Defending Representation; or, Thinking the Paradox to the Limit

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Abstract: Beginning with a response to some contemporary Posthumanist thinkers, this article defends the category of representation as a heuristic for thinking the logic of contradiction and the ethical implications that it derives. Comparing examples in science fiction cinema, and referring to genres such as cyberpunk and dystopia, and tropes such as the time-paradox and the multiverse, and by linking them to the form of cinematic representation, this article demonstrates how representational and teleological thinking help us to grasp the ontological contradiction at sites of ethical action and its possibility. Through an interpretation of these dimensions in time-paradox and multiverse cinema, this article shows that the category of representation, in opposition to the claims of posthumanism, make it possible for us to build—rather than withdraw from—emancipatory reasoning.

Keywords: Cinema; Dystopia; Multiverse; Posthumanism; Representation; Teleology; Time-Paradox

Staying With the Trouble?

There is something rather unsavoury, particularly during the times in which we now live, about an ethic of: "staying with the trouble." In her book of that title, Donna Haraway writes that in times of crisis, "many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations."[1] Against this urge, Haraway advocates "staying with the trouble." Doing so, according to her, means cutting off ties with the times we call "the future." What she calls the chthulucene represents a posthuman politics and ethics of absolute presentness: staying with the trouble means withdrawing from linear time in order to be "truly present."

Haraway defends her category of the chthulucene, which she refers to as a "timeplace" for learning to stay with the trouble, against two other popular concepts for reading our present circumstances: Anthropocene and Capitalocene. The former, of course, refers to the geological period that is now said to have begun with the rise of industrialization and humanity's full impact on the geological formations of planet Earth. It, thus, identifies human activity and impact as leading towards the contemporary crisis of climate change and global warming. Capitalocene, a term popularized by Jason W. Moore,[2] shifts the focus away from humanity, more generally, and onto the capitalist mode of production, specifically, to identify, not humanity as such, but the capitalist system as the primary culprit in the climate emergency.

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1 Haraway 2016, p. 1

2 Moore 2016

From my own perspective, Anthropocene as a category of Posthumanist critical theory appears to be fully aligned with the predominant neoliberal rhetoric, which proposes that individual human actors are each singularly responsible for their own ethical attitudes. More than this, it ties the crisis to the specificity of our embodiment, which we can never escape, and which we are doomed to inhabit. As such, the critique of anthropocentrism has the potential to devolve into a necro-politics that sees as the only salvation of the planet the extinction of humanity.[3] Anthropocene, thus, produces a kind of moralizing attitude that downloads collective responsibility for the crisis, not only onto individual behaviours, but onto humanity as such; whereas Capitalocene, in contrast, acknowledges that the mitigation of the climate crisis is tied to the political struggle against capitalism, the inequalities it produces, and its inequitable distribution of resources and needs.

Regardless, both perspectives—Anthropocene and Capitalocene—position the current dilemma within the context of an overall historical and teleological trajectory that Haraway dismisses in favour of the Chthulucene. But hers is an attitude that I, for one, find troubling, to say the least. Can we even imagine saying today to a family suffering from irrecoverable medical debt, or refugees fleeing war or catastrophes caused by climate change, forced from their homes due to the changing material conditions of land and resources elsewhere, or even now, with the entire transformation of global culture caused by the COVID-19 crisis—can we really imagine saying to people in dire circumstances such as these (which applies relatively to most of us today): "Don't worry—just stay with the trouble"?

Haraway expresses particular dismay with a certain variety of "futurisms," which she claims express bitter kinds of cynicism towards the future—an apocalyptic and dystopian attitude undermining hope. But we should pause here to expand a bit on what that means dialectically, from the retroactive position of the teleological limit. It may be helpful in this regard to distinguish between two divergent formulas of dystopia: critical dystopias and uncritical ones.[4] Dystopia is a relevant genre of postmodern science fiction cinema, and we can certainly see why. Like utopia, dystopia is a highly self-reflexive genre. It speaks less about the future, and so much more about the present, but only from the backward looking perspective of the future times. Uncritical dystopias—such as John Hillcoat's *The Road* (2009) and Jeff Renfroe's *The Colony* (2013)—are those that truly do speak apocalyptically about the future, but in a way that encourages us, indirectly, to *stay* with the present (if not necessarily "the trouble"). Uncritical dystopias present a dystopian future in which the world deviated too far from the present course of things—or, at

least, it disavows the centrality of the contradictions in the present, located in the antagonisms in the capitalist mode of production—which is retroactively assigned utopian status: the future looks grim, but only if we deviate too much from the way things are now. In this sense, uncritical dystopias do ask us to "stay with the trouble," but only if we perceive the negative into the future.

Critical dystopias, such as Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2005) and Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium* (2013),[5] in contrast, are those that help us to grasp the very contradictions and paradoxes present *within* the current society. They are, as Mark Fisher explained, representative of "capitalist realism:" the sense that "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."[6] They show us the potentials and possibilities for chaos and decay that are virtually present (in the Deleuzian sense) in the current society, and which have the potential to become actual if we *do* stay with the present course of things—that is, if we *don't* do anything to change our present circumstances or to affect the current system. Without altering the course, the current system is bound to unravel into absolute madness and destruction; and when we look at the world of the present, one would be hard pressed to say that we weren't in the least forewarned by a whole series of cyberpunk and dystopian films, from *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*, to *Children of Men* and *12 Monkeys*, to *Blade Runner 2049*[7]—all of which emerged in particularly significant historical moments of crisis and transformation, from the stagflation and late recession of the 1970s and the early 1980s rise of neoliberal capitalism, to the import of cyberspace paranoia in the age of globalization, to the Bush-Blair period of the War on Terror in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and even in the Trumpian era of rising global Authoritarian capitalism. We can see, then, in dystopian futurisms of both varieties the kinds of social and cultural fantasy structures mapping our desire and enjoyment to the present. But beyond this, it appears that Haraway's Chthulucene ethics align with much of the Posthumanist rhetoric and New Materialist thought that chides, not merely *teleological* thinking, but more specifically the category of *representation*, which I hope here to recuperate as a pivotal component of emancipatory ethical thinking.

