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FILM AND ETHICS
edited by

CINEMA E ÉTICA
editado por

Patrícia Castello Branco
Susana Viegas



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CONTENTS | ÍNDICE

<i>Abstracts</i>	1-10
ARTICLES ARTIGOS	
<i>Film Realism and the Possibility of Using Cinematic Characters as Moral Examples</i> William Pamerleau (University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg)	12-26
<i>Nihilism On The Metaphysical Screen: The Fate of Gilles Deleuze's Cinematic Ethics</i> Laurence Kent (King's College London)	27-41
<i>Staging Disagreement and Its Ethics: A Rancièrian Approach to Lanthimos' Dogtooth</i> Seckin Goksoy (University College Dublin) and Tugce Bidav (Maynooth University)	42-60
<i>Law And Image: The Minor Ethics in Krzysztof Kieślowski's Decalogue One</i> Aleksi Rennes (University of Turku)	61-78
<i>Phenomenological Imagination, Ethics, and Empathy: The Case of Epilepsy</i> Isabelle Delmotte (Waikato University)	79-96
<i>Trauma and Rationalization: Ethical Tensions and Confounding Empathies in Oppenheimer's The Act of Killing</i> Joseph G. Kickasola (Baylor University)	97-130
<i>A Psychoanalytic Ethics for Screen Aesthetics? The Case of Spring Breakers</i> Alison Horbury (University of Melbourne)	131-151
<i>"They're Bad People – They Should Suffer": Post-British Crime Films and the Ethics of Retributive Violence</i> Mark Schmitt (TU Dortmund University)	152-168
BOOK REVIEWS RECENSÕES DE LIVROS	
<i>Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary African Cinema</i> William Brown (University of Roehampton, London)	170-174
<i>Pixar with Lacan: The Hysterics Guide to Animation</i> Anthony J. Ballas (University of Colorado at Denver)	175-179
<i>Non-Cinema: Global Digital Film-Making and the Multitude</i> Harifa Siregar (Georgia State University)	180-184
<i>Hitchcock's Moral Gaze</i> Philipp Teuchmann (FCSH-UNL)	185-190

CINEMA 11

Sternberg and Dietrich: The Phenomenology of Spectacle 191-198
Maria Irene Aparício (FCSH-UNL | Ifilnova)

The Shape of Spectatorship: Art, Science, and Early Cinema in Germany 199-203
Philip Teuchmann (FCSH-UNL)

CONFERENCE REPORTS | RELATÓRIOS DE CONFERÊNCIAS

Genologophobia 205-210
William Brown (University of Roehampton, London)

ABSTRACTS

FILM REALISM AND THE POSSIBILITY OF USING CINEMATIC CHARACTERS AS MORAL EXAMPLES

William Pamerleau (University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg)

Can film characters serve as moral examples? Virtue theorists suggest that even fictional characters can provide ethical instruction and inspiration, as Martha Nussbaum has illustrated with her analyses of literature. Whatever one's views on the merits of virtue ethics, the claim that we can learn about moral character by way of fictional narratives is intriguing, particularly when applied to film and its ability to provide concrete depictions.

But if we think these characters should influence how we actually think about our lives, then it would seem we want them to depict real possibilities for how one might live; and in that sense, we would want the depiction to convey a certain amount of realism. However, contemporary theorists largely reject the sort of naïve realism that theorists like Bazin embraced – that the camera can just show us how the world really is. Rather, the very nature of film narration compromises its ability to be realistic, because film narration typically leans heavily upon filmic conventions, which may be very different from aspects of actual persons. For example, as David Bordwell explains, spectators make sense of narrative films by employing a variety of schemata, which they learn from exposure to other films, familiarity with film genres, and expectations based on stereotypes from the cultural at large. In short, films are *narratives*, which are based on learned expectations established by narrative conventions. Narrative plausibility, it could be argued, has little to do with what happens in the real world.

Or does it? While I largely agree with these observations, I argue for an alternative approach to film realism that explains why cinematic characters can indeed provide moral examples. Hugo Münsterberg claims that film “tells us the human story by overcoming the forms of the outer world” and instead “adjusting the events to the forms of the inner world.” The emphasis here is on how we *experience* the world, and if it turns out that experience is itself essentially a form of narration, shaped by the same sorts of conventions that influence film narration, then films *are* realistic portrayals of how we live.

David Carr puts forward a useful version of narrative identity, showing that we effectively tell a story in relating the events of our lives. In creating that story, we make use of various social scripts, which are themselves the results of cultural conventions. If this is the case, then, the

process of creating a narrative for our lives is not so different from the process of constructing film narratives. Yes, film characters may be the product of stereotypes and conventions, but our own narratives are chosen from among similar schemata.

So if we understand our own identity in narrative terms, the concern with cinematic characters being narrative constructions evaporates. We learn from and are inspired by narratives because we are in the process of thinking about our own narratives. This position shows why, then, cinematic characters can indeed serve as moral examples.

Keywords: Narrative; Narrative Identity; Virtue Theory; Realism; Moral Example.

NIHILISM ON THE METAPHYSICAL SCREEN: THE FATE OF GILLES DELEUZE'S CINEMATIC ETHICS

Laurence Kent (King's College London)

"I feel I am a pure metaphysician," declared Gilles Deleuze in a 1981 interview, and although perhaps his statement is more provocation than proof, this article takes Deleuze's admission seriously in a reading of his *Cinema* books. Commentary on Deleuze in film-philosophical scholarship has been largely typical of a reluctance to fully interrogate his metaphysical commitments, epitomised by the recent alignment of his work with the writings of Stanley Cavell. It is ethics that provides the common touchstone for Cavell's and Deleuze's philosophies of cinema, and D.N. Rodowick argues that an imagined "conversation" between the two thinkers can be productive. For Rodowick, Deleuze's ethics of belief and Cavell's Emersonian moral perfectionism are "a sinuous line along which [their] accounts of ontology complement one another." My article argues that this leads to a misreading of the Deleuzian ethics; it will require emphasising Deleuze's metaphysics, his claims on how reality itself is produced, in order to reorient this reading of his ethical project.

Deleuze's ethical problematic concerns "the modern fact (...) that we no longer believe in this world." Rodowick reads this as synonymous with scepticism: the creeping fear of the non-existence of external reality. He posits that Cavell and Deleuze both respond to the problem of scepticism by emphasising the link between cinema and belief, thus arguing that we cannot *know* the existence of the world but that we must believe instead. This is despite the different metaphysical commitments of the two philosophers, and Rodowick states that "Deleuze's Spinozan ontology presents a universe where scepticism should be made irrelevant." This means

that Rodowick is led to posit “Deleuze’s unacknowledged scepticism” as that which unsettles Deleuze’s philosophical position; it is “Deleuze’s difficulty in accounting for the human dimensions” of the existential concerns that arise after World War II that explains this contradiction, and Rodowick reads Deleuze *against himself* to assert a humanist account of his ethics.

I posit that it is as a response to nihilism that Deleuze’s ethics of belief is situated, and I use this metaphysical reorientation to draw out the fatalistic implications of Deleuze’s cinematic ethics, probing the question of whether or not it is *fit for purpose* today. The possibilities of agency and human freedom are diminished within Deleuze’s philosophical system as there is a deferral to a metaphysical reality of primary production that dictates ethical preferences. Instead of pacifying Deleuze by emphasising humanistic values, this article thus attempts to grapple with the full ethical and political implications of the metaphysics underlining Deleuze’s film-philosophy.

Keywords: Gilles Deleuze; Metaphysics; Agency; Film-Philosophy; Politics.

STAGING DISAGREEMENT AND ITS ETHICS: A RANCIÈRIAN APPROACH TO LANTHIMOS’ *DOGTOOTH*

Seckin Goksoy (University College Dublin) and Tugce Bidav (Maynooth University)

This article analyses Yorgos Lanthimos’ *Dogtooth/Kynodontas* (2009) on the basis of Jacques Rancière’s *ethics of equality*. It begins with an ethical elucidation of Rancière’s widely-known conception of *disagreement* through which Rancière meticulously conceptualizes politics not as a form of consensus, but as a form of disagreement or dissensus. For Rancière, what accompanies scenes of disagreement is the principle of equality, which signifies equality between each and every speaking being; it is the principle that corresponds to a presupposition of equality that animates both the police and politics. By taking the principle of equality into the centre of our argument, just as Rancière does, we suggest that ethics is the core of his aesthetico-political framework since both the police and politics are dependent upon this principle. Therefore, in the first section, we elaborate respectively the police as an organisation through which the ethical dimension of relationships is delimited and politics as scenes of disagreement in which the ethical dimension of relationships becomes unlimited. This is because politics is an ethical act that opens the undoing of the police order to an infinite number of ethical responses. We propose to name

this the *ethics of equality*. Then, the article aims to enrich the discussion on the ethico-aesthetics of politics through a reading of *Dogtooth* as well as to provide a unique appraisal of the film. Accordingly, we suggest that *Dogtooth* with its narrative provides exemplary settings to discuss the ethics of equality. To argue this, we initially provide a critical analysis of the familial organization in *Dogtooth*, specifically focusing on how the family structurally resembles the police order and how the scenes of agreement and disagreement are displayed within this structure. We then demonstrate how the ethical and aesthetico-political value of the film lies on its capacity to narrate scenes of disagreement, especially in a pre-political sense.

Keywords: Ethics of Equality; Rancière; Disagreement; Aesthetics and Politics; Lanthimos' *Dogtooth*.

LAW AND IMAGE: THE MINOR ETHICS IN KRZYSZTOF KIEŚŁOWSKI'S *DECALOGUE ONE*

Aleksi Rennes (University of Turku)

The narrative of *Decalogue One*, the first episode of Krzysztof Kieślowski's television series *The Decalogue* (*Dekalog*, 1988), revolves around a rationally unexplainable accident: a child falls through the ice of a frozen lake and drowns, even though his father has ensured with scientific calculations and empirical experiments that the ice should support the child's weight with ease. The series' references to the Ten Commandments suggest the tentative explanation that the child's death is a judgement of God on the father, who has transgressed by elevating human reason above God. This article argues that the possibility of divine judgement is invoked in *Decalogue One* only in order to question the logic of judgement in general as well as the idea of universal moral law on which such judgements depend. In this way, Kieślowski's film is able to bypass the moral code determined by the Ten Commandments and proceed to develop an alternative, cinematic ethics in and of the image.

The aim of the article is to locate Kieślowski's ethico-aesthetic practice within the "minor" tradition of ethical thought as developed by Gilles Deleuze in his reading of the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. Deleuze upholds a sharp distinction between morality and ethics. For him, morality, with its emphasis on transcendent values, laws, and obedience, represents a misinterpretation of the true nature of reality. Ethics, on the other hand, is concerned with the rectification of such a misconception. It is defined as an epistemic operation of overcoming the

natural and habitual conditions of human perception which prevent the attainment of adequate knowledge of the world. Similarly, in *Decalogue One*, ethical practice can be seen as belonging primarily to the domain of perception and knowledge: the characters constitute a typology of different modes of vision attempting to grasp the central mysterious event of the film. In addition, this article claims that the shift from religious morality to minor ethics in Kieślowski's film brings about a renegotiation of the concept of death as it is wrested away from moral considerations concerning guilt and judgement. Instead, death becomes a site for experimentation with the capacities of the cinematic image itself. It becomes a phenomenon of arrested movement which always also involves the potential for reanimation, for life regained.

Keywords: Krzysztof Kieślowski; Gilles Deleuze; Baruch Spinoza; Ethics; Judgement; Perception; Death.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL IMAGINATION, ETHICS, AND EMPATHY: THE CASE OF EPILEPSY

Isabelle Delmotte (Waikato University)

In this article, I explore the links between the cinematic development of representations built around iconographies of the body and the empathetic imagination related to epilepsy in fiction films. Accounts of epilepsies continue to associate these neuro-electrical disorders with an unsettling "otherness." Many cinematic representations of epileptic disorders still channel mythical divinity, madness and vulnerability, thus reinforcing stigma. Jerking bodies and falls have fashioned a stereotyped choreography of epilepsy used by various entertainment industries. This embodiment of the uncanny and its role in generating a reductive normativity of epileptic portrayals in films calls for viewers and, to some extent, filmmakers, to question their perspective on disease stereotyping. How can kinaesthetic simulations of neurological portrayals unreflective of a person's emotions lead to empathy? Can existing movie portrayals of epilepsy encapsulate synergies between various emotional and empathetic elements of phenomenological acting, viewing, and filmmaking? To offer alternative movie portrayals it is important to examine these intricate relationships, and to gain an understanding of the complexities attached to a much-feared disease.

I therefore examine aspects of epilepsy as translated by medical observers as well as potential perceptions of spectators experiencing acted performances of physical symptoms

associated with the disease. The supporting film scenes, extracted from five movies: *The Last King of Scotland*, *Augustine*, *The Infernal Cake-Walk*, *Control*, and *Electricity*. These movies link visual objectivity and the appropriation, by both the medical world and the entertainment industry, of a seemingly unmanageable body. The extracts from these films outline medical, sociological, intellectual, phenomenological and artistic ramifications associated with the multiplicity of symptoms telling of epilepsy. I thus focus on the visuality of depictions of epilepsy performed in films by actors who are presumably not afflicted by the disease and I highlight audiences' latent perceptions correlated to empathetic and affective imagination.

Keywords: Film; Representation; Empathy; Phenomenology; Epilepsy.

TRAUMA AND RATIONALIZATION: ETHICAL TENSIONS AND CONFOUNDING EMPATHIES IN OPPENHEIMER'S *THE ACT OF KILLING*

Joseph G. Kickasola (Baylor University)

Joshua Oppenheimer's groundbreaking documentary *The Act of Killing* positions the spectator within a besieged ethic, wherein the very language of morality has been co-opted by dictatorial, murderous powers. In such a situation, one can only maintain a sense of justice obliquely and somewhat insecurely.

The ingenuity of Oppenheimer's film is that this project, which initially aimed (and failed) to focus upon victims of genocide, came to be a feature length conversation and cinematic experiment with the killers. The murderers show no remorse, and live comfortably with their pasts, yet still, ironically, feel their true stories have not been properly told. A film, within Oppenheimer's film, becomes their chance to right the "wrong." The results of this experiment are at once reflexive, surreal, humorous, revealing, ethically vexing, and constantly surprising.

And so, *The Act of Killing* is a truly complex rumination on ethical experience, seeking to traverse and somehow corporeally understand the experiential, emotional terrain of great moral blindness.

In addition, I argue that Oppenheimer's film deliberately confuses, mystifies, and destabilizes the ethical instincts of the spectator, precisely by pitting his/her aesthetically-framed moral intuitions against his/her rational/abstract moral reasoning processes (to deploy the categories of the moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt). One feels one's moral reasoning warring against the emotional and perceptual experience that normally grounds it.

This vexing, bewildering experience does reveal something critical: our over-reliance on empathy as the primary touchstone for cinematic ethical experience. Given that empathy has become a core virtue in many contemporary ethical theories (cf. the “cinempathy” of Robert Sinnerbrink), this is important and timely. We look vainly for true empathy, and witness how empathy can be countermanded by cinematic imagination as much as marshaled by it.

Indeed, the film can be seen as a kind of laboratory on the empathy-ethic dynamic in human experience: our intuitions for it, our search for it in others, and our bewilderment at its remarkable absence in the characters before us. At the same time, we unavoidably find interest, humor, and endearing human qualities in the murderous subjects before us, nudging us toward an ethically ironic empathy.

However, the actual experience of the film may be more closely related to the victims’ perspective than we might first presuppose, as it functions like an aesthetics of national trauma. Language has been broken by torture and death, and reason, argument, and logic are all immediately found neutered. Through the film’s bewildering presentation of national amnesia—the tormented psychology required to live in a society where false narratives and ethical rationalizations are the norm—the viewer is placed in the position of having to witness this amnesic reality while constantly imagining a parallel, critical, and morally corrected reality alongside it. This is at once exhausting and constantly fascinating. Confirming evidence for moral truth is in short supply, but there are several strategic moments where it breaks through, and the cries of the oppressed are suddenly, shockingly heard. It is only at the very end of the film that some hope for a moral center might—tentatively, possibly—be grasped again.

Keywords: Empathy; Trauma; Moral Intuition; Embodiment; Cinematic Ethics.

A PSYCHOANALYTIC ETHICS FOR SCREEN AESTHETICS? THE CASE OF *SPRING BREAKERS*

Alison Horbury (University of Melbourne)

In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Jacques Lacan posits the work of the psychoanalytic clinic as an ‘ethics of the singular’: a practice that aims not at revealing ‘a universal truth’ but, rather, the ‘particular truth’ of self-knowledge that ‘appears to everyone in its intimate specificity.’ This ethics places special emphasis on knowledge regarding the subject’s particular mode of *jouissance*—how one ‘enjoys’ beyond the limits of pleasure and reality principles—where, as

Lacan puts it, ‘in the last analysis, what subject really feels guilty about’ is not immoral action per se, but ‘the extent to which he has compromised his desire.’ Can such an ethics have a place in an ethics of film aesthetics? This paper considers what a psychoanalytic ethics might add to our understanding of cinema’s ethical experience. I take a film that, at first glance, must appear singularly unethical—Harmony Korine’s *Spring Breakers*—to ask how its aestheticized experience of transgression might explicate something of the intimate specificity found in the clinic in ways that nevertheless resonate with a collective ethical project. I follow Tim Themi in showing where Georges Bataille’s formulation of a ‘taboo-transgression’ dialectic found in art maps onto Lacan’s registers of the real, symbolic, and imaginary in ways not insignificant to our understanding of cinema’s aesthetic experience. If psychoanalytic film theory first approached cinema as a technology of the imaginary it was in the sense that its imagery and illusions were (pejoratively) associated with an uncritical subject of ideology; the ethics of the psychoanalytic clinic similarly show us where speaking from the imaginary is an obstacle to analysis and the truth of the subject sought therein. If cinema is to provide an ethics in this sense, then, it should aim not at the imaginary ideals of a society but the real conditions of being in and belonging to it. Accordingly, I consider how for Bataille, Freud, and Lacan the function of art (here mapped onto cinema) is in producing an aesthetic experience that reconciles the individual to the collective project of civilisation—the symbolic register founded on taboo and morality—by identifying and granting access to something of the ‘real’ sacrifice that has been made. Significant here is *Spring Breakers*’ sublimated pornographic aesthetic that one is invited to enjoy not in spite of but as *part of* its ethical project. In this, the ethical aesthetic of *Spring Breakers* may be distinguished from other forms of transgressive cinema because its animation of what we have ‘sacrificed’ for the collective sustains a psychoanalytic ‘moral indifference’ to toward the real of desire. That is, the film does not let us remain in ignorance of the sacrifice even as it shows us its necessity. Effectively then, I argue *Spring Breakers* offers what Themi nominates as an ‘ethics of the Real’: an ethical encounter found through transgression that re-affirms taboo its wake, what Lacan might call the ‘maintenance and discipline of desire.’

Keywords: Psychoanalysis; Ethics; Art; Jouissance; Transgression.

“THEY’RE BAD PEOPLE – THEY SHOULD SUFFER”: POST-BRITISH CRIME FILMS
AND THE ETHICS OF RETRIBUTIVE VIOLENCE

Mark Schmitt (TU Dortmund University)

In my article, I will focus on Nick Love's *Outlaw* (2007) and Ben Wheatley's *Kill List* (2011) – two British films which I propose to call, using Michael Gardiner's words, “post-British” crime films. According to Gardiner, post-Britishness describes a cultural phase in which the cultural and political promises of the British union are being upended. Post-British forms of culture, then, prefigure the ethico-political crisis of the British union. I argue that this post-British sensibility bears strong resemblance to Thomas Elsaesser's notion of Europe's “post-heroic” cinema as an ethical and political thought experiment. In my article, I want to focus on a comparative analysis of *Outlaw* and *Kill List* as such thought experiments.

The two films focus on characters who have lost faith in Britain's institutions such as democratic politics or the justice system. The contract killers in *Kill List* and the frustrated ex-soldier in *Outlaw* consider the very idea of Britain itself to be at stake. *Outlaw* paints the picture of a fundamentally corrupt justice system which lets the streets roam with acquitted offenders, while *Kill List*'s narrative ultimately reveals central institutions of power to be run by a Pagan cult, and the two contract killers' final job turns out to be a ritual of sacrifice. In both films, characters are convinced that the only way to reach any kind of ethical standards within a disintegrating national community is to resort to vigilantism and retributive violence. This kind of retributive violence not only points to a crisis of ethics, but also to what René Girard has called a “sacrificial crisis” which is marked by the blurred difference between impure and purifying violence, and which ultimately affects the cultural order of a community.

In that respect, Nick Love and Ben Wheatley's post-British crime films become readable as though experiments in Elsaesser's sense since they render their protagonists within an ethical experiment of abjection: the vigilante outlaws and contract killers themselves assume the status of abjects through what they do and throughout the films' narratives end up in situations that “are situated at the bottom of what is human, as if to test [...] what survives when dignity evaporates and the ‘ethical self’ disintegrates”. Simultaneously, their retributive violence is directed against child molesters and other offenders who likewise inhabit abject positions. It is in these key scenes of violent “abject reciprocity” that the two films unfold their full (if not unproblematic) potentials as ‘films as ethics’, for here their thought experiments transcend the confines of popular genre conventions and drastically implicate the audience as abject spectators of a violence intended to be purifying.

I will use Elsaesser's concept of film as ethical thought experiment as a framework to demonstrate how these films negotiate the post-British situation as an ethico-political vacuum which finds expression in their narratives as well as in their form: both films ethically implicate

the spectator through their suggestive use of long takes and their deliberate deconstruction of genre conventions. In these post-British scenarios, plot and form comment on each other. Notions such as national cinema or genre have become as problematic and as compromised as democratic politics and the idea of justice. Abjection thus becomes “an ethical foil and a political vanishing point” in these cinematic thought experiments.

Keywords: Post-British Cinema; Crime Films; Ethics of Retribution; Ethical Turn; Film as Thought Experiment /Thomas Elsaesser.

ARTICLES | ARTIGOS

FILM REALISM AND THE POSSIBILITY OF USING CINEMATIC CHARACTERS AS
MORAL EXAMPLES

William Pamerleau (University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg)

One way in which we might develop our moral sensibilities is through a consideration of exemplary lives. In the tradition of Aristotelean virtue ethics (but certainly not contained to that particular theory), we learn about what constitutes a moral person by looking at concrete examples, as we do when we are inspired by friends and relatives or historical figures like Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. Can fictional characters in film also provide such examples?

On the surface, it seems that film, like literature, can offer the sort of particular description of persons and their situations that can indeed deliver moral insights. But it's important that such depictions offer *realistic* possibilities for how to live, and there are credible concerns about whether film narratives are sufficiently realistic. Specifically, narrative comprehension requires a significant amount of viewer activity, employing learned schemata that reflect conventions established by other films and cultural stereotypes. Films, according to this line of criticism, are more likely to reflect conventions and expectations than they are to portray what actually happens or what people are really like.

The purpose of this essay is to address this problem by proposing that the sort of realism we should be concerned with is that which accurately describes the way in which we experience the world, as opposed to an external or objective approach to realism. I suggest we make use of existing theories of narrative identity for this purpose. If we construe our own lives in narrative terms, then the fact that a film is a convention-bound narrative construct is a strong point of similarity between how we experience our own lives and how we experience fictional characters. Not only does this solve the concern with realism presented here, but linking identity and film viewing through narrative strengthens the case that cinematic characters can enhance our understanding of ethical life.

I. CINEMATIC CHARACTERS AS MORAL EXAMPLES: PRELIMINARY
OBSERVATIONS

The philosophical discussion about whether we might learn how to live a moral life from fictional characters was already well established before the emergence of the philosophy of film. Perhaps the most well-known source for this topic stems from the resurgence of Aristotle's virtue theory, which many ethicists see as an alternative or complement to the

dominant principle-based approaches to morality. For Aristotle, the question of how to live is answered primarily in terms of what sort of person one should be—the sort of character traits one should strive to instill through the cultivation of appropriate habits. More recently, Bernard Mayo championed Aristotelean virtue theory, which he refers to as “the philosophy of being,” over the more popular principle-based approaches, “the philosophy of doing,” for several reasons; but largely because virtue ethics offers concrete examples of moral persons.¹ As opposed to the abstraction of principles, the focus on character offers relatable examples of how one should live. “And we can say in answer to our morally perplexed questioner, not only ‘Be this’ and ‘Be that,’ but also ‘Be like So-and-So’— where So-and-So is either an ideal type of character, or else an actual person taken as a representative of the ideal.”² And Mayo suggests that the “the heroes of epic writers and novelists” can serve as moral examples as well as actual saints and heroes.

Martha Nussbaum has explored the use of fictional characters for moral instruction to a much greater degree. Her views are also based partly on Aristotle, but for her the value of the Aristotelian approach lies in its focus on asking the fundamental question: “How should one live?” Nussbaum sees Aristotle as open to a broader range of possible answers than contemporary philosophers generally assume.³ Literature, for example, can play an important role in answering Aristotle’s basic question because it is rooted in contextualized, concrete situations; and for that reason it often gets overlooked by philosophers accustomed to the abstraction of the philosophical essay. But often that very abstraction is what limits its ability to express significant aspects of ethical thought, since the particulars of a situation often yield essential moral insights. Literary works, whether histories, biographies, or novels, are “written in a style that gives sufficient attention to particularity and emotion,” and “they involve their readers in relevant activities of searching and feeling, especially feeling concerning their own possibilities as well as those of the characters.”⁴ Nussbaum sees novels as offering especially powerful means of exploring ethical thinking. They “characterize life more richly and truly—indeed, more precisely—than an example lacking those features ever could; and they engender in the reader a type of ethical work more appropriate for life.”⁵ (That said, Nussbaum is not claiming that traditional abstract essays have nothing to say, or are of less importance than these fictional sources. The point is that narrative fictions can complement traditional analyses, and in fact both forms can inform one another.⁶)

While Nussbaum’s comments are aimed at novels, the same arguments can be made for film: they provide concrete depictions of human beings engaged in particular contexts, showing us *how* it is possible to live in various situations. Such depictions allow us to see by example how others live, and who we might *be*, as Mayo says. Stanley Cavell argues for an approach to cinema that largely overlaps Nussbaum’s approach to novels, pointing out the ability for films to engage us at a personal and emotional level in ways that abstract essays

cannot.⁷ Of course, literature and film are different artistic forms, and analysis of how they affect us necessarily differ, but in both cases it is the concrete depictions that make the difference. That means the aesthetic qualities of film are relevant to the ethics, since it's not just what is conveyed but how it's conveyed that may matter most.⁸ And in fact, there are several recent works which do exactly this: exploring what film can teach us about morality through an analysis of film narratives and characters, understood in terms of the unique medium of film as an art form.⁹

So, there is good reason to think that cinematic characters can serve as moral examples. Just as Nussbaum's careful readings of literary characters help us understand ethics as both professional philosophers and moral persons, there is an established practice of using film in the same way. And this seems, at one level, obviously true. The character of Atticus Finch in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* can provide a moral example of how to be a father and a citizen, and so can Gregory Peck's depiction of him in Robert Mulligan's film version (1962), though the aesthetic analysis may differ. Marcello Mastroianni's portrayal of Marcello Rubini in Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960) provides a different kind of moral example: a warning of squandered opportunities and lost hope. His fate at the end of the film serves as a precautionary tale that is equally as instructive as Attic Finch's edifying one. Reflecting on examples like these, one can see how the particulars of the narrative context deliver moral insights. It is the compassion that we see Atticus present to both his daughter and the black man he defends in the face of the racial prejudice of the American South that instructs us on his moral qualities. Marcello's failed struggle for authenticity is understood within the context of the pressures of journalism, the distractions of celebrity life, and the personal challenges of the loss of his friend and mentor.

But as we shall see, it is precisely this narrative element that also gives rise to a difficulty with using narrative fictions, particularly film, as a legitimate means of ethical engagement.

II. THE REALISM CHALLENGE

If cinematic characters really can instruct us by serving as examples of how a moral life might be possible, then it must also be the case that they present real possibilities. That is, the ways of thinking and living they depict within the diegesis must be ones that we could also experience, at least to some substantive degree. Nussbaum, for example, favors the works of Henry James because "James's idea of creation (...) is thoroughly committed to the real. (...) The Jamesian artist does not feel free to create just anything at all: he imagines himself as straining to get it right, not to miss anything, to be keen rather than obtuse."¹⁰ And not all artists "get it right," nor do they even try. I sometimes ask students to write on any person they think serves as a moral example, real or fictional, and I occasionally receive papers in which

students choose to use superheroes as moral examples. While it's possible for one to find instructive narratives in the currently popular superhero genre, such examples tend to suffer from the fact that the narratives are based on powers or character traits that we cannot possibly possess. These characters and narratives are simply too unrealistic to serve as moral examples.

The difference between a realistic film and an unrealistic film in terms of their ability to contribute to our moral thinking, then, is in their ability to portray ways of living and thinking that the viewers may themselves adopt. The film must portray characters reacting to situations and interacting with people in ways that we might too. Such characters may provide realistic examples of moral behavior, however, while being quite unrealistic in several other ways. The character Han Solo (Harrison Ford) in the *Star Wars* films provides a rather simple moral example but one that makes the point about realism. No one expects to regularly engage in laser gun battles, own their own space ship, or pal around with a furry alien in their actual lives. But his moral behavior might be considered realistic: while initially a self-absorbed rogue, he is able to overcome these tendencies and make personal sacrifices in order to aid his friends. That's the kind of behavior one could well expect of actual persons, and perhaps similarly self-absorbed people might even reconsider their commitment to others as a result of watching these films.

But as we examine the nature of films more closely, it may appear that we are moving too fast when we pronounce the portrayal of film characters as realistic. Yes, it may well seem that people can and do act in the ways cinema portrays them, but is our sense of "how people act" really based on a comparison to actual human behavior, or is our reaction to cinematic characters based more on learned expectations, many of which may be contrived? As we shall see, the more we consider the nature of narrative, and film narrative in particular, the more unlikely it may seem that film characters are indeed realistic, despite our initial judgment that they are.

This concern arises from the long-standing debate on film realism within both film theory and the philosophy of film. While the meaning of "realism" is contested, the most straight forward approach is that we deem a film realistic when we let the camera directly show us what people are like, with as little human contrivance as possible. This was the sort of realism championed by André Bazin, who thought that certain styles of filmmaking could deliver realism more than others. For example, the deep focus and long takes popularized by Welles and Renoir in the mid twentieth century "brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality."¹¹ Bazin also pointed to the Italian neorealist use of location shooting and amateur actors as examples of film realism. In short, realism for him was about moving away from the stylistic conventions engrained in the studio system (especially Hollywood) and letting the camera reveal the world as it is.

Today, Bazin's notion of realism is commonly considered naïve, particularly the notion that we can create cinematic narratives where the human element is somehow minimalized to produce a degree of objectivity. In *Aesthetics of Film*, authors Aumont, Bergala, Marie, and Vernet provide a critique of realism that I will be using as the central concern with whether cinematic characters really can offer realistic examples of how to live.¹² We can begin to appreciate their view through their critique of Bazin: they argue that his recommendations for a more "realistic" filmmaking style do not do much to reduce the amount of human artifice in the filmmaking process. So-called realistic films still require a variety of contrivances, from film stock to lens choice to editing styles. Deep focus, for example, is just a different type of style, not the absence of it. In short, Bazin's denunciation of conventions as a means of achieving more reality "goes hand in hand with the installation of a *new* system of conventions."¹³

And it is precisely this use of convention that presents a challenge for film realism, because the nature of film narrative relies very heavily on conventions. David Bordwell's analysis of viewer activity in constructing film narratives explains why. Viewers are not passive receivers of information, according to Bordwell. They are involved in several complicated activities that are part of the more general activity of perception. We impose various types of schemata ("organized clusters of knowledge") on the data of our perception to make sense of what we see and hear. When it comes to comprehending narratives, viewers require more complex layers of schemata.

In comprehending a narrative film, the spectator seeks to grasp the filmic continuum as a set of events occurring in defined settings and unified by principles of temporality and causation. (...) Thus any schemata for events, locations, time and cause/effect may become pertinent to making sense of a narrative film.¹⁴

One particular type of schemata is "prototype schemata," used to identify individual agents, actions, locations, etc.¹⁵ In a Western, for example, there are prototypes of the outlaw, the sheriff, the saloon, the show down, etc. We expect these persons, places and events to look a certain way and causally interact in certain ways. The narrative need only present elements that cue these schemata, and viewers then bring to the film the information that will make meaningful narrative connections.

On a larger level, various structural schemata are in place that help us determine how to sort detail, arrange events in proper order, make causal connections, etc. These templates are particularly important when we summarize a story: picking the pertinent details to remember and connect in ways that provides a unifying meaning to the various events witnessed. For example, the "canonical story format" of film creates expectations for how narratives are

expected to unfold: “settings plus characters—goals—attempts—outcome—resolution.”¹⁶ Guided by these schemata, on both small and large scales, viewers make hypotheses about what the story means and revise them as they are confirmed or denied by unfolding events.

Where do these schemata come from? We get them from a variety of sources. We may develop prototype schemata from our own experiences of people or places, for example, but a major source of schemata are other texts, particularly other stories, which teach us how to cluster information together in various ways. The canonical story format is learned from experiencing the same story pattern repeatedly, for instance. By telling stories we teach schemata, then; and in fact different cultures may develop different canonical story formats, in which case the narratives might be experienced differently.¹⁷ Given that we learn through repetition, the genre effect amplifies the creation of these schemata, since it offers an opportunity to reinforce prototypes and templates.

Though Bordwell doesn't directly intend to challenge the notion of film realism with this account of viewer activity, we can use these views to make a preliminary case that film characters are unrealistic to a large degree. Characters are shaped by conventions and stereotypes, because filmmakers intuitively understand that appealing to what we know and expect is necessary in order for us to quickly disseminate and make sense of what we're seeing on the screen. Only so much can be directly displayed or conveyed in a dialogue; the rest of the diegesis must be supplied by the viewer. So characters and the narratives they inhabit are far more likely to be the result of previously established conventions, with all that that entails, whether or not they reflect the world objectively. (This is of no surprise to those who analyze the often unconscious racial or gender biases that are commonly propagated through film: those biases are reinforced and normalized through repetition.¹⁸)

Aumont et al make similar points, but they use these observations to challenge the notion of realism directly. They suggest that what audiences typically refer to as realism is really “plausibility,” and what is plausible is shaped largely by public opinion and “established standards of behavior.”¹⁹ The final shootout of a Western, for example, is supposed to occur according to specific rules governing the role and expected behavior of the characters and the “proper” procedure. It seems realistic not because that's the way events actually occurred, but because we have come to expect such behavior based on the schemata we have internalized. “As a result, the plausible constitutes a *form of censorship* since it restrains the number of narrative possibilities and imaginable diegetic situations, all in the name of preserving the rules.”²⁰

As expectations change, so does what seems plausible, which is further evidence that “plausible” cannot be understood in the objective sense of realism that Aumont et al are comparing it to. What seemed realistic fifty years ago no longer does, and that will be largely due to the fact that the rules evolve. “Within the evolution of the plausible, the new system

only appears ‘real’ because the old one is declared out of date and hence denounced as conventional, even though the new system is obviously just as conventional.”²¹ Furthermore, what seems plausible within one genre is implausible in another, which shouldn’t be the case if plausibility referred to what actually happens in the world. Romantic comedies often involve some massive misunderstanding that keeps the couple apart for much of the movie, and as unlikely as that misunderstanding is to occur in real life, it seems plausible in the context of this genre. The same sort of misunderstanding occurring in, say, a science fiction movie, would seem implausible, since it isn’t common in the plots for that genre. In short, the demands of narrative yield depictions of characters and events not according to what actually happens, but according to learned expectations. Is Han Solo’s selflessness realistic in the sense that it exemplifies how persons act, for example, or because expectations established by film conventions make us expect this sort of behavior as the result of having internalized the prototype schema of the rogue-hero character? If that’s the case, maybe Han Solo’s moral example isn’t that realistic after all.

So according to this line of thinking, using cinematic characters as examples of how we might live, and live morally, may be problematic, since such characters are largely based on convention and stereotype rather than attempts to adhere to the conditions that apply to the real world—that is, they are not realistic in the sense that they do not convey neutral and accurate descriptions of what the world is like. Furthermore, as Aumont et al point out, the conventions that shape our sense of the plausible also form a kind of censorship, limiting the range of narrative possibilities and promoting conformity to standing conventions. What is worse, such conventions will often reflect widespread assumptions about what we think people are like, including inaccurate or degrading assumptions regarding gender or ethnicity, which is clearly detrimental to ethical thinking. What, then, can be said in defense of cinematic characters and the narratives that shape them?

III. NARRATIVE IDENTITY

The concern proposed in the last section begins to dissipate when we approach realism from another angle. The sort of realism Aumont et al object to is based on Bazin’s view—that the camera and filmmaking techniques should be free to capture the world as it is and not according to established filmmaking conventions. If that’s what we mean by “realism” then Aumont et al are surely right to deny that fiction films can achieve this. But in this section I argue that this is not the appropriate sense of realism we want when considering the use of cinematic characters as moral examples. Specifically, I contend that what is most helpful is an account of how we actually experience the world. Since we approach life from a first person, subjective perspective, a depiction of life from a similar perspective will do much more to

capture the nature of ethical thinking than an objective, detached view (even if such a view were possible).

In short, we need a perspective that captures the inner experience of ethical subjects. This, too, is recognized by Nussbaum. As mentioned, she insists that novels must provide a sort of realism, but she is careful to qualify that claim. “The objectivity in question is ‘internal’ and human. It does not even attempt to approach the world as it might be in itself, uninterrupted, unhumanized. Its raw material is the history of human social experience, which is already an interpretation and a measure.”²² We are socialized beings who are historically situated, and fictional narratives can more or less accurately reflect these aspects of who we are, Nussbaum suggests, but they do so from the inside.

Films deliver this internal perspective as well, despite the fact that the camera is in some sense an objective recorder of images. This is a point that psychologist Hugo Münsterberg articulated in 1916. He noted that despite the realistic aspects of the photographic medium, we are immediately presented with two-dimensional pictures, abruptly transforming from scene to scene (e.g. shot reverse shot editing) that on the surface is decidedly not how we experience the world. But Münsterberg’s point is that the mind creates an aesthetically satisfying unity from the jumbled images that appear on the screen. Anticipating the sort of constructivist account that Bordwell and others would give decades later, Münsterberg explains: “We do not see the objective reality, but a product of our own mind which binds the pictures together.”²³ Specifically, it is the mind’s “processes of attention, of memory, of imagination, of suggestion, of division of interest and of emotion” that are brought to bear on our experience of a film. Framing and close-ups, for example, recreate the process of attention, through which we sort out the data of our senses to focus on what is relevant to us. Münsterberg draws his observations on the aesthetics and psychology of film into a unified principle: “the photoplay tells us the human story by overcoming the forms of the outer world, namely, space, time, and causality, and by adjusting the events to the forms of the inner world, namely, attention, memory, imagination, and emotion.”²⁴

We can make this connection between filmic representations and the “inner world” of the spectator clearer and more explicit with a theory of narrative identity. If we recount our own life in narrative terms, then narrative constructions even of fictional characters become analogous to our own experience. It provides a more precise account of the sort of cognitive processing Münsterberg describes; and as I shall argue, such an account shows that cinematic characters do indeed deliver realistic depictions of how human beings understand themselves and their world.

Theories of narrative identity became popular a few decades ago but have seen a recent resurgence in popularity, both in philosophy and psychology.²⁵ For purposes of this essay, I adopt a rather straightforward view: for the most part, we make sense of our lives by relating

various events in terms of a story. Specifically, we select particular events as relevant, ignore others as irrelevant, and relate them all in terms of causal connections according to meaningful conceptions of the self.

This is a view that was put forward by Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* in his attempt to reconcile a world of fact with the interpreted world of subjective experience.²⁶ David Carr provides a similar view, emphasizing the manner in which we organize the telling of our life story by temporal and causal organization. As Carr explains, "The narrator (...) in virtue of his retrospective view, picks out the most important events, traces the causal motivational connections among them, and give us an organized, coherent story."²⁷ It is, in fact, necessary that we recount our life this way. Even in the course of a day, there are far too many events to be related. We require a selection process that tells us why certain events matters and others don't. Carr distinguishes between a chronicle and a narrative to make this point: a chronicle is a description of events in a neutral way, one after the other, while a narrative involves a temporal/causal selection process.²⁸ For example, I am asked how my day is going, and I pronounce that I'm having a "bad day." If asked to explain, I would not begin by pointing out that the alarm went off, I brushed my teeth, I picked out such-and-such clothes to wear, put on first my left sock, then my right, etc. That would be a chronicle, which no one cares to hear. Most of those events, even though they did occur, do not explain why I chose to describe the day as "bad." Instead, I select the pertinent events—the ones that causally explain the "bad day" description: traffic was heavy and I was late getting to the office, which made me miss an important meeting that angered my colleagues; later I discovered I brought the wrong notes to a lecture, resulting in a disorganized and disappointing classroom experience, etc. Those events are the ones I select to assert meaningfully that I had a bad day. The same process occurs on a larger scale when we relate why we've become the kind of person that we are: we select and interpret events according to concepts that describe our sense of self.

While these sort of observations make a theory of narrative identity sound convincing, the notion has come under heavy critical scrutiny in recent years. The strongest criticisms are directed at attempts to make narrative identity provide solutions to some perennial philosophical issues surrounding continuity and identity. Some theorists reject narrative identity precisely because they think that some of us do not have a narrative unity that links my current narrating self with past selves.²⁹ And some point out that, in fact, we have multiple accounts of ourselves, not just in different phases in our life but with different people and in different situations, so that there is no single narrative that captures who we are.³⁰

Rather than engaging these debates, I will attempt to side step these issues by remaining agnostic about them, since I don't think they impact the role of narrative identity for present concerns. When I claim that we relate our life in narrative terms, I do not insist that we use the same narrative in every situation. Neither do I claim that I must identify with a past self who

shares my current narrative. For some people, it may be the case that we do consolidate the events of our lives around a single unifying narrative, but for others, it may well be that our experience of life is episodic or fractured. Maybe we juggle several narratives. Maybe our narratives are not always honest accounts. My point is that, for better or worse, we do recount the events of our life in narrative terms both to ourselves and others. We do not give neutral chronicles, to use Carr's term, but must engage in the process of selection according to causal and temporal demands of meaning and coherence. Story-telling is an effective way to describe this selection process, despite whatever may be the case about identity construction. From her own research in psychology, Jennifer Pals explains why thinking of our life as a story is in fact consistent with more complex notions of self:

One of the advantages of thinking of the formation of causal connections as an interpretive strategy for creating coherence within the life story is that it shifts our conceptualization of coherence toward the idea that it is something we continually try to do as we construct our life stories—an interpretive act of self-making—and away from the idea that coherence is a static characteristic that the life story as a whole does or does not possess.³¹

In sum, I am suggesting that, for current purposes, we adopt a view of narrative identity as a description of how we understand and relate our life's events, while remaining indifferent to the scope and depth of those narratives and what a narrative account implies regarding other philosophical matters of selfhood.

Let's next take a closer look at how this narration works in terms that will allow us to understand its similarity to cinematic narratives. Our narratives are constructed partly from our own narrative decisions and partly from the cultural resources available to us. For example, I have adopted the identity of a philosopher as a significant aspect of my life. I have a certain idea of what an academic philosopher is, which provides a schema by which I can measure events as counting as philosophical activities or as causally related to those activities. I can then tell you the story of how I became a philosopher and how my professional life can be understood in those terms. Of course, I have to know what a philosopher is in order to do that, which gets us to another element of narrative identity: the social component.

The schemata that most of us use to construct our sense of self are obtained from the society that shapes us. I didn't invent the concept of a philosopher, nor do accountants or construction workers invent their career identities. The same is true with other schemata that are often vital to a person's identity, like ethnicity, gender, and aspects of our sexuality. Kwame Anthony Appiah refers to these as "life-scripts," and describes how in constructing even our personalized, authentic identities, we nevertheless rely on these socially-constituted

life-scripts.³² In fact, if we want to ensure that people are treated with dignity, Appiah claims, it is important to understand the restrictive or demeaning elements these scripts sometimes embody. For example, when it comes to the negative stereotypes surrounding women, persons of color, or homosexuals, who rely on these scripts in order to construct their own identity, we have to be mindful of how we collectively define these groups. “Because there was no good reason to treat people of these sorts badly, and because the culture continues to provide degrading images of them nevertheless, they demand that we do cultural work to resist the stereotypes, to challenge the insults, to lift the restrictions.”³³

This point is important because it suggests that the narratives we construct as persons are dependent on schemata that are not a reflection of some neutral, objective description of people, but are based on socially evolving concepts. This, in turn, establishes an important connection between the portrayal of cinematic characters and our own lives. Film narratives are realistic because they portray life as we actually experience it: as a narrative construction based on a variety of pre-existing, socially-influenced concepts. Yes, film narratives do lean heavily on conventions, but so do life narratives. Film narratives reflect the same sort of character-making activity that we engage in when we select the events of our life and provide coherence according to organizing concepts, or schemata. Note also that life narratives, like film narratives, are based on life-scripts that may contain biases and false beliefs, being the product of social forces that they are, but they largely form the basis of our identities nevertheless. (Of course, that doesn’t relieve us of the responsibility of critically challenging them, whatever their source.)

Our lives are narrative constructions, then, just as the lives of cinematic characters are. The use of schemata to organize and give coherence to film narratives and characters closely resembles the use of life-scripts and learned concepts by which we make sense of our own lives. Films *are* realistic in the sense that the way they depict the world conforms to the inner world, as Münsterberg explains—the world as we experience it.

In the previous section, I mentioned that films can be realistic in some ways but not others. Science fiction films like those in the *Star Wars* series may be decidedly unrealistic in various ways, yet realistic in the way they represent character relationships and ethical interactions. We can now see that films in general are realistic in the sense that characters can provide realistic representations of ethical conduct: in both cases they make use of the same narrative schemata that we make use of in giving an account of our own lives. The realism requirement I established earlier demands that narrative structures can sever as genuine possibilities for how we might live. Films surely offer these, drawing as they do from a pool of narrative options established through both historical and fictional sources.

Let’s return to the Han Solo example to illustrate this point. Can this character serve as a moral example? The narrative element that matters here is the depiction of a largely

narcissistic character being altered by his relationship with others to the point that he is willing to put their interests ahead of his own. If this turns out to be a narrative construct that only makes sense in the film's Sci-Fi/Western genre, then the character is not realistic in the sense I'm proposing here. But if we determine that this narrative is one we can relate to as a real possibility for ourselves, then it is realistic for that reason *even if* its inclusion in the film was originally motivated by other narrative strategies and not modeled after actual persons.

IV. CINEMATIC CHARACTERS AS MORAL EXAMPLES: CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In part one I pointed out that fictional narratives, whether in literature or film, can answer the question "How ought one live?" by providing concrete depictions that can serve as a valuable resource for moral growth. We then raised the concern that fictional accounts, particularly in film, may be so convention-laden that they are not realistic. An account of narrative identity, however, allows us to recast the question of realism in a way that removes that concern. In this concluding section, I will establish how the notion of narrative identity makes clearer the way that cinematic characters can serve as moral examples described in the first section. With an understanding of narrative identity in mind, then, let us ask the fundamental question, "How do cinematic characters help us to grow as moral persons?" I see three main ways to answer this question.

1) *Cinematic characters demonstrate new possibilities for how we might live.* As we saw with Appiah, we make use of life-scripts in constructing our identity. Of course, a major source of those scripts are the persons and institutions through which we are encultured, but it is equally true that there are more possibilities than we are aware of or take seriously as a possibility for ourselves. Cinema can be a source of new scripts—new options for how we might live. Just as it is one thing to research the purchase of a new car by reading about it, quite another to test drive it, so it is much easier to understand the appeal of ethical ways of life when seeing them depicted in concrete terms. This is the point emphasized by Nussbaum with regard to literature and by Cavell when he claims that film can further the Emersonian project of self-perfection.³⁴ All of this becomes clearer when we understand that we are at least partial narrators of our own life stories. In watching the kinds of film that depict possible ways of living and interacting with others, then, we see how we might alter our story.

Recasting realism in terms of the similarity between our own narrative identity and the narrative constructions of film characters helps us recognize which films offer fruitful examples and which ones do not. Fruitful depictions are those that offer a narrative that we might actually adopt: they fit our circumstances and offer us a way to make sense of our own past and future possibilities. They tell us how I might tell my own story, or change it, to be the

kind of person I think I ought to be. This is why I am more likely to learn something from *To Kill a Mockingbird* than from *Superman*, no matter how noble I find the character of Clark Kent.

2) *Understanding the origin of the narrative elements of cinematic characters emphasizes the social nature of our narrative ideals and the need to address them critically.* I just noted that we are partial narrators of our own lives, “partial” because the scripts we learn are socially cultivated, even if we have the ability, more or less, to choose between them. For better or worse, we cannot help but be shaped by the possibilities presented to us by our society. It’s also easy to take these possibilities for granted or as givens, so the realization that life-scripts are social products which we have some control over is instructive. It not only reminds us that those scripts are contingent, but it encourages us to view them with a critical eye—to do “cultural work” at resisting the negative stereotypes, as Appiah says. As spectators, we can reflect on the appropriateness of various character traits that we observe in film characters. Nussbaum makes the same point while explaining how the works of Samuel Beckett teach us emotional reactions to situations that in turn inform our values: “the issue of social origin must be squarely faced with emotions as with beliefs. (...) The project, in short, must look at social history, and not without a critical eye.”³⁵ An obvious example of how spectators might reflect critically on a narrative element is how modern audiences are likely to respond to W. D. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915). While popular in its day, the negative stereotypes of African Americans and the depiction of the Ku Klux Klan as heroes reveal its racist assumptions in vivid terms to today’s audiences.

Films can also intentionally point out how certain life-scripts ought to be challenged. They help us do that cultural work. Take for example the films directed by Spike Lee, who helped make contemporary audiences conscious of racist attitudes they might have been previously unaware of.

The point is that social conventions, which are often reflected in film, are often flawed, but those flaws can be uncovered and the life-scripts which they support improved. Seeing ourselves as involved in narrative construction allows us to acknowledge the role we have in both changing how we tell our own story and how we contribute to the social pool whereby others tell theirs. Critical film viewers and challenging films can aid in this process.

3) *Cinematic characters have the potential to edify, providing motivation to pursue moral growth.* This was the point that Mayo emphasized in explaining the role of saints and heroes, real or fictional, in becoming virtuous. Beyond just educating us on different potentials for living and living ethically, the depiction we find in a film can inspire us. We may want to be more like that person. Seeing Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* stand up for the rights of the disadvantaged in the face of a hostile community makes us want others to think of us as we think of him. Or, if we have exhibited cowardice in a similar circumstance, it may shame us

into taking action in the future. Similarly, when we see what happens to Marcello in *La dolce vita*, we may be inspired to make a change in our own lives to avoid his fate. The sort of realism I have been arguing for here is largely what makes these films so inspiring in the first place: they offer real narrative options for us, in similar narrative contexts which we use to make sense of our own lives, but they also concretely depict the qualities that attract us to that way of living.

In sum, the common denominator linking our own lives, moral possibilities, and cinematic characters is narrative. Cinematic characters can serve as moral examples not despite the fact that they are narrative constructions, but because of it.

¹ Bernard Mayo, *Ethics and the Moral Life* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1958), 208-216.

² Mayo, *Ethics*, 214.

³ Martha Nussbaum, "Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 25.

⁴ Nussbaum, "Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," 46.

⁵ Nussbaum, "Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," 47.

⁶ Nussbaum, "Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," 27.

⁷ Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2004).

⁸ Robert Sinnerbrink provides a useful discussion of the relationship between film ethics and aesthetics. See Robert Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics: exploring Ethical Experience through Film* (London: Routledge, 2015), 4-32.

⁹ See, for example, Dan Shaw, *Morality and the Movies: Readings Ethics through Film* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012); and Thomas Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2007).

¹⁰ Martha Nussbaum, "Literature and Moral Imagination," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 163.

¹¹ André Bazin, "Cinematic Realism," in *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 39.

¹² Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, and Marc Vernet, *Aesthetics of Film*, trans. Richard Neupert (Austin: University of Texas, 1999), 108-25.

¹³ Aumont et al., *Aesthetics of Film*, 114.

¹⁴ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 34.

¹⁵ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 34.

¹⁶ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 35.

¹⁷ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 35-7.

¹⁸ The best examples are Laura Mulvey "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18; and Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (1988): 66-76.

¹⁹ Aumont et al., *Aesthetics of Film*, 114.

²⁰ Aumont et al., *Aesthetics of Film*, 114.

²¹ Aumont et al., *Aesthetics of Film*, 117.

²² Nussbaum, "Literature and the Moral Imagination," 164.

²³ Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Co., 1916), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15383/15383-h/15383-h.htm#chapter2>.

²⁴ Münsterberg, *The Photoplay* (italics original).

²⁵ I focus more on the philosophical approach here, but for an account of the psychological approach, see Dan McAdams, *The Stories We Live by: Personal Myths and the Making of Identity* (New York: William Morrow, 1993).

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Book 1), trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

²⁷ David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 59.

²⁸ Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, 59.

²⁹ For example, Galen Strawson distinguishes between a diachronic self and an episodic self, insisting that many people do not experience life as a continuous narrative, but instead experience life in terms of episodes which are not continuous with a past or future. Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," in *Real Materialism: and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 189-208.

³⁰ Peter Raggatt explains this point. But despite the multiplicity of the self, he claims, as I do, that narrative accounts are still consistent with the way in which we recount our lives. Peter Raggatt, "Multiplicity and Conflict in the Dialogical Self: A Life-Narrative Approach," in *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*, ed. Dan McAdams, Rutheleen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 15-33.

³¹ Jennifer Pals, "Constructing the 'Springboard Effect': Causal Connections, Self-Making, and Growth Within the Life Story," in *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*, ed. Dan McAdams, Rutheleen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 177.

³² K. Anthony Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, Survival," in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 159-63.

³³ Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, Survival," 161.

³⁴ Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 11.

³⁵ Martha Nussbaum, "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love", in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 310.

NIHILISM ON THE METAPHYSICAL SCREEN: THE FATE OF GILLES DELEUZE'S
CINEMATIC ETHICS

Laurence Kent (King's College London)

“Why film matters philosophically” is the question that Robert Sinnerbrink attempts to answer through an engagement with the writings of Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze, whom he posits as “exemplars of the film-philosophy approach.”¹ Sinnerbrink diagnoses this concern as a lacuna in other theoretical positions, especially cognitive approaches to cinema epitomised by the work of David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, and argues that dealing with cinema philosophically means asking whether “films respond to our cultural anxieties or ‘existential’ concerns,” and, more specifically, whether “cinema [can] deal with problems such as nihilism and scepticism.”² However, the difference between nihilism and scepticism is ignored as Sinnerbrink, in a later text, presents Cavell and Deleuze as responding to a shared problematic; Deleuze’s nihilism is defined as the “cultural problem of scepticism,” and Sinnerbrink consciously elides metaphysical questions in order to focus on the “ethico-existential imperative” of Deleuze’s film-philosophy: “Cinematic ethics, for both Deleuze and Cavell, thus concerns the relationship between *cinema and belief*: how do moving images express or elicit conviction for us?”³ This connection is fleshed out in the writings of D.N. Rodowick, who argues that an imagined “conversation” between the two thinkers is productive. For Rodowick, ethics provides “a sinuous line along which Cavell’s and Deleuze’s accounts of ontology complement one another, like two pieces of the puzzle whose pictures portray different worlds that nonetheless fit precisely at their joints.”⁴ By focusing on Rodowick’s argument, this article will claim that the conflation of Deleuze and Cavell leads to a misreading of Deleuzian cinematic ethics: the sense Deleuze gives to how film provides an encounter that revitalises what it means to live.

Using this comparison between Deleuze’s and Cavell’s writings on film, Rodowick takes Deleuze’s ethical injunction in the *Cinema* books as a response to an “unacknowledged scepticism” despite explicating how “Deleuze’s Spinozan ontology presents a universe (...) where scepticism should be made irrelevant.”⁵ Rodowick posits that it is “Deleuze’s difficulty in accounting for the human dimensions” of the existential concerns that arise after World War II that explains this contradiction, and he reads Deleuze *against himself* to assert a humanist reading of his ethics. In this article I will emphasise the differences between Cavell’s and Deleuze’s ethics precisely by using the metaphysical positions implicit in Deleuze’s writings on cinema to support a rereading of his ethical stance. My argument will be split into three sections: firstly, I will explicate Rodowick’s amalgamation of Deleuze and Cavell and lay out

the ethical stakes of their projects; I will then reread Deleuze's *Cinema* books as grappling with a specifically nihilistic problematic; and finally, I will use this metaphysical reorientation of belief to draw out the fatalistic implications of Deleuze's cinematic ethics. What comes out of these explorations is the question of whether or not Deleuze's ethics is *fit for purpose* today. Instead of attempting to pacify Deleuze, as does Rodowick, this article will thus attempt to grapple with the full implications of Deleuze's ethics of cinema.

THE SINUOUS LINE

Deleuze writes in *Cinema 2* that “the modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world.”⁶ This is historically defined as an inability to react sufficiently to the horrors of World War II and is an offshoot of the failure of cinema to do anything but uphold dogma and propagate cliché; cinema “denigrated into state propaganda and manipulation, into a kind of fascism that brought together Hitler and Hollywood, Hollywood and Hitler.”⁷ Cinema thus dies of mediocrity and the world itself becomes “a bad film.”⁸ However, a new kind of cinema is reborn in the ashes, going on to mirror the historical destruction of belief through a fragmentation of the sensory-motor schema, a disruption of the common-sense link between action and reaction as the guiding logic for cinematic sense. Instead of propagandistic certainty there is a fundamental irrationality, beyond cliché there is excess; this is the cinema of the time-image. The *mirroring* of a loss of belief present in this regime of images heralds an ethical solution wherein cinema can, counter-intuitively, *restore* our belief in the world and “reconnect man [*sic*] to what he sees and hears.”⁹ This requires a “whole transformation of belief,” torn away from the position of faith and instead underlined with a notion of choice.¹⁰ Deleuze utilises Pascal's wager to argue that choice is not a binary of belief or lack thereof but is instead a question of “the mode of existence of the one who chooses.”¹¹ Just as Pascal insinuated when he set out his argument for theism—arguing that one *might as well* believe as the pay-off is greater, if God does exist, than any loss of being wrong—, it is not merely a question of believing or not but the revelation of this itself being a choice. Belief often carries a sense of the inevitable, of an unmoving faith or the moment of its loss. The transformation of belief becomes the possibility of being in the position where there is a choice to make a wager, a framework with which to *choose to choose*. Cinema becomes ethical when it films, not a belief in a higher place or authority, but a belief in the possibility of making a wager, both for diegetic characters but also in a formal wager of creating new cinematic meanings and connections: of affirming the risk of not being tied to the sensory-motor clichés of habitual action, where, as Ronald Bogue explicates, in a Kierkegaardian leap of faith “the choice of images is an ontological choice, the process of choosing constituting a mode of existence that is inseparable from the becoming of

the cosmos as an open Whole of self-differentiating differences.”¹² This can thus galvanise an affirmation of a way of being that can rehabilitate the connection between us and the world.

