Voiding Cinema: Subjectivity Beside Itself, or Unbecoming Cinema in *Enter the Void*

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> The whole thing is about getting into holes. Putting the camera into any hole.
>
> (Gasper Noé, quoted in Adams 2010)

In this essay, we provide a close textual analysis of *Enter the Void* (Gaspar Noé, France/Germany/Italy, 2009). Using concepts from the work of Gilles Deleuze, we argue that the film's form reflects the narrative's preoccupation with the liminal space between life and death, between subject and object, between inside and outside –which we characterise here as *the void*. Indeed, *Enter the Void* not only tells the story of a man suspended between life and death, but formally it also tries to depict this liminal state, to show us *the void* itself – or to bring what normally exceeds vision into view (to turn excess into 'incess'). Through its creative synthesis of form and content, the film attempts to force viewers to think or conceptualise the notoriously complex notion of void.

Looking first at how film theory can help us to understand the film, we then investigate ways in which *Enter the Void* can enrich film theory and our understanding of cinema more generally, in particular our understanding of what film can do in the digital era. Incorporating ideas from neuroscience, from physics, and from somewhat esoteric research into hallucinogens, we propose that *Enter the Void* suggests a cinema that emphasises the related nature of all things, a related nature that we can see by being 'beside oneself', a process that cinema itself helps us to achieve. That is, cinema allows to become 'spaced out' and to 'unbecome' (to challenge our fixity of being) such that we can see our interconnected nature with all other things.

Thanks to the challenging and graphic nature of films like *I Stand Alone/Seul contre tous* (France, 1998) and *Irreversible/Irréversible* (France, 2002), Noé's work has up until now been considered as part of the 'New Extreme' (Beugnet, 2007; Horeck and Kendall, 2012), the 'post-modern pornography' (Downing, 2004), and the 'brutal intimacy' (Palmer, 2011) that are thought characteristic of contemporary French art house cinema.

Alongside directors such as Catherine Breillat, Claire Denis and Bruno Dumont, Noé is famous, or infamous, for his violent and deeply affective films, as well as for his innovative and baroque use of the camera, which typically is wielded by cinematographer Benoît Debie. While these terms are all useful in contextualising Noé's work within a specific moment in French cinema history, and while all would be applicable lenses through which to consider *Enter the Void*, we would prefer to offer a more film-philosophical approach to his work.

Nonetheless, before we offer our interpretation of *Enter the Void*, and before we demonstrate how *Enter the Void* can help us better to understand what cinema itself can do, let us provide an overview of this extraordinary film.

Enter

Enter the Void stands out as one of the most aesthetically daring and philosophically stimulating films of recent times. The story opens by focusing on a young drug dealer, Oscar (Nathaniel Brown), smoking hallucinogenic Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) in his apartment before being shot dead in a police sting in The Void, a Tokyo bar. Thereafter, the film passes non-chronologically through moments of Oscar's life, folding together events from childhood and adulthood, showing the arrival of his sister Linda (Paz de la Huerta) in Tokyo, and her journey to becoming a stripper. In the post-death sequences, Oscar observes how he had been set up by his friend Victor (Olly Alexander) as revenge for having slept with his mother (Suzy Stockbridge). After his life flashes before his eyes and consciousness and he 're-lives' his death, Oscar witnesses the aftermath of his life, including scenes of his body in the morgue, his sister aborting her child, seeing Victor slung out of his parents' home, a confrontation between Linda and Victor, and, finally, Linda having sex with his friend Alex (Cyril Roy). The film ends with Oscar's rebirth – to his own mother (Janice Sicotte-Béliveau) – suggesting his life is about to begin again.

While *Enter the Void* involves a relatively unconventional storyline that jumps about within the *fabula* of Oscar's lifetime, it is the style in which the film is shot and composited that marks it out as aesthetically experimental and deeply philosophical. For, after a breakneck stroboscopic opening sequence – affectively scored with thumping techno music – that flashes the names of creative personnel against solid colour backgrounds in a Tony Conrad-esque flicker-film fashion, *Enter the Void* gives the impression of being a single unbroken shot lasting over two hours and twenty minutes. Of course, this is not really the case, in that the narrative combines numerous shots captured in a number of places, including various Tokyo locations, which are digitally composited (by French special effects company BUF) in such a way that they appear seamlessly blended into a continuous whole. However, to say that the film gives the impression of being a single, unbroken

subjective shot is barely half the story. For, the 'camera' (if we can call it that) not only drifts through psyche and physics, passing seamlessly through solid architecture into interior locations, and over urban rooftops – at one point ascending so high that it enters a passing aeroplane within which viewers see Oscar's mother breast-feeding a child she refers to by his name – but it also begins aesthetically to actualise the void from which all matter and memory are woven.

Indeed, the narrative is marked by an unusual progression that passes from the human and subjective view of Oscar towards a ghostly or absent perspective associated with the lingering trace of his being. In this manner, the film invites viewers to connect with the philosophical concept of the void, which, as we shall see below, is shown to underlie the ground of all Being and appearance.

If this description does not do justice to the extreme nature of the film's aesthetics, then we should like further to describe the film as a marriage between the following: the seeming single-take films of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (USA, 1948) and Brian De Palma's *Snake Eyes* (USA, 1998), with the latter being cited as a direct influence (see Sterritt, 2007, p. 307); the point of view experiments that are *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, USA, 1947) and *Dossier 51/Le dossier 51* (Michel Deville, France/West Germany, 1978), with Noé confessing to having seen the former on mushrooms, which in turn led him to want to make a POV film of someone on drugs (see Erickson, 2010); the existential questioning of *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, USA, 1999); the freely moving camera-consciousness that passes through bodies and walls within David Fincher's *Fight Club* (USA, 1999); the unbroken meandering through time that is *Russian Ark/Russkiy kovcheg* (Aleksandr Sokurov, Russia/Germany, 2002); and the psychedelic Star Gate sequences for which *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, USA/UK, 1968) is best remembered, and which Noé also mentions as a formative experience that he felt was akin to an 'ecstasy trip' (see Sterritt, 2007, p. 314). The philosophical credentials of the narrative are also forged by lengthy descriptions of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which are playfully inserted as a diegetic template for the film's overarching journey.

