

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

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“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 time.

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.