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3 See, for instance, MacCormack 2020

4 See Mirrlees 2015

5 See Mirrlees and Pedersen 2016

6 Fisher 2009

7 See Flisfeder 2020

The Trouble with Representation

We see specifically how the posthuman disdain for representation operates in much of the Deleuzian, Derridean, and Foucauldian registers of contemporary critical theory. Karen Barad,[8] for instance, with her concept of "agential realism," rejects the category of representation in favour of performativity and entanglement. For her, as she puts it, "representation is the belief in the ontological distinction between representation and that which they [the representations] purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representation."[9] The implicit assumption, in other words, is that those who deploy the category of representation assume that it is assigned secondary status—it is an after-the-event effect. First, the real event takes place, and *only then*, afterwards, is the event represented. What we get with the representation appears to be an attempt at a mirror-like reflection that it tries to fix and arrest at the level of its meaning.

Bryant,[10] too, holds similarly to this conception of the representation and it would seem that for both he and Barad, and other Posthumanist thinkers, very much as an extension of the anti-humanism of post-structuralist thought,[11] representation emerges as a point of artificial and contingent—and, therefore, illegitimate—fixation, or arrest, or suture, located in the identity of the concept, leaning too closely to an overt and hierarchical humanism. Representation, as Deleuze argues in *Difference and Repetition*, subordinates difference to the concept. Difference, he claims, disappears through representation, congealed in the *identity* of the concept.[12] From the perspective of Posthumanist thought, representation, therefore, arrests the flow of "intra-active" differences, to use Barad's terms, and the multiplication, or splicing, of diffracted particles of pure difference. Here, the rejection of representation binds the Posthumanist perspective squarely to the defining feature of postmodern ideology, subjectivity, and theory, which Fredric Jameson so aptly described, relying on Lacan, as a "breakdown of the signifying chain;"[13] and, it is worth being reminded of this since it was, of course, the Deleuzian critique of representation that worked itself out in Jameson's periodization of the postmodern as the cultural logic of finance

capitalism.[14] Both are consequences of the absolute deterritorialization of the despotic signifier.

I raise this point about the breakdown of the signifying chain to indicate the paradox at the heart of financialization, which on the one hand, concerns itself with speculations about the future—speculative financial futures—while, at the same time, for many, on the other hand, financialization produces the sensation of a perpetual present. The underside of the financial stage of capitalism is that of the debt economy; where it becomes necessary to borrow from the future in order to live in the present.[15] For the indebted subject, the future never arrives since it has already been borrowed and spent, and therefore, we are plagued to live in (beleaguered to the condition of) a perpetual presentness. Ultimately, finance forces us into a cultural condition in which we have no choice but to stay with the trouble. In such a situation, futurisms form the front and back of the same condition—those that encourage us to stay with the trouble—uncritical dystopias—and those that entertain the possibilities for emancipation in the present—critical dystopias; each one implies its own relative ethical dimensions, insofar as they either affirm or negate the current run of things.

Some consequences follow from the Posthumanist critique of representation, which I intend to address by asking: if representation is merely an anthropocentric and, therefore, illegitimately contingent prosthesis on the real, from where, then, does the representation (and its critique) originate? In other words, if as Barad argues, reality is performatively constructed through our entanglements, producing diffracted agential reality, is it not the case that representation, itself, forms one point in the diffracted splicing into multiplicities? Or, even more than this, if representation is a merely contingent fabrication, what is its point of origin? The same question can be directed at Bryant: if all substance is of the same kind or type—where the development of each object is autopoietic, the product of infinite splicing and withdrawal of each into diffracted particles of the pluriverse—does the representational operation not also function here in the mode of translating objects through interpretation (and, therefore, representation) into points of self-development of each and every object?

Put differently, my point is that posthumanism misconstrues the category of representation. Far from being a mere mechanism of reflection—an after-effect of an event; its capture in the form of the representation—representation is the mode through which thought takes place. We need to distinguish between "reflection" as mirroring, and as contemplation. It is the latter that takes place in representation,

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8 Barad 2007

9 Ibid, p. 46

10 Bryant 2011

11 Although, many Posthumanists still identify post-structuralism as a wing of humanistic thinking.

12 Deleuze 1994, p. 266

13 Jameson 1984

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14 Jameson 1998

15 I raise this point at the beginning of my book on postmodernism and *Blade Runner*. See Flisfeder 2017

here conceived. Here, I am happy to occupy the Cartesian terrain—fully developed by Lacanian psychoanalysis, where the operation of reasoning and thought are the consequence of the analytical discourse[16]—and take it to its dialectical ends: representation, reason, and thinking are precisely that which allows us to approach the Real in our limited capacity to apprehend the contradiction at the heart of reality. My claim, in other words, is that thinking is not the human capacity to elevate *above* substance. Rather, representation and thought are what *alienate* us from substance. However, it is this very alienation that allows us to transcend the finite limitations of our merely corporeal existence as substance, and to perceive the infinite in reason. We can thus think the Real through forms of representation, and in what follows I will compare genres of science fiction cinema that permit us the comparison between the dialectical perspective that I advocate, and the Posthumanist one that rejects the category of the representation all together. The two genres I have in mind are that of the time-paradox as an expression of contradiction, and that of the multiple universe, as a corollary of diffraction and splicing, analogous to the agential realism of Posthumanist new materialism. Before arriving there, though, I want to first attempt to respond to the foundational problem of the origins of representation.