The film is theoretically composed from a single and literal perspective, namely Oscar's, although this does not prevent the 'camera,' nor in this way Oscar's POV, from freely drifting around the diegetic space once he is dead. Furthermore, the film incorporates scenes wherein narration passes beyond Oscar's exclusive (subjective) vantage point, to enter the heads of other characters and objects within the immanent 'void' that embeds all Being and appearance. A particularly memorable example of this trope witnesses the subjective perspective 'pass into' Alex's head as he has intercourse with Linda, thereby rendering (the voided) Oscar's point-of-view of Alex's point-of-view of his sister's mid-coital face. More outrageous still, the camera thereafter passes into Linda's uterus, observing the tip of Alex's

penis ejaculating sperm into her body, before following microscopic spermatozoa up the fallopian tubes to be accepted by the ovum and catalyse a human conception. Thereafter the 'camera' passes from the gestating foetus within her womb into the rebirth sequence outlined above.

Beyond any consideration of the film's affective soundscape, *Enter the Void* incorporates an affective hallucinogenic *mise-en-scène*, wherein viewers are subjected to psychedelic arborescent growths appearing in front of (or behind) Oscar's eyes as he trips on DMT, together with startling images depicting glowing streams of cosmic energy emanating from the genitals of copulating couples. Reading such sequences through Anna Powell's Deleuze-inflected lens of 'altered states cinema' illuminates how the film aims directly to affect the viewer's brain and perceptive mechanisms during screening (Powell, 2007, p. 71). Here, drug-affected images and effects offer a 'purely technological hallucinatory display disrupting norms of perspective by affective bombardment' (Powell, 2007, p. 73). In these sequences the aesthetics are understood to possess *narcotic properties* to help invoke altered states of human perception. As viewer and film become conscious together in an embodied machinic-assemblage, the film functions as a consciousness-altering 'drug' in and of itself, stimulating a form of 'contact high' (Powell, 2007, p. 67). Such models grant credence to Noé's reifying claims that the goal of his movie 'was to induce an altered state of consciousness as much as possible inside the viewer's brain' and that his film should make (himself and) viewers feel 'stoned' (see Adams, 2010).

Beyond drug-affected aesthetics, the film also encroaches upon 'spiritually' affected planes, offering viewers the opportunity to 'think' the nature of being-qua-being and being-nothing (void). In order to explore how this is achieved, we would first like to turn our attention to the fluctuating modalities of narrative address, and engage with how they 'think' subjectivity and the void.

From Subjective to Voided Narration

Stylistically, *Enter the Void* does more than cycle around Oscar's life and death, and is found mounting a complex spiritual and philosophical consideration of life as an event that is woven from the void. What is it that we mean by 'the void' and how is it that all objects and matter are woven therefrom? We shall work towards answering this question by first addressing the way in which *Enter the Void* segues together in its unbroken continuity three distinct and fluctuating modalities of cinematic narration, which we shall respectively describe as first person, second person and 'absent.'

The film begins by employing a first person mode of narration, mediating the spectator's view into the diegesis through a subjective POV trope reminiscent of *Lady in the Lake*. This POV, associated with Oscar, is initially 'humanised' by the inclusion of sporadic black frame flashes that suggest embodied blinking. The audio track further relates Oscar's subjective

thoughts in a monotonous stream of consciousness that interlaces his utterances with Alex and Linda (the sound of his voice being slightly muffled to suggest we hear it from the inside of the body). Thus, the initial alignment takes up an embodied position synonymous with Oscar's eyes and brain, positioning the viewer behind his eyelids and within his subjective consciousness. This stylistic folding of camera- and character-consciousness, which we will term a first person or subjective mode of address, gradually becomes eroded or transcended as the narrative progresses. During these subjective sequences, Oscar constitutes the 'out-of-field,' but it is worth stressing that he is not absent from the frame. Indeed, we witness Oscar interact with Linda and Alex, and see his hands enter the shot to load his drug pipe. Thus, although objective views of Oscar's face are initially absent, his body is very much present within the scene.

After his death, viewers are presented with a series of 'disembodied' perception-images as the camera rises out of Oscar's body (an 'out-of-body' experience), before collapsing into a series of sequences from his memory of the past. Here, images from Oscar's infanthood, childhood, adolescence and adulthood are folded together and stylistically linked by a framing trope wherein the camera is strategically positioned behind Oscar's body, holding the back of his head and shoulders in medium close-up. The camera relentlessly frames the back of Oscar's head in the foreground, utilising his body to block and mediate the/his view into the diegesis. We shall call this mode of address, whereby we see behind Oscar's head and body rather than his direct point of view, a second person perspective. In these scenes the images are defined by a form of self-perception – in that we are possibly seeing Oscar's memory of himself rather than truly objective, or third person, images. Since they are not necessarily objective, the term 'second person' serves at the very least to introduce a gap or fissure between Oscar as the subject and object of the gaze, between Oscar as subject and object.

Let us linger a short while on this term in order to make it clear that in calling such shots 'second person' we are not attempting to propose an abstract or grand theory regarding this particular framing trope. It is not that every shot in every film that features the back of a character's head in medium close up constitutes a second person shot; and it is not that these shots are told in the cinematic equivalent of the 'second person' – using the pronoun *you*. Rather, we argue that the term can be fruitfully applied here since it helps us (and the film) to 'think' the incrementally growing movement from subject to void. Here, then, viewers see a 'first remove' from Oscar, or Oscar seeing himself as a 'second person' – a concept that we shall relate later on to the notion of being 'beside oneself.'

