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MA Arts & Society: Thesis

**Give Me A Brain:
Deleuze and the Ethics of Thinking in
the Essay Film and Believing in This World**

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Abstract

Today we are faced with complex and multivalent challenges that are both material and existential. At the same time, it is increasingly easy to ignore the global chaos of our deeply polarised and atomised social, political and cultural milieu. For this reason, our art, philosophy, science and politics must, through their unique modalities, think *through* these issues in an ethical framework. In the medium of cinema, I argue that the ‘essay film’ is uniquely positioned to ethically respond to the challenges we are facing. The essay film is as a mode of ‘in-betweenness’, a filmic non-space, that coalesces the impulses of fiction, documentary and experimental filmmaking. This cinematic mode, like its literary antecedent, embraces heresy, liminality, and above all, thought. The essay film utilises the cinematic techniques of horizontal montage, elliptical editing, blending multiple mediums, reuse of archival footage, contrapuntal voice-over, and intertitles. The mode creates a violent oscillation of colours, sounds, rhythms and movements with a piercing essayistic inquisitiveness that cognitively and sensorially enlivens the spectator. I contend that present film scholarship fails to account for the intensities of the essay film’s operations and its intimate relationship with philosophy and ethics. I argue that by examining this form through the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze a radical potential for a unique ethical spectatorship emerges. Deleuze’s writing on the figuration of thought and film’s ability to elicit artistic *affect* and philosophic *concepts* provides a helpful framework to understand the essay film’s cinematic operations. An examination of Deleuzian *becoming* illuminates the philosophical implications of this unique mode. Finally, by exploring the essay film’s ethical underpinning as a Deleuzian call for *belief in this world*, the emancipatory capacities of this mode emerge. I examine three contemporary essay films that are exemplary of this mode’s aesthetic, philosophic and ethical potential: *Two Years At Sea*, *I Am Not Your Negro* and *Homo Sapiens*. They are, respectively, essayistic explorations of: world-building; identity/inequality; and ecological catastrophe. These films refuse to offer simplistic answers or saccharine optimism and instead present the complexity of the ethical concerns they address. They offer the spectator the opportunity to think, feel and embrace our fundamental capacity to address their ethical imperatives; the chance to restore our belief in this world.

1. Introduction

The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link... Restoring our belief in the world- this is the power of modern cinema... in our universal schizophrenia, we need reasons to believe in this world. (Deleuze, *Cinema II* 177)

I Am Not Your Negro, directed by Raoul Peck, throws us into a world of chaos. This chaos is recognisable; the banality, injustice and brutality of our immanent reality. Peck evokes the tragic failure of the United States to address 'its racial history' by making the peripatetic writing of African-American author James Baldwin the central focus of the film. The film layers and stitches together the vacuous drama of reality television, white-washed 1960s advertisements, images of lynchings, footage of the Ferguson protests, excerpts from Hollywood cinema, newspaper clippings, shaky mobile footage of innocent black children killed by police officers, and Baldwin's painfully prescient writing. The chaotic movement of forms and ideas make me feel nauseous, confused, guilty, disoriented and helpless. We are forced to our spectatorial limits in a dizzying sensorial ballet as the filmic mediums swirl; time and space are folded and contorted, and we encounter previously 'unthought' associative links. This is precisely how the mode of the essay film draws us into its merciless clutches.

I have seen these reality TV shows before, these advertisements, these films, discussed the incapacitating effects of racism and our colonial histories, and seen these videos of police brutality. However, seeing them in this violent essayistic oscillation I feel and think differently. I am compelled to embrace my ethical agency. Unlike a narrative fiction film, I am not delivered denouement; unlike a documentary film, I do not accumulate knowledge; unlike experimental cinema, I am not aesthetically aroused; and unlike my personal media consumption, I do not walk away satiated. The essay film sits uncomfortably 'in-between' and collides these forms with a heretical ferocity. With the essay film, I think and feel as if I am on a threshold. What am I to do with this intensity? How am I to process this perplexing encounter? The essay film forces us to make a choice. Are we to be consumed by our constructed nihilistic fantasies or to make an embodied leap of faith that embraces our ethical agency? It is with Gilles Deleuze's call for a cinematic 'belief in this world' in mind that this research project

seeks to explore if the mode of the essay film resembles a Deleuzian figuration of philosophic and aesthetic thought and how interrogating it as such could offer spectatorial opportunities for establishing a “link between world, thought, and life” (Rodowick, *The World, Time*, 110).

Drawing upon the work of Theodor W. Adorno, this research will explore the theory of this cinematic mode’s antecedent, the literary essay, and examine how its heretical, fragmented and liminal qualities contributed to the historical emergence of the essay film. The essay film can be understood as a mode of ‘in-betweenness’, a filmic non-space, that coalesces the impulses of fiction, documentary and experimental filmmaking. Consequently, I seek to establish a working definition of the essay film that “errs on the side of inclusion” but adequately accounts for this protean, multi-modal and genre defying form (Lee, “The Essay Film.”). Filmmakers and theorists alike, including Sergei Eisenstein, Walter Benjamin, Jean-Luc Godard, and Vivian Sobchack, have attempted to assimilate the figuration of thought with spectatorship and the screen. However, I argue that Gilles Deleuze’s request, “Give me a brain”, is delivered a resounding reply by the *film essayists* to come, ‘Je vais **essayer**’ or ‘I will try’ (*Cinema II*, 204).

This thesis will investigate and chart the work of essay film theorists David Montero, Timothy Corrigan and Laura Rascaroli, all of whom seek to account for the mode’s ‘thinkability’. These theorists offer compelling arguments for understanding this process as reflexive, subjective, dialogical or ‘unfinalisable’. It is here that I argue that applying Deleuze’s notions of: *thought*, *affect*, *immanence*, *rhizomatic structure*, *becoming*, and ultimately, a cinematic *belief in this world*, offers an insightful and unique way of understanding the formal processes, conceptualisation and ethical ramifications of the essay film. I conduct a close textual analysis of three contemporary essay films: *Two Years at Sea* (Dir. Ben Rivers), *I Am Not Your Negro* (Dir. Raoul Peck) and *Homo Sapiens* (Dir. Nikolaus Geyrhalter); respectively cinematic explorations of world-building, identity/inequality and ecological catastrophe. Through the analysis of these three films and drawing upon the work of Gilles Deleuze, this project will seek to develop a model of spectatorship for the essay film that recognises the cinematic thought underpinning this mode of filmmaking and examine whether this form and its artistic productions can offer a site of ethical resistance that facilitates our *belief in this world*.

2. Heresy and Ethics

Having returned home to Germany in 1949 after escaping the threats of National Socialism, Theodor Adorno attempted to think and write about/through the perilous issues of his time. His writing addressed the dangers of ideological conformity, the fragility of democracy, the commodification of the culture industry, and the aftermath of violent fascism. As a leading figure of the Frankfurt School, Adorno was accused of intellectual inaction and passivity. The members of the Frankfurt School's proclivity for critique and reflection over protest and participation led György Lukács to describe the movement as the 'Grand Hotel Abyss'. Lukács derided these academics for being "equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity" (qtd. in Jeffries 11). However, for Adorno, rethinking the role of academia, culture, community and politics was an act made radical by the preceding years of global warfare and turmoil: "Whoever thinks, offers resistance; it is more comfortable to swim with the current, even when one declares oneself to be against the current" (263).

Adorno's articulative medium was the written essay. For Adorno, the essay is where the written form has the capacity to unite human consciousness with its own frailty.

...the law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy. By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy's secret purpose to keep invisible. (Adorno 171)

I argue that this is the crucial link between the essayistic impulse, whether explored through the written word or cinematically. The essay film birthed a transgressive, liminal and unorthodox space, utilised by traditionally unrepresented voices and/or to express unrepresented ideas that challenge hegemonic thinking. This unique mode of aesthetic expression seeks to imagine the possibilities of this world and to think the 'unthought'.

I claim that like Adorno's heretical approach to the written essay, reading the essay film through Deleuze holds a radical potential. Deleuzian analysis allows us to recognise the essay film's power to transgress orthodoxy and think through chaos. I contend that understanding the essay film as a mode of Deleuzian cinematic thinking

par excellence allows for a spectatorial model to be developed that is missing from essay film scholarship.

It is my hope that this project may enliven discourse for artists, scholars and spectators by articulating the essay film's potential for restoring our "belief in a world of universal pessimism, in which we have no more faith in images than we do in the world" (Rodowick, *The World, Time*, 110). Today we are faced with complex and multivalent challenges: human-caused ecological destruction; extreme financial and social inequality; surging authoritarianism; mass-migration and community atomisation. We must again reconsider whether we are best positioned to implement necessary political change through intuitive action, or through the active resistance of thought. I argue that analysing the essay film through Deleuze offers a radical spectatorial opportunity to engage with the demands of reimagining our relationship with community, identity, governments, financial models and nature.

I acknowledge that the essay film's cinematic thinking alone will not and cannot account for the totality of challenges we face. The act of thinking this thesis takes seriously must be adopted and addressed by all realms of thought; philosophic, scientific, artistic or otherwise. Additionally, my positionality and privilege prevents any claim to absolute comprehension of the issues these specific films address. Instead, I hope an exploration of this mode and thinking that welcomes heretical multiplicity is a component of the intersectional tools at our disposal to rethink social structures and develop political change on the basis of an immanent belief in this world.

3. The Written Essay: Je vais essayer

This research necessitates a theoretical analysis of the literary essay to adequately understand the advent and characteristics of its cinematic descendant. While the essay has its roots in rhetoric as far back as Aristotle and Cicero, the literary essay, as we understand it today, first appears in the Western canon in the 16th century by way of the French writer Michel de Montaigne and his seminal work *Essays*. The term 'essay' derives from the French 'essai', roughly translating to 'attempt' or to 'try'. Thus, for Montaigne, the essay is not a practice to “pretend to discover things, but to lay open his (my) self” (254). Here we can trace the links between the cinematic form and his provocative enactment of an open-structure, reflexivity and scepticism. All of which is aptly surmised by Montaigne’s literary mantra "*que-sais-je?*" or "*what do I know?*" (244).

Along with Montaigne, it is important to explore Adorno’s theoretical studies of the literary essay. He asserts that the essay should synthesise impersonal fact, as in science, and immeasurable experience, as in art. Adorno claims that an *essayist* must distinguish herself by acts of literary transgression. He proposes that the *essay* should avoid totalising, seek a dialectic method and weave concepts together in a multi-modal approach. As Tracy Chavalier claims, for Adorno:

...although the essay by definition cannot claim to achieve... objective truth, it does succeed, through the very negation of these claims, in coming close to the truth of the matter... It is precisely because the essay can also incorporate untruth, and because it includes its own negation, that it does not conform to rigid, hierarchical ideological schemes. (5)

When contemplating the essay film and its fragmented, heretical and multi-modal nature, Adorno’s conception of the essay reveals the natural progression of the form as it has crossed mediums.

4. The Essay Film: A Mode of Dissatisfaction

The term 'essay film' can be traced back to 1927, when Soviet cinematic titan Sergei Eisenstein penned the phrase in his notes for his proposed project *Das Kapital* (an adaptation of Karl Marx' work). Alexandre Astruc, in his influential article *The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: The Camera-Pen*, posits that with the advent of portable technologies, experimental techniques, and ground-breaking filmmakers, cinema was liberated from a certain "tyranny of the visuals" and developing into a medium "as subtle and versatile" as language (144). However, André Bazin's analysis of Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia*, is evidence of the first discussion of the form in practice. Bazin suggests that Marker's work is "an essay documented by film" and should be considered "as in literature; an historical and political essay, though one written by a poet" (180).

