

Introduction

On the Subject of Endings

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The main thing is that the ending does not mark the end.

—Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film:
The Redemption of Physical Reality*

A film never really ends, according to realist film theorist Siegfried Kracauer, because it partakes in “the flow of life.”¹ As the camera works to record and reveal limitless reality, the spectator can at once experience life in all its uncertainties and simultaneously imagine a way to go on. Even the happy ending, according to Kracauer, is not a final resolution but rather marks our desire for indestructibility, our search to find something of necessity in the human condition. In the recurring final shots of Charlie Chaplin’s silent films, for example, as the little Tramp waddles away time after time, he personifies “a desire to exalt the power of resistance of the seeming weak who time and again cheat destiny.”² The fantasy of indestructibility is indeed the standard of the epic Hollywood ending, from *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) where Scarlett O’Hara (Vivien Leigh) has the promise to start her life over tomorrow, to the neo-noir sci-fi classic *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) where the hero Deckard (Harrison Ford) is left to ponder whether he himself is a replicant or a human. Kracauer is right to detect the fantasy of indestructibility at work in these film endings, but his realist theory rests

on a precarious wager—that is, that reality although limitless can nonetheless be apprehended directly through representation, and further that films can help us overcome our fears and anxieties about life's uncertainties, the vagaries of random chance, and even the inevitability of death.

The essays in the present collection however are not primarily concerned with the way films allow us to fantasize a happy ending or bring us to a resolution about the questions of our being (to find the purpose of our lives, the reason for our existence, the hope for a better tomorrow) but rather with how film cuts and endings might serve to reconfigure the very terms within which we ponder such questions. As Lacanian psychoanalysis reveals, our sense of reality is only accessed through the cut of the Symbolic order, an order that allows the subject to emerge by way of a constitutive paradox. That is, it can only find its meaning retroactively (thus displacing the linearity of cause and effect) and through a medium (language) that splits it from within, where it experiences itself in terms of either lack (a lack that generates desire) or excess (an enjoyment derived from the repetitive motion of the drive).

Film endings can indeed offer up a resolution, a happy moment where love reigns supreme, or a way to survive in a postapocalyptic world, but such endings usually follow a formula that works to cover over the paradoxes the subject must navigate on its trajectory in search of a lost object to fulfill its desire or in its experience of excess enjoyment when meanings break down.³ In films we find a multitude of fantasies that frame our desires for indestructibility, requited love, an answer to the meaning of life, and so forth, but it is the cut of a film ending that can call into question the dimensions of a subject's world, to unveil the impasse at its core. It is just such an impasse that Alain Badiou detects in his discussion of the intervention of philosophy in worldly matters. To Badiou, a philosophical question is one that looks for paradoxical relations, the “breaks, decisions, distances, events,” that create ruptures and that allow us to break out of the “disjunctive synthesis” of a situation, discourse, or history.⁴ To illustrate this Badiou refers to Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi's 1954 classic film *The Crucified Lovers* and more specifically to the final images of the film, which constitute a new instance of the philosophical situation. The narrative is of a love story that takes place in seventeenth-century Japan between the wife of a small workshop owner and her lover, one of her husband's employees. The punishment for the adulterous couple is death, and we follow the lovers as they flee, hide out in the countryside, and are assisted by the very husband who has accused them. Ultimately, the lovers are captured and face a horrible death, but as Badiou notes, in the final frames the couple is neither defeated nor fearful

of their impending doom; instead at the moment of their death they seem “enraptured, but devoid of pathos: on their faces there is simply the hint of a smile, a kind of withdrawal into the smile.”⁵ The lovers’ hint of a smile is registered by Badiou as marking an authentic event because with it we encounter an incommensurability. “Between the event of love (the turning upside down of existence) and the ordinary rules of life (the laws of the city, the laws of marriage) there is no common measure.”⁶ This film ending, in Badiou’s reading, provides an opening to see how a law, when confronted with an event, can lose its power and begin to crumble from within.

From a different philosophical quarter, Gilles Deleuze, in his work *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, detects a similar incommensurability in the way time is presented in films that were made after the cataclysmic event of World War II. For Deleuze, the irrational cut of the time-image as construed through Dedekind’s cut of irrational numbers in mathematics marks a point in cinema where the splendor and commensurability of classical cinema is displaced in the modern era with a series of discontinuities, a disorienting freedom where “the interval is set free.”⁷ The appearance in films of the “purely optical sound situation,” the proliferation of “empty, disconnected, abandoned spaces,” the prominence of chance relations, and the internal split of the actual and virtual image in a perpetual repetitive exchange are all ruptures that Deleuze detects in the emergence of modern cinema.⁸

Whereas Badiou illustrates the incommensurability and rupture between the world of laws and the event of love that confounds them (demonstrating what he terms “a relation without relation”)⁹ in his analysis of a film ending, Deleuze locates the irrational cut as a linkage (a linkage formed through a nonlinkage or unlinking of time and movement) that works to produce something new, which arises between our internal life and the external world, in the incommensurability of the two. Thus Deleuze will offer the following about the ending of Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 classic film *2001: A Space Odyssey*: “At the end of *Space Odyssey*, it is in consequence of a fourth dimension that the sphere of the foetus and the sphere of the earth have a chance of entering into a new, incommensurable, unknown relation, which would convert death into a new life.”¹⁰ For Deleuze, an ending can mark the emergence of the unthought, an opening to a becoming not yet realized.