However, *Enter the Void* does not stop there. Instead, the film progresses further, marking a trajectory from showing us Oscar's POV, to Oscar seeing himself as a second person, and finally to Oscar being absent, or voided, from the film – even though the film has given us the impression

that there has not been a cut. That is, Oscar's 'disappearance' from the film is not marked by a formal stylistic device like the cut, which usually separates different POV shots from objective shots and so on. Instead, without a cut, Oscar has drifted into 'the void.' For, in the narrative's post-death or post-human sequences, the film introduces a third mode of address that does not correlate with Oscar as an embodied character within the diegesis: we do not see directly from his physical perspective (replete with blinks, hands coming into frame, and muffled sound), nor do we see the back of his head in frame as per the 'second person' mode outlined above. Instead, the image is less obviously associated with any person at all, and yet, because of the absence of cuts, it retains a trace of Oscar's (voided) subjectivity.

Having explained the progression within the film from first person to second person to void, it is now time for us to explain what it is that we mean by the term 'void.' In order to do so, we shall turn to the work of Gilles Deleuze.

Thinking The Void

In *Cinema 1,* Deleuze aligns 'the void' with the 'out-of-field,' or what is understood to exceed the frame. In movement-image cinema, that which escapes the camera's framing 'testifies to a more disturbing presence, one which cannot be said even to exist, but rather to "insist" or "subsist"' (Deleuze, 2005a, p. 18). As all framing necessarily determines an out-of-field, the void of *Cinema 1* is external to the film itself. Since Deleuze aligns the movement-image with the body's sensory-motor-schema, however, *Enter the Void* does not really realise a movement-image form of void, because even in the film's opening moments, when subjectivity is clearly aligned with Oscar's bodily experiences, the inclusion of altered states drug images suggests that the actual and the virtual have already moved into expressive relation. In other words, a 'normal' sensory-motor-schema is already compromised. The film then stages an 'internal' transformation as after Oscar's death its narration shifts from the subjective/first person, via the 'second person' mode outlined above, and towards the 'absent'/voided perspective. This progression would suggest that the connoted 'out-of-field' that is the void of *Cinema 1* transmutes to become Oscar's voided subjectivity.

In *Cinema 2,* the concept of the out-of-field transforms for Deleuze, and is marked by the introduction of another, more immediate, conception of the void. In the time-image, the void becomes synonymous with the cut 'internal' to the film, with Deleuze suggesting that the edit or interstice between frames signals another form of voiding that ostensibly becomes invisible. In this way, the void external to the movement-image film transforms to become an internal void, shifting from the out-of-field towards the cut. Alex Ling argues that the jump from the movement-image to the time-image void therefore 'denotes a shift from the "inside outside" of the film (the whole being the very idea of inside, of the absolute – and fundamentally

paradoxical – containment of the One-All) to the "outside inside" of the film (qua cut)' (Ling, 2010, p. 122). As *Enter the Void* shifts to the 'absent' mode of cinematic address, the film's perception becomes increasingly aligned and folded into the void itself (the outside-within).

Enter the Void's free-form movement through digitally composited cinematic time and space is marked by a conspicuous lack of cuts, with a continuous flowing mode of spatial and temporal perception taking the place of editing. Indeed, the 'camera' increasingly becomes free to pass through memory and matter, time and space without recourse to any apparent cutting whatsoever (the black interstices that are Oscar's blinks aside). In *Cinema 2,* Deleuze, after Robert Lapoujade, articulates a shift from montage to *montrage*, which recalls Bazin's predilection for Welles and Renoir over Eisenstein (Deleuze, 2005b, p. 40). That is, in the post-war context, cinema no longer cuts, but is instead defined by continuity, by *showing* ('montrer' in French). William Brown has argued, along with David Bordwell, that digital technology plays a key role in 'intensifying' the continuity/'montrage'/'monstrous' nature of contemporary cinema (Brown, 2009a; Brown, 2012; Bordwell, 2006, p. 117-189). Beyond Deleuze's broadly antihumanist stance, then, a digital cinema that can pass through space and all that fills it, be that empty air, a wall, or even the uterus of a human, without seeming to cut, as per *Enter the Void*, would seem to suggest a new conception of the void. Rather than simply being the out-of-field, as in *Cinema 1*, or the cut, as in *Cinema 2*, *Enter the Void* demonstrates the void itself. What previously Deleuze defined as 'insisting' or 'subsisting' the image may now be understood differently; in *Enter the Void*, that which previously exceeded the image (because it lay beyond the spatial or temporal bounds of the frame) is now incessantly *within* the image. Cinema in the digital age may, in most instances, be a cinema that retains cutting as a skeuomorphic convention, but as in *Enter the Void*, digitally composited filmic space and flowing narration offer multiple other possible and impossible perspectives, movements, and objects, along with an ability to zigzag across different temporal planes without ever resorting to a cut. In this sense *Enter the Void*'s soluble cinematic perception seemingly fills out (actualises) and replaces (becomes) the void (previously aligned with the cut), and a flowing continuous perception passing seamlessly through psyche and matter replaces the edit. Thus, the film's digitalised perception opens up the entire finitude of the time-space continuum so that excess becomes 'incess.'

To clarify what we mean it becomes important to investigate how the three interrelated modes of cinematic narration (first person, second person, absent/void) and the camera presence employed within the film 'think' the nature of being and non-being from the perspective of the void.