The description of a film as essayistic is frequent, yet the form remains a difficult category, claiming filmmakers as disparate as Terrence Malick, Orson Welles and Jean-Luc Godard. Recognised for its resistance to conventional filmic structures, the essay film has been variously described as a discrete genre, a definitive mode of filmmaking, or as wholly unclassifiable. Its structural qualities are frequently termed protean, mosaic or vague (Rascaroli, *The Essay Film* 25). Its economic and aesthetic capacity has been diversely described as box-office poison, the fastest growing cinematic form, or even for Cousins, the defining form of this decade (qtd. in Higgins 16).

The essay film does not comfortably align with major cinematic forms like documentary film, where "a typical scene establishes time and place and a tie to previous scenes" presenting "some portion of a larger argument" (Nichols, qtd. in Brink 73) or narrative fiction, where "action and character are locked indissolubly together in the unfolding of the story, so that one reveals and confirms the other" (Armes, qtd. in Brink 74). I propose that the essay film should be considered a cinematic mode or form rather than a style or genre. The essay film cannot be treated as a hybrid, rather we should think of it as a mode of 'dissatisfaction'. The essay film is dissatisfied by hegemony, doxa, objectivity, binary distinctions, authenticity, and any pedagogic form of communication. We should not be made anxious by its

indeterminacy; the essay film demands and rewards interrogation.

While the essay film is not bound by any definitive genre conventions, certain consistent cinematic techniques are identifiable. The essay film frequently employs horizontal montage, elliptical editing, multiple mediums, archival and found footage collages, contrapuntal voice-over and reflexive intertitles. This inimitable mode produces disorienting oscillations of colours, sounds, rhythms and movements with a piercing essayistic inquisitiveness that cognitively and sensorially enlivens the spectator so that they are intricately connected to the unfolding thought on screen.

4.1 The Essay Film: Thinkability

In her study of the essayistic mode, Rascaroli argues that subjectivity and reflectivity are the key markers of the form. Rascaroli observes that the essay film is a "particular articulation of subjectivity" that produces a "thought-provoking reflection" (*The Essay Film* 23). Consequently, she offers her theory of 'interpellation', a term originating from the social and political theory of Louis Althusser. For Rascaroli, constant interpellation forms the protean structure of the mode:

...each spectator... is called upon to engage in a dialogical relationship with the enunciator, to become active, intellectually and emotionally, and interact with the text. (*The Essay Film* 36)

Corrigan suggests that the essay film mode produces a dialogic relationship, a "representational remaking of a self as it encounters, tests, and experiences some version of the real as a public 'elsewhere.'" (35). For Corrigan, this resembles a 'Socratic Dialogue' between the filmmaker and spectator. That is to say, the essay film expresses and exteriorises its thinking through a kind of second-person address, based on the question-answer-question model initiated by Socrates. For Corrigan, this 'thought' is also linked to a Lacanian process of identification, where identity arises "from a lack of wholeness... filled from outside us by the way we imagine ourselves to be seen by others" (Hall 287). Corrigan claims that through a discursive pastiche of form and content the viewer is placed at the heart of a "subjective experience in the

shifting interstices that define worldly experience itself" (36).

David Montero's *Thinking Images* continues the projects of both Corrigan and Rascaroli. He offers his own reading of the filmic mode through the framework of Mikhail Bakhtin's linguistic theory. For Montero, essayistic thought appears not only "as relational and dialogical, but also as necessarily tentative, inconclusive, and always open to further debate or, to use a Bakhtinian term, 'unfinalisable'" (16).

While these theorists have produced admirable scholarship that articulates the intricate relationship between the essay film and thought, I argue they fail to account for the mode's sensorial capacity and ethical imperatives. By implementing a Deleuzian analysis of the form we see the indivisible connection between the mode's generation of thought and its affective evocations. Additionally, I believe an introduction of ethics into the discourse of the essay film can contribute to burgeoning discussions of its political potential, like the recently published anthology *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics, Utopia*.

5. Deleuze

Existing accounts of the essay film draw upon the work of theorists and philosophers like Bakhtin, Socrates, Althusser and Lacan. However, when employing the work of scholars not explicitly engaged in cinematic discourse, these analyses are occasionally limited by tenuous and associative links. I seek to add to the field by utilising the work of Gilles Deleuze, whose philosophical project closely explored the figuration of thought and the cinematic form itself. As Deleuze was such a prolific writer and produced a body of work that is as large as it is dense, I will only cover some key Deleuzian terms and ideas crucial to an initial exploration of his philosophy. I will raise any relevant concepts of Deleuze that remain unaddressed or underdeveloped here in the discussion and film analysis chapters. Consequently, I will briefly explore: the act of *thinking*, Deleuzian cinematic theory, and *belief in this world*.

5.1 Deleuze: The Act of Thinking

Throughout his work Deleuze attempts to distil a unique philosophical understanding of the act of thinking. For Deleuze, thought arises from outside us, a result of encounters and events; “something in the world forces us to think” (*Difference and Repetition* 139). Deleuze draws a stark distinction between this involuntary thought we encounter and that which merely reproduces *doxa* or ‘common sense’. This distinction is crucial for Deleuze given his desire to produce a philosophy that repudiates any transcendent order. For Deleuze, there is no presupposition of a truth or a truth that exists outside the field of immanence, as there is in Plato or Descartes. Thought is, by its very nature, a heretical attack on the traditional moral “image of thought”; an act of creativity and a means of confronting chaos (*Difference and Repetition* 131). In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze differentiates the modes of thought involved in philosophy, science and art. For Deleuze, philosophy creates *concepts*, science creates *functions*, and art creates *affects* and *percepts*.

It is important to explore the notion of *rhizomatic thinking* when considering Deleuzian thought and its rejection of hegemonic or traditional structures. With the rhizome, Deleuze borrows a term from biology that describes a form of botanical

growth. Unlike a single root-structure, a rhizome “produces different points of equal growth across a lateral path” (Brooker 224). A rhizome is a centreless, non-hierarchical and nonsignifying system that embraces multiplicity and ‘in-betweenness’. This directly contrasts with the traditional 'arborescent' model of western thought.

As a model for culture, the rhizome... is characterised by 'ceaselessly established connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles.' Rather than narrativise history and culture, the rhizome presents history and culture as a map or wide array of attractions and influences with no specific origin or genesis, for a 'rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things. (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 3-4)

I argue that the essay film’s non-chronological montage, irrational structuring, and disruption of any narrative verisimilitude, exhibits the prototypical qualities of rhizomatic thinking. I will later articulate how these rhizomatic structures, when combined with the transgressive topics interrogated by the essay film, enables an alternative model of thought and cinematic ethics.

5.2 Deleuze: Cinema... A Matter of Thinking and Feeling

While Deleuze’s work on cinematic spectatorship is unique in its philosophic rigour, it is situated among a rich field of psychoanalytic, cognitive and phenomenological film theory. The psychoanalytic movement began with Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey in the early 1970s, who applied a Freudian/Lacanian analysis to cinematic spectatorial identification through notions of the gaze, repression and desire. This was followed by the research tradition of cognitive film theory in the 1980s, with figures like David Bordwell and Noel Carroll attempting to approach film theory with a certain empiricism born of cognitive science and analytic philosophy. In the 1990s and early 2000s, theories of film-phenomenology emerged as the predominate approach to film theory. Theorists like Laura Marks and Vivian Sobchack incorporated phenomenological philosophy in their filmic critique to develop concepts regarding spectatorial embodiment, sensoriality and haptics.

While Deleuze was largely ignored in the field of traditional film theory when his work was first published, by way of scholars like Bell, Rodowick, Buchanan et. al., it has become crucial to any serious discussion of film theory. This research takes seriously the claim of Robert Sinnerbrink that with *Cinema I: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, Deleuze “emerged as the most significant ‘Continental’ philosopher to have engaged seriously with film” and “decisively influenced the ‘philosophical turn’ in film theory during the last two decades” (52). Rather than borrow or rework theories of psychoanalysis, cognitive science or phenomenology, Deleuze sought to develop his own unique system. He considers cinema a specific mode of thought, with serious philosophical and ethical implications. Deleuze suggests that cinema’s mode of thinking shares an intimate relationship with both philosophy and art. Cinema holds the inimitable position of being able to think through the *concepts* created by philosophy, and the *affects* and *percepts* created through art.

This thesis is indebted to the thoughtful and rigorous work of Deleuzian scholars like Rodowick, Buchanan, Bellour, Thiele and Bogue. Their projects investigate the lasting effects of Deleuze’s work on the field of cinematic criticism. It is my wish to add the essay film to the long list of forms and genres studied within Deleuzian frameworks.

5.3 Deleuze: Cinematic Ethics

We must believe in the body as in the germ of life, a seed that splits the pavement... and which bears witness to life and to this very world such that it is. We need an ethic or a faith that makes idiots laugh, not a need to believe in something else, but a need to believe in this world, of which fools are a part.
(Deleuze, *Cinema II* 173)

This lyrical quote illuminates Deleuze’s project of immanent ethics; a belief in the world capable of overcoming transcendent beliefs, mythologies and nihilism. Deleuze outlines an ethics that considers life as a perpetual process of flux; that of *becoming*. Instead of moral codes founded in transcendent or utopian worlds, Deleuze asks us to

believe in our immanent corporeality, the earth's materiality and nature's capacity for sensoriality; to believe in this world and nothing more.

Deleuze links the need for a belief in the world with his philosophical taxonomy of cinema, advocating for a cinematic ethics. The point of the encounter between philosophy and cinema is a mutually transformational creation of *concepts* that allows for new ways of thinking philosophy and new ways of experiencing the filmic image. For Deleuze, this is the means through which cinema can address our collective crisis of cultural, social and ethical values. It is the power of the filmic image to summon affective and conceptual spectatorial responses that rethink modes of existence, calls for a "people to come", and reifies "reasons to believe in this world" (Sinnerbrink 54).

Another important concept of Deleuze's work for this thesis is *minoritarian* thinking. In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze introduces the idea by advocating for a textual process that encourages *becoming-minor*. Minor-Literature actively repudiates hegemonic or majoritarian projects. For Deleuze this illuminates a path towards the crucial immanent process of *becoming*, of which he delineates: becoming-woman, becoming-animal, becoming-other, and becoming-molecular. These *becomings* recognise the way orthodox and essentialist tendencies enact social, cultural and political structures of oppressive power. Other than the scholarship of Rodowick, discussions of what a minor-cinema might look like remain scant in existing literature. Due to the essay film's heretical nature and the ethical concerns of this thesis, I see an important opportunity to explore this relatively uncharted field.

5.4 Deleuze: Considering the Criticism

As a preeminent philosopher and cultural critic working across multiple academic fields over forty years, Deleuze's work has been subject to considerable criticism. Some theorists question his alleged misuse of scientific and mathematic terminology, his understanding of subjectivity, the idealism of his metaphysics, and the absence of revolutionary politics in his work. However, I believe any serious reflection and review of these arguments would exceed the limits of this thesis and would not be fruitful for this discussion. As I aim to focus on Deleuze's cinematic scholarship and his

proposition of an ethical system of ‘belief in the world’, it is instead important to consider the criticism that has been levelled at these projects.

The main critiques that have been levelled at Deleuze’s cinematic scholarship and system of ethics are its Eurocentric focus, theological preoccupation, and the problematics of his historical duality. David Martin-Jones claims that to articulate the ‘crisis of nihilism’ of modernity, Deleuze exclusively explores the traditions of European and American cinema and therefore risks conflating the multiplicity of global history and culture (10-16). Martin-Jones suggests that to contemporise Deleuze’s arguments and make them relevant to the plurality of today’s world cinema, critics must ‘decolonise’ his film philosophy.