This fact of our lack of belief in the world is taken by Rodowick to be synonymous with scepticism, the creeping fear of the non-existence of other minds or indeed the world itself. This allows him to align aspects of the Deleuzian cinematic ethics with Cavell’s work on cinema that views scepticism as an ethical rather than epistemological quandary. It is not a question of whether or not you have knowledge of the external world’s existence, but in affirming a certain mode of being where we can choose to act as though we are grounded in our activities by a certain reality. Indeed, he posits that Cavell and Deleuze both respond to the problem of scepticism by emphasising this link between cinema and belief, and that we must believe in this world instead of bemoaning a lack of knowing. Cavell’s philosophical commitments lead him to show that cinema is a “moving image of scepticism,” presenting the world in mobile images separate from us but complete and thus *affectively moving* us to grapple with our own doubt of the external world.¹³ Rather than directly searching for a solution to scepticism, Cavell instead finds his cinematic ethics on the idea that scepticism is an ethical motor inspiring all human endeavour: “its threat is as revelatory of human thinking as science itself is.”¹⁴ It is the way that film attempts to justify our conviction in others and the world that makes it matter philosophically, and, in Cavell’s socio-historical specificity, it facilitates a platform for intellectual exchange in the Classical Hollywood of mid-century America where the public philosophical cultures of Europe did not exist. Films are galvanised by a desire to display true connection and community by presenting the moral necessity of committing to these aspects of the world that cannot be proved in terms of epistemology or metaphysics; a leap of faith is required that cinema constantly probes and reveals on the scale of ordinary human interaction.

Mapping this on to Rodowick’s reading of Deleuze, it is the creativity of cinema and its grappling with a disenchantment of the world that “spur us to imagine a future self or a new mode of existence to which we may aspire.”¹⁵ This can be described as a humanist reading of Deleuze’s philosophy in the sense of asserting a humanity *to-come*. Disregarding the chauvinist legacy of Enlightenment thinking, Rodowick states that “humanity is not something that universally binds us, a quality we all share, but rather the widely shared experience of not living up to our best intentions, or to have failed on a quotidian basis to have been human or to have acted in a responsibly human way.”¹⁶ Humanism, for Rodowick, has never been achieved, and he takes Cavell and Deleuze to be asserting that cinema’s attempt to overcome a loss of belief in the world and our ability to change it is an opening up of the possibility for a sense of humanity to develop. It is this future-oriented nature of belief that will be interrogated further throughout the rest of this article; the concept of the future itself changes when it is viewed through the prism of Deleuze’s metaphysics.

In order to emphasise the metaphysical implications of Deleuze's *Cinema* books, it is as a response to nihilism that Deleuze's ethics of belief can be better situated. We saw in Sinnerbrink's connection between Deleuze and Cavell a synonymising of nihilism and scepticism, and Rodowick took a loss of belief in the world as articulated by Deleuze to be of a sceptical motivation. It is, however, the difference between nihilism and scepticism that can enable a rereading of Deleuze's cinematic ethics. Interestingly, both Cavell and Deleuze draw their respective notions of scepticism and nihilism from their engagements with Nietzsche, but the differences in their readings of Nietzsche's philosophy are profound. Cavell's Nietzsche is a thinker of the transformation of society, and Nietzsche's thought is most prominent in Cavell's espousal of the "remarriage comedy," where he states that "such comedies invite us to think again, what it is Nietzsche sees when he speaks of our coming to doubt our right to happiness, to the pursuits of happiness."¹⁷ Cavell also conflates Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism with the philosophical danger of scepticism, but, as Gilles Fraser argues, this is "problematic in a number of ways, not least because it seems that Cavell's scepticism has an overriding Cartesian format; and whatever else Nietzsche is, he is not a sceptic of the Cartesian variety."¹⁸ This anti-Cartesian interpretation of Nietzsche is one embraced by Deleuze, who reads Nietzsche, not as a dualist, but as a thinker of monist forces and pluralist types.¹⁹ An acknowledgement of the problematic of nihilism is not present in the *Cinema* books, so it is in Deleuze's work on Nietzsche that such a confrontation can be discerned and the map of an overcoming can be traced.²⁰

PERFECT NIHILISM

Through Nietzsche, Deleuze defines nihilism, not as a psychological or historical event, but as "the motor of universal history"; it is the engine of our "dogmatic image of thought."²¹ To interrogate what generates thought itself, and the epistemological manifestations of nihilism that subsequently arise, we need to understand the Deleuzian ontological system, where all phenomena reflect deeper states of forces. Nihilism is thus a metaphysical issue, a symptomatology arising from an ontology of forces. Forces are quantifiable as active or reactive, wherein reactive forces are "instruments of nihilism" in that "they separate active force from what it can do."²² Nihilism is figured as the triumph of reactive forces, against which Deleuze valorises active force.

The role of forces in the passage of time is either becoming-active or becoming-reactive, and the genetic element of forces is ascribed to the "will to power" of each force: "the internal element of its reproduction."²³ Deleuze gives to this level of forces the values affirmative or negative. When reactive forces separate active forces from their potential, a becoming-reactive creates a negative and inverted image of the will to power, and we are left with the will to

nothingness. Thus, the nihilistic will to nothingness operates through subtraction: it is not a value of forces but the differential element from which the value of values itself derives. Against this, the affirmative possibilities of the will to power are manifested as a capacity for being affected. In the becoming-active of affirmative forces there is the capacity for change and creativity.

To understand this becoming-active of forces that leads to affirmation and the overcoming of nihilism, it is important to first trace the three stages of nihilism preceding this possible final transvaluation, the stages whereby manifestations of reactive forces triumph and the capacity for new modes of thinking and feeling inherent in the will to power is negated. The first stage is *negative nihilism*: “the moment of Judaic and Christian consciousness” wherein life is denigrated in favour of the suprasensible worlds posited by religion, and a corresponding static conception of truth is valorised.²⁴ The second stage of nihilism is *reactive nihilism*. This is “the moment of European consciousness” where after the death of God the “reactive man” retains nihilistic values and marks himself as the centre of truth: “the Man-God replacing the God-Man.”²⁵ In both these stages of nihilism, the will to nothingness (in the guise of the will to truth) figures as the motor of reactive forces, feeding off *ressentiment* and bad consciousness. In the third stage, *passive nihilism*, reactive forces turn the will to nothingness into a nothingness of the will: “It is better to have no values at all than higher values, it is better to have no will at all.”²⁶ The figure that personifies this negation of the will is the ascetic ideal of the “last man,” the one who is left “dreaming of passive extinction” and is ascribed to “the moment of Buddhist consciousness.”²⁷ This sets the scene for a fourth stage of nihilism, a *completed form* of nihilism whereby “nihilism is defeated, but defeated by itself.”²⁸ In terms of the *Cinema* books, this deflated will of passive nihilism describes that post-war milieu that sets the scene for a re-evaluation of belief.

This transformation of belief centres on the role of the eternal return. The eternal return is the aspect of the system of forces that delivers an “answer to the problem of *passage*.”²⁹ It is, on one level, a “cosmological and physical doctrine,” and thus an affirmation of becoming: there is no stable level of reality underneath our own existential experience but rather the constant flux of time, where the “being” of this becoming is the form of time called the eternal return.³⁰ However, it is also an ethical statement through its ability for selection: it is not the “same” that returns, the repetition without difference that Deleuze defines as our dogmatic image of thought, but *pure difference*, only the new. The eternal return is both a selective *thought* that forms an ethical imperative—“whatever you will, will it in such a way that you also will its eternal return” —but, more than this, it has selective *being*: an immanent criteria of selection.³¹ It is both the positing of a way of thinking and acting as well as a metaphysical proposal on the nature of time.

This will be instrumental in Deleuze's cinematic ethics as it means that the eternal return selects what returns; reactive forces never return only difference. It is through the eternal return that the will to nothingness is freed from its own reactive qualities; it becomes a lack of connection to the world and not the conviction inherent in bad consciousness or *ressentiment*. The eternal return is the affirmation of this detachment from the world *as it is*. Thus, instead of recovering a sense of stable ground of common sense or the sensory-motor schema—variants of a will to truth—it is the nothingness of the will that reigns supreme. The *terra firma* is rejected as the will “makes negation a negation of reactive forces themselves.”³² Nihilism is thus overcome through itself, by the eternal return refiguring the will to nothingness as a nothingness of the will and its destructive and negative forces transmuting into affirmation.

To explain why film matters in this philosophy: the will to nothingness of passive nihilism indicates not a philosophical scepticism but a loss of belief in the possibility of stylistic newness. Active forces are separated from their potential, and the will only wills negation (of the world, of plot, of action and reaction). Cinema affirms this negation of the will to nothingness as it opens up potential, moving from passive nihilism to its overcoming in gaining the perspective of the future offered by the eternal return. Belief in the world is thus better described, as Deleuze himself does in *Difference and Repetition*, as “a belief of the future, a belief in the future.”³³ It is here that Deleuze goes further into his reading of Nietzsche's eternal return as a synthesis in a metaphysics of time. The eternal return is the possibility of the new coming into being, in which “the ground has been superseded by a groundlessness, a universal ungrounding which turns upon itself and causes only the yet-to-come to return.”³⁴ It is this affirmation of novelty that defines a cinematic ethics of belief. When Deleuze writes that “we need reasons to believe in this world” he is advocating for the importance of a new way of thinking, a way of escaping the repetition of the same that previous cinema compounded through cliché. Cinema can embody and produce the new, which gives back to us a belief in the future being different.

We are in a position to see why Rodowick's comparison of Deleuze and Cavell misreads the Deleuzian cinematic ethics. It is Cavell's moral perfectionism that Rodowick sees as parallel to Deleuze's ethical injunction, which argues for a constant striving for clarity and connection with others and oneself to overcome scepticism; it is the “moral necessity of making oneself intelligible,” with an “emphasis before all on becoming intelligible to oneself.”³⁵ This seems to miss the bite of the Deleuzian ethics. It is not the importance of self-knowledge that Deleuze is proposing, finding new ways to commit to and acknowledge the world and other people, but a renewed relationship with a radically nonhuman force that must occur, indeed something metaphysical. Cavell's ethics is based on a valorisation of the ordinary; as Rodowick ventriloquises, “philosophy will continually fail us if we cannot somehow return it to the ordinary, or make it pass through and return from the ordinary as humanly lived.”³⁶ The moral

system that Cavell proposes is thus a response to a lived and communally-felt threat of scepticism, and he writes on cinema as the socio-cultural means of grappling with the dangers of solipsism. However, as we have seen, Deleuze's interaction with nihilism instead allows an ethics of immanence that bypasses sceptical dilemmas. Instead of asserting an unacknowledged variant of scepticism haunting Deleuze's work, the reading of his ethics from the standpoint of an overcoming of nihilism leads to the conclusion that his ethical injunction is actually of a completed form of nihilism; as Brulent Diken states, "anti-nihilism is perfect nihilism."³⁷ This perfected form of nihilism is where the will to nothingness, as a nothingness of the will, is indeed valorised. It is not a future vision of the human that is being emphasised, a desire to change the world or self, but an alignment with a metaphysical process that is already producing change in its becoming, a realisation of the powerlessness of thinking. Instead of the ordinary there is thus a philosophy of abstraction and metaphysical speculation. This reading of Deleuze's ethics leads to a different emphasis, where the notion of choice is revealed to be fundamentally fatalistic, a Nietzschean *amor fati*.

THE FATALISM OF CHOICE

The different stages of nihilism were all symptoms of a series of ontological forces that shifted with historical epoch. Indeed, the rupture in cinema after World War II similarly produced a shift in the will to nothingness, from its appearance as a will to truth of propaganda and dogma to a nothingness of the will. However, the final stage of nihilism, wherein it is *completed*, is a realisation and an affirmation of something that was *there all along*. It is important to thus emphasise that active and reactive forces are not simply opposed as equally ontologically stable. Reactive force is what blocks the potential of force quantifiable as active. When the affirmation of the eternal return appears, in the guise of a belief in the world, it is an affirmation of potential that was always there but was being blocked off in some sense. In cinematic terms, it is the habitual connections between action and reaction that make the movement-image cinema of the pre-war era negate the potential of cinema to eschew the coordinates of the sensory-motor schema, the possibilities of the time-image that always existed within the cinema.

The eternal return is thus not merely that which somehow destroys reactive forces but is a theory of the always-already illusory nature of that which struggles for metaphysical certainty and therefore blocks active force at the level of an empirical state of affairs. Reactive forces thus have traction merely through a kind of misunderstanding of a prior metaphysical principle of contingency. The eternal return is the affirmation that reality exists by differing and that there is no necessity to things being the way they are. Believing in this world, as we have seen, is thus not a belief in a specific concrete certainty but actually the realisation that it is only belief that can tie us to existence, and in fact it is the only way through which reality is encountered.

This is belief, not of the external world as such, but of a specific relationship with the future. If we have shifted from the notion of a scepticism about the existence of others into a nihilism about the possibility of the future, then it is thus not a Cartesian scepticism that is relevant but that of David Hume. Deleuze's perfected nihilism can instead be read as a radicalised form of Humean scepticism, which provides an important addition to the theorisation of the transformation of belief in Deleuze's cinematic ethics. In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze writes of the "great turning point in philosophy" that worked to "replace the model of knowledge with belief."³⁸ The importance of Deleuze's reading of Hume here is that belief is "replaced" by knowledge, not in the sense of merely a different ethical valorisation but because Hume's empiricism argues that knowledge is, from the start, a question of belief; as Deleuze writes: "for if everything is belief, including knowledge, everything is a question of degree of belief."³⁹ This places a different slant on the Deleuzian ethics of belief found in the *Cinema* books. The choice of belief is the choice to accept that every form of knowledge is already in a precarious position structured by belief.

Revisiting Hume's problem of induction brings out the metaphysical consequences of this manoeuvre and its orientation towards the future. Hume asserts that causality is not based on an observable principle, and thus maintains that "every effect is a distinct event from its cause."⁴⁰ To exemplify this, Hume famously imagines a billiard table and the effect of one ball striking another:

When I see, for instance, a billiard-ball moving in a straight line towards another (...); may I not conceive, that a hundred different events might as well follow from that cause? May not both these balls remain at absolute rest? May not the first ball return in a straight line, or leap of from the second in any line or direction? All these suppositions are consistent and conceivable. Why then should we give the preference to one, which is no more consistent or conceivable than the rest?⁴¹

Hume is here questioning the basis by which we can know the causal structure to adhere absolutely, and concludes, as posited by Deleuze, that "causality is a relation according to which I go beyond the given."⁴² There is no foundation to this problem of induction, and the knowledge of causal connection becomes, instead, an issue of habit and custom, fundamentally underlined by a mode of belief.

In light of this Humean sceptical dilemma, we can see that Deleuze radicalises the problem in a perfected form of nihilism. This is to affirm belief as an acceptance of the precarity of knowledge. The passive nihilism over the dire possibility of the future being the same, clichéd and dogmatic, is transformed into a radicalised scepticism over the metaphysical status of the future itself. As it is only in belief that we assert that our activities are grounded, that what we

do in the present will have secure causal efficacy in the future, Deleuze affirms this precarity in order to posit that the future can be radically different.

The ungrounded relation between present and future is in fact defined in the eternal return as the future *always* being different. There is a sense here in which the new is constantly coming into being and it is only custom and habit that provide the illusion of stability. Affirming that it is only belief that secures the continuity of the future is paradoxically an acceptance of novelty being a metaphysical constant. The epistemic uncertainty of Hume is transformed into a metaphysical principle of becoming. The Deleuzian ethics of belief is thus not a belief in changing the future, or in developing a fuller sense of humanity, but of accepting the inevitability of future difference as an affirmative principle; the belief in the world contains a strange form of fatalism, what Alain Badiou calls “the Deleuzian form of destiny.”⁴³ It is important now to navigate the myriad Deleuzian voices, sounding in the wake of his philosophy to attempt to recuperate agency and politics into an ethical system that harbours this metaphysical fatalism.

It is in *The Logic of Sense* that Deleuze develops his fatalistic ethics, writing that “either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us.”⁴⁴ Questions of agency and human freedom become difficult with this assertion, and there is instead a deferral to a metaphysical reality of primary production that dictates Deleuze’s ethical preferences. Choice in this context is illusory, other than the choice to accept the fate of what happens, a new mode of existence that we can decide to embrace, an image we decide to reread. Choosing to believe is “a sort of leaping in place” wherein the illusion of similarity and repetition of the same is transformed into the realisation of constant novelty as an ethical primary principle.⁴⁵ Bad things happen but we must attempt to think about them differently; as Rosi Braidotti puts it “an ethics of affirmation involves the transformation of negative into positive passions.”⁴⁶ Ethics is defined by a moment of affirmation, a “turning of the tide of negativity” that entails a faithfulness to the process of becoming.⁴⁷ In terms of cinema this entails relinking images that are connected in the time-image through irrational editing; leaping in place necessitates making new kinds of sense of a fundamental irrationality in film style.

There is thus an incoherence set deep in the dual perspective of the eternal return as both an ethical and a metaphysical principle. Affirming the possibility of the eternal return as a principle of respecting difference and valorising the new has no causal traction on the metaphysical reality of the eternal return of difference.⁴⁸ This metaphysical constant of becoming leaves no room for agency or selfhood, and believing in the world is not a championing of the possibility of human directed change but an affirmation that change is the basis of reality, its only foundation. Rodowick is correct to suggest that the human dimension is lost in Deleuzian metaphysics, writing that a “clear and active sense of the quality of self-transformation as an

active philosophical practice is missing from Deleuze's philosophical constructivism."⁴⁹ Similarly, Sinnerbrink diagnoses that "there is no account of the role of *emotion* either in relation to perception or action in Deleuze's *Cinema* books," and thus posits the difficulty in ascertaining how the cinematic experience is supposed to be ethical.⁵⁰ Both valiantly attempt to rectify this by reintroducing more common-sense ethical positions into Deleuze's cinematic philosophy, from humanistic gestures to appeals to cognitive approaches to cinema that mitigate, as Sinnerbrink warns us of, the danger that, due to the "diminution of the sense of human agency, our historical capacity for collective or transformative action (...), the birth of time-image cinema remains caught within the very nihilism it aims to overcome."⁵¹ However, reading the ethical injunction of belief in the world as consistent with the Deleuzian metaphysics reveals instead its fatalistic bent. Rodowick, and others explored below, posit a notion of agency-to-come in Deleuze's work, and rightly emphasise how the time-image was historically vital for instigating a rejection of dogma and voluntarist agency by presenting the fundamental contingency of any world-view or habitual relationship to the world. However, this affirmation of contingency makes the grounding of any future political project difficult. What this means is that Deleuze's ethics ultimately evacuates cinema of a positive political programme, or, as Peter Hallward puts it, "the truth is that Deleuze's work is essentially indifferent to the politics of this world."⁵² What we find in Deleuze's philosophy, against a voluntarist politics that understands the future as tractable and thus possible to plan, is a politics of potential.

This is played out in the cinema of the time-image, where the agency of the characters involved is lost and they lose the ability to react to the world around them. This is not to say that Deleuze's ethics is merely to repeat the wandering aimlessness of filmic characters, and it instead affirms their escape from habitual modes of being as the first step towards affirming the potential of new ways of being. The politics of this is explored by Deleuze when he states that "if there were a modern political cinema, it would be on this basis: the people no longer exist, or not yet ... *the people are missing*."⁵³ Instead of appealing to the agency of a particular group, Deleuze valorises the power of cinema in "contributing to the invention of a people."⁵⁴ Cinema is the harbinger of political potential and affirms inadequacies and contingencies in our current ways of thinking to emphasise the possibility of new ways of thinking. Paola Marrati takes these interventions in cinema to be the best exemplar of a politics in Deleuze's work, and affirms that, although there is no explicit positing of new forms of agency, the destruction of moribund declarations on the sovereignty of the acting self provides an important political corrective: "certainly there is no politics without agency, but agency requires more than the fiction of a self-transparent and almighty subject."⁵⁵ The question of what this agency will look like, however, is left open.

The paradox between Deleuze's valorisation of a nothingness of the will in his completed form of nihilism and the necessity of a form of agency that would make politics possible is explored by François Zourabichvili as an *involuntarism*. Zourabichvili asserts that "nothing could be more foreign to Deleuze, therefore, than the enterprise of transforming the world according to a plan, or in view of an end," and develops a new theory of agency around "the emergence of new fields of the possible."⁵⁶ The nothingness of the will is thus a realisation that the will, and agency conceived around the self, is an illusion. Instead of the will there is an openness to the emergence of potential, of exhausting possibility of its reactive forces in order to bring about the future as difference.

It is this reorientation of agency that makes Deleuze's fatalism not of a vulgar or simple kind, following instead a line of what Véronique Bergan calls "passive volition," defined as "the transformatory power of a leap into a place beyond voluntarism or resignation: neither an active engagement in planning the future nor a mere acceptance of what is."⁵⁷ I claim this merely sidesteps the fatalist dilemma by redefining *what is*. In the sense of an empirical state of affairs, Deleuze's philosophy clearly jettisons existing conditions as necessarily good or inevitable. However, by introducing a metaphysical principle of difference as a new definition of *what is*, we can see that Deleuze's ethics does indeed entail an affirmation of difference as a primary ethical value that is metaphysically inescapable. Believing in this world is thus not a fatalism about that which goes on in the empirical world as it stands but in realising that the world is itself merely the propagation of difference that we must affirm. This leads Andrew Culp to demarcate Deleuze's cinematic ethics as "incomplete":

In his haste, Deleuze forgets to pose the problem with the ambivalence found in all his other accounts of power—how affects are ruled by tyrants, molecular revolutions made fascist, and nomad war machines enrolled to fight for the state. Without it, he becomes Nietzsche's braying ass, which says yes only because it is incapable of saying no.⁵⁸

Because of this, one has to affirm the future as inevitably different in a way that becomes difficult to *navigate*, it becomes a runaway process with no opportunity for political traction.⁵⁹

Deleuze's metaphysics thus provides an insoluble problem for any politics that arises from his work; as Allan James Thomas writes, although cinema rightly undermines parochial notions of agency and selfhood, "freedom *from* the human still seems to offer little to the problem of the freedom *of* the human."⁶⁰ Despite emphasising the ability for cinema to galvanise future thought and action through the undermining of current thinking, this future is inevitably always *to come*. Ashley Woodward questions whether nihilism is indeed ever defeated—or "completed"—as this means that "the overcoming of nihilism is projected to a future time in which such a radical transformation will take place that it can scarcely be imagined."⁶¹ Cinema wills difference,

precisely through a faithfulness to the primary production of becoming, but the dilemma of navigation is jettisoned: Marrati can, in the end, only “*hope* for the possibility of new forms of life, for new ties between us and the world.”⁶² The question thus centres around if Deleuze’s ethics is relevant for today. Although, of course, aesthetic strategies have shifted from the cinema valorised by Deleuze, alongside further technological development, the ethical potentials that Deleuze attributes to cinema can still have traction on contemporary cinema. This is hinted at by John Mullarkey when he suggests that “the time-image is actually a place-holder for *whatever transgresses*.”⁶³ However, within Deleuze’s metaphysical system the place of this transgression remains the same, and, although it can be instrumental in demolishing moribund systems of thought, it fares less well in developing a positive vision for the future. Cinema can thus find different aesthetic techniques to fulfil similar functions, but, if a Deleuzian approach is taken, it is questionable whether any new set of aesthetic principles can escape the metaphysical commitments of Deleuze’s work.

Deleuze realised that new enemies require new weapons, and, with Félix Guattari, demarcates two such tendencies in art: the “struggle against chaos” and the “struggle against opinion.”⁶⁴ Mapping this onto cinema, the movement-image represented cinema’s attempt to stave off chaos, a guard against the flexing of a mindless becoming that leaves no form intact. The security of a sensory-motor schema, and the thinking faculty that asserted itself in moments of cinematic sublime, provided stability against the infinite speed of process. In order to rally against opinion, which has its correlate in the *Cinema* books as cliché and dogma, the time-image ruptured the sensory-motor schema. The clichés of the movement-image lead to a false security of ideology and this *needed* undermining through the techniques of the time-image. There are thus times when a struggle against opinions and clichés is required, and other moments when chaos needs to be abated. However, the time-image reveals the pretensions of the movement-image to be misplaced, which leaves the tools available for Deleuzian philosophy to struggle against chaos lacking.

Any Deleuzian approach to cinema that intends to extend the ethics of belief into the present day must grapple with the question of if the transgressive potential of the time-image can provide the right weapons for new enemies and problems. Steven Shaviro, for example, realises the contemporary failure of artistic transgression but retains Deleuze’s focus on the pedagogical importance of cinema, which, interestingly, brings into the relief its fatalistic implications even more starkly. Shaviro analyses contemporary Hollywood cinema and its excesses of affect to emphasise the power of films in aesthetically training us for the present. He states, however, that “intensifying the horrors of contemporary capitalism does not lead them to explode, but it does offer us a kind of satisfaction and relief, by telling us that we have finally hit bottom, finally realised the worst.”⁶⁵ This still epitomises Deleuze’s ethics of making oneself worthy of the event, with the power for action depleted in favour of extracting from the world

that which one can affirm.⁶⁶ To attempt to wrest forms of agency from cinema requires either supplementing Deleuze's work with a new epistemology or perhaps reorienting his ontology. Deleuze, in his work with Guattari, states that "politics precedes being," and reading their work in purely pragmatist terms leads to the suggestion that Deleuze's metaphysics was *always a political injunction*, contingent to his specific socio-historical moment.⁶⁷ Thus, it can be subverted from within.

This article has attempted to present the fatalistic and nihilistic aspects of Deleuze's ethics of cinema, which were vital in opening up new ways of thinking in the context of the cinemas explored by Deleuze but that can lead to an impasse of agency today. Deleuze presents why film matters *metaphysically* by screening the supersession of passive nihilism with a perfected form of nihilistic ethical engagement, but, when the cinematic encounter is a merely a salve for our metaphysical powerlessness, it falters at opening up a positive platform of directed change. The whole of Deleuze's work thus verges on an abyss of political possibility, wherein only an ethics or a *micropolitics* is provided. Many Deleuzian scholars, Rodowick and Sinnerbrink included, attempt to cover up these moments of lack in Deleuze's work. However, emphasising the metaphysical fatalism implicit in Deleuze's *Cinema* books means that there is a necessity either to accept Deleuze's positing of the fundamental intractability of the future or to explicate deviations from his metaphysical system. Believing in the world's ability to become different might not always suffice; we may require new metaphysics for new times.

¹ Robert Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images* (London: Continuum, 2011), 90.

² Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies*, 90.

³ Robert Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film* (London: Routledge, 2016), 54–55.

⁴ D. N. Rodowick, *Philosophy's Artful Conversation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 197.

⁵ Rodowick, *Philosophy's Artful Conversation*, 197.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 177.

⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema II*, 169–70.

⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema II*, 177.

⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema II*, 177.

¹⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema II*, 177.

¹¹ Deleuze, *Cinema II*, 182.

¹² Ronald Bogue, "To Choose to Choose—to Believe in This World," in *Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze's Film Philosophy*, ed. D. N. Rodowick (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) 122–123.

¹³ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Enlarged edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 188.

¹⁴ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 165.

¹⁵ Rodowick, *Philosophy's Artful Conversation*, 178.

¹⁶ Rodowick, *Philosophy's Artful Conversation*, 178.

¹⁷ Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 131.

¹⁸ Giles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche: On the Piety of Unbelief* (London: Routledge, 2013), 158.

¹⁹ "The monism of the will to power is inseparable from a pluralist typology." Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 86.

²⁰ It should be noted that the question of whether Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche's eternal return, has textual and philosophical support in Nietzsche's writing is an open one. Cf, Joseph Ward, "Revisiting Nietzsche et La Philosophie," *Angelaki* 15, no. 2 (2010): 101–114.

²¹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, 32, 96.

²² Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, 53.

²³ Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, 47.

²⁴ Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, 144.

²⁵ Deleuze *Nietzsche*, 154.

²⁶ Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, 142.

²⁷ Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, 146.

²⁸ Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, 162.

²⁹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, 45.

³⁰ Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, 43.

³¹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, 63.

³² Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, 65.

³³ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 90.

³⁴ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 91.

³⁵ Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism: The Carus Lectures, 1988* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), xxxi.

³⁶ Rodowick, *Philosophy's Artful Conversation*, 181.

³⁷ Bulent Diken, *Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 2008), 32.

³⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema II*, 177.

³⁹ Gilles Deleuze, "Hume," in *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 44.

⁴⁰ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Other Writings*, ed. Stephen Buckle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 32.

⁴¹ Hume, *An Enquiry*, 32.

⁴² Deleuze, "Hume," 40.

⁴³ Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12.

⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 149.

⁴⁵ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 170.

⁴⁶ Rosi Braidotti, "Nomadic Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Deleuze*, ed. Daniel W. Smith and Henry Somers-Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 182.

⁴⁷ Braidotti, "Nomadic Ethics," 183.

⁴⁸ This contradiction between a moment of affirmation *in* time and the realisation of a certain structure *to* time itself is articulated by Brassier, in relation to Nietzsche's eternal return, when he asks, "how can the affirmation which is supposed to render every moment of becoming absolutely equivalent to every other, also be invested with the redemptive power capable of cleaving history in two and transforming the relation between all past and future moments?" Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 218.

⁴⁹ Rodowick, *Philosophy's Artful Conversation*, 241.

⁵⁰ Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 76.

⁵¹ Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 65. Sinnerbrink is here building on the work of J.M Bernstein who claims that Deleuze's cinematic philosophy is "redolent with abstract religiosity." J. M. Bernstein, "Movement! Action! Belief?: Notes for a Critique of Deleuze's Cinema Philosophy," *Angelaki* 17, no. 4 (2012): 81. Against Bernstein's cynicism for the Deleuzian project, Sinnerbrink suggests that "Deleuze's 'cinema of belief,' in the end, is more ethical than political: it is oriented more towards affective, philosophical, and creative responses towards our cultural-historical situation (as mediated through transformative cinematic experience), than to a distinctive collective project of socio-political transformation aided by the motivating power of a revolutionary cinema." Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 67. My intention in this article is to set out the limitations of such a distinction; if your ethics leads to a metaphysical fatalism then it also makes politics impossible.

⁵² Peter Hallward, *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (London: Verso, 2006), 162.

⁵³ Deleuze, *Cinema II*, 223.

⁵⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema II*, 224.

⁵⁵ Paola Marrati, *Gilles Deleuze: Cinema and Philosophy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), xiv.

⁵⁶ François Zourabichvili, “Deleuze and the Possible: On Involuntarism in Politics,” trans. Kieran Aarons and Caitlyn Doyle, *Theory & Event* 20, no. 1 (2017): 152, 168.

⁵⁷ Véronique Bergen, “Politics as the Orientation of Every Assemblage,” trans. Jeremy Gilbert, *New Formations* 68 (Autumn 2009): 39.

⁵⁸ Andrew Culp, *Dark Deleuze* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 8.

⁵⁹ A more extreme position is taken by Catherine Malabou who claims that Deleuze’s affirmation of the eternal return harbours totalitarian consequences: “The idea that the eternal return chases away the spectres is a seductive but dangerous vision.” Catherine Malabou, “The Eternal Return and the Phantom of Difference,” *Parrhesia* 10 (2010): 25.

⁶⁰ Allan James Thomas, *Deleuze, Cinema and the Thought of the World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 193.

⁶¹ Ashley Woodward, “Deleuze, Nietzsche, and the Overcoming of Nihilism,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 46, no. 1 (2013): 143.

⁶² Marrati, *Gilles Deleuze*, 111. [Emphasis added]

⁶³ John Mullarkey, *Refractions of Reality: Philosophy and the Moving Image* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 103.

⁶⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Birchill and Hugh Tomlinson (London: Verso Books, 1994), 203.

⁶⁵ Steven Shaviro, *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 44.

⁶⁶ A more disturbing example of Deleuzian fatalism in action can be found in the thinking of Nick Land, who, taking influence from the Deleuze and Guattari of *Anti-Oedipus*, bases a worldview around the intensification and acceleration of capitalism. Thus, in much the same way we have seen with the eternal return, there is no way to extricate oneself from the system of capitalism, or to find a position from which to critique it. Instead, “the process *is* the critique, feeding back into itself, as it escalates. The only way forward is through, which means further in.” Politics is rendered meaningless and we open ourselves up to fascism and neo-reactionary bigotry (as anyone who has followed Land’s trajectory on Twitter can attest to). Nick Land, “A Quick-and-Dirty Introduction to Accelerationism,” *Jacobite*, May 25, 2017 < <https://jacobitemag.com/2017/05/25/a-quick-and-dirty-introduction-to-accelerationism/> > [Accessed 23.05.19]

⁶⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 203.

STAGING DISAGREEMENT AND ITS ETHICS: A RANCIÈRIAN APPROACH TO
LANTHIMOS' *DOGTOOTH*

Seckin Goksoy (University College Dublin)

Tugce Bidav (Maynooth University)

'Ethics' is a tricky word. It is a much-discussed concept by scholars and non-scholars; yet, to comprehend the very meaning of ethics seems challenging. This is, perhaps, what makes the word ethics an attractive one. We often encounter the interchangeable use of ethics with morality; what is at stake with the word ethics is this ambiguity. If ethics is viewed as an indistinguishable term from morality, it generally falls into a field of normativity in which one's actions are obliged to align with certain judgements and principles. Such view of ethics, in other words, depicts a sphere in which judgements of morality reign over one's actions. Ethics, in this sense, simultaneously attempts to determine the limits of validity of these actions and justify the validity of these limits. Contrary to this widely accepted understanding, ethics implies a potentiality to disagree with the limits of validity of actions and question the validity of these limits at the same time. Ethics, in this way, exceeds morality; it is even capable of supplementing morality.

It would be valuable to turn back to the Ancient root of the word ethics, namely *ethos*, as it marks the overlap between the way in which one inhabits the world and one's attitude towards life in which the self, the other and the world are reciprocally related. *Ethos* does not solely offer an individual point of view towards life; rather, it offers an individuality that is positioned in a dynamic and involute map of relationships. In contemporary discussion of ethics, the word *ethos* seems appealing in order to free ethics from a certain set of moral principles and judgements. *Ethos* indeed characterizes a way of life that constantly and incessantly transgresses itself. It does not solely distinguish the validity of actions with respect to certain categories of morality; instead, it is the very ability to reflect on the limit that separates the valid and the invalid. *Ethos*, in this sense, creates a paradoxical scene in which the subject of *ethos* is both the one who experiences these limits and has the potential to transform them. It is this paradoxical movement of thinking that invites us to an infinite way of being.

If ethics is understood in this way, this question should be raised: Is there any generative principle that leads the subject of *ethos* to an infinite way of being? If there is, what would be this principle? We suggest Jacques Rancière's principle of equality as a potential answer to this question. To elaborate the principle of equality as an ethical principle is a demanding task since Rancière, in most of his works, discusses this principle implicitly as an ethical one, but explicitly as an aesthetico-political one. To put it differently, whereas the principle of equality is the very principle that leads Rancière to discuss aesthetics and politics prior to ethics, our primary focus is to reveal the ethics of this principle. The best strategy would be to carefully derive the ethical ground from his aesthetics and politics; this

could be considered as an attempt to make what is implicit explicit. We, therefore, offer a movement that is oriented towards ethics by concentrating on Rancière's central conception, namely *disagreement*. This also requires elucidating the scene of disagreement within its organic structure mainly comprising the act of the policing, politics and the distribution of the sensible.¹

Within this structure, Rancière meticulously conceptualizes politics not as a form of consensus, but as a form of disagreement or dissensus. He persistently distinguishes the policing from politics to reveal the wrongness of consensus-based politics, which is widely recognized by a set of procedures including arrangements of relationships between the state and its citizens through law. The wrong is, in the very ordering of the police, the production of a part that has no part. In other words, the wrong is the functioning of the police order in which "whoever is nameless cannot speak" for the good of society.² Politics, in this regard, is a handling of this wrong by the part that has no part. It is, as a problem, the enunciation of a gap between those who are capable of speaking for the good of society and those who are allegedly incapable of speaking.

Here, the distribution of the sensible operates as a concept to depict the sensible experiences of those who are assigned to certain functions, roles and places as well as to trace possible changes in the sensible experiences of those who are mis-functioned and mis-placed within the police order. To avoid from confusion, it should be noted that the distribution of the sensible does not imply the maintenance of the sensible order, but fundamentally a rethink of the impossibilities and the possibilities of the sensible order. To investigate ways of converting what is impossible into what is possible within the police is the main drama, which sets a stage for politics as the scene of disagreement. What accompanies scenes of disagreement is the principle of equality, which signifies equality between each and every speaking being; it is the principle that corresponds to the presupposition of equality that animates both the police and politics. By taking the principle of equality into the centre of our argument, just as Rancière does, we suggest that ethics is the core of his aesthetico-political framework since both the police and politics are dependent upon this principle. Therefore, in the first section, we elaborate respectively the police as an organisation through which the ethical dimension of relationships is delimited and politics as scenes of disagreement in which the ethical dimension of relationships becomes unlimited. This is because politics is an ethical act that opens the undoing of the police order to an infinite number of ethical responses. We name this the *ethics of equality*.³

Ethics as a major branch of philosophy has been discussed through films from diverse perspectives. For instance, focusing specifically on care ethics, Joseph H. Kupfer indicates that it is possible to convey and reconfigure fundamental values in the ethics of care through a film's narrative.⁴ David Martin-Jones, moreover, looks at "how we understand the ethical relations that are created in cinematic encounters" through Enrique Dussel's transmodern ethics.⁵ While these authors aiming to supplement philosophical discussions through cinema, their accounts on ethics are deprived of its relations to politics and aesthetics. The intricate relationship between ethics, aesthetics and politics in or through cinema, on the other hand, has been addressed broadly by some other film-philosophy

scholars. In this regard, for James S. Williams, cinema has a capacity to represent “an ethical dilemma connecting the work, author, character, spectator, and screen through different forms and modalities of subjectivity.”⁶ In order to demonstrate how ethics, aesthetics and politics are connected to each other in Jean-Luc Godard’s cinema, he accordingly argues that the director has an ethical intention while representing the other in his film as he tries not to subordinate the other within the film’s aesthetic parameters.⁷ Similar to Williams in terms of revealing ethics-aesthetics-politics relation, Robert Sinnerbrink proposes a concept of “cinematic ethics” through which he demonstrates cinema’s potential “to evoke ethical experience and invite philosophical reflection.”⁸

Our way of addressing the question of ethics in relation to aesthetics and politics is slightly different from the existing literature. First, while connecting the question of ethics with politics and aesthetics, we refer to what Rancière calls *the primary aesthetics* rather than to the aesthetics of the film which looks at how films “communicate ethical meaning via aesthetic means.”⁹ That is why it is important to distinguish between what Rancière calls *the aesthetics of politics* and *the politics of aesthetics* for the sake of our attempt. On the one hand, the aesthetics of politics designates a certain commonality in which the sensible forms of experiences are distributed and/or re-distributed. On the other hand, the politics of aesthetics designates artistic practices that, in Rancière’s words, “suspend the ordinary coordinates of sensory experience and reframe the network of relationships between spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular.”¹⁰ The former is also what Rancière calls the “primary aesthetics”, which also reveals the possibility of artistic practices within the general order of sensory experience.¹¹ For the latter, he also notes that “artistic practices are ‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility.”¹² Thus, the politics of aesthetics deals with the question of artistic practices, which may pave the way for an alteration within the general sensible order.¹³ What enables such artistic practices is the primary aesthetics as the sensible order which contains its own aesthetic forms, distributions and (im)possibilities of redistributions, namely the aesthetic of politics. Since our prior motivation is to examine the aesthetics of politics in relation to ethics, this can be renamed as the *ethico-aesthetics of politics*.

Secondly, while discussing Rancière’s ethics of equality through cinema, our investigation does not ground itself in the relation between film and spectators. This does not necessarily mean that we ignore the ethical and political interaction between film and spectators; however, to focus on this interaction requires examining how a film as an artwork deploys a certain politics via its aesthetics; what Rancière calls the politics of aesthetics. In other words, a film might carry the potential to bring counter-aesthetical forms of politics, which foresee a reconfiguration within the sensible order. Yet, to check the effectivity of films in this regard is dependent upon the primary aesthetics. Also, it must be noted that the interaction between film and spectators may lead to infinitely many forms of dissensus depending on different subjectivities that are shaped by various cultures, geographies, histories and so on. To examine a certain film with its politics of aesthetics would be nothing but the delimitation or

reduction of its political potentiality since each reception by spectators is unique. However, it is not impossible to depict general dynamics of the relationship between film and spectators in regard to the ethico-political potential of an artwork.¹⁴ Rancière indeed shows the way in which how the politics of aesthetics could infinitely proliferate itself depending on each singular encounter.

Hence, the value we see in such explication of Rancière's framework in relation to cinema does not lie on the investigation of either the aesthetics of film, or audience reception, or the *auteur*-ship. We are, instead, concerned with a special mode of thinking in which philosophy and film are mutually responsive to each other. Specifically, we aim to enrich the discussion on the ethico-aesthetics of politics through a reading of *Dogtooth/Kynodontas* (2009) as well as to provide a unique appraisal of the film. We selected *Dogtooth* – a film co-scripted (with Efthymis Filippou) and directed by Yorgos Lanthimos which tells the story of a family consisting of middle-aged parents of three adult-looking, home-schooled children, living in an isolated house with a private garden and a swimming pool somewhere in the countryside – as its narrative provides an exemplary setting to enrich the discussion of the ethics of equality. To argue this, we initially provide a critical analysis of the familial organization in *Dogtooth*, specifically focusing on how the family structurally resembles the police order and how the scenes of agreement and disagreement are displayed within this structure.¹⁵ We then demonstrate how the ethical and aesthetico-political value of the film lies on its capacity to narrate scenes of disagreement, especially in a pre-political sense.

THE ETHICS OF EQUALITY

To understand why Rancière discusses politics and aesthetics by prioritizing (in)equality, it is perhaps meaningful to mention his critique of Louis Althusser. In his early career, Rancière was a student of Althusser who is one of preeminent figures of Marxist theory and politics in French philosophy. After some time working in line with the Althusserian project, Rancière denounced it by indicating that it is grounded on the logic of inequality instead of equality. In the book titled *Althusser's Lessons*, Rancière declares a war against “the theory of the inequality of intelligences at the heart of supposed critiques of domination”; instead, he radically suggests that “all revolutionary thought must be founded on the inverse presupposition [the equality of intelligences], that of the capacity of the dominated.”¹⁶ The very foundation of Rancière's opposition to the Althusserian project lies on the division between intellectuals who are supposed to produce theory, as they are the ones capable of struggling with “the ‘complexity’ of history”, and workers who are responsible for production within “the ‘simplicity’ of nature.”¹⁷ It is, consequently, the logic of inequality that overlooks the intelligence of workers by presuming that “workers need our [intellectuals'] science” to revolt against their existing conditions.¹⁸ This initial critique of Rancière is what leads him to develop his own method, which he later names “the method of equality”, based on the principle of equality between any and every intelligences or speaking beings.

The principle of equality, as a primary principle of politics in Rancière's framework, has a dual role. On the one side, it enables us to understand the inauthentic form of politics, which generates consensus-oriented elements of politics such as state, bureaucracy, citizen, elections and so on. On the other side, it paves the way for the authentic form of politics, which generates dissenting scenes within the consensus-oriented politics. Rancière calls the former the police and the latter politics. Whereas the police is the organization in which the principle of equality turns into a non-egalitarian logic, politics is a stage where the principle of equality gives rise to an egalitarian logic by confronting it with the non-egalitarian one. To understand this, we need to take a closer look at how the principle of equality operates in the police and political processes.

The police, for Rancière, is a special process that must be distinguished from politics though majority of people consider politics as "the set of procedures whereby aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution."¹⁹ Rancière emphasises that what the majority think of politics is actually the police. This, at the same time, requires rethinking the police differently than the state apparatus, for instance, which disciplines society in order to maintain it secure. The police, rather, is essentially the law of an order that assigns bodies to certain functions, roles and places through which it configures the sensible boundaries between what is sayable/unsayable, visible/invisible, audible/inaudible and ultimately possible/impossible.²⁰ What enables the police to set these boundaries is the principle of equality. Rancière appeals to the practice of obeying an order to explain how the principle of equality functions in the formation of the police:

There is order in society because some people command and others obey, but in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it. And to do that, you must already be the equal of the person who is ordering you. It is this equality that gnaws away at any natural order.²¹

At the heart of obeying an order, there is the equality of intelligences, which is prior to the police order or makes possible the policing. The police, in other words, is an organization in which "inequality is only possible through [the principle of] equality."²² The equality of intelligences is the irreducible equality of speaking beings, which is later converted into the non-egalitarian logic once the police is established. This irreducible principle is what allows us to elucidate an ethical dimension of Rancièrean framework in which subjects of the police are not yet subjects, but equally intelligent speaking bodies before being subjected to a certain order.

What is wrong in being subjected to the police in relation to ethics? The wrong is the conversion of the initial equality of speaking beings into the logic of inequality at the expense of establishing the police. The wrong is the production of the part that has no part within the police order as if there are people who are less equal than others who are privileged. The police fundamentally does not deny

equality but, as Rancière points out, “*wrongs* equality” and damages the ethical.²³ Hence, what the policing seeks is consensus on the proposed order so as to homogenize the places of its subjects as if they were equal. This is, in a sense, an attempt to cover its wrong; this is ultimately what annihilates the possibility of the ethical within the order by tying subjects to a certain set of regulative values, allegedly ethical or moral values. Rancière addresses this ethical problem within the police as follows:

[Consensus] implies positing an immediate identity between the political constitution of the community [*demos*] and the physical and moral constitution of a population. Consensus describes the community as an entity that is naturally unified by ethical values. [However] *ethos*, we know, means 'dwelling' and 'way of being' before it refers to domain of moral values.²⁴

The police conceives *demos* as *one* entity within both its physical – or *spatio-temporal* – and moral configurations by the methodical abuse of the principle of equality. This is the way in which the police deals with the threat of an *excessive-one*, or in Rancière’s saying *one more*, “which confuses the right ordering of [the police].”²⁵

As opposed to such methodical abuse, politics is the stage in which the use of the principle of equality is performed by those who have no parts to undo the wrong. The political occurs when the part that has no part marks himself/herself as a subject of miscount, misnomer or misplacement within the police. Engagement with a certain distribution of roles, functions and places, even if it produces misrepresentations, depicts the distribution of sensible experiences within the police. The police, in essence, is a distribution of the sensible which is “a generally implicit law that defines the forms of partaking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed.”²⁶ Politics, on the other hand, is what breaks and disturbs the organization that is arranged by the parts of *demos* who are privileged with the status of speaking for others. Equivalently, it is a breach of the configuration of the sensible. What accompanies these moments of rupture is the principle of equality “between any and every speaking being.”²⁷ Politics is, in a sense, the interruption of the continuous validity of words belonging to the privileged ones who distribute the sensible order. Yet, politics cannot be comprehended solely on the ground of the rupture that initiates the process of equality, as the rupture is what sets a stage for a renewal of the police’s sensible distribution. Politics, then, is also the stage in which the field of sensible experiences of subjects is redistributed, reorganized or reconfigured. It requires the staging of dissenting words with the words of the police; it necessitates the staging of disagreement that results in the spectacle where the police logic and the egalitarian logic confront each other.²⁸ Politics, therefore, is fundamentally dependent upon the distribution of the sensible in which the principle of equality is always and already at play.²⁹

Concerning ethics, politics signifies that the damage to the ethical, which has been done by the police, can be suspended. This is because political subjectivization is about becoming the one who relentlessly demands to be equal to those who speak for the sake of the police. What describes this

process of equality as a political subjectivization, accordingly, is the correction of the wrong by supplementing the police with the words of those who have no part. Putting it differently, there is an interposition of the words of the police and the words of those who have no part within the police. The political subject, therefore, is a subject who enunciates his/her misplacement by assuming that his/her poetic capacity is equal to that of the privileged. It is to confirm politics as an activity, which “turns on equality as its principle.”³⁰ Politics, in this sense, is a revival of the principle of equality that was once forced by the police to be forgotten; nonetheless, this desire of the police is a paradoxical one since equality also lies in its very foundation. The method of equality as “the enactment of equality – or the handling of a wrong” is revivification of a certain kind of ethics at the stage of politics, namely the ethics of equality.³¹ The stage of disagreement, consequently, hosts political subjects who are simultaneously ethical.

Politics, for Rancière, is pregnant with multiple scenes of disagreement. As opposed to consensus-oriented politics, dissensual politics provides a stage in which the heterogenous logic of politics is revealed by the meeting of the police logic and the egalitarian logic. Politics is the staging of dis-homogeneity as long as the political subject performs a dissensual subjectivization, which signifies the very ability to enunciate a problem without the consent of the police. Where the police marks the archaic by constantly appealing to the hierarchy that comes with the distribution of places, the political subject marks that “politics has no arche, it is anarchical.”³² Consensus, on the one hand, is a way of maintaining of the positions designated by those who are privileged to speak and who give consent to others to speak. Dissensus, on the other hand, is what breaches this consensus by appealing to nothing but the principle of equality, which at the same time establishes the police order. Politics, thus, emphasises that even the police is a non-archaic organization despite its archaic claims. Correspondingly, there is a double paradox. The first one can be called the paradox of the police which is the act of ordering by the principle of equality that later turns into the non-egalitarian logic; the second one can be called the political paradox of bodies in which the bodies experience equality by suspending and supplementing the words of the police while they are also the subjects of inequality caused by these words. As Rancière puts it, “political subjectification is an ability to produce these polemical scenes, these paradoxical scenes, that bring out the contradiction between two logics, by positing existences that are at the same time nonexistences-or nonexistences that are at the same time existences.”³³ In other words, politics contends that what is invisible is actually visible, what is unsayable is actually sayable, what is inaudible is actually audible, and ultimately what is impossible is actually possible within the sensible order of the police. What makes the staging of disagreement spectacular is this ongoing paradoxical drama between the police logic and the egalitarian logic that leads to a production of subjects who have previously not existed or been named within the spatio-temporal organization of the police.

Then, the ethics of staging disagreement is embedded in the principle of equality. As long as every dissensual scene verifies and demonstrates equality, as Rancière noted, this contributes “to the

framing of new fabric common experience or a new common sense, upon which new forms of political subjectivization can be implemented.”³⁴ As politics operates with this ethical principle, it leads to a transformation in the sensible experiences of the bodies in desired forms. Correspondingly, what Rancière offers is actually the nexus of aesthetics, politics and ethics. Yet, we would like to emphasise the priority of the principle of equality as the principle of the distribution of the sensible. The conception of the distribution of the sensible is what allows us to trace the political on the stage. The dual implication of the concept as both the initial distribution of the police order and its redistribution through politics is what makes the inequality visible, audible and sayable such that the counter-transformation of inequality into equality becomes ethically, politically and aesthetically reified. The ethics of equality offers an ethical perspective in which ethics, politics and aesthetics are inseparable from each other. It is not the ethics dealing with deciding the validity limits of actions and justifying their validity with respect to a certain order, but the ethics dealing with the limits that wrongly confine the subject into a particular way of being. Ethics, in this sense, cannot be a set of values, mostly called morality, that regulates the very sensible experiences of subjects; it is, rather, a field in which the subjects of a miscalculation, misplacement or misrepresentation within the order designate new places and representations to themselves by both transgressively imagining and shaping themselves differently than the way they are.

THE STAGE OF DISAGREEMENT IN *DOGTOOTH*

Dogtooth has been well received in the world cinema especially after being awarded the *Un Certain Regard* award at *Cannes Film Festival* in 2009. Accordingly, the film has attracted a considerable attention in the field of film studies due to its unique aesthetic characteristics, the absurd and violent elements in its narrative as well as its critical approach to the notion of family. Rosalind Galt, for example, explores the crucial narrative role animals play in *Dogtooth*, whereas Angelos Koutsourakis looks at how Lanthimos reduces the narrative of *Dogtooth* to the bodies of the actors.³⁵ Most of the literature on *Dogtooth*, however, suggests an analysis of the film in relation to the (socio)economic crisis of that time in Greece and the crisis of contemporary Western society more generally by referring to *Dogtooth* as an example of *Greek Weird Wave*.³⁶ Stamos Metzidakis argues that *Dogtooth* cannot be analysed without examining “contemporary Greek familial culture” and how this is linked to (socio)economic crisis.³⁷ Alex Lykidis demonstrates how the political and economic crises are symbolically represented in the family’s quasi-bureaucratic structure where the father as an authoritative figure exercises methods of governance over other family members.³⁸ From a slightly different perspective, Ipek Celik examines the family in *Dogtooth* “as an allegory to internal borders in and of Greece, and in extension those in and of Europe” to discuss contemporary migrant crises.³⁹ Tatjana Aleksic’s approach, on the other hand, is notably different from previous ones as she avoids the contextualisation of *Dogtooth* in line with the crisis narrative. Aleksic suggests an analysis of “the

modalities of violence” within the family through *Dogtooth* and *Miss Violence* by not reducing the inner dynamics of violence into the historico-political and economic crises in Greece as if these are the sole reason for oppressive familial practices.⁴⁰ As Aleksic did, we also invite our readers to think about what is called family beyond the (socio)economic crisis narrative as these narratives would lead to the obscuring of fundamental principles that operate within the very logic of oppressive familial practices. Accordingly, what we attempt is not to situate or appropriate *Dogtooth* in the historico-political and economic context of Greek society at the time the film was released. In a sense, we avoid a sort of journalistic appropriation. Rather, we concentrate on the organization of what is called family in regard to ethics, aesthetics and politics in a Rancièrian way. The motivation behind such an attempt is not exclusively dependent upon our choice as there is neither a specific sign of the historical period to which the family belongs, nor a geographical verification of the location inhabited by the family.⁴¹ These aspects reveal the untimely character of *Dogtooth*. By not confining *Dogtooth* to a particular place and time, we aim to enrich the discussion of the notion of family; to do otherwise would miss the chance to meditate upon the resemblance between the *oikos* and the *polis* as well as the very functioning of these two.

Accordingly, the reason we chose Yorgos Lanthimos’ *Dogtooth* is its availability to show how the family structurally resembles the *police*. This idea comes from a common aphorism: the family is the basis of society. This saying can be traced back to Ancient Greece. In *The Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle specifies two sorts of controlling arts. The first is “the art that controls all arts”: the art of politics which is the art of governing bodies of the *polis* or what Rancièr criticises as the police order.⁴² The second sort of art is household management: the *oikos*.⁴³ The word *oikos* does not only refer to a house in its materiality, but also refers to the idea of the family and its inner regulations. Even though there is a hypothetical distinction between the *oikos* and the *polis* depending on the facts that the house is a more private and controllable space with respect to the city and the city is the idealized form of the *oikos*, the distinction between them is vague. This is because the *oikos* and the *polis* are constantly in a mutual relationship as what constitutes the city is the merging of various representations of houses. In other words, ‘the political man’ is a ‘man’ who simultaneously orders his house and the city with other householders. It is, therefore, hard to describe where the limits of the *oikos* end and where the limits of the *polis* begin and vice versa. They are rather involute processes that seem compatible with each other in terms of a certain configuration of the sensible experiences of bodies. Even though the presumption of the *polis* is that it is an idealized form of the *oikos*, *Dogtooth* reverses this presumption in that the *oikos* is the space that can be an idealized form of the *polis* by the regulations of the householder. In *Dogtooth*, the father [Christos Stergioglou], who has an exceptional status to distribute certain roles, functions and places to the other family members, sets a stage to analyse the *oikos* as a form of the *polis*.

The idea of staging, as an inherent characteristic of politics, is not just about politics as scenes of disagreement but also the act of policing as scenes of agreement about a certain distribution of the

sensible. What *Dogtooth* firstly accomplishes is the presentation of scenes of the police order by specifically focusing on the organization of the family. The film, in a radical sense, provides a certain vocabulary, spatio-temporal boundaries of the house, a certain set of moral values and so on. Even this initial description of *Dogtooth* is capable of triggering a discussion of the act of policing by promoting the *oikos* as an alternative of the *polis*. Yet, this substitution of the *polis* with the *oikos* is not a utopia as the father's act of policing overrides his intentions of protecting his family from the city and its perversion.

Lanthimos opens the film with a scene where the children are listening to a tape to learn new words and the meanings of those words. The interesting thing is that the words defined on the record are absolutely different from what they actually mean. The word sea, for instance, is defined as “a leather armchair with wooden arms like the one we have in our living room.”⁴⁴ In the similar way, the other words motorway, excursion and carbine are defined. These words are circulated in the *oikos* under the control of the parents. Throughout the film, we also hear other words that are put into circulation without the consent of the parents. These words are the words that the children unexpectedly learn like the words pussy and zombie. However, regardless of whether the word is presented under the father's control, all words are explained by staying within the sensible limits of the house. The word pussy, for this reason, is explained as “a big light” and the word zombie as “a small yellow flower.”⁴⁵ Why it is extremely important to be able to dominate the relations between words and things is in need of explanation.

As Rancière noted, “humans are political animals because they are literary animals: not only in the Aristotelian sense of using language in order to discuss questions of justice, but also we are confounded by the excess of words in relation to things.”⁴⁶ The literariness or the poetic capacity of humans is what leads to the staging of disagreement by the excess of words. The excess, here, refers to the limits that are imposed on us by the police order. The very definition of the police also implies certain regulations of the relation, in Rancière's saying, between “the visible and the sayable, [...] words and bodies.”⁴⁷ The police, depending on that, is the name of an organization that determines what the excessive words are by holding all relations between the visible and the sayable, and correspondingly words and bodies. In other words, the maintenance of the ordering of the police is dependent upon the act of controlling words in the circulation and its relations with things and bodies. Back to *Dogtooth*, it is noticeable that none of the family members have a specific name, except the names defining their roles within the *oikos* like the father, the mother [Michele Valley], the eldest [Angeliki Papoulia], the son [Hristos Passalis], and the younger daughter [Mary Tsoni]. The reason, of course, is open to speculation, but the clear thing is that these names assign bodies into certain functions or spatio-temporalities. Control over the relations between names and things, on the other hand, operates as a way of securing the order. For this reason, when one of the children asks for the meaning of a new word s/he heard, the mother's first reaction is to ask where s/he heard that word. This is because the excess of words is a threat that needs to be annihilated for the sake of the order.

The ongoing struggle of the parents with the excessive use of words is to reduce or alter their meanings in accordance with the existing configuration of the sensible. This functions as a way of blocking the outside as well as the excess.

Blocking the outside and the excess, in another aspect, unfolds what Rancière calls “the pedagogical myth” that “divides the world into two. More precisely, it divides intelligence into two. It says that there is an inferior intelligence and a superior one.”⁴⁸ Whereas the latter determines a regime of thinking, saying, seeing and doing as it “knows things by reason, proceeds by method”, the former is supposed to follow, retain and imitate what is proposed by the latter.⁴⁹ Rancière, in parallel to the non-egalitarian logic, names this “pedagogical stultification” which operates against the equality of intelligences that inherently refers to the equality of speaking beings as its axiom.⁵⁰ It is, in a sense, the pedagogical logic that methodically abuses the ethical principle of equality between any and every speaking being. As long as the children obey this logic, they are rewarded; if one of them somehow disturbs the very functioning of this logic, s/he is punished. This reward-punishment-based law of the order is what delimits the field of ethical responses by interchanging it with the set of rules defining the way in which the family members speak and live.