While the philosophies of both Badiou and Deleuze offer us a way to theorize film endings through the paradoxical notion of a “relation with no relation” (through the concepts of the event and the irrational cut, respectively), it is Lacanian psychoanalysis that reveals how a film ending might work according to the eruption of the Real, exposing an incommensurability already built into the split constitution of the subject itself. While for Badiou

the Real refers to a rupturing event and for Deleuze the Real refers to the process of becoming, the Lacanian Real is neither a substance nor a process. Rather, and as Alenka Zupančič puts it, “it is something that interrupts a process, something closer to a stumbling block; it is an impossibility in the structure of the field of reality.”¹¹ The subject enters the Symbolic order (the Other) of language into a never-ending and incomplete process of signification, and the Real is the impasse at the very heart of the Symbolic dimension itself. It is the arbitrary cut of a Master Signifier (a signifier that paradoxically signifies its own lack) that halts the flow of signifiers, allowing the subject to configure meaning only retroactively. But this does not offer closure as the subject remains a split subject, seeking to reconcile the “I” that speaks (the “I” of enunciation) and the “I” that is spoken of (the “I” of the enunciated).¹² In essence, and as Lacan relates, in return for becoming subjects of language (of meaning) we must necessarily be deprived of our being, which can only be grasped in moments when language fails and identifications break down, when the structural impasse of the Symbolic order is exposed.¹³

It is fantasy that shields us from the trauma of our lack, from the unexpected contingencies of life, and from our failure to find the key to our fulfillment; fantasy provides us a sense of coherence and purpose and promises to reveal the object that would satisfy our desire. But it is the cut of a film ending that tells us not only how a subject’s desire is engaged but also how its enjoyment erupts beyond fantasy. An ending may offer up an object in a momentary and illusory satisfaction of desire as in the standard Hollywood romantic comedy, or it might depict the nostalgia of an inaccessible love (James Cameron’s *Titanic*, 1997; James Ivory’s *The Remains of the Day*, 1993). Or, an ending might enact a rupture in the spectator’s interpretation of a film narrative with an unexpected violent act (Claire Denis’s *Bastards*, 2013), a surprise twist (M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense*, 1999), or an open-ended irresolution (Christopher Nolan’s *Inception*, 2010; David Cronenberg’s *eXistenZ*, 1999). More rarely, an ending might present the spectator with a glimpse of herself as a being of absolute otherness through encounters with the objects *a* (gaze and voice) in film. The object *a*, however, is not a material object but rather a virtual object of absence, an open lack that cannot be filled or inscribed by signifiers. Thus, it is essential here not to confuse the gaze with a point of view; it does not refer to a subject looking at an object and identifying with it, but rather it is the blind spot (or in the case of the voice, an unlocatable utterance or sound) that constitutes the place of the absent subject within the scene. As Todd McGowan puts it in *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan*, the gaze is “a point that disrupts the flow and the sense of the experience . . . it is the point at which the spectator is

obliquely included in the film.”¹⁴ Through the deployment of countless formal elements (including montage, ellipses, proximity, split narratives, ambient sound, *mise-en-abyme*, nondiegetic voice, digitalized glitches) and endless variations of endings (including illogical twists, comical surprises, abrupt truncations, indeterminacies, repetitions, reversals, and uncannily doubling), films generate cinematic cuts that are moments of discontinuity and rupture where the Real makes its appearance. Such cuts and endings disorient our sense of our singular selves on a chronological path toward a certain end and short-circuit the dimensions of being and meaning.

In narrative films, the final cut provides the temporal break we need to begin the interpretation of our unconscious response and to puzzle through the meaning of events.¹⁵ In this sense a film ending functions in a way similar to a period at the end of a sentence or even the abrupt ending of a psychoanalytical session, for it provides the pause wherein a meaning can retroactively be proffered, but a meaning that will always be multilayered, ambiguous, and incomplete. Our interpretation, which coincides with the metonymic movement of desire, is always an attempt to find the enigmatic X that will allow the narrative to make sense, to uncover the logic of how events fall into place, whether the ending is predictable (offering the desired object up as a satisfaction of desire) or whether it remains open-ended and inconclusive. In *The Sixth Sense*, for example, after we learn that the psychologist (Bruce Willis) has been dead during almost all of the film’s running time, we then go back and select out the clues in the narrative that would have alerted us to this; no wonder his wife never responded to him during their “conversation.” The ending provides the stopping point where a spectator can go back and find meaning, but it is also the point where an excess is generated, which leads to further questions, further searching, because desire is always the desire for more desire. In this way, film cuts and endings open a gap that forces us to insert our interpretation while at the same time exposing the ultimate failure of interpretation itself. Even a film ending with an unambiguous conclusion will generate interpretations that elicit further meaning-making. In Don McKellar’s cult classic *Last Night* (1998), for example, the film ends with a cataclysmic planetary disaster, a sudden end of the world, and its narrative follows the lives of several individuals in the twenty-four hours leading up to the final moment. Viewers are prompted both to make sense of the narrative—was it an asteroid that struck the planet; did the characters live a meaningful last day—and to wonder what they would do on the last day of their existence, to contemplate what would bring meaning to their lives in an imaginary retrospection. Although this film ending leaves no doubt, it keeps desire and the quest for meaning at play.¹⁶