J.M. Bernstein argues that while Deleuze is preoccupied with developing a philosophy that flattens and rejects the transcendent claims of religion and dogmatic ideology, his own system deserves to be subject to the same criticism. Bernstein specifically cites Deleuze’s frequent use of the concept of ‘belief’ as the primary imperative for ethical action as evidence of this very problem. He suggests that Deleuze’s philosophy articulates an unfounded trust in the power of the filmic image that requires a “leap of faith” that diminishes direct human agency and reifies the very nihilism Deleuze seeks to overcome (Bernstein 79).

Finally, Jacques Rancière suggests that Deleuze’s cinematic philosophy makes an unsubstantiated division of film history into two discrete movements, the movement-image of early cinema and the time-image of modern cinema. Rancière’s fiercest criticism is his rejection of how this aesthetic rift could be symptomatic of a rupture on a historical/political level. Rancière argues that when Deleuze considers this shift as a positive transformation, he succumbs to the pitfalls of a deeply modern gesture, thinking of the development of each art form as a “quest to realize its own essence” (Sinnerbrink 69). Rancière believes this is evidenced by Deleuze’s textual analysis of cinema, and posits that his approach underlies a failure to recognise the complexity of filmic methods which contradict these discrete temporal movements.

While these critiques offer important considerations of Deleuze’s scholarship, I believe these arguments tend to mischaracterise his work as a historical project and ignore the

rhizomatic multiplicity and challenge to hegemony implicit in his writing. They also fail to acknowledge the ethical framework which underlies his cinematic theory. Deleuze would not only reject claims of Eurocentrism, theological preoccupation, or a simplistic conflation of art and history, but his very project demands a radical rethinking of our ethical responsibilities, with these ideas firmly in mind. In response to the same challenges, Sinnerbrink encourages scholars to embrace the revolutionary, multiplicitous and deterritorialising aspects of Deleuze's ethical system, but also confront our world's "deterritorialising plane of fluxes and flows, of mutating identities and proliferating desires" resulted by global capitalism (75).

In my mind, the fundamental question that emerges when trying to implement a philosophical and ethical system like Deleuze's to cinematic spectatorship, is **how** can such an idea founded on something as seemingly vague as *belief* respond to the multivalent ethical challenges it seeks to address? I aim to add to Sinnerbrink's analysis of the ethical potentialities of cinema. I take seriously his claim that:

We need to consider, rather, not just 'what cinema can do' (as Deleuzians might put it) but how cinema does what it does, and thus, more concretely and empirically, how it might serve as a medium of ethical experience. (Sinnerbrink 76)

I believe that uniting Deleuze and the essay film announces a unique possibility to explore philosophical perspectives that: "can open new ways of thinking about how affect, emotion, and cognition work together in our ethical experience" (Sinnerbrink 77). My wish is that this approach to Deleuzian cinematic analysis can deliver unique results for essay film study and artistic practice, and help rethink the growing challenges of our world and time.

6. Methodology

6.1 Methodology: Style and Structure

To develop a model of spectatorial response, I will conduct a strictly qualitative textual analysis of the three films within the context of Deleuzian and essay film scholarship. I will structure the discussion section of the thesis in three distinct but logically evolving sections. Firstly, I will explore the cinematic operations of the essay film in relation to cinematic affect and concepts. Consequently, I will interrogate the philosophical implications of such operations on the process of spectatorial thought. Finally, I will explore how this informs the ethical imperatives of the mode. Within these chapters I will weave an academic study of Deleuze's philosophy with an experimental and reflexive style of film analysis indebted to the purveyors of cinematic theories of affect and haptics. I believe this approach will respect the characteristics of the essay film and Deleuze, and importantly provide the reader with a textual glimpse of the aesthetic capacity of the essay film mode itself. Through this focussed experimental approach, I seek to answer Sinnerbrink's call for a study of 'how cinema does what it does' and how unique cinematic operations 'serve as a mode of ethical experience'.

To enable this style of cinematic analysis, the following chapter will introduce the three individual films and their respective filmmakers. This will allow the reader to achieve a richer understanding of the filmmakers' practice, the films' content and cinematic movements, so that the experimental aspects of the analysis can communicate the evocative immediacy of thought and affect.

6.2 Methodology: Why These Films?

I chose these three specific films for my analysis because they are uniquely pertinent to the ethical framework of this thesis and are urgent cinematic explorations of our present social, political and cultural milieu. Importantly, all three films have been explicitly described as essay films by their directors, reviewers and promotional material. Additionally, these films are yet to be extensively explored in the realm of

academia, with no mention of the films in the fields of essay film theory or Deleuzian scholarship. For *Homo Sapiens* and *I Am Not Your Negro*, this may be explained by their recent release and for *Two Years At Sea* by its relative industry obscurity.

Furthermore, a crucial subjective criterion for selecting these films is they each made a direct, moving and emotional impact on me. The affect they generated not only challenged my preconceptions and ability to interpolate their movements into my own ideological framework, but left me with a sense of ethical drive. They each discuss important social issues: racial inequality (*I Am Not Your Negro*), reimagining modes of existence (*Two Years At Sea*) and the philosophical implications of human-caused environmental destruction (*Homo Sapiens*). These films refuse to offer simplistic answers or saccharine optimism but instead present the multivalence of the ethical concerns they address. I fundamentally believe these three films are exemplary of the essay film's unique ethical potential. In true essayistic tradition, they offer the spectator the space for the act of thinking, a radical becoming-other and the chance to restore our belief in this world.

7. Introducing the Films and the Filmmakers

7.1.1 Introducing Raoul Peck

At sixty-three, Raoul Peck has cemented his position as a successful independent filmmaker. Though hardly a household name, Peck is self-sufficient from his craft and has produced a body of work that has travelled international film festival circuits, received industry awards and secured wide distribution. Peck, like many of his contemporaries from the Global South, has managed, or rather *had* to secure transnational funding from major film institutions, local arts bodies and private co-productions from Europe, the Caribbean, Africa and the United States.

Peck's oeuvre is marked by a distinctive transnational or cosmopolitan gaze, concerned with the notion of power and its political enactment. His work interrogates these interstices, and our pedagogically instructed histories.

As far back as my childhood, I was confronted with power, and the corridors of power. I knew about its rituals and its characters. (qtd. in Pressley-Sanon and Saint-Just 11)

Peck was born in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti in 1953 into an upper-middle class family heavily involved in local politics and non-government initiatives. When Peck was eight, his family fled to the Democratic Republic of Congo, seeking exile from the Haitian dictatorial regime François Duvalier. He spent his formative years living in Leopoldville (DRC), Brooklyn (USA), Orléans (France) and Berlin (Germany). He studied and worked in fields as diverse as politics, economics, engineering, journalism and photography, before studying filmmaking in Berlin at the German Film and Television Academy (DFFB). At the DFFB Peck was introduced to the films of the French New Wave's Left Bank and, importantly for this thesis, the essay films of Chris Marker and Alain Resnais. Their experimentation with non-chronological narrative, montaging, and precarious authorial narration, exposed Peck to the essayistic capacity.

Pressley-Sanon and Saint-Just claim that one of the crucial and defining features of

Peck's filmic innovation has been this "exploration of cinematic language through the essay film" (95). While Peck adopts his style to each cinematic subject he addresses, there are some consistent techniques he employs to produce his complex and affective essayistic enquiries. His signature practices include: non-chronological montage, spliced archival footage, disruptive voice-overs, TV news and media cut-ins, and Ken Burns-esque effected still images. Pressley-Sanon and Saint-Just suggest that these cinematic methods facilitate Peck's exploration of political, economic and ethical discourse; a concerted effort to "level-power". Peck through his finely tuned cinematic language:

...challenges the construct of the "universal" as a totalising all-encompassing historicity and questions the economic, political, and cultural legitimacy of the Western world. (Pressley-Sanon and Saint-Just 2)

This is the essayistic impulse in Peck's work and evidence of his desire to summon a belief in our world that recognises it for its facticity.

7.1.2 Introducing *I Am Not Your Negro*

Peck's 2016 film *I Am Not Your Negro* signals his most critically and commercially successful project to date. The film was made with a budget of \$1 million USD and, at the time of writing, has made over \$6.2 million USD at the box-office, received universal critical acclaim, and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. While this critical and commercial acclaim does not signal a radical variation in Peck's filmography, given the film's thematic concerns, this can perhaps be partly explained by present political realities. The film comes at a time when the United States is marked by: a deeply ideologically divided political landscape; police shootings of African-Americans; the Black Lives Matter movement; and a resurgence of white supremacy. Furthermore, the film was released one year after the Academy Awards was publicly excoriated for its lack of racial diversity.

I Am Not Your Negro is a filmic imagining of the unfinished work of African-American novelist James Baldwin, tentatively titled "Remember this House". The book was to be

an examination of the links, differences and cultural impact of three of Baldwin's close friends and prominent African-American leaders, assassinated in the 1950s: Medgar Evers, Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr. These unfinished and fragmentary notes, bequeathed to Peck by the Baldwin estate, form the foundation of his essayistic enquiry. The film is a poetic interweaving of the lives of the three assassinated figures, Baldwin's life and work, corporate and entertainment culture, African-American history, and the disastrous state of US race relations. In some ways, this film is a powerful show of solidarity to the black experience and the black spectator. However, I argue that it also functions as a call for white viewers to examine white hegemony at large for its historic violent acts and our resultant contemporary malaise, what Baldwin deems the "moral apathy – the death of the heart" of our culture, society and history (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*).

While critics describe the film as a documentary, Peck's work, like all great works of the essay film mode, intentionally diverges from traditional cinematic conventions. *I Am Not Your Negro* does not chronologise events, interview relevant historical characters, re-enact historic events, or pedagogically instruct social messages. Peck's film is deeply restless, moving with the perceptive and, at times, nauseating ferocity of Baldwin's writing. We are presented with an affective montage of: Baldwin's unfinished text and passages from his published writing; archival black-and-white footage of Baldwin's television appearances; archival photographs of American history; excerpts of Hollywood cinema; racially prejudicial advertising of the 1950s; segments of reality TV; splices of cable news; shots of Black Lives Matter events; and mobile footage of the bashings and violent murders of African-Americans by police officers, all of which is punctuated by Peck's own original footage.

The film's power lies in its refusal to be read as a simple reification of a progressive liberal agenda whose constituents could sublimate the film into their existing ideological positions. Peck does not sensationalise, proselytise or simply appeal to guilt or outrage. Instead, the film begs us, including those of us who are white spectators, to stare at and *through* the screen until we are confronted by our thinking-selves once more. Why are we scared by the black body? Why do we continue to pillage black culture and relegate expressions of suffrage to soulless and amoral commodities? Why do we feel entitled to an experience of life that is untenable and unthinkable to

others? Why do we mindlessly recite fictive narratives of western culture and empty sentiments of freedom, liberty, equality, destiny and progress? Why do we assert these poetic notions but never truly interrogate their impossibility in relation to the anesthetising materiality of our constructed hegemony? Why do we need the imagined 'other' to validate selfish, immoral and violent personal/political acts?

This is not a project of hapless nihilism; the film summons the audience to believe in our world for what it materially and immanently is. It asks us to become honest, active and ethical participants in this process of flux. As Baldwin intones in the film, "I can't be a pessimist because I'm alive... I'm forced to be an optimist" (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*).

7.2.1 Introducing Ben Rivers

At the age of 44, British video artist and filmmaker, Ben Rivers has created a sizeable body of work. With twenty-nine shorts, four feature films and an expanding series of multi-modal gallery installations, Rivers has constructed a vast oeuvre of filmic art. His work delves between the interstices of documentary and fiction, the individual and the collective, and the imagined and materiality. The chief concern that underpins his work is an interrogation of Utopia, through a poetic study of an individual's capacity to author their own authentic experience. Rivers' filmic subjects work to carve their lives in constant dialogue with the very material fabric of the world; nature and its elements, society and its objects, man and his dreams.