What abuses the ethical equality of poetic beings is also the set of rules that orders bodies spatio-temporally. As Rancière details in obeying an order, the method of inequality forces its subjects to forget the fact that the one who pronounces the law and the one who understands the law and obeys are equally intelligent. This is how the father in *Dogtooth* gains his exceptional, privileged and heroic status as the legislator of the *oikos*. He is the one who defines the spatio-temporal organization of the bodies; he is also the one who is capable of re-defining this organization as if the other members of family have no capacity to do it. Correspondingly, he is, on the one hand, the hero and the privileged who can drive, go outside the house, destroy the enemy-cat, hunt the fishes, punish/reward the children and so on; he is, on the other hand, the exception within the family as he decides what the children and the mother are supposed to do in which time of the day and in which space of the house, who can come into the house, who cannot leave the house, how each member of the family should behave according to the moral values, how they should be dressed at dinners and so on. All of these ultimately result in the distribution of the sensible experiences within the *oikos*. Putting it differently, all these acts determine the boundaries between the sayable/unsayable, the visible/invisible, the audible/inaudible and consequently the possible/impossible sensible experiences. It should be noted that these dualities are not rational contrasts; rather, they are depictions of what is possible and impossible to experience within the partition of the sensible by virtue of the poetic capacity of the father. The poetic capacity, here, designates the very regulation of the relations between words and the field of sensible experiences. It is the poetic capacity that wrongs the equality of poetic beings or speaking beings as it silences the other possible poetic relations within the sensible partition. The father is the poetic figure who constantly attempts to eliminate the possibility of counter-poetic

movements that might lead to a change within his predesignated relations between words and the sensible.



Figures 1-6: Screenshots from *Dogtooth* (© Yorgos Lanthimos).

The spatio-temporal organization of bodies cannot be separated from a certain aesthetics which refers both to the sensible experiences of bodies and the scenes of consensus with regard to these experiences. That is why the family gatherings, the celebration of certain dates like the wedding anniversary, the image of the heroic father after his so-called struggle with the enemy-cat, certain songs and dances while having fun and so on are integral parts of the act of ordering. These are the scenes of policing in which everyone acts as if they are in agreement with the ordering. What threatens these scenes of consensus is the excess as it evokes a way of living outside the boundaries of the *oikos*. Throughout the film, there are a few noticeable threats, even sometimes enemies, like the plane, the cat, the escapee brother, perhaps more importantly Christina [Anna Kalaitzidou] who is hired by the father to meet the son's sexual needs. The common characteristic of all threats is to lead to excessive speech and acts within the *oikos* since they are basically the outsiders. Even though the parents are persistent in maintaining the sensible order, we see that the order is always open to breaches. As long as there is a designation of a certain configuration of the sensible with words, the possibility to penetrate into those designations with the excessive use of words is always and already there.

In order to grasp better what essentially defines the *oikos* in *Dogtooth*, attention should be paid to this conversation between the father and the children at the dining table:

The Father : A child is ready to leave the house...

The Eldest : When the right dogtooth comes out.

The Father : Or the left. No matter.

Only then is your body ready to face the dangers that lurk.

To leave the house and be safe outside we must take the car.

When are we ready to learn to drive?

The Son : When the right dogtooth grows again. Or the left, it doesn't matter.⁵¹

These lines express the main configuration of what is possible and impossible within the *oikos*. We are witnessing the presentation of the impossibility as if it is a possibility inasmuch as the father knows the fact that the falling dogtooth of an adult cannot renew itself. These rules, therefore, are designed to ensure that the children cannot leave the house, which fundamentally shapes the way in which the children live. Even if these rules are based on a contradiction or a lie, it does not matter as long as the bodies that are subjected to these rules believe without questioning and behave accordingly. This is how consensus operates throughout the bodies and how the logic of inequality remains functioning. Inequality, as Rancière puts it, “works to the extent that one ‘believes’ it, that one goes on using one’s arms, eyes, and brains according to the distribution of the positions. This is what consensus means. And this is the way domination works.”⁵² The belief that entitles the film is that the children can only leave the house when the dogtooth comes out. Moreover, they can only leave the house by car, but they can learn how to drive once the dogtooth grows again. This is the doubling of the impossibility; yet, what the logic of consensus accomplishes is to make the children believe that both the falling and the renewal of the dogtooth are possible. This is how the logic of inequality dominates the field of perception and relations.

However, “dissensus starts with a new belief”; a new belief that imagines the field of perception other than the way it is.⁵³ We are following the initial signs of such an imagination with the eldest, especially after she gets copies of two films, *Rocky* (1976) and *Jaws* (1975), from Christina. She learns other uses of words that are unsayable and inaudible as well as other things that are invisible within the very order she inhabits. Perhaps most importantly, she notices that she even does not have a specific name. By the effect of the films, the eldest begins to disturb the spatio-temporal organization of the *oikos*. She performs acts differently than those she is supposed to perform by imitating the scenes in the films. Even though they are mimetic acts, the supplementation of the *oikos* with these acts presents genuine scenes. We are observing the eldest as someone who is not compatible with the spatio-temporal order. She is signifying herself as the part that has no part of the *oikos*, the part that has no proper name to regulate the order. One of noticeable scenes of *Dogtooth* is the one in which the eldest decides her own name as in the following dialogue:

The Eldest : I want you to call me Bruce.

The Younger Daughter : What is Bruce?

The Eldest : It is a name.

The Younger Daughter : I want a name like that too.⁵⁴

This is what Rancière calls *nonrelation* through which the relation between names and bodies is broken.⁵⁵ It is, in a sense, a breach of the continuity of the process in which names assign certain functions to bodies; it is the excessive use of words that jeopardizes the sensible configuration.

The excess is dependent upon the principle of equality as it confirms the equality between every poetic being. Such an understanding of ethics, as different from morality, is pregnant with infinite ways of being or a field of infinite responses towards what problematically delimits us. If ethics is shaped through the necessities of the police order, it always offers a set of values that determines the way in which bodies must act within the order. This is a delimitation of ethics, which eventually opens it to abuses of the police. It is, indeed, possible to observe different sets of moral values within different spatio-temporal orders. In *Dogtooth*, for instance, the father offers incest between the son and the eldest daughter as a solution after Christina became a dangerous outsider. As the very order of the *oikos* designates that a man has sexual needs, we are witnessing changes in the moral values depending on the necessities of the order, and correspondingly a lack of response to that situation. The scene of the eldest and the son after having obligatory sexual intercourse demonstrates that the set of words of the *oikos* is inadequate for the eldest to show how uncomfortable and annoyed she is; that is why she expresses her own feelings by the lines from the films. This is another moment of nonrelation we witness in *Dogtooth*. As Rancière puts it:

In politics, subjects do not have consistent bodies; they are fluctuating performers who have their moments, places, occurrences, and the peculiar role of inventing *arguments* and *demonstrations* – in the double, logical and aesthetic, senses of the terms – to bring the nonrelationship into relationship and give place to the nonplace.⁵⁶

What is expected from bodies in politics is performances that are inconsistent with the sensible configuration. It is the supplementary logic of politics that sets a stage in which bodies perform the unexpected and the unforeseen in the eyes of the order; it is, in other words, the stage of disagreement where bodies reject the roles assigned to them by demonstrating how the relations between names and things that structure their field of experiences could be broken.

In the last scenes of *Dogtooth*, the eldest, especially after naming herself Bruce, increases the frequency of moments of nonrelation. The following dialogue between the eldest and the younger daughter depicts how the eldest starts to imagine things other than the way they are:

The Eldest : I think my dogtooth is moving.

The Younger Daughter : You are imagining things. It is not moving at all.⁵⁷

The younger daughter is, indeed, right because the eldest is imagining even though she knows the bare fact that her dogtooth is not shaky. She, moreover, disturbs the very organization of the marriage anniversary by the peculiar way she dances and acts. The final and the impressive moment is where she breaks her own dogtooth. This, at first sight, may seem compatible with the rules of the *oikos*; nonetheless, it is a moment of breach as she actualizes the unexpected. In this sense, she signifies the paradox of the *oikos* that presents the impossibility of falling of a dogtooth as a possibility: Correspondingly, while she is following the dogtooth rule to leave the house, she transforms what is impossible into the possible.



Figures 7-8: Screenshots from *Dogtooth* (© Yorgos Lanthimos).

Yet, it is not possible to mention that there is politics in *Dogtooth*. Even though the eldest performs the pre-political by acting in line with the principle of equality that is excessive to the *oikos*, the consequence is not capable of producing more than the moments of nonrelation. What politics requires is, through the enunciation of a problem, the redistribution of the field of the sensible experiences by genuine demands of the subject that has no part within the order. Politics is the stage in which the nonrelation turns into a relation and the nonplace of the subject is transformed into a place. Hence, without these transformations or the redistribution of the sensible, politics is not achievable. Politics would have been achieved if the eldest had stayed within the *oikos* to supplement it with a process of equality. This is because “politics acts on the police. It acts in the places and with the words that are common to both, even if it means reshaping those places and changing the status of those words.”⁵⁸ However, this does not necessarily mean that *Dogtooth* fails to demonstrate ethical and aesthetico-political possibilities within the order, though the eldest misses the opportunity to redistribute the sensible by escaping from the *oikos* in the trunk of her father’s car.



Figure 9: A screenshot from *Dogtooth* (© Yorgos Lanthimos).

Dogtooth is capable of illustrating the pre-political, which can be considered as a demonstration of how policing functions and is open to breaches. *Dogtooth*, in this regard, signifies having the courage to initiate something incompatible with the order, something anachronistic with the spatio-temporal order or something that ruptures the very functioning of the organization without a pre-determined end. The last frame of *Dogtooth* (see figure 9), in a metaphorical sense, demonstrates the uncertainty of the political even in its initial stages. Consequently, we must shift our attention from the designation of certain ends for the political process to the moments that initiate it. The eldest is not the first who tries to disturb the *oikos* and to find a way out. We also know the escapee brother who initiates such a crisis without any achievement as the redistribution of the sensible order. To quote from Rancière:

[...] the slogan of 1968: ‘This is only the beginning, let’s continue the struggle.’ Beginnings do not reach their end. They remain halfway. But this also means that they never stop beginning over again, even if this means that the actors change.⁵⁹

The very ability to start over and over again is dependent upon the irreducible principle of ethics, namely the principle of equality. It is the principle that conceives ethics as the field where the infinite ways of being is possible. The main drama triggered by this principle in the ongoing struggle with any kind of policing is its very ability to interrupt the delimitations and to infinitize the responses against those delimitations afterwards. This is how the ethics of equality stages disagreement.

EPILOGUE

There were two major aims of this article. The first aim was to reveal Rancière’s principle of equality as the ethical principle that is embedded in his aesthetico-politics; the second was to demonstrate how this principle is depicted in *Dogtooth* in relation to Rancière’s framework. The initial step was consisted of a careful elaboration of how the equality of speaking beings as the irreducible principle of ethics is always and already at play within both the police process and the political process. The police, as the consensus-based form of politics, is the organization in which the principle of equality is reduced to the logic of inequality, as we called the methodical abuse of this principle. Politics, contrarily, is the process in which the methodical use of the principle of equality evokes dissensual subjectivizations within the police. It is, at the same time, an ethical process where the subjects that have no parts interrupt the order with their poetic capacities and supplement it with their dissenting words so as to gain a part. This is the ethical speech act being excessive to the police, which eventually results in the redistribution of the sensible. Hence, the ethics of equality generated by the principle of equality is the locus of Rancière’s aesthetics and politics of disagreement. The second step consisted of the analysis of *Dogtooth* in regard to the ethics of equality. By justifying the *oikos* as an

equivalent form of the *polis*, it is argued that the narrative of *Dogtooth* provides exemplary scenes of disagreement, especially in the pre-political sense. *Dogtooth* presents, on the one side, scenes of consensus with its designated relationships; on the other side, scenes of dissensus where the relations are turned into nonrelation to create new forms of relations. In *Dogtooth*, even though there is no staging of sensible transformation in the order, the presentation of such scenes is crucial to signify the political as a fundamental ability to initiate processes in which the sensible field might be reconfigured. What the ethics of equality offers is the constant capacity to initiate emancipatory processes as opposed to every sort of domination by the predetermined correspondence between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*. What makes *Dogtooth* both ethically and aesthetico-politically remarkable is the staging of such dominations and how they are always open to be breached.

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¹ Rancière's one of main conception *le partage du sensible* is translated into English mainly in two ways: *the partition of the sensible* and *the distribution of the sensible*. The reason is the polysemy carried by the word *partage*; *partage* means sharing, division and separation. All these meanings are referential to each other. On the one hand, the partition designates the way of distribution as the partition, in Latin *partitio*, determines the way things are divided, separated and shared. On the other hand, what is distributed designates the share and the division as to distribute, in Latin *distributus*, means to divide and to give out in portions. We, for this reason, do not hesitate to use both translations; yet, *the distribution of the sensible* is frequently used in this article.

² Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 23.

³ We could prefer to use Rancière's own saying, *the method of equality*, instead of the *ethics of equality*; however, this could be less effective to signify the underlying ethics of Rancière's aesthetico-political framework. See Jacques Rancière, "The Method of Equality: Politics and Poetics", ed. Katia Genel and Jean-Philippe Deranty, *Recognition or Disagreement: A Critical Encounter on the Politics of Freedom, Equality, and Identity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 133–55. Moreover, the usage of this phrase, the *ethics of equality*, is not exclusive to us. See for example, Todd May, "Jacques Rancière and the Ethics of Equality", *SubStance* 36, no. 113 (2007): 20–36. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25195123>.

⁴ Joseph Kupfer, *Feminist Ethics in Film: Reconfiguring Care through Cinema* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 120.

⁵ David Martin-Jones, "The Dardenne Brothers Encounter Enrique Dussel: Ethics, Eurocentrism and a Philosophy for World Cinemas", ed. M. Monteiro, G. Giucci, and N. Besner, *Beyond the Limits: Essays for the XXI Century*, (Rio de Janeiro: State University of Rio de Janeiro Press, 2013), 105; David Martin-Jones, "Trolls, Tigers and Transmodern Ecological Encounters: Enrique Dussel and a Cine Ethics for the Anthropocene", *Film-Philosophy* 20 (2016): 63–103.

⁶ James S. Williams, *Encounters with Godard: Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics* (New York: Suny Press, 2016), 10–11.

⁷ Williams, *Encounters with Godard*, 8.

⁸ Robert Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 3.

⁹ Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 17.

¹⁰ Jacques Rancière, "The Politics of Aesthetics", *Mute*, September 2004, accessed October 12, 2019. <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/politics-aesthetics>.

¹¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 8.

¹² Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 8.

¹³ Rancière, through the politics of aesthetics, problematizes the art practices as practices that would potentially impart different sensory experiences to our common sensory fields as if art is a call for dissensus for the reconfiguration of the sensible order. Accordingly, Rancière distinguishes three regimes of art where he meticulously questions certain approaches towards art: *the ethical regime*, *the representative regime* and *the aesthetic regime*. By this tripartite analysis, Rancière suggests considering cinema under a bipartite framework consisted of the representative regime and the aesthetic regime. To demonstrate distinctions between these regimes is not an attempt to define historical periods in which each regime reigns over creative practices in a strict sense; instead, it attempts to demonstrate how each regime and their principles stand in contrast to one another and ultimately shape the aesthetics of art practices. Accordingly, the representative regime exists in contrast to the ethical just as the aesthetic regime exists in contrast to the representative. Briefly, the ethical regime deals with the question of images in order to know the ways in which the *ethos* – the mode of being of individuals and communities – is influenced by images. In a confrontational way with the ethical regime, the representative regime deals with the regulation of visible forms within a community in order to construct an organization where words and representations, or namely *poiesis* and *mimesis (aisthesis)*, are appropriately corresponded. This is the regime at the service of the pre-designated order of the sensible in which certain roles, functions and places are distributed to individuals to form a community. Lastly, the aesthetics regime, contrary to the representative, is the regime in which the singularity of an artwork is radically freed from any pre-designated correspondences or principles. It is the regime where the radical singularity of art is most welcomed. Art, in this regime, is no longer bounded by a certain ordering of the sensible; rather, it suspends and supplements the existing order in unexpected ways. Thus, the aesthetic regime of art is profoundly connected with what Rancière calls the politics of aesthetics. See Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 15–25.

¹⁴ For further discussion on the general dynamics of the relationship between film and spectators in compatible with Rancière’s notion of the politics of aesthetics, see Tom Conley, “Cinema and Its Discontents: Jacques Rancière and Film Theory”, *SubStance* 34, no. 108 (2005): 96–106; Duncan Chesney, ‘Rancière, Deleuze and Contemporary Film Aesthetics’, *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 8, no. 1 (2010): 22–40.

¹⁵ Considering the main setting of the film as a large house located in the countryside, we should note that Rancière also acknowledges the domestic sphere as a political space. This is not only because we see the operation of power relationships in the domestic sphere but also because there is a possibility of disagreement within the structure of family. Rancière, for instance, overbroadly argues the conversion of the domestic sphere into a political one by regarding the capacity and the role of women in the society; however, we propose that this can be extended in various ways such as parent – children relationships. See Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 32.

¹⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Althusser’s Lessons*, trans. Emiliano Battista (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), xvi.

¹⁷ Rancière, *Althusser’s Lessons*, 10.

¹⁸ Rancière, *Althusser’s Lessons*, 12.

¹⁹ Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 28.

²⁰ Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 29.

²¹ Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 16.

²² Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 17.

²³ Jacques Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization”, *October* 61 (1992): 59.

²⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 100.

²⁵ Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization”, 59.

²⁶ Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 36.

²⁷ Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 30.

²⁸ Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 32.

²⁹ Rancière uses *the distribution of the sensible* to refer both the sensible order of the police and the re-ordering of the sensible as politics. In order to emphasise the re-ordering of politics, we shall use *the redistribution of the sensible* hereafter.

³⁰ Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, ix.

³¹ Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization”, 61.

³² Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization”, 59.

³³ Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 41.

³⁴ Jacques Rancière, “Afterword/The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions”, ed. Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts, *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 280.

³⁵ Rosalind Galt, “The Animal Logic of Contemporary Greek Cinema”, *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 58, no. 1–2 (2017): 7; Angelos Koutsourakis, “Cinema of the Body: The Politics of Performativity in Lars von Trier’s *Dogville* and Yorgos Lanthimos’ *Dogtooth*”, *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image* 3 (2012): 84–108.

³⁶ Stamos Metzidakis refers to *Greek Weird Wave* in cinema “as an absurdist reaction to some of Greece’s most pressing contemporary socio-economic issues”. See Stamos Metzidakis, “No Bones to Pick with Lanthimos’s Film *Dogtooth*”, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 32, no. 2 (2014): 368.

³⁷ Stamos Metzidakis, “No Bones to Pick with Lanthimos’s Film *Dogtooth*”, 368.

³⁸ Alex Lykidis, “Crisis of Sovereignty in Recent Greek Cinema”, *Journal of Greek Media & Culture* 1, no. 1 (2015): 11.

³⁹ Ipek A. Celik, “Family as Internal Border in *Dogtooth*”, in *Frontiers of Screen History: Imagining European Borders in Cinema, 1945–2010*, ed. Raita Merivirta et al. (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 219.

⁴⁰ Tatjana Aleksic, “Sex, Violence, Dogs and the Impossibility of Escape: Why Contemporary Greek Film is so Focused on Family”, *Journal of Greek Media & Culture* 2, no. 2 (2016): 157.

⁴¹ If attention is paid to Yorgos Lanthimos’ interviews about *Dogtooth*, it is noticeable that his accounts are devoid of any specific connections between his film and a particular historical-political context. See, for example, David Jenkins, “Giorgos Lanthimos on “*Dogtooth*””, *Time Out London*, 2010, accessed October 12, 2019. <https://www.timeout.com/london/film/giorgos-lanthimos-on-dogtooth-1>; Michael Zelenko, “Rumpus Interview with Yorgos Lanthimos, Director of *Dogtooth*”, *The Rumpus*, June 2010, accessed October 12, 2019, <https://therumpus.net/2010/06/rumpus-interview-with-yorgos-lanthimos-director-of-dogtooth>; Sam Adams, “*Dogtooth* Director Giorgos Lanthimos”, *The A.V. Club*, June 2010, accessed October 12, 2019, <https://film.avclub.com/dogtooth-director-giorgos-lanthimos-1798220614>; Virginie Sélavy, “*Dogtooth*: Interview with Yorgos Lanthimos”, *Electric Sheep: A Deviant View of Cinema*, April 2010, accessed October 12, 2019, <http://www.electricsheepmagazine.co.uk/2010/04/05/dogtooth-interview-with-giorgos-lanthimos>.

⁴² Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics of Aristotle*, trans. Michael Woods (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2013), 19.

⁴³ Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics of Aristotle*, 19.

⁴⁴ Yorgos Lanthimos, “*Kynodontas/Dogtooth*”, filmed 2009, Greece, Boo Productions, video, 0:51, <https://itunes.apple.com/ie/movie/dogtooth/id375983430>.

⁴⁵ Lanthimos, *Dogtooth*, 55:45, 1:01:15.

⁴⁶ Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia, “Dissenting Words: A Conversation of Jacques Rancière”, *Diacritics* 30, no. 2 (2000): 115.

⁴⁷ Rancière and Panagia, “Dissenting Words: A Conversation of Jacques Rancière”, 115.

⁴⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 7.

⁴⁹ Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 7.

⁵⁰ Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 9.

⁵¹ Lanthimos, *Dogtooth*, 55: 07.

⁵² Rancière, “The Method of Equality: Politics and Poetics”, 137.

⁵³ Rancière, “The Method of Equality: Politics and Poetics”, 141.

⁵⁴ Lanthimos, *Dogtooth*, 1:07:08.

⁵⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 34.

⁵⁶ Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 89.

⁵⁷ Lanthimos, *Dogtooth*, 1:18:23.

⁵⁸ Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 33.

⁵⁹ Jacques Rancière, “Jacques Rancière on the Gilets Jaunes Protests”, *Verso Books*, 12 February 2019, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4237-jacques-ranciere-on-the-gilets-jaunes-protests>.

LAW AND IMAGE:
THE MINOR ETHICS IN KRZYSZTOF KIEŚŁOWSKI'S *DECALOGUE ONE*

Aleksi Rennes (University of Turku)

THE DECALOGUE AND THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALITY

Krzysztof Kiesłowski's television series *The Decalogue* (*Dekalog*, 1988) lacks a continuous narrative thread between its ten stand-alone episodes, but the separate stories are tied together by shared location, that is, a housing estate in Warsaw. In this barren, alienating environment of grey concrete, the lives of the characters interlace only faintly as the protagonists of one episode occasionally appear at the margins of another. The characters are often depicted diminished against the background of impersonal high-rise apartment blocks creating the impression of powerlessness, of individuals never quite in control of their own lives. Such pictorial compositions reflect the uncertainty of the characters' situation. Their lives are permeated by complex ethical problems that appear irresolvable and inescapable. Experiences of struggle and loss seem to be dictated solely by the arbitrariness of chance and coincidence, thus questioning the efficacy of all conscious moral deliberation; the whole motif of moral choice becomes shrouded in ambiguity.

The descriptions of the muddled moral landscape of everyday existence function as a counterpoint to the ostensible clarity, certainty, and irrefutability of the Ten Commandments alluded to in the series' title. The explicit reference to a core text of Judeo-Christian moral legislation signals an apparent incongruity within the series between ideal law and actual experience. Thereby, a fundamental duality is introduced to the ethical subject matter of *The Decalogue*. William Bartley traces the origins of this incongruity to the series' tendency to portray unique, coincidental, and inconsistent circumstances: because rule-making will never be able to satisfactorily anticipate such singular situations, they pose a challenge to the authority of the commandments.¹ More generally, the series can be perceived as spanning two planes: the universal and the local, or the transcendent and the worldly. The ethical dilemmas it raises trigger a constant probing of the correspondences and tensions between these planes. This procedure in the series of linking the abstract with the specific has been described by Paul Coates as a reciprocal movement where "concrete events blunt the maxims' abstraction" while "the maxims universalise the stories."²

Kieślowski scholarship tends to emphasise the importance of the universal within this dual ethical composition of *The Decalogue*. For example, the series is typically considered as inaugurating a more general shift within Kiesłowski's oeuvre towards the universal and away from the overtly political and narrowly Polish concerns of his earlier documentaries and fiction films.³ Similarly, Eva Badowska and Francesca Parmeggiani see the series' connection to the Ten Commandments and the concomitant

“depoliticizing and aestheticizing” of its narratives as achieving a “near-universality of the films”, which is aligned with Kieślowski’s aspiration to “artistic universality.”⁴ According to Joseph G. Kickasola, *The Decalogue* demonstrates the richness, complexity, and continued relevance of the “ten universal arenas of moral choice” demarcated by the commandments. Yet, “amid the complexities of contemporary life,” these moral rules are obscured from view and difficult to grasp.⁵ For Annette Insdorf, too, the central question posed by the series concerns the true spirit of the commandments and their applicability today.⁶ All these interpretations agree on the idea that the central aesthetic gesture of *The Decalogue* consists of affirming a universal, transcendent, or ideal reference point as an auspicious but elusive horizon for its cinematic images. This view is appositely summarised by Kickasola, who compares the series’ treatment of the problematic interrelation between ideal law and actual experience to Plato’s cave: Kieślowski’s characters may be able to glimpse the ideal, occasionally and only on the periphery, but most of the time their perception is limited to “shadows of the truth.”⁷

In this paper, however, I will question the presupposition of universality and ideality by suggesting that the principal aesthetic gesture of *The Decalogue* is rather an inverse one: instead of acknowledging the elusive possibility of transcendence and consequently exploring its arduous reconciliation with actual experience, the series describes the collapse of all appeals to an ideal morality. In this respect, the series’ connection to its biblical source material, this encounter between image and law, can be described as deconstructive. Thus, the ethical problem at the heart of the series in the end pertains less to bridging the duality between the ideal and the worldly than to exploring the difficult ethical situation that ensues when the promise of a solid moral ground is lost altogether. I will limit the scope of the paper to the first episode of the series, *Decalogue One*. The narrow focus is based on the hypothesis that it is this first film that most precisely articulates the denial of the possibility of a universal moral law and, thus, creates the ethical framework that orientates all subsequent episodes.

I will attempt to locate the series’ negation of transcendent law within the “minor” tradition of ethical thought that Gilles Deleuze traces in the history of philosophy, from Epicurus through Baruch Spinoza to Friedrich Nietzsche. Drawing upon this lineage of thinking, Deleuze maintains a sharp distinction between ethics and morality. He defines morality as a “system of judgement” that “always refers existence to transcendent values”, while ethics denotes “a typology of immanent modes of existence.”⁸ Hence, morality determines a domain of law and obedience, whereas ethics designates a practice of knowledge and evaluation of relations and encounters between bodies. Invoking Spinoza, Deleuze emphasises that ethics does not constitute merely a theoretical alternative to morality, but it necessarily involves a radical, practical method of overthrowing morality and denouncing “all the falsifications of life, all the values in the name of which we disparage life.”⁹ I will propose that a comparable cinematic method is at work in *The Decalogue*, where the system of judgement of the Ten Commandments is supplanted by an immanent ethics in and of the image.

The paper begins with a brief excursion to the Spinozist-Deleuzean conception of ethics, followed by a clarification of its proposed affinity with *The Decalogue*. After this, the paper will proceed to a closer

analysis of *Decalogue One*, concentrating particularly on the themes of judgement, perception and motion.

ETHICS OF JOY AND VISION

In Deleuze's reading of Spinoza, the main ethical problems are equally also problems of epistemology: we have an essential ethical responsibility to become aware of the natural and habitual conditions of human perception, which limit its scope and prevent us from forming adequate ideas. Furthermore, this analysis of our boundedness initiates a subsequent affirmative insistence to overcome such limitations in order to become capable of comprehending the world in an adequate way that is truly representative "of what we are and of what things are."¹⁰

What each existing body¹¹ is can be defined by its capacity for being affected.¹² This capacity is exercised every time one's body encounters another body. In these encounters, the natures of the two bodies in question can either agree or disagree. If the encounter is favourable, the bodies enter into composition with one another and one's power of acting increases as a result of the new combination. This increase in one's own capability for activity is experienced as a feeling of joy. On the other hand, if one's body encounters another body that proves incompatible with it, they cannot achieve any beneficial combinatory agreement. Instead, the other body may set to decompose one's own, functioning as a limitation or hindrance of its power of acting.¹³ In such encounters, then, one's capacity for being affected is not manifested as a power of acting but rather as a power of being acted upon.¹⁴ This passive state of undergoing a limitation on one's power is accompanied by the feeling of sadness.¹⁵ Spinoza designates these passages between states of increased or diminished power of acting and their accompanying feelings with the concept of "affect."¹⁶

An encounter between two bodies can be adequately represented by an idea that is able to comprehend the nature of the bodies in question as well as the combinatory laws that regulate the composition and decomposition of their mutual relations.¹⁷ Such ideas are adequate, and thus necessarily true.¹⁸ They connect to one another in a causal and necessary order under the attribute of thought, and their truthful representativeness is assured by the fact that a parallel order and connection pertains also to things under the attribute of extension.¹⁹

Yet, this all-pervasive order of true causes tends to elude human perception and knowledge: under the natural conditions of perception, we register only "affections," that is, the modifications that one's affected body undergoes in an encounter with an external body. In other words, we perceive only what happens to us, or the effects as separated from their real causes.

Therefore, our ideas of affections are necessarily inadequate. They are not explained exclusively by one's own power, since they are reliant on the presence and effect of an external body. Accordingly, the mind cannot be purely active when it forms these ideas; there is a limitation on its power as it is acted upon by something external to itself.²⁰ Through its natural and subjective boundedness, thus, the human mind is condemned to an inadequate epistemic state of "confused and fragmentary knowledge."²¹ Spinoza terms this mode of knowing "the first kind of knowledge" or "imagination."²²

The difference between inadequate and adequate knowledge manifests itself in an individual as the difference between activity and passivity: "Insofar as it [the mind] has adequate ideas, it is necessarily active; and insofar as it has inadequate ideas, it is necessarily passive."²³ This duality repeats in the affects caused²⁴ by the mind's ideas. Adequate ideas are explained solely by one's own power, and as such they function as an adequate cause for active affects of joy. Inadequate ideas, on the contrary, always involve an external cause and hence give rise to affects which must derive from something outside the individual as well. These kinds of affects are passive affects or passions: they keep the affected body separated from its power of acting. As a diminishment of one's power, sadness is invariably a passion, but, importantly, joy will be passive, too, as long as its cause remains in an external object. Thus, even though passive joy involves an increase in one's power of acting, it does not reach the "point of conversion" where one becomes truly active.²⁵

Spinoza's definitions of adequate and inadequate ideas, together with his mapping of the habitual ways in which human beings perceive and know the world, lead to a fundamental epistemological problem: "How do we manage to form adequate ideas [...] given that the natural conditions of our perception condemn us to have only inadequate ideas?"²⁶ The movement towards adequate ideas must overcome those natural bounds and strive "to capture the power of the body beyond the given conditions of our knowledge, and to capture the power of the mind beyond the given conditions of our consciousness."²⁷ Within this decisive cognitive task, epistemology aligns with the practice of ethics in a common pursuit of true activity: the objective of forming adequate ideas is simultaneously an ethical striving towards coming into full possession of one's power of acting and achieving the maximum of active affects of joy. The epistemological designations of the adequate and the inadequate thus correspond exactly to the ethical difference between strength and weakness, or between freedom and boundedness.²⁸ In an inadequate state of knowledge, an individual is "determined externally [...] to regard this or that." This leads to an existence dominated by passive affects, as the individual remains a prisoner of circumstance left at the mercy of fortuitous encounters. However, if one arrives at a

correct use of reason conducted through an internal determination, one becomes capable of forming adequate ideas, of “regarding several things at the same time, to understand their agreement, their differences, and their opposition.”²⁹ This kind of comprehension of the order of true causes is a prerequisite for ethics as a relational practice that joins the individual to other beings whose natures agree with its own.³⁰

In *Ethics*, Spinoza develops the theory of common notions to explain the nature of this ethico-epistemological process, which can lead an individual beyond the given conditions of human cognition and towards an adequate knowledge of the world. Spinoza defines common notions as ideas of something in common between different bodies. At their most general, these notions represent things that are common to all bodies, such as extension or motion and rest. At their least general, they capture commonalities merely between an individual body and at least one other body external to it.³¹ Yet, wherever they are located within this continuum of generality, these notions must, by their nature, be adequate in the human mind.³²

Common notions are representations of either eternal truths or eternal laws of nature. Here, an eternal truth refers to a singular essence or rather to an individual’s characteristic relation in which an essence expresses itself.³³ Eternal laws, on the other hand, are laws of composition and decomposition that determine the outcome of every encounter between two distinct bodies in their characteristic relations.³⁴ Together, eternal truths and eternal laws comprise the order of true, constitutive causes, and through common notions human beings are capable of comprehending this order adequately. In this way, common notions combine into a system of adequate ideas, which Spinoza designates as “the second kind of knowledge” or “reason.”³⁵

Still, the question remains: how do we manage to form common notions? The first step in the practical process towards adequate knowledge and away from the natural passivity of human existence involves a heightened attentiveness to joyful passions. Learning from these instances of joy, one can begin through an effort of reason to attempt to organise one’s encounters so as to avoid sad passions and to maximise the number of passive affects of joy.³⁶ This is a practice of experimentation with the goal of discovering what the body can do.³⁷ It is specifically in this sense that Deleuze characterises Spinoza’s ethics as an ethology: it is a matter of studying through experimentation the characteristic relation of a body and its relations with the world, that is, what bodies it can affect or be affected by.³⁸

Even though the accumulation of joyful passions increases one’s power of acting, it is not enough in itself to induce the conversion to true activity. Therefore, there is a second step in this method of aiming towards adequate ideas and active joy: the passive affects of joy have to be used as an aid for the formation of common notions. Given that their occurrence indicates an

agreement between two bodies, the joyful passions provide a route for forming an idea of the specific commonalities between the two bodies in question. This resulting idea is a common notion on the lowest level of generality. As such, it is necessarily adequate, and its comprehension gives rise to an experience of active joy. This conversion from the inadequateness of the ideas causing joyful passions to the adequateness of common notions requires traversing a gap between two modes of knowledge that differ in kind. It necessitates a genuine “leap” from one to the other.³⁹ Finally, the formation of common notions then proceeds from the least general level to degrees of more generality: following the initial common notions and active affects, one becomes capable of deducing further notions, which in turn give rise to new affects of active joy.⁴⁰

In summary, the epistemological and ethical impetus within Spinoza’s philosophy and Deleuze’s interpretation of it concerns the relation between two kinds of knowledge. On one hand, there are the naturally limited and habitually organised forms of thought and perception that provide a fragmented and extrinsic understanding of the world and condemn the individual to a passive state undergoing the effects of external things. On the other hand, there are the common notions or adequate ideas that represent the internal structuring of reality and facilitate an ethics of joy and activity. Between these two modes of knowledge there is a difference in kind, and the task of philosophy is to reach a point of conversion or to effectuate a leap from one to the other.

From this point of view, philosophy can be understood as a science of effects: it reveals our habitual ways of perceiving the world as a realm of mere effects whose process of production must be studied by connecting them to their necessary and rational causes.⁴¹ Spinoza, the philosopher and lens-grinder, requires philosophy to assume an aspect of optics: its function becomes one of optical rectification of the natural distortions of perception. The ethics of joy necessitates a “new vision.”⁴² This emphasis on vision and optical effects suggests a possible zone of proximity between Spinoza’s philosophy and film theory in general.

More particularly, Spinoza’s ethical urgency to see what appears imperceptible pervades also Kieślowski’s work. For example, a tentative connection can be made to Kieślowski’s oft-quoted statement regarding his own documentary films, where he likens actual life in communist Poland to living in a “world without representation”⁴³: when the state defines and restricts the range of acceptable representations, the filmmaker has the responsibility to reveal the inadequateness of this official viewpoint and describe a reality that is excluded by it.

The aspiration to describe a world that escapes description appropriates the camera lens as an instrument of rectification against distortions and omissions in perception, which are, in this

case, a result of societal rather than natural preconditions. Yet, even after shifting from documentary to fiction film and to less overtly political subject matter, the theme of a ‘deeper’, internal structure of nature concealed from ordinary view repeats in Kieślowski’s films. In *The Decalogue*, this theme is approached from the point of view of ethics; the series poses the question: what is hidden beneath the seemingly irresolvable ethical dilemmas of everyday experience? An ideal, transcendent morality appears as one possible answer to this question, but the series’ fundamental aesthetic gesture, I claim, consists of a rebuttal of that reply and of a search for an alternative, non-moral vision. For Spinoza, morality is a misinterpretation of the world that can be attributed to the first kind of knowledge among all the other illusions of human thought under its natural conditions. Thus, the leap from the first kind of knowledge to the second also implies a conversion from morals to a minor ethics. In this conversion lies the ‘methodological affinity’ between Spinoza’s *Ethics* and Kieślowski’s *The Decalogue*.⁴⁴

MORALITY AND MISPERCEPTION

Belonging to different kinds of knowledge, there is a difference in nature between morality and ethics. Yet, in practice, they tend to be perceived confusedly. Spinoza illustrates such a misperception with the help of the biblical story of Adam and the tree of knowledge. He stresses that God’s command to Adam not to eat of the tree must be understood as a revelation of the natural consequences that would occur if Adam were to eat the fruit. In other words, the command functions simply as a disclosure of an eternal truth of nature: the fruit would have a poisonous effect on the constitution of the human body because their characteristic relations are not compatible. Yet, Adam misinterprets God’s revelation to be a moral law and thereby entirely transforms the character of the situation. Namely, the warning of potential consequences no longer pertains in Adam’s mind to the intrinsic nature of the encounter between him and the fruit but rather to God’s will and God’s power to demand obedience to that will.⁴⁵

Adam’s misinterpretation is a symptom of his lack of adequate knowledge: he retains only the effect of the encounter, that is, the decrease in his own power of acting, and has no understanding of the true cause of the event. Having no recourse to the characteristic relations and natural laws of combination that determine the outcome of the encounter, Adam posits a universal moral law instead. From a moral perspective, the act of Adam eating the fruit can be judged to be evil because it represents a violation of moral law, and the undesirable consequences of his act can be explained as God’s punishment for the transgression. However, through an adequate understanding of the order of true causes, all such judgements based on the transcendent categories of the morally good and the morally evil are exposed as unfounded.⁴⁶ As an alternative, Spinoza proposes a genuine ethics that replaces the judgements of good and evil with evaluations of good and bad encounters between bodies. Here, “the good” refers to

encounters that cause joy and increase the body's power of acting, and "the bad" indicates sadness and the diminishment of one's power.⁴⁷

In addition to the story of Adam, Spinoza notes that a similar confusion between morality and ethics concerns all interpretations of Scripture that make God into a lawgiver, including the Ten Commandments: "not knowing God's existence as an eternal truth, it was inevitable that they [the Hebrews] should have perceived as a law what was revealed to them in the Decalogue, namely, that God existed, and that God alone must be worshipped."⁴⁸ In like manner, in *The Decalogue*, the idea of the Ten Commandments as constituting a universal moral law inevitably appears as one possible interpretation of the series: the commandments promise an ideal clarity of assessment and an unwavering certainty of judgement that offer hope of a resolution when set against the obscure actual situations and ethical problems described in the episodes.

However, this "inevitable misperception" of eternal truth as moral law is rectified within the series through its refusal of judgement as the inseparable corollary of a morality. This aspect in Kieślowski's work is noted also by Tadeusz Sobolewski, who claims that *The Decalogue* adopts the point of view of a defendant, not a judge, in relation to its characters. Thus, it replaces judgement with a feeling of solidarity.⁴⁹ The characters in the series have difficulties in appraising their situation correctly: they do not know the true causes of the events they undergo, nor can they foresee the myriad consequences of their own decisions and actions. Eddy Troy maintains that it is precisely this state of imperfect knowledge in Kieślowski's films that also precludes the possibility of judgement. Namely, judging would imply the kind of position of mastery which the epistemic uncertainty of the situation expressly disallows.⁵⁰ Troy's interpretation resonates with Spinoza's emphasis on the natural epistemic inadequacy of human beings and with his denial of morality and judgement as a wrong method to counter that inadequacy.

JUDGEMENT AND DEATH

Decalogue One relates a story of the death of a child, the 12-year-old Pawel (Wojciech Klata). The first part of the film depicts his everyday life embedded between two contrary worldviews: the scientific and rationalist outlook of his father, Krzysztof (Henryk Baranowski), and the deep-seated Christian faith of his aunt, Irena (Maja Komorowska). Krzysztof entertains his son by presenting him with puzzles and mathematical calculations to solve on their computer. One exercise that they engage in together involves calculating the thickness of the ice on a nearby lake to determine whether it is safe for Pawel to try out his new ice-skates. Before giving his son permission to skate, Krzysztof confirms the results provided by the computer by going to the lake himself and testing the strength of the ice. Despite all precautions, the ice does not hold, and the child drowns. The second part of the film follows Krzysztof's increasingly desperate search for Pawel, when he does not return from school. The search ends at the lake, where a large crowd has gathered to witness the boy's body being retrieved from under the water.

The film follows in detail the conscientious, empirical process of acquiring knowledge of the possible outcomes of an encounter between Pawel and the frozen lake. Yet, this whole process is invalidated by Pawel's eventual death, which appears to suspend causation and elude rational explanation altogether. Krzysztof's scientifically oriented viewpoint proves unable to accommodate the dawning realization of what has happened; the event is imbued with a sense of inconceivability, as he cannot locate it within the order of true causes. His consequent powerless disbelief and stubborn denial are exemplified by his words to another worried parent: "Calm down, the ice couldn't break." Because Pawel's death cannot be confined to the empirical, it suggests rather "malicious intervention by a providence."⁵¹ The sequence of the episodes in *The Decalogue* follows the traditional numbering of the Ten Commandments, so that each film coincides, more or less directly, with its corresponding commandment. Accordingly, connecting *Decalogue One* to the first commandment "you shall have no other gods before me"⁵² implies a possible motivation for the malicious intervention and suggests a moral interpretation of the whole story. It becomes a tale of transgression and punishment: Krzysztof has elevated human reason with its pretensions to certainty above God and is therefore punished and robbed of his son. The indication of Krzysztof's guilt is supported as well by the film's somewhat schematic duality between religiosity and rationalism.

Yet, a moral explanation of this kind is contradicted by several elements in the film. First of all, there appears to be no real conflict between Irena's religiosity and Krzysztof's scientific point of view. The two aspects coexist harmoniously in Pawel's life, and he himself follows both paths enthusiastically without giving preference to either. Secondly, Pawel's death is, self-evidently, irreconcilable with Irena's faith, too. When Pawel asks her to describe God, Irena says that "God is very simple, if you have faith" and equates Him with the love between her and Pawel; certainly, the God she believes in, the God residing in the bond between aunt and nephew, would not allow the ice to break. In the end, neither Krzysztof's empirical knowledge nor Irena's religious belief can offer an adequate understanding of Pawel's fate or provide any consolation. The certainty of his cognition and the simplicity of her faith both dissolve.

Thus, the suggestion of the possibility of godly intervention in *Decalogue One* does not occur in conjunction with faith or in opposition to reason. Rather, it appears solely in the context of judgement. If the consequences of the encounter between Pawel and the lake are to be explained by inferring the will of a transcendent God as cause, that God must be a judge that uses an innocent child as an instrument for His punishment. In a sense, this option functions in Kieslowski's film as a revelation of the cruel inner logic that is involved in all judgement, its "hatred of life" together with "all these transcendent values that are turned against life."⁵³ Echoing the statements by Sobolewski and Troy mentioned above, it could be argued that by illustrating very literally how judgement opposes life, the film carries out a disavowal of the position of judge in general. In an analogous way, Mirosław Przyłipiak interprets *The Decalogue* as problematizing the foundational Christian idea of sacrifice, which "constitutes the main structural and conceptual axis" of the series and receives perhaps its most striking rejection in the first episode: "the son should not die because of his father's 'misguided' faith."⁵⁴

Through its refutation of judgement, sacrifice, and, consequently, universal moral law, *Decalogue One* could be said to determine the whole series' relation to the Ten Commandments. At the moment of Pawel's death, the possibility of interpreting the commandments as an ideal morality becomes problematic. Their status as a transcendent reference point, against which the characters' actions could be measured and judged, is undermined. Rather, the commandments assume an immanent function within the series as a structural device. In the same sense, Emma Wilson notes Kieślowski's use of "a literal and metaphoric legal system as infrastructure in his cinema" while indicating that this does not imply an affirmation of these systems of judgement, because "the guardians of the legal system are themselves as much on trial."⁵⁵

When the Ten Commandments are emptied of their moral quality, they do not operate in a legislative or judicial manner, but the relation between the text and the series becomes purely compositional and a complex network of thematic correspondences and structural parallels is established between them. For example, the biblical first commandment has a heightened structural importance within the textual whole: by asserting the authority of God, it also functions as a necessary condition for all the other commandments as they derive from that same authority. Notably, *Decalogue One* adopts an equivalent structural function of defining the conditions for the rest of the series. This conditioning takes place in an inverse manner, however, as the film problematizes the authority of the moral law and seeks to rectify the moralist mistake of invoking a judging God when no other cause can be perceived.

THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Decalogue One differs from all the other episodes of the series since it involves no specific ethical dilemma or difficult choice which the protagonists need to resolve; there is only the unexplained event at the lake and its horrid consequences. Therefore, the ethical inquiry that arises in the film seems to be ethical in a very Spinozan manner. It is an issue of knowledge and vision: How to understand Pawel's fate? How to perceive the accident adequately? Finding an answer to these questions becomes a prerequisite for Krzysztof and Irena to be able to confront the intolerability of a world where children die inexplicably and needlessly. The ethical and the epistemological intertwine in their experience in a manner that also orientates all the following episodes and defines the ethical framework within which the ensuing dilemmas and problems are formed.

Thus, there are two ways in which *Decalogue One* designates the conditions for the whole series. First, it affirms an immanent interpretation of the Ten Commandments, shifting the focus from morality to ethics or from judgement and guilt to thought and perception. However, the revelation of morality as an illusion caused by inadequate knowledge is not in itself sufficient to overcome the characters' inadequate epistemic state. Therefore, secondly, this epistemological uncertainty of the first episode goes on to infiltrate the whole series and becomes its fundamental ethical problem.

The ethical questioning in *Decalogue One* is located at the limit between the seen and the unseen. This limit importantly also involves the relation between what is included in the image and what is excluded from it, that is, the relation between the in-frame and the out-of-frame. Thus, the mysterious quality of Pawel's death is underscored by the fact that it takes place out-of-frame, literally beyond perception. Furthermore, the inexplicability of the event is never resolved; the unseen remains unseen. The film ends quickly after Pawel's death, leaving Krzysztof and Irena suspended in a state of indecisiveness, not knowing how to react to their loss. This relative abruptness of the ending signals the impossibility of any satisfactory resolution or closure. In fact, it is the unresolved nature of the narrative that opens the film up towards the subsequent episodes and allows its epistemic uncertainty to permeate the entire series.

The ethical and epistemological irresolution of *Decalogue One* also recalls Deleuze's notion of modern cinema's "crystalline narration" and the typical characters it produces. According to Deleuze, this crystalline regime of the image becomes established with the crisis of the action-image. It is defined by situations where the characters are forced to encounter "something intolerable and unbearable [...] or too unjust [...] which henceforth outstrips [their] sensory-motor capacities."⁵⁶ For Deleuze, such encounters with the intolerable have the potential to interrogate, disrupt, and bypass entrenched habits of subjective perception and action. Deleuze's description of this potential to overcome the habitual reaffirms the Spinozan ethical interconnection between vision, knowledge, and activity: it is a matter of "grasping the intolerable [...] and thereby becoming visionary, to produce a means of knowledge and action out of pure vision."⁵⁷ However, this cinematic approach suggests an ethical method that differs somewhat from Spinoza's account: the leap to a new kind of vision is achieved not through reasoned organisation of encounters and a slow accumulation of joyful affects but rather with a singular, overpowering encounter that effects a sudden dislocation of the coordinates of everyday existence. It is, then, precisely this dislocation caused by the intolerable or by the insistence of the unseen to become seen that creates the space for a Spinozan experimentation with the as-yet-unknown forces of the body.

According to Deleuze, crystalline narration and the presence of the intolerable in moving images give rise to a cinematic "seeing function,"⁵⁸ which inaugurates a new type of character that is not defined through action but vision. These characters become seers in situations to which they "cannot or will not react, so great is their need to 'see' properly what there is in the situation [...] to see the terms of a problem which is more profound than the situation, and even more pressing."⁵⁹ In *Decalogue One*, Pawel's death emerges as just the kind of problem that exceeds the limits of the actual situation and renders Krzysztof and Irena unable to act and make sense of it. The intolerable event even proceeds to extend its influence on situations depicted in subsequent episodes; the precarious fate of children and the corollary obligation for adults to protect them become recurring themes throughout *The Decalogue*. These themes receive their most direct expression in *Decalogue Eight* with the words of an ethics professor: "No ideal, nothing, is more important than the life of a child." Thus, in relation to the series as a whole,

Pawel's death comes to constitute the unseen not as an instance of the transcendent but rather as an immanent genetic condition for all the ethical problems and choices that follow.

Because the intolerable event that marks the end of Pawel's life also signals the end of the whole narrative of the film, *Decalogue One* allows no opportunity for the characters to attempt to truly apprehend or renegotiate their position regarding this intolerability. Therefore, the ending carries a tone of hopelessness, as it seems to provide no elements towards a new, adequate kind of vision and knowledge. However, the film also brings forth an alternative mode of perception, a further seer whose near-omniscience functions as a kind of counterpoint to the inadequate knowledge of Irena and Krzysztof. This "enigmatic angel-like character"⁶⁰ (Artur Barcis) constitutes a continuous mysterious presence in the series, appearing in every episode except for *Decalogue Seven* and *Decalogue Ten*. His appearances usually coincide with dramatic junctures in the narrative underlining moments of important decisions. In *Decalogue One*, the figure is repeatedly shown encamped by the lake, quietly observing the scene of the coming accident. He seems to possess a certain kind of foreknowledge of what is to come, an access to the unseen. His presence brings an air of inevitability and foreboding to the unfolding of the story: ominously, he makes eye contact with Krzysztof, who is testing the strength of the ice, and he disappears from his station after the fateful accident has taken place. Joseph G. Kickasola compares the angel-character to *Dei oculi*, "the 'seeing' dimension of God's connection with the world".⁶¹ To use Spinozan terminology, this "omnipresent perspective" could be construed as an adequate apprehension of common notions, that is, of the characteristic relations of both Pawel and the lake, as well as the laws of combination that determine the consequences of their encounter. For the angel, in other words, the breaking of the ice would conjoin naturally and unproblematically the order of true causes.

From a Spinozan point of view, every kind of perception and knowledge implies a corresponding mode of existence, as it is one's knowing that defines the types of ideas and affects one is capable of and thus determines a way of being in the world.⁶² In this manner, for example, an adequate kind of knowledge ties in with the full possession of one's power of acting, the endeavour to organise one's encounters favourably, and the maximising of active affects.⁶³ However, the angel's ostensibly adequate epistemic state seems to lack this parallel ethical transformation from passivity to activity as well as the deep embeddedness in one's surroundings entailed by the accumulation of affirmative relations. He remains positioned as a detached and distanced onlooker instead, wholly external to the chain of events that he observes and appears to know in advance. Thus, he is in no sense exempt from the inherent powerlessness that afflicts the characters in *Decalogue One*; even the omniscient quality of his perception proves insufficient for fulfilling the series' underlying ethical obligation of protecting the child.

In summary, *Decalogue One* can be described as consisting of an intolerable, mysterious event that belongs to the realm of the unseen and of three epistemological approaches or three modes of vision – the scientific, the religious, and the quasi-divine – which attempt to grasp that event but prove insufficient for the task. Consequently, the characters inhabiting the world of Kiesłowski's *The Decalogue* appear to be eternally condemned to the state of inadequate knowledge and subject to the rule of fortuitous encounters.

All in all, this world seems wholly irreconcilable with the rationalist optimism of Spinoza's ethics. Annette Insdorf extends this conclusion further to involve the cinematic medium itself: she suggests an analogy between the angel's "pure gaze" and the film camera, arguing that both are able only to "record human folly and suffering but unable to alter the course of the lives they witness."⁶⁴ In this sense, for Insdorf, the powerlessness of the characters infects also the images or, conversely, the characters' desperate existence becomes a symptom of the powerlessness of the moving image itself. By equating cinema with an inadequate kind of perception, her interpretation would imply a fundamental inability, on the part of cinema, to align with Spinozan ethics for the task of revealing the imperceptible and overcoming the habitual.

In the last section of this article, however, I will contest these propositions of an ethical impasse in *Decalogue One* in particular and for the moving image in general. I will suggest that the central ethical problem of the series, the inexplicable death of Pawel and the concomitant obligation to protect children, should not be approached only through an ethical evaluation and typology of the different modes of existence represented by the characters. Instead, I will shift the emphasis to another facet of Spinozan ethics, from typology to ethology, and propose that in *Decalogue One* the powers of the moving image itself become an important site of ethical investigation.⁶⁵ This aspect of practical experimentation with the image has been emphasised, for example, also by Emma Wilson, who argues that in Kieślowski's filmmaking "[t]he image itself – its capacities and properties – is the prime abiding concern."⁶⁶ What affects is the cinematic image capable of? What can the moving image do? These kinds of questions initiate an ethology of cinema or an immanent ethics in and of the image. In *Decalogue One*, this facet of ethical practice also takes place in the space for experimentation opened up by images of Pawel in relation to his death.

MOTION AND LIFE

In the opening sequence of the film, Irena walks along a street at night and stops, staring at a television monitor on display in a shop window. On the television screen, Pawel and a group of other school-children are running joyously down a hallway towards the camera. Later, this footage is revealed as having been shot by a local news crew that visited Pawel's school. As the children approach, the movement of the image slows down until it stops completely in a freeze-frame close-up of Pawel's face. The close-up is constituted through a double procedure of Pawel's running towards the news camera and a simultaneous zoom in towards the television monitor, focusing only on a section of its screen's surface. With this sequence of manipulation of both the television image (slow motion, freeze-frame) and the image of the image (zoom in), as well as through the interaction between the two, *Decalogue One* performs its most literal experimentation with the capacities of the moving image.

Irena becomes tearful while watching Pawel on the television screen. Her reaction reveals that this opening sequence takes place after Pawel's death, thus turning the whole story into a flashback: the loss

of the child is irreversibly present from the beginning, and the images of Pawel come to represent a trace of his being; a memory that is all that remains of him. In this sense, the focus shifts on one particular capacity of the moving image: its power of preservation which can facilitate human efforts of memory. As Haltof notes, the manipulated images of Pawel assume this distinct function of remembering as they “extend our failing memory” and preserve “the smile on Pawel’s face and his moment of happiness.”⁶⁷ These intertwined themes of mortality and memory are also highlighted in a conversation between Pawel and Krzysztof when the latter, answering his son’s questions concerning the afterlife, points to the importance of remembrance: “The memory that someone moved in a certain way, or that they were kind. You remember their face, their smile, that a tooth was missing.”

The idea of the cinematic image as a vehicle of preservation is an enduring theme in the history of film theory. One of the most striking examples of this tradition can be found in André Bazin’s essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” where he presents an interpretation of the entire history of the visual arts as an expression of the deep-rooted human need to resist mortality. In fact, Bazin traces this history all the way to the ancient Egyptians’ practice of embalming, arguing that the aim of pictorial representation is to shelter the represented object from the decaying effects of the flow of time.⁶⁸ In this struggle against entropy, photography emerges as a significant turning point: through its automatic and mechanical nature, a photographic image is able to achieve more than a mere approximation of the represented object, namely a “transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction.” By virtue of its production process, in other words, a photograph truly shares the being of its model and thus signals a genuinely successful preservation, liberating the model from the effects of time. Bazin illustrates the power of preservation of photographic images with the example of family albums. His description of these albums also recalls the effect created by the images of Pawel in the beginning of *Decalogue One*, as they testify to “the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment of their duration, freed from their destiny.” Cinema, however, goes still further than photography in its ability to preserve the past: cinematic images are not restricted to embalming only an individual instant of time, but they are images of duration, “change mummified.”⁶⁹ Similarly, in *Decalogue One*, the function of the footage playing on the television screen is to preserve a duration, that of Pawel running down the corridor. While capturing his movement, the sequence simultaneously tends towards the immobile, using slow motion until finally arresting all movement altogether. From a Bazinian perspective, this shift from motion to rest creates an interplay between a cinematic and a photographic mode of preservation.

Bazin’s reading of the history of the visual arts amounts to a declaration of faith in the power of the moving image. Yet, when the cinematic image’s power of preservation is probed in *Decalogue One*, the tone is quite different. Already Irena’s desolate encounter with the pictorial remembrance of Pawel points to its insufficiency. Her connection to the image brings about an amplification of her remembering, but nevertheless she is left in a state of powerlessness, not being able to help Pawel, not having been able to help. There is a distance and externality to her position as she is separated from Pawel by the glass of the window and the television screen. Pawel’s presence in the image only underlies his real absence; it seems

impossible that Pawel and this moving picture of him could share the same being. Irena's positioning as external observer is very similar to that of the angel-character with his pure gaze, and this parallelism is also indicated in the film as the shots of her watching the television screen are juxtaposed with shots of him sitting by the fire looking straight at the camera. However, their perceptions acquire different hues: the latter is an issue of foreknowledge, the former one of hindsight.

In Spinoza's philosophy, the affirmations of life are accompanied by a devaluation and demystification of death: death is "irreducibly external," nothing more than "an inevitable *bad encounter* in the order of natural existences."⁷⁰ It is an encounter between two incompatible bodies whereby the realization of one's characteristic relation is halted.⁷¹ Because such occurrences are entirely external and belong to the realm of sad passions, death should not concern adequate understanding in the least, as "wisdom is a meditation of life, not of death."⁷² Yet, under habitual, inadequate conditions of thinking, human beings tend to carry death within, misperceive it as internal, and lead a life fixated on it.⁷³

While Spinoza and Bazin share the idea that preoccupation with death constitutes a natural condition for human beings, their conclusions concerning this matter diverge. For Bazin, it is an inescapable part of our psychological makeup, consequently suffusing the history of visual art as well, whereas for Spinoza it is a misperception that will be rectified by an ethics of joy. From a Spinozan perspective, then, the power of preservation of the moving image functions simply as the reproduction of a false appearance, tying cinema to the same inadequate preconditions that limit human epistemology in its natural state. Irena's experience with the footage of Pawel playing on television in the shop window appears to corroborate the inadequacy of this idea and ideal of preservation.

However, it is possible to analyse the manipulation of the images of Pawel in a different light; there is a second aspect, besides memory and preservation, to the ethological experimentation in *Decalogue One*. This other aspect, too, is expressed in Krzysztof's answer to his son's inquiries about the afterlife, when he describes death as a phenomenon of motion and stasis: "The heart stops pumping blood. It doesn't reach the brain, movement ceases, everything stops. It's the end." In *Decalogue One*, this account of the movements of the body is transposed to the image itself: it refers not just to a physical, bodily determination but works also as a description of cinema and the moving image as a composition of differential relations of motion and rest. The film's overt experimentation with movement and stasis is established instantly in its first shot. It is a close-up of the surface of the lake, where two separate elements bisect the image: the solid immobility of ice on the left and the flowing movement of water on the right. Notably, this interplay of motion and rest occurs at the precise location of Pawel's death: as long as death is defined through movement and stasis, it becomes an inherently cinematic effect. Importantly, the composition of relations of motion and rest is understood here as a power immanent to the cinematic image and, unlike preservation, not as reducible to pre-defined human categories and needs.

Because Pawel dies out-of-frame, the arresting of his movement in the freeze-frame becomes the visible form of his death within the film. But if death is movement ceasing, then the power of the moving image, in relation to death, is not that of preservation but rather reanimation. In the final scene of

Decalogue One, the frozen close-up of Pawel, which ended the sequence in the beginning of the film, returns. This time the image goes through a few distinct, tentative jolts before gaining motion again. The repetition of the television images in the beginning and end of *Decalogue One* encloses the whole film in a development from movement to stasis to movement again. The final gesture of the film is thus a reanimation, a shift from immobility to motion, from death to life. This procedure is the polar opposite of the narrative which ends in the loss of life.

