³ While Badiou and Nietzsche are not aligned philosophically, this does not preclude the possibility of analysing *The Leftovers* as a response to both.

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181.

¹⁵ Darren Ambrose, *Film, Nihilism and the Restoration of Belief* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2013), 5.

¹⁶ Kevin Stoehr, *Nihilism in Film and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 15.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), 23, 168.

¹⁸ See Nietzsche, *WP*, 17-19.

¹⁹ Thomas Hibbs, *Shows about Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from The Exorcist to Seinfeld*. (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 1999), 148.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1983), 164-165.

²¹ Nietzsche, *WP*, 267-268.

²² Sophie Gilbert, "The Brilliant Nihilism of *The Leftovers*," *The Atlantic*, August 4, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/08/the-brilliant-nihilism-of-the-leftovers/375563/>.

²³ Nietzsche, *WP*, 19-26.

²⁴ Nietzsche, *WP*, 12.

²⁵ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 174-175.

²⁶ Alain Badiou, *Cinema*, trans. Susan Spitzer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 219.

²⁷ Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, trans. Oliver Feltham and Justice Clemens (London: Continuum, 2005), 53-54.

²⁸ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (London: Picador, 1989), 247.

²⁹ Alain Badiou, *Philosophy and the Event*, trans. Louise Burchill (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 27.

³⁰ According to Tom Perrotta, Matt is explicitly a Job figure. Tom Perrotta, "The Leftovers' Co-Creator Tom Perrotta on Mysteries, Grief, and Getting Weird with Damon Lindelof," interview by Tom Phillip, *GQ*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.gq.com/story/the-leftovers-tom-perrotta-interview>.

³¹ Christopher Eccleston, "The Leftovers' Christopher Eccleston on Matt's Boat Orgy Breakthrough and Why His Character is Actually Damon Lindelof," interview by Ben Travers, *Indie Wire*, May 14, 2017, <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/05/the-leftovers-christopher-eccleston-interview-matt-is-damon-lindelof-season-3-1201816845/>.

³² In the show's trivia notes, consulting producer Reza Aslan suggests LADR technology is a portable *axis mundi*, "The concept of the LADR is this notion that here is this kind of mystical, supernatural thing - the departure - that is beyond explanation. And yet here is a 'scientific' explanation for it that is as much mystical as it is rational." *The Leftovers*, The Book of Nora, Trivia," IMBD, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5338044/trivia>.

³³ Having watched the second season of *The Leftovers* in January 2021, the overrunning of Miracle bore striking resemblance to the storming of the US Capitol by an insurrectionary mob on 6 January 2021. The producers and creators should be commended for diagnosing nascent strains of political rebellion within the US demos.

³⁴ Interestingly, for Badiou, evil confuses an event with a simulacrum of the event. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 73.

³⁵ Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Louise Burchill (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 83.

³⁶ For a good summary of Badiou on evil see Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 263.