How Does Representation Derive *From* Reality?

Žižek addresses the question of the origins of representation in his response to Barad in *Less Than Nothing*.[17] There, he asks: how does thought arise out of matter? This question is somewhat paradoxical insofar as the subject is an *a priori* necessity for *thinking* reality—reality, in other words, cannot be thought without the subject; but from where does the contingency of subjectivity arise? Subjectivity, we might say, is the product of the self-alienation of matter. At the same time, the subject's alienation produces, too, that of substance as limited. While the Spinozan and monistic new materialists may wish for a closer connection with the immediacy of matter, as Gregor Moder puts it, the immediacy of matter is only ever a constitutively lost.[18] We only ever perceive immanence as constitutively lost; a product of the self-alienation of the human subject. We might think of this mutual self-alienation of substance and subject as the "big bang" of thinking reality. But, again, the question

of representation returns as one of the self-knowledge of substance—can we maybe even think of the subject as the self-knowing of substance?

Insofar as the self-knowledge of substance relates to the question of representation, Barad argues—via quantum theory—that apparatuses of measurement are *performative*, rather than merely reflective of reality. In this sense, the subject's very act of observing reality is entangled with its diffractory production of itself. But Žižek is correct to ask, "[I]f ordinary empirical reality constitutes itself through measuring, how do we account for the measuring apparatuses themselves which are part of this same empirical reality?"[19] To rephrase: why would we think of representation and reflection as mere after-the-event phenomena when, in fact, the apparatuses of measurement—apparatuses of representation—are themselves part of the very reality so constituted? In other words, doesn't Barad's critique of representation imply the perception of a conceptual apparatus of reality set apart from substance? Or, to repeat differently: in defending her own view of agential realism as the product of performative entanglements, how does Barad explain the emergence (from her perspective) of the *wrong or illusory* category of representation? Starting from Barad's account, can we ask: how did critical theory get things *wrong* in the first place? How do we account for the emergence of the prior *false* appearance? According to Žižek, it's here that we see how what looks like a limitation in our knowledge of reality is, in fact, a central feature of that reality, itself—that reality, itself, is non-all.[20] It is the *error* of the representation that marks the point of origin of subjectivity.

According to Žižek, the philosophical consequence of quantum theory is that it shows how reality itself, not merely the finite human subject, is ontologically incomplete. For him, the lesson of quantum theory "is thus not that reality is subjective, but that we—the observing subjects—are part of the reality we observe."[21] The limit in our knowledge of reality—the fact that it has to be represented; the fact that the representation itself is both set outside of substance *and* within it— is redoubled back into the truth about the ontological contradiction. Grasping this is how we begin to arrive at ontological truth. Here, I argue, that representation, instead of being presented as a mere after-the-event phenomenon of mirror-like reflection, is very much constitutive of our ethical approach to reality. That is, it forces us to ask how we come to freely affirm or negate the representation. More than that, it is only through a foundational representation that we are at all capable of *thinking*, and not merely knowing and understanding reality. It is in this way that we are made capable of transcending the finite limitations of human embodiment; not without, of course, the intersubjective/discursive

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16 Here, I am more or less drawing on arguments from Joan Copjec and Slavoj Žižek, and others, regarding the feminine side in Lacan's logics of sexuation. The masculine logic is on the side of mere understanding, whereas the feminine side is that of thought and reasoning. See Copjec 1994 and Žižek 1993.

17 Žižek 2012

18 Moder 2017, p. 76

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19 Žižek 2012, p. 918

20 Ibid, p. 925

21 Ibid, p. 932

dimension required for grasping the self-reflective lack at the heart of subjectivity.

If, in another register—that of Deleuze—the claim is that contradiction is *imposed* upon reality through the representation, we have to then account for the context in which we are saying this is so. Contradiction, according to Deleuze, is not a fact but an imposition—it is, for him, "the manner in which the bourgeoisie defends and preserves itself," thereby subordinating all difference to the representation.[22] His ethic is one of an absolute and indefinite negation of the signifier. But, on the contrary, what we need to grasp is that it is only *within* representation that we can even come close to grasping the contradiction at the heart of its imposition as both contingent and necessary—that is, it remains contingent as an imposition, but necessary insofar as we cannot grasp its contingency without the prior instance of its having been imposed. Representation is, thus, both an artificial construction *and*, at the same time, a concrete necessity. In the semiotic register, we recognize that the signifier is both an imposed contingency *and* a basic necessity for thinking reality and subjectivity together.

Affirming a Limit

The two poles so far discussed of the Posthumanist perspective—the rejection of history (Haraway's "staying with the trouble"), and the rejection of representation—align in contrast with the poles of Kant's third *Critique*: the aesthetic and the teleological judgements.[23] The task set out by the *Critique of Judgement* is to build unity between pure and practical reason—between theory and practice. The production of unity, according to him, as set out in the introduction to the third *Critique*, requires the invention or affirmation of the regulative idea as a heuristic *limit*; but just how we *arrive* at the limit is a matter of thinking aesthetically—that is, at the level of the representation.