Born into a middle-class family in Somerset, United Kingdom, Rivers studied sculpture at the Falmouth School of Art in Cornwall in the 1990s. As he explored the plastic arts he developed an interest in photography and film. He was captivated by the materiality and tactility of the celluloid itself and film development. After teaching himself to develop 16mm film by hand and establishing the Brighton Cinematique (a theatre screening experimental films), Rivers began to develop a style that was strongly indebted to a bygone era of avant-garde cinema; marked by Moliere-esque colour tints, archival footage montages, and experimentation with exposure and frame rates. Rivers was more satisfied with sculpting imagined temporal and spatial worlds

with the moving image than the plasticity of clay or metal. Rivers' work is influenced by cinematic figures like Jonas Mekas, Peter Greenaway, and Robert Gardner, but also strongly marked by the writing of Knut Hamsun, J.G. Ballard and Thomas Moore. This is evidenced by his consistent exploration of a cinema experimenting with ethnography, realism, documentary, science-fiction and the unsettling rupture between a post-industrial world and an almost prelapsarian natural environment.

In an age of high-budget, blockbuster, sequel-ridden filmic escapism, filmmakers like Lucien Casting-Taylor, Pedro Costa and Ben Rivers are part of a cinematic trend and concerted effort to create low-budget, sensory and personal slow cinema that disturbs narrative verisimilitude as a contemplative antidote to mainstream Hollywood cinema. What makes Rivers a crucial component of this movement is the almost ascetic limitations he ascribes to his practice. He creates films on a shoe-string budget and usually works as a one-man crew, directing, shooting, sound-recording and editing his projects. Rivers shoots his work on a hand-wound 16mm Bolex film camera, and develops the reels of film in his kitchen sink. He describes his practice as making films *with* people instead of *about* people. A concept that he borrows from the participant-observation model of ethnography. He lives with his filmic subjects for months and works to develop personal rapport that imbue his final filmic works with a felt honesty and sense of comfort.

I argue that these practices are not a *Walden*-esque rejection of society or in service of a market-ready press release one-liner. Rather, Rivers seeks to embody in his practice a hopeful imagination of alternative modes of existence, sculpting a meaningful life from our facticity. As the narrator intones in Rivers' film *Slow Action*, "everywhere new utopias are possible".

7.2.2 Introducing Two Years At Sea

Two Years At Sea marks Rivers' first foray into feature filmmaking. The film is less an entry into the world of the box-office and more an extended cinematic poem that continues the artist's meditation on personal utopias. Set in a majestic Scottish forest and filmed in Rivers' trademark tactile black-and-white film, the work tracks the

quotidian life of Jake Williams. Continuing his self-imposed limitations, Rivers' film centres on a single character with no dialogue and seeks to craft a singular cinematic language, "a language of gestures and movements" (Rivers qtd. in Picard 26).

We follow Jake as he cooks, lops trees, showers, builds a raft, takes aimless hikes, and naps. We learn little of Jake's personal life except for sporadic glimpses of his faded photographs, eclectic taste in music and ramshackle house of hoarded objects. We are instead encouraged to look, listen and think about the way Jake moves and interacts with his environment, both built and natural; the crunch of the snow as his worn boots trudge through the hills, the rupturing fibres of a tree he fells and the thump of its fall, the ripples and reflections on a lake.

Jake Williams is not an actor; this is where and how he lives. He is at once a rugged and utopian figure and a sensorial surrogate for our gaze. The film sits between documentary, sensorium and daydream. As Andréa Picard suggests, Rivers creates a "generous vision, which exhumes fantasy from the real, while showing how reality is fundamentally strange and mysterious" (qtd. in Lim). Critics have invoked descriptions like spooky, dark and moody to describe this film. I argue that this not only mischaracterises Rivers' work and methodology, but also reveals a latent fear of quietude, nature, and solitude; a latent fear of our world. What does it say about us that we fear our material and immanent existence? Why cannot we accept, embrace and believe in our world? Perhaps *Two Years At Sea* can help us restore this belief.

7.3.1 Introducing Nikolaus Geyrhalter

Unlike the other two filmmakers addressed in this chapter, Nikolaus Geyrhalter remains a rather anonymous figure in cinematic scholarship. Although the forty-five-year-old Austrian director has worked in the industry for twenty years, making his feature film debut in 1994, and has directed twelve films, there are no scholarly texts dedicated to his career and no English-language academic papers on his work. This makes charting and historicising his career difficult in any comprehensive manner.

It is only with his most recent film *Homo Sapiens* that Geyrhalter has begun to receive considerable media coverage, industry attention and critical acclaim. The film had its world premiere at the Berlin Film Festival, was nominated for multiple festival awards, and has been reviewed by major publications. However, rather than delve here through an underdeveloped and superficial examination of Geyrhalter's biography and filmography, I propose looking at *Homo Sapiens* itself and direct the reader to several long-form interviews and festival press releases if they require further reading of the scant existing literature (see: Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduction; Giradot; Lermercier).

7.3.2 Introducing: Homo Sapiens

As the deconstructionists might say, human beings are the structuring absence in this film. (Sicinski)

The title of Geyrhalter's film reveals the looming but absent spectre of the meditative, achingly slow, and oddly haunting work... humans. Like *The World Without Us*, by Alan Weisman, the eco-futurist text which inspired Geyrhalter, this is a film about the world we will leave behind, a study of our legacy and our destructive capacity; "our own relics in the making" (Sicinski). In the film's ninety-four minutes we do not see a single human; instead we see our architectural creations, our social structures and our material excesses slowly and immanently decomposing. Our constructed world is reclaimed by nature's flow and flux.

Throughout the film we are flooded with waves of semiosis and their linguistic identifiers. However, it feels impotent to describe these structures and locations in such disrepair and stripped of their intended use-values. Words like mall, hospital, prison, garden, theatre, cinema, temple, and stadium, may arise in the viewer's mind, but unlike a Foucauldian analysis of such institutions, circumscribing power to these discursive descriptors is inadequate and hints at the transience of their presence in our world today. With under two-hundred shots Geyrhalter produces a work of remarkably affecting scale. His camera-work, stylistic composition and languid editing provides us with a non-judgemental gaze that echoes the absence of our human form.

This deeply essayistic work is a part of slow cinema, post-human discourse, speculative ecocriticism. Just as Geyrhalter has freed the frame of human imposition, his filmmaking techniques hold a certain emancipatory potential for the spectator. The viewer is allowed feel and think through the chaos of stasis and empty semiosis. This is by no means repudiating any directorial intent, but instead of surrendering disbelief to illusion or relishing my own cathartic pleasure of narrative dénouement, I am plagued by questions. Who spent their last pay-check on a toy for their children in this moss riddled shopping mall? What play received a tear-drenched standing ovation in this now decrepit theatre? Who shared their first kiss in this crumbling cinema? Who died alone and plagued by regret in this flooded hospital? Claude Levi-Strauss once declared “The world began with man, and it will complete itself without him” (413). This poses a cacophony of cerebral and existential questions, that this film provides the space and time to consider. However, the nature of the affective quality of cinema also elicits a bodily response. Beyond solipsism, how do we *feel* about a world without us? How do we feel about a world polluted by our signs and symbols but free from our memories and emotions? Importantly, how do we feel about leaving a world in an irretrievably worse condition than we found it, when we had every opportunity to act?

Like the Zone in Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*, these spaces are simultaneously brimming with life and drenched in death. When we leave this world, we will leave behind the facile by-products of industrialism, colonialism and neoliberalism, without a trace of what Abraham Lincoln termed the “better angels of our nature”. *Homo Sapiens* presses us to question not only what makes us human, but what world we inhabit, believe in, and project our dreams upon.

8. Discussion Chapter: Cinematic Operations

Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter. What is encountered may be Socrates, a temple or a demon. (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* 131)

Thinking for Deleuze engenders the multiplicitous, the different and importantly the exterior, arising as a product of what he deems the fundamental encounter that “forces thought” (*Difference and Repetition* 171). Thought is involuntary, it trespasses against us and destabilises stasis and homogeneity. For Deleuze, considering thought as an articulation of common sense or simple cognition is a fatal flaw. Rather, Deleuze suggests, we “count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up and educate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or a passion to think” (*Difference and Repetition* 176). With *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari attempt to express the radical possibilities of the various modes of thinking. They explore three major modes of thought: philosophy, science, and art, and their capacity for “rupturing life” and to “shock, shatter and provoke experience” (Colebrook 11). While they examine the distinctions between these three modes, Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic approach clarifies that these modes interact and are in constant dialogue. Rhizomatic thinking encourages plurality and diversity, not simple or discrete distinctions. This is especially important for Deleuze’s understanding of the operations of cinema.

For Deleuze and Guattari, art is a “bloc of sensation”, the intensive qualities of percepts and affects, however cinema is a phenomenon centred in time and space, duration and movement (*What is Philosophy* 164). Cinema produces a:

...creative system of signs that discovers a non-hierarchical means of ‘stammering’ through a ‘method of BETWEEN, “between two images”, which does away with all cinema of the One’ (*Cinema II* 180).

Thus, he develops a cinematic philosophy that undulates between the filmic creation of philosophical concepts and the affective intensities of art through which they are expressed. Filmmakers articulate radical cinematic concepts, spectators encounter

this thought through affect and philosophers again work with this affect to create related radical concepts:

The essential and positive relation between philosophy and the non-philosophy of the arts is evident throughout the noon-midnight hour... an extended hour in which ‘What is cinema?’ and ‘What is philosophy?’ are posed as a single question. (Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema* 202)

8.1 Cinematic Operations: Concepts

For Deleuze, the concepts produced by philosophy are markedly different from our understanding of everyday concepts. Everyday concepts articulate orderly and functional habits and opinions. However, this for Deleuze is the failure to think; allowing transcendence, hegemony or lazy consensus to diminish the difference and possibilities of this world. Everyday concepts reduce the complexity of the world to generalisations filtered through our subjectivity; to merely read and desire a world that resembles *me*.

Deleuze illustrates this distinction between everyday concepts and philosophical concepts with the idea of love. Everyday concepts diminish love to discrete personal encounters; love understood through marriage, cultural traditions, sexuality and gender etc. As Colebrook suggests, this allows and promotes personal subjective dismissals of others experiences, like “that’s not love, it’s perversion” (17). In contrast, a philosophical conception of love allows us to think of it as openly as possible. Love for Deleuze can be understood as a “possible encounter with an other as a whole new world” (Colebrook 17). This provides us with room to think of and through experiences of love that we are yet to encounter.

Therefore, for Deleuze, a concept holds the power through thought to extend experience. As Colebrook explains, “a concept does not just add another word to a language; it transforms the whole shape of language”, a concept can articulate a whole new world (17).

8.2 Cinematic Operations: Affect

Just as the concepts of philosophy force us to think outside of our linguistic definitions and opinions, the affects and percepts of art forcibly disrupt the reductive connections we make between our sensorial experiences in the world. Percepts are the sensory data we receive (smells, tastes, sounds etc.) while affects are the experiences we encounter when exposed to these sensory percepts (desire, disgust, passion, excitation etc.). Affects and percepts, when presented through art, “free these forces from the particular observers or bodies who experience them” (Colebrook 22). Opinion and doxa subordinate the complexities of sensory experience to expressions of the sensible and intelligible. They convince us that what we taste, smell, hear, see and feel can be communicated through a repeatable and recognisable manner by way of our identity. This lessens the complex flows and fluxes of affects and percepts to everyday concepts. Art refuses experience of its affects and percepts to be reduced to such homogenous and orderly flows, instead illuminating, through intensive singularities, our capacity for a prepersonal ability to be affected. As Shaviro suggests, “thought is affect, and not the expression of substitutive representation of affect. And affect in turn is not a fixed state, but the immediacy of a passage or alteration” (87). When we encounter the intensity of the affects and percepts of art, our frames of reference are relinquished; subjective fulfilment is disturbed as we are heaved into a moment of excessive excitation, beyond ourselves. This power of affect shows the capacity of thinking when involuntarily encountered to expose new modes of sensory experience, and our capacity to think and feel whole new worlds.