But while the quest to find meaning remains open after the close of a film narrative, there are ideological limits in place that circumscribe how a film can be interpreted and that always point to what is necessarily excluded in the narrative itself. Ideology “works,” as Žižek repeatedly reveals, because it maintains this illusion of openness. And in his discussion of narrative closure in film, Žižek maintains that a film contains a “curved space,” or some formal element that operates as this impasse internal to the film itself; a film narrative presents events only by way of what’s also left out of the same. He writes: “*the subject’s universe of meaning is always ‘curved’ by traumatic blanks, organized around what must remain unsaid if this universe is to retain its consistency.*”¹⁷ And when this curved space or blank becomes visible, through materializations of the objects *a* on screen, the spectator is confronted with moments of impasse that rupture the subject’s Symbolic universe. Thus, although most all Hollywood genre films present endings that offer a momentary satisfaction of desire (according to the dictates of socio-symbolic notions of finding true love, achieving the good life, and other fabrications that supplement the ideologies of capitalist consumption), the more rare films that break out of the genre formula make use of the “blank spots,” the objects *a*, in ways that force the spectators to face the trauma they seek to escape (usually by way of disavowing what they already unconsciously know); the appearance of the object *a* stops meaning-making in its tracks. For example, no one is surprised or shocked when the unmarried couple (Seth Rogan and Katherine Heigl) in *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007) eventually gets together to parent their unplanned child, or when George Bailey (James Stewart) chooses family life over the dark temptations of single life and suicide in Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946).¹⁸ But in the case of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1966), the ending confronts us with a trauma that goes beyond fantasy’s ability to point us toward an object that would make everything all right. As Slavoj Žižek’s astute analysis of this film ending reveals, when the psychotic killer Norman (Anthony Perkins) lifts his head while thinking thoughts in the voice of his dead mother to meet our look, he at once makes us complicit in the knowledge of his diabolical deed and simultaneously reverses the gaze back onto us: in an instant a subject that observes, fantasizes, and desires is transformed into a being of absolute otherness. Žižek writes, “The ‘impersonal’ abyss we confront when we find ourselves face-to-face with Norman’s gaze into the camera is the very abyss of the subject not yet caught in the web of language—the unapproachable Thing which resists subjectivization, this point of failure of every identification, is ultimately the subject itself.”¹⁹ The nearly imperceptible imprint of a skull that, just for a second, flashes on top of Norman’s face is this very

appearance of a “blank” spot that forces us to register how death (our non-being) haunts our very subjectivity. At such moments, being and meaning are not opposed to each other, rather they retain something of each other that is only accessible through the paradoxical logic of the Moebius strip; a slight turn in the curve keeps us on the same path but puts us in a different dimension. In this dimension we glimpse how sense itself takes an erratic form and how nonmeaning is constitutive of both being and meaning. In contrast to Kracauer’s contention that films allow spectators an experience of reality in all its otherness, film cuts and endings, when they function like Hitchcock’s ending in *Psycho*, engage spectators in a traumatic experience of the otherness of their own subjectivity.

Another striking example of the way the object *a* (as voice) in a film ending offers the subject an experience of its constitutive otherness occurs in David Mackenzie’s dark apocalyptic film *Perfect Sense* (2011). The narrative follows two lovers (Eva Green and Ewan McGregor) who meet and develop a relationship just as a worldwide plague is stripping people of their senses, one by one. In the final scene the couple, now deaf and without the ability to smell and taste, manages to find each other and embrace just as they both go blind and the screen goes black, while a female voice narrates the scene. It is this nondiegetic female voice in the final scene that offers the spectator an experience in the dimension of the Real, as it is only her voice that lives on beyond the catastrophe and that is our only remaining entry into the film after the screen has gone black (since our protagonists have already gone blind); it is a voice coming from an unlocatable source, and as such it functions as the Lacanian object *a* that elicits our fascination in the drive.²⁰ Her voice has been heard throughout the film at pivotal moments as she described the connection between the loss of each sense and its effect on humans. She tells us that with the loss of smell comes the profound sense of sadness over memories we’ll never be able to associate with it again, of feeling regret over lovers we’ve never had, and despair over all the wrongs we ever committed and cannot undo. Yet after each loss humans rebound, and her voice repeats the words “this is how life goes on,” which are spoken one last time just as the film ends. Despite the usual meaning of these words, their final iteration neither offers hope nor provides a cause for events, because the voice speaking the words addresses us in our constitutive otherness. That is, although it sounds like a neutral voice providing commentary on events, it conveys instead the status of the subject’s ontological ambiguity itself, as we hear these words already from a place of absence. As we stare into the darkness of a black screen, we are absent from the scene while we are obliquely included in the scene, as the

unplaceable voice tells us not that all life has forever ended but unexpectedly that “this is how life goes on.”²¹