The Void's Entrance

The film begins by utilising a first person modality. Murray Smith argues that, from a cognitive perspective, POV functions to help viewers imagine characters from 'the inside,' and the technique appears as part of a larger strategy to 'promote central imagining as a part of a larger structure of multifaceted alignment' (Smith, 1997, p. 417). Narrative films typically incorporate POV shots within a web of other shot types, then, and it is this web that offers to viewers multiple forms of access to a character – by showing not only what they see, but also 'objective' images depicting their reactions to, and experiences of narrative events. It is these other forms of shot that are conspicuously absent from *Enter the Void*'s opening sequences, where we have only one or two moments that feature Oscar's face (in a mirror). If, for Deleuze, a close-up of a character's face (what he terms an 'affection-image') serves directly to communicate how they feel or think about a situation, *Enter the Void* on the whole prohibits viewers from seeing what Oscar feels or thinks about events, and instead demands that viewers 'read' the image(s) in order to build up a picture of who and what Oscar is. By denying a reverse-shot to reveal the gaze's owner, the reverse-shot (or sutured image) is what is voided, or absent, in the film's opening. Thus we begin from the limited perspective of the one minus the multiple ('alignment').

During Oscar's early onscreen drug revelries, the subjective camera does offer another alignment. Here, the camera follows his ascending 'consciousness,' elevating above and beyond his purely embodied position to offer a drug-induced 'out-of-body' experience. Hovering above Oscar's prostrate form, the camera looks down at the body that previously constituted the out-of-field. Although this shot offers a delayed reverse-shot (or opportunity to perceive the owner of the gaze), it either remains out of focus or vertiginously spins around his face so that centrifugal forces make the camera movement a more prominent subject of the shot than Oscar. At these moments Oscar's subjectivity and the camera become loosened from a purely embodied mode, with Oscar understood to be perceiving himself (as an object) whilst never fully relinquishing his position as subject of the gaze.

As per Ling's philosophical reading of Samuel Beckett's *Film* (Alan Schneider, USA, 1965), we can recognize how this mode of self perception or *aperception* is also 'strictly speaking *void*' (Ling, 2010, p. 77). In line with *Film*, we can understand Noé's film mounting an investigation into the nature of 'film qua film' through a story ('both' and 'neither') of tragedy and transcendence. In both we also find a 'single, albeit sundered' subject who is at once the object and subject of the camera's gaze (Ling, 2010, p. 72-73). These self-perceiving subjects either experience or enter into a world beyond speech, and by subtracting this realm (or being subtracted from it) both Beckett and Noé force viewers to confront and think the image – which in both films displays a primary concern with the (impossible) 'invisible being of all appearance' (Ling, 2010, p. 76). In this manner we can recognise how

Film and *Enter the Void* explore the essence of cinema, or what cinema is becoming, and by so doing, set out a notion of appearance for itself, or appearance in-itself, which works to overcome the self-perception of being by moving thought or thinking towards unbecoming, qua an escape from a fixity of being.

In this manner, the concept of void enters into the filmic assemblage for the first time via a fissure opened up by Oscar's drug-induced self-perception. Moments later, the camera/perception returns to a POV modality, showing Oscar framed in a mirror attempting to sober himself up by splashing water on his face. It is here that viewers are first treated to the only well-lit shot of Oscar as an objective character in the film. Interestingly, this first clear view of his face captures an image of him 'off his face' on drugs, trying to perceive objectively the affects of a chemical substance upon his face, but from a subjective position.

After the 'first' death scene, filmed entirely from Oscar's POV, the camera-perspective begins to disengage itself from the dying body, initially hovering over and looking down upon him in another out-of-body experience. During these moments of self-perception, we find the first significant shift from Oscar's subjectivity to the voided view. Because the sequence initially reflects the earlier scene of Oscar's drug high, the out-of-body trope hints that the rest of the narrative may be read as a subjective journey of brain-death through a crystal of memory and fantasy (partially guided by Oscar's earlier reading and discussions of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, about which more below). That is, after this 'subjective,' or literal, death, the film begins to move backwards and forwards through Oscar's past, seamlessly zigzagging through disparate sheets of memory and time. Noé's distinctive framing of these sequences from behind Oscar's head (the second person) continues to deny viewers any image of Oscar's face (qua affection-images), and thus continues to erect a distance between the viewer's knowledge of his feelings and experiences. By becoming 'once removed' the film also renders Oscar more of an object than subject of the gaze, particularly as the audio stream of consciousness, prevalent in the first person sequences, has also been voided; we are no longer in Oscar's brain. In the sequences depicting his parents' horrific death in a violent car crash we do not necessarily need facial shots to understand his emotional response, but at other moments the conspicuous lack of a facial shot or affection-image draws attention to this stylistic framing choice.

A notable example frames Victor facing Oscar (and the camera). Here, Victor accusingly asks Oscar if he is sleeping with his mother. Victor's question elicits no immediate verbal response, and an uncomfortable silence ensues. This immediately draws attention to Oscar's 'loss of face.' It thus becomes Victor's reaction to Oscar's absent face that signals to the viewer that Oscar's guilty face has given him away. In this manner there is a form of feedback loop, in that Victor's reaction serves as the affection-image which

viewers read, but which is itself triggered by his perception of Oscar's absent/voided face. Thus, throughout his past memory it is often the reactions of others that grant viewers access to Oscar's voided-image, and Oscar's face only becomes accessible via its trace.

Thereafter, the film's perceptions introduce an intensified temporal and spatial '*montrage*' through various sequences, wherein the 'absent' (voided-Oscar) drifts freely around Tokyo observing the effect of his death upon other characters. As time's passage continues, the absent perspective continues to view the trace of Oscar's life on those he left behind. He enters his sister's brain to share in a virtual dream in which she imagines Oscar returning from the dead as a zombie, as well as actual images where she washes his ashes down the drain. Here, the overarching aesthetic shift completes the movement from human subjectivity towards a post-human perception of/from the void. Thematically, this achieves a switch in cinematic thought or thinking from the position of 'subject' to that of 'void,' wherein hard-edged divisions familiar to our usual embodied experience of movement, time and objects dissolve. As consciousness and matter no longer formulate wholly separate categories, they begin to blend into a seamless continuity through cinematic perception that takes up the non-human perspective of the void itself. This gradual dissolving of Oscar into other people and pure matter traces out his becoming-imperceptible, or becoming-voided, and witnesses him merging with the plane of immanence – in such a way that being, matter and life are understood as being woven from the void. For, in his journey from self to immanence/void, Oscar becomes one with being (the totality of all that exists as opposed to his subjective being), and he attains what Deleuze might call 'a cosmic and spiritual lapping' (Deleuze, 1997, p. 26), in the sense that the personal and the whole form a single continuum, rather than existing entirely separately.