8.3 Cinematic Operations: The Essay Film

So, how are we to understand Deleuze’s film-philosophy and the encounter of thought arising from affects and concepts through spectatorship of the essay film and our three specific case studies for this thesis? We must think *through* these works rather than slavishly *apply* Deleuze’s conceptual apparatus to them. Through affect and concepts, we can understand that thought is at once corporeal and mental. By avoiding notions of representation and direct readings of narrative, I will instead think through the colours, sounds, rhythms, movements, elliptical and rhizomatic structures and

horizontal montages, central to the essay film mode. Consequently, exploring how the encounter of these cinematic experiences rupture, shock and force us to think.

8.4 Cinematic Operations: I Am Not Your Negro

As a tense string symphony pulses, I see young black children preparing for school in rich 16mm colour film. From their idyllic suburban home, the children nervously walk towards a car. The vehicle is marked "U.S. ARMY". They are greeted at school by a dozen military guards who stand at attention, their rifles firmly grasped to their chest. A non-diegetic and disembodied voice begins to bellow over this image, "the moment a negro child walks into the school..." (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*). I am now thrown temporally and spatially to this speech's enunciator, Leander Perez, the president of the "White Citizens Council" (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*). He stands at a lectern, violently gesticulating and lit by a stark stage-light. Thumping the podium like a judge and his gavel, he continues "every decent, self-respecting, loving parent should take his white child out of that parochial school" (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*).

Before I can interpolate this declaration into outrage or offence, the strings progress to an ominous melody and I flash to a cardboard sign that reads "WE WON'T GO TO SCHOOL WITH NEGROES". I pan up this black-and-white photograph. I see that holding the sign is a gaunt white child. My panning gaze reaches his face, he stares directly at me, he is poised and sure, his lips pursed in a cheeky grin. With his returned gaze, I am consumed by an overwhelming absence that feels as if it needs to be addressed, but Peck pushes me forward and disallows the fulfilment of this impulse.

I see a black-and-white shot of a middle-class woman; dappled light caresses her shoulder. She stares off-screen with a look of disdain, "God forgives murder and he forgives adultery" she says, "but he is very angry and he actually curses all who do integrate" (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*). While I am lost on a tangent, questioning her biblical authority and the malice she directs at these innocent children Peck throws me back to the school. The mood is chaotic; protesters tussle with the military and police officers. They forcefully push past the police barricades and begin to wreak havoc. As the violins and the chanting of the crowd reach a crescendo, framed behind

the jeering onlookers I see a white man chase a black man, violently tackling him into a grassy mound.

The music fades and the chanting quiets as the narration recounts Baldwin's words: "that's when I saw the photograph" (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*). Baldwin explains how seeing a photograph of Dorothy Counts, a fifteen-year-old African-American girl, in a Parisian newspaper drove him to return to the United States. I see a sequence of five photographs depicting Counts' agonising first day at an 'integrated' high school. She is encircled by her taunting white classmates. The 'mob', as Baldwin calls them, are frozen forever on film; mid-laugh, screaming, and spitting. In stark contrast, the besieged fifteen-year-old's face is strong and stern but betrayed by a tangible horror and pain. I am drawn into these visceral sensations.

Peck forcefully disorients me so that the past I see captured on screen and the present I inhabit are confused and conflated. I am forced into a deep sensorial relationship with the screen. I feel the testosterone-fuelled anger of the mob. I think of the racial taunts of the alt-right today. With the stillness of the photograph and the absence of sound, I am forced into an affective and abject shame. I beckon the racially charged epithets and violent threats I imagine coming from this crowd. I feel pained as if these phrases are my own, but remain unuttered by me. As Rascaroli declares "I, the spectator am looked at, I am called upon, and by answering, I am implicated in the film" (*The Personal Camera* 79). I feel the guilt of the voyeur, the act, and of our history. However, what is important is that through affect I am forced to think, my collective sensorial response to the call of the essay film. I exceed normative concepts of guilt, shame and the gratifying feeling of pity. I am not swept up into the trajectory of the narrative, but am thrown into the past, dragged back to the present and cannot help but imagine and pine for a future. With the disorienting staccato oscillation between narration, still photography, film and music, I am beckoned into the intensities of the work and encounter the body of the film. In response, I feel my own body affected and stirred.

Baldwin yearns "Some one of us should have been there with her" (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*). He articulates the guilt and anger he felt by being absent from the political realities of his home country and evokes the fear and vulnerability that

Dorothy Counts must have faced when encountering such hate alone. However, with Peck's confusion of temporality, cinematic techniques and undulating flows of tension, I am implicated as spectator. This *some one of us* punctures and strikes me. Peck forces me through essayistic modalities to encounter this unfinalisable thought. We should have been there, not just for this moment, not just for Dorothy Counts, but for history, for each other, for the world. The pure impossibility of this thought and the visceral cinematic operations at play here are like Barthes' *punctum*, the image that pricks and wounds me. We are compelled to recognise that "this-has-been" and "this-will-die" (Barthes 96). With *I Am Not Your Negro*, Peck obliges us to confront the atrocities of history, the helplessness of our present, and forces us to think beyond ourselves.

8.5 Cinematic Operations: Homo Sapiens

Homo Sapiens opens on a series of dishevelled mosaics. The tiles depict a world alive with humans and nature. Two forlorn men carry a coffin. A child reaches for her parents' embrace. Lovers stare longingly into each other's eyes. Doves soar to the sky above. Fires burn, stars explode and clouds billow. There is no soundtrack to direct me, no camera movement to steer me forward. Dripping water and luminescent reflections distort my vision. The sound of each droplet hitting the intricate mosaic's surface emits an echo which indicates that the scene takes place in a vast industrial area. This is not the intimate or solemn space that these artfully crafted stones suggest. These mosaics are representations of how we see ourselves, how we want to be remembered. Seeing our experiences reduced to crumbling stone, I feel a pinch of melancholy. However, this is the last time Geyrhalter shows any representation of humans in his film. He implants this uncomfortable desire for self-representation firmly in my mind so, as the film unfolds, I remember this rupturing juncture. The film forces me to stare at our remnants, a world without our presence and to think and feel through our interaction with that world here and now. With no direct screen surrogate, *Homo Sapiens* forces me to think and feel beyond myself.

Rain falls in a vast overgrown forest. A gust of wind shakes the trees' branches. The calls of birds chime in the distance. Large military tanks lie disused, encroached upon by moss. A field of discoloured and rusted Jeeps are enveloped by the shade of a

passing cloud. Two naval frigates, striped by corrosion, float on a still lake. Their missile launchers frozen and impotent. These images slowly and softly unfurl, but the meditative flows put me into contact with the absurd, the heterogenous rhythms of our world, the unordered chaos. These symbols of military might are reduced to their material and molecular qualities. While I have the incessant impulse to categorise their semiosis, I am forced to encounter these violent and destructive weapons move to mere obstacles of nature's inevitable submergence. It is overwhelming for me to witness this process of shifting ontology. I think about our own shift implicit here too.

Can we forgo our obsession with self-images? Can we come into contact with the immanent world before we fade? Can we play a constructive role in the flows of life and embrace our position in the ceaseless multiplicity of our rhizomatically linked world? This is what is at stake in *Homo Sapiens*. These are the achingly powerful affects generated by each frame, and the concepts we are encouraged to think through.

Large cylindrical bags of waste fill a rubbish dump. The waste's abject fluids spill forth and dry in the roasting sun. Curdled milk, faeces, stained clothes, and broken toys are compressed and percolate in a nauseating stew of human excess. The gentle breeze and the passing cumulus betray the disgusting matter that pervades below. My body heaves in response to the screen but forces me to think of the palace of *things* that surrounds me. This makes me question the solace these objects provide my transient life and the effect they will have one day as waste. I am confronted with my ability to deny this inevitability. Geyrhalter forces me to meet this shameful encounter by linking my sensorial affect and cognitive conceptualisation.

In a dark cave a ray of light pierces through a crack in the stone walls. The light hits the water at cavern's craggy base and shines a radiant turquoise. The immense beauty of this colour consoles me, but I am made uneasy by a pile of corrugated iron, tin sheets and an incongruous blue car perched atop this inorganic tower of decay. I am distracted by the reflected light of ripples that caress the cave walls. I remember the walls of our ancestors in Lascaux, emblazoned with our first artistic expression of a desire for transcendence and immortality. However, here our ancient and trembling hands struggling to communicate our experience of the world are replaced by the world's intrinsic capacity to paint its own chaotic flux. The world does not need us to

reduce its flows, to expend and consume its magnitude, but requires us to encounter its overwhelming force. *Homo Sapiens* renounces our everyday seeing, feeling and thinking. I have no recourse to an embodied perspective of 'my world' alone. We are forced to imagine a world that is inextricably no longer ours.

8.6 Cinematic Operations: Two Years At Sea

With *Two Years At Sea*, Rivers creates an affective and conceptually rich ballet. He carefully intertwines the materiality of the filmic object itself, the materiality of the world and Jake's 'deterritorialised' encounter with the world. This work is marked by unique filmic artefacts that create an almost topographical materialism, or what Tarrant terms a "chemical landscape" (59). A set of compound images; layers of the light captured by the film-strip, the scratches and abrasions created by physically handling the film, and the faded and dynamic exposure produced by Rivers' hand-development. This for Rivers is not baseless experimentation in the service of aesthetics. Rather, the shaky moving camera, static long-takes, and naturalistic sound, produces an embodied encounter with the world. This sensorial experience is deepened by the texture, elements and life Rivers captures with this style. Rivers' filmic subject Jake is captured encountering this environment in what Deleuze would term a *deterritorialised* nature, a movement beyond a system of any kind, whether linguistic, social, temporal or spatial. Jake experiences the world around him through a space and time not demarcated by measurable functions. He has a pure relationship with speed, movement and the molecular material of our world. Rivers' implements cinematic operations that push toward the intensities, flows and tactility of affect and the concepts these movements communicate.

As Jake plunges his worn boots into the snow, I hear the crunch of the frozen surface cracking beneath his feet. I hear his weary breath pulsate with each step. The camera struggles to keep up with his determined trudge, so my vision shakes and jerks. The tactile grain and faded edges of the frame make the elements outside the contrasted snow and Jake's dark figure cloudy and indistinct. I am drawn into the frame, brought closer to Jake's experience in the world and begin to embody his movements and gestures; the sensorial evocations of this environment. I begin to feel my own senses

enlivened. My sensory motor-scheme is addressed rather than my comprehension of a forward motion of narrative.

Jake disrobes and sets up his rickety shower in his kitchen. I watch every action and movement of this routine. I hear the clothes fall from his skin, the squeaking metal of the old shower head, his careless arrhythmic whistle and the uneven patter of the shower. Jake scrubs and washes with an instinctive agility. I am encouraged to drop my act in response, to join his vulnerability. As the room begins to fill with steam, Rivers cuts to a small box of potted plants basking in the morning light. The healthy stems reach in the direction of the sun. The plants, like Jake, read their environment and interactively adjust to its dynamic flows. As the thick clouds of mist envelop Jake's shower and our frame, I feel a certain calmness in the obfuscated boundaries of sensorial distinctions. The sound of the shower, the rustling wind, the sunlight that illuminates Jake's naked form, the steam that fills the room and fades our vision, the scratched celluloid, begin to weave and create unique compounds. The multiplicitous interaction of *mise-en-scène*, filmic subject, natural environment, vision, sound and deterritorialised time and space, make me feel as if I am on a precipice, a threshold.