The appearance of the object *a* as something impossible, something that reveals in a traumatic way how our subjectivity is split, how we are constituted as subjects through both lack and excess, is rendered in endless variations of the cinematic cut, where the Thing emerges in a timeless eruption of the Real. At the end of Clint Eastwood’s 1995 film, *The Bridges of Madison County*, for example, we learn through a retrospection that the lonely housewife Francesca (Meryl Streep) chose not to leave her husband and children to be with her lover Robert Kincaid (Clint Eastwood), and this move allows her to exchange the object of her desire (a relationship with her lover) with a spectral object (the object *a*) of lack itself. A nostalgic memory allows the couple to relive the missed encounter of their ill-fated romance again and again. Similarly, at the ending of *Titanic* the retrospection of the long and fulfilling life of survivor Rose DeWitt Bukater (Kate Winslet) makes clear that the sacrifice of her young lover, Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio) was necessary in order for the memory of the encounter to take the place of an actual relationship—the perfect love foiled is transformed into the sustaining nostalgic memory (the Thing) that Rose passes down to her offspring.²²

M. Night Shyamalan is a director well known not only for his unexpected twist endings but also for endings that enact repetitive loss and melancholia through materializations of the objects *a* in the form of aliens, plagues, and monsters; his endings give expression to the enjoyment of circling around rather than working to obtain the object of desire. At the ending of *Signs* (2002), for example, the aliens simply vanish, and at the ending of *The Happening* (2008) the unexplained plague abates, but we are given clues that either might return to threaten humans again and again. Rather than puzzle through a causal explanation of the narratives (to find the source of the plague or the reason for the aliens’ landing), the spectator is instead enjoined to experience the anxiety of continuous and potential loss, a form of melancholia where loss itself becomes the object.²³ By deploying these ambiguous endings, the director manages to stage a narrative that repeats his own epistemology of belief in faith and necessity over random chance and contingency.²⁴ Some directors (like Shyamalan) supply clues in the narrative of the source of the trauma that is linked to repetition (mother loss), while others offer an enigmatic object, a Thing that exists outside the signifying chain. The black monolith, for example, that appears throughout and at the end of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* or the image of the burning sled “Rosebud” at the end of Orson Welles’s epic film *Citizen Kane* (1941)

do not have adequate signifiers to suture them to certain meanings; instead, they seem to signify the void at the center of desire (and meaning) itself.

In contrast to the portrayal of lack at the center of desire, a film ending might work to reveal an excess of the Symbolic dimension itself, exposing the Real that exists just beneath the guise of our Imaginary reality. Spectators may be able to glimpse how a Master Signifier may itself work in an idiotic way. Stanley Kubrick, for example, combined a striking image with a certain music both at the end of *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) where the marching marines sing the Mickey Mouse anthem amid burning buildings in Vietnam, and at the end of *Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), where the atomic bomb explodes as we listen to the World War II song “We’ll Meet Again.” The placement of these images together with music (rife with socio-symbolic references), makes the diegesis appear both real and unreal to the spectator at the same time. Such cuts leave us suspended in the gap between the tragic and comic, which in turn affects our ability to make sense (or rather, they expose the idiotic enjoyment) of things like war, killing, and Mutual Assured Destruction. Or another example that deploys the Real of our socio-symbolic interpretations, but to comic effect, occurs in Billy Wilder’s classic comedy *Some Like It Hot* (1959), where we expect that Daphne (Jack Lemmon), who has been dressing in drag and dating the eccentric millionaire Osgood Fielding (Joe E. Brown), will have to reveal that “she” is really a man, but what we don’t expect is that the millionaire will in the final scene retort, “Well, nobody’s perfect.” In this instant we are startled by this comic reply and the humor works to elide our need to “make sense” of everything that went before. More importantly, the humor works to short-circuit the sense upon which all signifiers of sexual difference rely.²⁵

Directors can introduce such “impossible” moments in film that cut through the narrative to address the subject in its indeterminacy, and which expose a gap between our interpretation and our enjoyment, through a myriad of formal film elements and endings. Hitchcock’s famous use of the ellipse in editing, for example, forces the spectator to insert her own fantasy of a murder without witnessing the actual murder scene. David Lynch’s use of ambient sound, strange sequencing, and proximity all work to include the spectator in the film in oblique ways, revealing the grotesque reality that exists both beneath the Imaginary guise of our Symbolic world and in the strange uncanniness of everyday life.²⁶ Spike Lee’s cuts to montages of vitriolic hate speech by characters in *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *25th Hour* (2002) confront the spectator directly with an excess she cannot escape. What Lee achieves with this formal cut away from the linear narrative is a

revelation of the way hate speech is itself a montage. It puts together words erratically and in a form not meant for a dialogic reply; it is an eruption of enjoyment (in this case a painful enjoyment), while it also gives expression to the Thing in the other that is excessive of language itself. We recognize this excessive outburst, but its enjoyment resists a satisfactory interpretation and cannot be captured in Symbolic meanings.