Representation matters to the aesthetic insofar as it produces the concrete form of an imposed limitation; and, as limit, the idea here presents itself as the form of the represented teleology. It matters that the representation of the regulative idea, or the concept, as teleology, as limit, also operates heuristically to provide for the subject an object of its own *contemplation*, as well as the starting point for thinking its freedom in the form of the negation. Freedom, as such, consists in both the act of imposing the contingency of the limit, while also producing the conditions necessary for its negation. The representation is, therefore, for the subject, paradoxical in as much as it is both a contingent product of the subject's own (unconscious) positing, but it is only by way of the subject's

22 Deleuze 1994, p. 268

23 Kant 2009

contemplation of *it* that it can perceive the justification for its own *prior* imposition. Its justification, in other words, is judged and affirmed only *retroactively*, in the act of its negation: what Fabio Vighi refers to as "retroactive signification."[24]

Put differently, the subject chooses, affirms, its own represented limitation freely, if however unconsciously; but it is only after the fact that its imposition is justified—it is justified retroactively, after it has already been affirmed. Just as historical necessity is only recognizable after the fact, so too is the contingency of the regulative idea posited as necessary retroactively by occupying the site of the subject's thought and contemplation. From the outset, it is only in hindsight that a contingent act of representation is posited as necessary. By making it an object of its thought, the subject is then free to *negate* it—but in what way?

Reason, contemplation, and thinking become possible only by continuing to negate an initial point of understanding. The understanding and its frameworks of knowledge must *precede* as a contingent point of imposition; but from the perspective of reason, such an imposition is nevertheless constitutively necessary. Without it, reason has no groundwork to negate—it has no object to infinitely pursue. Such a lost object (the Lacanian sublime object, the *objet a*) that the subject pursues infinitely through practices of negation is posited by the initial affirmative imposition of the represented limit. We call this object sublime because it expresses both the enjoyment procured in the pursuit of the necessarily *lost* object; but also because of the *jouissance* received by the unconscious knowledge that the limit is imposed—that made the object a lost object—is itself contingently and artificially set in place by the subject in an initial act of free (yet repressed or disavowed) choice, the product of which is the constitution of the subject as an alienated being. The paradox of contingency and necessity can be perceived as an epistemological contradiction, when taken towards its own limit, and should be seen, not merely as a limitation in understanding, but as an ontological principle. The transposition of the external limit of knowledge into an ontological contradiction in the dialectical register, is sublated in the knowledge that the contingent limit is a necessary condition of reality. Once we grasp this, thought is freed to become ethical in practical action, which sets loose the subject to impose or affirm its own *new* limit.[25] In terms of the Lacanian discourse of the analyst, it's at this point that the subject produces a new master-signifier. Because this achievement is reached at the limit point of thinking contradiction, action is at the same time ethical, subjective, *and* universal insofar as it overlaps the limit point in both thought and reality. When this limit is reached it creates

24 Vighi 2014

25 Here, I adapt to a certain extent, Anna Kornbluh's Lacan-inspired political ethic of formalism, structuration, and building, requiring the setting of new limits. See Kornbluh 2019

the ethical conditions for the subject to act within the co-ordinates of the material reality.

The Cinematic Representation
My goal in expressing the preceding points is to justify, against the Posthumanist perspective, the necessity of the representation in a critical theory that remains truly committed to an emancipatory ethics. Whereas posthumanism seems to chide representation due to the fact of its contingency—a sign of its humanism—it fails to acknowledge the necessity of the representation for thinking the infinite in the form of the contradiction of contingency and necessity. The latter, we might say, is achieved, not merely by negating finite externally contingent limits of knowledge and understanding, but by freely (self-)affirming and building our own limits. Thinking, that is, only begins by negating an affirmed limit as its *point of departure*—even posthumanism begins with the humanism it negates.

Cinema is, in this way, and in this capacity, quite useful since the specificity of the manner and form of its own representational apparatus allows us to think, at the level of its content, certain degrees of the very problematic of which representation is, itself, a condition—that is, of the paradoxical and/or contradictory ontological truth that thought makes it its mission to grasp and assess.

We can see, even, in its material constitution, that film—to borrow and adapt Deleuze's categories of cinema—reflects a depiction of the paradox/contradiction of contingency and necessity in its form as a "movement-image," and one of the infinite *regress* of the splicing in its capacity as "time-image."[26] If we think the former in terms of montage, we see in it the formal dimensions of the dialectic. Here, the Soviet montage theorists, like Eisenstein, detail for us the way that movement in the "motion picture" is aesthetically dialectical, the product of the juxtaposition of the shot-reverse shot.[27] Alternatively, the illusion of motion in the cinema also makes possible the perception of the isolation of the *moment*, not merely the unconscious optics of the image that Walter Benjamin described,[28] in space, but of the moment as pulled out of time. Here, in this sense of the "time-image," we can conceptualize the withdrawal (to use the term deployed by the Object-Oriented philosophers) of one moment out of time. Doing so, time can be spatialized as one moment out of many in parallel with all of the others, not unlike the splicing or diffractory dimensions of Object-Oriented Ontology and posthumanism.

Conceived in this way, we can grasp the profundity of even the

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26 Deleuze Cinema 1986 and 1989

27 Eisenstein 1974

28 Benjamin 1968

earliest technological developments in the motion picture, for instance in the example of Edward Muybridge's horse gallop. The story, here, is familiar: that Muybridge built his motion picture to settle a bet—is there, at any point in the horse's gallop, an instance at which all four of the horse's hooves are lifted off the ground. To resolve the matter, Muybridge set up a series of cameras along the horse track, with wire trips, used to trigger the shutter. As the horse passed by, each trip was successively triggered, and the gallop itself captured by the series of cameras. Muybridge's experiment did, in fact, prove that the horse lifts all four hooves at one point in the gallop, but compiling the series of still images, he was able to put them together into a sequence that created the illusion of motion. Reversing this process, once we have the production of the illusion of motion, we can conceive the removal of the single moment from the whole course of the image/process in motion—a singular instance/moment withdrawn from the rest.