Consideration of the film's spiritual elements allows us to illuminate how the film's form and content, or philosophy and aesthetics, are expressively intertwined. Indeed, the passage from physical human to metaphysical post-human, from subject to void, is mirrored by the film's formal expression, which can be read as both an elegy for 'humanist' modes of cinematic expression and an enthusiastic embrace of 'post-humanist,' particularly digital, forms. That is, the film's single take form, together with its ability to pass through solid objects and humans as if they were thin air, suggests the decentralisation of the human in Noé's film, and a more 'post-human' aesthetic, as also suggested in other films that feature such digitally enabled shots, such as *Fight Club* (see Brown, 2009b; Brown and Fleming, 2011). Through its remarkable combination of the long take, psychedelic visuals, the mixture of POV, second person and voided shots, and its impossible camera movements, not only is *Enter the Void* an aesthetic landmark, then, but it also offers new ways for us to conceptualise cinema in the digital era. To this end, while the film embraces new post-human forms

(passing from POV to the voided shots and through walls and people without a cut – movements enabled by digital technology), we wish to explore the ramifications of this for how we conceptualise the cinematic experience, or what cinema can do. With this latter point in mind, the essay will now move to synthesise various strands of contemporary film theory at the intersection of which *Enter the Void* seems to situate itself.

Monstrous Epiphany
It is well known that André Bazin rejected montage in favour of films that employed depth, continuity, and, after Cesare Zavattini, neorealist tales in which 'nothing happens' (Bazin, 1967). While *Enter the Void* is clearly not a film in which 'nothing' happens (nor indeed are many neorealist films), it is a film where *nothing* is actualised, and a film that seems to take spatial continuity to the extreme, as we drift, for what certain viewers may feel is a frustratingly long period, across the whole of Tokyo in seemingly unbroken shots. While Bazin's myth of total cinema is no doubt a guiding text that helps us think about *Enter the Void*, it is Deleuze who helps us go beyond Bazin and humanism towards a posthumanist cinema.

Deleuze traces a shift away from a cinema dominated by anthropocentric movement towards films where human characters are overwhelmed by their surroundings and become insignificant. The relative slowness of travel across Tokyo spaces, neither broken into noticeably different or fragmented shots, means *Enter the Void* offers a conception of cinema wherein experiences of space involve duration, bringing this thematic to the fore in a more overt manner than neorealist cinema. Furthermore, as narration slides back and forth through time without cuts or dissolves, the film thinks the interaction of different time planes in a manner akin to Deleuze's time-image models. These are actualised by sequences incorporating scenes of Oscar's past life, which invoke Deleuze's desire for cinema to become like memory or thought, where past-images invade the present of the screen. As discussed, the film also incorporates vivid hallucinations, invoking a blurring between fantasy and reality that Deleuze praised in films like *Last Year at Marienbad/L'année dernière à Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, France/Italy, 1961). Before dying, Oscar endures a 'weakened' motor control through taking drugs, experiencing pure optic and sonic situations/signs, and so surfaces as a cinematic 'seer' (Deleuze, 2005b, p. 39).

As discussed, the collapsing of subjective and objective perspectives, and the folding of reality and imagination or hallucination, matter and memory, empty space with all that fills it, demonstrates how *Enter the Void* erects a challenging philosophical and aesthetic realisation of the void. We would argue that a narrative where the camera can pass through solid objects as easily as it does empty air conforms to what Deleuze would call a 'gaseous' cinema, which he originally relates through the 'molecular perception' of 1960s American expanded cinema and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie*

Camera (USSR, 1929) (Deleuze, 2005a, pp. 81-85). Significantly, John Johnston argues that Vertov's molecular perception thinks the (be)coming community of the Soviet state, which summons the dissolution of boundaries between subject and object – wherein humans achieve an equality and collective identity that overrides individual identity (Johnston, 1999, pp. 37-38). Furthermore, in the expanded cinema evoked within *Enter the Void* via the flicker film-like opening and the psychedelic sequences, we move from a world of doing to a world of pure seeing, which Deleuze expresses through references to Carlos Castaneda, the author and shaman, or *nagual*, who experimented with psychedelic drugs, especially peyote, and whose role in Deleuze's thought we shall discuss below.

Powell explains that Castaneda's work is not taken literally by Deleuze (and Guattari), but is emblematic of another way of life that is most clearly summarised by the term 'becoming' (Powell, 2007, pp. 56-61). Castaneda's experiences engage with conditions whereby perception is rethought from the bottom up, not understanding himself as detached from the world, even though he observes it, nor without agency, but in such a way that the world also acts on him; that is, the world sees him as much as he sees it. In this sense, the boundary between Castaneda and the world disappears as he becomes all that surrounds him (both subject and object) in a manner akin to *Enter the Void*.