With the digitalization of filmmaking directors can create novel distortions of a subject's experience of causality and temporality in film endings that never conclusively end. The reverse narrative of Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), the beginning of a repetition that ends Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), and the *mise-en-abyme* at the end of David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* and Terry Gilliam's *The Zero Theorem* (2013) are just a few examples of film endings that leave spectators in an indeterminate place. When films deploy such eruptions of the Real through any number of formal elements and endings, they are also depicting how the logic of the repetitions of the drive short-circuits our finitude and linear causality. The subject is no longer able to find its meaning in a retrospection as there is no certain past; instead, it finds itself suspended in the realm of nonmeaning. Thus, we can also discern how the desire for indestructibility that Kracauer detects in great film endings becomes not a quest to survive another day on a chronological timeline but rather a movement to escape the matrix of finitude-infinity itself. The indestructibility that the drive seeks becomes a time loop or hole in finitude, and when it appears, a cut or rupture has occurred to disorient our notion of chronological temporality and linear causality.²⁷

Importantly, films that use the motif of repetition, multiples, alternative realities, and indeterminacy in their endings, from Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Double Life of Veronique* (1991) to Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (1998) and from Harold Ramis's *Groundhog Day* (1993) to Christopher Nolan's *Inception*, all reveal the gap between iterations, the contingent eruption in a moment of timelessness where the Real appears as the very impasse at the heart of the Symbolic. In the endings of films that repeat a situation, unveil a world within a world, or remain open-ended, the enjoyment of an excess comes to take the place of fantasy. We no longer seek the object of our desire (to find our purpose, a way to survive, a requited love, etc.) but rather experience an enjoyment located in the movement itself. As Alenka Zupančič writes, "Repetition is always a repetition of representation (the signifying dyad), but it is also a repetition of the inherent gap or interval between its terms, which is the very locus of the surprise in repetition, of the Real encountered in it."²⁸ What's being exposed in film endings that do not conclusively end is

the constitutive circularity involved in the constitution of the subject itself. The subject exists on the basis of the act of repression that it performs, but this act is at once the source of its alienation from itself. Primary repression sets in motion a paradoxical circularity for the subject, and the repetitions, uncanny doublings, reversals, and indeterminacies revealed in films without a conclusive end are revealing this gap or loop of the subject's causality.

Thus, the repetitions, reversals, and nonresolutions in film endings ultimately demonstrate something important about the subject itself existing in an indeterminate place, as a being of both lack and excess, which is the central paradox of the signifier as Lacan conceived it: the idea that a letter always arrives at its destination. Posing the very question of the meaning of life is what opens the portal to the idea that there needs to be a meaning of life. We realize only in retrospect that it was our original question that set us on a paradoxical path: it was in our waiting for the call to tell us the meaning of life (as does Christoph Waltz's character in Terry Gilliam's *The Zero Theorem*) that we created our purpose that was from the beginning without resolution. As Žižek writes, all of us have a letter marked "death" waiting for us, and although the meaning of the letter might be determined by the way it circulates among subjects in the symbolic network, its appearance as object *a* (of materialized enjoyment) "is what interrupts the continuous flow of words, what hinders the smooth running of the symbolic circuit."²⁹

Film endings may enact fantasies of overcoming loss, cheating death, or finding true love, while they offer us various forms of enjoyment (a momentary fulfillment of desire, the pleasure of repetitive loss in drive, the torment of indeterminacy, the surprise of a comical twist, the exhilaration of an unexpected reversal, the frustration of a cliff-hanger, or the disorientation of experiencing ourselves as objects of an Other's gaze). But we become aware of how our reality is structured and how our fantasies work only when the eruption of the Real cuts through the film narrative in one or another contingent way; it disorients (which is not the same as a loss of all orientation) our fantasies of a coherent knowable world and short-circuits the dimensions of being and meaning, and knowledge and jouissance.³⁰ Ultimately, and as McGowan proposes, such an encounter with the Real in films holds the potential to become radically political, because "it deprives spectators of their symbolic support and thereby forces them to experience their radical freedom."³¹ This freedom becomes visible through various formulations of the cinematic cut.

The contributors to our present collection engage various theoretical perspectives and concepts to analyze film cuts and endings, including Lacan's objects *a* (gaze and voice), Deleuze's irrational cut in the time-image, Žižek's

parallax view, Freud's death drive, Hegel's dialectic, Jameson's vanishing mediator, and Benjamin's innervative responses, among many others. They theorize how film cuts and endings parallel the cut of a Master Signifier or the ending of a psychoanalytical session; how new digital technologies in film reorient a spectator's experiences of temporality, causality, and closure; and ultimately how film endings offer spectators the gap to insert a retroactive interpretation and to experience enjoyment when signification fails. Our authors offer film analyses that illustrate how endings can reveal something about our reality that is itself structured by way of gaps, ellipses, repetitions, and short-circuits.