In the final shot, Pawel draws so close to the camera that he transforms into an abstract, blurry, and granular mass of grey and white in motion. In this sense, the regained movement and life is no longer tied to a pre-formed personality but becomes a kind of pre-subjective force of becoming, thus initiating a cinematic renegotiation of the concepts of life and death. The questioning of the common-sense limits of a life through different repetitions and variations is a recurring theme throughout Kieślowski's filmmaking. This has been emphasised also by Wilson, who notes: "For Kieślowski [...] the privilege of narrative cinema is in its potential to visualize parallel destinies, to actualize so many virtual existences."⁷⁴ In *Decalogue One*, however, this remapping of life does not take place primarily in relation to the narrative but through an ethological experimentation with the moving image itself: it constitutes an affirmation of the power of the image that redeems the powerlessness of the characters.

According to Deleuze, in modern cinema, the encounter with the intolerable does not give way to a new kind of vision and activity, to new powers and dimensions in the image, until one knows "how to extract from the event the part that cannot be reduced to what happens: that part of inexhaustible possibility that constitutes the unbearable, the intolerable, the visionary's part."⁷⁵ In an ethical consideration of cinema, the starting point must be that we do not yet know what the moving image is capable of. In this respect, the hopelessness of Krzysztof and Irena does not exhaust all the possibilities in the film. The final shot, the reanimation of Pawel, is an expression of faith beyond their perspectives. It is not only a preparation for the ethics professor's appeal to the importance of the lives of children in general but an assertion of the significance of Pawel's life in particular. It fashions a cinematic faith, beyond reason, that this child is not yet lost.

¹ William Bartley, "Faith, Doubt, and Chiasmus in Krzysztof Kieslowski's Decalogue I," *Journal of Religion and Film* 18, no. 2 (October 2014): 1–2.

² Paul Coates, "Introduction," in *Lucid Dreams: The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski*, ed. Coates (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1999), 7.

³ See, for instance, *ibid.*, 10; Marek Haltof, *The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski: Variations on Destiny and Chance* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 78; Paul C. Santilli, "Cinema and Subjectivity in Krzysztof Kieślowski," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 149.

⁴ Eva Badowska and Francesca Parmeggiani "Introduction: 'Within unrest, there is always a question,'" eds. Badowska and Parmeggiani, *Of Elephants and Toothaches: Ethics, Politics, and Religion in Krzysztof Kieślowski's Decalogue*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 6.

⁵ Joseph G. Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski: The Liminal Image* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 161–162.

⁶ Annette Insdorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 71.

⁷ Kickasola, *The Liminal Image*, 162.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 23.

⁹ Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 25–26.

¹⁰ Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 73–74.

¹¹ Spinoza defines bodies as finite particulars that are modifications of a single substance. For more on this concept of the body, see, for example, Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1984), 92–96.

¹² Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley, *Spinoza: Complete Works*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), Part III, Post. 1, 278.

¹³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, Prop. 38, 341–342; Prop. 41, 343.

¹⁴ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 27.

¹⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Prop. 11 Schol., 284–285.

¹⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Def. 3, 278.

¹⁷ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 19.

¹⁸ See Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Prop. 34, 263–264.

¹⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Prop. 7, 247.

²⁰ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 19, 73–75.

²¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Prop. 29 Cor., 262.

²² Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Prop. 40 Schol. 2, 267.

²³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Prop. 1, 279.

²⁴ An idea of an affection represents a momentary state of the affected body, but in this momentariness there is always implicated a passage to a greater or lesser power of acting in comparison to the preceding state. These passages or affects are inseparable from ideas as they attach the current state of the body to its preceding state and make it tend towards the next one. This indicates that there is a certain kind of causal relation between ideas and affects. See Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 48–49.

²⁵ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 27–28, 76.

²⁶ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 56.

²⁷ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 18.

²⁸ Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 261–262.

²⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Prop. 29 Schol., 262.

³⁰ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 72.

³¹ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 54.

³² See Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Prop. 37–39, 265–266.

³³ For more on the distinction between essence and characteristic relation, see Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 209–212.

³⁴ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 22.

³⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Prop. 40 Schol. 2, 267.

³⁶ Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 273–274.

³⁷ See Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Prop. 2 Schol., 280–281.

³⁸ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 125.

³⁹ Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 282–283.

⁴⁰ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 56.

⁴¹ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 10.

⁴² Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 13.

⁴³ See Insdorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances*, 15–16.

⁴⁴ Spinoza also distinguishes a third kind of knowledge that he calls “intuition.” *Ethics*, Part II, Prop. 40 Schol. 2, 267. If the second kind of knowledge refers to characteristic relations in which essences express themselves, it is only the third kind that captures eternal essences in themselves. Thus, the active joys of the third kind differ from their counterparts of the second kind by deriving “absolutely from our essence” and not having to find their “occasional causes in passive affections of joy.” Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 303–304, 307–308. In this paper, I will consider only the first two kinds of knowledge because they encompass the leap from morality to ethics and, thus, the proposed alignment between Spinoza and Kieślowski. Nevertheless, it can be noted that the difference between the second kind and the third kind of knowledge involves a conversion from the relative to the absolute, that is, from particular affections and affects to an essence that “surveys its affects and affections in eternity.” Deleuze, “Spinoza and the Three ‘Ethics,’” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), 148–149. In relation to ethics, this absolute and eternal survey means that true activity ceases to be “the ultimate end” and becomes instead “the first foundation” of ethics, instigating “the language of pure potency or virtue.” Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 72. Consequently, a tentative parallel could be

drawn between Spinoza's theory of the third kind of knowledge and William Jaworski's interpretation of *The Decalogue* from the point of view of virtue-based ethics. See Jaworski, "Rules and Virtues: The Moral Insight of *The Decalogue*," in *Of Elephants and Toothaches*, 15–29.

⁴⁵ Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, 430.

⁴⁶ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 22–23.

⁴⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, Def. 1 and 2, 322; Prop. 41 Proof, 343.

⁴⁸ Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 430–431.

⁴⁹ Tadeusz Sobolewski, "Ultimate Concerns," trans. Coates, in *Lucid Dreams*, 27–28.

⁵⁰ Eddy Troy, "Deleuze and Kieślowski: On the Cinema of Exhaustion," *Film-Philosophy* 21, no.1 (February 2017): 56.

⁵¹ Coates, "The Curse of the Law: *The Decalogue*," in *Lucid Dreams*, 95.

⁵² Exod. 20:3 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁵³ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 25–26.

⁵⁴ Mirosław Przyłipiak, "Dekalog / *The Decalogue*," ed. Peter Hames, *The Cinema of Central Europe*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 233–234.

⁵⁵ Emma Wilson, *Memory and Survival: The French Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), 96.

⁵⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 18.

⁵⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 18.

⁵⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 19.

⁵⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 128.

⁶⁰ Haltof, *Variations on Destiny and Chance*, 81.

⁶¹ Kickasola, *The Liminal Image*, 164–165.

⁶² See Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 82.

⁶³ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 103.

⁶⁴ Insdorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances*, 73.

⁶⁵ Similarly, for Deleuze, the intolerable cannot be reduced simply to a narrative device or a related character type: these are rather just surface effects or indirect products of different compositions of relations of time and motion in the cinematic image. *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 59. Thus, the intolerable can be thought of as an internal capacity of the moving image in itself where "something has become too strong in the image." Simultaneously, the process towards a new kind of vision and knowledge, which takes place in relation to this intolerability, becomes an experimentation with the powers of the image itself and a growth in its dimensions. See Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 18, 22.

⁶⁶ Wilson, *Memory and Survival*, 3.

⁶⁷ Haltof, *Variations on Destiny and Chance*, 83.

⁶⁸ André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 9–10.

⁶⁹ Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 14–15.

⁷⁰ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 12–13.

⁷¹ See Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, Prop. 39 Schol., 342.

⁷² Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, Prop. 67, 355.

⁷³ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 42.

⁷⁴ Wilson, *Memory and Survival*, 99.

⁷⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 19–20.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL IMAGINATION, ETHICS, AND EMPATHY: THE CASE OF
EPILEPSY

Isabelle Delmotte (Waikato University)

INTRODUCTION: EMPATHY AND THE “FALLING DISEASE”

Neurological facts and supernatural powers are supposedly distinct; however, in the case of epilepsy, they often coexist in the popular imagination.¹In *The Last King of Scotland*², Dr Nicholas Garrigan [James McAvoy] is a young Scottish physician who is called to the house of Kay [Kerry Washington], one of the wives of his employer, Ugandan dictator Idi Amin [Forest Whitaker]. The hand-held camera frames him running through the house and finding Kay who is frantic, yelling for help, trying to hold her child, asking him repeatedly to stop. Her son Mackenzie is having a convulsive seizure on the floor, foaming at the mouth, eyes rolling backwards, breathing heavily. Dr Garrigan asks ‘is your son epileptic?’. The young African mother replies ‘I don’t know’, but adds that he has done this before. Garrigan wants the child, who had been hidden from public eyes at the demand of his father, to be hospitalised but the terrified mother refuses. Garrigan keeps insisting, but Kay, filmed in close-up while looking at him, yells ‘please’ and repeats her plea in a softer voice, almost crying. Close-ups can indeed be “dramatic revelations of what is really happening under the surface of appearances.”³ Kay explains that Idi Amin wanted her and her son to live far from public scrutiny. Garrigan looks at her silently and in disbelief, gives an injection to Mackenzie who is still seizing, and the child falls asleep, inanimate. Kay blames herself for her son’s illness, while Garrigan re-assures her that in his eyes Mackenzie has epilepsy that he describes as “a perfectly treatable condition”. As individual viewers we can engage in various ways with their individual circumstances and their emotional telling, precipitated by the violent surge of a child’s body.

Empathy is a relatively new concept that has many meanings and has evolved differently according to the disciplines concerned: for example, medicine, philosophy, and psychology. Empathy is, at its core, a phenomenon that involves societal, cognitive and neurobiological mechanisms. For example, social neuroscientist Simon Baron-Cohen describes empathy as the ability to notice and identify the thoughts or feelings of someone else, and to convey similar or appropriate emotive expressions back to that person.⁴ However, neuroscientists looking at cultural empathy and intergroups found that parts of the brain linked to emotions show greater activity in the amygdala, thus revealing more empathy, when people notice facial fear in someone of their own race, and less activity when “watching a needle prick the face of someone of a different ethnicity.”⁵ Empathy is commonly described as an emotional process, one that involves the perception and, importantly, the imagination by onlookers of someone else’s feelings and an understanding of their experiences. The

duration of viewers' exposure to scenes or acts is an important aspect of eliciting emotions and developing an empathy, because "emotions take time to catch".⁶ An important construct of empathy involves various back-and-forth emotional states highlighting an intersubjective and phenomenological process that enable us to also understand ourselves, a point emphasised at length by Edith Stein.⁷

Theatre scholar and cognitivist Bruce McConachie also describes empathy as the ability to "step into an actor/character's shoes," whereas sympathy involves projecting our own beliefs and feelings onto the portrayal provided by the actors.⁸ There are various kinds of empathy applicable to movie audiences; they associate phenomenological and cognitive perspectives and are linked to the use of filmmaking techniques, as outlined by Jane Stadler when surveying empathy in film.⁹ Film theorist Carl Plantinga also suggests that using close-ups to view human faces and showing facial behaviours compels movie audiences to feel similar and empathetic responses to emotions portrayed on the screen.¹⁰ In *The Last King of Scotland*, the lively epileptic body acts as intermediary to build feelings and rapports that highlight cultural differences; it also provides viewers a perceptual partaking to Kay's and Garrigan's emotions and focus while they interact physically in a charged situation. There is a tripartite empathy facilitated by the film, an empathy that join both characters on screens and audiences, all physically and emotionally involved in this chaotic scene. As viewers, we can feel the mother's fear, understand Dr Garrager's gestures. The empathetic interaction between Kay and Dr Garrager is visually enhanced by a close up of her face when she begs for his understanding and he perceives the seriousness of the situation. From an audience perspective, we can also perceive in Kay's voice and gaze the physiology of her emotions and we can imagine that her despair provokes empathy on Garrager's part.

We can easily develop a sympathy for Kay and project our individual beliefs about her reactions to her son's epilepsy and the resulting social impositions. We could also sympathise for Dr Garrager, seemingly stuck between his human compassion in the context of social constraints in disagreement with his Hippocratic Oath. When watching Mackenzie's disorderly limbs, perceiving his breathing and hearing Kay's vocal panic, we are able to superimpose all this information and empathize with the people who can display and express emotions. Parts of Mackenzie's seizing body are visible in the shaky frame for roughly 30 seconds during the two minute and 20 second scene, always surrounded by the body of one of the two adults. Faciality, described by Laura Marks as "the intensification of affect in an image whose motor extension is limited"¹¹: Mackenzie's face appears for one second in this scene. Do we have time to develop an empathy with the unconscious child?

EPILEPSY: AN ENDURING IMAGE

"Epilepsy" is a general term for disorders provoking seizures of symptomatic or genetic origins but also of idiopathic nature. Currently, a diagnosis of epilepsy can be confirmed after two or more

seizures. Partial and temporal seizures, which are less dramatic than total collapses, result from neuronal instability or misfiring in discrete parts of the brain, while generalised seizures (Tonic-Clonic) typically involve both hemispheres. Temporal lobe seizures (TLE) therefore appear different from tonic-clonic episodes, and a person's body might appear from the outside immobile or performing automatic behaviours and gestures, for example. More often than not, epilepsy continues to be portrayed as a tonic-clonic seizure, a total absence of control, a collapse, a body on the run and a mind deep in a cognitive void.

Rajendra Kale appropriately summarises Epilepsy cultural history: the general ignorance of its medical characteristics, summed up as abnormal electrical discharges of a set of neurons in the brain, has generated millennia-long stereotypes and has typified, worldwide and over generations, what has been known as “the falling disease”, sustaining stigma at all societal levels.¹² Medical perspectives, social observations, arts and philosophy, have accompanied epilepsy for millennia to various results and for different audiences. The portrayals of symptoms determine how we, individually and collectively, understand and interpret epilepsy. The descriptions in texts written in the Neo-Assyrian script around 700 BC are in accordance with current medical classifications¹³ and effectively outline the major kinds of epilepsy.

Aristotle situated the cause of epilepsy in the heart and believed its cure was pharmaceutical.¹⁴ Plato considered it a disease of the body affecting the head and the rational soul, whereas Hippocrates thought it no more divine or sacred than other illnesses, but hereditary and with natural causes.¹⁵ Although retrospective medical diagnosis can be contentious, neurologist Muramoto argues that Socrates was himself subject to what is currently classified as mild temporal lobe epilepsy. Muramoto's assertions are based “almost exclusively” on Plato's descriptions of Socrates and the multiple episodes witnessed by others.¹⁶

The public visibility and witnessing of seizures have become rarer in western countries due to pharmaceutical developments. Its presence is socioeconomically and culturally biased: 80% of people with epilepsy live in low and middle-income countries and have often poor access to medication.¹⁷ To complicate the picture, visual expectations about the disease also affect other medical diagnoses because physical manifestations that “look like” the neurological predicament to the layperson can be nonepileptic phenomena of a psychological nature.¹⁸ At present, these phenomena are labelled hysteroepileptic, pseudoseizures, hysterical seizures, psychogenic seizures, and dissociative disorders and are often caused by emotional trauma or abuse.¹⁹ These events impact cognitive and emotional functions and mimic epilepsy but do not display abnormal brain electrical activities, although they can be accompanied by alteration of consciousness. The above labels, such as hysterical seizures, resurge from a not so distant past, as retold in the 2012 fiction film *Augustine*²⁰.

Epileptic conditions can be isolating because of observations and beliefs that invoke the supernatural, the demonic, the retarded and the weak; often, an individual's predicament is seen as curse, spiritual possession, or witchcraft.²¹ The main etiological approaches to finding causes and sources of epilepsy can still be firstly supernatural powers, and secondly biological and neurological explanations. These aspects of the disease, are central to films that portray or suggest the presence of epilepsy. This narrative thread is also in line with medical approaches and expectations: there might not be a solution but, surely, there has to be a clinical point of departure able to generate passion and in this case, a staged show.

In the early 1870s, at the Hôpital de La Salpêtrière, Professor Jean-Martin Charcot was the doctor and neuropathologist in charge of the ward housing non-psychotic epileptics and hysterics.²² At that time, clinical diagnoses were still linking epilepsy with madness, hysteria, mania and other illnesses. Charcot described himself as being “in possession of a kind of *museum of living pathology* whose holdings were virtually inexhaustible.”²³ Charcot offered two main causes, and some variations, relating to the epileptic condition: it acts as a primary illness, to which hysteria adds itself following an emotional shock around puberty, and, more rarely, epilepsy succeeds hysteria, and intelligence starts to decline as a consequence of the epilepsy.²⁴ Clinical causes and labels for epilepsy included terms and labels such as idiopathic, syphilitic, spinal, toxic, essential, genital, partial, and vulgar, among others.²⁵ Charcot proposed new kinds of epilepsy, including ovarian epilepsy and epileptic somnambulism, and also defined hysterioepilepsy, a kinesthetic disease that transported the patient “both mentally and sensorially to “an imaginary world”—an imaginary theatre”.²⁶ Désiré-Magloire Bourneville, one of Charcot's assistants, establishes distinctions, but also parallels, between epileptic events (*accès d'épilepsie*) and hysterioepilepsy “attacks” (*attaques d'hystero-épilepsie*). Both kinds of manifestations turn the body rigid, provoke delirium and clonic movements, and consciousness seems lost as in epilepsy, but only the hysterioepilepsy “attacks” last for extended periods of time; they could involve “crucifiement” and, in the context of that particular medical era, could be stopped by applying ovarian pressure.²⁷

There has been much controversy about Charcot's methods and ethical standards for exploring the nervous system.²⁸ Charcot's Tuesday public lectures, set in a purpose-built amphitheatre in La Salpêtrière, were centred around stage performances by chosen hysteric patients and depended on hypnosis, suggestion, and magnetism. According to Charcot, simulations were used by hysteric patients to create “an imaginary symptomatology”²⁹ thus his patients were hypnotised to better demonstrate the natural symptoms of illnesses. Charcot narrated aloud the effects of the induced hysteric attacks performed by his hypnotised female patients while they created a spectacular, often erotically charged choreography of epilepsy-like manifestations. The individual bodies autonomous performances were spectacular, and included convulsions, rigidity, jerking, extreme limb contortions and facial distortions. The medical audience at Charcot's Tuesday lectures was joined by artists, philosophers, politicians and the Parisian bourgeoisie, as well as a young Sigmund Freud in 1885,

who unlike Charcot, was more interested in what patients said than observing anatomical irregularities.

Alice Winocour's first feature film, *Augustine*, depicts the life of a young woman named Augustine [Soko] employed as a maid in the late nineteenth-century in a bourgeois Parisian household. While serving a formal lunch she experiences uncontrollable sensations that lead to what appears, to the horror of her employer and guests, like a tonic-clonic epileptic seizure, or even a demonic attack for one of the guests who crosses herself. Augustine subsequently is admitted to the Hôpital de La Salpêtrière in the ward of Charcot [Vincent Lindon]. The real Augustine Gleizes, entered Charcot's ward as a patient in October 1875, age 14.³⁰ In Winocour's film, Augustine becomes aware after entering La Salpêtrière that Charcot chooses those patients he wants to be personally in charge of. Augustine has initially no sensations on her right side and a paralysed eyelid. Having anxiously waited in vain for a diagnosis, she has an attack in Charcot's presence. While looking at her body, arched as if electrified, Charcot asks his assistant to press her ovaries to make her stop, and to assign her to his care. In the film Charcot attempts to diagnose Augustine through visual and tactile examinations, while also questioning her intellect. He diagnoses her with "ovarian hysteria" and exhibits her under hypnosis in front of stern men of the medical profession, hoping to gain further funding for his research. Charcot knows that her performance will impact the trust of other scientists and their financial backing. Hypnotised, Augustine is possessed by an attack, falls to the ground, her pelvis violently thrusting, her back arching, limbs flying. Under the appreciative eyes of Charcot's colleagues, she grabs her pubis with both hands and vocally expresses sexual ecstasy. She then faints and is taken out of the amphitheatre to the applause of her male audience.

As the film progresses Charcot's attempts to cure Augustine become almost desperate and involve violent mechanical experiments, notably with an ovarian press. In one of the last scenes, Augustine is made aware of her star role in Charcot's final demonstration to the Academy, as he is still aiming to obtain his research funding. Just before this demonstration, Augustine attempts to escape La Salpêtrière, falls on some stairs, hits her head and suddenly recovers all her corporeal faculty. She nevertheless is brought on stage but is unresponsive to the hypnosis, and murmurs to Charcot that she is cured. Her performance in front of Charcot is in a state of full consciousness, which deeply unsettles him. Unable to hypnotise her, Charcot turns his back to Augustine to address his agitated medical audience, saying that animal experiments are more reliable. Suddenly Augustine, realising what is at stake for him, starts to simulate an attack of hysteria. She is taken away to the applause of the members of the medical Academy, his financial backers. The last scene shows Charcot surrounded and congratulated by his peers while Augustine leaves La Salpêtrière in disguise. The two different scenes describing Augustine's performances in front of the medical academy provide film viewers with alternating states of empathy and sympathy. In the first demonstration, we might feel sympathy for Augustine under hypnosis and under Charcot's eyes: she seems intellectually alert but void of emotions. In the last scene described above, we are confronted by Augustine's

sympathy for Charcot. As well, the volitional attack that she performs can trigger, for movie audience, empathy for her emotional strength and develop an awareness of what she might be feeling and acting, thus resulting in an assemblage of kinaesthetic empathy and imaginative phenomenology.

SIMULATION, OTHERNESS AND CHOREOGRAPHY

The simulation performed by Augustine in the film has its roots in historical facts that highlight various levels of embodiment, empathy, and sympathy that existed in Charcot's ward and could typify Vittorio Gallese's idea on simulation. For Gallese, simulation can be conceived of as a prereflective process triggered during social interactions, which is "being plastically modulated by contextual, cognitive, and personal identity-related factors."³¹ Being physiologically different from hysteroepileptic attacks, neurological epileptic events dissociate the being: while the world keeps going "through the living body", the faculty to process and articulate that knowledge vanishes. The body cannot "produce" epilepsy on cue, as it demands functional connectivity between different brain regions and synchrony in a network of neurons connected with electrical synapses.³² Hysteroepileptic patients provided ways for Charcot to demonstrate some aesthetic aspects of epileptic symptoms virtually on demand. These patients were able to mirror aspects of epileptic loss of control, learned by living at La Salpêtrière with persons whose epilepsy manipulated their uncontrollable body.

The mimicking patients were performing an embodied empathy and relied on conscious knowledge of the self and the other. The physiological, cognitive and neuro-biological facets of empathy indicate that it is the ability to imagine being the other that prevails in the empathetic act. For Gallese, watching a person's physical actions can trigger in an observer a motor representation of the same action activated by specific neurons, the mirror neurons, that cause movements, evaluate spatial perception and also react to visual, tactile and auditory stimuli.³³ Mirror neurons can produce internal representation of the intended movement that links to "motor learning and understanding the meaning of observed action."³⁴ In the context of Charcot's performing hysteroepileptic patients, a convergence of embodied simulation and empathy would bring to the front mimetic faculties, described so appropriately by Michael Taussig as "the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other."³⁵

To add another layer to the simulation of a state of being, Merleau-Ponty reminds us that the alterity, the Otherness, of others also define our own: "If there is an other, by definition I cannot install myself in him, coincide with him, live his very life: I live only my own".³⁶ At its core, acting is led by a desire for performing a physical, emotional, and ethical, alterity. Epileptic choreography has long been used to create a spectacle, and its use has unveiled different ethics, as stated in the 1596 "Moral Discourses of the Excellent Mr Fabio Glissenti":³⁷

What would you say if you saw me fall down for the “ugly” or epilepsy, whose effects I imitate to perfection? When I with great clamour fall down and lie prostrate or, reversing, with extravagant movements, twisting my eyes, my mouth foaming, move all who are present to come to my aid? Then I feign that I will not recover unless a cross or a blessed coin is placed in my hand and then – as if by a miracle I had recovered my sanity, with a deep sigh I open my eyes and then little by little recovering I find that those who have seen me in this pitiable spectacle generously pay me.

Charcot’s best hysteric and partially-dressed patients/actresses were “proud and pleased” to be asked to perform choreographic hysteroepileptic symptoms on stage.³⁸ Their gestures, facial mimicry and contortions influenced the cabarets of La Belle Époque. One of the best-known performers was Polaire (Emélie Marie Bouchard). In 1890, to distinguish herself from the other café concert performers, the 16-year-old decided at the start of her career to perform in the following manner: “[I] throw my head backwards, and sing somehow, my hair flying, with my quivering nostrils, with my clenched fists, and even with my toes, wriggling in my stage shoes.”³⁹ Polaire, known as a “gommeuse épileptique,” could bend in half, arched backwards as if cut in two at her extremely flexible and small waist; the brutality of her performances and the frenetic twirling of her pelvis and jerking of her body were considered scandalous at the time.⁴⁰

Polaire’s performances predated by a few years the rise in popularity in Paris of the “cake-walk,” a dance popularised between 1902 and 1903 by two American mixed-race troupes (“Les Elks” and the “Florida Creole Girls”). This dance established the convergence of African dance and the epileptic choreography of the Parisian cabaret artists.⁴¹ Jean Cocteau noted that the Elks danced with “their knees higher than their heads, tilted backwards, breaking themselves in two or three,” and other critics noted that members of the audience were dancing involuntarily when leaving the premises.⁴² Rae Beth Gordon notes that “to dance the cake-walk and master its gestures and movement might represent a hope of overcoming the fear of the Other,”⁴³ but a brutal change of tone develops in the press in 1903. It called for the epidemic of cake-walk performance to stop and demanded that “the eccentric choreography, the epileptic extravagances of a savage dance” and its inference to “African, dances, Black-American, monkeys and epilepsies” be replaced by reasonably rhythmised steps performed to captivating tunes.⁴⁴ The denigration of the cake-walk mounted, increasing the fear of the non-normative and providing an indirect association with the danger of nervous predicaments.

In 1903, Georges Méliès produced, directed and acted in *The Infernal Cake-walk*⁴⁵, a film that combined racial exoticism and epileptic choreography. In this comedy Méliès-Méphisto comes back to Earth and witnesses two black cake-walk dancers performing frenetically, acrobatically, and epileptically, surrounded by virginal youths dressed in white. He imitates them, standing on a small platform, arched back, knees high, performing dance steps in a diabolical rhythm. At one point, he lies on the ground while his legs, dissociated from his torso, keep punching the air above him. The ethical and political significance of these portrayals were clear: Darwinian sentiments prevailed and the epileptic label’s negativity was confirmed.

Despite its negative connotation, the “epilepsy” danced by controlled bodies was integral to an aesthetic discourse and lasted throughout the duration of the show or, in the case of Méliès, the films. On stage and in Méliès’ movies, performers danced upright for minutes on end, and their falls, if any, were deliberate or aesthetically simulated, as in *Le Déshabillage Impossible*.⁴⁶ Epilepsy had had its hour of “public glory” and moving images contributed to keeping this aesthetic alive. What remained was the affective impact of a specific gestural aesthetic and a titillated public: the reproducibility of film ensured that these experiences endured despite the social invisibility of epilepsy. However, while the cameras used by Méliès were fixed, the development of moveable cameras and editing techniques altered forms, duration and significance of epilepsy on screen. The fixed camera kept audiences at a distance whereas moveable cameras morph our eyes into “organs of touch,”⁴⁷ bringing a proprioceptive function to the viewer’s visual, as well as auditory, experiences.

OTHERNESS: ENGAGING FILM VIEWERS AT MULTIPLE LEVELS

While providing a completely different aesthetic due to its filmmaking, the scene extracted from *The Last King of Scotland* highlights the presence of epilepsy: it now usually occupies the screen in short bursts, from a few seconds to a minute or two; those exhibiting the condition are usually falling towards the ground or convulsing on the floor, or both. In *The last King of Scotland* the fall is bypassed and bodily convulsions fill parts of the screen, eyes roll in their sockets, jaws clench, muscles tense, and occasionally guttural yells provide the final touch. In films without focus about the disease, these kinds of physical events are narrative devices with specific purposes: to disturb and distract other characters in the film as well as the spectators; to highlight a specific instant in the plot; and often to define the character’s soul by implying unpredictability, weakness and other negative traits.⁴⁸

These common portrayals of epilepsy often unveil a dynamic amongst protagonists that reflects the powerlessness of the individual affected by a seizure. A seemingly tacit knowledge of what epilepsy should look like and an instinctive performance of its most dramatic aspects, even if they had never been witnessed by the performers or their audience, permeates the collective consciousness. However, during a real tonic-clonic manifestation, an observer might be stunned when a face changes colour, skin looks heavy, movements are aimless, the gaze is absent. For onlookers, the objective time-space of a being might be shattered; the person is “gone”; the flow of reciprocal empathy is interrupted. The ethical role of the face, the *Other* being constructed by epilepsy, might endorse a notion of embodiment in which a state of vulnerability can supplant reason, alter consciousness, and destabilise a sense of identity, in line with Emmanuel Levinas’ words: “Life is a body, not only lived body [*corps propre*], where its self-sufficiency emerges, but a cross-roads of physical forces, body-effect. In its deep-seated fear life attests this ever possible inversion of the body- master into body-slave, of health into sickness.”⁴⁹

The value for the viewer watching the representation of epilepsy lies in the meeting and witnessing of the *Other*, and an understanding that a phenomenological act of viewing leads to an *embodied viewer*.⁵⁰ In the case of epilepsy on screen, it might be rare that spectators perform physiological mimicry or feel a spontaneous embodied simulation of pain for a flesh that is seemingly unsynchronised with emotions. Considering that phenomenology is intentional and at large focuses on the “I”, is it possible to conceive of a reflective phenomenology triggered by a foreign body under the control of a physical “unconsciousness” prompted by epilepsy?

The exposure to events and duration of these occurrences can generate empathy or at least provide viewers with steps that could lead to a distinction between empathy and sympathy. An empathy is being led by a foreign experience and takes place, according to Edith Stein, on three levels: “the emergence of the experience; the fulfilling explication; the comprehensive objectification of the explained experience.”⁵¹ To add to these distinctions, but giving fluidity to the experience, philosopher Robert Sinnerbrink coined the term “cinempathy”: it allows cinematic experience to embody a new kind of ethics, one that personifies “a cinematic and kinetic synergy between affective attunement, emotional engagement, and moral evaluation.”⁵²

Two feature films, *Control*⁵³ and *Electricity*⁵⁴, provide audiences enough time to feel an array of sensations that question notions of epilepsy and empathy and their connections to phenomenology, unconsciousness and vulnerability. *Control* and *Electricity* both facilitate a cinempathy, a process that contributes to separate empathy and sympathy, but also allows audiences’s sensory and moral compass to oscillate between these two states. These films conjugate the words sympathy and empathy differently: they demand fluctuations between cultural ethics, belief systems and sensory perceptions. These movies have outlined another identity to the disease, regardless of its positive or negative impacts on the individual and the collective. The disease does not define the personality of the main characters, who have epilepsy, but acts rather as a sensory conduit: it leads stories rather than impairing them, and pushes the lives of the main characters forward. *Control* and *Electricity* call for phenomenological viewing, a manner of knowing the self while, at the same time, watching characters learning *how* to know *other* aspects of *themselves*. These two films take very different narrative and cinematographic approaches in engaging audiences, because of the roles and journey of their respective main characters.

Control highlights the life of Ian Curtis [Sam Riley], the charismatic vocalist for the British post-punk band Joy Division who was subject to the whimsical and overpowering nature of epilepsy, and to which he alluded in many of his lyrics. The frequency of his seizures increased over the years and the movie depicts, both on and off stage, forms of absence, temporal seizures, and tonic-clonic events. Curtis eventually took his own life, aged 23, a year and a half after an official diagnosis of epilepsy. In the first scene of the movie, we meet an adolescent Curtis in a chemistry classroom, his gaze fixed on the blackboard, his shoulders immobile. A first-person viewpoint lets us see his point of focus on the blackboard, zooming in and out on a formula. This event might portray a temporal lobe seizure,

often labelled as *absence* in everyday terms. The first tonic-clonic seizure of the movie, the tacit imagery of the “real thing,” happens in front of an older Curtis as he, a social worker at the time, sits at his desk making phone calls to find work for a young woman wearing head protection gear. She suddenly falls from her chair, hitting the floor, body jerking. The first-person point of view shows her body from Curtis’ eyes and then cuts to his face while he watches her in shock before running to get help; we can assume that Curtis has not been diagnosed yet and his identity and social status are intact.

For Joy Division’s audiences, most probably unaware of his condition, Curtis’s style of dancing like a shaman to the rapid rhythms of their music distinguished him as a performer and contributed to building the cult-like status of the short-lived band. Filmmaker Malcolm Whitehead described the impact of their performances: “They were absolutely stunning. They hit me not in my head but in my stomach” and journalist Jon Savage depicted Curtis’ stage presence on stage: “Lacking fluidity, his movements resemble the jerkings of a marionette... There are moments when he suddenly looks exhausted, sighing and closing his eyes. When they reopen, they are wide and unfocused, blurry as if filling with tears. Then he's off again, manically dancing as though a switch has been flipped.”⁵⁵

In a scene set at a live concert, Curtis mixes mechanical restraint and frenetic trance, his arms hitting the air in front of him, balancing his almost rigid body. His dancing looks like prowess, a mastering of a seemingly disarticulated frame, almost matching Méliès’ performance in *The Infernal Cake-Walk*. The public claps and yells. Curtis suddenly loses balance, his uncoordinated movements lead him towards the back of the stage and he falls under the surprised eyes of the young punters, crashing the cymbals while hitting the ground and jerking violently. For two seconds, the faces of audience members reflect surprise at viewing an *Other*. The body’s distress is watched and felt although not fully understood: there is a feeling of having witnessed a somatic vulnerability at odds with the physical skills displayed in Curtis’ usual wild dancing. A long shot silhouetting the heads of audience members points at the stage to show the managers protecting Curtis’ head, lifting his electrified and shaking body and dragging him backstage. The camera stays behind, static and functional, immersed in the crowd; the band has not stopped playing during the chaotic event. The other band members play till the end of the piece, while Curtis is transported to the dressing room.

TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EMPATHY FOR THE “ELECTRIC OTHER”

There is, between the body of the film and the consciousness of the viewer, a process that “enables both the spectator and the film to imaginatively reside in each other,” to become each other’s sensory investigator to appreciate the inner phenomenological world of an Other differently⁵⁶. The 2014 low-budget British drama *Electricity* provides this alternative inner-vision and also confronts audiences to intense haptic visuality. The camera takes us into a “reality” that spans aspects of the central character’s life, Lily O’Connor [Agness Deyn]. In this context ‘reality’ is the mundane mystery of

existence, with the emotions, desires, and the weight that it carries. The film itself is a method of enquiry and gives us a first-person viewpoint from Lily's perspective: we, the viewers, are invited to haptically and viscerally engage with her "interrupted" life and the episodic surges of otherness. The medical "reality" pictured in this film is accurate and sometimes brutal, epileptic manifestations include generalised and tonic-clonic seizures, aura, hallucinations and so on- totalling to a duration around seven and half minutes.

A cinempathic synergy could seem problematic because it is difficult to conceive of untellable experiences, such as epileptic events, happening to a subjective phenomenal body that does not let emotions transpire, not even through the blink of an eye. A film recognised for its visual and auditory haptic capabilities to pull audiences in the perceptual life and vision of the world of another is the biopic *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*.⁵⁷ The film depicts the psychological and physical upheaval of Jean-Dominique Bauby, prisoner in his own body by way of 'Locked-In Syndrome' (LIS) after a stroke. In this rarely reversible condition, patients remain paralyzed and mute and appear as if in a vegetative state. Patients are aware and self-conscious, and eye-coded communication using blinks and vertical movements is the only mode of interactions with others.⁵⁸ Bauby blinks to indicate which letter of the alphabet spelt by his human interpreter is correct. His vision, with its limitations, becomes our mode of seeing, the camera involves us in his gaze and this visualisation illustrates 'that consciousness is enacted by the physical body and its corporeal engagements with the material and social world.'⁵⁹

Contrastingly, in *Electricity*, Lily's eyes can seesaw but her consciousness is out of reach to herself. Over the length of the movie our awareness of some of her modes of consciousness develops: Lily's journey between epileptic manifestations can encourage phenomenological awareness and emotional empathy sustained by a cinempathic process. In this context, audiences can look at alterity, explore their own otherness, and to some extent are looked at by the Other. These viewings question social conventions focused on the functional, formal, and aesthetic conditions of our bodies, which in turn inform individual and collective ethics. Viewers' perceptions can oscillate between three narrative frameworks – sensory, medical, temporal- that can provide ground for a reflective phenomenology that interrogates personhood. Neurologist Sally Baxendale acknowledges *Electricity* as a turning point in fiction films' representation of the condition and states "it is not for the medical profession to dictate cinematic content. Who would want to watch a film so accurate in every detail that it mimicked a clinic consultation? However, it is satisfying when medical portrayals are sufficiently accurate not to distract from the narrative of a film for those in the know."⁶⁰

We initially meet Lily in a game parlour where she works as a cashier, alone in her glass cashier's cabin, engulfed in the noise of electronic games and their reflected shimmering lights. She is in her 20s, emanating a sense of bravado and resilience through unblinking blue eyes. Her boss, Al [Tom Georgeson] acts as her protector, sometimes caring about her injured soul and body and appearing at key moments. The death of her mother, from whom she has been estranged for many

years, brings an unexpected financial surplus, bitter memories, and the reappearance of the older of her two brothers, Barry [Paul Anderson], a professional poker player. Trust, in her brother and the world at large, is an issue as she tries to trace her other brother, Mickey [Christian Cooke], who has been missing from her life for years and whom she insists on finding to share her inheritance with. The story and various plots revolve around her quest for Mickey, led by her epilepsy that tangles physical and social vicissitudes, as well as emotional richness.

Her epilepsy is the consequence of her mother throwing her down the stairs when she was a toddler. Poverty, an unstable family, and two brothers taken away by social services make for a grim introduction to her life in a northern England seaside town. Lily knows that life can be fragile at times, has no pity for herself, and is constantly listening to her frequently autonomous body. Nevertheless, she struggles with the grip that her medical condition has on all aspects of her life, from unresolved family issues to the insistence of doctors of changing her anti-epileptic medications. Lily has an acute and self-reflective understanding of her inner self, a knowledge in line with Stein's words: "My recollections announce my memory to me; my acts of outer perception announce the acuteness of my senses (not to be taken as sense organs, of course); my volition and conduct announce my energy, etc..."⁶¹ The change of pharmaceutical treatment imposed on Lily is also deeply affecting her own in-depth sensory knowledge, her foreboding of her symptoms, the clarity of her thoughts, and, of course, leaves her susceptible to life-threatening situations.

There are entanglements between epileptic pathology, lived experiences, bodily demonstrations, medical existence, public presence, the lens, the screen, and fictional representations: some portrayals of the condition can unveil these elements and also their emotional interactions. While watching *Electricity*, members of an audience can physically experience an alternate world that links time erasure, bruised flesh, and also hope. A mix of first- and second-person and a third, omniscient perspective creates a visceral mode of perceiving, feeling and reacting to the worlds that Lily navigates. The initial epileptic portrayal happens on Lily's way to a first date with a young client of the game parlour. Walking on the pier, the aura sets in: her vision blurs and distorts the world around her. The distorted acoustic landscape mixes pin-balls, seagulls, breath, bells, and the voices of strangers. Her voice-over is matter-of-fact, aimed at herself, who is soon to leave *the living envelope of her actions*: "Here is the breath, here is the breeze, here is the shimmer, and I am Alice falling down the rabbit hole," and she down goes.

Through her open eyes, we hit the pavement, hands forward to lower the impact, and roll on our back. From down there we see through her eyes the bystanders who stay standing high. No one makes a movement towards her/us, but for five long seconds all eyes look down on her/us, and then our vision shuts out their intrigued and fading faces: we dive, yelling, eyes first into a dark but scintillating electrical landscape. This topographic situation, the ground, the largely unresponsive faces of others towering over her, repeats itself when she is in frantic and noisy London, looking for the elusive Mickey. While she is in a quest for him, she unveils an emotional empathy for her own

epileptic shadow. Her resistance to a pharmacological change imposed by doctors perversely also provides her with a new awareness of her phenomenological being, a new palette of sensations and triggers for the behaviour of *her* epilepsy and its unsteadiness.

Merleau-Ponty wrote that cinema should not try to make us feel “the internal landscape of dizziness” and that spectators would get a better sense of these states if they could contemplate, from the outside, occasional bodily ineffectiveness.⁶² Technical advancements and new mindsets allow a camera to actively dive into internal landscapes of dizziness: subjective imagery and sound represent the imagination of both storyteller and the audience. In *Electricity*, the sensory telling includes visual effects, sound distortions, and a voice-over that thrusts audiences’ imagination to work “behind the scenes.”⁶³ What gives us an enhanced perception of the electrical body in *Electricity* is also its unusual filmic treatment to express the *within*. The camera seems electrified at times: shaky jump cuts bring hallucinations, dreams, and the past. It focuses not on Lily’s whole body but on parts of its jerking totality, blurring others: epilepsy is told in small gestures that fill the screen more than in many other movies portraying aspects of the disease. The felt moving images propel spectators’ heads towards the ground, acting as alternative centres of gravity, all the while opening a mental void.

After each episode of epilepsy, her hands are ours, and we look at them closely, bruised and red-fleshed from falls on asphalt. She looks clinically at herself when she checks whether her teeth are intact, touches cuts, and traces hematomas on her skin as if remapping her body after each misadventure. Her hands slide on the walls of houses, corridors and handrails in the Tube, and we move forward and down with her towards a seizure or come back and up from one. There is a kinetic economy in the telling of Lily’s inner strength. The correspondence between the visual and the tactile is almost omniscient, and it needs to be: *Electricity* questions existential impressions, because epilepsy is a story that lies within the flesh of an individual and suspends and erases time.

Bodies fall and bruise, brains hurt, people suffer: the lives of affected individuals and their social circles can definitely be impaired. Epilepsy kills. Even today, it is not uncommon for a person having a seizure in public to become a spectacle that few bystanders will react to.⁶⁴ Socio-cultural conventions align the lives of disease, individual corporeal memory, sense of time and space, with the bodies of others and their representations in the flesh or in various media. Screen representations of neurological disorders such as Alzheimer’s and dementia have steadily increased public awareness of their human face.⁶⁵ It is possible to involve an audience’s “imaginative participation in a narrative”⁶⁶ by engaging with Lily and *her* epilepsy towards a “moral interaction” facilitated by prior practice of narrative imagination.⁶⁷ As spectators, we can imagine empathetically the differences in states of consciousness inherent to Lily’s inner world, and develop with insight and knowledge, a moral imagination that requires “imaginative extension beyond immediate appearances or spoken words”.⁶⁸

CONCLUSION: COULD REPRESENTATION OF EPILEPSY ON SCREEN EVOLVE, AND DOES IT MATTER?

In this article I have examined the evolving capacities of films to elicit emotions, sympathy and various kinds of empathy in relation to the enacting of epileptic gestures and hysteroepileptic simulations. I have also outlined some of the social influences and public responses to aspects of medical staging, cabaret appropriation and movie portrayals of these diseases. Charcot's mimetic hysteric female patients, photographic documentation, the affective impact of the "danseuses épileptiques" and cake-walk performers on stage, and the acting of epileptiform events in early films did not show proof of the disease as lived by individuals. It was the audiences' gaze on images and human performances that built an apparent truth based on medical experiments, the non-epileptic actors and audiences' experiences, expectations and imagination of the Other. This point is central in grasping the impact of Charcot's work in the context of visuality, symbolism and our quasi obsession with the appearance and objectivity of the visible, and in this case, its relationship to neurological diagnosis. Ironically, a short time before his death, Charcot admitted that his work on the pathology of the nervous system had to be revisited⁶⁹.

A kind of "mediatised medical objectivity" has contributed to a degradation of the values given to the human body in general and the wealth of unmanaged, and invisible, corporeal knowledge in particular.⁷⁰ With the bias of hysteria, epilepsy became an unspecifiable genre, binding an imagination of the pathological with affective mimetic experiences to establish a new kinetic normativity that reflected social, cultural, and moral values. Thus, to translate for movie audiences the ethical, empathetic, kinetic and emotional dimensions of some types of epilepsy is challenging because of the unique ways the disease is experienced, socially considered, and visually witnessed, in the flesh and on screen. The affective transmission of epilepsy to audiences seems to stay skin deep, maybe because epileptic aesthetics and ethics do not operate in isolation, and are also tributaries to notions of consciousness. It does matter to highlight epilepsies on screen: to bring them to life, and watch them, demands imagination, empathy and an understanding of the unique sensory abilities that lie in the flesh of actors, audiences, and individuals living with the disease.

Haptic visuality, affect, mimicry, imagination and ethical conscience can reunite: this cinematic process re-enforces the entwining of the complexity of the film text, our perception of its aesthetics, and the phenomenological engagement of spectators. Phenomenological understanding and reflective experiences converge with a cinematic empathy to escort audiences in Lily's journey. The individuality of the empathetic spectator is at the core of the interpretation of both Lily as an individual with *her* epilepsy and the gaze that is fixed upon their coupling. Her eyes and skin feed the perceptual experiences of the audience, but it is her defiance in the face of her epilepsy that takes us out of the simplified objectification often represented on screen. This is a positive development as in this film we witness, and experience, Lily developing an empathy for her own self and her own Other.

Nevertheless, we are reminded that we all feel and conceive our own emotional empathies, the products of socio-cultural and sensory knowledge and expectations, as foreshadowed by this sentence

from a 2014 review of the movie *Electricity* “Though she is smart and beautiful, Lily's life has been stunted by epilepsy.”⁷¹ To some extent, in its rawness, the sentence almost annihilates a cinempathy that runs through *Electricity* and offers a pitying view of *the falling disease*. It could also suggest that regardless of what cinema wants to show and the ways audiences want to watch, the face of epilepsy can distort the aesthetics of otherness because of the autonomy of its impulsive existence, its multiple physical disguises, and the liminality of consciousness.

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⁶¹ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 33-34

⁶² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* [Sens et non-sens], trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, *Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy*. Ed. John Wild. (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 58.

⁶³ Jane Stadler, *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 188.

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⁶⁶ Stadler, *Pulling Focus*, 186.

⁶⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Democratic Citizenship and the Narrative Imagination" in *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, 143-57 (Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, 2008), 148.

⁶⁸ Stadler, *Pulling Focus*, 202.

⁶⁹ Georges Guillain, *J.-M. Charcot, His Life - His Work 1825-1893*. Translated by Pearce Bailey. (New York, NY: Paul B. Hoeber, Inc, 1959), 176.

⁷⁰ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 181.

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TRAUMA AND RATIONALIZATION:
ETHICAL TENSIONS AND CONFOUNDING EMPATHIES IN OPPENHEIMER'S *THE ACT
OF KILLING*

Joseph G. Kickasola (Baylor University)

INTRODUCTION

*It is forbidden to kill. Therefore, all murderers
are punished unless they kill in large numbers,
and to the sound of trumpets.*

--Voltaire

This barbed quote opens Joshua Oppenheimer's groundbreaking documentary *The Act of Killing* (2012), and characterizes its overall moral situation: a besieged ethic, wherein the language of morality has been forcibly co-opted by the powers that be. As Voltaire's satire hints, one can only maintain a sense of justice obliquely and somewhat insecurely in such a situation.

I argue that, generally speaking, ethical "principle" becomes difficult to maintain in the viewing of this film, as it does not easily cohere with the emotional and perceptual experiences the film generates. In this light, this essay is concerned with the ethical experience of cinema, and what such experience can reveal about the nature of ethics and emotion. I begin with a generalization: as moral creatures, we typically approach morals as idealizations in tension with the realities of social life. *The Act of Killing* is remarkable for its subversion of this pedestrian ethical process, and, in particular, for the way it problematizes empathy, that oft-hailed virtue of contemporary morality.¹ Oppenheimer's film is a dialectical, emotionally charged, and often befuddling experience, and this makes it productive for analysis.

The Act of Killing is one of the most complex of recent documentaries, at numerous levels (construction, narrative trajectories, character personalities and trajectories, ethical and emotional dynamics, etc.). Given this, any analysis requires a certain number of caveats, up front.

I use the royal "we" throughout this essay, and generalize "typical" responses to the film. Many would say this is ill-advised, but there are a few reasons for this. While there is no doubt my quasi-phenomenological approach is inflected by my own, Western perspective (and it is clear that, even among Western audiences, judgments regarding Oppenheimer's characters, their motivations, and the moral status of the filmmaker himself have varied²), I believe Oppenheimer

is challenging any simple ethical approach. In that light, any generalized ethic could work, and I have chosen one I take to be the most common, attempting to remain at the most general levels of human perception, sense-making, and morality to minimize cultural exceptions.³ And so, the “we” in this essay signals typical judgments on the broad moral issues at stake (the evil of genocide and racism, the failure of empathy as a moral problem), as well as the existence and legitimacy of various concepts developed in this analysis (many which were developed in the West, such as empathy and sympathy). Regardless, the main argument here does not hinge so much on a universal moral code as the widely shared desire for one, on these issues, at least.⁴

At various points, I will also have to make judgments about the verity of the documentary itself and I have (as a practical matter, really) chosen to give Oppenheimer the benefit of the doubt; I write as if the events roll out before the camera precisely as Oppenheimer suggests they do, without any substantive manipulation beyond what he freely admits.⁵ However, it is crucial to note that any doubts about Oppenheimer’s intentions or fidelity to actual events only add layers of complexity to the emotional topoi of the film, and so one of the central arguments of this essay still generally holds: the testing of empathy in this film reveals its limitations as a sufficient foundation for ethics.

In the first section of the essay, I will trace and articulate some primary experiential contours of the film: surprise, vexation, and bewilderment. This pattern, a deliberate strategy to incur epistemic doubt and moral uncertainty, will be shown, in itself, to have significance as a film-philosophical dynamic that ultimately highlights and scrutinizes moral intuition (as opposed to moral reasoning).⁶

Second, what also comes to light is that this experiential pattern often hinges on empathy; our intuitions for it, our search for it in others, and our bewilderment amid its absence. The typical course for audience empathy is short-circuited in various ways, and, so, the film becomes a kind of laboratory on the empathy-ethic dynamic in human experience, and a critique of the too-easy “empathy solution” for social problems. Given that empathy has become a core virtue in many contemporary theories, both ethical and cinematic, this is important and timely.

Finally, empathy links ethics and aesthetics in that they are both weighted toward experiences, sensations, and feelings over concepts. Threaded throughout these discussions, the film’s emotional contour amounts to a dialectic between the aesthetics of ethical rationalization and national trauma, forcing the audience to live through the strange, puzzling contortions of a society permanently shaped by a relatively recent genocide. In other words, the experience of viewing the film replicates the bewilderment that accompanies life in a society where power-driven ethical rationalizations refigure reality constantly. In this case, the structure upends the

traditional form of the genre, problematizing the basic moral touchstones on which the socially-conscious documentary typically depends.

CORPOREAL EPISTEMOLOGY, ETHICS, AND INCREDULITY

Following the opening Voltaire's quote (cited above), the ironic tone persists, as the imagery defies all expectation:



Figure 1. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 2. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 3. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

These surreal, uncontextualized images are suddenly ruptured by an off-screen voice, hollering ironic instructions for the promotion of a happy surface image: “Real joy! Not just pleasure! And natural beauty! This isn’t fake!”

Perhaps we are enchanted, through the sheer audacity of the fish, the bright colors and natural beauty of the waterfall. This experience may be matched with a feeling of amusement and

curiosity—even bewilderment— as women proceed forth from the fish’s mouth and dance among the mountains, accompanying an ecstatic man in drag and another in a black robe. That the fantasy is broken by the off-screen voice yields a reflexive clue and a slight feeling of superiority: we likely don’t understand what this film is about, exactly, but we have a general cognitive category available. This is a *movie* shoot, and we admit all kinds of license to the movies (and this is to become a key critical theme).

But this is all morally inappropriate. We have been deliberately misdirected, emotionally and intuitionally. We do not yet understand the moral significance of the scene, even though we were primed by the preceding Voltaire quote to look for it. As the quote indicates (but we have not yet fully perceived), the film begins with a broken language, where words, reason, argument, and logic are all immediately found neutered and co-opted by powerful forces. We struggle to find orientation in the realm of distracting experience, and this will continue.

Indeed, the experience of the film yields a vexing epistemological pattern: constant vexation at multiple levels of understanding (rational, emotional, moral, intuition, social cognition, cultural, etc.), often in conflict. The core phenomenological contour of the film is a constant unfolding of surprise, incredulity, and bewilderment on the part of the spectator. Ethical horror will greet us, as we come to understand more, and that “horror,” as a moral anchor, will be tested. Going forward, our feeling of comprehension, mastery, and control will be continually subverted.

Regarding moral intuition, Jonathan Haidt, Antonio Damasio and others have argued that this *just is* morality, as reason is utterly wedded to, or even grounded in, our emotional life.⁷ Short of fully assenting to this claim, it is likely that many of our moral judgments flow from such lightning quick moral intuitions, with reason providing a kind of *ex post facto* considered justification/explanation to ourselves. For what it’s worth, there are critics of this theory (e.g., the philosopher Thomas Nagel⁸), but however true the theory may be, the film points to the peril in which state of affairs places us. For our purposes here, this is the central point: the film is largely *performing* this philosophical debate in experiential terms. Maarten Coëgnarts and Peter Kravanja argue this process can begin to explain how cinema itself can articulate and even “philosophize” ethics by its own formal, artistic, and experiential means.⁹ This film follows that account through, exemplifying the experience of a morally challenging cultural (and cinematic) situation, where moral reasoning is greatly hindered, and we left to work with moral impulse, only to find it also wanting, when it is so isolated.

The next images, of Indonesian street scenes overlaid with informational titles, gives us the standard “facts” of the matter, and so we are yanked back to something like conventional documentary “normalcy.” The titles read:

In 1965, the Indonesian government was overthrown by the military. Anybody opposed to the military dictatorship could be accused of being a communist: union members, landless farmers, intellectuals, and the ethnic Chinese. In less than a year, and with the direct aid of western governments, over one million “communists” were murdered.

The army used paramilitaries and gangsters to carry out the killings. These men have been in power – and have persecuted their opponents - ever since.

When we met the killers, they proudly told us stories about what they did.

To understand why, we asked them to create scenes about the killings in whatever ways they wished.

This film follows that process, and documents its consequences.

Thus ends what may be called the two-scene “prologue” to the film. The odd pairing of these two scenes—a surreal, constructed media fabrication against a more traditional, “factual” documentary opening—sets up an agonistic dynamic that will characterize the film, though not with the regularity we might find morally comforting. After being “disarmed” by cognitive disconnection in the opening scene, the heavy burdens of both morality and reason suddenly and definitively shift to us, the viewers. The weight of that burden feels particularly overwhelming precisely because we have been thrown into a place of confusion.¹⁰ In general, the “truths” and other moral touchstones for the reality before us will recede from visibility and we must, generally, maintain their presence in our minds amid a “post-truth” milieu.¹¹ They will return infrequently, in punctuated form, but will be all the more powerful for their suddenness, as a kind of moral shock to the system.

In the next scene, a group of men walk through a low-income neighborhood.



Figure 4. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

A heavy-set man in a quasi-military fatigues holds a little girl's hand (she sports a military beret). Titles indicate he is Herman Koto, a local gangster and paramilitary leader. The other prominent figure is older, in more sophisticated dress. He is Anwar Congo, an executioner in the 1965 genocide. Throughout this scene he coolly looks on, while Koto crudely jokes with local residents. The strangeness of the event is compounded by the way these “killers” seem bumbling, incompetent, and largely undirected.

“I’m looking for an actress...” Koto says to a village woman. She smiles and declines, and he jokes about her alleged aspirations for movie stardom. Koto then mentions to Anwar that this area was “all communist” during the time of the massacre, and so it will be difficult to cast his film here. And so, amid all the jocularity, we realize this is a particularly cruel manner of typecasting:

We’re looking for women with children to play communist wives. You try to prevent us from burning down your house, but in the end we burn it down.

The casualness with which Koto describes his project, and his attempts to recruit victim families to it, is properly rattling. However, our moral queasiness is held in tension with the overall humor and strangeness of the scene, instigated by Koto. At first, the villagers’ reactions are difficult to discern, partly because of their own inherently conflicted state: some of them are

“auditioning” for roles that will, conceivably, get them money or some other form of remuneration.



Figure 5. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 6. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 7. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

One prominent trigger of empathy, psychologists tell us, is our urge to imitate and mimic those to whom we are trying to relate.¹² This process is stymied with this ambiguity. Any moral reasoning assembled so far is not easily finding support in our emotional experience of the film.

Then the scene becomes more emotionally complicated. Koto does some actor coaching with a group of neighborhood children, regarding how they ought to act in the scene he is pitching. Naturally, the children should be distraught when contemplating their neighborhood's destruction, but we observe a shift from concern to laughter in the crowd, via Koto's wild theatrics and off-color humor. Tellingly, the adults only laugh belatedly (after the children, born after the massacre). All this incongruity points to how trauma hides away, after it has broken the world.



Figure 8. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 9. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 10. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 11. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 12. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

Oppenheimer thought that he'd be telling the untold stories of the victims, like a typical investigative journalist. However, the victims and their families would not speak to him, partly out of fear, and because the Indonesian military eventually forbade them.¹³ It's an open question as to how much they *could* have spoken. As Elaine Scarry has written, "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it... Intense pain is world-destroying."¹⁴ This is so, largely because pain is an experience for which language does little justice and cannot readily be shared among those who have not experienced it. That lack of shareability opens the door for the abuse of power in a unique way, Scarry argues, in her discussion of torture.¹⁵

This also begins to explain how the killers could find some measure of acceptance in their respective areas to this day, more than fifty years later, and why a new generation of criminals idolize them, even as they continue in both corruption and social influence (e.g., Oppenheimer depicts the criminals as friends with political leaders, and one of them even runs for political office). Oppenheimer claims the Indonesian government has always framed the killings of 1965 in terms of national emergency (politically "saving the nation," and so on), and has downplayed any suggestion of cruelty, racism, or inhumane treatment of others.

We see this propaganda portrayed in Oppenheimer's film, but we also see the "gangsters" (as they proudly call themselves) curiously resisting it. Our mind-reading abilities (related to the empathic) are tested, as one would think these gangsters would sanitize their own histories. Oppenheimer reveals the opposite. To our amazement, they are eager to share their exploits and

do not attempt to justify or reconcile their behavior with any obvious moral code. They are utterly comfortable: no shame, no guilt, not even a sense of discomfort with their past (with a few important exceptions near the end of the film, to be discussed below). Unlike their victims, they have their language fully intact, though we have reason to think it does not fully reflect actual reality. By the end of the film, it's clear that flexing power also has consequences. As they go on to express themselves further, things take a turn to the surreal. We discover that if “intense pain is world-destroying” intense guilt is world-warping.

To summarize the emotional contour of the opening few scenes of the film, we began with an intriguing yet bewildering reality. We know abstract historical facts about national trauma and what might be called genocide. We now look for experience, through footage – live characters moving, talking, and gesturing – to confirm and flesh out the truth that we have been told. What we have encountered so far, however, are gangsters that don't look like gangsters, talking to victims who don't act like victims, all embarking on a bizarre, troubling project without anyone acknowledging how strange it is.