Given that Castaneda's work incorporates the use of psychotropic drugs, it shares common ground with Noé's film that is worth exploring in greater detail. *Enter the Void*'s narrative is purportedly inspired by the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, but the resemblance between the two is minimal enough that we shall forsake a detailed and direct comparison here. However, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* does serve to bridge the gap between *Enter the Void* and drug culture. For instance, Noé discusses how DMT is believed to be a naturally occurring chemical that the human brain emits when it is dreaming or dying (Adams 2010), whilst similar chemical experiences inspired Timothy Leary and colleagues to compose in 1964 *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* as a guide to drug taking (Leary et al., 2008). The primary reason for this is that both texts, *The Book of the Dead* and *The Psychedelic Experience*, seek to promote the loss of ego. That is, both attempt to prepare readers for the moment when the boundary between subject and object disappears (and when the void appears). While *Enter the Void* is not a particularly close adaptation of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the fact that it features both hallucinations provoked by psychotropic drugs and a 'camera' that passes from one point of view to the next without so much as a cut to signal the transition, means that it, too, tries to think a similar experience, wherein subjects and objects merge via a 'gaseous' mode of perception.

This weave of psychedelic and Buddhist literature can be taken a step further by evoking Alexander and Ann Shulgin's classic guides to drug

consumption, *PiHKAL: A Love Story*, wherein PiHKAL formulates an acronym for 'Phenethylamines i [sic.] Have Known And Loved' (Shulgin and Shulgin 1995), and *TiHKAL: The Continuation*, which offers the same acronym regarding tryptamines (Shulgin and Shulgin 1997). Regardless of the legitimacy or otherwise of such writings, Shulgin offers an account of his experiences with various phenethylamines and tryptamines – psychotropic drugs akin to the ones Oscar takes in *Enter the Void*. For example, Shulgin describes smoking 100g of DMT as follows:

> As I exhaled I became terribly afraid, my heart very rapid and strong, palms sweating. A terrible sense of dread and doom filled me – I knew what was happening, I knew I couldn't stop it, but it was so devastating; I was being destroyed – all that was familiar, all reference points, all identity – all viciously shattered in a few seconds. I couldn't even mourn the loss – there was no one left to do the mourning. Up, up, out, out, eyes closed, I am at the speed of light, expanding, expanding, expanding, faster and faster until I have become so large that I no longer exist – my speed is so great that everything has come to a stop – here I gaze upon the entire universe. (Shulgin and Shulgin, 1997)

Similar visions and experiences of 'losing human form' and leaving the planet are echoed by Noé in his descriptions of imbibing Ayahuasca, a drink heavily laced with DMT, as part of his 'professional research' for making the film (see Lambie, 2010). Hopefully those who have seen or read our descriptions of *Enter the Void*, then, will sense immediately the resonances between Noé and Shulgin's experiences and those of Oscar within the film: his early drug experience involves and is defined by both an upwards and an outwards movement as we drift away from his body, an experience experienced more intensely after his death, with all identity ultimately shattered, or what we have termed voided.

We will return to consider how *Enter the Void* may function as a hallucinogenic drug for the viewer, but presently we wish briefly to explore psychedelic drugs, especially phenethylamines (which occur naturally in humans – as well as in foodstuffs like chocolate – and with high concentrations being linked to schizophrenia; see Himwich, Kety and Smythies 1967). Playfully, we should like to point out that the etymology of phenethylamine comes in part from the Greek *phanein*, which means to show, and is linked to the illuminating gas used by oracles (or so says Shulgin; tryptamine meanwhile is derived from the verb *tryein*, meaning to rub or wear down). To push this further, it seems appropriate that a digitally 'monstrous' cinema that 'gaseously' demonstrates could also be linked to substances that are similarly thought to show (making what is not normally visible perceptible), or to inspire, moments of epiphany through gases, and to wear

down solid boundaries between self and world and to have subjects and objects rub together in such a way that they become indistinguishable.

Spaced Out

Beyond these etymological links between the showing/*phanein* and the wearing down/*tryein* of drugs and the showing/demonstrating of cinema and the wearing down and rubbing of subjectivity and objectivity in *Enter the Void*, we should establish what it is that *Enter the Void* shows us. We have already listed some phenomena above, including cosmic flows of erotic energy and the inside of a vagina. But unusual objects are not quite what we wish to discuss here. Rather, because all these are shown in one continuous and seemingly unbroken shot, *Enter the Void* does not show us objects, but more pointedly that which exists *between* these objects, that from which all objects and matter are woven – namely the void itself.

Thematically, this is fitting, as the film, like the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, thinks the stage between life and death. But more than this, it shows what is between objects, namely empty space itself, or the void. In an essay that connects the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* to Deleuze, N. Robert Glass discusses notions of the between and two concepts of the other (Glass, 2001). For Deleuze, there are two types of otherness, which he discusses in relation to Michel Tournier's 1967 novel *Friday*. Firstly, there are the actual others we see, but then there is also a second level of otherness, which is understood as the way in which the fact of others moulds our perceptions. That is, if we lived for long enough without other human beings (as might happen to someone stranded on a desert island), would we 'enter into an alternate perceptual and affective world' (Glass, 2001, p. 67; see also Deleuze 1984)? While it is hard for us to prove this (since to measure it, we would have to be present with the supposedly isolated person), what the question illuminates is the way in which perceptions and desires are shaped by the fact of others, whether we can literally see actual other people or not. In effect, and in a manner similar to Jean-Luc Nancy's conception of 'being singular plural,' we are always with others; we are fundamentally social, and while we think of others as separate (because they appear within our field of vision), it is the very fact of *with-ness* that offers the precondition for our ability to perceive them at all (Nancy, 2000; for more on 'withness' and cinema, see Brown, 2013). Thus, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a guide that, after Glass, supposedly helps us to see not only actual others, but also that which is between us (space itself) as the founding condition of our with-ness (that which connects us). So, too, *Enter the Void,* via its (digitally-enabled) gaseous continuity does not think space as fragmented into objects *and* that which divides them, but rather shows space and matter as a single continuum (connected). Purloining a Deleuze/Glass example, we see a table and a chair as separate objects but ice and water as different modes of the same thing (H_2O). When we see 'between,' when we see space itself and that we are

fundamentally 'with' others, objects and people become less like the table and chair, and more like continuous ice and water. Space does not separate us, then, it connects us; and the 'between' that *Enter the Void* thinks is fundamentally rendered temporal (as spaced-time).