This sensorial embodied encounter does not conflate or collapse the differences of the world but illuminates the points at which they intersect and rhizomatically link. I am forced into feeling and thinking about an alternative mode of existence, a deterritorialised life beyond me. Another way of living is invoked that without these cinematic operations remains unthought, unimagined and unexplored.

9. Discussion Chapter: Philosophical Implications

What are the philosophical implications of these films evoking intensities and encounters beyond ourselves? For Deleuze, these encounters not only solicit new modes of thought but are a crucial catalyst in the unending process of *becoming*. As I explored in the previous chapter, Deleuze's project extrapolates the interstices and interactions between cinema and philosophy; a becoming-cinema of philosophy and becoming-philosophy of cinema. When a spectator is cinematically forced into thinking: they encounter and perceive the previously 'unthought', time and movement are rendered immanent and pure, subjectivity and static notions of the self are disturbed and the preconditions of history are shattered.

9.1 Philosophical Implications: Becoming

Being is about those questions that have engaged philosophers, scientists and theologians alike for centuries: what is the essence of life? What makes us human? What does it mean to exist, biologically, culturally, historically, spiritually? (Sotirin 116)

Deleuze posits an argument against both the transcendent *being* stipulated by most monotheistic religious traditions and the claims of a static and subject-driven *being* articulated by philosophy from Plato, Descartes and Kant. For Deleuze, existence is never a question of who we are, but of what we can become. *Becoming* radically departs from bifurcated categorisations of us and the world: men and women, humans and animals, subjects and objects, and the perceptible and imperceptible. *Becoming* moves past our desire for knowledge, control and possession; beyond the concepts that underpin much of our social order.

Becoming expands and multiplies experience, a process of cognitive/sensorial creativity. Patty Sotirin, sifting through Deleuze's expansive bibliography, posits four key animating dynamics that drive this process of *becoming*: a positive ontology, block of becoming, immanence and non-representational becomings.

9.1.1 Becoming: Positive Ontology

Positive Ontology describes the affirmative qualities of Deleuze's becoming, a process that enables the possible; the opportunities for a life to expand and move beyond itself. Becoming is felt, sensed and thought and cannot be reduced to logical or moralistic terms. It is a creative mode of existence that requires us to surpass our social/cultural/economic/political/historical/biological boundaries, and reap the vitality and freedom of such a movement.

9.1.2 Becoming: Block of Becoming

For Deleuze, becoming is not a simple transformation, where one switches or exchanges their identity, but recognises the plurality of a rhizomatic system. Becoming is always in the middle, always in-between; origins and destinations are irrelevant, instead what matters are the intensities and capacities of singular encounters and how they dynamically compound. These moments of a dynamically compounded in-between are what Deleuze terms *blocks of becoming*. When one is at these thresholds, a self cannot be categorised as distinct but is rendered indiscernible. As Deleuze suggests, the possibilities of living differently, transgressing hegemonic limitations of committing acts of creative heresy is revealed when "one changes becoming depending on the hour of the world, the circles of hell, or the stages of a journey that sets scales, forms and cries in variation" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 274)

9.1.3 Becoming: Immanence

Deleuze's philosophy is often called a philosophy of immanence because it is concerned with what a life can do, what a body can do when we think in terms of becomings, multiplicities, lines and intensities. (Sotirin 119)

Arguably the most fundamental component of becoming for Deleuze is immanence, the ultimate unshackling of existence. This is understanding life's chaotic flows without reference to a structured system of presuppositions. Immanence instructs we understand experience through encounters and their boundless possibilities here and

now, not through transcendent foundations and their proclamations. This for Deleuze is “absolute immanence: it is complete power, complete bliss” (*Immanence: A Life* 27)

9.1.4 Becoming: Non-Representational Becomings

The final component of Deleuze’s becoming noted by Sotirin is its non-representational quality. As will become clear in the following section on becoming-minor, this is the most crucial aspect for the ethical concerns underpinning this thesis. Becoming recognises the under/misrepresented, unequal and excluded minorities of our hegemonic social orders, without relying on appropriation, gestures or mere appearances.

Becoming is certainly not imitating, or identifying with something... Becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, "appearing," "being," "equalling" or "producing". (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 3-4)

9.2 Philosophical Implications: Becoming-Minor

Minority for Deleuze is not a simple demographic minority, as Rodowick suggests, the “defining characteristic of a minority is in fact philosophical: to become-other as an affirmative will to power” (Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine* 153). This discursive function of minority cannot be reduced to identity politics, because to do so would simply fall into a systematic reversal, where subjects of oppression and exclusion are reified through the same essentialist practices they seeks to overcome. Rather than establishing a cinematic ethics that relies on an individual refinement of moral actions, Deleuze promotes a more collective focus to his ethical approach. He argues that cinema has the capacity and should work towards the constitution of a missing people, a “people to come” (Deleuze, *Cinema II* 208). This is a people without recourse to any historical, political, teleological or ideological organisation.

Ideally, a minority discourse is collective without unifying. The people are never one but several or multiple, not molar but molecular... minor cinema must

produce collective utterances... whose paradoxical property is to address a people who do not yet exist and, in so doing, urge them toward becoming. (Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* 153)

Deleuze suggests that the utopian political potential of cinema was crushed with the film practices enacted during the era of the Soviet state, the Nazi regime and Hollywood Studio system. He claims that with this early cinema, the “people are already there, real before being actual, ideal without being abstract” (Deleuze, *Cinema II* 208). This cinema operates as counter-revolutionary; the community dreamt up by hegemonic power was projected on screen as a model for the people to reflect and act out in their daily lives. This is a malevolent cinematic representation of the ideological and political aspirations of the state that actively limits its citizens’ experiences and encounters in the world. As a mode of combatting this malaise, Deleuze posits that a minor-cinema can articulate a minority’s limits, constraints, and repression to show “how the people are what is missing” (Deleuze, *Cinema II* 208). This is an affirmation of a collective ‘not yet’ that has the capacity to creatively facilitate a people to come.

Becoming embraces the multiplicities of experience, the liminality and differences of humans, animals, and inorganic life. Deleuze specifies examples of this threshold of ‘otherness’ that we are to traverse and transgress in pursuit of a minoritarian logic, like that of becoming-woman, becoming-animal and becoming-molecular. However, what is crucial is that becoming-other does not relate to being resembling or standing in for an other. Becoming is a gleeful line of flight through the rigid hierarchies of binary limits. It is a process that exceeds definition, destabilises hegemony and is directed towards the opening of new worlds, the possibilities of life itself.

9.3 Philosophical Implications: The Essay Film

I argue that the essay film actively embraces a cinema of becoming-minor. By heretically rejecting any transcendent or hegemonic order, and by radically thinking the ‘unthought’, the essay film necessarily encourages a process of spectatorial becoming-other. These three exemplary case-studies actively explore the problematic notions of static identity, subject-oriented thinking, and capitalist modes of

production. Rather than portray a fantastical or utopian destination of a promised people or world, they imagine and evoke in us a 'people to come'.

9.4 Philosophical Implications: Two Years At Sea

An atonal strumming guitar strikes a driving rhythm as Jake sets off into the forest carrying a wooden frame and plastic containers. As he wades, hikes and climbs through the marshes of the Scottish highlands he exerts his corporeal energy with reckless abandon. Rivers' captures these physical movements with dizzying camerawork, and elliptical editing. I am drawn into a tangible exhaustion by this pace and intensity. I see the pain and effort on Jake's face. I respond sensorially to his physical exertion, intensified by the sounds of his encounter with the raw materiality of his environment. The muddy gravel squelches underneath his feet. The plastic boxes rattle as they sway and smack against his skin. I feel as if Jake is working towards something, a rewarding goal, but I am not sure what. The sky is faded and the horizon is indistinguishable, so that now I both sensorially and cognitively struggle to *see* where he is heading. I slavishly read each act as a component of a narrative I am yet to piece together.

As Jake reaches a large body of water the guitar's strumming slows, but he continues his undertaking with vitality. From the sporadic objects he carried here, he builds a makeshift raft. The wooden frame forms the base of the vessel and the water containers serve as the pontoon. He vigorously inflates a rubber mattress to use as the boat's buoyant body. My curiosity peaks as he pushes off from the shore and rows towards the centre of the water. Where will he venture with his raft? What is at the other side of this water channel? What uncharted territory lies there waiting for his conquest? However, Jake merely stops and reclines; he is still and silent. Rivers' holds me here; it begins to dawn on me that this is not a man struggling to conquer nature. Jake is not chasing some masculine quest for glory. As I stare at this image Rivers' begins to reveal the pure time and space of this environment, the materiality of this world and of the filmic object itself. I stare at the reflection of the overcast sky on the surface of the water. I follow each ripple formed by Jake's delicate movements. I gaze at the swaying shrubs in the foreground of the frame. I see, or rather try to see through,

the layers of flickering and scratched celluloid over the overexposed grey sky. I feel the slow undulating currents in the water as Jake floats across its surface. I hear the calming hiss of the wind, the soothing sound of the flowing water, the cries of sheep, gurgling frogs and warbling birds. These aural and visual textures communicate the fluctuating life that constitutes our world. This is a process of becoming-other in the world. An aching attempt for an immanent relationship with the very sensorial fabric of this world, here and now.

For Deleuze “the function of cinema is not to reflect reality, but rather to bring forth a vision of it” (Åkervall). *Rivers* brings forth a vision that exceeds not only narrative impulses for causality and dénouement but that exceeds the capitalist logic of value. In our deeply commodified world, value is accorded and accrued per its return; each act judged by its potential gain and profit. The intensities, flows and premise of *Two Years At Sea* disturbs this reductive reasoning. I am so accustomed to narrative logic that I instinctively search for the signs of a journey, the clichés of emotion turmoil, the flows of a grand-narrative.

I want Jake to have a motive for his actions and be rewarded for his struggle. Here I reduce life, time, space, movement, to quantifiable singularities that privilege my subjective understanding of experience. The film offers a deeper relationship with the flows and intensities of our immanent world. There is no reward or purpose for Jake’s actions, he is becoming, an encounter with the world that opens his sensory and cognitive capacity for experience. We too are swept up in this procedure. We are confronted with our restrictive reasoning; the pure excess of this encounter is the reward in and of itself.

Rivers’ film viscerally communicates the possibilities of other modes of existence, other ways of living. The film is a flurry of movement and action, but is unconcerned with language, causality, or the value exchange of capitalism. This is a minoritarian logic, that addresses a people who do not yet exist and, in so doing, urge us toward becoming. The film is a creative assemblage that repeats nothing other than the pure power to be different.

9.5 Philosophical Implications: Homo Sapiens

An abandoned prison in a devastating state of disrepair haunts me. The cracked paint, rusted metal and collapsing infrastructure hints at the cosmic absurdity of an industrial-prison complex. I confront the impermanence of a space constructed to perpetuate forced labour, corporate interests and social exclusion, cloaked in the transcendent claims of morality and justice. What is before me in these ruins? Iron grates, cement slabs, wooden frames and broken glass form an ugly architectural imposition on the world. I begin to feel the larger flows of time and space in the prison that our self-important costume drama disallows. The violence we assert against each other and on the material world around us is revealed in our gaping absence. I feel the flux of the prison's materiality. I see the wooden bed as the compressed fibres of fallen trees and the prison bars as wrought assemblages of iron ore.