Similarly, Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) puts together a series of still images, not in a motion picture, but to recount its story through a much more basic process of montage—of shot/reverse shot—that dialectically produces its plot. Marker's film also tells the story of a man in the not-too-distant future, who lives some time in the mid-twenty first century. The hero of the film is chosen to become a voyageur into the past to help the scientists of the future hone their time-travelling technologies. The film's hero is chosen for the experiments since he holds onto, himself, a very powerful memory of the past, one that the scientists feel gives him a much better chance of perceiving his existence in two separate time periods. The memory that he holds onto is very specific—it is a memory of a woman, standing on the pier at the airport in Orly. He remembers the woman and a particularly tragic image of a man being shot dead. We later learn that the man whose death he witnessed as a young child on the pier at Orly was, in fact, himself, sent from the future. The story is significant here because, as I am claiming, the film is both, at a formal level—that of the practice of dialectical montage—and at the level of its plot or content, evocative of the time-paradox in the cinema that represents the form of the contradiction that we are able to contemplate. The key is located about halfway through the film, in the only instance of motion found in the work—a scene of the woman waking up from her sleep, blinking her eyes. Here, at the centre, where the illusion of the motion picture is placed, we see in what sense I mean that the "movement-image" is the manner in which the cinema presents for us the dialectical dimensions of reality. As a film that applies the trope of the time-paradox, the film is doubly intriguing for the way that form and content intersect in a shared identity.

Another detail about the film is worth noting. At one point, the hero is visited by time-travellers from his own future. They have travelled back in time to enlist the hero to help them to achieve the knowledge that will be required to save and protect their own future. The hero sees this as

a sign that he must indeed accomplish what the future time-travellers request of him, otherwise, how would they survive into the future in order to come to meet him in the past. His compliance is both assumed freely—that is, contingently—but is also necessary. Therein lies the time-paradox posited by the teleological limit set in place by the film.

In the sense I describe here, the dialectical movement-image is analogous to the historical image of the teleological representation/reflection; whereas the time-image, as we see with the Muybridge film, reflects the splicing ethic – the infinite *regress*—of posthumanism; of the multiple of "particle-ization"—but of the kind that stands out as a multiplication of moments in parallel with each other. The single still image of the horse's gallop exists in parallel with all of the other moments, or instances captured singularly by each triggered camera. When we think about these two forms in this way we, thus, also discover the same analogue in two popular tropes of modern and postmodern science fiction: that of the time-paradox, and the other of the multiverse, which require some elaboration in the present context.

First as Multiverse, Then as Paradox

As I have been describing, much depends upon how we conceive the limit form of the representation. Does the limit impose the kind of finitude that sublates all difference; or, on the contrary, does the limit put in place the conditions of possibility for *thinking* the infinite through the very form of its negation? One way of addressing this is by thinking through the form of the time-paradox and the multiverse (or the parallel universe) in science fiction cinema and its ethical implications insofar as it deals with the dialectic of contingency and necessity.

Time-paradox narratives in cinema often address directly the ethical dilemma of the paradox. The obvious example is Robert Zemeckis' *Back to the Future* trilogy (1985-1990).[29] In its manner of dealing with the time-paradox, the film reveals its generally conservative political bias, representative of its own historical conditions of production. The plot of the film can be summarized as the hero, Marty's, attempt to bring back the power of his "impotent," weakling father—the film, in other words, is an attempt to resurrect the father function fully in line with Reagan era neo-conservatism.

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29 There are, of course, a number of other useful examples that I could cite here, but for the sake of brevity I am limiting myself to only a couple of relevant texts. Other noteworthy films, of which there is more than enough to express ideas similar to those I here describe include *The Terminator* (1984), *The Butterfly Effect* (2004), and *The Cloverfield Paradox* (2018), to name only a few. On the side of the multiple universe narrative, it is worth mentioning, as well, the recent *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), *Run, Lola, Run* (1998), *Sliding Doors* (1998), and the television series, *Sliders* (1995-2000), amongst others. Of course, my thoughts here are also inspired by relevant episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994), and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999).

The teleological dimension of the first film in the series is marked by the hero's present, in the year 1985—hence, the paradoxical title: "Back to the Future," not "Back to the Present." Here, I'm referring to the teleological as the marker of a certain limit against which acts of a particular kind of negation present themselves. Marty's present is used as the limit point through which the judgement of the past is evaluated—it is posited, initially, as the ideal towards which he desires his return. However, in the course of the film, Marty disrupts elements of the past, interfering with his parents' coupling, and as a consequence risks his very own existence. He works quickly to prevent this from happening, and in the process of ensuring that his parents fall in love (and have children), he ends up altering his own present. By coaching his father, George, on how to court his mother, Lorraine, Marty influences his father into becoming a much more emotionally powerful paternal figure. When Marty returns to 1985, everything remains familiar; however, slightly altered around the paternal nucleus of the family. George is transformed from a weak figure into a much more dominatingly paternalistic character by the end of the film.