We have been looking for *cues* to confirm our moral knowledge, but they are nowhere to be found. Our knowledge remains abstract – a moral truth we have been told but have not yet experienced. That lack of emotional anchor – so far – places us in a tenuous position. It's not that we disbelieve the massacre happened, or that it was anything but evil. We just don't feel experientially confirmed in this judgment, and so moral reasoning becomes harder to retain.

Another bewildering irony here is that those with the power—the killers, not the victims—feel their stories have not been adequately told. In the scene to follow, Koto and Congo discuss the significance of the project to come:

Whether it ends up on the big screen – or only on TV, it doesn't matter. But we have to show... that this is the history! This is who we are! So in the future people will remember!

So, they see national memory as a commitment to the detailed truth of their brutality. However, when given opportunity to tell their stories, they turn to the distorted language they know best: the heavily constructed, fanciful tropes of entertainment. They re-enact “history” as cinematic vignettes, each in a different cinematic genre: the musical, the western, the war film, the horror film, and (their specialty) the gangster film.



Figure 2. The musical. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 3. The Western. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 4. The War Film. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 5. The Horror Film. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 6. The Gangster Film. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

So, Oppenheimer's film becomes, unexpectedly, a story about how killers tell their own stories to themselves, through the media that inspired much of their brutality (they explicitly admit). In this way, the killers will psychologically, and aesthetically, frame "reality" for us for the rest of the film.

It's not difficult, by the end, to determine what has happened, but it becomes increasingly difficult to believe *that* it happened as it did, leaving us with numerous questions regarding why it happened at all. Whether this is a doubt of the filmmaker (is he manipulating us?) or a bewildered recognition that "truth is stranger than fiction," Oppenheimer deliberately puts us through the paces of doubt, incredulity, and disorientation, epistemically and morally. In so doing, the film is a moral critique, but an oblique, discouraging, and bewildering one, at best, calling for a better harmonization of our two tiers of moral experience: the intuitional and the higher ordered principle.

THE TESTING OF EMPATHY

There is a great deal of confusion in the popular use of the terms sympathy and empathy, such that they are often used interchangeably. Most debates surrounding the term have to do with the level of emotional/corporeal immediacy and/or intensity involved in the experience. Generally speaking, to be "sympathetic" is largely conceived as feeling "for" someone in a manner that

doesn't aim to take on the experiences or emotional state of the target person. To be "empathetic" is to feel "with" someone, with some measure of imagination, simulation, or embodiment of the experiences and emotions the target is experiencing.¹⁶

In Robert Sinnerbrink's account, cinema's ethical power is to promote a kind of "cinempathy," wherein both the intuitional and rational moral processes of a person are put in dialogue and mutually strengthen.¹⁷ Cinema can prompt ethical experience, that is, an experiential "space" to holistically work out ethical issues. "Cinempathy" is the power of cinema create this space by "render[ing] the dynamic movement between poles of empathy and sympathy in an experientially rich manner." That is, "[i]t can encourage shifting between central and peripheral imagining, thus enabling spectators to both inhabit and observe, emotionally engage with and ethically evaluate, the fictional characters with whom we align ourselves within a cinematic world." It is "a cinematic/kinetic expression of the synergy between affective attunement, emotional engagement, and moral evaluation that captures more fully the ethical potential of the cinematic experience."

In its ability to comprehensively embrace both dimensions of the encounter with the other, cinempathy is a valuable construct for film ethics.¹⁸ Likewise, it provides a baseline of "typical" ethical experience for film. However, this is not a typical film, and this "balanced" dynamic is precisely what is strained in *The Act of Killing*. The experiential dynamic of bewilderment and vexation in both empathic (central imagining) and sympathetic (peripheral imagining) operations, renders the whole equation challenging.¹⁹

This tension suggests the limitations of empathy *alone* as a sufficient foundation for ethics, cinematic or otherwise. When the language is broken in a minority culture, the natural recourse is to find common experience to bind people together in unity. And, yet, empathy is partly contingent on a shared ethic to form an evaluative ground for the emotions experienced. The film denies us any obvious resources for this. Any empathy we feel may,, in fact, be legitimate empathy, but without sufficient balance or support from peripheral imagining or abstract reasoning. The resources are so low in those areas that the total ethical equation becomes unbalanced, and prone to moral error. What's more, our empathic targets are very limited.

With the discovery of mirror neurons – that is, motor dimensions of the brain that generate types of experiences that mirror the experiences of others²⁰ – the discussion of empathy has extended far more deeply into the territory of movement and what Julian Hanich calls "somatic empathy," the affective dimension (as opposed to the cognitive dimension) of empathy.²¹ Affective mimicry, as part of somatic empathy, is a phenomenon whereby we precognitively mimic the expressions, emotions and affects of someone else, and this forms a facial feedback

loop, whereby the perceiver comes to replicate similar emotions to the perceived resulting in something of an understanding of the other person's experience. Pre-cognitive mirroring mechanisms partially engage the motor system of the perceiver in solidarity with movements perceived in the other.

As a narrative, the emotional, dramatic arc, which *naturally demands* some kind of empathy, is hijacked in service to the wrong cause. The killers, we discover, are funny, curious, often joyful, untroubled characters, and affective mimicry, as an impulse, naturally drives us toward a kind of emotional attunement to the characters on the screen despite the protestations of our conscience. Most viewers will not be passive in this hijacking, but this means their energies will be split between the emotional pull of the film and ethical resistance to it. Likewise, we are taxed as we search for a moral center to the narrative before us.

Given the depths that "empathy" runs, and extent to which empathy defines human interactions from top to bottom (cf. Fritz Breithaupt's claim²²), we might think that these killers could not help but feel empathy for the victims they saw writing and dying at their own hands. To not feel empathy in these circumstances seems a truly daunting feat requiring great effort. Yet, there is no evidence this brutality was hard for them at all. Indeed, it seems as natural as respirating. Why?

One answer to this dilemma comes from an empathy critic, Yale University psychologist Paul Bloom.²³ His judgment is that empathy is, more often than not, an unhelpful or even dangerous dynamic. In this situation, he would argue that the empathic capacities of the killers are not lost, but the emotions and affections arising are perversely re-directed to their "tribe" of fellow gangsters. The energy and emotion generated by the suffering of victims cements their allegiance with the tribe, ironically, *against* the victim. In other words, the victim is not merely de-humanized, but *instrumentalized* for the facilitation of a perverse form of empathy, group bonding over another's suffering, often with a skewed, solipsistic moral telos (e.g., "do what must be done").²⁴ This criticism is supported, in many respects, by the philosopher Jesse Prinz.²⁵ Both admit to some benefits (personal, social, moral) of empathy in some situations, but they all fiercely decry its prominence in contemporary moral theory and warn that an over-reliance upon it can be disastrous.

Fritz Breithaupt envisions a middle way between "anti-empathy" critics and pro-empathy apologists. He takes an instrumental view, arguing for empathy as a powerful human *capacity* to "co-experience" with others at some key emotional and cognitive levels. As such, it forms an enormous part of our humanity and functions as the key to many human endeavors and achievements we hold dear, but should not be assumed to be inherently moral. To the point, here:

Breithaupt details how narcissists, rapists, stalkers, and sadists (among others) all make liberal and skilled use of empathy in their immoral pursuits.²⁶

The third full scene of the film is particularly disturbing in this regard, as Congo re-enacts, almost gleefully, one of his typical killings upon a rooftop. Here, he demonstrates an advanced embodied understanding of the movements and position of his victims, and suggests he had access to their feelings and existential dilemma, all without any resulting moral conviction.

Smiling, and as a way of introduction, he flatly states: “There’s many ghosts here because many people were killed here... they died unnatural deaths.” Then, he begins to “act” as he talks: “They arrived perfectly healthy. When they got here they were beaten up... and died.”



Figure 7. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 19. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

The casualness of his demeanor mixed with the precision of his account is chilling. He literally pantomimes the very qualities that affirm the humanity of the victims, as a demonstration of embodied understanding, on some level.



Figure 8. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

Congo believes it imperative that we understand how his favored execution system worked, and puts himself and his friend through the paces of it. He instructs his friend to play the victim. Given that we are now less than eight minutes into the film, and we are faced with yet another strange “genre,” of sorts: a particularly dark version of the “how-to” video.



Figure 9. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

In an odd turn, the next shot shows Congo with the wire casually ringing *his own* neck, discussing how he’s “tried to forget all this” through music, dancing, alcohol, drugs, etc.. He begins to dance, and, after a few moments, his friend announces, with a strange smile, “He’s a happy man.”

The idea of role-playing as empathy-enducing therapy is common in contemporary psychology, particularly in the study of pro-social behavior in children.²⁷ However, there has been nothing in Congo’s demeanor, to this point, to suggest that he is emotionally *aligned* with his victims, despite his detailed understanding of them. Congo wants “to forget,” not obviously for moral conscience, the film reveals, but because of the fear of vengeance. He has dreams and night terrors of his victim’s ghosts returning to kill him.

One would be tempted to relegate this man to an easy conceptual bin: that of the self-deluded psychopath, but Oppenheimer will not permit this. For instance, in a later scene, Congo teaches his grandson how to care for a pet duck, which the boy accidentally injured. His loving instructions rise to the most ironic levels: “Sweet little duck -- Don’t! You’ll hurt her again -- Say... I’m sorry duck. It was an accident. I was scared, so I hit you.”



Figure 10. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 11. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

No one disputes that empathy is an essential capacity that must be developed for normal, healthy human functioning. Likewise, empathy is a virtue the cinema is strongly positioned to engender (cf. Stadler 2008, Sinnerbrink 2014). Yet, this film functions as a giant qualification on these general statements: it is *often* so, but when it fails to engender *morally-directed* empathy, or engenders a false or misleading empathy, the results can be morally disastrous.

This is important, because another theme of this particular film is the movies and their influence. In addition to all the “genres” that characterize the “historical” film the killers are making, they were movie ticket scalpers before the government recruited them for violence. Not only did they watch movies to “get them in a happy mood” before killing, but they also talk about the gangster movies and other violent films that *inspired* their violence. At another point in the film Congo positively revels in how much violence they will be able to show in their own film, more than any ordinary Hollywood film, because he has done it himself, “in real life.”

As viewers, we are hereby implicated in this reflexive game. As the film runs along, we find ourselves, in all our confusion, looking for some relief. It is natural to laugh at the jokes (and there are quite a few), marvel at the novelty of the story, and come to find endearing dimensions in even the worst characters... until the amusements slip to talk of murder, as if there is little distinction between the two. Over and over again the pattern repeats.

RATIONALIZATIONS WILL ABIDE, BUT TRAUMA WILL OUT

Killing is the worst crime you can do. So the key is to find a way not to feel guilty. It's all about finding the right excuse. For example, if I'm asked to kill someone... If the compensation is right... then of course I'll do it, and from one perspective it's not wrong. That's the perspective we must make ourselves believe.

--Adi Zulkadry, executioner in 1965

As mentioned, most of *The Act of Killing* revolves around the making of this odd film, and various conversations with the gangsters in their normal day-to-day activities (which are typically amusing, inflected with morally discomfiting moments). However, two key scenes – both appearing as sudden divergences from everything else in the film, provide something of a moral bedrock from which the film can be evaluated. Without them, the film would not be a dialectic, as described in the introduction, but a nihilistic descent.

The first features Anwar's neighbor, Suryono, who is involved with the gangster's production and encourages them in their efforts to describe the truth of the genocide. He tells them he has a true story, and the others urge him to tell it because “everything in this film should be true.” He laughs as he speaks, even though he reveals, early on, this is the story of his own Chinese stepfather, who had raised him since he was an infant. When Suryono was “11 or 12,” unknown men came at 3 a.m. and kidnapped the man from his home (“I remember it well... and

it's impossible to forget"). The next morning they found him dead on the side of the road under a cut oil drum. The boy Suryono and his grandfather buried him. After that, the entire family was exiled, and this is why Suryono was never given an education and had to teach himself to read and write.

As he tells this deeply personal, tragic story, he smiles, and laughs, and ends with a disclaimer that he is "not criticizing" the gangsters or their film project, but merely wants to contribute a true story to the film. They are unsure what to say, but ultimately reject his idea as too complicated.

This does not keep them from having him do a stint as a rehearsal actor, however, playing the role of an alleged communist during an interrogation. Suryono's "performance" is absolutely devastating.



Figure 12. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

The "voices" of the victims are nearly absent in this film, but when they do emerge they puncture the fantasy in which we've lived. They function as a kind of shock to the system, which has largely been instantiated by various levels dramatic attraction to, even empathy for, the central (evil) protagonists. In this respect the film could be seen in a kind of Brechtian light: a suspicion and self-reflexive critique of the emotional powers of the medium.

This “performance” provokes no obvious emotional response from the gangsters, but they do go on to admit that they were cruel, and have a high-academic discussion of how this film they are making will undercut the propaganda that always suggested that *communist* cruelty necessitated the killings for the sake of the nation. They hold this matter-of-fact discussion in front of Suryono, who finds the entire discussion very evidently painful. He winces and fidgets throughout.

That traumatized individuals would hide their torment through laughter and other forms of social performance is not surprising, but Oppenheimer runs the audience itself through this disconcerting aesthetics of trauma. Through much of the film, our natural responses – facial mimicry and such – run in utter disharmony with the truths of the trauma that we know. Then, in an ironic turn, the emblematic-yet-fictional scene reveals the most emotional truth. Though Suryono was never interrogated as such, to our knowledge, he has little trouble empathetically channeling his stepfather’s emotional experience.

This naked, powerful moment is followed by a strange, even ominous image of Congo on studio camera, aiming right at us. We have been witnessing the truth of the victims slip out, here and there, amid the ostentatious, insensitive cinematic constructions of the gangsters. Congo’s camera breaks the fourth wall, reminding us that we are also watching a construction in the form of Oppenheimer’s film. We are ontologically destabilized in this moment.

The aesthetics of trauma mingle with and run up – in complicated ways – with the aesthetics of the filmmaking process, which (for the gangsters) amount to a kind of aesthetics of rationalization.



Figure 13. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

This becomes powerfully evident, a bit later, when we see the re-enactment of the village burning, the casting for which was depicted earlier. The laughter and frivolity of that scene turns to shock and terror once the shooting of the re-enactment is over. Several participants are very clearly traumatized.²⁸



Figure 14. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 15. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 16. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

Regarding this scene, Congo remarks “Honestly, I never expected it would look this awful. My friends keep telling me to act more sadistic, but then I saw the women and children. Imagine those children’s future. They’ve been tortured...Now their houses will be burned down. What future do they have? They will curse us for the rest of their lives.” The girl (“Febby”) in the

picture above is Koto's daughter, recruited for the film, and she's been emotionally shattered. Congo's own "tribe" has now experienced trauma, in at least some simulated fashion, and the negative empathic bonding he had enjoyed has been ruptured by empathic trauma, causing him to rethink the experience of his victims.

So begins Anwar's very delayed, incremental epiphany regarding the moral calamity he has wrought. This tiny bit of perspective taking, present in that last bit of empathetic dialogue, gives way to a scene that depicts Congo talking about judgment: "Karma.... A law straight from God" and a "terrifying" darkness surrounding him. For this moment, whatever empathy did in him in this moment is quickly displaced by a sense of self-preservation, fear of judgment, and concern over consequences.

The next scene heightens this dynamic. Congo plays a communist being tortured for information (with everyone dressed up as gangsters, see still image, above). And, so, he embodies his victims one step further than the rooftop scene. He plays the victim in the strangulation. He is visibly disturbed after a scene with a knife in his face, and then has an emotional breakdown after a shot in which he is faux-strangled by a wire garotte. He is so emotionally distraught afterwards he cannot go on filming, and there is some hope that he is finally beginning to understand, on an experiential level, what his victims endured.

"The body keeps the score," Bessel van der Kolk writes.²⁹ The quote from Congo's fellow murderer Adi Zulkadry, above, suggests a kind of moral trauma of guilt on the part of the killers that must be suppressed and denied, and Zulkadry himself claims extraordinary success in this regard.³⁰ However, could it be that the corporeal knowledge builds and builds in a kind of corporeal economy that eventually tips from somatic empathy into the realm of cognitive empathy? It doesn't quite happen here, but, in yet another alarming reversal, it does seem to occur in the next scene.

CONCLUSION: TRAUMATIC CINEMA, EVIL, AND OTHER EPISTEMOLOGICAL TANGLES

In the first section of this essay, I described the opening "movie set" scene and how we were inclined to shelve moral incomprehension for surreal entertainment. Now we can begin to imagine how a minority culture might receive this scene if it were epistemologically and ethically exhausted, knowing only a broken, distorted language, with little means of expression.

Toward the end of the film, just before Congo's epiphany, we return to that scene. Contextual information, withheld from us before, is now readily apparent. Two (previously unseen) men remove steel wires from their necks. One takes a medal of honor from his pocket and places it over Congo's head, before the waterfall.



Figure 17. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

“For executing me and sending me to heaven, I thank you a thousand times, for everything,” he says.

The film suddenly cuts to Congo watching this scene on his home television. He gushes with enthusiasm: “I never imagined I could make something so great. One thing that makes me so proud is how the waterfall expresses such deep feelings!”

He then eagerly requests to see the gangster scene, wherein he is “strangled.” He requests his young grandsons get out of bed to “watch the scene where grandpa is tortured and killed,” rebuffing admonitions that the scene is too violent. Congo himself becomes more and more disturbed as he watches himself on screen.

“Did the people I tortured feel the way I do here?” he suddenly asks. “I can feel what the people I tortured felt, because here my dignity has been destroyed... and then the fear comes, right there and then. All the terror suddenly possessed my body. It surrounded me, and possessed me.”

Oppenheimer responds, off camera: “Actually, the people you tortured felt far worse – because you know it’s only a film. They knew they were being killed.”

“But I can feel it, Josh. Really. I feel it. Or have I sinned? I did this to so many people, Josh.”

He starts to cry.

“Is it all coming back to me? I really hope it won’t. I don’t want it to, Josh.”

The final scene of the film depicts Congo ascending to the same rooftop execution site he showed us before. “I know it was wrong – but I had to do it.” He says.

And then he starts to retch. And retch again. And again. And again.

The visceral power of the scene is heightened by the abnormally loud, undeniably corporeal sound of the retching, which is voiced directly into the lavalier microphone on Congo’s shirt.

So, the aesthetics of rationalization yield to the aesthetics of trauma. The empathic revelation we have sought finally arrives, but with an ironic vengeance. The pain of acting out the scene was not enough. It took *seeing himself* on the screen, with some experiential distance from the moment (what Gregory Currie has described as a cinematic “running one’s emotions off-line”³¹) to *connect* his own suffering to those of his victims. It took the mediated image—the very medium that had catalyzed so many of his crimes—to present a distanced and yet potent simulation of his own trauma, and “really feel” the suffering of his victims.

To take him at his word, a kind of moral empathy does good work in Congo, in the end, though the road has been long and halting, and required extraordinary intervention on Oppenheimer’s part. The experience of acting permitted Congo to acquire a vocabulary of suffering at the experiential level, at the image schematic level (as Mark Johnson might describe it³²). That vocabulary, in itself, is not enough, but the cinema eventually provided the impetus to *morally utilize* those experiences. It was out of Congo’s new experience that the words finally came.

The body keeps the score, but the cinema preserves the body in time, not in the dead “mummified” way André Bazin suggested,³³ but as an empathetic call to the senses of those who are still among the living.

However, the experience of this film has taught us of the limitations and ethical indeterminacy of both the cinema and empathy. We have some (small) hope for Congo now, but this does not explain why it took so long, how efficacious this change will be long-term, or how we could begin to care for the multitude of unseen victims. This society’s enormously propagandistic structure, built to sustain the rationalization of genocide, still stands. If we care to

follow this experience through, we must interrogate propagandistic structures everywhere, including those we find in the West.

The Act of Killing is a truly complex rumination on morality, seeking to experientially traverse the aesthetic and emotional terrain of great moral failure. The “problem” is not knowing the historical truth in this film, but rather that the truth (and, thus, the “right” or “good”) seems powerless and inaccessible in the wake of surreality. There is no clear “message” here, except a warning of the depths of human evil and the exceedingly strange mental and emotional gymnastics one can perform to avoid personal guilt or responsibility. The audience finds itself—paradoxically—*alone* in the moral equation, limited to observation, and powerless amid the dynamics that normalize injustice.

Indeed, the primary emotional contours of this film are characterized by repeating cycle of surprise, fascination, incredulity, vexation, and bewilderment. This is by design, accomplishing multiple objectives: they highlight and interrogate moral intuitions (over moral reasoning), simulate personal and national trauma, and mirror the incoherent spirals of ethical avoidance.

So much of this stems from the need and desire to “get inside the heads” of killers, and fruits of our efforts are unclear, difficult to accept, and beg even more questions. This is, perhaps, because these killers do not fit easily fit into our expectations of how human beings behave, guilty or innocent. What’s more, there is little access to victims; instead, most of our time has been spent in the warped universe of killers, who fancy themselves entertainers and artists. Given who they are, we may also struggle with their credibility. For most of the film we have been taxed, challenged to avoid our natural inclinations towards empathy with most of the characters we have seen, to resist empathy for the moral good.

The film deliberately and relentlessly presents us with scenarios where our intuitive and categorical moral faculties fail to harmonize. This is a cinematic, experiential correlate to the “loss of language” that accompanies great pain and trauma, as well as suggesting something about tensions involved in the rationalization of evil. Likewise, we are implicated in the moral equation, as we have consumed this film, as well as the film within the film.

All this problematizes recent theories of ethics that largely build upon empathy, suggesting that empathy may be “natural,” but an ethical empathy is quite difficult work, and not always as efficacious for ethical behavior as it is sometimes portrayed. This raises dark questions about human nature and points to the need for other measures of ethics to supplement empathy.

In the end, we don’t fully disbelieve what we see and feel. We just struggle to believe that this experiential reality can fully account for itself.

¹ This, admittedly, pedestrian summation of ethics reflects the common amalgamation of various ethical theories that still abide in the West. Immanuel Kant, famously, put forth a dramatically normative “deontological” ethics over the moral sense theory (“sentimentalism”) of his day, and I believe it’s fair to say that most people operate on (at least) both these theories at different times, with consequentialism thrown in (for good measure), and attempt to harmonize them. Assuming “pedestrian” views of things is, of course, very imprecise, but I have generalized ethics in this way for a particular purpose: this is not an essay on moral intuitional or ideal ethical theories, but on the *experience* of having them, and how the film manipulates and challenges these amalgamations of theory and intuition in our ethical lives. This is most pronounced in the contemporary concern for “empathy,” for which, President Barack Obama famously claimed, we suffer a “deficit” (in a speech for the gala for K.I.D.S./Fashion Delivers, December 4, 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4md_A059JRc). In this way, the analysis here is more phenomenological and aesthetic than argumentative, and I admit I am generalizing from a broadly Western perspective with hopes of transcending it. I do believe, however, at this very general level, this ethical posture does have at least *some significant* compatibility across many cultures and ethical theories, particularly in regard to some of the largest issues in this film, which have received broad, international attention over the last century (e.g., genocide, ethnic cleansing, etc.).

² To take one potent example, see the special issue of a prominent academic journal dedicated entirely to this film. Ed. Thomas Fenton, *Critical Asian Studies*, 46:1 (2014) contains a wide range of thoughtful opinions and interpretations of the film.

³ The reader must judge me right or wrong, but, in the end, I maintain that some variance in reception is precisely what we should expect from such a complex film. However, based on widely accepted principles of human psychology, I still maintain that some broad generalizations about the emotional shape of this film can be made and made productively.

⁴ For example, the desire for human beings to universally view genocide as evil is in keeping with the position of the United Nations (see the U.N. General Assembly Resolution 260: https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crimes%20of%20Genocide.pdf). However, clearly, the provocative question hanging over this film is “Why is such a resolution necessary? Why is this not the state of world affairs?”.

⁵ This essay, in its attempt to capture a kind of experiential contour of ethics in cinematic encounter, assumes a certain trust in the filmmaker and its subjects. One could view the film more critically than I do here, and perhaps one should (Oppenheimer has not fully escaped criticism for some of his methods, see Ed. Fenton, *Critical Asian Studies*), but the assumption here is that most viewers will receive the film as Oppenheimer’s own, native experience, and will generally trust his framing of the issues, even as they negotiate the complex “realities” they experience throughout the film. This whole issue is difficult to summarize, however, because so much of the film *confesses* manipulation in light of its artificial construct (i.e., giving criminals the means to cinematically fantasize about their own histories). Likewise, there are clearly temporal manipulations (which Oppenheimer doesn’t hide) where scenes are presented sequentially that were clearly not shot sequentially (e.g., the obvious changing color of Congo’s hair, back and forth, between scenes). In these cases, I am choosing to believe that Oppenheimer is editing thematically, rather than sequentially, and doing so as a means of presenting a portrait of a man as accurately as he can perceive the man himself. This is, of course, a contestable judgment, but that feeling of contestation also, *itself*, becomes part of the confounding, bewildering ethical dynamic of the film.

⁶ As Robert Sinnerbrink, Tom Wartenberg and others have argued, this is film-philosophy, which is to say it “does” philosophy by its own unique, aesthetic and experiential means. The familiar “contents” of philosophical ethics are present, but largely hang as constellations around a core set of experiences. Films “do” philosophy by having the audience *live through* philosophically steeped situations, cinematically. This process yields philosophical insights and sets the terms of philosophical debate in ways that rational thinking, alone, cannot. Indeed, this film often strategically undercuts the rational, but does so as a critique of moral intuition as sufficient unto itself, suggesting that moral reasoning remains intuition’s essential partner. See Sinnerbrink, Robert *New Philosophies of Film* (London: Continuum, 2011) and Wartenberg, Tom, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁷ See Haidt, Jonathan, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment”, *Psychological Review* 108.4 (2001): 814-834) as well as *The Righteous Mind: Why*

Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion (New York: Pantheon, 2012), and Damásio, António, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: GP Putnam, 1994).

⁸ See Nagel's review of Haidt's *The Righteous Mind*, entitled "The Taste for Being Moral", *The New York Review of Books*, December 6, 2012, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/12/06/taste-being-moral/> (accessed June 24, 2019).

⁹ Cöegnarts, Maarten and Peter Kravanja, *Embodied Cognition and Cinema* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015), 171-4.

¹⁰ It's worth noting this is precisely the opposite of the Classic Hollywood model of screenwriting, wherein the story world is comprehensively defined and the moral stakes of the story clearly laid out.

¹¹ McIntyre, Lee, *Post-Truth*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018).

¹² See Hatfield Elaine, Richard L. Rapson, and Yen-Chi Le, "Emotional Contagion and Empathy," and van Baaren, Rick B., Jean Decety, Ap Bijksterhuis, Andries van der Leij, and Matthijs L. van Leeuwen, "Being Imitated: Consequences of Nonconsciously Showing Empathy," in Eds. Decety, Jean and William Ickes, *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009).

¹³ Such is Oppenheimer's claim. Goldberg, Matt. "Director Joshua Oppenheimer talks *The Act of Killing*, How the Film Has Affected Indonesia, Seeing Horror through Cinematic Prism, the Director's Cut," *Collider* (online), (January 9, 2014) <http://collider.com/joshua-oppenheimer-the-act-of-killing-interview/> (accessed June 29, 2019).

¹⁴ Scarry, Elaine, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

¹⁵ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, chapter 1.

¹⁶ There are many resources on empathy, but some of the main ones guiding this essay are Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie's *Empathy: Philosophical Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Decety and Ickes' *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, and Jane Stadler's *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2008).

¹⁷ Sinnerbrink, Robert, *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 94-95.

¹⁸ One of the virtues of Sinnerbrink's elegant construct is that it encompasses and tames a lot of the confusion surrounding empathy as a term. As C. Daniel Batson notes there are at least eight uses of the term in the social scientific and psychological literature. See Batson, Daniel, "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena", Ed. Decety and Ickes, *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, 3-15.

¹⁹ While Sinnerbrink clearly regards this film highly, and sees it as ethically productive, he does not fully articulate how his "cinempathy" construct operates within the film, despite giving a whole chapter to the film in his book. I argue that it doesn't easily work here, and this is both deliberate and significant.

²⁰ See Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra, *The Empathic Screen: Cinema and Neuroscience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

²¹ Hanich, Julian, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 181-3.

²² "...[W]e are 'homo empathicus,'" he states. Breithaupt, Fritz, *The Dark Sides of Empathy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2019), 7.

²³ Bloom, Paul, *Against Empathy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016).

²⁴ Bloom, *Against Empathy*, chapter 5 ("Violence and Cruelty").

²⁵ Prinz, Jesse, "Against Empathy," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 49, no. 1 (2011): 214-33.

²⁶ Breithaupt, *The Dark Sides*, chapters 3-5. Note that negative empathies are not limited to the pathological or wickedly motivated. Breithaupt also critiques helicopter parenting and German Chancellor Angela Merkel's humanitarian refugee policies as misguided, unproductive empathies, for instance.

²⁷ Examples are not difficult to find today, having emerged from influential research on "perspective taking" exercises among children in the 1970s: Iannotti, Ronald J. "Effect of role-taking experiences on role taking, empathy, altruism, and aggression", *Developmental Psychology* 14, no. 2 (1978): 119, Iannotti, R. J., "Naturalistic and structured assessments of prosocial behavior in preschool children: The influence of empathy and perspective taking", *Developmental Psychology*, 21 no.1 (1985): 46-55, Paula B. Boorman, "Biography and Role Playing: Fostering Empathy in Abnormal Psychology," *Teaching of Psychology*, 29 [1] (2002): 32-36.

²⁸ It is unclear in the film, but Oppenheimer has clarified that he never knowingly cast a victim in the film (he explains that no one knew Suryono was the stepchild of a victim until after the scene was shot, due to a language gap). The children in the burning scene are all the children and relatives of gangsters and perpetrators. The old woman who dramatically faints during filming is, in fact, the wife of an executioner who publicly announced, in a previous scene, “God hates communists. There will be no reconciliation.” She claimed she fainted because she was “possessed” of a spirit. See Oppenheimer, Joshua, “When Killers Played Victims,” *The New York Review of Books* (online), (November 19, 2015) <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/19/when-killers-played-victims/> (accessed June 30, 2019).

²⁹ Kolk, Bessel van der, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014).

³⁰ Over emotionally contrapuntal scenes of an upscale shopping mall visit with his family, he recounts his crimes in merciless detail (“We shoved wood in their anus until they died... we ran them over with cars...,” etc.). In the end, Zulkadry and his cohorts were never punished, and “there’s nothing to be done about it.” The victims “have to accept it.” Remarkably, Zulkadry claims “I’ve never felt guilty, never been depressed, never had nightmares.”

³¹ Currie, Gregory, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 144.

³² Johnson, Mark, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

³³ Bazin, André, *What is Cinema? Vol. 1.* (2nd ed.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 9.

A PSYCHOANALYTIC ETHICS FOR SCREEN AESTHETICS? THE CASE OF *SPRING
BREAKERS*

Alison Horbury (University of Melbourne)

INTRODUCTION

Robert Sinnerbrink suggests that film-philosophy and film-ethics converge around cinema's production of an "aesthetic experience" preoccupied with "the human figure in action, the individual in relation to the community, the human being against nature, or the interpersonal world of psychological and emotional conflict."¹ Within this broad definition any film might be the subject of ethical-philosophical inquiry where, Sinnerbrink further notes, film-ethics is broadly evident in approaches to film that examine the ethics "*in* cinema (focussing on narrative content)," questions "*of* cinematic representations" (the politics of representation), and cinema's role as "a medium" of political and ideological ways of seeing.² As Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey suggest, despite the discipline formalising around "three major ways of seeing the relationship between film and its ethical functions: the revisionist, the perceptionist, and the cognitivist perspective," each category works within "the two traditional realms within ethics—goodness and morality."³ Seemingly in contrast to notions of goodness and morality, Jacques Lacan posits the work of the psychoanalytic clinic as an "ethics of the singular": a practice that aims not at revealing "a universal truth" but the "particular truth" of self-knowledge that "appears to everyone in its intimate specificity."⁴ Indeed, a psychoanalytic ethics places special emphasis on the specificity of knowledge regarding the subject's particular mode of *jouissance*—how one "enjoys" beyond the limits of pleasure and reality principles—where, as Lacan puts it, "in the last analysis, what subject really feels guilty about" is not immoral action per se, but "the extent to which he has compromised his desire."⁵ Can such an ethics have a place in an ethics of film aesthetics? The difference in approach is perhaps smaller than first approximation for, as Choi and Frey note, many contemporary approaches to cinematic ethics prioritise "affectivity over rationality, and ethics of the particular over ethics of moral imperatives," where "the particular effective nature of film spectatorship" and "perceptual and sensorial engagement with film" can be "considered ethical in and of itself, not merely as a moral ground to connect reality and others outside the self."⁶

This paper therefore considers what a psychoanalytic ethics of aesthetics might add to current approaches to film as an ethical experience. I take a film that, at first glance, must appear singularly unethical—Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* (2013)—to ask how its aestheticized experience of transgression might explicate something of the intimate specificity

found in the clinic in ways that nevertheless resonate with a collective ethical project. Specifically, I ask how cinema, as a modern industrial art-form creating uniquely aestheticized experiences, may be positioned to perform the important work of synthesizing an individual into the collective ethics of civilisation following Georges Bataille's notion of "sacrificial art."⁷ Tim Themi has argued that a psychoanalytic ethics aligns with Bataille's on the latter's formulation of a "taboo-transgression" dialectic found in art (most notably Palaeolithic art), where man is seen transitioning from animal to human "and back again,"⁸ a phenomena that maps onto Lacan's registers of the real, symbolic, and imaginary in ways not insignificant to our understanding of cinema's aesthetic experience. This establishing of taboos on violence, sex, and death (taboos transgressed in *Spring Breakers*) creates a world of social bonds and culture, what Themi follows Freud in describing as a process of "humanising a world of work" founds a "respect for taboos, awareness of mortality, and concomitant developments of tools for controlling and understanding nature."⁹ This new world of taboo might be said to cut us off from the (Lacanian) "real"—that time associated with our animal being prior to taboo, complex language, and culture—and ushers in, for Themi, the same "*symbolic* register" of Lacan's tripartite schema.¹⁰ Here, the language of the symbolic is "used to communicate law, morality, knowledge, and reason" but is only "made possible by [the] space created by taboo, to found *an order of things* that every newborn repeats our species entry into" where, Bataille observes psychoanalytically: "what are children if not animals becoming human?"¹¹ In all this, art—often taken to be the "imaginary" register in the Lacanian schema, of image and illusion—plays an important function in offering momentary transgression of the taboos laid down for our advancement.¹² For though we find happiness (enjoyment) in the comfort and rewards made possible by taboo, Themi notes that Bataille precedes Lacan's seminar on ethics in identifying a "contrary need for transgression."¹³ For where "taboos create a distance from the real of our animal-bodily drives registered in terms of enjoyment," this distance builds "a debt that also, periodically, needs to be repaid."¹⁴

As I want to show in this paper, Bataille's work offers a useful compliment to Freud and Lacan's on ethics insofar as we can comprehend the function of art—and in this instance, cinema—in reconciling the individual to the group. Those who take *Spring Breakers* as a serious work of cinema (it was number two in *Cahiers du Cinéma's* top ten films of 2013) tend to see it as "aesthetically gorgeous" but ultimately a "deconstruction" of narrative cinema and a commentary on various aspect of contemporary life (as I detail later).¹⁵ Described by Jason Wood as "a neon-infused tale of crime, sisterhood and debauchery,"¹⁶ *Spring Breakers* follows a quartet of university students—Faith (Selena Gomez), Candy (Vanessa Hudgens), Brit (Ashley Benson), and Cotty (Rachel Korine)—in pursuit of the pleasures of spring break. Here the film animates something of the transgressive experience of the sacred festival that Bataille follows Friedrich Nietzsche in relating to the Dionysian "god of transgression."¹⁷ In the feast of

Dionysus, as with the festival depicted in the film, “the suspension of taboos sets free the exuberant surge of life,”¹⁸ where “what is ordinarily excluded” during taboo time is “allowed and even required” in an orgiastic excess that “culminates in ecstasy.”¹⁹ Once in St. Petersburg, Florida, the four embrace the excesses of enjoyment found in the festival: drugs and alcohol flow freely facilitating uninhibited sexual experiences. But the film pushes past this sanctioned (even expected) form of transgressive activity to examine what lies beyond the limits of law and justice founding the collective good, prefaced by the actions of Brit, Candy, and Cotty, who rob a diner (wielding a fake gun) to finance the trip. The spring break festivities are halted when the quartet are arrested for drug offenses, only to be bailed out by a stranger, Alien (James Franco), a drug and arms dealer/rapper who invites the girls into his criminal world. Here they begin to transgress in more violent and fatal terms, joining Alien in armed robberies. While Faith and eventually Cotty come to the limit of their transgressive capacity and return home to the order of things, Britt and Candy pursue transgression beyond the reality and pleasure principles—concluding in a murderous spree of Alien’s rival Big Arch (Gucci Mane) and his entourage. Such a film challenges our perception of ethics, given the singularly amoral actions of the individuals within, not to mention the film’s representative strategies which, as I will suggest, transgress the normative limits of narrative cinema to lift tabooed enjoyment to the surface. What can such a film offer the collective ethical praxis of civilisation? Moreover, what can psychoanalytic discourse disclose about this project?

The singular psychoanalytic ethics of the clinic may appear narrowly focused on the particular mode of enjoyment the subject can find within the limits of the social group: the degree to which one may access *jouissance*, regardless of others. As Dylan Evans notes, however, though at first Lacan uses *jouissance* to refer to “enjoyable sensation that accompanies the satisfaction of a biological needs such as hunger” (and later sexual pleasure/orgasm), the term comes to refer to the subject’s pursuit of enjoyment at the limits of (or beyond) the pleasure principle (the embargo on unlimited pleasure) such that “pleasure becomes pain.”²⁰ In this, one’s particular mode of *jouissance* may not appear to others (or even to the individual) as “enjoyment” but may manifest in forms of deep un-pleasure or unhappiness (motivating one to enter analysis). But though the psychoanalytic clinic may focus on coming to understand an individual subject’s particular mode of enjoyment (felt paradoxically as “suffering”),²¹ such a singular praxis can arguably never be separated from a broader ethical project since the subject must always come to operate within a community (as I discuss further shortly). But perhaps the most radical discovery of the clinic—that of the unconscious, as a consequence of which the subject is “inevitably cut off from full awareness of its own inner workings”²²—is what makes psychoanalysis of such value to a collective ethical praxis.²³ As Peter Dahlgren argues, recognition of this divided subject must alter how we engage with any (ethical) ideal based on the “rational,” “reflexive,” “transparent,” and “contingent” subject optimistically imagined in

Enlightenment thinking.²⁴ This is evident, for example, in Freud's "Thoughts for The Times of War and Death," in which the disillusionments of war (the atrocities inexplicably perpetrated by friends and neighbours), are felt most keenly in the optimism of Enlightenment thinking.²⁵ Thus, while many have left psychoanalysis behind in the "cultural turn"—where, as David Bordwell puts it, "much freer agents" are allowed (and positions of resistances theorised)²⁶—I suggest the problem of the split subject remains central to understanding our moral/ethical experience.²⁷ And though this split subject is problematic to theorise and apply—representing an "impossible" knowledge for scholars in any quantitative sense²⁸—the findings of the clinic must be part of any ethical project that engages with human experience in the establishment of reasonable expectations, standards, and values. Moreover, psychoanalysis' "singular" knowledge does not exist in isolation from the collective.

Indeed, it is striking how much of Freud's work underwrites an ethical praxis where it is concerned with the *psychical* impact of the human animal's transition into a collective social group wherein certain quantities of libidinal energy and instinctual impulses must be redirected and "sacrificed" to the community.²⁹ The consequences of this sacrifice are examined at length in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, where Freud observes that "a good part of the struggles of mankind centre round the single task of finding an expedient accommodation—one, that is, that will bring happiness—between this claim of the individual and the cultural claims of the group," and further questions, moreover, "whether such an accommodation can be reached by means of some particular form of civilization or whether this conflict is irreconcilable."³⁰ The singularity of a psychoanalytic ethics is thus not only interested in the economic problem of redistributing and regulating libido to the satisfaction of the individual—via forms of sublimation—but for the community at large insofar as Freud is equally interested in the particular *forms* of society's directions for libido (both socially valued forms of sublimation and the ideals *for which* one must sacrifice) and in the consequences of failing this task for the individual (neurosis, psychosis), and society (war).³¹ Accordingly, in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan considers this project through Sophocles' tragic play *Antigone* to explicate the role of law—the foundations of civilization, befitting a collective social good—where it is excessively (hubristically) enforced. Georges Bataille similarly takes up Freud's interest in the demands of culture on our instinctual disposition to consider how impositions on individual libido tie into collective economic structures invested with quotients of energy and, as both Freud and Lacan do, asks what role art may play in the exchange.³² Here, if there is an excess of taboo—as with the neoliberal demand for constant accumulation—an equivalent excess of libido "dams up," seeking satisfaction.³³ For Bataille this excess "must be spent, willingly or not," either "gloriously" in art or, if ignored, "catastrophically" in war.³⁴

Freud similarly argues that art "offers substitutive satisfactions for the oldest and still most deeply felt cultural renunciations, and for that reason it serves as nothing else does to reconcile a

man to the sacrifices he has made on behalf of civilisation.”³⁵ It is in this light that psychoanalysis may contribute something to our understanding of cinema as an ethical experience. Todd McGowan has more recently renewed the case for theorising cinema psychoanalytically, positing cinema as a “dream factory, a form of public dreaming” where “[t]he filmmaker creates a film to satisfy the spectators desire” and, like dreams in the clinic, we are invited to analyse a film’s “formal structure to show how the film speaks to the desire of the spectator and what the film reveals about this desire.”³⁶ Here, the “crucial parallel lies in the position of the subject in the dream and in the cinema [which] marginalizes conscious will and privileges unconscious desire more than any other artistic medium.”³⁷ This reinvokes older applications of psychoanalytic thought to film where, Stephen Heath puts it, the spectator was understood to take “pleasure from the desires allowed through film’s scenes and images while at the same time distanced from the disruptive force of those desires.”³⁸ This is often where ethical approaches address a film’s representational and ideological strategies (as I detail further later) rather than the desire it expresses, however, it is important to note that while a viewer may enjoy the film’s content, it does not mean they have no control over their response or, equally, have no ability to distinguish it from the reality principle—to *evaluate* its morality. Rather, film-as-public-dreaming only licences the viewer to enjoy the dream’s content without feeling responsible for producing this content as it is (seemingly) authored by someone else. The ethical potential of viewing unethical action in film may, at least in the first instance then, be in its inspiring of ethical reflection (as I explore further shortly). As Robert Samuels notes, however, if art can manifest our desire, “it [usually] does so without analysis” and does not constitute the *work* of analysis.³⁹ We cannot therefore presume watching a film (ethical or otherwise) will inspire reflection. Indeed, as McGowan observes, frequently “the most important films are the ones that are the least popular” because we do not always want to confront the desire reflected there.⁴⁰

Here we recall cinema first theorised psychoanalytically as a “technology of the imaginary,”⁴¹ where McGowan puts it, the “pseudo-dreamworld of the cinematic spectator represents the key political problem of the cinema.”⁴² Because instead of “making spectators aware of the functioning of ideology,” cinema’s imaginary register functions “as a crucial ingredient in the propagation of an uncritical subjectivity” in the way it can “suture” us into ideological identification with the film’s world view.⁴³ In this, as Freud pre-empts, though “the creations of art heighten feelings of identification” with the community “by providing an occasion for sharing highly valued emotional experiences,” insofar as “those creations” *only* focus on civilization’s “ideals” we encounter a “narcissistic satisfaction.”⁴⁴ It is therefore, as McGowan explicates, cinema’s capacity to approximate the register of the Lacanian real where cinema’s ethical experience may be most equated with a psychoanalytic praxis. But if Lacan’s real refers to that which is *prior* to our entry into the symbolic register of language and meaning

(and thus, incomprehensible to us), it must seem unlikely cinema could simulate its qualities. McGowan suggests that if the imaginary “is the order of what we see,” and the symbolic “the structure supporting and regulating that visible world,” the real emerges as an “indication of the incompleteness of the Symbolic order” and is that “place where signification breaks down.”⁴⁵ The real may be affected in cinema then, where a film exposes a point of failure in the logic of the symbolic or imaginary that normally “hides the real.”⁴⁶ Lisa Downing notes that for Slavoj Žižek, the Lacanian real is central to the ethics of cinema, most notably animated in the *noir* universe which examines “the risk the subject takes with regard to encountering the Real of his or her desire.”⁴⁷ The real here may correlate to that aspect of our being that predates our development of collective community; it designates that part of us that, as Marc de Kesel puts it, as “impossible pleasure animals” that must come to regulate pleasure and mitigate un-pleasure in our confrontation with the external world of language, law, and culture.⁴⁸ It is this real we “sacrifice” as part of our commitment to the collective group and symbolic dimension of experience, and the effect of the sacrifice—its successes and failures—that Freud, Bataille, and Lacan find animated in art. Subsequently, as Themis puts it, a psychoanalytic ethics seeks an ethics “of the real—as opposed to an imaginary ethics, caught in the imaginary.”⁴⁹

This marks out aesthetic experience as potentially ethical according to a psychoanalytic praxis, insofar as in aesthetics we may find dramatized the conflicts between law and desire. As Lacan notes, however reasonable that law might be, the *jouissance* of transgression—when one “tramples” such laws “under foot”⁵⁰—plays a part in our understanding of the function but also the *limit* of the law, because the transgression reveals its “imaginary structure.”⁵¹ Richard Capobianco notes that on this point Lacan critiques Aristotle’s virtue ethics “for ‘cleaning up’ desire” in “the service” of ideals—whether in the service of economic, political, or religious gain.⁵² It is also where Lacan sees the law (that places a taboo on desire) become preoccupied with what he calls “the service of goods”:⁵³ the reductive accumulation of goods, resources, and power without limit (or, as Bataille might add, without appropriate *expenditure*), such that “[a]s far as desires are concerned, come back later.”⁵⁴ This is the antithesis of what Bataille argues we seek in aesthetic experience, because we need, Themis summarises, “separate times for work and play, politics and art, or reason and the unconscious.”⁵⁵ Consequently, where the *jouissance* of transgression becomes foreclosed in art (through a tightening of taboo) such enjoyment is easily co-opted by politics, evident in the rise of fascist leaders who express and/or facilitate a *jouissance* of transgression (personified, for example, in the rise of Donald Trump). Such a predicament inspires Bataille’s ethical project, what Patrick French describes as the question (so prescient to our current time): “how is it possible to counter the threat of fascism when the latter thrives on an exploitation of the *jouissance* that is foreclosed in the Marxist schema?”⁵⁶ Here, if cinema were to only accede to the demand that we ‘tighten’ “the moral standard to the greatest possible degree,” it may lead, in Freud’s terms, to a greater “estrangement” from our

“instinctual disposition” that results in the catastrophes of neurosis and, as Bataille later agrees, the collective catastrophes of war.⁵⁷

As I argue in this paper, what distinguishes the ethical experience of *Spring Breakers* is its animation of what we have “sacrificed” for the good of the social group that nevertheless reasserts the value of taboos transgressed therein without, importantly, enforcing ignorance toward our sacrifice or our forms of *jouissance*. It does so not merely in its diegesis, but through its unique aesthetics of transgression: one that erodes the temporal coherence of symbolic and imaginary narrative, such that what is tabooed pushes to the surface in a spectacle of the sacrifice—that is, it offers an aesthetic experience of and as “sacrificial art.” It is here that a psychoanalytic ethics opens up additional facets in ethical thinking insofar as it insists on confronting knowledge of, rather than maintaining ignorance toward, our instinctual life, approaching the subject, as Marc de Kesel puts it, with a “moral indifference of the polymorphous-perverse drive[s].”⁵⁸ That is, psychoanalysis begins by recognizing that libido lacks a socially ascribed aim or (moral) object where, as Freud puts it, “the sexual instinct does not originally serve the purposes of reproduction at all, but has as its aim the gaining of particular kinds of pleasure.”⁵⁹ I suggest that the escalating excess of transgressions in the film culminating in the taking human life provides a warning against ignoring *jouissance*, and highlights the importance of transgressive expenditure found in aesthetics.⁶⁰ I examine the tension in the film between the pleasure provided by its aesthetic experience (including its sublimation of the pornographic), at the interface of its irredeemable action (violence, robbery, murder). As Themis argues, where art may only offer a “simulation” of transgression, we may perceive it to be a “weaker” form of ethics than our own “participation” in the festival, yet through our experience of it, he further notes, a “knowledge” emerges “that more than compensates for any lack of physical agency” such that, “with better knowledge of desire we can sublimate it toward better ethics.”⁶¹

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND THE CLINIC

No doubt many view *Spring Breakers* as an unethical film, insofar as its main characters neither act morally nor offer morally good representations, evident in popular criticism. Heather Long performs a standard feminist critique of the film as “a terrible movie,” for example, because its “lewd” scene of “debauchery” openly objectifies women, reinforces “rape culture,” and undermines the work of feminist discourses to regulate public spaces.⁶² From a psychoanalytic perspective, evaluating a film purely from a question of its moral representations overinvest its diegesis with a remit to only animate those most noble achievements of civilization, rather than a work of art from which other aspects of our existence may be dramatized. That is, such a review measures the film against our *imaginary* ideals of civilization. To approach art from a

question of its morality equates to inhibiting the work of analysis in the clinic to the examination of only those conscious ideas we have that dovetail to our ideal image, of the self as purely altruistic.⁶³ This is not to say that the “moral indifference” to desire found in the clinic rejects morality’s value to civilization, rather, it recognizes that self-knowledge sought in the clinic would remain occluded if intimidated by a moral framework. As de Kesel puts it, if we begin analysis from the position of moral ideals, we risk “fill[ing] out in advance the drive’s open, polymorphously perverse nature with one’s own [ideological or political] wishes and fantasies,” leaving the subject in ignorance of their own (and other’s) motivations.⁶⁴ For cinema to shed (ethical) light on the human condition it must likewise not submit to moral intimidation.

A moral-ethical critique of *Spring Breakers* as an American form of “extreme cinema” ventures beyond a simple rejection of its amoral diegesis toward its potential as a form of deliberate ethical provocation. I want to suggest, however, that a psychoanalytic investigation of the film’s *aesthetic* experience takes us further yet in this provocation. “New French Extremity” cinema or what Time Palmer calls “French Cinema of the Body” is noted for its “tendency to the wilfully transgressive” and “unflinching” “depictions of physicality” at a limit, often including full penetrative sexual intercourse in addition to bodily violence.⁶⁵ But as Frey argues, these “extreme” forms of cinema “create critical and popular controversy” that is (ironically) “in the service of [a higher] morality” — creating a moral-ethical dialogue about the limits of cinema and art.⁶⁶ The transgressions animated in *Spring Breakers* vary from the seemingly harmless (to others) and barely (if at all) illegal activity of the Dionysian spring break festival—nudity, excessive consumption of drugs and alcohol, multiple sexual partners, and public sexual activity—to those of the most significant consequence: armed robbery and the taking of human life. What response might be expected (if not demanded) of a viewer here? Many have argued the film offers critiques of all that it seemingly celebrates. It has been critiqued as a meditation on gun-control in America, as too of the sexual exploitation of young women and celebrities like Britney Spears (whose oeuvre punctuates several of the film’s key moments).⁶⁷ Here Jennifer Keishin Armstrong suggests the film’s moral message is that “we got off easy with a mere public head-shaving and umbrella-bashing” in Spears’ public meltdown.⁶⁸ And yet, though transgressive, violent, and highly sexual (if lacking genital and penetration shots), *Spring Breakers* offers an altogether different aesthetic to extreme cinemas (even if it inspires similar ethical reflection), one that entails a specifically *erotic* dimension. It is here, I suggest, following Sinnerbrink, where there may be “a conflict or dissonance between aesthetic expression and moral-ethical meaning,” one that “we [may] find the most challenging, thought-provoking cases of cinematic ethics.”⁶⁹

Aesthetic experience becomes important to an ethical project where, Freud notes, though art sits alongside science and technology as our most celebrated achievements, it goes beyond the “utility” of progress and reminds us that civilization consists in a “striving towards the *two*

confluent goals of utility and a yield of pleasure.”⁷⁰ Nowhere is this more evident than in our non-utilitarian fascination with “beauty,” which he observes, “civilization could not do without.”⁷¹ In this impulse for pleasure Freud notes that “every individual is virtually an enemy of civilization” because despite our efforts to raise ourselves “above [our] animal status” there remains in all a “destructive, and therefore anti-social and anti-cultural” instinct.⁷² If through art we attempt to satisfy this instinct—to sublimate it—what type of art might provide satisfaction while also securing our commitment to the community in which we live? Sinnerbrink’s examination of melodrama points to the way its “expressive mode” inspires an “affective responsiveness and emotional engagement that open up a space for *sympathetic* ethical understanding.”⁷³ Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenological approach goes further to suggest that a film’s aesthetic experience engenders a type of “response-ability,” an embodied response to “the charge of the real” that calls for “aesthetic valuation” and “ethical judgment.”⁷⁴ In adding a psychoanalytic approach, with its emphasis on understanding *jouissance* of transgression, we might further explicate how an amoral film may nevertheless offer an aesthetic experience toward an ethics of civilization.

In the clinic, Lacan notes, “[m]oral experience” comes to concern the “relation” of a subject “to his own action” as regards both the “articulated law but also [...] a good that he appeals to,” in the form of “an ideal conduct”;⁷⁵ however, the effect of this demand from outside can produce conflict in the subject if not the “omnipresence, of a sense of guilt” where external moral censorship is internalised as a super-ego injunction that results in guilt—not for one’s moral shortcomings, but for “giving ground relative to one’s desire.”⁷⁶ For while “[b]oth analyst and analysand aim for the good, in the highest moral sense of the word,”⁷⁷ Lacan notes that “we nevertheless find” in the clinic an “irreducible margin as well as the limit of [the subject’s] own good.”⁷⁸ The “irreducible margin” between desire and the external good is not a question of desire for *things*—objects, wealth, success, or satisfaction found in obtaining any of these substitutes—rather, a question of enjoyment, specifically, *jouissance*. And it is “the attraction to transgression” and subsequent “paradox of *jouissance*” present in the clinic that Lacan posits as quintessential drama of the human condition—the “tragic sense of life” —found in certain works of art.⁷⁹ Put simply, the ethical paradox that psychoanalysis “leads” to is, for Lacan, “the relationship between action and the desire that inhibits it” where, in the end, the subject must confront a limit: “[w]ill it or will it not submit itself to the duty that it feels within like a stranger, beyond, at another level?” and let this “half-unconscious, paradoxical, and morbid command of the superego” inhibit action and desire?⁸⁰ On the other hand, could one abandon the obligations to society entirely? In a descriptive passage that strikingly recalls the list of transgressions animated in *Spring Breakers*, Freud speculates precisely this question: what “if, then, one may take any woman one pleases as a sexual object, if one may without hesitation kill one’s rival for her love or anyone else who stands in one’s way, if, too, one can

carry off any of the other man's belongings without asking leave—how splendid, what a string of satisfactions one's life would be!"⁸¹ Such a fantasy is clearly impossible but reminds us, Freud notes, that "[t]he first requisite of civilisation, therefore, is that of justice—that is, the assurance that a law once made will not be broken in favour of an individual."⁸² Recognising this root of desire, Lacan seeks to redefine ethics against the humanist tendency to view man as naturally or inherently "good," and, rather, de Kesel notes, to construct an ethics from "that sudden flash of light" in the Freudian experience, into "the polymorphous perverse" origins of desire.⁸³ Perversion here, Lacan notes, does not refer to an "anomaly contrary to good morals" or "deviation" from "the reproductive finality of the sexual union"⁸⁴—*qua* heteronormativity—but Freud's discovery that in the beginning (infancy) libido is "characterised by the absence of any pre-given natural order."⁸⁵ A psychoanalytic ethics begins with this knowledge of the clinic but does not, however, promote unlimited action on it; rather, it acknowledges the gap between the law—our ideals—and the real of our desire such that we may examine the necessary force and ultimate value of the law. That is, if our libido has no original moral aim, we must find one for it—but not in ignorance of its constitutive force in our life.

Where a psychoanalytic clinic may be transposed onto cinema is in our understanding of Hollywood's imaginary, ideological mode, and the function of a cinema of the real. In classical film theory, as McGowan puts it, "the illusory qualities of film" are linked to "the process through which subjects enter into ideology" by "misrecognising themselves" in the image on-screen—a device of the imaginary.⁸⁶ Film theorists seeking to critique ideological genres and films thus formed around a process Christian Metz describes as wresting "the cinema-object from the imaginary" so as "to win it for the symbolic."⁸⁷ Where cinemas of the imaginary interpolate us is thus also where they fail on ethical grounds, for empathy in the form of our own imaginary identification can block our access to truth, "sheltering" us, McGowan notes, from the real and symbolic dimensions of experience.⁸⁸ Likewise in the clinic, the ethical potential of analysis requires relinquishing imaginary ways of perceiving ourselves and others to embrace a truth that, as Anna Freud puts it, must be placed "higher than any discomfort at meeting unpleasant facts, whether they belong to the world outside or to your own inner person."⁸⁹ This is counter, Bruce Fink observes, to the *mis*conception that the analyst must empathise with the analysand in order to build a "therapeutic alliance" as the latter undermines opportunities to "hear" the analysand's discourse.⁹⁰ Fink argues this stems from our "usual" *imaginary* "way of listening" to other people where we "assimilate" the story of the other into "stories that we have heard others tell" "or that we could tell about ourselves."⁹¹ If art—and cinema—is to be psychoanalytically ethical, then, it needs to show us, Samuels notes, "what we don't want to see, by forcing its gaze upon us" and disrupting our illusion of imaginary identification with (in this case) the screen.⁹² Here McGowan suggests that the "filmic gaze can function in the same way as the analysts interpretation, provided that we as spectators fully

invest ourselves in the filmic experience,” and “interpret” what we have felt there “after the traumatic experience of it.”⁹³

THE EROTICS OF TRANSGRESSIVE EXPENDITURE IN *SPRING BREAKERS*, OR, “SACRIFICIAL ART”

The attraction to the “*jouissance* of transgression” found in the clinic is what distinguishes the aesthetic experience of *Spring Breakers* over other forms of transgressive cinema, in that the film’s aesthetic lifts what is tabooed to the surface, allowing us to appreciate (and vicariously participate) in the transgression. Ed Cameron argues that though the film eschews Korine’s usual realist aesthetic, the shift is not toward escapist “fantasy” (*qua* the imaginary) but an *inward* turn toward a form of psychological realism.⁹⁴ Here the film’s offering of transgressive expenditure is achieved via a convergence of its diegetic and aesthetic components. The film’s diegetic transgressions become erotic, in Bataille’s terms, where they express “desire dam[med] up” against the taboo, showing where transgression is *structurally* aligned with taboo.⁹⁵ In this regard, “transgression does not *deny* the taboo but transcends it and completes it,”⁹⁶ showing us where the line of the law is situated such that transgressing it works to re-affirm it. Accordingly, *Spring Breakers* animates, tests, and exposes the limits of *jouissance* found in the modes of transgression offered in the neoliberal economies of the West. Jacob Glazier argues that the film’s anarchic project inverts “the ‘classic’ iconography of spring break: naked girls, frat guys” and other popular commodity signifiers of late modernity to create a “dangerous point of rupture” around (and critique of) neoliberal cultures of enjoyment.⁹⁷ Cameron further argues the film explores (at least) three modes of *jouissance*: a normative “institutionalised” *jouissance* found in the spring break festival, animated via Faith, who enjoys the sanctioned space for transgression as a “break from reality” before returning to the symbolic order; the imaginary *jouissance* of Alien, who dutifully pursues enjoyment-through-accumulation espoused in The American Dream (denoted in his “look at all my shee-yat”) which transforms into a perverse *jouissance* as he becomes the object of enjoyment for the other in the gun-fellatio scene; and, finally, the *jouissance* of the real found by Brit and Candy (and to some extent Cotty), who transgress the limit of the law to find satisfaction “somewhere beyond the pleasure principle” evident in their pursuit of transgression without aim—accumulation, power, or advancement.⁹⁸ As Korine puts it, while in the institutional space of the spring break festival “[k]ids go off, cut loose, destroy everything and then go home as if it didn’t happen,” Britt and Cotty “are a little extra,” they “transcend.”⁹⁹ For while they first approach transgression as a means of advancement and enjoy the feeling of power as they rob other holiday makers, by the final shoot-out, it is Brit and Candy who kid Alien that he is scared of what may lie ahead, and take no back-step as he dies, moving unflinchingly towards their own self-destruction. Thus, while

Alien appears to represent what McGowan calls the “hidden enjoyment” of the “criminal” in late capitalism,¹⁰⁰ it is Brit and Candy who carve out an ethics of *jouissance* in transgression that leaves behind the institutionalised symbolic enjoyment of the festival and the imaginary enjoyment of The American Dream, to find a *jouissance* in the real as they “expend” themselves without pretence of utilitarian purpose, such as, in Richard Brody’s terms, returning from the festival “refreshed, reenergized, and reeducated.”¹⁰¹

Insofar as the film vividly animates both minor and major transgressions the film-as-dream might be summarised as a simple (psychoanalytic) ‘what if’: ‘what if I did *not* have to submit myself to the law?’ What would the consequences be? Though our protagonists are not punished for their crimes (Korine has said that their denouement is implied), it is arguably clear that the answer to this question is “catastrophe”: for its protagonists and the community they live in.¹⁰² The film’s metaphoric ‘what if’ is thus, not a call to action, but a meditation on those transgressions for which a law exists that we could not do without—murder, robbery, violence—while registering those for which a law is required (in the order of things, individual and collective cohesion and advancement) but should not be imposed excessively: that is, that point at which our enjoyment in transgression may be satisfied, without consequence to the collective.