An empty abattoir is terrifying in its stasis. My imagination drenches a motionless metal saw in the carnage its blade has wrought on flesh and bone. A heaped pile of putrefying animals reminds me of the mass graves of our violent history, but slowly transforms in my mind to a pile of dust and soil. Its 'decompositional' inevitability emerges from the screen as I think and feel through these haunting remnants. As the plastic flaps of the abattoir door flutter in the wind and reflect the setting sun, I think about industrial animal farming, the sheer brutality and suffering this butchery causes living creatures, the unequal distribution of resources this system perpetuates, the scale of emissions and the extinctive effects on our ecological system.

Homo Sapiens is not explicitly political about positions of minority, but through its abstraction of the human figure Geyrhalter enlivens a process of becoming that embraces an assemblage that is deeply other. The film encourages the spectator to enter into becoming-molecular and as a consequence, becoming-minor. We are inundated with a world of nature, animals and molecular elements without our presence but marked by our havoc. Geyrhalter presents us with our hegemonic social constructs, our institutions, our industries devoid of our performative presence. What is the molecular value of a prison? What constitutes an abattoir once we are gone? Beyond that, this is a crucial push missing from our present nihilistic position on climate change. Instead of an unempathetic denial of the facticity of future generations

or the injustice of our present, Geyhalter's film shows us our transient social orders and reveals where we are heading. The film encourages us to enter into a multiplicitous assemblage that begs us to imagine other worlds, other possibilities.

9.6 Philosophical Implications: I Am Not Your Negro

I float down an unmistakably southern swamp. A sky casts hanging branches in a melancholic blue. As I am looking up at the canopy of the passing conifers, Baldwin's narrated words catch me off guard in my contemplation:

...his telling me how the tatters of clothes from a lynched body hung, flapping in the tree for days, and how he had to pass that tree everyday. (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*)

Encountering the thought of this barbaric history, the water I glide down starts to feel like the river Styx; a haunting boundary between our earthly realm and the dark underworld. Distant and slightly indistinct the sombre voice of Lightin' Hopkins sings *Baby Please Don't Go*. As the song remains quiet in the background I bring forth another song from my own aural memory. Billie Holiday's distinctive voice haunts me and I hear her bellow:

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
(Holiday, *Strange Fruit*)

I stare at the reeds and mangroves swaying in this same southern breeze. Baldwin again strikes me unawares: "In America I was free only in battle, never free to rest and he who finds no way to rest cannot long survive the battle" (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*). I am engulfed by another vision, a crowd of men my age, march with confederate flags raised skyward. Blurred in the background I make out a straight row of more southern trees. I wonder, "Are these the *poplars* Holiday sung about?". I feel

sick, enraged and confused by this collage of cinematic forms, concepts and the intensities of thought.

I am dragged back to the swamp. Rain falls forlornly on its surface and an ominous drone sounds to a climax. I see Baldwin's face tightly framed. "The *N-word* has never been happy in this place" he says (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*). I see an archival tape of five black children dressed in Easter Bunny costumes, hopping around a manicured garden. As the camera pans across their smiling faces, Baldwin's words '*never been happy*' reverberate in my mind, again and again.

Baldwin intones, "As you grow older, this is not a figure of speech, the corpses of your brothers and sisters pile up around you" (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*). His passionate oration is combined with photographs of slain young black children at the hands of the Police. The faces of Tamir Rice, Darius Simmons, Trayvon Martin, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Christopher McCray, Cameron Tillman, and Amir Brooks, flash and fade before me. I realise the words I hear narrated, and the heart-wrenching images onscreen, are separated by over forty years. This feels like jab to the heart, a forced encounter with the material reality of this suffering that has been perpetuated for over two hundred years. The fantasies of manifest destiny, the American dream, liberty and freedom are shown to be just that... fantasy; a hateful nihilism that pervades and mindlessly reproduces. Baldwin hammers this agonising point beyond my limit:

When you try to stand up and look the world in the face like you had a right to be here, you have attacked the entire power structure of the western world.
(Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*)

Despite the impossible task of communicating the experience of minority of African-Americans, Peck manages to make a dizzying and desperate collective utterance that implicates us all. The power of the singular personal stories, the evocation of incapacitating affect, the shameful predictability of our social condition today, demands to be felt and thought in this film. The polyglot voices of the marginalised and excluded are heard in the multiplicity of experience they deserve. The essay film mode utilised by *I Am Not Your Negro* sensorially demands we begin to change. We must embrace our liminal subjectivity, and facilitate a people to come. We are forced

to encounter the injustice and brutality of the past and present through previously unthought and rhizomatically chained sequences. The consistent minoritisation of African-Americans through state violence, cultural representation and sheer 'othering' is based on greed, unfounded fear and nihilism. Peck illuminates this by folding, rearranging and splicing our temporal chronology and showing how our nihilistic culture, mythologises, celebrates or simply ignores our violent past.

10. Discussion Chapter: Ethical Imperatives

How do we move from exploring the cinematic operations and implications of the essay film towards the ethical imperatives of such a spectatorship? Why is the essay film important in developing a cinematic ethics? What is a cinematic ethics? What ethical dilemmas does such a system allow us to address? To address these questions, I will explore here the foundation of Deleuzian ethics, the crisis of nihilism this system hopes to address, the way a cinematic ethics faces this nihilism, and how the essay film mode itself facilitates a belief in this world, our fundamental ethical response.

10.1 Ethical Imperatives: Immanent Ethics

Deleuze draws a stark distinction between ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’. Morality signals a set of rules and codes that constrains and judges human action according to the value claims of a transcendent, universal or hegemonic order. Ethics on the other hand functions as facilitative rules that evaluates what we do, say, and think according to the immanent mode of existence (Smith 124). As Deleuze declares ethics demands a questioning of “what *can* I do, what am I *capable* of doing?” instead of that asked by morality: “what *must* I do?” (Smith 125). An ethics of immanence radically opposes any set of governing rules that draws a distinction between existence and our power to act. Deleuze proposes an ethics that privileges a mode of immanent and ethical becoming that pushes at the very limits of our ethical capacity.

10.2 Ethical Imperatives: Nihilism

Deleuze argues that the primary role of ethics today is to combat a pervasive nihilism. He suggests, as do many theorists, including Cavell, Jameson, Baudrillard and Lyotard, that in response to the two World Wars, a massive decline in religion, capitalist modes of production, and failed utopian projects, society has undergone a collective crisis of belief, nihilism. Nihilism attests to a weakening of our meaningful sensorial and cognitive links with the world, where we have all but ethically given up,

We hardly believe any longer that a global situation can give rise to an action

which is capable of modifying it – no more than we believe that an action can force a situation to disclose itself, even partially. (Deleuze, *Cinema I*, 206)

The question from a Deleuzian perspective becomes: How do we renew meaning, ethics, value, cohesion, action and collectivism in such a time? How do we restore a collective belief in the world?

10.3 Ethical Imperatives: Cinematic Belief in the World

For Deleuze, cinema too has undergone and reflected this nihilistic crisis of belief. As aforementioned, without an affirmative project, the early cinema of the Soviets, Nazi Germany, and Hollywood, cloaked state control in aestheticised visions of utopia, and our modern post-war cinema is largely steeped in pessimism, cynicism and irony. In what appears now to be a prophetic claim about the state of mainstream cinema, Deleuze suggests that rather than confronting our disillusion with cultural and political realities, cinema is stuck in a postmodern vortex. The titanic financial machine of blockbuster cinema produces films that repeat clichés and exhaust classical narrative conventions all under the pretence of a reflexive and aware creativity.

Beyond these observations, Deleuze articulates a poignant allegorical connection between our daily nihilism as a kind of “shoddy” cinematographic experience:

We no longer even believe in the events that happen to us, love or death, as if they hardly concern us. We do not make cinema; rather, the world looks to us like a bad film... Man is in the world as if in a pure optical or acoustical situation. The reaction of which man is dispossessed can only be replaced by belief. Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. Cinema must not film the world, but rather, belief in this world, our only link. (*Cinema II*, 166)

This nihilistic cinematic experience today is one in which media not only pervades and saturates our daily lives, but also fragments and atomises our relationship with the

world. Swept up in a maelstrom of pure optical and acoustical situations we are rendered passive and subservient to the claims of ideology and power. Our ethical agency is stripped as links between perception, affection, thought and action are severed.

So, what does it mean to film our *belief in this world*, what Deleuze terms our “subtle way out” (*Cinema II*, 164)? He advocates for a cinema that rethinks our immanent relationship with this world, here and now. The answer for Deleuze lies in cinema thinking the unthinkable, filming our cognitive and sensorial relationships with intolerable injustices and exploring our apparent powerlessness to embrace life. Through cinema we can unite the body, the mind and the world. I contend that the essay film mode is at the forefront of a cinematic project of belief; a creative reunification of perception, affection, thought and action.

10.4 Ethical Imperatives: The Essay Film

The essay film facilitates a cinematic philosophy that, through its intensive affects and percepts, and the conceptualisation of a becoming-other, encourages its spectators to ‘choose to choose’. This is a positive affirmation of the world and our capacity for ethical agency. We are confronted with an embodied encounter with the cinematic image of the world with no recourse but to think and feel through the intolerability of injustice and the incapacitating banality of nihilism. We are drawn into the movement and time constructed by these films. Instead of offering us a mimetic representation of our desires or a cathartic escape from our passivity, the essay film encourages us to expand our experience and to imagine new worlds.

Peck, Rivers and Geyrhalter recognise that the answer to our restrictive modern condition is not to nurture knowledge, advocate for a liberal political progress, or to escape through illusion. They have created cinema with this inimitable essay film mode that offers a kind of absurd hope, *belief* as an alternative mode of living. The essay film confronts us with the “aberrant paths that might lead us down new, fresh and undiscovered byways in thought...the vital faith in the possibility of living differently again” (Ambrose 6).

10.5 Ethical Imperatives: Homo Sapiens

His soul swooned softly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (Joyce 160)

These are the immortal closing words of James Joyce's short story *The Dead*. Joyce invokes the falling snow to allegorically illustrate the process of 'metempsychosis', the passing of the soul at death into another body, human or otherwise. The final moments of *Homo Sapiens* compel us to consider another kind of metempsychosis, again with the imagery of falling snow.

Snowflakes softly engulf a satellite, covering the traces of our cosmological curiosity. I think of the loneliness that led us to constantly look upwards. Are we alone? Why do we look to the stars and the heavens for answers? Snow begins to hide a drab and utilitarian tenement building. A winding road is enveloped by the snow. Evidence of our infrastructural thirst for order and manipulation is wiped away with the caress of nature's flow. We return to the site of the mosaics that opened this film. The disintegrating representations of our human form are now cloaked by the fallen snow. My soul swoons as I think of my impermanence. I am reminded of my death, the death of those I love and of you. I try to think through the deadly acts our species enacts on our world; the animals we slaughter, the wars we fight and the ecological life we destroy. Should I be saddened by our own 'metempsychosis'; returning our temporary life source back to the world from which it was born? There is a perverse pleasure I feel in considering our mass extinction, of the world reclaiming its immanent self from our selfish grip. As I feel this toxic rapture, I remember this is a fantastical disavowal of the world around me. The acts of senseless violence and brutality we have committed on our world during our brief time on this planet cannot be simply undone and swept away by our disappearance. The answer to the gravity of our situation is not to view it as a narrative of revenge, or as the deterministic outcome set in motion since the Big Bang. This is to view our world as a bad film, a bad collective dream. This is to quell our existential fears with disbelief, to ignore our immanent agency. This is nihilism.