The paradox that presents itself, on the one hand, is that of Marty's own interference with his very existence—he interferes with his parents' coupling and therefore risks negating his own birth. But it is also, on the other hand, the one that makes his intervention retroactively necessary. The question we need to raise for all time-paradox narratives is whether the intervention is merely a contingent, accidental act, or if it is always already necessary and assumed. At first, it appears that Marty's intervention is merely accidental since the fact of his own prior existence seems to prove that he wasn't necessary at the site of his conception—his orchestrating of his parents' coupling. However, the sequel films put this into question.

In *Back to the Future, Part II*, Marty travels to his own future, to the year 2015, one based on the altered present seen at the end of the first film. From the future 2015, the villain, Biff, steals the time machine and goes back in time to the year 1955, overlapping with the events in the first film, and alters the past in his own greedy interests. When Marty and Doc (his scientist friend, and the inventor of the time machine) return to 1985 from 2015, they arrive at a third version of their present, where Biff has become a powerful, obscene figure, not too dissimilar from Donald Trump, who marries Lorraine after murdering George in the early 1970s. Marty and Doc, then, once again, use the time machine to return to the past to ensure that the present is not transformed into the dark version where Biff is the dominant, obscene father figure. However, the present that they revive is not the original one from the *beginning* of the first film; it is the one from the ending, the second, altered, version. The fact that they return to this second version of 1985 proves a few details about the series.

First, it proves that Marty's intervention in the past was, from the perspective of the politico-ideological co-ordinates of the film, not merely

contingent but necessary. It shows that while the film is conservative it remains consistent in its moral-ethical outlook.[30] Second, it does not propose that the past shouldn't be altered, but that it *should* only be altered towards a particular direction – towards a particular set of self-motivated interests. Third, it is necessary to point out the particular limit dimension of the film: the initial teleological trajectory of the film is comprised of a split between utopia and dystopia. It is utopian insofar as it establishes the ground, the origin point, to which Marty hopes to return. It therefore presupposes the direction of the hero's pursuit. It is dystopian to the degree that there are details that Marty wishes to alter, specifically the power of his father.

Finally, we see that the time-paradox in the film is tied to the production, the splitting into the multiple universe. It produces three parallel versions of the year 1985: the one with the weak father, the one with the potent father, and the one with the obscene father (Biff). What ties them together is the central version of the potent father. This fact accomplishes two things: first, it demonstrates the ethico-political dimensions of the series; second, it also shows how, even at the intersection of the production of the multiverse, there exists a singular *point-de-capiton* that ties all of the others together as its universal function—this function becomes, not the end point of the process in practice, but the product of *thinking* the paradox as a contradiction taking it to its end as an ethical act of choice. *Back to the Future* serves as a useful starting point, too, because of the way the trilogy maps out the various withdrawals—in the Posthumanist sense—of the self-contained worlds in the films, aesthetically; but also, how they are nevertheless bound to contradiction. What the multiverse in a film like *Back to the Future* shows is that the production of reality is, nevertheless, bound to ethical acts of decision, making our "entanglements" with reality constitutive in a way that both Barad and Žižek describe, if however differently vis-à-vis quantum theory. But thought through this example, it's worth bearing upon the relation between the ethical and the nexus of the teleological discovered in the representation.

In an example that contrasts well with *Back to the Future*, Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016) treats the time-paradox in a way that is ethical while avoiding the split into the multiverse. *Arrival* also appropriately makes use of the montage to represent the contradiction.[31] The plot

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30 In some ways, as much as I enjoy the *Back to the Future* trilogy, it has seemed to me to be a kind of conservative masculinist response to the "effeminate" (or feminizing) "liberal" 60s. Read in this way, the trilogy can be read as somewhat reactionary.

31 It does so in a style that Todd McGowan refers to as "atemporal," a product of the digital age, which sees a preponderance of film narratives that depart from linear plot development. See McGowan 2011. *Arrival* also relies on a technique that McGowan, elsewhere, calls the "priority of the deception," referring to the films of Christopher Nolan, where spectators are deceived at the origins of the film as a practice to lure them at the level of their desire. We require the deception in order to be drawn towards the truth; or, as Lacan is known to have put it, the truth has the structure of a

of *Arrival* is anachronistic and non-linear in its telling of the story. Its opening sequences are presented as if they were the beginning of the story when, in fact, they are the end. But added to this, during the course of the film, drawing on the Sapir-Whorf theory that language affects perception, the hero, Louise, learns how to read the language of the alien heptapod visitors to Earth, which allows her to perceive time anachronistically, making it possible for her to see both past and future events (or premonitions viewed as memories) simultaneously with the present, as if they existed on a single, flat, plane or continuum. The non-linearity of the form of the film intersects with the plot in that the resolution of the film requires Louise to have a premonition-memory into the future in order to grasp the ethical course of action in the present.

At a crucial moment in the film, Louise is able to see into the future the scenario of a conversation she has with the Chinese General, Shang, who, in the present, is set to begin an attack against the alien heptapods. In the future conversation, Shang gives Louise his private mobile number and tells her a secret that she will use to gain his trust in the present: his wife's dying words. Louise uses this information to help to negotiate a cease fire to avoid an armed conflict with Shang in the present. In this scenario, the prior event must have taken place first (the knowledge that Louise has learned the heptapod language that allows her to perceive memories of the future) since the future Shang already seems to know that Louise was capable of having premonitions of the future—this is why he provides her with such crucial personal information. However, the event also *begins* in the future, where the resolution in the present depends on the priority of the future conversation. Knowledge, here, moves both forwards and backwards, simultaneously, through time. However, unlike *Back to the Future*, the paradox does not split time into separate competing/alternate realities; rather, it is transformed into a contradiction that is nothing less than purely ontological and constitutive of the reality of the film. This ontological contradiction, relayed in the film's plot, is reflected, as well, in the very form of the film's montage.