Significant here is the film’s sublimated pornographic aesthetic that invites us to enjoy it as an aesthetic experience, not in spite of but as *part* of its ethical value. As I have argued elsewhere, the affective experience of pornography reminds us of the “sensual interest” invested in all art, however unconscious it may be and, indeed, however distorted its expression.¹⁰³ This follows Nietzsche’s observation that our interest in aesthetic objects finds libidinal interest “transfigured” in that project central to psychoanalytic thought: sublimation, where libido is no longer “consciously” felt in the form of “sexual excitement” but finds satisfaction in aesthetic substitutions.¹⁰⁴ And where pornography may be distinguished from other artistic expression by its “intractable Real referent”—its explicit depiction of body-parts around which our libidinal substitutions first orient themselves (i.e., the breast, mouth, and phallus)—it no doubt offers a *reduced* form of sublimation.¹⁰⁵ But in doing so, I argue, it offers ethical value in confronting us with reminders of our status as “pleasure animals”—though we may reject such reminders where they do not correlate with our ideal notions of self and civilisation.¹⁰⁶ The point here is that such knowledge is not a requisite to *acting out* fantasies invoked in pornography (or *Spring Breakers*), but to act with greater understanding—and humility—toward our human condition as we strive for a better society. As Freud notes, where the demand of morality on sexual instinctual life becomes too great, the ensuing neurosis can become “paralysing” such that, the individual “would have been more healthy if it could have been possible for them to be less good.”¹⁰⁷ The question is not whether people will act out the impulses brought to light in the film (or in the clinic) but, rather, of how one will act if such impulses remain repressed from

conscious thought: how will such (repressed) instincts be satisfied and at what cost to the individual and to society?

The film thus pursues its aesthetics of expenditure through its integration of an intra-diegetic *jouissance* of transgression and eroticised *aesthetics* of transgression, what Korine calls “beach noir”:¹⁰⁸ an aesthetic release from the taboos placed on the order of things. Though some critics wrote the film off as a work of “surface” rather than depth,¹⁰⁹ Korine consciously sought to create a primarily *aesthetic* (rather than narrative) “impressionistic reinterpretation” of spring break, striving for a “liquid narrative” and “drug [like] experience” of “transcendence, reaching a peak before disappearing into black.”¹¹⁰ In this the film animates a type of vicarious festival, abandoning—*transgressing*—narrative form for sensory enjoyment. As Cameron notes, despite mixed reviews of the film’s lack of coherent “narrative,” “moral compass,” “subtlety,” and “sense,” reviewers nevertheless “seemed to have enjoyed the film”; indeed, he suggests that in an inversion of classical and neo-noir aesthetic tropes “the excess of the visuals” over “conventional linear narrative” effectively “places Korine’s film somewhere beyond the pleasure principle.”¹¹¹ Here I suggest the film’s “surface” offers an aesthetics of transgression by releasing the viewer from taboos on eroticism and nudity evident from the opening to closing frames of the film. The film opens on the spectacle of spring break with hundreds of young, tanned, near-naked (and naked) bodies pulse to music on the beaches of Florida. Immersed in the action, the camera picks out particularly eroticised bodies, parts, and acts in a slow-motion montage that captures the libidinal quotient of the festival: hips gyrate invitingly, crotches thrust exuberantly, bare-breasts shimmy under drink-simulated bukkakes. Indeed, on this last the camera cuts closer, lingers on the pornographic explicitness of the image as if to emphasise the barrier that is being crossed: not only that of propriety, but public discourse on “good” representations of women (especially in film). In this, Cameron puts it, “Korine’s heroines seem to travel to a neon-lit ethereal dream world of Freudian wish fulfillment.”¹¹² For contra to the harsh lighting of traditional noir *mise en scène* which signifies a “background [of] repressed enjoyment,” Korine lifts enjoyment “to the foreground through the overt use of coloured florescent lighting,” such that “what was repressed in the original film noir diegesis” is allowed “to flourish unfettered” in a realm of “unlimited enjoyment.”¹¹³

Though this erotic dimension to the film’s aesthetic approximates pornography, it departs from the explicit depiction of (real) genitals, body-fluids, and penetration found in mainstream pornography and instead, effects something of the loss of symbolic meaning through its discontinuous montage. The eliding of reality through flash forwards and back, and the switching between impressionistic focus and sharp contrast, gritty documentary style footage and a hyper-real neon world eschews narrative cinema’s (imaginary) realism (via continuity editing) and calls attention to the way the image is explicitly loaded with forms of enjoyment that relentlessly work against meaning. As Cameron puts it, the *jouissance*, or enjoyment, of the

film itself, is experienced in the way it “overflows any principle of reality to which most mainstream cinema [...] conventionally cling[s].”¹¹⁴ Unlike most feature films that “substitute” or “displace” libido into the intrigues of its narrative, *Spring Breakers*’ adopts pornography’s purview to “engage the viewer openly with those earliest, originary substitutions” of “part-objects and aims”: of the “oral, anal, genital, invocatory, and especially scopic” drives.¹¹⁵ Our heroines are always either in string bikinis or semi-naked, with few overgarments to conceal the erotic appeal of their bodies. Their arrival in St. Petersburg is shown through a montage in which they surrender inhibition to the festival as if returning to the innocence of childhood where the polymorphous perversity of the drives is not yet co-opted into the order of things. They dance impishly in the shoreline, sing with abandon songs of adolescence, and take a collective piss squatting on the side of the road, backs arched, buttocks thrust back to the camera’s gaze. They touch, embrace, and fondle in the spirit of intimate girlhood, and the camera openly seeks to capture if not underscore the erotic potential of each gesture, explicitly inviting a gaze onto what is ordinarily tabooed in mainstream cinema and often degraded in the explicit sexual violence of art-house (Extreme) cinema. Sexual explicitness is nevertheless partly sublimated in *Spring Breakers*, not via narrative substitutions (per narrative feature film), but in the *degree* of substitutions that aestheticize or veil the real in a beauty effect without completely displacing its affect. As Freud notes, the distinction of beauty in the art of sublimation is its fundamental distinction from the actual genitals as sources of libidinal interest, “the sight of which” though “always exciting” is “hardly ever judged to be beautiful.”¹¹⁶ Bataille follows in saying that “the further removed from the animal is [woman’s] appearance, the more beautiful they are reckoned,” such that a woman becomes of erotic interest precisely where her beauty “promises” to “reveal a mysterious animal aspect” of sexual being that remains hidden: “the private parts, the hairy ones.”¹¹⁷ Much has been made of the matching unicorn ski-masks Brit, Candy and Cotty wear when they participate in Alien’s armed robberies, but as Cameron argues, though the masks make the girls “indistinguishable” the effect is not objectifying as much as it denotes their willingness to “obliterate their individual egos” in pursuit of “boundless jouissance.”¹¹⁸ I further suggest the masks function as a reminder of the humanity that is being transgressed in this *jouissance*, akin to those animal masks donned in paleolithic art where, Bataille notes, man hides “behind an animal mask” to designate the “shame” of leaving this realm of animal sovereignty—without taboo—behind.¹¹⁹ In *Spring Breakers*, by contrast, transgressive *jouissance* requires humanity to be (momentarily) relinquished, hidden behind the mask. Additionally, the girls don matching tiger-print swimsuits that cover the real (hairy, animal) body-parts in such a way as to nonetheless remind us of their return to animality and the eroticism of this transgression. Here the film allows us to perceive the pornographic effect of transgression as part of the film’s sublimated aesthetic experience.

No doubt one could object here—as Long does—that the film’s erotic component is an oppressive if not sadistic (in Mulvey’s parlance) heterosexist male fantasy, as if, by virtue of the appeal to a theoretical male viewer, the fullness of the bodies on display were not beautiful but a representational deception of the patriarchal apparatus. One is reminded of Michel Foucault’s reflections on objectification in cinema where, he suggests, it is a “vulgar Freudianism that reduces to sadism this way of celebrating the body and its wonders.”¹²⁰ Yet even if we can appreciate the ethical importance of the critique—of not reducing any subject exclusively to one aspect of their being—such an approach also reminds us, as Bataille argues, that the ethical potential of aesthetic experience is closed down “when the political game” (exclusively) occupies aesthetic space, leaving the door open for our unfulfilled *jouissance* to be co-opted by others.¹²¹

The film’s eroticized aesthetic becomes ethical where it insists without retreat, refusing to bend to the taboos required of us in the collective good (during ordinary work times) as staged in the girl’s meeting with Alien. After bailing the group from jail, Alien asks what they have done at the festival (“did you get crazy? Smoke some weed? Cocaine? ... Bitches all up on each other?”), and the camera cross-cuts between flashbacks to the night before (in which the girls participate in all the things Alien suggests), the onlooking twins (Thurman and Sidney Sewell) with whom the girls partied, and Faith’s worried face. Faith’s reaction reintroduces the moral taboo placed on such transgressions during ordinary times, particularly where Alien and the twins are positioned as a menacing “male gaze” on these activities. The liberated orgy of the night before is transformed in light of this gaze—Alien reveals the twin’s real agenda is “double penetration”—from which Faith openly recoils, signalling the return of taboo. Despite this, the film does not retreat but pushes forward like a tragic hero who, as Lacan describes, “trembles before nothing, and especially not before the good of the other.”¹²² Here it may be useful to note that for Bataille, “eroticism is analogous to a tragedy” because to confront eroticism one must face and transgress “taboos” that are “the price of a sacrifice” the hero must confront in the destruction of his own limits.¹²³ In its refusal to take a backward step from the explicit display of eroticism the film thus does not ask its viewer to be intimidated by the taboo required in ordinary times—however necessary such taboo may be to the order of things.

In contrast to the explicit eroticism of the opening scenes, the film’s critique of the possibilities of enjoyment in neoliberal economies also posits the restrictive force of capitalism in increasingly familiar scene: young people channelled into institutionalised education in preparation for a life of accumulation in an equally ascetic workforce. We cut to Brit and Candy sharing a marijuana bong in a darkened college dorm-room while cartoons run mindlessly in the background, a scene of depressed enjoyment soon replaced with establishing shots of the university campus. We then cut to the interior of a darkened lecture theatre where a sea of anonymous students look-on dully, faces barely illuminated by the uniform glare of open

laptops. The lecturer describes the effects of war on those who return “transformed” by the violence they have witnessed, while Brit and Candy share notes to amuse themselves: Brit writes “I heart penis” and Candy returns an outline of a penis filled with “Spring Break Bitches!” toward which she mimes a blow-job.¹²⁴ They later bemoan with Cotty and Faith “we really need to get out of here.” The scene illustrates how transgression—eroticism, violence, and aesthetic expenditure—has no place in the order of things and must be sought elsewhere, but also hints at the suffocating *excesses* of the order of things especially where, as McGowan outlines, desire is co-opted under capitalism (with its “ideological commitment to utility”) towards accumulation and consumerism with its promise of providing “the object that would provide the ultimate satisfaction for the desiring subject.”¹²⁵ Spring break here becomes yet another form of consumption—of consuming the idea of transgression rather than a dissolution of the self and the good, where, Maryn Wilkinson suggests, the girls are at once “ideal objects and subjects of contemporary hyperconsumerism.”¹²⁶ Brit and Candy show us the limits of enjoyment in this milieu when, as Cameron notes, they re-enact their robbing of the diner for Faith (left out of the crime), such that their enjoyment is revealed to be in transgression (not its commodification), an expression of the drive satisfied beyond its functional aim (of acquiring the funds for further consumption or transgression).¹²⁷ And after enjoying the orgy of spring break itself, it is clear that such sanctioned transgressions are not sufficient to our heroines. The religiously devout Faith returns home, while Candy, Brit, and Cotty push toward a “lethal” kind of *jouissance*.¹²⁸

Consequently, Brit and Candy’s escalating transgressions provide a warning against ignoring *jouissance*, and highlight the importance of transgressive expenditure found in aesthetics, where, in Bataille’s economy, art provides the appropriate outlet for “loss, sacrifice, eroticism, and violence” in a post-secular society.¹²⁹ The escalation of violence in the girls’ murderous finale is also suggestive of an excess that responds to the increasing violence of neoliberalism on the individual and collective economy. Whereas in “primitive” society the sovereign power would celebrate the “potlatch,” a “process of expenditure, “the lavish loss of an object given up,”¹³⁰ in modern capitalism Bataille argues that the ruling class “repudiates this obligation to excessive expenditure” and insists, instead, on “an ethic of accumulation and utility.”¹³¹ In neoliberal economies, this ethic becomes a demand without reprieve, where all energy is spent in the utility of accumulation little is left for the expenditure of aesthetic experience without (economic) gain. The tragic tone of the final scene is suggestive of a violence that reacts to a demand that has become excessive in a moment of ruinous expenditure—of sacrificial transgression. That is, I suggest the film’s aestheticized transgressions approximate a sacrifice to make good our own sacrifice of libido to the community. The moment of ruination is completed in the final montage, with its ironically juxtaposed dialogue (a phone call home to grandmother) playing over the image, noting “it was

way more than just having a good time.” Images of the opening scene’s beach party are intercut with those of Brit and Candy’s victims in their neon-lit graves, Brit and Candy drive into the sunrise, pausing at the water’s edge to reflect. In flashback the camera cuts to a contorted close-up aerial shot of Alien’s face where he lies dead on the jetty, the camera so far over his head as to be almost looking back at him upside down. As Brit and Candy lean over to kiss him farewell they appear from the lower edge of frame, and the camera then tilts to follow them to a true 180 degrees upside down, creating a final shot of the girls in an overturned image as they leave Alien to begin their shooting spree, quite literally now on another plane—no longer part of the order of things.

CONCLUSION: THE ETHICS OF “SACRIFICIAL ART”

As I have tried to show in this paper, the film offers a warning against ignoring *jouissance*, but perhaps its most ethical feature is in animating this warning without censoring or reductively moralising desire in the process. Korine’s reluctance to stage the final denouement of Brit and Candy is suggestive of the analysts position toward an analysand. He does not punish them—or the viewer—for their desire, as he puts it, “I don’t like to invent characters and then condemn them” which is “not to say that there isn’t condemnation present in the film but I don’t necessarily feel I have to punish people.”¹³² In film as in the clinic, I suggest, censure of our desire does not lead to self-knowledge. And if cinema as a modern art-form can affirm the taboos that keep civilisation in check, it should also acknowledge and affirm the real of our being, for if not it may further mislead us as to the real dimension of experience and thus, make the sacrifice of libido all the more unsatisfying.

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¹ Robert Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience Through Film* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 7.

² Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 10, emphasis original; see also, Asbjorn Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2017), 18.

³ Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey, “Introduction,” *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice and Spectatorship*, 1-14 (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 24.

⁵ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, 319.

⁶ Choi and Frey, “Introduction,” 1-2.

⁷ I take this term from Michèle H Richman, in *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

⁸ Tim Themi, "Bataille and the Erotics of the Real," *Parrhesia* 24 (2015): 312.

⁹ Themi, "Bataille and the Erotics of the Real," 313; and Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 44, 54.

¹⁰ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 44; Themi, "Bataille and the Erotics of the Real," 313.

¹¹ Themi, "Bataille and the Erotics of the Real," 313, emphasis original; Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volumes II The History of Eroticism, and III Sovereignty*. trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 65.

¹² Themi, "Bataille and the Erotics of the Real," 312; Tim Themi, *Lacan's Ethics and Nietzsche's Critique of Platonism* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 21-22.

¹³ Tim Themi, "Bataille, Literature, Happiness, and Evil," *Continental Thought & Theory: A Journal of Intellectual Freedom*, 2, no.3 (2019), 190, 195.

¹⁴ Themi, "Bataille, Literature, Happiness, and Evil," 190, 195.

¹⁵ See Jamie Dunn, "Spring Breakers," *The Skinny: Independent Cultural Journalism*, 01 April (2013): <https://www.theskinny.co.uk/film/cineskinny/spring-breakers>; Jennifer Keishin Armstrong, "'Spring Breakers': An Appreciation of the Movie-Length Meditation on Britney Spears," *Billboard*, 15 March (2018): <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop/8247403/spring-breakers-britney-spears-everytime>

¹⁶ Jason Wood, *Last Words: Considering Contemporary Cinema* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 67.

¹⁷ Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), 70-74; and Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volumes II and III*, 131-32.

¹⁸ See Bataille, *Eroticism*, 113.

¹⁹ Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, 71-72.

²⁰ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 91-2.

²¹ Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 92; Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, 184.

²² Peter Dahlgren, "Tracking the Civic Subject in the Media Landscape: Versions of the Democratic Ideal," *Television & New Media*, vol. 14, no.1 (2013): 81.

²³ See also, Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Why Psychoanalysis?* trans. Rachel Bowlby (New York: Columbia University Press), 53-54.

²⁴ Dahlgren, "Tracking the Civic Subject," 73.

²⁵ Freud, "Thoughts for The Times of War and Death," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XIV (1914-1916)*, ed. James Strachey et al., 275-288 (London: Vintage Books, 2001).

²⁶ David Bordwell, "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 10; see also David Bordwell and Noel Carol, "Introduction," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), xiii.

²⁷ As I have shown elsewhere, failure to engage with this split subject has significant consequences for political life, as I take up in later sections of this paper, see Alison Horbury, "Digital Feminisms and the Split Subject: Short-Circuits through Lacan's Four Discourses," *Communication and Media Journal* XI, 38 (2016): 135-166.

²⁸ Excepting a noteworthy project by Jacob Johanssen in *Psychoanalysis and Digital Culture: Audiences, Social Media, and Big Data* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

²⁹ See Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XXI (1927-1931)*, ed. James Strachey et al., 59-145 (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 95; and Freud, "'Civilised' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness," in *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume IX (1906-1908)*, ed. James Strachey et al., (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 181.

³⁰ Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents," 96.

³¹ Freud, "Thoughts For The Times of War and Death," 284; Freud, "'Civilised' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness," 181.

³² See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume I: Consumption*, trans Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Bataille, *The Accursed Share:*

Volumes II and III; Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Paintings, Lascaux or, The Birth of Art*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Lausanne: Skira, 1955).

³³ Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volume I*, 21.

³⁴ Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volume I*, 21.

³⁵ Sigmund Freud "The Future of an Illusion," In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XXI (1927–1931)*, ed. James Strachey et al., 5-56 (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 14.

³⁶ Todd McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and The Rules of the Game* (New York: Bloomsbury), 8-11.

³⁷ McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and The Rules of the Game*, 8.

³⁸ Stephen Heath, "Cinema and Psychoanalysis: Parallel Histories," in *Endless Night: Cinema and Psychoanalysis, Parallel Histories*, ed. Janet Bergstrom, 25-56 (Berkeley: University of California Press), 32; see, in particular, M Masud R Khan, "Dream Psychology and the Evolution of the Psychoanalytic Situation," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 48 (1972): 424-32.

³⁹ Robert Samuels, "Art and the Position of the Analyst," in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Marie Jaanus, 183-186 (Albany: State University of New York Press 1995), 186.

⁴⁰ McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and The Rules of the Game*, 10.

⁴¹ See Christian Metz *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis 1982); Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (SUNY: Albany, 2007).

⁴² McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 13.

⁴³ McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 13.

⁴⁴ Freud, "The Future of an Illusion", 14.

⁴⁵ McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 3.

⁴⁶ McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 3.

⁴⁷ Lisa Downing, "The Cinematic Ethics Of Psychoanalysis: Futurity, Death Drive, Desire," in *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*, ed. Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, 133-146 (New York: Routledge 2009), 135.

⁴⁸ Marc de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII*, trans. Sigi Jöttkandt (Albany: State University of New York, 2009), 186.

⁴⁹ Themí, "Bataille and the Erotics of the Real," 312.

⁵⁰ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 243, 195.

⁵¹ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 197.

⁵² Richard Capobianco, "Lacan and Heidegger: The Ethics of Desire and the Ethics of Authenticity," in *From Phenomenology to Thought, Errancy, and Desire*, ed. Babette E Babich, 391-396 (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 393.

⁵³ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 315.

⁵⁴ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 315; see also, Bataille *The Accursed Share: Volumes II and III*, 45.

⁵⁵ Themí, "Bataille, Literature, Happiness, and Evil," 196.

⁵⁶ Patrick ffrench, "Dirty Life: London – Paris – Barcelona – Trier – Frankfurt" in *The Beast at Heaven's Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, ed. Andrew Hussey, 61-72 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), 63.

⁵⁷ Freud, "Thoughts For The Times of War and Death," 284; Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volume I*, 21.

⁵⁸ de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics*, 48.

⁵⁹ Freud, "'Civilised' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness," 186.

⁶⁰ See Richman *Sacred Revolutions*, 156.

⁶¹ Themí, *Lacan's Ethics*, 59.

⁶² Heather Long, "Spring Breakers Isn't Just A Terrible Movie, It Reinforces Rape Culture," *The Guardian*, March 13 (2013), 01.30 AEDT: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/mar/28/spring-breakers-movie-wild-girls-rape-culture>

⁶³ See Bruce Fink, *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique: A Lacanian Approach for Practitioners* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 1-5.

⁶⁴ See de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics*, 48; Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents," 84.

⁶⁵ James Quandt, "Flesh & Blood: Sex And Violence In Recent French Cinema" *Artforum* Vol. 42, Issue 6. (Feb. 2004), 127; Tim Palmer, "Style and Sensation in the Contemporary French Cinema of the Body," *Journal of Film and Video* 58, no.3 (2006): 22.

⁶⁶ Mattias Frey “The Ethics of Extreme Cinema,” in *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice, and Spectatorship*, ed. Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey, 145-162 (Routledge, 2013), 145, 151.

⁶⁷ See, Lilia Kilburn “Blow Guns: Escapist Erotics in *Spring Breakers* (Harmony Korine, 2012),” *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 83 (June 2017); <http://sensesofcinema.com/2017/feature-articles/spring-breakers/>; and Armstrong, “Spring Breakers.”

⁶⁸ Armstrong “Spring Breakers.”

⁶⁹ Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 82.

⁷⁰ Freud “Civilization and its Discontents,” 82, 94.

⁷¹ See Freud, “The Future of an Illusion,” 6; and Freud “Civilization and its Discontents,” 82.

⁷² Freud, “The Future of an Illusion,” 6-7.

⁷³ Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 110; my emphasis.

⁷⁴ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004): 284-86.

⁷⁵ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 3.

⁷⁶ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 3, 321.

⁷⁷ de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics*, 2.

⁷⁸ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 237; de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics*, 53.

⁷⁹ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 2, 313.

⁸⁰ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 313, 23.

⁸¹ Freud “The Future of an Illusion,” 15.

⁸² Freud, “Civilization and its Discontents,” 95.

⁸³ de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics*, 4; Lacan *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 4.

⁸⁴ See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-54*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 221.

⁸⁵ See Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 138.

⁸⁶ McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 1-2.

⁸⁷ Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 3.

⁸⁸ McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 3.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Heinz Kohut, “The Evaluation Of Applicants For Psychoanalytic Training,” *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis And Bulletin of the International Psycho-Analytical Association* 49 (1968): 553.

⁹⁰ Fink, *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique*, 3.

⁹¹ Fink, *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique*, 3-4.

⁹² Samuels, “Art and the Position of the Analyst,” 184-85.

⁹³ McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 14.

⁹⁴ Ed Cameron, “Harmony Korine’s ‘Break from Reality’: *Spring Breakers* as Candy-Coloured Neon Noir,” *Mosaic* 49, no. 4 (2016): 91.

⁹⁵ Themi, “Bataille and the Erotics of the Real,” 314; Bataille, *Eroticism*, 65.

⁹⁶ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 63; my emphasis.

⁹⁷ Jacob W. Glazier “Spring Break Forever, Bitches! Neoliberal Identity Politics Undergoes Schizoanalysis,” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, 28 (2015): <http://rhizomes.net/issue28/glazier.html>

⁹⁸ Cameron, “Harmony Korine’s ‘Break from Reality’,” 89-105.

⁹⁹ Harmony Korine, quoted in Jason Wood, *Last Words*, 68; Harmony Korine, “Commentary,” *Spring Breakers*. Lionsgate, 2013. Film.

¹⁰⁰ Todd McGowan, *The End of Dissatisfaction? Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 52.

¹⁰¹ Richard Brody, “The Life Lessons of ‘Spring Break’,” *The New Yorker*, accessed June 13 2019: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-life-lessons-of-spring-breakers>

¹⁰² Quoted in Wood, *Last Words*, 71.

¹⁰³ Alison Horbury, “A psychoanalytic ethics of the pornographic aesthetic,” *Porn Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2019): 89-90.

¹⁰⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1989), 111.

¹⁰⁵ See Alison Horbury, “A psychoanalytic ethics of the pornographic aesthetic,” 95.

¹⁰⁶ Horbury, “A psychoanalytic ethics,” 94, 96.

¹⁰⁷ Freud, “‘Civilised’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness,” 190-91.

¹⁰⁸ Cameron, “Harmony Korine’s ‘Break from Reality’,” 93.

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- ¹⁰⁹ Maryn Wilkinson, "On the Depths of Surface: Strategies of Surface Aesthetics in *The Bling Ring*, *Spring Breakers* and *Drive*," *Film-Philosophy* 22, no.2 (2018): 222–23.
- ¹¹⁰ Korine quoted in Wood, *Last Words*, 68; Korine, "Commentary."
- ¹¹¹ Cameron, "Harmony Korine's 'Break from Reality,'" 93.
- ¹¹² Cameron, "Harmony Korine's 'Break from Reality,'" 92.
- ¹¹³ Cameron, "Harmony Korine's 'Break from Reality,'" 93.
- ¹¹⁴ Cameron, "Harmony Korine's 'Break from Reality,'" 93.
- ¹¹⁵ Horbury, "A psychoanalytic ethics," 91.
- ¹¹⁶ Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents,' 83.
- ¹¹⁷ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 143.
- ¹¹⁸ Cameron, "Harmony Korine's 'Break from Reality,'" 100.
- ¹¹⁹ Bataille, *Prehistoric Paintings*, 115, 125; Themis further notes the return to animal sovereignty is present in pre and non-Christian religions where deities take on animal form in transgressive activity, such as Zeus' divine rapes, see "Bataille and the Erotics of the Real," 322.
- ¹²⁰ Michel Foucault, "Sade: Sergeant of Sex," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al., (New York: The New Press, 1994), 224.
- ¹²¹ Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volumes II and III*, 230.
- ¹²² Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 323.
- ¹²³ Themis, "Bataille and the Erotics of the Real," 315; Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volumes II and III*, 107, 109, 119.
- ¹²⁴ For a full transcript of the lecturer's dialogue, see Kilburn "Blow Guns."
- ¹²⁵ Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 112, 21.
- ¹²⁶ Maryn Wilkinson, "Leisure/Crime, Immaterial Labor, and the Performance of the Teenage Girl in Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers*' (2012) and Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring* (2013)," *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 12, 13 (Spring/Fall 2017): 22.
- ¹²⁷ Cameron, "Harmony Korine's 'Break from Reality,'" 99.
- ¹²⁸ Cameron, "Harmony Korine's 'Break from Reality,'" 101.
- ¹²⁹ See Richman, *Sacred Revolutions*, 156.
- ¹³⁰ John Brenkman, "Introduction to Bataille," *New German Critique*, No. 16 (Winter, 1979): 61.
- ¹³¹ Brenkman, "Introduction to Bataille," 61.
- ¹³² Quoted in Wood, *Last Words*, 71.

“THEY’RE BAD PEOPLE – THEY SHOULD SUFFER”:

POST-BRITISH CRIME FILMS AND THE ETHICS OF RETRIBUTIVE VIOLENCE

Mark Schmitt (TU Dortmund University)

In recent years, British popular genre cinema has displayed a tendency to allegorise the ethical questions resulting from the nation’s social and political challenges of the 21st century.¹ Whether it is the Blair government’s decision to join the US in the Iraq war in 2003 and the ensuing disillusionment with democracy and the futility of public protest, the austerity measures and subsequently increasing social divisions in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, the ongoing process of Scottish and Welsh devolution that challenges the very notion of a United Kingdom, Britain finds itself in a stage that Michael Gardiner has described as “post-British.”² On the level of the nation-state, and especially with regard to Scottish and Welsh devolution, the post-British process can be identified as the “democratic restructuring of each nation within union *and* each nation still affected by Anglophone imperialism”³, while the social structure of Britain is still marked by the internal fault lines of class divisions of class.

The notion of “post-Britain” has been addressed in British film studies. William Brown has suggested that Britain’s cinematic output in the 21st century offers a “paradoxically post-British” perspective which is reflected in subject matter, ideological points of view and modes of production.⁴ As Brown argues, such post-British perspectives can particularly be found in popular genre films such as *28 Days Later* (2002) and *V for Vendetta* (2006).⁵ In the following, I will argue that this post-British sensibility in contemporary national genre cinema is aligned with urgent ethical questions regarding the nation state on both the British level as well as within a larger European context. By focussing on two recent examples of British crime films – Nick Love’s *Outlaw* (2007) and Ben Wheatley’s *Kill List* (2011) – I want to show how British genre cinema deals with the ethical questions that Thomas Elsaesser has addressed in his recent book *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy* (2019). Contemporary Britain is a textbook example of what Thomas Elsaesser identifies as Europe’s current political and ethical challenges which consist in three deficits: the “democracy deficit”, the “multicultural diversity deficit” and the “social justice deficit.”⁶ As Elsaesser argues, these deficits amount to “intractable ethical dilemmas”⁷ in that they constitute ideological discrepancies between what Europe as a political project is expected and supposed to be and what large sections of the public consider to be faulty or amiss. These challenges are taken up in the “thought experiments” of contemporary European cinema.⁸ While Elsaesser primarily considers films that could be labelled “art cinema”, I will show how these two commercial British films can similarly be considered as thought experiments. As I will demonstrate, their experimental nature relates both to the way they address post-British political issues and the way they deal with the conventions of the crime film.

Outlaw and *Kill List* allegorise the political and ethical dilemmas of 21st-century Britain in their depiction of retributive violence committed by vigilantes in the wake of Britain's involvement in the Iraq war. The two films focus on "post-heroic"⁹ characters who have lost faith in Britain's institutions such as democratic politics or the justice system. They are thus representative of a number of 21st-century British genre films that deal with vigilantism as a means of individuals to overcome the perceived deficits of the political and juridical institutions, among them films such as Dan Reed's *Straightheads* (aka *Closure*, 2007) and Daniel Barber's *Harry Brown* (2009). The group of vigilantes in *Outlaw* and the contract killers turned vigilantes in *Kill List* can be considered to grapple with the "unchallenged totality of consensus" which Britain tried to maintain since World War II.¹⁰ *Outlaw* paints the picture of a fundamentally corrupt justice system which lets the streets roam with acquitted offenders, while *Kill List*'s narrative ultimately reveals central institutions of power to be run by a Pagan cult, and the two contract killers' final job turns out to be a ritual of sacrifice. *Kill List* thus inscribes itself in the tradition of British popular genre cinema, particularly the folk horror cycle that includes films such as Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973), another seminal anti-authoritarian film about human sacrifice.

In both films, characters come to the conclusion that the only way to reach any kind of ethical standards within a disintegrating national community is to resort to vigilantism and retributive violence. This kind of retributive violence not only points to a crisis of politics, ethics as well as politics *as* ethics. As I will argue in the following, the two films engage the audience in an ethical thought experiment precisely in their depictions of retributive violence – a violence which, as I claim, is enacted by the protagonists as compensation for Britain's failure to maintain ethical principles and integrity in recent international conflict. That is, the war on terror Britain engaged in alongside the US is allegorically brought home. Love and Wheatley's films can thus be interpreted in the context of the ethical turn described by Alain Badiou¹¹ and Jacques Rancière¹² and which Elsaesser has identified as a key aspect in contemporary European cinema.¹³ As I will show, Love and Wheatley engage with ethical questions in a twofold manner. First, on the diegetic level, their characters navigate the post-British ethico-political vacuum and thus deal with the personal and collective ethical dilemmas that Elsaesser addresses in his book. Secondly, these dilemmas are transferred on the relationship between the film and their audience by addressing the "ethics of spectatorship"¹⁴ in scenes of extreme violence. It is in these scenes that the two films unfold their full (if not unproblematic) potentials as 'films as ethics', for here their thought experiments transcend the confines of popular genre conventions.

FILM AS ETHICAL THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

For Elsaesser contemporary European cinema is in a unique position because it is no longer expected to express images of the nation in the face of Hollywood's global commercial dominance now that it is increasingly being subsumed into the category of 'world cinema' where it competes with "other national

or transnational cinemas.”¹⁵ Since it now has lost its economic and innovative aesthetic relevance, it can concentrate on new tasks – namely “to be ‘European’ in a post-national sense, that is, to contribute to the continent’s political experiment, which has rarely seemed more precarious.”¹⁶ Cinema’s capacity for philosophical thought experiments is the outcome of this liberation from artistic and ideological responsibilities. In that context, European politics and European cinema become “the recto and the verso of each other.”¹⁷ Cinema is thus able to engage with the political dilemmas of contemporary Europe that manifest itself in both philosophy and film in three major tropes: “‘the empty centre of sovereignty’ (lack of accountability and crisis of authority), ‘stranger/neighbour/other’ (multicultural diversity/xenophobia), and ‘equality is only possible in death’ (equality before the law and the limits of social justice).”¹⁸

These tropes are taken up in European cinema in the context of “‘as if’ scenarios, often in order to explore and expose intractable ethical dilemmas” by asking “[w]hat if we imagine a scenario that enacts one or several of these core values of democracy, by putting them to the test in contemporary Europe?”¹⁹ Elsaesser goes on to argue that these cinematic ‘what if’ scenarios explore the ethical questions that arise from the aforementioned deficits and dilemmas. They thus tie in with current philosophical questions about “the political.”²⁰ Elsaesser considers the questions by engaging with recent debates over ethics based on competing schools of contemporary continental philosophy, namely the trajectory based on Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida²¹ and the one pursued by Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière,²² both of which are in turn critical of the Levinasian and Derridean ideas of ethics and have taken to task the “ethical turn” due to its tendency towards becoming a problematically Eurocentric, neoliberal consensus (and thus a hegemonic formation) which does not properly account for specific situations outside the matrix of European cultural hegemony.

Elsaesser proposes a distinction between ethics mark 1 and ethics mark 2. Ethics mark 1 thus “would encompass both the authority and respect a person commands, on the basis of his or her actions, as well as the principles that govern the good life, the ‘examined life’ worth living.”²³ The second definition of ethics would pertain to the notion prevalent in the ‘ethical turn’, namely the notion of ethics as a “supplement” that “tries to fill the perceived absence of normativity in multiculturalism.”²⁴ This is the type of ethics that Badiou²⁵ and Rancière²⁶ have challenged in their writings, especially when it comes to military and humanitarian intervention in international conflicts in the 1990s and the post-9/11 era. While Badiou criticises the normative Western attitude towards ethics as a normative, all-encompassing principle that defines “evil” by departing from a historical catastrophe (in which case ethics is the means to avoid the repetition of such catastrophes irrespective of historical, cultural and political specificities), Rancière, especially in his post-2001 writings, challenges the universal ethics of the war on terror which pits “infinite justice” against “infinite Evil” based on the implementation of a dubious ethical consensus which is

the constitution of an absolute, extra-judicial right for the victim of infinite Evil. Whoever inherits the victim's absolute right thereby becomes the defender of that absolute right. The unlimited nature of the wrong suffered by a victim justifies the unlimitedness of the right of its defender. This process was brought to completion by the American retribution for the absolute crime committed against American lives.²⁷

The role of Britain in the war on terror, which is one of the central aspects in Nick Love and Ben Wheatley's films can, as I will argue in my analysis, be considered with respect to this ethical turn which rests on "the emergence of a post-ideological politics of the moral emotions."²⁸

The role of cinema as thought experiment consists in critically interrogating the impasses produced by such an ethical consensus. It can do so by creating "post-heroic" narratives, as Elsaesser proposes in a re-formulation of Rancièrian dissensus: "A post-heroic narrative – in contrast to recovering such old or new universals that seek to find common ground between the different religions, or posit shared mutual responsibilities and interests – is more likely [...] to affirm incompatible interests, dissensus rather than consensus, and incommensurable values."²⁹ In that respect, the post-heroic shares similarities with Gardiner's notion of post-Britishness in that the post-heroic narrative replaces the "heroic narrative around [the] 'birth of a nation'"³⁰ and instead suggests that "antagonisms, dissensus and disagreement can still be mutually beneficial."³¹

OUTLAW

The democratic deficit and its accompanying trope of the empty centre of sovereignty as well as the deficit of social justice and equality are the ones that resonate most strongly in the two films I want to look at in this article. Both *Outlaw* and *Kill List* are pervaded by a strong sense of lost trust in and disillusionment with the notion of representative democracy and social justice. *Outlaw* establishes its male protagonists as broken individuals betrayed by the "powers that be." Danny Bryant, a soldier who fought in the Falklands, Afghanistan and Iraq, returns home after duty to find his wife cheating on him and his neighbourhood dominated by "chavs"³² who harass him. The discourse surrounding anti-social (white) and chavs in particular is crucial for understanding the political and social climate in Britain at the time and has found its way into a wide range of cultural production of the time, especially into contemporary genre cinema. The chav as a demonised figure of social and cultural malaise features prominently in crime films such as the aforementioned *Harry Brown*, but has particularly been used as an antagonist in horror films such as James Watkins' *Eden Lake* (2008) and Paul Andrew Williams' *Cherry Tree Lane* (2010).³³ Later, when he talks to his former mentor, he reflects on the futility of his service abroad to supposedly ensure the nation's safety from global conflict when the nation itself is riddled with corruption and violence from the inside: "I wanna do something; it's a dirty fucking world. Otherwise, what was I doing out there?" Meanwhile, insecure office worker Gene Dekker struggles with

the trauma of having been beaten up and humiliated in front of his fiancée by a random gang of thugs after an altercation at a traffic stop and with bullying at work. Similarly, prosecution barrister Cedric Munroe is intimidated by gang members who urge him to withdraw from his case against crime boss Terry Manning.

All of them are eventually brought together by circumstance after hotel security guard Simon convinces Bryant to put together and train a team of vigilantes. Simon is a key character for the film's ethical thought experiment since he at first is an impassive observer. His office is plastered with newspaper articles that testify to a general "breakdown of law and order in this country", an impression supported by the film's use of TV footage covering the Iraq War abroad as well as the pervasive "yob culture" on Britain's streets. Simon, himself a convicted ex-hooligan, experiences the world through this media coverage as well as through the panopticon of security cameras he has installed throughout the hotel. Not only does Simon provide a connecting point for all the other characters in the film's narrative, he also becomes crucial in the film's more meta-reflexive aspects. Simon is a watcher (or, rather, a pathological voyeur who masks his compulsion with an ethical purpose) who, like the audience, must position himself ethically in relation to the images he sees. His personal conclusion from what he witnesses is to take action by side-stepping the law and the country's ethical consensus. This meta-reflexivity is emphasised on the formal level by the use of an almost constant nervous zooming effect which makes watching *Outlaw* an unnerving experience.

While many critics have heavily criticised the film for its speculative tone as well as for its seemingly odd and sometimes implausible narrative and stylistic choices³⁴, a point could be made in favour of unnerving stylistic devices such as the almost constant zooming effects in that they highlight the mediated approach to violence and, like the many surveillance cameras used in the United Kingdom, the film's cinematography constantly probes and observes what is going on in the film's world. Thus, Simon becomes a reflector in the film's ethical experiment. Initially, he voices the desire for retribution and justice that many viewers might feel after the harrowing stabbing of Cedric's pregnant wife, a turning point in the narrative. When the vigilante project gains traction, however, Simon reveals his sleazy side and once they exact retribution on the first delinquents, he is the one most eager to sadistically torture and execute the victims while the others show more qualms. Audience sympathies gradually shift towards the more remorseful characters, especially when Simon starts to express his jingoist, anti-Islamic and racist sentiments which are rebuked by the rest of the group. Significantly, when he undermines Bryant's authority and jeopardises the group's integrity, Bryant sets an example by executing him.

The execution of Simon is a crucial turning point for the use of violence among the vigilantes. While all of them are motivated by a profound sense of frustration (with the "powers that be", Britain's seemingly twisted ethical consensus), injustice and humiliation (all of them are personally affected by the corrupt state of things, and for all of them, their sense of masculinity seems to be at stake), Simon is the one who seems to be the most unstable, and in the eyes of the others, he seems to enjoy violence a

bit too much. In fact, he seems to be as abject as the “paedophiles, dealers, bullies, junkies, scum, cunts” that the vigilantes want to put to justice. Thus, setting an example by executing him becomes a way for Bryant to reassert his authority and also to disrupt the cycle of violence set in motion by him and his followers. Love’s version of Britain is one of a society on the brink of chaos in which a Girardian primitive pattern of violence and counterviolence in which the state’s monopoly on violence has been replaced by “reciprocal violence, the violence that really hurts, setting man against man and threatening the total destruction of the community.”³⁵ It is an apocalyptic image of post-Britishness in which the authority and legitimacy of the British state, its legal and representative systems, are put into question in the face of internal chaos and international shame in the form of the Iraq war. The film thus touches on the public disillusionment with the British government after the UK joined the war despite significant public protest and seems to map this disillusionment onto Britain’s internal conflicts and differences, among others in terms of social class. The disaffected thugs and chavs that roam the streets of London betray the persistent class divisions in British society. The questions implied by this scenario are: given the decision to ignore massive public protest and to join the war regardless, what does this say about the integrity of Britain’s sense of democracy? Why, consequently, should people still feel connected to parliamentary politics and social contracts? Why should the domestic legal system be any better if “infinite justice”³⁶ is flawed on the international level?

This tabloid newspaper vision of a “broken Britain” (to use a phrase used by *The Sun* since 2007 and subsequently taken up by Prime Minister David Cameron with regard to the same type of “yob culture” and inadequate policing which the film’s characters bemoan) is the backdrop for the film’s thought experiment about what would happen if a few people would put to the test what a majority of people seem to think: that official law is insufficiently implemented by corrupt institutions and can be warped to such a degree that it benefits the perpetrators more than the victims. As Bryant puts it in one of his pep talks: “I’ve got the confidence to fight back, but if you want to spend the rest of your life being bullied and raped by cunts like Blair... I am talking about legitimate targets, I’m talking about the people that hurt you.” However, by fighting back against “cunts like Blair”, and by rejecting official law and ethical consensus expressed in the allegedly “humanitarian” war on terror³⁷, the violent death of “legitimate targets” could also set in motion a series of reciprocal violence. This is the danger that Bryant and his group face. By executing the dissenter Simon, Bryant not only punishes the “wrong” (i.e. jingoist, racist, sadistic) kind of vigilante, he also stages a symbolic sacrifice which establishes a new code of ethics that replaces official law and restricts the chain of reciprocal violence endangering the new post-British community to come.

Love’s *Outlaw* is, of course, deliberately using B-movie tropes and has been considered by I.Q. Hunter as a prime example of contemporary British trash cinema.³⁸ Its premise has been heavily criticised in reviews at the time of release, with Peter Bradshaw calling it “ugly, naïve, and deeply unpleasant [...] crime-revenge-porn”³⁹ and Ryan Gilbey accusing it of being “exploitative” and “crypto-racist.”⁴⁰ Yet, I would argue that even while the film certainly has its flaws, its b-movie sensibility and

its “pornographic” nature is exactly what constitutes its ethical experiment. The probing (and thereby “pornographic”) camera I described earlier offers the film up to thinking about the ethics of spectatorship even when the film walks a fine line in trying to find a nuanced balance in depicting different forms of legitimate and illegitimate (or “good” and “bad”⁴¹) violence. This, of course, is rooted in the film’s indebtedness to genre conventions. Love tries to balance between the viewers’ desire for the spectacle of retributive violence while at the same time withholding and complicating this very desire as ethically problematic, reflected in the main characters’ conflicted attitudes towards this violence. This is most evident in the characters’ first attempts at acting out their desire for retribution and “proper” justice by inflicting pain on those who hurt them. Apart from the ex-soldier Bryant, none of them is trained in fighting, they do not come to violence as easily and effortlessly as prototypical movie vigilantes played by Clint Eastwood or Charles Bronson.⁴² Their first fights are choreographed in an awkward, hesitant and almost embarrassing way, which is contrasted with the film’s final moment of violence, which belongs to Gene, played by Nick Love regular Danny Dyer. With a triumphant smile, Gene shoots a crime lord in the face after he says a line he has heard repeatedly throughout the film: “you ain’t got the bollocks, son.” The final moment is thus one of an empowerment through violence, an ending at once in line with its b-movie credentials and at the same time a testimony to its ambivalent ethical experiment.

While an ending like this might play into the hands of those critics who have accused Nick Love and his film of celebrating masculine empowerment, proto-fascism and vigilante violence, it might as well be argued that the ending of the film leaves it up to the audience to figure out the answers to the open-ended ethical questions on offer. Two things can thus ultimately be said in conclusion to *Outlaw* as an ethical thought experiment. First, the film can be considered as an example of what could be called populist genre cinema. *Outlaw*, as I. Q. Hunter has argued, “sets out to be politically relevant, incendiary” and offers a “*Daily Mail*-ish vision of Britain as a lawless dystopia overrun with gangsters and hoodies”.⁴³ This is indicative of the democratic deficit at the heart of European cinema’s ethical thought experiments: the established institutions supposed to uphold European ideals of democracy and security cannot actually do so in Love’s vision of Britain, and “[s]ocial change is impossible except at the end of a gun”.⁴⁴ This populist sentiment is also apparent in the film’s mode of production. A making-of extra on the Blu-ray release shows how Nick Love and his frequent actor Danny Dyer called on their fanbase to be extras in the film’s crowd scenes via social media. The (exclusively male) fans are shown to be excited to take part in their favourite filmmaker and actor’s new project. It becomes clear that the film speaks to a certain audience and that they are taken seriously by the filmmakers in a way that suggests that *Outlaw* is a film for the people and by the people – a sentiment that inevitably escapes the mainstream critics that derided the film, and which gains additional significance in the light of the film’s political and ethical project. There is thus a performative aspect to *Outlaw* in that its polemic idea of what political and democratic participation should look like reach beyond the filmic text and

implicate at least its die-hard fan audience, if not the critics (who, however, are in turn derided paratextually in Love and Dyer's audio commentary, also available on the home video release).⁴⁵

This immediately ties in with the second conclusion, which concerns the ethical implications of the relationship between audience and genre cinema. In contrast to what the aforementioned appalled reviews of the film imply, namely that it is a detestable, "ugly" vindication of vigilante retributive violence, I would argue that *Outlaw* does precisely what many genre films do: other than teaching the audience a clear and unambiguous lesson about the dubious ethics of retributive violence, it leaves it to the audience to answer the ethical questions raised by the film. Very much like Rob Zombie's *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), an homage to grindhouse cinema which engages the audience by daring it to empathise with a family of deranged sadistic killers, *Outlaw* is ultimately another example of a trash or B-movie cinema that is an ethical thought experiment precisely because of its very status as grindhouse-y trash cinema. An argument by Jeremy Morris about the moral implications of retributive violence in torture-horror films such as *The Devil's Rejects* holds equally true for Love's *Outlaw*: "Torture-horror requires an audience both capable of empathy with the victims and able to share something of the joy of the torturers, however unsavory. [...] the audience must experience both of these conflicting sentiments. Being conflicted in that way is not the mark of immorality; on the contrary, it is a moral vindication of the audience."⁴⁶

KILL LIST

Kill List is not primarily a vigilante crime film. Rather, it offers a mix of genre tropes, which on first viewing deliberately confuses audiences. First, it seems to be a hitman movie, with its two main characters Jay and Gal being hired by the dubious "Client" to assassinate a range of target designated as "the Priest", "the Librarian" and "the MP." The film soon veers off into horror territory after a turn of events in which Jay turns the assassination of "the Librarian" into an act of vigilantism after learning that he is responsible for the filming and distribution of snuff films. Wheatley's film takes the thought experiment on post-British vigilantism a few steps further than Nick Love by moving past the tabloid press vision of broken Britain and by transgressing the boundaries of the crime genre into a folk horror⁴⁷ version of post-British politics while it shares *Outlaw's* concern with the spectre of the Iraq war. The film opens with semi-retired hitman Jay arguing with his wife Shel about their drying money reserves. Jay hasn't been working for the past eight months due to a supposed back injury and PTSD. Later, during a dinner party with Jay's partner Gal and his new girlfriend Fiona, the family's dire financial situation is taken up again. When Jay asks Fiona to elaborate on what she does for a living, she explains that she works as a human resources manager, a "hatchet person." When Fiona explains that her job and the "dirty work" to be done especially during the current post-2008 recession are "not personal", Jay mumbles that sacking people is "probably personal to them – and their families."

This conversation carries meaning for the rest of the film not only in terms of characterisation, but also in a number of other ways, which only become clear to the viewer upon second viewing. When, in the film's disturbing conclusion, it is revealed that Fiona had been a member of the nameless Pagan cult that eventually sacrifices Jay's family, her job in "human resources" assumes a new meaning, as does her explanation that "there's a lot of dirty work to be done." In the overall context of the film, this line is a macabre foreshadowing: Jay and his family, by being sacrificed for a cult whose purpose is left largely unexplained throughout the film, have indeed been "sacked" by Fiona, the "hatchet person." The conversation, however, also sketches the film's ethical coordinates. On the one hand, Jay and Gal's rightful indignation and condescension towards "hatchet persons" and the practice of "sacking" can be read as ironic considering their own profession as hitmen and soldiers: They, too, "sack" people for a living, and thus are literally "hatchet men." However, the joke will eventually be on them since Fiona and her fellow cult members also turn out to be actual killers. On the other hand, Jay's disdain for Fiona's job does not only spring from his own current experience of impending economic precarity (if he was an employee in a business, a human resources manager like Fiona would certainly consider him "under-performing"), but also betrays what could be considered his moral compass (despite his questionable line of work) that will later guide his actions and be put to the test when it comes to the film's central scene of violent retribution.

In this context, *Kill List* starts to make sense as an allegory of austerity Britain in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and ensuing questions of social justice. As Fiona comments, when Shel somewhat nonsensically remarks that "the 80s recession was a lot more glamorous" to counterbalance the awkwardness of the dinner situation, "this [i.e. the current recession] is much worse – a lot of dirty work to be done." This situates the recent recession in Britain within a national and historical narrative – a narrative that by now seems to have become so bleak and confused that even past times of economic recession become the subject of nostalgic yearning which is complicated in the film by the fact that, despite Jay and Shel's temporary financial troubles, the two couples seem not to be immediately affected by the financial crisis. In fact, an earlier conversation revolved around Jay and Shel's jacuzzi – hardly a symptom of being stricken by poverty. However, as Adam Nayman argues, "[t]here is a parable here of the house-poor lower-middle class inadvertently doing the dirty work for the ruling elite."⁴⁸

The warped sense of history of Shel's comment on the "glamorous" 80s recession is also echoed in Jay's comparison of the austerity measures to the exclusionary and genocidal politics of the Nazis – an attempt to gain the moral high ground in the conversation: "I wish I could have had a go at them – difficult to know where a man stands these days", he adds, alluding to his past tour in Iraq. Just like his wife, he yearns for a time when it was supposedly easier to ethically navigate the world. With his wish to "have a go" at the Nazis, he evokes the Churchillian "unchallenged totality of consensus during and after World War II"⁴⁹ when Britain seemed on the right side of history rather than part of the muddled affair of the war on terror.

This makes *Kill List* a scenario that is paradigmatic of the ethical turn outlined by Badiou and Rancière. It is indicative of the “reversal of the flow of time” which Rancière identifies as one of the features of this turn: “the time turned towards an end to be accomplished – progress, emancipation or the Other – is replaced by that turned towards the catastrophe behind us.”⁵⁰ This “catastrophe behind us” is the historical “radical Evil” of the Nazis and the extermination of the European Jews, which, according to Badiou, has become the “incommensurable measure of Evil” which serves as the “only way to access Evil in general.”⁵¹ This measuring of Evil (rather than approaching ethics from a definition of what is “Good”) based on a historical singularity is for Badiou the fundamental problem of the ethical turn he describes because it makes it impossible to define ethics in terms of a specific situatedness in what he calls a “truth-process.”⁵²

If, according to Elsaesser, contemporary European cinema faces the challenge to be “‘European’ in a post-national sense, that is, to contribute to the continent's political experiment, which has rarely seemed more precarious”⁵³, then *Kill List* seems to take up this challenge from a particularly British (or post-British) angle. Its ‘thought experiment’ is located in the ‘what if’ of the disillusionment with British democracy and politics in the time after the financial crisis and the failed ethical project of the military intervention in Iraq. This is precisely the culmination of what Rancière attributes to the time of the ethical turn – “our consensual and humanitarian time” whose formula “[o]nly evil repays evil” led to the invasion of Iraq, based on the misrepresentation of false facts by the Bush and Blair governments.⁵⁴ This melange of unease and disillusionment – with parliamentary politics, the rights and wrongs of humanitarian interventions, the validity of the economic system – is the starting point for *Kill List*'s cinematic thought experiment, whose “research questions” might be paraphrased as, “what happens to a man who no longer knows where to stand these days?”, “what will happen to his ethical compass?” and “can the social contract be rewritten?” With respect to the last question, it is worth noting that the dubious character for whom Jay and Gal work themselves through the titular “kill list”, and who is only known as “the Client”, formulates the purpose of their job as “reconstruction.” This “reconstruction” consists in “secular and religious figureheads freshly slain.”⁵⁵ Yet, it also “alludes specifically to Britain’s post-World War II history [...], but seems here to be about the reshuffling of the social and economic deck since the 1970s.”⁵⁶ The term “reconstruction” therefore seems to echo the earlier dinner conversation about the ethical integrity of Britain’s role in World War II and at the same time seems to be more semantically ambiguous, leaving room for allegorical interpretations.

It is to this end of “reconstruction” that the sacrifices in the film are being performed. First, the victims on the Client’s “kill list” can be considered sacrifices, especially since they seem to expect their violent deaths at the hands of Jay: the Priest, the Librarian and the MP all knowingly look at Jay, with the first two even thanking him for killing them. What the exact function of these sacrifices for the cult is remains vague – it can only be assumed that these victims are key figures representative of Britain’s social, spiritual and political order, which is being subjected to “reconstruction.” In this sequence of sacrificial murders, the killing of the Librarian constitutes a turning point in the film’s narrative and

characterisation. Having observed the hideout of their next victim, Jay and Gal inspect the Librarian's secret archives, which apparently comprise a stash of what must be assumed to be snuff tapes. What these tapes show is not visually revealed to the audience, but the tortured screams on the tapes and Gal and Jay's reactions to them – shock, disgust, anger and tears – indicate that they must involve minors. Supposedly, they are some kind of snuff film tapes, and they push Jay – who wasn't the emotionally most stable to begin with – over the edge. Subsequently, Jay makes it his mission to not simply shoot the Librarian like their first victim, but to punish him for his crimes, very much like the “nonces” that the “outlaws” in Love's film set out to execute. The torture and murder of the Librarian turn into a case of vigilantism: Jay smashes the Librarian's skull with several hammer blows which are captured in what appears to the audience as a single, unedited take with shockingly convincing in-camera practical effects.

The scene is remarkable in formal terms since, as Nayman notes, “[i]n a film mostly defined by its editing, Wheatley lets the assault play out in a single, static shot that's so convincingly choreographed that anybody not viscerally overwhelmed by the sight of splattering brain matter is probably wondering how on Earth the filmmakers pulled it off.”⁵⁷ The technicality of the shot showing Jay split the Librarian's skull is, I would argue, instrumental in the ethical thought experiment of the film. With Sonia Lupher, I contend that the scene is central for the genre twists that Wheatley installs throughout the film. At first, *Kill List* appears to be a “family drama-turned-crime film” which then gradually evolves into a horror film, and “moments of shock placed strategically throughout the film” announce this change in tone and genre from an atmospheric slow burn into visceral horror.⁵⁸ What is more, not only are film genres upended as points of orientation – with the hammer scene, “Wheatley emphasizes his desire to communicate to his audience that he, the director, is as unreliable as his protagonist.”⁵⁹ The unreliability of Jay as a character, of *Kill List* as a genre film, and Wheatley as the directorial authority over the proceedings in front of the camera feed into the ethical experiment of the film, since the audience here is challenged in terms of their reactions.

This leads to the issue of the ethics of spectatorship when watching scenes of extreme violence. William Brown, in relation to a similar aesthetics of violence and conflicted spectatorship in Thomas Clay's *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* (2005), has argued that it is especially the form of the unedited long take in “extreme cinema” that encourages an “ethical mode of spectatorship”: “This ethical mode of engagement is not brought about by films featuring onscreen violence or sexual violence per se. Instead it is most consciously brought about in films that depict violence in what I term a ‘cruel fashion’ – films in which violence is explicit, often framed in long shot, and depicted at length.”⁶⁰ While *Kill List* does not necessarily constitute a prime example of what Brown, following Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall⁶¹, labels European extreme cinema, its hammer scene, I would argue, is indebted to the visceral aesthetics and ethics of the “new extremity” of European filmmakers such as Ulrich Seidl, Claire Denis, Gaspar Noé, Virginie Despentes and others. What is central about the ethical implications of such scenes is, according to Brown, their repulsive quality. They do not lend themselves

to pleasurable, exciting viewing and thus suggest an “ethics of revulsion.”⁶² This particular ethical mode can be connected to what Elsaesser has termed “ethics mark 1”, since it is concerned with the question of self-examination on the side of the audience which might be paraphrased as: what is the “good” or morally appropriate way of engaging with this particular scene or film? This question also concerns more general issues of audience sympathy and engagement. Apart from the films of the “new extremity”, which are generally considered to couple art film sensibilities with conventions of genre film (and are thus often considered to be more worthy of complex aesthetic discussion than pure genre films), such questions have been raised by torture-horror films such as James Wan’s *Saw* (2004), Eli Roth’s *Hostel* (2005) and Rob Zombie’s *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005). As Jeremy Morris has argued, these films are remarkable for how they “[entangle] moral questions about torture with moral questions about its own audience. [...]. The implication of the audience through the torturer’s purposes and experiences is both essential to the genre and a primary source of its appeal.”⁶³ Linking Morris’ argument with Elsaesser’s, one could argue that torture horror as a subgenre is always a kind of ethical challenge, which limits its thought experiment not only to diegetic and formal elements, but always implicates the audience in its ethical questions. *Kill List*’s hammer scene exemplifies this aspect and thus extends its genre-bending mind game by not only viscerally and emotionally affecting the audience, but by addressing it as a player in this game.