As a consequence, Oscar's 'ego' is transcended and the dichotomy between subject and object becomes irrelevant. Tibetan Buddhists not only see this as a perspective to help prepare for death, but also as a mode of living. To connect this back to the drug culture that forms the core of *Enter the Void*, reaching this state of seeing 'between,' and recognising the foundation of our fundamentally social nature ('with-ness'), we must literally 'spatialise' ourselves, or become 'spaced out,' so that – as per the film's aesthetics – there is no gap between subject and object. Both are part of a single continuum, and both psychedelic drugs – and cinema – can help us to see/think this.

Cognitivism and physics
The argument has perhaps taken a rather esoteric turn at this point and some reasonable questions likely linger. In particular, a drug-induced hallucination will, for what we shall call 'objectivists,' simply *not* constitute the means of seeing something 'real'; whatever is 'seen' in such conditions is patently not real, and just a figment of the imagination. However, we can draw upon both the 'soft' and the 'hard' sciences to counter this objection – if not here definitively to disprove it. Where Greg Hainge (2012) has considered *Enter the Void* from the concept of anatomy, then, we shall look at the film through the lens of cognitive psychology and physics.

In cognitive psychology, there have historically been two strands of thought pertaining to perception: those which favour direct perception (we perceive objects in the world as they are) and those which favour indirect perception (our perceptions are always mediated by our senses or our brain). To cite one of many sources that argue as much, Nobel prize winning neuroscientist Gerald M. Edelman points out that colour and other 'qualia' in our perceptual field are *not* properties of the object itself; that is, colour perception alone would seem to suggest that perception is indirect and mediated by the senses (Edelman and Tononi, 2001, p. 159ff). Influential cognitivist James J. Gibson (1986), meanwhile, whose work is often cited in relation to cognitive approaches to film, would argue that we can only perceive 'ecologically'; that is to say, our perception is dependent upon input from the external world. In the case of a drug-induced hallucination, it would seem that qualia, or the intensity with which we see certain properties of the visual field, would be indirectly perceived – that is, in part if not wholly a product of the brain. If it is well known that some humans are blind to certain objects in their visual field, then we must similarly ask how perception can be direct; what is it if not the brain that blocks out information that stares other people, literally, in the face? And if direct perception becomes hard to sustain in the face of certain forms of blindness, then might we not also posit

that certain hallucinations can conversely be solely the product of the mind? In other words, to see 'between' as per *Enter the Void* is to see nothing 'real' at all.

However, if we are always and inescapably in, or better with, the world, then there can be no hallucination that is *purely* the product of the brain. Cinema itself can function as a tool for thinking through this issue. Films show us that which does not exist, especially digital special effects films that have lost analogue cinema's indexical link to reality, a loss that preoccupies many scholars of the digital (for one of the earlier explorations of this issue, see for example Mitchell, 1992). And yet, even if 'false,' films can and do have tangible effects on humans, from visceral to emotional to intellectual responses. Neurocinematics, that branch of neuroscience and film studies that analyses what happens in the human brain during film viewing, can function here to reaffirm that the borderline between 'false' and 'real' is an arbitrary one – and that the false and the real lie on a continuum that suggests not their separation but their connectedness. Neurocinematics would seem to affirm this because scholars studying what happens in the human brain during film viewing have seen that brains often respond in the same way to certain movies (see Hasson, et al., 2004; 2008a; 2008b; Kauppi, et al., 2011). This suggests that we are conscious not of but with films – in that the virtual realities of cinema are real enough, otherwise they would not have any common effect on us.

One might still contend that a film is 'out there' while a hallucination is only ever 'in here.' A weak defence, but one that we would like to make anyway, is that we are only sensitive to some five per cent of the light spectrum (Vogel, 2005, p. 16). That to which we are sensitive naturally depends upon the abilities of our senses to detect it, as well as on our brain, the chemical constitution of which also provides the means with which we can process raw information into perceptual data. Changing the chemical constitution of our brain is something that we do at all times, whether we ingest coffee, alcohol, vegetables, meat or hard drugs. Since inescapably we are in or with the world, changing our perceptual abilities through the use of drugs does not simply mean that we create 'objects' that are not there; instead it modifies the range of objects to which we are sensitive, such that what we hallucinate may not necessarily be an accurate representation of what is out there (it is mediated by the brain, after all), but it does respond to things out there, since there can be no isolation in the face of our absolute with-ness. In other words, between direct and indirect perception, hallucinations and the ability to see 'between' can be posited as true (which potentially makes sense of the 'profundity' that the DMT and/or the phenethylamine experience can offer: finally sensible form is given to things that we cannot directly perceive, but which we know to be there).

The world of quantum physics can also step in here to help pursue this matter further. Realism has in physics been under attack since the discovery

of the quantum world. What this means is that physical properties are not necessarily 'out there,' but that they are dependent upon, or inextricably linked to, the way in which observers observe. Werner Heisenberg was the first to discover that one could not simultaneously measure the position and the momentum of a particle – and not because of flaws in the measuring system, but because the system could not have such a measurement (Heisenberg, 2000, pp. 3-26). An electron is, famously, *both* a wave and a particle (or, as physicists term it, it 'decoheres'), and its ability to manifest itself in the world is always limited; the more it is visible as a particle (with a fixed location), the less it is visible as a wave. After Niels Bohr, these dual properties, wave/momentum and particle/position, are complementary; that is, the more the electron's position is determined, the less its momentum is determined. One cannot fully measure the position of a particle, then, because its momentum would be fully *un*measured, which is a physical impossibility. In other words, electrons do not behave in a deterministic manner.