At the beginning of the film, we see that Louise's daughter dies from a terminal illness—because of the way this unfolds in the plot, we assume that this is a past event, a rendition of a memory taking place prior to the primary events of the film. However, we later learn, as we witness the way that Louise perceives the future through the heptapod language, that these events happened only following the primary story events, at some point in the future that comes later. We learn that Louise, in fact, had the foreknowledge of her daughter's death, because she was able to perceive it in the alien language, and decided, nevertheless, to have her child. Her choice, I claim, is determinately ethical insofar as it is not predetermined, but is the product of thinking the contradiction

fiction. We might even say that the original scenario in *Back to the Future* works in this way, too, as the prior deception that launches us into the paradox. See McGowan 2013.

to the end and of accepting, or grasping it in positive terms. Hers is a choice already made, necessary, but nevertheless assumed freely. This is radically different than the choice made by Marty in *Back to the Future*. He chooses to alter reality and therefore splits it into the multiverse, withdrawing into the one that suits him best. But this multiverse, we can see, suffocates ethical action insofar as it devolves into infinite regress. When any choice is possible, every choice is possible, and choice is no longer ethical insofar as the consequences are not determined by their ends. The multiverse, I claim, presents us with a false conception of freedom, where anything and everything is made possible—all possible options that can exist *do* exist, in which case, choice becomes inconsequential.

Another noteworthy example, with regards to its manner of treating the time-paradox and the multiverse at the level of its ethics, is Rian Johnson's *Looper* (2012). This film is set, as well, in the not-too-distant future, in the year 2044, where "loopers" have been hired by crime lords from thirty years later into the future (in the year 2074), when time travel has been invented and outlawed. Since in 2074 it has become easier to track when crime syndicates kill and try to dispose of dead bodies, the crime lords send the bodies back in time to 2044 where the loopers are hired to kill and dispose of the bodies in the past. When the crime lords in the future decide to end the contract with the looper, the looper's own body from the future is sent back into the past, which they then kill and "close the loop."

Looper intriguingly depicts the intersection of the multiverse and the time-paradox. When the older version of the film's hero, Joe, is sent back to be killed, thereby closing his loop, the young Joe continues living his life, after killing the older version of himself, into his own 30-year older self in the future. The old Joe falls in love and gets married; but when his wife is murdered by one of the crime lords, the Rainmaker—one of a few humans who have developed telekinetic powers—Joe decides that when he is sent back to close the loop, he will escape to kill the Rainmaker as a child. He sends himself back, unbound and unmasked, and evades the killing of himself, by his younger self, thereby altering the future and creating two competing, contradictory versions of the future: the one where the older Joe is killed, and the one where he evades his own killing. Because he evades his own killing, once sent into the past, he thereby alters the future (not the past or the present), clashing with and undermining the very conditions which made his return possible in the first place.

At the film's conclusion, the young Joe takes the radical step of committing suicide to resolve the contradiction during the climax of the film, when the older Joe attempts to kill the child, Cid, who he has discovered will grow up to become the Rainmaker. While Cid's mother, Sara, tries to block old Joe from shooting her son, the young Joe kills himself, to prevent the older Joe from accidentally killing Sara. In the moment before he kills himself, the young Joe perceives the contradiction itself, the paradox of how the older Joe's actions will still lead to the conditions that created the crisis in the first place. He perceives how by accidentally killing Sara, that this will build into the anger of the young Cid, causing him to grow up into the Rainmaker who will later murder old Joe's wife. The difficulty, here, is that we realize that the older Joe's evasion from being killed was, on the one hand, always already necessary in order for the very conditions of looping to become possible; but, on the other hand, even with the suicide of the young Joe, the contradiction is not resolved since accidentally killing Sara in the past created the conditions in the first place for Joe to arrive at this scenario from the outset. While the film does not resolve this—it appears to do so—it does makes possible on the part of the spectator the ability to perceive the contradiction and to think it to its ontological ends. It demonstrates, even, how the problem of the withdrawal of reality into the multiverse is still evocative of the spatial contradiction in which the subject/spectator is able to think it, giving priority, still, to the dialectical contradiction. To put it simply, the two realities are *both* necessary. Neither is contingent and this is what moves the paradox into the realm of the ontological contradiction. Materially, both realities need to exist. At the most, we are only capable of grasping the fact of the contradiction. It becomes unethical to try to evade it. The form of the film paradox, here, provides for the spectator a useful heuristic for being able to grasp the actuality of the contradiction.

The difficulty with the multiverse and of multiple realities, is that the ethical begins to infinitely regress—where no option, no choice, is truly ethical because we see that we can always redo and change our choices (in the same way that a digital document is never finished because we can always go back and make changes), so that every possible option is available to us, which means that our act of choice, itself, becomes meaningless. Our choices, freely assumed, make no difference at the level of determinate reality.

We have, however, another way to think this explosion into multiple realities—we might think of this in the psychoanalytic register in terms of the fantasy that gives structure to our desire. In fact, when we think of the kind of splicing conceived in the multiverse scenario we come to see it as the genre of fantasy – the fantasy, that is, as conceived by psychoanalysis—*par excellence*.