In an essay entitled "Resolution, Truncation, Glitch," Hugh S. Manon reveals how two relatively new types of endings alter our sense of a film's temporality. "Truncation" is a rare and abrupt ending that leaves the spectator in a state of ambiguity, while the digitalized "glitch," which simulates a failed truncation, is deployed to reassure the spectator that a potential rupture has been averted. In the same way, Ryan Engley locates a new "drive twist" in contemporary film endings, which creates a dialectical shift in the spectator, offering her an entirely new epistemology of experiencing a film narrative and film ending. Slavoj Žižek's analysis of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) posits that the ending "only makes sense" if we imagine that Alfred (Michael Caine) was day-dreaming when he saw Selena (Anne Hathaway) and Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) at the cafe; he enjoins us to imagine an alternative ending, one that follows the Hegelian dialectic of emancipatory struggle against the state.³² In his essay "The Satisfaction of an Ending" Todd McGowan conceives of the great film ending in what he terms oxymoronically the "expected surprise." As he shows, the most radical film endings are those that take the form of a cliché to an extreme. Similarly, Henry Krips argues contra both Žižek and McGowan that the Real may occur not through an open cut in the visual field but rather in what Dziga Vertov calls the Kino-Eye, where the camera cuts away from what the viewer can identify with seeing, which includes instances of overconformity to the cinematic codes in terms of which a film is framed.

Two of our authors in this collection analyze film cuts and endings according to the work of Gilles Deleuze. In his analysis of the 2003 avant-garde Korean film *Save the Green Planet* by director Joon-Hwan Jang, Jan Jagodzinski proposes that the ending places us in an impossible time and place where we can see our past (from a projected future) differently. Similarly, A. Kiarina Kordela argues in her analysis of John Huston's 1972 film *Fat City* that the narrative repeatedly presents cuts of failure, which themselves undercut the standard Hollywood action film and its stereotypical fantasies

of masculinity. Several of our contributors consider films that end with a disturbing and radically violent act in a way that reorients our political critique of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalist ideology. Hilary Neroni concludes that the violent murder at the end of Claire Denis's film *Bastards* reveals (and leaves open) the wounds of patriarchy, exposing its ultimate impotence. Similarly, Jennifer Friedlander's analysis of Denis's *White Material* (2009) reveals how a brutal murder at the end of the film allows a white colonial female overlord, Maria (Isabell Huppert) to radically renounce her position in the Symbolic order and simultaneously embrace the failure of her familial/social identity. David Denny's essay on Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) traces the film's unique narrative structure and its romantic aesthetic to find that Justine's (Kirsten Dunst) acceptance of both her impending doom and the planet's ultimate destruction is heroic.

Exploring the split constitutive of the subject and the void around which the love relation forms, Fabio Vighi analyzes Jane Campion's 2003 film *In the Cut* to reveal how signification emerges from the retroactive effect of the cut of language, severing the body from its presumed biological autonomy, which inscribes both lack and alienation and opens the possibility of love for the subject. Juan Pablo Lucchelli offers a psychoanalysis of Jacques Audiard's 2012 film *Rust and Bone* by tracing how the love relation emerges only at the end of the film after the literal cut of the amputation of Stephanie's (Marian Cotillard) legs is mirrored in the "cut" of Ali's (*Matthias Schoenaerts*) gaze. In my essay on Spike Jonze's film *Her* (2013), I reflect on how the privatization of fantasy mediated by personalized digital devices creates a Symbolic world of flat, pregenerated meanings, which further illustrates the vanishing mediator of the voice in film. In an essay that explores the way appearance inscribes itself into reality (our Symbolic world) through film cuts and endings, Rex Butler analyzes Henry Joost and Ariel Shulman's 2010 documentary *Catfish* to conclude that the truth a documentary film helps us attain is not to be understood as occurring somewhere before or outside of the film but only through and as a result of it. And Brian Wall analyzes the ending of Akira Kurosawa's *High and Low* (1963) to explore the way the film's synchronic presentation of space creates a "totalization," which articulates the ideological limits of the world.

The authors in this collection not only analyze film cuts and endings according to theoretical insights in novel ways, they further open up new aporia for film theory, psychoanalysis, and philosophy in general. Some of the questions they leave us with are: How can the radicalization of the cliché, the exposure of the impotence of patriarchy in the violent act, and the presentation of failure (of masculinity, for example) in film endings all lead

to a radical politics? Might there be a new way to conceive of a transformative politics that plays on the Symbolic dimension's weak points without deploying the violent Act? How will fantasy be sustained in an era of closure, when capitalism works 24/7 to both generate and satisfy (through prediction and calculation) our every desire? As the machinery of global capitalism increasingly works according to the logic of the drives, it is television that has reconfigured itself as a medium to provide enjoyment with its serial repetitions and failures. Will cinema (now still mainly a medium of desire) be able to reinvent itself accordingly, offering enjoyment not in the resolution of an ending but in more novel variations of the twist ending?