Audience sympathy is stretched even before this scene since, after all, viewers are supposed to empathise with two men who make a living as professional killers. Yet, they do have family lives and relationships like any other average person and are thus relatable in any other way, very much like the gangsters in the films of Martin Scorsese and others. The first scenes have warmed us to these characters, their everyday problems and concerns. Yet, there is a mystery and dread looming over everything in the forms of open plot questions and a haunting soundtrack, which thwarts some of the more innocent scenes. Viewers are further challenged by sudden changes in genre registers and tone, which complicate the decoding of what we see. With film violence in particular, the way an act of violence in a film is decoded by the audience rests to a fundamental degree on genre semiotics. Thus, as James Kendrick has argued, the decoding of film violence is dependent on the context and tone of the scene and “will suggest to the viewer, on both denotative and connotative levels, how the violence should be read.”⁶⁴ Since genre “has become the dominant means by which most viewers understand and make sense of popular movies, it is also one of the central semiotic and referential frames within which audiences decode scenes of violence.”⁶⁵ Consequently, when a film plays with genre conventions as ruthlessly as *Kill List*, this also has repercussions in terms of the film’s ethics. Genre conventions can mark the depicted acts of violence as morally legitimate or illegitimate, aesthetically pleasurable or unpleasurable. Once *Kill List*’s narrative reaches the turning point of the hammer scene, such semiotic and ethical frames of reference are upended.

The scene – if what it shows is considered as an act of retributive, vigilante violence – is also complicated by the lack of context the narrative provides the audience with on the nature of the

Librarian's crimes. As mentioned before, it seems to be clear that the tapes he collects document some kind of act of (sexual?) violence against minors. If *Kill List* was a revenge thriller like, say, Michael Winner's *Death Wish* (1974) or James Wan's *Death Sentence* (2007), the film would have spent enough screen time on the depiction of the atrocious crimes (or their consequences for the victims) in order to "validate" the act of retribution and the violent, maybe even sadistic means the vigilante protagonist makes use of. Patrick Fuery identifies three stages of the cinematic revenge narrative: "the causal sequence, the acting out, the revelation", the first of which establishes the act of injustice, which "justifies the revenge", and it is in the third part that "power is asserted and satisfaction gained."⁶⁶ It is for those reasons that Marcus Stiglegger locates in revenge films a seductive element: the viewer is seduced into enjoying transgressive acts of violence which are on the surface validated by the preceding acts of injustice.⁶⁷ *Kill List*, however, does not quite operate in that way: the audience is not sufficiently introduced to the context of the Librarian's crimes, and we only see Gal and Jay's reactions to the tapes, but not the tapes themselves (as, for instance, in Paul Schrader's *Hardcore* [1979] or in Joel Schumacher's *8mm* [1999]), so they cannot make the emotional experience which would make the cinematic seduction complete and the act of retributive violence satisfying. In that respect, *Kill List* bears some similarity with Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002), which turned the subgenre of rape-revenge films upside down by first showing the atrocious act of retributive violence out of context (and, as it eventually turned out, directed against the wrong person). *Kill List* likewise employs alienating, yet seductive strategies and, as Stiglegger notes about *Irréversible*, the viewer is "turned into the victim of their own expectations and need for identification and rational explanations of the unfathomable event."⁶⁸

In this seduction lies the experiment with what Elsaesser calls "ethics mark 1."⁶⁹ The question implied in the atrocious hammer scene is: is Jay ethically right to take the life of a person who supposedly has committed unspeakable crimes? Does it redeem him, considering that he has probably killed numerous people before for money? When he and Gal burn the Librarian's body as well as his monstrous archives, Jay, looking into the flames, proclaims that it "doesn't feel wrong. They're bad people – they should suffer". This seems to reflect his own internal debate about the rightfulness of his actions, his examination of his own life and the principles guiding his actions: maybe it should feel wrong, but it doesn't, considering the fact that the actions of my victim are infinitely worse than mine. Of course, all this is morally dubious, not only because of the questionable act of vigilantism itself, but also because Jay would have killed the Librarian anyway, no matter his personal qualities and criminal record. In that light, Jay's framing of the killing as a "rightful" act (or at least one that "doesn't feel wrong") could be considered as an attempt to restore ethical integrity in a life which, as the film's first act suggested, has been kicked off balance before the narrative sets in.

With respect to "ethics mark 2", that is, ethics as a "supplement", Jay's desire to know "where a man stands these days" also seems to feed into his motivation for retributive violence. Metonymically, the killing of the librarian rights the wrongs of Jay's complicity in Britain's misappropriation of

“infinite justice.”⁷⁰ By the time *Kill List* was released in 2011, trust in this “infinite justice” and its ethical consensus was dramatically undermined in the British public, and the Iraq Inquiry led by Sir John Chilcot had been launched in 2009 by then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown to find out “whether it was right and necessary to invade Iraq in March 2003” and concluded in 2016 with the finding that “[t]he judgements about the severity of the threat posed by Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction [...] were presented with a certainty that was not justified.”⁷¹ Symbolically, then, Jay restores the ethical consensus put into question by Blair and the British government’s involvement in an unjust war by killing someone who has committed “infinite Evil.” He appropriates the “victim’s absolute right”⁷², that is, the absolute right of those name- and faceless victims seen on the snuff tapes, and enacts it in an act of retributive violence. He thus tries to rectify what went wrong on the global stage when the US and Britain declared to introduce their universal democratic values (another expression of the ethical consensus according to Rancière and Badiou) in Iraq. Thus, by making the second killing on the Client’s list “personal”, Jay transforms the sacrificial killing in which he was supposed to be an instrument into a personal symbolic sacrifice – a sacrifice which is supposed to restore his own ethical integrity and which becomes “an outlet for the revolutionary violence that would otherwise manifest itself as actual violence against the state.”⁷³

However, Jay’s sacrificial gesture of retributive violence remains a mere testimony of his personal, political, spiritual and moral impotence. In this impotence and in its failure to change the course of events, his act of retributive violence becomes the ultimate post-British gesture: the expression of a directionless anger about one’s position in the current political order and of moral, personal and political disconnection. When in the end, Jay has killed his family as part of the final sacrifice, the endeavour of “reconstruction” seems to have reached a temporary climax. Yet, it is doubtful whether Jay will enjoy the benefits of this “reconstruction”. The end rather implies that a particular kind of financial elite will have ensured their dominance. Considering the obvious Pagan characteristics of the cult, reminiscent of the ones depicted in earlier British folk horror films such as *The Wicker Man* and Piers Haggard’s *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971) while simultaneously anchored in the place-less realm of finance capital, the cult appears as the embodiment of the paradoxical character of contemporary Anglo-British identity: an identity at the same time stuck in the cultural-historical paralysis of post-Empire as it is compelled to maintain its “ethical universalism”⁷⁴ – a universalism that has set Anglo-Britishness as the universal norm of British belonging and works to cover the internal disconnect between institutional politics and the public.

Jay’s personal conflicts thus are an analogy of national ones. In that regard, the seemingly unmotivated (at least in terms of narrative) ominous establishing shots of the English countryside interspersed throughout the film become evocative of these conflicts. The violence that erupts in them in the form of the cult sacrifices as well as the brutal confrontation between Jay, Gal and the cult members, who are apparently led by the financial and ideological elites of the country, during the film’s climax – a

violence that becomes “transcendental” in the Girardian sense since it is a “ritual dispute” which prevents the “total destruction of the community”⁷⁵ – is a restorative violence.

POST-HEROIC CRIME FILMS

The Britain envisioned in Love and Wheatley’s films seems to be on the brink of a destabilising escalation of collective violence. This tendency is present in the ethically deeply compromised global conflicts the country is involved in, but also on the internal level. Jay and his family’s conflicts and tensions, which are at the centre of the first third of the movie, then, in hindsight assume a deeper meaning in that the family structure becomes an allegory of the nation and its break-up. Returning once more to the foreboding dinner conversation between Jay, Gal, Shel and Fiona supports this reading: during this conversation, the religious and political conflict in Northern Ireland is brought up when Gal jokingly suggests to say Grace in Irish and turns serious when his girlfriend mentions that she “never understood the Irish thing” since, after all, they were all members of the same religion, to which Gal replies that “it’s debatable.”⁷⁶ The topic comes up again when Gal suggests to Jay that serving in Belfast during the Troubles would have done him “the world of good”, curing him of his ethical dilemmas. In a similar way, Bryant and his gang of vigilante outlaws yearn for a simpler form of “direct” justice and enact the revenge fantasies of populist ideologies. However, none of the films’ protagonists will emerge victorious from their conflicts. Rather, violently disrupting Britain’s ethical consensus has rendered them as abject, post-heroic protagonists. In that respect, the two films’ thought experiments not only negotiate questions of ethics in a post-national, post-British Europe – they also radically challenge genre conventions and thus leave the audience with questions regarding the stability (and validity) of such traditional notions of narrative film.

¹ I would like to thank Kai L. Fischer, I.Q. Hunter, Désirée Klingner as well as the anonymous peer reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

² Michael Gardiner, *The Cultural Roots of British Devolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004). I have previously explored the issue of post-Britishness in relation to devolutionary literature, see Mark Schmitt, “A World Separate Yet Within: Welsh Devolution and the Paradoxes of Post-British Community in Niall Griffiths’s *Sheepshagger*,” in *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies* 26, no. 1 (2015): 93-102, and Mark Schmitt, *British White Trash: Figurations of Tainted Whiteness in the Novels of Irvine Welsh, Niall Griffiths and John King* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018).

³ Gardiner, *Cultural Roots*, x.

⁴ William Brown, “Not Flagwaving but Flagdrowning, or Postcards from Post-Britain,” in *The British Cinema Book*, ed. Robert Murphy (London: Palgrave / BFI, 2009), 408.

⁵ Brown, “Not Flagwaving but Flagdrowning”, 412-414.

⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 85.

⁷ Elsaesser, *European Cinema* 86.

⁸ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 86.

⁹ Elsaesser, *European Cinema* 167.

¹⁰ Claire Westall and Michael Gardiner, *The Public on the Public: The British Public as Trust, Reflexivity and Political Foreclosure* (London: Palgrave, 2014), 2.

¹¹ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2012).

¹² Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹³ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 207-225.

- ¹⁴ William Brown, "Violence in Extreme Cinema and the Ethics of Spectatorship," *Projections* 7, no. 1 (2013): 25–42.
- ¹⁵ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 84.
- ¹⁶ Elsaesser, *European Cinema* 58.
- ¹⁷ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 83.
- ¹⁸ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 85.
- ¹⁹ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 86.
- ²⁰ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 86.
- ²¹ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 209-211.
- ²² Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 211-225.
- ²³ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 209.
- ²⁴ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 210.
- ²⁵ Badiou, *Ethics*.
- ²⁶ Rancière, *Dissensus*.
- ²⁷ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 111.
- ²⁸ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 170.
- ²⁹ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 171.
- ³⁰ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 167.
- ³¹ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 167.
- ³² Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (London: Verso, 2011).
- ³³ On chavs in horror films, cf. Johnny Walker, *Contemporary British Horror Cinema: Industry, Genre and Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 85-108. On chavs as a case of social stigmatisation, cf. Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed Books, 2013), 153-178.
- ³⁴ Cf. e.g. Peter Bradshaw, "Review: *Outlaw*," *The Guardian*, 2007, accessed Jun 01, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/mar/09/thriller.periodandhistorical>. For an assessment of the critical derision of Love's film, cf. I.Q. Hunter, *British Trash Cinema* (London: Palgrave / BFI, 2013), 175.
- ³⁵ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 141.
- ³⁶ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 111.
- ³⁷ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 194.
- ³⁸ Hunter, *British Trash Cinema*, 172-175.
- ³⁹ Bradshaw, "Review: *Outlaw*."
- ⁴⁰ Ryan Gilbey, "Ten Things I Hate About Nick Love's *Outlaw*," *The Guardian*, 2007, accessed Jun 01, 2019,
- ⁴¹ James Kendrick, *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 74.
- ⁴² Henry Bacon, *The Fascination of Film Violence* (London: Palgrave, 2015), 46-49.
- ⁴³ Hunter, *British Trash Cinema*, 172-173, 174.
- ⁴⁴ Hunter, *British Trash Cinema*, 175.
- ⁴⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 175 on *Outlaw*'s audio commentary which became infamous when samples of it leaked on Youtube. On Danny Dyer's status as a b-film star and the fan cult surrounding him and his persona, cf. also Sarah J. Godfrey and Johnny Walker, "From Pinter to Pimp: Danny Dyer, Class, Cultism and the Critics", *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 12, no. 1: 101-120.
- ⁴⁶ Jeremy Morris, "The Justification of Torture-Horror: Retribution and Sadism in *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *The Devil's Rejects*," ed. Thomas Fahy, *The Philosophy of Horror*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 51.
- ⁴⁷ For an interpretation of *Kill List* as a folk horror narrative, see Adam Scovell, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (Leighton: Auteur Publishing, 2017), 176-178.
- ⁴⁸ Adam Nayman, *Ben Wheatley: Chaos and Confusion* (Philadelphia: The Critical Press, 2016), 55.
- ⁴⁹ Westall and Gardiner, *The Public on the Public*, 2.
- ⁵⁰ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 200.
- ⁵¹ Badiou, *Ethics*, 62-63.

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- ⁵² Badiou, *Ethics*, 67.
- ⁵³ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 58.
- ⁵⁴ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 194.
- ⁵⁵ Nayman, *Ben Wheatley*, 55.
- ⁵⁶ Nayman, *Ben Wheatley*, 53.
- ⁵⁷ Nayman, *Ben Wheatley*, 51.
- ⁵⁸ Sonia Luper, "Slow Burn, Interrupted: On Tone and Horror in Ben Wheatley's *Kill List*," *Critical Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2016): 29–35, 29.
- ⁵⁹ Luper, "Slow Burn, Interrupted," 32.
- ⁶⁰ Brown, "Violence," 26.
- ⁶¹ Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (eds.), *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013).
- ⁶² Brown, "Violence," 27.
- ⁶³ Morris, "The Justification of Torture-Horror," 52.
- ⁶⁴ Kendrick, *Film Violence*, 19.
- ⁶⁵ Kendrick, *Film Violence*, 69.
- ⁶⁶ Patrick Fuery, *New Developments in Film Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 19.
- ⁶⁷ Marcus Stiglegger, *Ritual & Verführung: Schaulust, Spektakel & Sinnlichkeit Im Film* (Berlin: Bertz & Fischer, 2006), 206-207.
- ⁶⁸ Stiglegger, *Ritual & Verführung*, 204 (my transl.). Original German quote: "[D]as Ziel ist es, den Zuschauer selbst zum Opfer seiner Erwartungen, seiner Identifikationsbedürfnisse und seines Ringens um eine rationale Erklärung zu machen."
- ⁶⁹ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 210.
- ⁷⁰ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 111.
- ⁷¹ "The Iraq Inquiry," 2016, accessed Jun 01, 2019, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20171123123857/http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/the-inquiry/>.
- ⁷² Rancière, *Dissensus*, 111.
- ⁷³ Aaron Jolly, "Kill Lists: The Occult, Paganism and Sacrifice in Cinema as an Analogy for Political Upheaval in the 1970s and the 2010s," various authors, *Folk Horror Revival: Field Studies* (Durham: Wyrd Harvest Press, 2018), 294.
- ⁷⁴ Gardiner, "Brexit," 105.
- ⁷⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 141.
- ⁷⁶ Northern Ireland and the Troubles are similarly evoked as a historical past haunting the British present in *Harry Brown*, another vigilante film about "broken Britain."

CINEMA 11

BOOK REVIEWS | RECENSÕES DE LIVROS

ETHICS AND AESTHETICS IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN CINEMA

William Brown (University of Roehampton, London)

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Beauty plays a central role in James S. Williams' *Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary African Cinema*. For Williams, beauty was suspicious to the first generation of African filmmakers like Ousmane Sembène, who felt that beauty would detract from political engagement and meaning in their Third Cinema-inspired work, while the subsequent generation of filmmakers like Souleymane Cissé, Gaston Kaboré and Idrissa Ouedraogo engaged in a much more 'poetic' cinema that perhaps pleased more than it challenged western perceptions of Africa. If the first is a 'baobab cinema' in which shots of baobab trees regularly demonstrate not (just) 'environmental beauty' but also a 'material being' that continues to survive in spite of hardship (pp. 5-6), then the second phase is a 'calabash cinema' that 'returns to the source' (p. 2), or to a pre-colonial (mythical?) Africa. These two phases of African cinema, which in some senses overlap and are complicated by in-between filmmakers like Djibril Diop Mambéty, are nonetheless followed by a contemporary, millennial cinema that tries to span both the physicality of the baobab and the metaphysicality of the calabash, in the process 'reconceiving the aesthetic as a vital point of departure for addressing and interrogating the political in ways no longer tied to the original Sembenian political ideals of pan-Africanism' (p. 14). In other words, beauty now functions 'relationally,' in that it need not reaffirm an otherwise fixed and external worldview, or be 'transcendent' and thus not of this world, but rather (after Sarah Nuttall, who in turn is drawing upon Elaine Scarry) serves to 'un-self' us (p. 30), such that we are not viewers who are, as Aimé Césaire might put it, detachedly observing a spectacle as one might a dancing bear, but who instead can see, hear and be affected by the 'screaming man' who expresses what it means to live in a contemporary Africa defined by

the often total erosion of the state due to uncontrolled neoliberalism, causing social disintegration and fragmentation at a local level; increased Chinese economic influence and investment in the sub-Saharan region; destabilization due to religious fundamentalism and mounting intolerance and ethnic violence (including genocide); demographic explosion and the development of the African mega-city or 'afropolis'; displacement and migration to Europe at unprecedented levels, aggravated by the

catastrophic effects of climate change and ‘manmade’ natural disasters like desertification. (p. 13)

Given that Césaire’s reference to a screaming man in *Cahiers d’un retour au pays natal* is referenced not only by Williams (see p. 39), but also directly by both Abderrahmane Sissako—in *La vie sur terre* (*Life on Earth*, 1998)—and Mahamat-Saleh Haroun—in *Un homme qui crie* (*A Screaming Man*, 2010)—then it perhaps comes as no surprise that these two filmmakers, along with Mambéty as perhaps their most clear precursor, become constant points of reference for Williams over the course of his monograph, with key roles also played by Mati Diop, Alain Gomis, Sembène and others.

After the opening chapter in which Williams also outlines how the aesthetic can become ‘flipped over’ and ‘frozen’ as far as its political effectiveness is concerned (p. 38), he goes on to explore the role of violence in contemporary African cinema. Williams asserts with reference to Nyasha Mboti that African filmmakers do not simply make violent films, but rather seek to expose ‘the hidden, hegemonic system of violence invisible to the naked eye, yet which underpins and enables all other forms of violence’ (p. 41). This can take the form of violence towards women, as explored in Sembène’s final film, *Moolaadé* (2004), child soldiery as per *Ezra* (Newton I. Aduaka, 2007), violent dictatorship, as per Haroun’s *Hissein Habré, une tragédie tchadienne* (*Hissein Habré, A Chadian Tragedy*, 2016), or the atrocities of war as explored in Fanta Régina Nacro’s *La nuit de la vérité* (*The Night of Truth*, 2004). With regard to *Hissein Habré*, the film in particular resists ‘the genericity of genocide... by prioritizing the individual and unique, the personal and the flawed, as part of a “poetics of resistance”’ (p. 52). Meanwhile, Nacro’s film equally avoids ‘the fatal violence of narrative spectacle’ (p. 59)—and so each of these films demonstrates a kind of ‘opaque vision’ with regard to (cinematic) violence (p. 60), which style reaches its apogee in Sissako’s *Bamako* (2006), where the filmmaker suggests the violence of structural debt in often indirect but powerful ways, thus creating a kind of ‘violent beauty’ (p. 44). Even though Williams considers the video footage that we see towards the end of *Bamako* as being ‘sub-Sissako’ (p. 77), the chapter then ends with Williams charging against Sissako for making *Timbuktu* (2014) too beautiful—and indeed for not directly depicting the violence that the film involves (choosing a magisterial long shot for a murder, for example), even as Williams also finds the film too didactic in its condemnation of Islamic fundamentalism in contemporary Mali.

Chapter three considers the afore-mentioned contemporary afropolis, with Williams charting the representation of Dakar on film from *Borom Sarret* (Sembène, 1963) and

Contras'city (Mambéty, 1968) through to Gomis' *Tey* (*Aujourd'hui*, 2012) and Diop's essayistic reworking of her uncle's *Touki-Bouki* (Mambéty, 1973) in *Mille soleils* (*A Thousand Suns*, 2013). Dakar is a city that has mushroomed in the contemporary era, with the distinction between the rich and poor areas, having been so pronounced in the earlier films, now giving way to uncertainty: 'central Dakar is no longer the iconic and ironically circumscribed white space high on the urban horizon, but instead a continually alienating, atomizing, anonymous concrete and iron expanse' (p. 111). Considering *Dakar Trottoirs* (Hubert Laba Ndao, 2013), Williams argues that the afropolis is 'an anonymous, frameless site of open danger and disorder' (p. 114), while *Mille soleils*, in its blend of found footage from *Touki-Bouki* with original material featuring the same lead actors some 40 years later, suggests that 'the real *is* the found *is* the (re)enacted *is* the narrative *is* the poetic *is* the biographical *is* the fantasmatic' (p. 134). With regard to Dakar, this blurs the distinction between the everyday and the imagined, making of it an ever-elusive space that in its elusiveness also becomes the breeding ground for new (hybrid) possibilities.

In the next chapter, Williams focuses on language, noting the importance of (francophone) African cinema's evolution from French to Wolof in Sembène's *Mandabi* (1968), before blooming into the polyphonic cinema of Sissako and Haroun, especially the former's *Bamako* and *Heremakono* (*Waiting for Happiness*, 2002), and the latter's *Screaming Man*. Of *Heremakono*, Williams suggests that 'language as communication and sign is suspended in order to be experienced materially and physically' (p. 158) as we see characters failing fully to understand each other, and as we hear on the soundtrack passing ships that help to diminish the centrality of the human in relation to the non-human. Where we should not treat a screaming man like a dancing bear and simply watch him as if he were a spectacle, though, Williams conversely contends that 'it might sometimes be a more affirmative critical first step to do "nothing" in the direct face of ecological disaster and instead allow things simply to be (as things) *aesthetically*' (p. 162)—even as this seems to conform very closely to his reasons for dismissing *Timbuktu* as sub-par work. Nonetheless, sometimes the sound of a voice is more meaningful than its actual words (as per the sung plea of Zégué Bamba in *Bamako*). And while we might not detachedly observe, sometimes to listen is wilfully to enter into relation with the other, and to allow language to achieve, after Achille Mbembe, *power and beauty* (p. 170).

Even as Dakar is a hybrid space, it is also a straight space (with baobab cinema also being a straight cinema). It is only outside of Dakar, according to *Karmen Geï* (Joseph Gaï Ramaka, 2001), that 'polymorphous desire' can occur. Williams notes that there is not much in the way of African queer cinema—especially outside of South Africa—but he nonetheless does pick up on

queer elements in a range of films, including Mohamed Camara's *Dakan* (*Destiny*, 1997) and Haroun's work, in which the director creates 'an erotics of male abstraction and intimacy.' For example, in *A Screaming Man*, the central father and son relationship takes on an erotic subtext as they swim together and touch each other, as do the dance displays that are an integral part of *Grigris* (Haroun, 2013). In this way, Haroun *queers* the 'mighty, sacred baobab tree planted so proudly by Sembene in *Mandabi* as the privileged symbol of social progress, continuity and masculinity' (p. 205)—even as the baobab supposedly did not have a metaphysical function in Sembène's cinema.

In the sixth chapter, Williams considers migration and border-crossing in numerous recent films, noting various common trends or 'modalities,' including getting off the ground 'the initial project, the journey across the Atlantic, migration across the African continent, intercontinental migration beyond Africa and Europe, and the return home and its aftermath' (p. 218). Sissako again looms large here, with *Waiting for Happiness* typifying the first modality described above, and *Rostov-Luanda* (Sissako, 1998) the last. *Life on Earth* receives particular attention, since the film demonstrates how migration exists beyond the literal journeys enumerated above but also as a 'an existential state of mind and being' (p. 234). More broadly, then, Africa as a whole 'migrates' in the sense that it cannot be restricted to 'a single reified definition and interpretation... [but is] always in the process of being "transnationalised"' (p. 246). As beauty, opaque depictions of violence and listening all inspire relationality, this transnational becoming of Africa also entails a 'becoming world' of the film and for the viewer, and which has at its core Sissako's Césaire- and Frantz Fanon-inspired depiction of 'the ultimate unreadability of the human and non-human worlds' (p. 257). This is conveyed powerfully in a long shot that swallows the human protagonists of *Life on Earth* (even as Williams critiques Sissako for using the same technique—too obviously, apparently—in *Timbuktu*); unable to 'read' the image and the vibrant world that it depicts, the viewer is pushed towards thought (or must listen) in order to learn how to read. In this way, they understand that they are not detached spectators, but entities ecologically entangled with the rest of existence.

Williams then concludes with an analysis of Gomis' *Félicité* (2017), which he considers an example of a film that elides the art house style of the likes of Haroun and Sissako with the seemingly more challenging aesthetic put forward by 'video' industries such as Nollywood, the piecemeal Nigerian film industry that makes its presence felt on several occasions in Williams' book, but which never fully forms a focus for his analyses. All the same, where the use of video is 'sub-Sissako' in *Bamako*, with *Félicité* it becomes an important innovation in African cinema.

Williams is not unaware of his relentless ‘good’ taste, as he consciously focuses primarily on (and seems to favour) transnational (often French-backed) and often sub-Saharan francophone productions (‘FESPACO art cinema’), while to a large degree ignoring Nollywood and the other African film industries that nonetheless constitute important components of contemporary African cinema. All the same, *Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary African Cinema* could perhaps find more worth in those other industries, not least because they are enabled by the same technologies that allow Diop to create *Mille soleils*, about which Williams is otherwise so enthusiastic. Perhaps they lack ostensible subtlety, which might explain why Williams is so down on *Timbuktu*, even as various of its features are lauded when deployed in other contexts, as I have hinted above. Perhaps I am simply more easily seduced than Williams by Sissako’s most successful international film, demonstrating my own infirmity as a critical thinker. But in the same way that Williams gives short shrift to Kenneth D. Harrow for his exploration of African cinema in relation to trash, perhaps in part because Harrow perpetuates a ‘dirty’ image of Africa even as he tries to critique the same, so does Williams’ emphasis on (politicised) beauty run the risk of undermining his own argument (and even as Williams discusses trash, dirt and other related concepts on various occasions throughout the book). That is, as Williams resists essentialising African cinema, he perhaps does it so much that re-essentialises it, or ‘flips it over’—as per his own warning at the end of his introductory chapter.

Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary African Cinema is beautifully written and contains many insightful analyses of a wide range of important texts, with Sissako and Haroun at the fore—as their global reputations perhaps demand. Nonetheless, when a film like *Timbuktu* or the use of video in both Nollywood and *Bamako* crops up, it is dismissed for not quite fitting Williams’ theoretical model. Perhaps a fuller understanding of African cinema would come from a less partial reading, or at least one that listens to, rather than judges, the work. For the most part, Williams brilliantly does precisely this. But on occasion it would seem that his own good tastes are incapable of admitting as powerfully real (or of hearing?) the otherwise distasteful/cacophonous elements that, through their very distastefulness/cacophony, might have a perverse beauty of their own—or which might indeed challenge and help us to develop the (Francophile? European? Imperial? FESPACO?) art house iterations and interpretations of cinematic beauty that underpin this text.

PIXAR WITH LACAN: THE HYSTERIC'S GUIDE TO ANIMATION

Anthony J. Ballas (University of Colorado at Denver)

Lilian Munk Rösing. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 192 pp. ISBN: 9781501320170.

Lilian Monk Rösing's *Pixar With Lacan*, departs from a perhaps over-theorized realm of psychoanalytic film theory—that “fugitive moment” of capture of live-action cinema—to the repeatable, readily reproducible, and seemingly inconsequential forms of computer animation: a dimensional shift seldom entertained in the tradition of psychoanalysis (27). Rösing's argument is cleverly premised upon the extended allegory between the animated forms and figures in Pixar films and the question of “what animates the human being?” (168); how Pixar offers insight into the ways in which the big Other, *objet a*, the voice and gaze and other foundational concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis function in the psychic economy of the subject, or, as Rösing quotes Žižek from *Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (Sophie Fiennes, 2014), “Humanity means: the alien is controlling our human bodies” (17).

Rösing offers an extended analysis of individual Pixar films, including early shorts such as the production company's first *Red's Dream* (John Lasseter, 1987), using them as the cultural material from which to introduce Freud and Lacan. Thus, this volume does a lot of heavy lifting in only 190 pages; the reader will gain insight not only to foundational concepts such as Lacan's notion of fantasy, *objet a*, the name-of-the-father, *das Ding*, and the Real, and as well those perceived by many Lacanians as less foundational (depending on who you ask) but more difficult (though no less important) theoretical insights of Lacan's such as his formulae of sexuation, *lamella* and *sinthome*. What we get in this short volume is a delicate balance of dense theoretical work, streamlined introductory work, and often surprising applications to what are widely considered to be ‘innocent’ childrens' films—if there is one paramount lesson we learn via Rösing's readings Pixar, it is the appropriately Freudian observation that there is *nothing* innocent about animated cinema, just as there is *nothing* innocent about childhood sexuality either.

Composed of eleven chapters, an introduction, and epilogue, Rösing focuses each chapter on one particular Pixar film, reading into the finer narratological and psychoanalytical details thereof; for instance, the first three chapters deal each with the first three films of the *Toy Story* franchise (John Lasseter, 1995;1999; 2010; and now Josh Cooley, 2019, though the latter is not included in the present volume) with special attention to the name-of-the-father, the big Other, and the *lamella*

respectively. One particularly noteworthy feature of Chapter Two is the way in which Rösing addresses the oft-neglected development from the psychoanalysis of the Screen Theory era to the post-Copjec era, acknowledging the shift from the imaginary look to the real gaze, from Mulvey to Copjec, and from the Lacan of the “Mirror Stage” to the Lacan of the “gaze” from his Seminar XI.¹ To discuss this shift, Rösing provides a wonderful explication of the impossible gaze from the point of view from the inside of Woody’s (Tom Hanks) body.

Acknowledgement of this shift in psychoanalytic theory has been scant among film studies scholars; Todd McGowan’s *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* and *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and ‘The Rules of the Game’* and Matthew Flisfeder’s *The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek’s Theory of Film* are a couple of notable exceptions. Thus, Rösing’s inclusion of this crucial distinction between the Lacan of the imaginary and the Lacan of the real is certainly refreshing especially to readers familiar with latter day psychoanalytic film theory.²

In Chapter Four, on the film *A Bug’s Life* (John Lasseter, 1998), Rösing is perhaps at her very best, relating the rotund caterpillar Heimlich’s (Joe Ranft) “non-genital sexuality” to Dennis Hopper’s perverse sexual display in David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986). Not only is this comparison exceptionally entertaining for the reader, but also illustrates the “seat of the drives” belonging to children and to adults, and the preponderance of the sexual in human life, even in the non-genital perversity of an otherwise innocent, animated creature. Rösing’s analysis of *A Bug’s Life* relies on Jack Halberstam’s notion of “Pixarvolt”: a word coined by Halberstam to encapsulate the idea of animation as a transformative technology uniquely harbored, and uniquely queer, in Pixar’s *œuvre*.

In Chapter Six on *Finding Nemo* (Andrew Stanton, 2003), Rösing reads “the stream as an allegory for the Freudian drive” (75), focusing on the film’s topography and a close reading of father figures in the film with regard to Lacan’s *nom du père*. Rösing, following the concept of the drive, describes Dory (Ellen Degeneres) as “nothing but momentum” (77), and argues against Halberstam’s reading of the character as released from the tyranny of Oedipal temporality via the “‘queer’ temporality of the ephemeral, the momentary, the surprise” (78). Instead, Rösing reads Dory as “a principle of pure movement forwards: ‘just keep swimming!’” (78), and is in this way perhaps closer to Lacan’s reading of Antigone more than anything else. Rösing’s reading of the drive is worth mention for its sophistication: “Drive is a kind of purified desire, desire at its barest ripped of the words and images that sustain it in the symbolic order. Think of the activity of sex, for instance: ripped of all fantasies and words is it nothing but desire consuming itself in a compulsive-repetitive way” (81). One might detect here a bit of Žižek in Rösing’s definition (just as readers of Žižek may detect an echo of Chesterton: “[T]he most comic things of all are exactly the things that are the most worth doing — such as making love”).³ For Lacanians, this relation

between desire and drive (and specifically Freud's *Wiederholungszwang*) may come across as a bit too perfect, too complete, however to pursue this line of inquiry in this short review would be to do a disservice to both Lacan and Rösing.

Although Rösing's chapters on *The Incredibles* (Brad Bird, 2004), *Cars* (John Lasseter and Joe Ranft, 2006) and *Cars 2* (John Lasseter, 2011) falter a bit—save perhaps for Rösing's variations on the theme of Freud's *Reizschutz*, or, stimulus-shield, “[t]he car may seem as a materialization of modern man's protective shield, yet is it also a fragile shield, actually exposing man's body to lesions and death” (109), and, following Paul Virilio, reading the body of the car as the body of the woman (110)—the volume picks up in Chapter Nine with *Ratatouille* (Brad Bird, 2007) and the “ambivalent character” of *objet a*, the “in-you-more-than-yourself” [*Ce qui est en toi plus que toi*], “excremental and sublime” (115), an “immanent excess” (119). This chapter explores not only the excremental character of the Rat in the film, but as well how it functions as, “...‘the other’ that one can be sure to find in every American product of popular culture today. The rat becomes a metaphor of the social or ethnic ‘other’ as the worker, the Afro-American, the Jew,” asking the question, “what is the effect of staging ‘the other’ (ethnic or social) as a rat?” (123). Rösing answers her own question by way of democracy, ruminating on the phrase, “anyone can cook” as “the outspoken dictum of the film, seemingly a very democratic, inclusive and tolerant dictum, but one that has through the film to be reinterpreted: it is not that anyone can cook, it is that someone with a talent for cooking could come from anywhere, even a family of rats. This is the liberalist version of democracy: it is not that everyone should be recognized, it is that the specially talented should be recognized from wherever he comes” (127).

Chapter Ten details *Wall-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008) as “... a poetic vision of earth as a post-apocalyptic wasteland, and a dystopian vision of the ultimate consumers' society as a totalitarian state” (129). This chapter takes the reader through subjection and subjectivity in late capitalist society, proposing “love as the antidote to that obscene imperative to enjoy” (129), suggesting a vista of what “kind of life... persists when humanity disappears” (130). One of the major highlights of this chapter, as well as the book itself, comes from Rösing's ambitious decision to include an introductory analysis to Lacan's formulae of sexuation through *Wall-E* and his feminine counterpart *Eva*—indeed, even seeing the formulae of sexuation juxtaposed with images of these Pixar characters is a sight to see unto itself. Here, Rösing deftly avoids the rote interpretation of the ‘mystical’ character of Lacan's feminine subject, noting correctly how “Žižek regards this depressive feminine position as the foundation of the subject, as that ‘night of the world’ (Hegel) which is at the core of subjectivity, thus claiming ‘femininity’ to be the model for universal subjectivity, rather than ‘masculinity’ as feminist critics would have it” (143). This primacy of the

feminine at the level of the subject is crucial, in the opinion of this reviewer, to understanding Lacan, and as well, for extracting any political ramifications from his work as a whole.⁴ The only problem with Rösing's reading of the feminine position is that it can at times capitulate just a bit to the conception of the feminine as outside of language, or in "a kind of communion with ...lack, with something that escapes language... the position of being in communion with something exceeding the symbolic order... something beyond words" (144/145). What is so often neglected in Lacan's feminine subject is the Woman's identification with the phallus and with the lack in the position of the big Other simultaneously, as Žižek puts it, "Woman is one of the names of the father."⁵ From this vantage, although the feminine is a different form of sexuation, 'Woman' is actually just another version of the primal father, the symbolically castrated subject's fantasy of an uncastrated position (the femme fatale, the woman devoid of a superego, *l'etre-ange*, etc.).⁶

Rösing closes her volume with an enlightening account of the voice (one of Lacan's partial objects appended to Freud's list — breast, shit, phallus, etc.) through the film *Up* (Pete Docter, 2009). Rösing uses Michel's Chion's notion of the *acousmetre* to detail the ubiquity of the voice in *Up* as a voice without a body paradoxically, and somewhat bathetically, 'housed' in the body of the dog Doug (Bob Peterson).⁷ Rösing asks a pertinent question regarding Lacanian orthodoxy, "... why is it, from a Lacanian point of view, so important to maintain the divide between human and animal?" (161), or, the voice as that which incarnates the human flesh as something exceptional. Rather than simply upending this orthodox stance, Rösing supplements an otherwise anthropocentric interpretation with a corrective, asserting that "[a]ctually, the important thing to maintain is that it makes a difference to be a *parletre*, a being of language, inhabited by and inhabiting in the chain of signifiers" (161). In this way, for Rösing, *Up* provides an instance of the *parletre* staged via the animated body of an animal, one who, just as the human *parletre*, is haunted by the chain of signifiers.

In her Epilogue, Rösing makes mention of Sergei Eisenstein's praise of Disney animation for its "aptness for metamorphosis" and "emancipatory potential" (163). Pixar, for Rösing, accomplishes something similar insofar as the medium of virtual reality harbors "the possibility to bring us closer to the real," emphasizing how "the special quality of computer animation is not to break with reality or media or genres as we know them, but to reflect upon them, and on its own construction of them" (167). What is striking about this description is its insistence that what Pixar offers is not simple entertainment, but rather a contemplative form, which, "reproduce[s] not only reality, but also the media and genres to which" it is heir (167). It is in this way that this book accomplishes both tasks that Žižek identifies about reading Lacan through popular culture, "as an introduction to Lacanian 'dogmatics' (in the theological sense of the term)," and "as an excuse for

indulging in the idiotic enjoyment of popular culture.”⁸ Lastly, *Pixar With Lacan* echoes notable titles from the Lacanian tradition, for instance, “Kant *avec* Sade,” and could just as easily have been (sub)titled “Pixar with Žižek”; Rösing creatively navigates through both well-worn and unbeaten territories alike, opening up certain concepts anew, while providing a stable theoretical firmament for others. For these reasons, this title is recommended for undergraduate through professional-level academics whose desire to read Lacan stubbornly butts up against the task of actually endeavoring to do so. Although Rösing’s book is no substitute for Lacan’s seminars, nor for Žižek’s work thereon, the title provides ample ground upon which to stand should one choose to undertake the latter two figures seriously.

¹ See: Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: British Film Institute Publishers, 2001); Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (London: Verso, 2014); and Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (Albany: University of New York Press, 2007); Todd McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and ‘The Rules of the Game’* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015); and Matthew Flisfeder, *The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek’s Theory of Film* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

² The shift from imaginary look to real gaze echoes the Lacanian shift from imaginary impotence to real impossibility.

³ G.K. Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity* (San Francisco: Ignatious Press, 2011), 22.

⁴ As Badiou notes in his seminar on Lacan, “This is why people are still fighting over Lacan’s ‘political’ teaching: it’s transmitted in an essentially metaphorical way.” See: Alain Badiou, *Lacan: Anti-philosophy 3* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 127.

⁵ See: Slavoj Žižek, “Woman is One of the Names-of-the-Father, or How Not to Misread Lacan’s Formulas of Sexuation,” *Lacanian Ink* 10 (1995): <https://www.lacan.com/zizwoman.htm>.

⁶ In “Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason,” from *Read My Desire*, Joan Copjec calls for a development of this position (the feminine superego and a feminine form of sublimation) without resorting to the baggage which so often accompanies this position as being ‘beyond language’, a call which she herself follows up with in her text *Imagine There’s No Woman* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2002).

⁷ Even the dog’s name “Doug” exemplifies the incarnated figuration of the character, insofar as we transition from animal to subject (the “u” in Doug providing the minimal difference from “Dog,” from an animal to the proper name of a subject). In this case, the “u” functions as *objet a*, as that which is “in the dog more than himself,” providing the material support for his subjectivity even when the voice is taken away.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992), vii-viii.

NON-CINEMA: GLOBAL DIGITAL FILM-MAKING AND THE MULTITUDE

Harifa Siregar (Georgia State University)

William Brown. New York: Bloomsbury, 2018. 313 pp. ISBN: 9781501327292.

One of the intriguing questions in the digital age is the question of visibility. How would the digital interfere with the traditional or conventional views? The views that make cinema becomes barriers or burdens in its depiction of the modern way of life. Cinema and its close association with capital have affected certain inclusion as well as exclusion of visibility and erasure in many places or other cinema outside the cinema capital. William Brown's book, *Non-Cinema: Global Digital Filmmaking and the Multitude* attempts to investigate the close relationship among the creation of images, the inventions that come out of its processes, the shift in the understanding of using the "non-professional" tools, digital technologies, and the approaches in making identities possible.

Brown explains that in the era of capitalism where everything is measured by the visibility, non-cinema gives hope as counter-movement to capitalist notion of presence = visibility. For Brown, capitalist has always embedded in the reality of the visible. Today is the era "when gaining and maintaining attention not only helps to constitute reality but also profitability (the more people pay attention to you or your products, the more money you make), then we can see how capital has in large part come to take on the characteristics of cinema (and vice versa)" (p. 1). With this understanding, non-cinema relates to two linked forms of invisibility. First, it deals with the idea that often those who are invisible cast as unreal, barbaric, useless and/or not valid. Then there is the other side of the coin, the worker of capital itself is invisible. Capital, for Brown, functions more smoothly when these things (labor, line of production, chain of distribution, etc.) are kept hidden. One of the basic agendas of capital is to keep its operation patterns out of sight. The same thing happens in cinema which for Brown is not only constitute the "high" cinema but also the "invisible" ones. "Non-cinema, then, involves an attempt to challenge the limits of cinema and, by extension, the limits of what is constituted as real in our world of cinema capital" (p. 2). Brown embraces the notion of barbaric which coined by Enrique Dussel, an Argentine-Mexican philosopher, "barbarian cinema, typically characterized as poor, is in fact rich" (ibid). That non-cinema is about heterogeneity, the unusual, the minor, and the

multitudinous. While cinema is, as defined by capital, “about both homogeneity and hegemony (the repetition that is the pursuit of box office returns that in turn reinforce power).”

In this book, Brown attempts to demonstrate that, “barbarian cinema, typically characterized as poor, is in fact rich (p. 3). Also, the ‘wretched of the screen,’ the term Hito Steyerl used, should be used to “demonstrate that non-cinema also exists and is important” (ibid). In the first chapter, ‘Digital Dreams in Afghanistan,’ Browns examine how Afghanistan often portrayed to conform the western eyes and “fall within Orientalist discourse” (p. 16). From three basic categories such as: *The Kite Runner*, Marc Forster, (USA/China, 2007); *Out of the Ashes*, Tim Albone/Lucy Martens/Leslie Knott, (UK, 2010); and films made or produced by the prolific Makhmalbaf family create the idea of Afghanistan as ‘A country without an image’. Brown suggests us to look at micro-budget action films made by Afghans and the Afghan diaspora: *Anjam/End* (Basir Mujahid, Afghanistan, 2008) and *Ehsaas/Emotion* (Farid Faiz, Australia/Germany/UK/Afghanistan, 2006). By drawing upon Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s concept of the multitude, those digital films aspire the creation of non-cinema as they demonstrate the concept of nation and a unified national people. The realm of the multitude.

In chapter 2, ‘The Iranian Digital Underground, Multitudinous Cinema and the Diegetic Spectator,’ Brown engages with Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophy of witness. Witness linked to the multitude has helped films like *Kasi az gorbehaye irani khabar nadareh/No One Knows About Persian Cats* (Bahman Ghobadi, Iran, 2009) give expression not to the national sense of filmmaking but to the multitude as well as the concept of being singular plural. Analyzing the form of traditional theatrical of *ta’ziyeh* plays in the work of late Abbas Kiarostami, Brown suggests how in non-cinema the spectator does not detach. They become part of the film; the spectator might be diegetic.

‘Digital Entanglement and the Blurring of Fiction and Documentary in China,’ the third chapter, elaborating the work of feminist physicist Karen Barad on how the blurring of fiction and documentary suggests not separation but something related to witness, namely entanglement (p. 61). Brown argues via the documentaries of Wu Wenguang’s *Fuck Cinema* (China, 2005) and activist film work of Ai Weiwei, that we are not detached from the world, but active participants with it. Furthermore, Brown looks briefly at the works of Andrew Y-S. Cheng’s *Wo men hai pa/Shanghai Panic* (China, 2002) and Lou Ye’s *Suzhou he/Suzhou River* (Germany/China/France, 2000) to demonstrate how this entanglement extends beyond documentaries and into digital fiction film-making (p. 55).

Brown works with David A. Grandy’s philosophy of light (p. 103) in the fourth chapter, ‘Digital Darkness in the Philippines’ to elaborate the role that darkness plays in non-cinema in the

work of punk digital film-maker Khavn de la Cruz. Khavn's work of darkness not only serve as the aesthetic of non-cinema but also related to the historical facts of Philippines as non-nation. *Kommander Kulas*, one of Khavn's film "positions itself within a complex web of Philippine cinema and history of European literature" (p. 97). The work of minor virtuosity of 'cinematic disobedience.'

Chapter 5, 'Digital acinema from afrance' considers the role that dark skin plays in non-cinema. Brown takes his cue from the work of Alain Gomis's *L'Afrance* (France/Senegal, 2001) to argue that it is not only cinema as a form that favors whiteness, but technology as well. "If cinema-capital is constructed as whiteness or light, then blackness is non-cinematic, as my first two viewings of *L'Afrance* made clear: the quasi-invisible black characters did not quite shine, and certainly did not glow, but instead seemed to absorb light, like a black hole" (p. 116). Brown also considers the digitally shot films of *Wesh wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?* (Rabah Ameur-Zaimeche, France, 2001) and *Baise-moi/Rape Me* (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, France, 2000). *Baise-moi* for Brown serves as the example that "cinema meets its extremities and pushes into non-cinema" (p. 114). The other equally 'extreme' cinema Brown discusses in this chapter is of Philippe Grandrieux, *Sombre* (France, 1998). This film explains the similarities and differences between J.F. Lyotard's concept of acinema and non-cinema as well as Akira Lippit's concept of ex-cinema.

The next chapter, 'A Certain Compatibility: The British Digital Wave,' discusses how Michael Winterbottom's treatment of the British weather and Francois Truffaut's suggestion that cinema and Britain are incompatible. Brown wishes to show "how Britain and non-cinema are paradoxically very compatible, especially as a result of digital cameras and their increasing use in British film-making" (p. 138). The essay-film of Mark Cousins and Mania Akbari's *Life May Be* (UK/Iran, 2014) and Andrea Luka Zimmerman's *Taşkafa, Stories of the Street* (Turkey/UK, 2013) also explore in this chapter to suggest that the 'suppressed' component of cinema, landscapes, and animals, as the key ingredients of non-cinema. Brown takes the opportunity to argue the non-cinema relation with the anthropocentrism.

Giuseppe Andrews and the mumblecore movement are the focus of 'Non-cinema in the Heart of Cinema' chapter. For Brown, "unlike mumblecore, Andrews creates a cinema not of the gentrification of poverty, then, but of the poverty of poverty, a cinema of total failure" (p. 170). Nevertheless, Andrews' is an example of a sovereign cinema. Although it exists right on the doorstep of cinema-capital, Andrews creates "a cinema that shows aspects of the world and the body that many might consider unbecoming, in the sense of being unfit for polite society. In

creating an unbecoming cinema, Andrews's films unbecome cinema, or become non-cinema" (p. 176).

In 'Globalisation, Erasure, Poverty: Digital Non-Cinema in Uruguay' Brown takes us to the south of the Americas. Uruguay to be precise, the country which "being eliminated from cinema as its films are remade in the global north" (p. 10). Brown focuses fully on Argentine philosopher Enrique Dussel on wider relationships between the so-called global north and south in the era of globalization as well as the ethical pursuit of the liberation of the poor. Brown argues how Uruguayan cinema, such as *La casa muda/The Silent House* (Gustavo Hernandez, Uruguay, 2010) and Federico Veiroj's *La vida útil/A Useful Life*, is a cinema of erasure, disappearing in the age of the blockbuster. Brown suggests that "if the blockbuster has taken over cinema, then perhaps it is in non-cinema, or in a cinephilia that includes not just certain types of cinema, but cinema and non-cinema, that hope for cinema's future survives" (p. 10).

Brown continues his proposal that "the small, the poor and the low have equal value to the big, the rich and the high" (p. 213) to focus on two films shot in part using smartphone camera in chapter nine, Jafar Panahi and Mojtaba Mirtahmasb's *In Film Nist/This is Not a Film* (Iran, 2011) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Film Socialisme* (Switzerland/France, 2010). Brown suggests how technological advantages could help established the realm of non-cinema. On the other hand, smartphone camera and various other devices would also be "process involves a socialist, or democratic, principle: all films – be they rich or poor – are equal" (p. 10).

In chapter 10, 'Farewell to Cinema; Hello to Africa' Brown looks at Godard's *Adieu au langage/Farewell to Language* (Switzerland/France, 2014), to continue the shift away from modern national film concepts to a technological context. Brown proposes that Godard's 3D film "knowingly engages with the limits of cinema, and that it is thus exemplary of non-cinema, especially through its treatment of hair, language (including the 'language' of film) and Africa" (p. 237). Given that, Brown continues to discuss the Nollywood production of *Osuofia in London* (Kingsley Ogoro, Nigeria, 2003). For Brown, Nollywood is "perhaps the most significant hub of non-cinema ... also is the most vibrant and prolific producer of non-cinema in the contemporary world" (ibid). As we look closely to *Osuofia in London*, Nollywood, and Africa, we would learn that the hope for future of film-making may be located in the site which long been neglected by the center of the cinema. However, it certainly serves a greater purpose for non-cinema as it opens equal opportunity for all.

Non-cinema is an interesting entry in our attempt to map and understand the contemporary issues in film and media world as well as pointing out the incapability of capital to penetrate the symbolic realm of many "non-culture" society. The tendencies to place people into certain groups

such as the center and periphery, the first world and third world, the colonizer and colonized, or the *I-thing* relationship (the relationship of subject to object (p. 195)) as suggested by Dussel has become the erasure for those who live outside of capital. Moreover, it also maintained our ignorance of the multitude.

It would be fascinating to pick up Brown ideas and analyze conditions in other countries or regions. How the advancements of digital technologies would help make visible many other “national” cinemas which have been erased for so long. For instance, how is the cinema in Indonesia as the most populous Muslim-majority country? Where is it located in the cinema capital? Would it be more thrilling if we examined it via non-cinema lens rather than how much is it invested in the capital?

Our mediascape has been flooded by the emergence of new audio-visual forms and products which enrich as well as complicates our understanding of this field. Non-cinema is a way to understand as well as to redefine the current condition. Non-Cinema offers how images should be seen in its relationship with the continuity of its meaning. The notion which embraces the multitude instead of homogeneity. Especially in the situation where everything is being valued by its capital function.

HITCHCOCK'S MORAL GAZE

Philipp Teuchmann (FCSH-UNL)

Edited by R. Barton Palmer, Homer B. Pettey & Steven M. Sanders. New York: Suny Press / State University of New York, 2017. 331pp. ISBN 9781438463858

As a way of opening this review about an anthology of essays that addresses the relationship between Hitchcock's cinema and the ethical and moral spheres, it is worth considering that the aforementioned collection presents itself as a praise of Hitchcock's psychological and philosophical depth. For it is in this sense that Irving Singer, in his book about the relationship of philosophy to film¹, considers Hitchcock as a "philosophical filmmaker", despite Hitchcock considering himself, in his interviews and writings, as "someone who merely provides entertainment to an interested public" (Singer, 2004, p.7). Furthermore, it is clear that a considerable portion of Hitchcock's reflexion about film is devoted to technical aspects associated with the medium and his craft. Nonetheless, the discussion of such assertions would be out of the scope of this review. One might only add, following Singer, that "art becomes philosophical when it offers probing insights into our reality that are valuable to people who have learned how to appreciate them" (Singer, 2004, p.8). It is such assumption² that informs the philosophical sophistication and solemnity of Hitchcock's films. Hitchcock's subtlety as a "moralist not moralizing" is noteworthy, "an artist committed to portraying characters who find themselves compelled to choose" (Palmer, Pettey & Sanders, 2017, p.8)³. It should be emphasised that Hitchcock's film philosophy manifests itself in the implementation of these fictional characters, as means for a broader reflection about the effects of cinema, for it is in the relationship that is built between the director and the audience that Hitchcock is interested. With that in mind, the fifteen essays distributed throughout four chapters ("Skepticism"; "Immorality", "Moralizing", "Moral Acts") "reconsider the concept of morality in terms of Hitchcock himself, the content of his films, and their effect on his audience" (p.14). By reflecting on Hitchcock's moralism and ethics, the book constitutes a place, a *geography* (if we may put it like that), an *ethos*; therefore emerging likewise, as Hitchcock's movies, as a political project.

The first essay, Graham Petrie's "Jealousy and Trust in *The Lodger*", draws on Marie Belloc Lowndes's *The Lodger* (1913), which is considered to be the "earliest full-length fictional treatment" (p.24) of the theories and speculations that surrounded Jack the Ripper. Hitchcock's *The Lodger*, considered to be the "first true" Hitchcock film is, following Petrie, the result of an "amalgam": Lowndes's novel, some facts about the "real life" of Jack the

Ripper and the play *Who is He?* (H. A. Vachel, 1915). Although inspired by such “documents”, Hitchcock (re)writes the fictional by introducing some changes rendering the film “less complex psychologically than the book” (p.28) but closer to Hitchcock’s signature: suspense and, in this case, an univocal ending (more precisely, a “happy ending” simultaneously linked to a theme of rejoice).

In “Fun with Suspicion”, Thomas Leitch analyses the actual ending as well as the potential endings of *Suspicion*, a film inspired by Francis Iles’s novel *Before the Fact*, whose opening paragraph states: “Some women give birth to murderers, some go to bed with them, and some marry them” (p.39). Filming such novel would imply major changes on the original narrative, introducing conflict in the very process of filming, thus giving place to a collision between film and novel. In fact there were “no fewer than six endings Hitchcock and his collaborators scripted, often filmed, and sometimes previewed (p.42). For many the actual ending of the film is unsatisfactory; a dissatisfaction that has its origins in what one may call, alongside Leith, an “anticlimactic finale”. However, Leith argues that the debate around the ending of *Suspicion* is to some extent pointless, thus overlooking “the crucial point that the film is impossible to bring a satisfactory conclusion” (p.47); rather, *Suspicion* (as does *The Lodger*) presents another of Hitchcock’s signatures: “suspecting without knowing”. Following Leith, such a passion (if we may use this word), is a kind of wondering; a state of contemplation or of consideration. Indeed, it is a suspension of our attention, an *état d’âme*, a capturing. This provides the audience with a particular aesthetic experience, which is that of a “pleasurable anxiety”. This experience is pedagogical in its essence, for it is rooted in a *Gedankenexperiment*, where entertainment and moralism merge.

Nick Haeffner addresses the “Spoto myth”, which states that Hitchcock’s characters and narratives are extensions of his own personality, thus attributing to Hitchcock a perverse psyche. His movies are therefore considered to be the offspring of a diseased personality. Taken to its last consequences, this myth even suggests the possibility of contagion, drawing on the manipulative capability of cinema, and on Hitchcock’s famous comparison of the audience to a piano (Hitchcock as a *virtuoso* instrumentalist) or to an orchestra (Hitchcock as conductor). To deconstruct such myth, Haeffner develops an intertextual analysis of villainy in Hitchcock, providing a particular examination of Uncle Charlie (*Shadow of a Doubt*), inspired not only on romantic philosophy (the idea of the heroic villain, which has one of its sources in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, but also on a “Sadean perspective”. Indeed, Haeffner states that Hitchcock was a “keen admirer of Buñuel” (p. 71), who was also an admirer of de Sade. Thus, Hitchcock’s villains ought to be understood more as “effective dramatic conventions with their own histories” (p. 61).

Brian McFarlane focuses on a Christian theme, in *The Paradine Case* and *Under Capricorn*, by placing due emphasis on the guilt and confession of Maddelena Paradine and

Lady Henrietta Flusky, respectively. It could be argued that both films also explore the theme of sacrifice where, according to McFarlane, if Henrietta finds relief and hope, then the same cannot be said of Maddelena Paradine, which perhaps finds relief, but no hope. The “network of relationships”, as McFarlane calls it, is also present in both movies; both involve a man “who is meant to be helping her to deal with the facts of her guilty past” (p. 75), who falls in love with the subject guilty of murder. In addition, this play of passions also encompasses the problematics of class and gender, via the movements of the characters in a hierarchized and patriarchal society. Thus, both films exhibit what may be acknowledged as an anatomy of passions, a notorious trait of Hitchcock’s movies.

George Toles, in *The Forgotten Cigarette Lighter* refutes that the cigarette lighter of *Strangers on a Train* is a mere “Hitchcockian MacGuffin”. On the contrary, the visual emphasis that Hitchcock gives to Guy’s lighter, and its relevance till the end of the movie, attributes to the object a moral dimension, rendering the object in a quasi-subjective stance, a “thought-object”. Indeed, the cigarette lighter is semiotically charged, for “once in Bruno’s hands, [the lighter] begins to mirror its new owner” (p.103), leading Toles even to suggest if it might be possible to cast a moral judgement on the object. Furthermore, for Toles, the public exposition of the lighter at the end of the film, suggest the end of the control that Bruno exerts over Guy.

Opening with a statement of Philippa Foot, Steven Sanders addresses the fundamental and complex question of “Why should I be moral?”, taking Bruno Anthony and Uncle Charlie as examples of the psyche of “Hitchcock’s immoralists”, while simultaneously showing the insufficiency of Kantian and Hobbesian approaches to the question. In fact, for Sanders, Hitchcock’s movies (specially *Strangers on a Train* and *Shadow of a Doubt*) provide the ideal *Gedankenexperiment*, by which the viewer can “compare the two ways of life” (p.130). Sanders concludes that the odds of conducting a moral life are high, or at least there is enough of a justification to opt for a moral life, seeing how Hitchcock’s immoralists represent “not how well one can live once he has shed the constraints of morality, but how devoid of feeling and stability such a life would be.” (p.131).