The snow of Geyrhalter's film obscures my vision, so that the world before me is an indecipherable white. I remember the ethical demands of environmental destruction. I think about my boundless capacity. I can believe in the pain, suffering and ecological damage my acts cause. If I truly believe that I am a singular node of an infinite rhizomatically chained world, I can begin to change myself. I can empathise with the experience of all life and become-other. I can shake off the gutless comfort of being a white heterosexual, middle-class, educated man. I can recognise how this reduces the capacity of everything around me and diminishes my own capacity in this endless flux. I can believe in this world, for what it is, here and now.

By encountering the limits of my thoughts, the thresholds of my feelings, *Homo Sapiens* confronts me with perils of nihilism and the possibilities of immanent belief. As I stare at and through the white screen I am confused and scared by our world but feel an intense drive to combat its insufferable injustices. If I can believe in the unthinkable complexity of experience I can open myself up to imagining new worlds.

10.6 Ethical Imperatives: I Am Not Your Negro

They look at me, or rather they look through me. They do not want my pity. They do not want my guilt. They do not want my self-congratulatory solidarity. They want my belief. As Peck inundates me with a sequence of African-Americans faces from archival photographs of the 1800s all the way to high-definition colour video of today, I am struck by own transparency. They know me. They know the hegemonic order that has given me my privilege. They believe in this world, because to survive, they must duck and weave its transcendent claims, its Machiavellian oppression and its systemic violence. As we meet eyes, the onus is on me. I cannot continue to merely pledge my support for equality, and reap the rewards of my advantaged position. I am forced think and feel through this encounter and actively believe in the insufferable injustice.

Baldwin's narration interjects, "The world is not white. It never was white, cannot be white. White is a metaphor for power" (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*). His words and this imagery assert the transience of this social imposition. I think of the brutality this metaphor has caused and the fear and nihilism from which it was summoned. The

white population has recited this metaphor of power like a genocidal lullaby to will themselves into the deepest of sleeps, a sleep of disbelief in the fabric of reality. Baldwin's tired and pained face now fills my screen. The chaotic black-and-white film static buzzes in unison with my feeble heart. His furrow, his brow, his wrinkles and his bulging eyes are in a discomfoting dialogue. I see him search for words that could possibly communicate the pain written on his face and etched in his soul.

I can't be a pessimist, because I'm alive. To be a pessimist means that you have agreed that human life is an academic matter, so I'm forced to be an optimist.
(Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*)

Our experiences, marked by encounters that take thought and feeling to their thresholds, unequivocally instil that our life exceeds matters of academia. We think and feel alive and therefore we too must be optimists. The only optimistic ethical stance is not to speak for, pretend to understand or stand in for the experiences of minorities, but embrace our collective capacity for becoming. When we encounter the destitute sickness of our past and present we can begin to see liberating future worlds.

What white people have to do is try to find out in their own hearts, why it was necessary to have a *N-word* in the first place. Because I'm not a *N-word*, I am a man. The question you have to ask yourself... if I'm not the *N-word* here and you invented him, then you have to find out why. (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*)

As the screen fades to black on Baldwin's stoic face and he takes a final drag of his cigarette, the cacophony of thought and feeling are alive and encountered. If I a white spectator can begin to look inside, and question and acknowledge the absence in me that played a role in this 'othering', I can begin to turn outward authentically and in good faith. I can begin to believe in this world for what it truly is. *I Am Not Your Negro* reveals in its essayistic cinematic techniques of oscillating mediums, fragmented rhizomatic structure and penchant for heresy, that spectatorship of this mode can be ethically instructive.

10.7 Ethical Imperatives: Two Years At Sea

I see Jake in close-up, each of the folds and markings of his worn face revealed. He sits in the right-third of my frame, looking off-camera even further to the right. After consuming so much carefully crafted media, this framing feels off. This unusual choice makes me question directorial intent. “How am I supposed to feel?”, I wonder. Jake’s face is lit by the flickering flames of a campfire. I watch and study his face and body. I try to read something, anything, in his pensive expression and jittery movements. His eyelids flicker, he touches his hair, his eyes dart back and forth, his nose twitches and his lips tremble. I think I am witnessing the burden of his consciousness struggling to exorcise itself through instinctive bodily functions. The longer Rivers holds me here, the more I brush these reductive thoughts aside. I forgo my instinct to read him as a sage or a primitive man captivated by burning light. I begin to think and feel that this is not a man imprisoned by politics or capital. With only gestures, visuals, diegetic sound and filmic materiality, *Two Years At Sea* creates a cinematic space in which, alone with Jake and the crackling embers, I start to think and feel that I could live my own life more ethically and authentically.

Rivers holds this final shot for eight minutes. As the stark chiaroscuro light wanes on his face, I feel that this is a man becoming-other. Not believing in the transcendent narratives of our species but in the materiality of this world. By the time my eyes squint for any sign of detail and my ears pricked for the crackles of the flames, I have one final encounter with this film. I start to realise that my watching this fading film is just like Jake gazing in to the fading fire. Like the fire for Jake, there is no explicit reward for gazing into the flickering film that now illuminates my face in this dark room. Rivers guides me to imagine another mode of living; a life beyond materialism, structures of power, the vacuity of capitalism and my own base narcissistic desires.

The materiality of the filmic object, the scratched and faded celluloid, the endless organic visuality, the natural diegetic auralty, the rough hand-held tracking shots, the aching slow static takes, that pepper this film open me up to a radical encounter. Rivers has like Deleuze demands, filmed a belief in this world. As the film fades to black we can return to the world and believe once more in its restrictive commodified present

and imagine a boundless capacitive future. To think and feel through this rhizomatic maze is the true radical act, and the essay film's inimitable potential.

10.8 Ethical Imperatives: Fading Finales

It is no coincidence that the three scenes that I have chosen to explore as exemplary of the essay film's push for a belief in the world are the films' final scenes. There is a vitality in the closing moments that delivers us a final encounter bursting with ethical rewards. Each finale: pushes at the limits of our thought, pricks at the boundaries of our senses, beckons us to become-other and begs us to believe in this world. The films embody their ethical projects in their final scenes and punctuate the unthinkable limits of their goals with a potent fade to black or white.

A final fade to colour is not a technique limited to the essay film. However, while a narrative fade is complimented by tragic or joyous dénouement and a documentary fade is linked to the final logic of a larger argument, the fades of these essay films hold no cathartic rewards. Rather, we are left with the intimidating aftershock of encountering the boundary of affects and concepts in the face of intolerable injustice.

We are left with questions not answers. We are not settled in a resolute state but asked to leap with faith into the movement of becoming. Deleuzian scholar Bogue asserts that "the *white or black screen*, finally is the interstice made visible" (*Deleuze on Cinema* 179). The between of the images and sounds we have previously encountered are now a testament to the screen itself. As Deleuze declares:

...the image is unlinked and the cut begins to have an importance in itself... there is no longer linkage of associated images... The cut may now be extended and appear in its own right, as the black screen, the white screen... (*Cinema II* 220)

The rhythms, rhizomatic structures, multi-modal mediums now reveal our capacitive encounter with the limits of thought and feeling itself.

The object of cinema is not to reconstitute a presence of bodies, in perception and action, but to carry out a primordial genesis of bodies in terms of a white, or a black or a grey... a “beginning of visible which is not yet a figure, which is not yet an action”. (*Cinema II* 201)

The absence of visual and aural stimuli reveals the imperceptible, illuminating the partition that separates life from death, the emergence of our raw becoming. Once the projector darkens, the TV stops flickering, the computer screen dims, we are left with the white and black interstices, the limitless in-between. We are asked to take the energy of these encounters and focus it productively and ethically. If we can feel and think this much through belief filmed in essayistic cinema, we can begin to embody this spirit cognitively and sensorially in our daily lives. We can allow the essay film to restore our belief in the world, this world.

11. Conclusion

The world is not a codified aural and visual construction waiting for our passive spectatorship; the world is much more than a bad film. To reduce the chaotic flows of life to a 'shoddy' cinematic event is a nihilistic repudiation of our agency, multiplicity, and ethical responsibilities. The essay film allows us to address this nihilism by revealing the injustice and banality of our present social conditions. The mode illuminates the boundless multiplicity of our immanent world and our capacity to act ethically within it.

As the essay has developed from its literary form to its cinematic iteration, it is evident that its heretical nature, reflexive address, and propensity for thought, remain consistent. The essay film has birthed a mode of cinema, distinctive for its collaged techniques of montage, elliptical editing, archival footage, voice-over and intertitles. It is a mode of dissatisfaction that lies in the liminal 'in-between' of documentary, narrative and experimental cinema. While Rascaroli, Corrigan and Montero explore how thought is inextricably tied to the essay film, they fail to account for the intense sensorial spectatorial operations and its intimate relationship with philosophy and ethics. Through Deleuze we see that this mode's cinematic operations create the intensive affects of art and facilitative concepts of philosophy. The essay film demands we recognise the multiplicity of minorities; whether humans, animals or molecular. It plunges us into an immanent process of *becoming* where we can encounter experiences and movements of life beyond us. By linking our sensory and cognitive faculties, the essay film confronts us with the complex flows of life and compels us to actively believe in this world.

Two Years At Sea exposes us to a deterritorialised conception of space and time that reveals the reductive effects of commodifying and structuring our lives according to a capitalist system. *Rivers* encourages us to imagine a possible future in which our bodies, minds and natural environment interact and create boundless compounds. A possible world emerges that privileges all of life's materiality and corporeality for its pure excess and not for a return of constructed value.

I Am Not Your Negro viscerally presents the violence and brutality capitulated by our prejudicial hegemonic order. We are forced to sensorially respond to this pain and think through the multiplicity of the minoritised African-American experience. Peck presents a world of such chaos, through equally chaotic cinematic operations, that render conceiving of a capacitive future and a 'people to come' our only ethical choice.

Homo Sapiens strips the human form from our filmic frame so we are forced to encounter a cinematic world without us. The film is a wounding reminder of our mortality, limited subjectivity, and destructive actions against our immanent world. Geyrhalter summons a spectatorial response that links cognition, corporeality and our world. We are nihilistically destroying our world, here and now. The film implores us to believe this, and in turn embrace a belief in our boundless capacity to change.

It is not my wish with this thesis to simply idolise the figure of Deleuze and salvage his theory from critique. Deleuze's writing itself may warrant the criticism of being Eurocentric, theologically preoccupied, and reductive in conflating cinema's history in service of a verbose articulation of the medium. At a time like this, we must not shy away from investigating such problematic ideas. However, it is my contention that the thinking of Deleuze, the multiplicitous, deterritorialised and rhizomatic assemblages he invokes, are a remarkable tool for considering our world and the very notions raised by his critics. With these three films and a Deleuzian framework we can feel and think through and beyond the strictures of race, capitalism and environmental exploitation. We can confront our violent past, our nihilistic present and imagine a future free of their wrath. As with all discourse, future scholars and artists should consider the limitations and problematics of Deleuze's theory, but I believe they too would be rewarded by its logic and potential.

While the essay film was first envisaged, nine decades ago, in the depths of a Soviet winter, I believe it is now more aesthetically relevant and ethically urgent than ever. What better way to react to a frenzied, fragmented and saturated media culture than by harnessing this chaos *for* ethical action through the oscillating techniques of the essay film? What better way to combat a post-truth world than with a form that rejects such binary distinctions and embraces an unbridled multiplicity? What better way to combat the hegemonic structures that perpetuate injustice than with a cinema that

heretically discards these claims and reveals alternative modes of existence? What better way to combat a pervasive nihilism than with the essay film's intense belief in the world? The essay film demands we embrace our potential to think, feel and become-other, our ethical capacity to believe in this world, here and now, and act accordingly.

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