Siegfried Kracauer, it now seems, was not so far off from a psychoanalytical theory of film in that he sought for the spectator an experience with reality in its most random and unpredictable "otherness."³³ He would, no doubt, be in agreement with our conclusion that cinema allows the spectator a way of experiencing reality itself as something fantasmatic. Film doesn't represent reality in its many variations but rather redoubles it; it adds another layer so that we might see how truth itself is never complete, how it necessarily takes the form of a fiction. With this logic, film cuts and endings can reveal how a subject is constituted as split: its meaning is configured retroactively through semblances, allusions, metaphor, and other devices, while its desire is elicited metonymically, in expectations of a future wholeness. It relies on the Symbolic order to grasp "reality" and confronts its constitutive otherness when meanings fail and identities disintegrate. From these coordinates, a film ending is determinative not because it allows us to imagine what might happen next, as Kracauer proposed, but rather, and as Alenka Zupančič suggests in her reference to Nietzsche's concept of midday, because an ending is "inaugural"; an ending does not provide a resolution (bringing two phenomena into a union) but rather a conjunctive moment where one becomes two through an internal splitting.³⁴ Film cuts and endings can provide just such a conjunctive moment, allowing us a glimpse of our being in the gap of the Real while we work to give expression to our experiences from within the very impasse that makes signification and meaning possible. The point, however, is not simply to be disoriented or spellbound in this conjunctive moment but rather to see that it is from this place that we can locate how our world of meaning and enjoyment is structured, allowing us also to detect new incommensurabilities (as in Deleuze's discovery of the time-image), new philosophical situations (as in Badiou's logic of the event), and new ways for the Lacanian subject to experience freedom and enact the impossible.

Notes

1. Kracauer refers to the end that does not mark an end in Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 269.

2. Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 270.

3. In one of his many references to the film *Casablanca*, Slavoj Žižek claims that even if we knew the ending of the film in advance, we would still remain split, holding out the possibility that things might still turn out differently as we watch the narrative unfold. And this, according to Žižek, is the way “fundamental contingency is most effectively concealed in a linear narrative.” Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel and Lacan*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 31.

4. Peter Engelmann, ed., *Philosophy in the Present: Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek*, trans. Peter Thomas and Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 16.

5. Engelmann, *Philosophy in the Present*, 10.

6. Engelmann, *Philosophy in the Present*, 11.

7. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 277. According to Deleuze, “There is thus no longer association through metaphor or metonymy, but re-linkages of independent images. Instead of one image after the other, there is one image *plus* another” (Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 214).

8. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 272–273. Deleuze’s detection of these novelties as found in the works of directors such as Alain Resnais, Jean Renoir, Joseph Mankiewicz, and especially Orson Welles leads him to the conclusion that modern cinema as seen in the French *nouvelle vague*, American cinema of the 1950s, and Italian neo-realism are all efforts of cinema’s internal push to recreate its very conditions through the time-image (Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 272).

9. Engelmann, *Philosophy in the Present*, 11.

10. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 206.

11. Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 162.

12. The subject exists within a temporal paradox, or as Rex Butler puts it, in Lacan’s formula of fantasy the subject’s identity arrives either too soon or too late, because “at once we attempt to pre-empt uncertainty by assuming an identity and it is only from the position of identity that we can look back and see this uncertainty.” Rex Butler, ed., *The Žižek Dictionary* (Durham: Acumen, 2014), 241. Slavoj Žižek refers to this logical paradox of how for the subject history appears in a linear way only in retrospect in his foreword to Molly Rothenberg, *The Excessive Subject: A New Theory of Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), xvi.

13. Lacan writes: “If we choose being, the subject disappears, it eludes us, it falls into non-meaning. If we choose meaning, the meaning survives only deprived

of that part of non-meaning that is, strictly speaking, that which constitutes in the realization of the subject, the unconscious.” *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 211.

14. Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 7–9. Importantly, in this breakthrough work McGowan changed the way we see how enjoyment is part of the filmic experience. He writes, “Film holds out the promise of enjoyment through the way that it deploys the gaze as objet *petit a*”; the politics of a film “rests not in its ability to elicit our conscious reflection, but rather in the way that film fascinates us in its points of rupture where the gaze emerges” (McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 14).

15. While any sense of continuity in film is only achieved through the use and/or absence of editing, the nonnarrative forms of montage, from the surrealist short *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Buñuel, 1929) to avant-garde films, such as Jean-Luc Godard’s 1967 film *Weekend*, present us with the play of excess; that is, in surrealist montage, for example, the form is of continuous eruptions and nonsensical juxtapositions, and this aligns with Lacan’s concept of drive as having no beginning or ending; rather the eruptions expose an excess enjoyment in the realm of nonmeaning. In the rarer films that avoid editorial cuts altogether to create a narrative, something more complex occurs. In films such as Alejandro González Iñárritu’s 2014 *Birdman: Or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*, where we find no perceptible editorial cuts but are forced to listen to an incessant drumbeat and follow the close shadowing of characters’ movements by the camera, the lack of cuts alters the spectator’s orientation to the film in an overproximity. Paradoxically, this works as its own kind of rupture, displacing the “usual” distances we expect in terms of our orientations to space, time, and movement on screen. The excessive overproximity distorts our sense of the narrative similar to the way the appearance of an unexpected lack (a materialization of the object *a*) would in a narrative film.

16. These responses to films combine the subject’s Imaginary ego (ideal ego) with its Symbolic directives (ego ideal). As Bruce Fink puts it in his comments on how an analyst always fails to understand the speech of his analysand: “The imaginary focuses on meaning, which virtually always involves predigested, prefabricated meanings that derive from our own view of the world,” while our responses also consider an Other that is full of contradictions, mixed messages, and inconsistent demands. Bruce Fink, *Against Understanding: Commentary and Critique in a Lacanian Key, Volume 1* (London: Routledge, 2014), 11.

17. Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* (London: Verso, 1992), 242.

18. As Slavoj Žižek argues, what the phenomenon of the resolution in film allows the spectator is both the enjoyment of racist/sexist excess, libidinal enjoyment of sex scenes, and so on, and “political correctness,” because by the end of the film we know that these excesses will all be renounced. Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch’s Lost Highway* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 8.

19. Žižek, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan*, 245. Elsewhere Žižek writes: “In the final scene of *Psycho*, the ‘mother’s voice’ literally cuts a hole in the visual reality: the screen image becomes a delusive surface, a lure secretly dominated by the bodiless voice of an invisible or absent Master, a voice that cannot be attached to any object in the diegetic reality—as if the true subject of enunciation of Norman’s/mother’s voice is death itself, the skull that we perceive for a brief moment in the fade-out of Norman’s face.” Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 669.

20. Slavoj Žižek in *Less than Nothing* posits that the voice as *objet a* (the object that gives body to the very lack of being), functions as the *objet a* of the visual, or the blind spot from which the scene returns the gaze (669).

21. A sample of the anonymous comments on the discussion board of the Internet Movie Database for this split-narrative film generated responses that were also split over whether the ending was a “nightmare” or “poignant”; whether love reigned supreme or love sustained nothing. These comments, however, do not mention the authority of the nondiegetic voice, which in a Lacanian analysis would provide the link between the lovers and the plague. The film makes “perfect sense,” only through the realization of Lacan’s formula of the nonsexual relation. We can obtain the impossible (an actual sexual relation without obstacles) only if we lose all senses, the very things we need to enjoy another as love object. The voice as object *a* in this film (the voice that speaks to no-one directly) is the Thing that connects the Real of the sexual relation to the enigma of the plague, an affliction that is experienced through repetitive loss itself.

22. The replacement of an object of desire (a lover, for example) with the Thing or object of lack is only one way that films can offer a substitution. Another example occurs in Michael Curtiz’s classic film *Casablanca* (1942), when Rick (Humphrey Bogart) gives up his former lover (Ingrid Bergman), and this loss is replaced by an unexpected male friendship with his former persecutor, Inspector Louis Renault (Claude Rains). One could argue that he acts to put Ilsa on the plane to be with her heroic husband not out of any sense of duty or loyalty but rather in order to be able to carry on as a bachelor in a world full of unexpected contingencies and possibilities, despite the script that makes us think he is acting according to a higher purpose.

23. Of all the directors to convey Freud’s repetition compulsion, Shyamalan is certainly at the forefront. As Bruce Fink relates, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud explores “a number of different explanations for repetition compulsion, one of which is that an attempt is made by the psyche to insert anxiety into a traumatic experience” retroactively, and with Lacan, Fink writes, “the drives involved in compulsive repetition of the traumatic scene . . . seek to insert the subject in some way, to bring the subject into being there where formerly there had been no subject.” Bruce Fink, *Against Understanding: Commentary and Critique in a Lacanian Key, Volume 1* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 62.

24. For an interesting discussion of M. Night Shyamalan’s main themes, including his allegiance to faith, his attempts to find order in the world, to restore community, and enact a mythical play of fables, I refer to the reader to Jeffrey

Andrew Weinstock, ed., *Critical Approaches to the Films of M. Night Shyamalan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

25. Of course the play of comedy is far more complex than this. Thomas Wartenberg notes that the ending of *Some Like It Hot* is potentially politically radical. "If, as it should, our laughter prompts us to reflect on why Osgood's response is so startling, the subversion of heterosexuality's normative status has been initiated." Thomas E. Wartenberg, *Unlikely Couples: Movie Romance as Social Criticism* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1999), 3. But from a Lacanian perspective the radically political move would be to see how all depictions of sexual difference are formulations of the Symbolic and the kernel of our enjoyment lies in an excess; of locating the Thing in the other. Thus our continued puzzling of identity politics to come to the most tolerant and accepting view still works only on the Symbolic level of ideological meanings.

26. See Todd McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), and Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: University of Washington Press), 2000.

27. The depiction of the drive as a hole in finitude comes from Alenka Zupančič in *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 52–53. And Todd McGowan explores the contemporary turn in film to an "atemporality" under the repetitions of the drive in his stellar work *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

28. Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 167.

29. Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (London: Routledge, 1992), 22–23.

30. As with comedy, we have the opportunity through short-circuits of film cuts and endings to repeat the vacillation between being and meaning, which in turn allows us a sense that "the subject's nonbeing is already there, as part of his very existence." Alenka Zupančič, *Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 170.

31. McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 171.

32. According to Žižek, "This is how, from a proper Hegelo-Lacanian perspective, one should subvert the standard self-enclosed linear narrative: not by means of a postmodern dispersal into a multitude of local narratives, but by means of its redoubling in a hidden counternarrative." Slavoj Žižek, "Afterward: The Counterbook of Christianity," in Marcus Pound, *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 149.

33. Miriam Bratu Hansen in her excellent introduction writes that although Kracauer referred to the way a viewer is primarily engaged with film as a corporeal being, his themes are nonetheless closer to those explored by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) (Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, xxi).

34. Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 23–25.