In “Hitchcock the Amoralist”, Sidney Gottlieb takes a look on *Rear Window*, commonly known as a film that meditates and urges meditation about the act of looking, more specifically, that that in the field of cultural studies was called the “gaze”. Therefore, according to Gottlieb, the ways of looking and seeing can be measured, qualified and judged according to moral categories, giving place to a polarised view of our “ways of seeing”. Gottlieb, on the contrary, argues for an “expanded view of the wide variety of «ways of seeing»” (p.135) that are presented in the film. Therefore, Gottlieb lists “Seven Ways of Looking at Hitchcock’s Ways of Looking” (p.135). The first proposition is about the eye and the world, its blindness, coupled with misperception; and its binding, coupled with

connectivity. The second proposition states that *Rear Window* is about “a culture of looking and being looked at” (p.136); a culture which has at its core the eye coupled with the I. Thirdly, the film is about “looking good and looking well”. The fourth premise addresses the multiplicity of gazes in *Rear Window*, one of the most interesting being the “exponential look”, “people looking at people looking at people looking” (p.138). This takes us to the fifth proposal which states the medial character of the look. Sixth, *Rear Window* as cinema of attractions but also of distractions. Finally, the seventh proposition is about the control of looking and tactility, an ethics of distance and proximity, and the fight against chaos and horrifying abysses. The questions raised by *Rear Window* and by the practices of looking, in this case, voyeurism, are further analysed by Richard Allen, which not only seeks to “revisit” thoroughly this concept, but also expands this category, building a typology that encompasses sexual voyeurism, psychological voyeurism, cine-voyeurism and “mediated-voyeurism”, thus contributing to the analysis of the complex moral apparatus of Hitchcock.

Following Goffman’s interactional symbolism, Kenneth Keniston’s distinction between morals and ethics and Hitchcock’s *The Lodger*, *The Wrong Man* and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Murray Pomerance offers a “dramaturgical approach” and a “conceptual map”, showing that Hitchcock’s films display a metatheory about morals – the problems that affect and destabilize morality and moralism – and an “ethical drama” – the “ethical world of his characters, that world and its doubts, its vacuums, its labyrinths, its obscurities, its fervent hopes (p.182).

R. Barton Palmer, in “The Deepening Moralism of *The Wrong Man*”, shows how the collapse of the illusion that our lives are guided by what may be called a “metaphysics of justice” (p.197) is addressed. Hitchcock tackles such assumption through the topic of misidentification, which has its corollary in the failure of the justice system. Hitchcock teaches the most immutable and unchanging lesson, combined with a harsh psychological moralism: “life’s unfairness and the dead-end to which all human hopes and intentions must eventually come” (p.199). In *The Wrong Man* Hitchcock presents a sort of “re-creation”, something “stranger than all the fiction that has gone into many of the thrillers that I have made before”, and that he “was offering [...] a semidocumentary film” (p.206).

Analysing *Rear Window*, *Psycho*, *North by Northwest*, *Rope* and *The Birds*, whilst drawing mainly on Hegel’s philosophy of art, as well as on Deleuze’s film theory and Arthur Danto thesis on painting and cinema, Jerold Abrams argues that cinema becomes philosophy. Firstly, cinema “transcends representationalism”; secondly, and as a consequence of the former, cinema enters the movement of history (the general movement of the *Geist*), becoming self-conscious, reflecting on its own conditions. Now, the reflection on the “historical self-consciousness” of cinema; this double movement is the singularity of Hitchcock. Therefore, it is with him that cinema ascends to the highest form of consciousness; that we witness the end

of cinema, not in a technological sense, but in an historical sense: in the absence of the possibility of evolution, film becomes post-historical.

Alan Woolfolk not only stresses Hitchcock's social critic in *Vertigo*, namely "the poverty of American institutional and popular psychology when faced with serious moral questions [...]" (p.238) but also that Hitchcock shows the effects of the fragmentation of the individual after the "fleeing of the gods" (Hölderlin) or the "death of God" (Nietzsche). Individuals are caught between the decaying of the collective "ascetic culture" and the loneliness of mass society. Thus, Hitchcock emerges as an heir of the "crisis psychology", that finds in Nietzsche, Freud and Kierkegaard its prophets. This is the case of John "Scottie" Ferguson, for Hitchcock "prefers to describe the deficits of the self in a culture with a dearth of spiritual and moral demands, rather than the inner conflicts of one with too many" (p.238). Therefore, for Woolfolk one of the best ways to analyse *Vertigo* is to pay attention to the psychological references, for this "therapeutic culture" in which the characters are portrayed is immersed in such references but is powerless in curing psychic ills.

Following Russell's *Marriage and Morals*, Jennifer Jenkins considers marriage as a leitmotif in *North by Northwest*. Hitchcock's film emerges as a social critic, amidst the reconsideration of human relationships and romantic love, that is, a "re-negotiations of gender roles [...]" (p.255). *North by Northwest*, contests the theme of feminine "conformist domesticity", replacing it by autonomous moral agents and an ethics of choice. Neil Sinyard too gives continuity to what may be considered as a more social approach towards morals and ethics in Hitchcock, not only by examining professional ethics in the controversy between Hitchcock and Bernard Hermann, but also by showing how *Torn Curtain* explores morality "in both the personal and political sphere" (p.272). In fact, the main protagonist's role (Paul Newman as Michael Armstrong) is a dubious and ambiguous one, not only due to the nature of his mission but also derived from the relationships that he establishes with other characters, inasmuch as he begins to endanger people to the point that Sinyard calls *Torn Curtain* a Faustian narrative.

The last contribution, written by Homer Pettey, drawing on the philosophy of Hobbes and Hume, states that in *Frenzy* Hitchcock "plays with the philosophical concepts of scepticism, causation, and moral judgement" (p.289), casting at the end what may be called an alternative to both philosophical systems (a different "moral gaze"). The film not only represents one of Hitchcock's signatures, namely the theme of the false accusation where the innocent protagonist (Richard Blaney) is accused of a crime he did not committed, but also leaves the moral judgement and conclusion to the audience. Living in what may be called a "Hobbesian society or social structure", Pettey shows how the narrative of *Frenzy* makes visible the chasm that exists between the individual and the state, and the risks that the former must take to prove his innocence. Hume's sympathy is materialised in Inspector Oxford's doubts and the

Hobbesian society and justice (which central figure is the state) “finds its antithesis in the Blaney case, whereby all judicial procedures were based in error [...]” (p.303).

¹ *Three Philosophical Filmmakers: Hitchcock, Welles, Renoir*. This seminal work was also cited by the editors of *Hitchcock's Moral Gaze*.

² Also cited by the editors of the collection (p.8).

³ From now on this work will be referenced only according to its page number.

STERNBERG AND DIETRICH: THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPECTACLE

Maria Irene Aparício (FCSH-UNL | Ifilnova)

James Phillips (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, 124 pp.)

“The supreme value to me is justice.”

Josef von Sternberg

Sternberg and Dietrich. The Phenomenology of Spectacle, de James Phillips (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, 124 pp.) é, assumidamente, um livro sobre a experiência da percepção cinematográfica, a partir do *corpus* constituído pelos sete filmes sonoros de Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969), realizados entre 1930 e 1935, com a actriz Marlene Dietrich (1901-1992). O livro inclui quatro capítulos de análise e reflexão, nomeadamente sobre os filmes *Shanghai Express* (1932), *Blonde Venus* (1932), *The Scarlet Empress* (1934) e *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), uma introdução dedicada à questão maior do rosto e da voz de Dietrich – “Dietrich’s Face and the Talking Pictures” - que assume uma importância decisiva numa abordagem estética mas também ética do cinema, e uma conclusão que situa a obra de Sternberg e, em particular os filmes deste estudo, numa condição ética do Cinema em geral.

O autor inicia o estudo com a referência a dois aspectos relevantes da história do cinema: o *star system* – aqui representado pela figura de Marlene Dietrich -, e a sincronização, vulgarmente associada ao advento do “cinema sonoro”. Estes aspectos são, de resto, essenciais para compreender a consagração de Marlene Dietrich, mas igualmente a projecção dos filmes de Sternberg numa dimensão filosófica. Uma reflexão sobre o corpo ou a voz no cinema é, no mínimo, tangencial às suas implicações fenomenológicas, e é conhecida a influência do designado cinema sonoro no declínio das carreiras de algumas estrelas de Hollywood, cujas vozes não correspondiam ao imaginário dos espectadores. É preciso salientar, também, que para Phillips a imagem da actriz resistiria a todo e qualquer gesto de objectificação nos filmes deste cineasta, embora o autor afirme: “a imagem de Marlene em *Morocco* e noutros filmes é a percepção que Sternberg tem de Marlene. É o seu olhar que vemos e é através da ligação sensoriomotora que somos cativados.” (p. 14) Na verdade, sublinha que se trata de uma “reconstrução artística desse olhar”, uma percepção mediada pela máquina do cinema, mediação essa que a salvaguarda do “male gaze”.¹ Neste sentido, o rosto de Dietrich é a matéria mesma do cinema, uma face que adquire “autonomia espaço-temporal” (p. 2) projectando-se no passado e no futuro – num espaço-qualquer ferido pela incomensurabilidade dos afectos, para utilizarmos a terminologia de Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) a propósito do grande plano. Para

Phillips, a fotogenia de Dietrich é ainda inseparável da “constelação de transformações e oportunidades veiculadas pelo filme sonoro” (p. 2). No essencial, o autor parece querer resgatar, quer a dimensão do som face à primazia da imagem, advogada por muitos autores do cinema, incluindo aqueles que o autor convoca (e.g. Béla Balazs), quer o trabalho dos directores de fotografia (Lee Garmes, no caso de Sternberg) sobre a (média) luz, trabalho esse optimizado pela produção em estúdio. É, de resto, pela maestria da iluminação que os corpos “físicos” e massivos perdem o seu peso e adquirem a leveza dos anjos. Em *Der Blaue Engel / Blue Angel* (1930), na pele de Lola Lola, personagem de virtude duvidosa, o corpo ambivalente de Dietrich é ainda de carne e sangue, mas está já de passagem para a sua figura (in)corpórea, diáfana e translúcida através da qual o cinema irá celebrar a sua dimensão ontológica; *i.e.*, para a sua figura de estrela, e para a eternidade, garantida pela trágica morte do personagem masculino. A propósito do filme *Shanghai Express*, diz Phillips: «Fazer emergir a estrela da actriz Dietrich [e das personagens sórdidas ou insignificantes que ela encarna], movê-la do submundo para o mundo belo do transatlântico da *high society*, é dar visibilidade à celebridade que era já a sua condição» (p. 34). De resto, neste e noutros filmes de Sternberg, são a fisionomia e os gestos que exaltam o cinema, tal como Béla Balazs descrevera nos seus textos seminais: *Der sichtbare Mensch* (1924) [*Visible Man*, 1924] e *The Spirit of Film* (1930) que Phillips também cita.

Ainda na introdução, o autor reflecte sobre o paradoxo do uso do grande plano da actriz, cuja escala reveste uma proximidade veiculada pela ausência da profundidade de campo que, na verdade, traduz uma distância abissal entre o espectador e a “personagem-estrela”. Nas palavras de Phillips: «a presença do rosto numa imagem cinemática é sempre, de alguma forma, a sua ausência» (p. 18). De facto, o que parece restar no *close up* não é já o corpo-matéria de Dietrich, mas o espírito do cinema, a sua (i)materialidade e o espaço etéreo das suas imagens fantasma. Ocorre-nos uma comparação com o trabalho similar do cineasta britânico Edmund Goulding (1891-1959), a propósito do uso do grande plano com a actriz Greta Garbo (1905-1990) configurando o papel de uma bailarina clássica em fim de carreira, no filme *Grand Hotel* (USA, 1932). Também ali, o cinema se revela no *close up* e na voz de Garbo em monólogo, ambos pautados por uma luz diáfana, expressando a solidão e a angústia da personagem assim elevada à condição de figura universal que qualquer espectador reconhece independentemente do seu tempo. A marca profundamente humana é veiculada pelo rosto, mas a voz adquire, também, a sua “fisionomia” provinda do fundo negro da imagem da bailarina em posição fetal e filmada em ângulo picado. Poderíamos aplicar aqui a afirmação de Phillips sobre Dietrich: «A voz é crucial para a construção da sua imagem e para a cristalização da sua fama» (p.7). A figura da bailarina, emergente no ecrã negro, traduz assim o paradoxo de uma “leveza material” do corpo, que não consegue eclipsar o gigantesco “peso espiritual” da sua experiência no mundo, modulada pelo lamento triste do fluxo da sua consciência, veiculado pelo monólogo interior.

É importante salientar que, num cinema da fisionomia, as histórias são contadas através dos rostos e das suas emoções moldadas pela luz e pelo som, mais do que pelas narrativas, questão que autorizaria Balázs a declarar a potência do grande plano no cinema, legitimando também a afirmação de Phillips: “juntos Sternberg e Dietrich reinventam a luz investindo-a de uma fina película leitosa que é simultaneamente transparente e opaca” (p. 3), *i.e.*, uma “nova imagem” ou, dito de outro modo, um ecrã (des)velado através do qual circulam as paixões das personagens e os afectos dos espectadores.

Se esta ideia não era, na verdade, totalmente original, já a proposta de correlação entre a condição ética das imagens e a dimensão estética no cinema de Sternberg surge aqui como argumento essencial para compreender o alcance filosófico da obra do cineasta, no limite da sua condição autobiográfica. Contra a aderência da imagem ao seu referente, Phillips sublinha que “o desafio artístico é uma resposta ao imperativo ético e não o seu substituto...” (p. 4); ou citando Sternberg, “nos meus filmes a Marlene não é a Marlene. Eu sou a Marlene e ela sabe disso melhor do que ninguém” (p. 5).

A densidade dos argumentos de Phillips abisma o enigma do cinema, sobretudo no que diz respeito ao contributo destes filmes para o debate em torno de uma fenomenologia da experiência, mas a alusão a filmes que estabelecem contiguidades com a obra de Sternberg - por exemplo *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972), de Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945-1982) -, traduz bem a complexidade das personagens de Sternberg que se projectam, por sua vez, noutras personagens do cinema, onde coabitam corpos físicos e existências virtuais: do actor e da estrela, do espectador e da personagem, do cineasta e respectivos alter-egos, todos decalcados da vida e das suas vicissitudes, e em toda a sua materialidade e contingências perceptivas. Phillips parece, deste modo, perseguir uma tangibilidade do conceito de consciência no cinema, ao sublinhar a primazia da percepção no cinema de Sterneberg e a subordinação das narrativas à respectiva dimensão de visualidade marcada pela condição semi-subjectiva da câmara de filmar. Na introdução faz ainda referência ao filme *An American Tragedy*, realizado por Sternberg em 1931 por contrato com a Paramount, em substituição de Sergei Eisenstein cuja adaptação da novela de Theodore Dreiser (1925) não agradara aos Estúdios.

O capítulo 2, sob o título *Shanghai Express: Making Room for Faith in Appearances* é uma reflexão complexa e articulada a partir de uma *découpage* parcial do filme *Shanghai Express* (1932), e da análise textual dos diálogos onde questões como a verdade e o falso, a aparência e a fé parecem espelhar preocupações e obsessões do próprio cineasta. A epígrafe do capítulo - “*I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith*” - indica explicitamente uma reflexão inspirada na dialéctica transcendental de Immanuel Kant e na *Critique of Pure Reason*. A subtil convocação da filosofia Kantiana da Religião, em particular da questão da fé, diferente da opinião e do conhecimento cujas bases são experiência ou o

argumento, justifica o contributo do filme para a compreensão da dimensão prática da fé e respectivo envolvimento com o livre arbítrio, o agenciamento e a questão da moralidade. Em contexto, poderíamos efectivamente questionar-nos em que medida estas e outras subtilezas filosóficas intersectam o cinema. Segundo o autor, o filme de Sternberg estabelece a mediação da fé com uma dimensão fenomenologicamente concentrada – isto é, *com centro* – na imagem | corpo de Dietrich; “o comportamento designado por fé [...] remete para a aparência (e.g. performance, semelhança, etc.) que é diferente da realidade. A aparência, enquanto tal não pode ser conhecida. É objecto de uma crença, que uma vez conhecida deixa de ser uma aparência para se tornar realidade” (p. 27).

Ocorre-nos um paralelismo com os mapas credíveis das paisagens cinemáticas que povoam o imaginário - mas também a realidade transformada – dos públicos que “viajam” através do cinema. A essas paisagens “geográficas”, parcialmente fenomenológicas, correspondem seguramente outras “paisagens” geocinemáticas, interiores, que os filmes ajudam a delimitar e que contribuem, directa ou indirectamente, para a (re)acção do espectador perante as vicissitudes da sua própria vida. Dito de outra forma: o filme é “mais do que um prazer para o espectador: [e] mesmo que ele apreenda a aparência como tal, e em contradição com o que ele conhece, na sua passividade tende a respeitar as fronteiras entre os aspectos estéticos e as atitudes práticas.” (p. 27). Este agenciamento justificaria a leitura de Phillips: “o que é importante para Sternberg é menos a demonstração das potencialidades dos cinema do que a força da imagem” (p. 33). Mais, é na exaltação do “exótico” e na operação de estranhamento que, segundo o autor, Sternberg mobiliza a potência da percepção. Tratar-se-ia, em última análise, de contrapor a crença do espectador à “hegemonia do conhecimento” (p. 36), caucionada pela suspensão da experiência quotidiana e respectivos valores do primeiro. Referindo-se à diegese, Phillips termina o capítulo sublinhando a ideia de que, no campo da experiência humana, cada envolvimento amoroso parece obedecer a uma “dimensão civilizacional larval” na qual nos reconhecemos e que nos leva a tratar-nos mutuamente “como se não fossemos, na verdade, os simples corpos moventes no espaço que sabemos que somos” (p. 40). Daí que, acrescenta, “na *mise en abyme* de *Shanghai Express* a crença na ficção cinemática espelhe o prazer da suspensão do conhecimento, que se substitui ao mesmo, recriando-o a partir de dentro, e oferecendo-o ao público mesmo quando [esse (re)conhecimento] se oculta na profundidade [semântica] da imagem” (p. 40).

Sob o título do capítulo seguinte, “*Blonde Venus: A Sale of Two Bodies*”, e a propósito do filme homónimo – *Blonde Venus* (1932) -, Phillips salienta a retomada das questões do corpo e da sexualidade - “a atracção sexual da personagem é indissociável do medium cinemático...” (p. 46) -, mas reflecte também sobre a performatividade do nome (e.g. Helen Faraday, Helen Jones, Venus, etc.), e destaca a semelhança do apelido Jones com Jonas, nome original de Sternberg, alterado para Josef em 1911, pouco tempo antes do cineasta austríaco dar os primeiros passos no

mundo do cinema ao obter, com apenas 17 anos, emprego na *World Film Company*². Trata-se aqui, em meu entender, de convocar questões subliminares relevantes, nomeadamente a identidade e subsequente alteridade, mas também a possibilidade de (re)ação política dos filmes, através de uma memória sintomática do(s) nome(s), quer na história do cinema, quer na própria história, se relembramos a origem de Sternberg, filho de uma família de judeus ortodoxos em Viena, forçados a emigrar para os EUA, tendo mesmo ficado retidos na Ellis Island.

Phillips sublinha ainda a deferência de Sternberg ao mito da beleza feminina, filtrado pela referência ao romance de Émile Zola (1840-1902), *Nana* (1880), e à personagem central da cortesã. O filme seria, de resto, na opinião de Phillips, uma forma cinematográfica de consolidação do mito e, em última análise, um forte indício da empatia do cineasta com “a estrela enquanto estrela” (p. 45). Quase no final do capítulo, o autor consolida a ideia de que o cinema tem um acesso privilegiado a uma dimensão mitológica: “Para Sternberg, a tarefa do realizador não é a de saber como aceder ao mito, mas sim como controlá-lo. O eterno ‘presente’ do mito irrompe na imagem durante o processo de registo mecânico da realidade” (p. 54).

Em “*The Scarlet Empress* (1934): History as Farce”, Phillips assinala a sátira política de Sternberg ao despotismo na Europa, e a abordagem da História como espectáculo, embora sublinhe que o mesmo não é comparável ao filme de Charlie Chaplin *The Great Dictator* (1940) que considera uma resposta imediata a uma ameaça. Em *The Scarlett Empress*, Dietrich encarna a figura da Imperatriz Catarina II, *A Grande* (1762-1796), cujo reinado foi considerado a Época de Ouro da Rússia. A Imperatriz autocrata foi uma das defensoras dos ideais iluministas, levando ao limite os poderes do Estado Absolutista. Nas palavras de Phillips, o filme revela a “incoerência e a anarquia” num “ambiente simultaneamente ridículo e aterrador” onde “a arbitrariedade do exercício do poder sob o despotismo coincide com a impostura da farsa” (p. 63). Apesar da breve invocação de *Leviathan* (1651) de Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), o filme é, na verdade, uma “falsa memória do despotismo”, uma simples “estória”, isto é, uma farsa... Catarina, *A Grande* terá sido reimaginada por Dietrich à imagem e semelhança de Mae West³, sua amiga e vizinha nos Estúdios, e o sucesso político da monarca no filme parece encontrar explicação plausível na sua “generosidade sexual para com o regimento do palácio” (p. 67).

De forma algo enigmática, e socorrendo-se da teoria do romancista Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) sobre a “missão da arte”⁴, Phillips propõe um tratamento superficial da questão da justiça, a partir deste filme: “A justiça de um filme como *The Scarlet Empress* [...] está localizada na superfície e provém do entretenimento que o filme providencia” (p. 60). Trata-se aqui, bem entendido, da justiça *do* e *no* cinema. O cinema ilumina e torna visível o que se oculta na superfície das coisas, e é deste modo que a arte faz justiça à dimensão superficial do mundo. Uma vez mais, o autor convoca Kant, agora a propósito do conceito de “beleza livre” que induz um prazer estético desinteressado - tal como o fazem as flores, os pássaros “beija-flores” ou as

fantasias musicais -, para concluir, de forma não menos indesvendável: “o que resta do despotismo em *The Scarlet Empress* é a beleza” (p. 64).

À semelhança dos capítulos precedentes, “*The Devil Is a Woman: Against the Off-Screen*” trata da dimensão de visualidade no cinema; o que se vê e o que está para além do visível, num questionamento das relações entre imagem e “verdade”, e entre narrativa ficcional e o “mundo real”. Para o autor, *The Devil is a Woman* (1935) – o último dos sete filmes semi-autobiográficos de Sternberg -, é o espaço de uma experiência que reflecte a “realidade extracinemática” (p. 76) e que pressupõe, em última análise, uma mobilização da experiência do espectador. Neste filme, a misteriosa “mulher fatal” (Concha), protagonizada por Dietrich, jamais poderá ser revelada no ecrã (*on-screen*). Em contrapartida, ela projecta nos muitos espectadores – os do presente e os do futuro -, a perpetuação do enigma engendrado pela montagem. E a recusa da revelação do que permanece fora do ecrã (*off-screen*) seria, a seu modo, uma forma de “cristalizar” o mundo, tal como o fazem a pintura e o teatro, enquanto artes da representação. Phillips socorre-se de André Bazin (1918-1958) para justificar a imperiosa necessidade (e a “presença” espectral) de um mundo existencial fora de campo, que propõe como “suplemento cognitivo no processo perceptivo do espectador. [...] Um espaço vazio num puzzle, [lugar ausente], sem o qual o jogo não poderia ser jogado” (p. 79); i.e., o *espaço ambíguo e ambivalente do cinema* onde a face visível de Dietrich “assume as propriedades do invisível” numa imagem holística que “liberta [Sternberg] da necessidade de provar a ‘verdade’ de um mundo fora do ecrã [e do estúdio]” (p. 87) caucionando o gesto idiossincrático de realização configurado pelo enquadramento. Para Sternberg - e ao contrário de Bazin (e de Alberti) -, o ecrã não é uma janela através da qual se contempla o mundo, mas é, isso sim, um mundo ele próprio mediado pela experiência, numa imagem espectacular que “aspira a um realismo perceptivo” (p. 87). Num breve diálogo com Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Phillips questiona a afirmação do filósofo sobre a deterioração da audição e da visão “sob o domínio da tecnologia, em resultado da rádio e do filme”⁵, já que, justifica, “criar um mundo é muito diferente de activar a predisposição aos mundos na mente dos espectadores. O mundo que a obra de arte⁶ estabelece para Heidegger é um espaço que excede qualquer experiência e que não pode ser reduzido à inteligibilidade e coerência do fenómeno” (p. 88).⁷

O autor estabelece ainda um paralelismo com *Stage Fright* (1950), de Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980), e relembra o episódio da escolha do título do filme – inicialmente *Capriccio Espanhol*, da composição musical (1887) do mesmo título, de Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) - que Ernst Lubitsh (1892-1947) preteriu em prol de *The Devil is a Woman*, com a suposta intenção de atrair audiências, o que não se verificou, apesar do rasgado elogio crítico do *New York Times*, à época. O próprio Sternberg – citado por Phillips – relembra o facto de o filme ter sido censurado e banido em Espanha, em pleno período franquista, sob a acusação de representação caricatural da *Guardia Civil*.

Finalmente, a conclusão “Toward an Ethics of the Moving Image” é um manifesto em defesa de uma dimensão pro-fílmica que diferencia o cinema de outras artes (e.g. a pintura, a escultura...) e que torna a imagem credível para além de toda e qualquer verosimilhança. A ética do cinema – literal e não metafórica – pressupõe um acto de olhar o mundo alinhado com uma forma de contar uma estória cujo trajecto narrativo é antecipadamente conhecido pelo realizador. É uma ética subserviente, que se submete aos imperativos estéticos da composição. Deste modo, constitui “uma base pobre para um esteticismo amoral, porque os corpos pro-fílmicos não são identificáveis com o produto da imaginação do artista” (p. 93), ou com o resultado de uma “transcendência da imagem cognitiva do espectador” (p. 93). Em defesa do cinema e de Sternberg, contra Platão e os iconoclastas, Phillips liberta, também ele, os filmes da sua referencialidade, para responder às acusações epistemológica e teológica da imagem, advogando que a sua não assimilação à ‘verdade’ constitui justamente o garante da autonomia enquanto imagem e espectáculo. É neste sentido que o cinema de espectáculo de Sternberg propõe uma reflexão sobre questões éticas específicas da imagem cinematográfica e das suas ficções. Isto é, julgar as imagens e as suas personagens não é o mesmo que julgar os actos que as mesmas (re)apresentam.

Em suma, trata-se de uma reflexão primorosa cujas complexidade e profundidade se revelam nas múltiplas referências à filosofia e à história, à literatura e à música, mas também à história do cinema, entre outras impossíveis de mapear neste breve exercício de recensão. Finalmente, é preciso dizer que, ao circunscrever a análise aos filmes de um período específico, e nos seus próprios contextos, o estudo tem o mérito de não ceder à tentação de criar um modelo do cinema Sternbergiano. Contrariamente ao fechamento que um tal modelo poderia efectivar, o texto de Phillips entretece os filmes de Sternberg numa matriz universal do gesto que, tributário do *studio system*, toma em consideração as vicissitudes da vida e do mundo, apenas para, finalmente, se libertar do último e assumir-se simplesmente como *cinema*.

¹ Na verdade a propósito de *Morocco* (1930), o autor refere a abordagem de Laura Mulvey, nesta mesma perspectiva, no livro *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York: Palgrave, 1989).

² A também designada *World Film Corporation*, empresa produtora e distribuidora, foi criada por Lewis J. Selznick in Fort Lee, New Jersey, tendo sido a base de vários estúdios das primeiras décadas do século XX.

³ Mary Jane “Mae” West (1893-1980), actriz de “vaudeville” foi o protótipo de estrela da indústria do cinema Americano e do “star system”. Considerada como símbolo sexual, começou a sua carreira de actriz tardiamente, sob contrato com a Paramount Pictures.

⁴ Conrad parece ter, de resto, uma certa afinidade com o próprio cinema; *Sabotage* (Hitchcock, 1936), *Dangerous Paradise* (William Wellman, 1930), *Lord Jim* (Richard Brooks, 1965), *Victory* (Jacques Tourneur, 1919), *The Rover* (Terence Young, 1967), *Smuga Cienia/The Shadow Line* (Andrzej Wajda, 1976), *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), ou *Almayer's Folly* (Chantal Akerman, 2011) são apenas alguns dos muitos filmes que resultaram de adaptações das obras do autor, alguns deles com os mesmos títulos das obras adaptadas.

⁵ Cf. “The Turn” in Martin Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures. Insight Into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking*, trans. Andrew J. Mitchell (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), 72.

⁶ O autor alude aqui ao texto heideggeriano “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935–36).

⁷ Professor de Filosofia na University of New South Wales, em Sydney, James Phillips é autor de *Heidegger's Volk: Between National Socialism and Poetry* (2005) onde procura reflectir sobre os limites da implicação da obra Heideggeriana na promoção do nazismo. É também editor do volume *Cinematic Thinking: Philosophical Approaches to the New Cinema*, onde assina a Introdução (“What can cinema do?”) e um capítulo sob o título “Glauber Rocha: Hunger and Garbage”.

THE SHAPE OF SPECTATORSHIP: ART, SCIENCE, AND EARLY CINEMA IN GERMANY

Philip Teuchmann (FCSH-UNL)

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In the last few years, there has been an increasing trend which has changed and refreshed the historiographical methods in cinema studies. This new movement in the historiography of film prioritizes linkages: interfaces, couplings and articulations between the moving image and other realms of human cultural and social activity; it assumes and emphasises the plurality of applications of media technologies (in this case film). Scott Curtis's *The Shape of Spectatorship* (2015) clearly belongs to the drift mentioned above, and is perchance one of the first books that addresses exclusively the relationship(s) and connection(s) between early film and the pertaining epistemological and ideological context. It is with this in mind, that Curtis's book opening states: "whatever cinema is, it has always been many things to many people." (Curtis, 2015, p.1), thus seeking to explore the relationship between film, science (physics, motion studies, medicine, educational and pedagogical enterprises) and aesthetics (the Kantian tradition, which generally draws its attention to the reception of the work of art) in Wilhelmine Germany. It should be noted that other outstanding examples of this "contextual turn" in the historiography of the moving image are Vonderau's *Films that Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of media* (2009), Oliver Gaycken's *Devices of Curiosity: Early Cinema and Popular Science* (2015) and Andreas Killen's *Homo Cinematicus* (2017).

Curtis's aim is to show the "heterogeneity of early cinema" (2) and the quest for legitimacy of this "new" media technology ("always already new", as Lisa Gitelman would say). To carry out this challenging task, Curtis's develops a critical analysis in four of his chapters—each of them featuring different (but linked) case studies—the way film is shaped by the diverse patterns in which an object of study is represented in a certain epistemic culture¹. Film is therefore defined by its multiplicity of meanings whose variation depends on certain traditions of "ways of looking that are assumed" (6) by each discipline. These ways of viewing are always collective, shared by the members of a certain community (be it medical or aesthetic) and which are in its very nature always segregating, establishing requirements, rules and ideological bonds that must be respected and followed if one chooses to be part of the community. Therefore, "the ways of looking that are assumed" (pag.2) by different disciplines are always of a performative nature. However, Curtis identifies a particular dialectic in this process: film is not only a passive cultural form that is moulded by expert viewing; film actively shapes practices of looking in which it is itself a way of looking. Fulfilling Berkeley's dictum "*esse est percipi*", media technologies determine our situation² by determining our perception, affects and senses.

Therefore, the moving image features a whole new fashion of representing the world, shaping expert viewing and thus being a catalyst of new problems (in science, medicine, aesthetics, etc.). Film becomes a synthetic category for modernity's problems and debates around questions of education, representation, perception and ideology. In fact, cinematic experience becomes an "expression of the state of urban life" (pag.13) and grants continuity to the history of fragmentation of the subject traced by Jonathan Crary.

The first chapter ("Science's Cinematic Method") traces the use of film in three renowned scientific disciplines: human motion studies, physics and biology. Each of the scientific disciplines and the established relation between technology and epistemic object enables Curtis to display cinema's diverse epistemological functions. In other words, the relation of chronophotography and film to an "object of study" (the body in human motion studies), "a theory" (physics and the recasting of Brownian motion by Einstein) and "representational options" (the research on cells in biology). The ability of the cinematograph to "decompose the event into discrete, regular units" (pag.21) earned himself some prestige and value. Indeed, Henri Bergson already declared that science and film shared some "philosophical affinity" (pag.22). For Bergson cinema, like science, overlooks the *Whole* due to its inability to acknowledge the qualitative dimension of time, or as he calls it, duration (*durée*), which is always a *becoming* (*avenir*). Although Bergson's critique might be understood as part of the broadly context of critiques to images and simulacra (which characterizes western's metaphysical tradition), one also might assume that the relation of science and film is built precisely upon film's ability to quantify, measure and manipulate time and space.

The manipulation of time and space is already obvious in Braune and Fischer's experiment (human motion studies). Directly related to a general "medicalization of society" (pag.127), a conventional *Weltanschauung* of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Braune and Fischer aim first to decompose human movement and then to reconstitute it so that there could be an increase of efficiency in movement, that is, a better conservation of energy and lessening of fatigue. Evidently this experiment had an indubitable military orientation and concepts like energy (consumption and conservation) become tropes for the moral and physical wellbeing of a society. To decompose and to measure bodies was the first step to take in order to rebuild society (Curtis, 2015). It was with this in mind that Braune and Fischer wanted to build a three-dimensional model of human movement, which was only possible through the decomposition and measurement of the human body, thus rendering him docile. Furthermore, the composition of a legible image was only possible by first rendering the body visible (accomplished through Geissler tubes), that is, a selection of what is of significance for the experiment. Secondly, Curtis says that there is also the need of constituting a graphic (or mathematical) space. These elements materialize the body's "protomathematical properties" (49), thus creating mathematical space. Finally, the interpretation of the data would render the "real" body into an

“ideal”, creating an “*eidetic image*” (59), which culminated in the above mentioned three-dimensional model. For Curtis this final operation is cinematographic, forging continuity out of discontinuity. The second experiment (located in physics) describes the early twentieth century quarrel between phenomenological thermodynamics, a heritage of Newton’s mechanics and atomic-kinetic theory. The atomic-kinetic theory shed some light on the behaviour of matter (composed of particles of so small nature that they were invisible). Brownian motion demonstrated, in turn, that the movement of particles had to have some external cause. An experimental confirmation to that thesis came from Einstein, which advocated for the atomic-kinetic theory of heat. Einstein succeeded, proving that the laws of thermodynamics did not apply absolutely, but only statistically. Not only did Einstein found in Brownian motion theory the backbone for proving the existence of molecules, but he also proved the displacement of particles. After Curtis, the significant role of cinema comes to light with Seddig, who built a cinematic apparatus for the measurement of Brownian motion. In Seddig, one may find the “empirical translation of Einstein’s displacement equation [...] an experimental method that corresponded to [...] Einstein’s theory” (72), which in spite of the efforts, still remained more of a theoretical guidance than a mathematically built description. Indeed, even Einstein’s theory remained akin to the workings of the cinematographic apparatus. There were gaps and deletions in Einstein’s equation, for the complete and actual path of the particles was not traceable. According to Curtis, the “interruption” created finds its homology in Seddig’s cinematic interruption. Therefore, film is rendered mathematical, and time becomes reversible both in Einstein’s equations and in Seddig’s cinematographic truth. The third example of Curtis concerns biology, in particular nerve fibers. In this case, motion picture technology emerges in all its rhetorical power. Studying the processes that govern the organism, the argument developed around what type of connection there was between fibers and tissues. In other words, how nerve fibers grew. There again, this was a question of movement, leading Curtis to declare: “once the new techniques were available, new questions came to the foreground” (81). Anticipating some of the issues of the second chapter, Curtis highlights the importance of “virtual witnessing” prompted by film, wherein lies its rhetorical power. The major relevance of film lied here in its reproducibility, even substituting the object of study. Analogous to tissue culture, film granted the isolation and analysis of tissues, thus permitting measurement and manipulation. In fact, film became a new form of evidence, structurally reproducing Harrison’s *in vitro* technique and materializing Benjamin’s “optical unconscious”. Perhaps referring himself to our *posthuman* condition, for Curtis the analogy lies in the fact that both film and tissue culture reproduce the notion that life is separable from the body.

The second chapter (“Between Observation and Spectatorship”) emphasises the relationship between researcher and image. Being still part of science, this chapter can be seen as a bridge between the first one (concerned mainly with science) and the third one, concerned with the

notion of “*taste*”. Curtis demonstrates that German doctors were particularly interested in cinema. In fact, for Curtis there is a correlation between life and death, as well as, movement and stillness. Cinema served firstly an exploratory function, granting the researcher with the power to manipulate time and space, thus leading to an exploration of new domains and comprehension of the complexity of movement. Secondly, it served a documentary function, being able to capture moving (and therefore fleeting) phenomena. This function is related to cinema’s rhetorical power, building a new type of truth. This leads us to the third function: its pedagogical nature. The potentiality of cinema as a *medium* of education was soon recognised, be it for students, teachers or the general public. However, the pedagogical nature was also related to the training of the eye and perception. Indeed, the difference between spectatorship and observation lies in the capability of controlling the moving image. While spectatorship was perceived as a passive stance (resulting from the untrained eye), observation was perceived as a critical and controlling approach to cinema, preaching a contemplative stance. This contemplative stance translated itself in a “viewing protocol” (140), linked to the notion of *Wille* (“will”) and attention, which avoided immersion. Spectatorship, on the other hand, was shaped by this immersion, thus the comparison between cinema and hypnotism. In the third chapter (“The Taste of a Nation”) Curtis lengthens his analysis of spectatorship to taste. Indeed, anticipating what will be said in the fourth and last chapter, Curtis explains that those who wanted to reform cinema pretended to do it by negotiating between the new *medium*’s singularities and the moral as aesthetic values of Wilhelmine Germany. This reform would also appease the tension existing between *Zivilisation* and *Kultur*. Therefore, for reformers, film’s most useful shape was its pedagogical and educational potential, which translated itself in the *Anschaungsunterricht*³. “Vision was the means by which taste was trained” (146), thus the *Anschaungsunterricht* was directly linked to aesthetic education and norms. Curtis subdivides the film reform movement in *Filmreform* and *Kinoreform*, the first engaged in reforming movie’s content and the second the physical space for it was deemed that both films and theatres had “physical and moral side effects” (154), especially for children. Accordingly, the film reform movement not only issued a general plea for filmic realism— as film was seen as something that is “faithful to nature” (179), his function was recording and reproduction of “real life”—but also was simultaneously concerned with the regression of aesthetic sensibility. Therefore, Curtis shows that there is a correlation between spectatorship, masses and childlike behaviour. The problem of taste was then a problem of “moral weakness”. By being the perceived solution to the aforementioned problem, aesthetic education emerges here in its full moral potential, precisely by yielding a moral renewal. Therefore, aesthetic education was predominantly conservative; homologous to the *status quo*. For Curtis, this is specially clear not only in the controlling function that the *Anschaungsunterricht* assumes in relation to modernity, the image and movement, but also because the “visual education” always supposed

the mediation and intervention of the word, as a means of rationalization. Hermann Lemke even suggested that films should be preceded and succeeded by discussions. Therefore, film was put “into an orderly and recognizable system of practice” (177), which is translated in the numerous attempts to adapt film to school *curricula*.

As the fourth chapter (“The Problem with Passivity) demonstrates, aesthetic education, the basis of the film reform movement, still was perceived as the major means to counter cinema’s negative moral and physical side effects. As Curtis argues, temporality and control play an important role in aesthetics. In fact, those who master time and body are perceived to master motion pictures. Therefore, in the fourth chapter Curtis focal point is the *Kino-Debatte*⁴. For Curtis, the *Kino-Debatte* represents an enlargement of the discourses on cinema in Germany, due to its increasing popularity and significance. However, the *debatte* was two-pronged. On one hand, advocates of cinema felt the need in justifying the new *medium* in terms of literature, drawing on the written word. Indeed, as Curtis demonstrates and as we have seen, there was an urge to “conform film to traditional bourgeois aesthetics” (194). On the other hand, there was also the acknowledgement, as Walter Benjamin argues, that cinema represented a dramatic change in aesthetics, establishing new modes of reception of art such as distraction, mass reception, hallucination, shock and embodied immersion, thus replacing the individual contemplative stance and recasting categories of space, time, agency and identity. By all means, the *Kino-Debatte*, as Curtis argues, was an aesthetic debate and therefore placed in the “larger ideological problem of the moral significance of the aesthetic experience” (199), for the “viewer’s stance before the image was also a stance before the world.” (213). It is with this in mind that Curtis explains thoroughly the concept of *Einfühlung*, which establishes a “resonance between the structure of the body and the structure of the artwork” (216), a resonance thought in terms of movement and described prevailingly in terms of emotional projection and embodied perception. For Curtis, *Einfühlung* was therefore an attempt to reconcile some of the values of traditional aesthetics and modern art reception. During the chapter, Curtis shows gradually how aesthetics suffers a conversion. In fact, one example is Walter Serner’s “Kino und Schaulust”⁵, which links aesthetic experience in cinema to sexual desire: cinematic movement appealed to our “basest instincts, our darkest needs.” (229). “The eye was no longer detached from the body” (229) as it was in traditional aesthetics, for aesthetic experience could now also encompass not only erotic but also phisic, bodily, visceral reactions.

¹ To make use of the acclaimed concept of Karin Knorr Cetina.

² As Kittler and other so vehemently noticed.

³ *Anschauchen* means to look at, to behold or watch; a lengthy gaze. *Anschaung* can be translated as “intuition”, but also “contemplation”. *Unterricht* means, in this case, lesson.

⁴ A term created by Anton Kaes.

⁵ Cinema and Visual Pleasure.

GENOLOGOPHOBIA

William Brown, University of Roehampton, London

I enjoyed two excellent conferences this year, including the 2019 NECS Conference, which is the conference of the European Network for Cinema and Media Studies, and the 2019 Film-Philosophy Conference. The former had as its central theme ‘Structures and Voices: Storytelling in Post-Digital Times,’ and was held at the University of Gdańsk in Poland, while the latter was unthemed and took place at the University of Brighton in the UK.

There were many wonderful papers at each conference, as is perhaps to be expected, and so what follows may come across as an unnecessary criticism, in that I am going to discuss something that did not take place with any great regularity at either conference—even as I make mention of various papers that did take place at each conference.

What I am going to critique these conferences for is a relatively persistent absence of discussions of race, which for this essay I am going to define as *genologophobia*, meaning fear (φόβος/phóbos) of discussing (λόγος/logos) race (γένος/genos).

This assertion already/alone may provoke a roll of the eyes in some readers. And I can enumerate various of the excuses that easily can be rattled off in order to explain why people are (still) not talking about race—or at least not very much—at conferences such as these. For example, the majority demographic at each of these conferences is white Europeans, North Americans and Australasians, with this high level of white participation itself reflecting the demographics of advanced higher education in those regions, which in turn might reflect quite simply (if problematically) the demographics of those regions, especially the demographics of those with reasonable/realistic access to higher education within those regions. Not that white scholars cannot talk about race, and not that scholars of colour are obliged to talk about race; but in some senses it is perhaps an inevitability that predominantly white scholars will predominantly talk about cinema and its attendant media as if there were no need to address race as part of its being—even as conferences possibly/actually attempt to take ‘affirmative action’ in terms of ensuring a diversity of participants.

What is more, I am of course guilty of being a single person who cannot attend every paper at conferences that have more than one panel running at any given moment in time. It is quite possible, therefore, that I simply missed a bunch of race-themed papers, or at least panels at which race was raised as an issue (in spite of the descriptions of the papers in the conference programs?), meaning that the ‘white bias’ that I am delineating is in fact my own, as I unconsciously err away from race-themed panels and papers for the purposes of sticking to an ‘easier,’ white agenda. In this sense, perhaps I am an unburnt kettle calling a bunch of pots white—not least because I myself do not perhaps talk about race as much as I could or

should do. While I acknowledge this possibility, though, I hope that this was not a strong factor in my perception of genologophobia. Indeed, in spite of both conferences hosting scholars from various continents, and with various scholars also talking about cinema and media from a wider range of continents still, it seemed clear to me that 2019 was a(nother) year in which race seemed not to be discussed at these two recent and relatively large-scale film studies conferences.

But why am I making this interjection, even at the risk of redundancy, rejection and hypocrisy? For perhaps the whiteness of film and media studies is a long-standing problem and one that cannot and will not change overnight. And yet, as we live in an increasingly globalised world, in which people who identify as white account for only about one fifth of the population, it can at times seem odd that white cinema dominates our discussions of the medium, and that the medium thus inevitably comes in some senses to be defined as white, with the expectation of whiteness in turn coming unthinkingly or otherwise to obviate for many the need to talk about race.

I am not alone in this perception. From a broader, cultural perspective, Reni Eddo-Lodge has recently and passionately articulated her frustrations at the difficulty she encounters when trying to talk with white people about how ‘not everyone experiences the world in the way that they do.’¹ With regard specifically to film studies, the aim here is not to overlook a rich history of critical race theorists, nor classic texts like Richard Dyer’s *White*, nor the ongoing work of scholars who do bring discussions of race to the table.² Indeed, Greg de Cuir Jr is on the editorial board for NECS’s journal, *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies*, and he is actively invested in promoting black cinema, as per the recent *Black Light*, a selection of 47 films that he curated for the 2019 Locarno Film Festival—even if he did not discuss this experience directly at NECS at the workshop entitled ‘It’s All About Telling a Story. Artistic, Curatorial, Scholarly Perspectives in Dialogue.’³

In a fashion that echoes Eddo-Lodge’s argument, Celine Parreñas Shimizu has also written a series of provocations in which she outlines the ongoing and overwhelming whiteness of film studies, including an exhortation for scholars to stop watching and talking about white media.⁴ This sits alongside Racquel J. Gates and Michael Boyce Gillespie, who while acknowledging that ‘[d]iscussion about black film and media is booming in academic programs [in the USA],’ nonetheless have felt compelled to write a manifesto ‘reclaiming black film and media studies.’⁵ Meanwhile, if these examples focus exclusively on North America, Noah Tsika has also argued that African media are marginalised within the contemporary and supposedly global academy, with Lindiwe Dovey adding that when African film is discussed, it is more often factual rather than fictional media that receive critical attention, a tendency that in turn might lead to a renewed emphasis on African bodies as opposed to African minds and imaginations.⁶ Dovey further contends that Africa should

not be ‘treated as an exceptional space to the rest of the globe,’ and that African examples should be brought to people’s attention ‘within broader studies of narrative, genre, and media institutions.’⁷ With this in mind, while conferences such as Black Film British Cinema, which was organised by Clive James Nwonka at the University of Greenwich in 2017, and which was timed to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the 1988 conference of the same name, are indeed significant contributions to rectifying the genologophobia of (British) film studies, it does seem that race—much like the African continent with which issues of race are perhaps indelibly linked—should also not be treated as an ‘exceptional theme’ but systematically included within film studies more broadly. If Achille Mbembe suggests that the contemporary moment is defined by the ‘Becoming-Black-of-the-World’ (if to quote Mbembe is not merely to quote the fashionable *philosophe du jour*), then it does indeed seem telling that there is such seeming genologophobia in contemporary western film studies. To mention only African-American filmmakers, remarkable recent work by the likes of Khalik Allah, Beyoncé, Ryan Coogler, Ava DuVernay, Kevin Jerome Everson, F. Gary Gray, Christopher Harris, Barry Jenkins, Spike Lee, Kasi Lemmons, Julius Onah, Jordan Peele, Dee Rees, Boots Riley, RaMell Ross, Justin Simien, George Tillman Jr, Billy Woodberry and Phillip Youmans only makes this occlusion more surprising. Which is not to mention work dealing with race by American filmmakers from other ethnicities (Kathryn Bigelow, Justin Chon, John M. Chu, Kogonada, Carlos López Estrada, Joe Talbot, Lulu Wang have all, for example, enjoyed wide releases with their work) and non-American filmmakers working within the American system and also engaging with histories and actualities of race, notable examples being Chris Morris, Steve McQueen and Roberto Minervini. In the light of such prominent work, it seems odd that race seems so little discussed. Or, as Denise Ferreira da Silva might put it, it seems odd that we are not prepared to look at cinema under a blacklight—especially since such a blacklight can create *the possibility of considering thinking in some other way*.⁸

But in spite of my suggestion that it is a critical necessity to think and to talk about race, across 324 papers and keynotes at NECS (i.e. excluding workshops), zero included race in their title, while there was one panel dedicated to Chinese cinema (featuring talks by Mila Zuo, Victor Fan, Jessica Yeung and Ruby Cheung), one to North African cinema (Samar Abdel-Rahman, Matthew Croombs, Elizabeth Miller, Marion Hallet), and one panel on Feminist and Video Aesthetics that included Lidia Kniaź talking on ‘Afrofuturism as a Storytelling Mode in Selected American Music Videos,’ Rosanna Maule on ‘Postcolonial Archives and Feminist Digital Art Practices,’ and Agnieszka Piotrowska on ‘*Neria* – the first feminist black movie in Southern Africa or an example of opportunistic neo-colonial venture?’ There were also one-off papers on Ousmane Sembène (Anna Warchało), *Black Panther* (Niels Niessen) and Whitney Houston (Jaap Kooijman). And while there were

various papers that focused on examples from African (Raul Alvarez), American indigenous (Monika Siebert), Chilean (María Paz Peirano), Egyptian (Terri Ginsberg), Indian (Catherine Bernier, Grazia Ingravalle), Iranian (Sammaneh Assadi), Korean (Aleksander Koren, Kyoung Sung), Kurdish (Murat Akser), Mexican (Begoña González-Cuesta), Nepali (Dishyia Karki) and Turkish (Melis Behlil, Ece Vitrinel) cinemas, together with a panel on migration (Alice Cati, Irene Gutierrez Torres, Silvia Murillo), this still amounts only to 29 papers out of 324—or less than nine per cent of papers presented.

Meanwhile, across 106 papers and keynotes at Film-Philosophy (i.e. also excluding workshops), again zero mentioned race in their title—or in their abstracts. There were papers on films from Chile (Matthew Holtmeier), China (Bruno Lessard), Iran (Kaveh Abbasian, Maryam Tafakory, David Deamer), Japan (Joff Bradley), South Korea (Hee-seung Lee), Mexico (Hui-Han Chan), Palestine (Samira Makki), South Africa (Finn Daniels-Yeomans) and (at least in principle) Thailand (Xiao Cai—although this scholar did not in fact make it to the conference), while Thomas Austin spoke about ‘Benefaction, processing, exclusion: documentary representations of refugees and migrants in Fortress Europe.’ Hannah Paveck discussed ‘Sounding Colonial Encounters: Strategies of Subtitle Translation,’ while Mila Zuo engaged with the representation of Asian women as sexbots in her paper ‘The Girlfriend Experience: Virtual Beauty and Love in Post-Cinematic Times.’ Finally, Mark Cauchi did discuss Jim Jarmusch as a filmmaker who regularly works with actors of colour in ‘*Paterson* and the Renewal of American Secularity in the Age of Trump.’ But this again only amounts to 15 per cent of the papers presented—with race not even featuring explicitly in a few of these papers that I managed to see. I should mention that Victor Fan did present a specifically non-western theory of cinema when in his keynote he discussed ‘Time and Nothingness: Image and Temporality through the Lens of Buddhism’—an expansion on the work that he outlines towards the end of his important book, *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory*.⁹

As I began over the course of these conferences to consider the way in which race was repeatedly absent from papers and/or discussions, it struck me that many could easily place the term ‘white’ in front of numerous of the claims being made about cinema, or indeed that the claims being made about cinema could in fact equally be claims about whiteness, without any substantial change to the argument being put forward. Even as we all in principle know that whiteness goes unmentioned as it passes for normality, this mechanism is still (un)clearly at work—unclearly because it is not explicitly recognised and thus becomes invisible, but also clearly precisely because we all are supposedly aware of its ubiquity.

Lest I be guilty of trying to seem ‘more woke than thou,’ I wish to end by emphasising that I contribute to this problem of genologophobia, including during a paper on darkness at NECS that only obliquely refers/referred to race (with a video-essay at Film-Philosophy that

also only obliquely alludes to race through its use of a couple of Bollywood films set in San Francisco). And there remain problems even in this short conference report of sorts ('of sorts' because it is, as mentioned, focused on what was not discussed more than on what was): why is it that I specifically reference Dyer's *White* rather than the numerous other volumes on (non-white) race and cinema (from foundational work within film and media studies by the likes of Manthia Diawara, bell hooks, Michele Wallace and Lola Young, onwards), and is it equally leukocentric/white-focused to talk about unspoken whiteness when, as Parreñas Shimizu suggests, it might be best simply to leave white cinema and white film studies behind?¹⁰

Nonetheless, I hope here to have addressed in part my own genologophobia and to encourage my (white) colleagues to ask if they have a fear of talking about race, even as we are nearly all trained and thus encouraged to have the issue of race on our radars/as part of our scholarly work. But even if we in some senses all think about and perhaps make mention of race, perhaps it is something that we really need to talk about specifically, always and for the rest of our lives, from now and going forward, even if we have not done so (enough) up until this point.

¹Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018): ix-x.

²See Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997).

³For an interview with De Cuir Jr on his experience at Locarno, see Sean Nam, 'Locarno Curator Calls Out the Politics of Film Festival Programming,' *Hyperallergic*, 28 August 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/513897/greg-de-cuir-locarno-black-light-interview/> (accessed 14 October 2019). Meanwhile, the workshop also included contributions from Miriam De Rosa, Daniel Kulle, Paula Albuquerque, Elizabeth Cadena Sandoval, James Snazell, Catherine Grant, Jeroen Sondervan and Victoria Pastor-Gonzalez.

⁴See Celine Parreñas Shimizu, 'Gnawing at the Whiteness of Cinema Studies: On Asian American Media Now,' *Cinema Journal*, 56:3 (Spring 2017): 119-124; and J. Reid Miller, Richard T. Rodríguez and Celine Parreñas Shimizu, 'The Unwatchability of Whiteness: A New Imperative of Representation,' *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas*, 4 (2018): 235-243.

⁵See Racquel J. Gates and Michael Boyce Gillespie, 'Reclaiming Black Film and Media Studies,' *Film Quarterly*, 72:3 (2019), 13-15.

⁶See Noah Tsika, 'Close-Up: The Marginalization of African Media Studies: Introduction: Teaching African Media in the Global Academy,' *Black Camera: An International Film Journal*, 7:2 (Spring 2016): 94-124; and Lindiwe Dovey, 'Close-Up: The Marginalization of African Media Studies: On the Matter of Fiction: An Approach to the Marginalization of African Film Studies in the Global Academy,' *Black Camera: An International Film Journal*, 7:2 (Spring 2016): 159-173.

⁷Tsika, 'Close-Up', 159.

⁸See Denise Ferreira da Silva, 'In the Raw,' *e-flux*, 93 (September 2018), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215795/in-the-raw/>. Accessed 4 June 2019.

⁹Victor Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

¹⁰A footnote that in fact contains the most important aspect of this essay: in the context of events like Ferguson, it would seem more urgent still that we discuss race, even if to say as much could imply that we can only, or only begin to, talk about race during what Giorgio Agamben might describe as 'states of exception'—as if race were not worth discussing at all times. However, not only is the state of exception becoming the norm (which is essentially Agamben's argument), such that it should also be the norm to discuss race, but, lest this be seen as a defence of 'the state of exception' as a political reality (states of exception are 'good' because they allow us to feel 'progressive' in talking about race),

we should also point out that the world outwith the state of exception, or what we might call ‘the state of normality,’ was built upon the exceptionalisation and exclusion of non-white bodies. That is, if the state of exception is becoming normal, ‘normal’ was always already a state of exception for non-white bodies. ‘Normality’ was always, then, white normality (as well as being a normality based upon exceptions of class, gender, sexuality and so on). In this way, Agamben’s state of exception is revealed as a state of exception *for white people*, with the upshot being that white people are feted as exceptional (endless films celebrating the most basic exploits of white people, including a continued celebration of an embittered white masculinity that suddenly feels threatened for not being able to take all that it wants from the world), while people of colour continue to be marginalised in spite of the heroic efforts of filmmakers like those mentioned above (and with attendant issues about the possible ‘becoming white’ of anyone who is featured at length in a form as white as cinema). From the perspective of race, then, the state of exception is simply business as usual; *it is the same white normality as the white normality that preceded it*. From the perspective of race, then, there is no state of exception except yet further attempts to marginalise a numerical majority and to consolidate power and wealth amidst a white minority—as a scholar like Alexander G. Weheliye has argued in relation specifically to Agamben. The state of exception is not the new normal; from the perspective of race, it was always normal. If we are to acknowledge and/or to critique the history, the present and the would-be future of white power, then, we need to talk about race. Indeed, if modernity as a whole is built upon the racial state of exception outlined above, then critical race theory is not at the periphery of, but is in fact central to all theory about modernity. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); see also Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).

Finally, I would like to engage briefly with the wonderful keynote paper delivered at Film-Philosophy by Janet Harbord, who has herself discussed at length Agamben’s importance to film theory/film-philosophy. In Brighton, Harbord considered ‘Film as a Training for Neurotypical Life,’ without explicitly engaging with how ‘neurotypicality,’ in the spirit of Sylvia Wynter, equally involves a racial/racialised component. This has nothing to do with any abhorrent claims that the non-white brain is biologically different from the white brain. But if Donald Hebb suggested with regard to the neurons in our brains that ‘what fires together wires together,’ and if the neurons that fire together fire together as a result of experiences and intra-actions with the world, and if that world is not only white but also in some senses racist, then it stands to reason that (or at the very least must be tested whether) to be trained to be ‘neurotypical’ is to be trained to be white. And yet, if one is not white, then to be trained to be white (whiteness as normality/whiteness as neurotypical) while also being made aware of one’s non-whiteness (deviations from whiteness are abnormal or alien) is by definition profoundly alienating—with this alienation functioning perhaps as yet another mechanism of white supremacy. In this sense, neurotypicality becomes a technology of white power. See Janet Harbord, *Ex-Centric Cinema: Giorgio Agamben and Film Archaeology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); and Sylvia Wynter, ‘Towards the sociogenic principle: Fanon, identity, the puzzle of conscious experience, and what it is like to be “Black,”’ in Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana (eds.), *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2001): 30–66.

Some evidence to at the very least suggest that this claim might be worth investigating: black Caribbeans in the UK are nine times more likely to be diagnosed as schizophrenic than the white population, with the incidence *increasing* across younger generations, whose black lives are more fully ‘formed’ in the white UK, rather than decreasing as a result of ‘colour-blind’ socialisation. Read in this blacklight, film is a training for white life and a tool for enacting brain damage on non-whites. Small wonder that the white academy, including white film studies, has trouble attracting non-white scholars when we live in a world in which the colour of bodies is burdened with so much meaning that it surely has enormous effects on those otherwise ‘colourless’ brains (the creation of non-white bodies, or bodies that are marked as different by virtue of the utterly contingent factor of colour, involves the simultaneous creation of non-white brains, which by virtue of their non-whiteness do not fit into the white academy). Or, to evoke a formulation of Gilles Deleuze, if the brain is the screen and if the screen is white, then the brain of cinema and brains in the cinematic society are also white. See Rebecca Pinto, Mark Ashworth and Roger Jones, ‘Schizophrenia in black Caribbeans living in the UK: an exploration of underlying causes of the high incidence rate,’ *British Journal of General Practice*, 58:551 (June 2008): 429–434; and Gilles Deleuze, Deleuze, Gilles (2000) ‘The Brain is the Screen: An Interview with Gilles Deleuze,’ in Gregory Flaxman (ed.), *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press): 365–373. (It is also notable that the authors of the former paper seek to locate the causes of the increased rate of schizophrenia within the afro-Caribbean community and not in wider, white society as a whole.)