Furthermore, since Einstein, it has been known that particles, such as photons and ions, are, or at the very least can be, 'entangled'; that is, pairs of photons can behave in such a way that they are always in the same state (or polarised in the same fashion), regardless of the distance separating them. This befuddled Einstein such that he called this 'spooky action at a distance,' it being spooky because for photons to behave in this way would suggest that information travels faster than the speed of light, which for Einsteinian physics is an impossibility (see Zeilinger, 2003). Entanglement, however, is not information being passed from one photon to another over impossible distances; entanglement, rather, suggests their complementarity, or the (admittedly boggling) connection of particles. In the terms of this essay, it suggests the inherent 'with-ness' of particles.

As Bohr wrote in 1937, complementarity can appear to 'involve a mysticism incompatible with the true spirit of science' (Bohr, 1937, p. 289). One could easily critique our use of physics here as an intellectual imposture (Sokal and Bricmont, 1998), and one could also tar us with the brush of choosing esoterica from the sciences that remains far from proven, even if friendly to readership-hungry magazines like *Scientific American*. What does such a view of physics have to do with *Enter the Void*? Well, if quantum mechanics suggest that particles decohere, or give the appearance of being either a particle or a wave to those that observe them – i.e. observation determines (at least the appearance) of behaviour, then this, together with the cognitive approach outlined above, hopefully serves as some evidence for the validity of the philosophical interpretation of *Enter the Void* offered here. That is to say, its mystical world that collapses the need for a subject-object binarism, finds some support in the 'entangled' and 'complementary' world of quantum physics, as well as in the 'ecological' *and* brain-mediated world of perception, in which, for Edelman and Tononi, all information undergoes 're-entry,' which can be described as a process whereby all sources of

information influence the perceived outcome of that information. We are in, or with, a world in (or with) which everything is connected – and *Enter the Void* tries to make us see the connecting space that is 'between,' or better with, all of us, namely the void itself.

Beside oneself, or unbecoming cinema

The Shulgins describes the hilarity of being on certain phenetheylamines, especially MDA, which is often referred to as the 'love drug.' In another context, William Brown, following Henri Bergson's theory of laughter, argues for the inherently 'comic' nature of motion capture films, which involve the digital pasted onto the human in such a way that the distorted result is, or should be considered, humorous – even if a motion capture film like *Beowulf* (Robert Zemeckis, USA, 2007) is not particularly funny (see Brown 2009a). Not only does *Enter the Void* offer us a digital 'reality' that is similarly pasted on to the profilmic, but its 'spaced out' nature literally shows us Oscar 'beside himself' – a trope first signalled by the 'second person' shots that we have described and by the fuller, more elaborate out-of-body experiences signalled during Oscar's DMT high and after his death. True enough, with its violence and anger, the film is not overtly comic – though Noé does consider both *I Stand Alone* and *Irreversible* to be at least partly funny, meaning that the same could apply in his mind to *Enter the Void* (see Sterritt, 2007, p. 314). Nonetheless, *Enter the Void* is what we shall term 'hilarious' on another, formal, level. That is, as hilarity itself is etymologically linked to the Greek *hilaos*, or kindness, so, too, is the 'with-ness' shown in *Enter the Void* an incitement to kindness.

In a film that involves behaviour that is unbecoming for kind people, to stand beside oneself, to let go of one's ego, is to recognise one's shared placed in/with the world; it is to take a step towards forgiveness, towards kindness, towards love. In the confused, chaotic and hateful world of *Enter the Void*, the story also becomes a search for love in the void, as Alex and Linda's union at the climax of the film testifies. What arguably becomes true for Oscar, that he literally stands beside himself, or becomes 'spaced out' in a manner that allows him to see the interlinked and communal nature of existence (both human-human and human-planetary-universal existence), is also possibly true for the viewer. If not plainly comic or funny, nor obviously scientific, the film seeks to show the familiar in an unfamiliar way.

As befits a film by Gaspar Noé, *Enter the Void* is replete with graphic sex and violence. However, it is also a film that formally makes us rethink cinema. As much as it is a film about Oscar's unbecoming, so, too, is the film (an) unbecoming of cinema. For, a cinema in which time and space and all that fills it are placed on a single, interconnected or entangled continuum, is necessarily a non-anthropocentric cinema quite unlike the individualistic and anthropocentric mainstream cinema. Even if/precisely because *Enter the Void* does have cinematic precursors – as the examples from *Dossier 51* to *2001*

made clear earlier – it is part of the cinematic continuum itself, and it crystallises qualities that existed as only potential within other films. After Dudley Andrew, then, cinema is a dynamic process that is constantly changing (Andrew, 2010). Or, in our terms, cinema is also constantly becoming and unbecoming – perhaps especially when formal techniques are married to the unbecoming behaviour of protagonists who themselves are in the process of unbecoming, or becoming-void, as happens to Oscar in *Enter the Void*.

The Void

Enter the Void thinks, via *montrage* and continuum, certain perspectives that can help us to rethink our place in the world, to help us unbecome, abandon the ego and show that we are fundamentally with others and the world. Like the profound, hilarious and temporally distorted drug experience, the film helps place us beside ourselves, inspire social-minded acts of kindness as we learn to see things from beyond our own perspective, and as part of society and the world.

Deleuze always encourages us to see things anew, to challenge the limitations of our perceptions. Often this can lead to exhaustion, a state that can induce hallucinations, or false impressions (see Deleuze, 1995). In exhaustion, however, we are less capable of prejudice, and we let ourselves enter the flow of the universe, potentially freeing ourselves from anthropocentric vision. If the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* really is a guide for the living, helping us see the 'between' and that we are together in/with space, then so might *Enter the Void* also serve a similar 'spiritual' function. If we are with a world that itself might soon be exhausted, then the hallucinatory form of *Enter the Void* can help us to see and to think 'with-ness,' not only between ourselves and other humans, but between all that is life and all that appears woven from the void.

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