Enjoying the Limit
Another way to conceive the multiverse is in terms of the fantasy structure as revealed in psychoanalysis; the various unchosen realities are just so many of the negated choices we make in the pursuit of our desire. We might reflect upon this in terms of the subject's foundational act of a forced free choice, which transforms—or alienates it—it into the

form of the subject. What Lacan describes as the subject's alienation into the Symbolic order coincides with its symbolic castration. Here, the subject must choose: "to be or not to be." At the crucial moment of the subject's emergence into the Symbolic order, it must simultaneously affirm its identity, while negating others. When the subject affirms, chooses, its identity in the terms of the Symbolic big Other, it also negates all of the unchosen choices of what it *could have been*, which are relegated to the position of the unconscious. What we call fantasy is the forgotten, yet present, "memory" of the unchosen, negated, choices, which we sublate through the turn towards the agency of the Other, onto whom we displace the blame for our own act of the forced free choice of being. If only the Other didn't force me to choose I would have available to me all of the other choices I was forced not to take—that is, I would have access to the lost object. It's in this way that the fantasy constructs the scenario of the subject's desire, the desire for the lost choice principally negated in the formation of subjectivity, the inaccessibility of which is thought to be thwarted by the limit as prohibition.

As an example of this logic, let's take the case of the married couple—of the partner who fantasizes about all of the affairs they could be having if not for the fact of being married. The marriage, here, serves as the limit onto which is displaced the prohibition against the multiple affairs that could be taking place. Desire is propelled in the form of the fantasy of limitless sexual partners, prohibited by the married partner preventing this realization. However, the enjoyment in such a fantasy exists only insofar as the prohibition is set in place. Without the prohibition, the enjoyment in the fantasy dissipates. We require the form of the limit in order to enjoy the fantasy. Enjoyment is in the fantasy and not what lies virtually beyond it. In the same way, the fantasy of the multiverse only exists insofar as it remains regulated by the necessary limit imposed through the foundational representation. The point, then, is not merely to negate the limit, but to acknowledge the agency of the subject in having chosen it in the first place itself, the result of a forced free choice of being.[32]

The plurality of negated choices exist as the multiverse of all of the other virtual/possible realities. They are the ones that remain unchosen, prohibited, perhaps, but which orient the subject towards the affirmative choice chosen, which it asserts, however unconsciously, as its own self-appointed limit—that is, as its own point of self-affirmation and regulation. This limit exists as the ground against which the pursuit of the lost choice, of the lost object of desire, is determined. The subject can, in this way, continue to negate all material objects in favour of its search for the lost object that fuels its activity. But we need to acknowledge that this alternate reality of the choices not chosen is

only ever a virtual reality, and that their fantasmatic existence is only possible against the grounds of the limit self-imposed by the subject in the moment of its own formation. Once again, here, we discover the dialectic of contingency and necessity, where the subject experiences the limit as contingent, as something it can evade, but which is also at the same time the necessary condition of possibility for the existence of the other alternate-fantasmatic realities. They exist only insofar as they remain tied to the limit—only insofar as they remain lost. It's when the subject is capable of avowing this limit as self-imposed—of choosing the limit itself—that it becomes capable of an ethical act—where it affirms its own lack as consubstantial with the contradictory gap in reality. In the case of the happy couple—to employ a tired "Hollywoodism" —the choice of affirming the right lover (not merely in the romantic sense, but in the sense of love as emancipatory) may just be one of the most radical-ethical gestures we can make.[33] It's only through the reflection of the self in the other that we have the chance to gain access to and recognize the lack in the self.

Responding to the Trouble

What we see in both the cinematic and psychoanalytic examples is that acting ethically is impossible outside of the representation. Representation is tied both to the contingency of the human intervention, but it is also a necessary aspect of our (self-)alienation from the substance of reality. We are both stuck with it, while we require it to make possible are ethical acts by way of the various forms of negation. Thinking the paradox—thinking the contradiction—shows the value in representation. Through the representation, we are able to perceive the constitutive place we hold in reality. Against the Posthumanist thinkers, we see that neither chthulucene nor Anthropocene helps us to grasp this aspect of the contradiction, since we can neither stay with the trouble, nor evade our anthropocentric conditions of alienated subjectivity. It remains impossible to stay with the trouble without even knowing what the trouble is in the first place—and in order to grasp this we require representational and teleological, or limit thinking. It's only by representing and thinking the limit that we are made capable of grasping the infinite, translating it into an ethical act of decision. Thinking, as Comay and Ruda put it, "involves a decision."[34] Absolute knowing is perfectly antagonistic to the multiversal "all-sidedness." The path towards universal truth begins with a strictly partisan gesture that retroactively posits the presuppositions of its own conditions of possibility.

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32 I address this point in more detail in an article responding to McGowan's book on Hegel. See Flisfeder 2019.

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33 Here, I rely quite a bit on Todd McGowan's Hegelian interpretation of love, as well as, to a certain extent, Anna Kornbluh's defence of the Lacanian formalisms. See McGowan 2019 and Kornbluh 2019.

34 Comay and Ruda 2018, p. 8

Cinema, as we see, both at the level of its form and at the level of its content, proves useful in its capacity to allow us to think through such contradictions. However, we should add that the mediated conditions in which we are made capable of grasping the contradiction are historically contextual. The manners of representation in every new epoch, in other words, help us to grasp differently the conditions of the present contradictions. Media, in this way, are metaphors for our reality and the conditions of our collective existence. Reading media as our metaphors, we are able to understand them as representations – not merely as reflections of reality, but as the grounds against which we are capable of perceiving the conditions of our existence and possibilities for transformation. To think the trouble—more than simply staying with it—we need to think through the representation. This requires thinking the times we call the future—even thinking—and in some ways relating to—the *fantasies* of alternate realities—in order to produce the kinds of cognitive mapping that we need to respond appropriately to the troubles that we, no doubt, continue to face.

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