

The Cognitive Import of Contemporary Cinema: Deviant Phenomenal Models in Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void*

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In his brief but illuminating essay 'Genre is Obsolete', Ray Brassier criticizes the commitment of much contemporary critical theory to the transformative potency of so-called 'lived', or 'aesthetic', experience. (Brassier 2007) For Brassier, the latter is merely a cultural residue of early bourgeoisie modernity whose supposedly critical injunction has been vitiated by recent advancements in modern neuroscience which harbors a decisive cognitive and socio-cultural import: the objectification of lived experience. Indeed, rather than being a mere abstract exercise played out exclusively at the level of theoretical science, the techno-scientific mapping of the neural correlates underlying global information-processing (*qua* lived experience) will surely have both practical and concrete consequences in the domain of subjective and intersubjective experience; most immediately, perhaps, through their inevitable commercialization (in the form of cosmetic neuropharmacology, neuromarketing, cognitive enhancers, etc.) which undoubtedly will find their place within the capitalist economy. Yet rather than recoil in horror over these developments, such as by affirming the so-called 'unobjectifiable' condition of human existence (whether characterized as 'experience' or anything else), what is necessary for any form of theory that intends to deem itself critical in the current context is a *major update of its cognitive commitments*, which only will be achieved through a thorough reconsideration of the intricate relationship between the social, the cultural, the personal, and the neurobiological.¹ The current essay aims to present the rudiments for such a cognitive reconsideration viewed through a cultural lens, through the medium of film – or, more specifically, through Gaspar Noé's psychedelic melodrama *Enter the Void* (2010). The latter, it will be argued, is significant precisely insofar as rather than participating in the proliferation of default aesthetic (or

¹ See Negarestani 2014. In the present case, this would imply conceptually and practically integrating the scientific and the cultural (without sacrificing their cognitive dissonance) under the aegis of a genuinely rationalist inhumanism (*qua* Sellarsian functionalism).

cinematic) experience it instead utilizes the medium of film “in a way that draws attention to the synthetic character of all experience” (Brassier 2007) by combining narrative logic with experimental vigor at the intersection between the cultural and the neurobiological. We will consequently present an analysis of the film drawing upon both neurobiological and cinematic resources, which then will be followed by a more general account of the wider cultural and philosophical context in which the film makes sense. Finally, we will end with a brief conclusion on the status of cinema and culture as such within the framework of a scientifically informed, rationalist inhumanism.

‘The Shimmering Vacuity of the Human Experience’

Enter the Void tells the story of Oscar (Nathaniel Brown), an American who lives in Tokyo with his younger sister Linda (Paz de la Huerta) and supports himself by dealing drugs. One night, following an intense DMT-trip and a discussion with one of his friends about *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and its depiction of reincarnation following the afterlife of the spirit, Oscar is caught by the police during a job and is shot to death in the bathroom of a bar called ‘The Void’. Yet rather than marking the end of a conventional narrative, Oscar’s death merely initiates the main scenarios of the film, which depict the disembodied viewpoint of the protagonist as he recalls his traumatic childhood caused by the death of his parents in a car-crash, his strong bond with his sister, their move to Japan and eventual descent into drug-abuse and stripping; observes the aftermath of his death from the perspective of a spirit; and eventually re-experiences his own birth (or, perhaps, reincarnation) at the very end of the film.

Undoubtedly, this brief summary of the film’s storyline raises questions regarding the relevance of a film supposedly dealing with reincarnation and spirits within the context of an analysis of the impact of scientific rationalism on cultural production. Let us therefore begin with sorting out this potential lacuna. Noé himself comes from an atheist background and became interested in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* not for its spiritualist speculations on afterlife and reincarnation, but rather because of its vivid

depictions of altered phenomenal states (most notably out-of-body experiences and the experience of dying) and their hallucinatory underpinnings, which inspired counter-culture icons such as Timothy Leary in using it as a manual for experiments with psychedelics already in the 70's, and also has had notable influence on various experimental musicians, such as Tool (*Lateralus* 2001) and Eliane Radigue (*Trilogie de la Mort* 1998), as well as the painter Alex Grey and the author Philip K. Dick. In other words, it is within this avant-garde/counter-cultural lineage – operating at the intersection between visionary art and psychedelic experimentation – where the film must be situated, since it too aims to bring together the aesthetic and the psychedelic through the cinematic articulation of extreme mental states (e.g. hallucinations and out-of-body experiences). However, what is particularly significant from the perspective of the current essay, and where the film indeed stands out from the majority of the cultural material inspired by the book – which tends to retain much of its spiritualist animus – is that it substitutes the latter in favor of a thorough *neurobiological* account of altered, psychedelic states. Indeed, as Noé himself has pointed out: “Actually, the movie is not so much about reincarnation. It’s more about someone who gets shot while on acid and DMT, and trips out about his own death and dreams about his soul escaping from his flesh, because he wants to keep this promise to his sister that he’ll never leave her, even after death”. (Noé and Lambie 2010) This consequently gives *Enter the Void* a decisive *cognitive import*, and the major impact of the film indeed lies in its utilization of the capacity of the cinematic medium to aesthetically translate altered experiential states into publicly available images (many of the more distinctive psychedelic segments, such as the opening DMT-trip, are based on Noé’s own experimentations with psychedelic drugs) in a way which bring to the fore what Noé refers to as “the shimmering vacuity of the human experience”. (Noé and Schmerkin 2010) Here, as one character in the film puts it, dying itself becomes the ultimate trip:

Books tell stories where people have hallucinations at the moment of their death, linked to the secretion of DMT in their brain. This molecule is a substance that is the source of dreams, and, apparently, a massive

discharge of DMT can occur in the brain during an accident or when one dies. It's the same molecule that we absorb in our systems when we take ayahuasca, the magic Amazonian drink... (Noé and Schmerkin 2010)

Hence, what might at a first glance appear to be nothing but a mere residue of 70's counter-culture – a bland mixture of hippie psychedelia and popular Buddhist thought – instead turns out to be a distinctively modern fusion of cinematic and cognitive resources – an audiovisual laboratory operating under the aegis of the neurobiological plasticity of phenomenal experience – which consequently must be analyzed accordingly. We shall therefore, in what follows, aim to do so by arguing that the cognitive import of the film best can be understood by bringing together Thomas Metzinger's illuminating writings on deviant phenomenal models and the phenomenal first-person perspective with a reconsideration of Gilles Deleuze's reflections on cinematic perception and Reza Negarestani's conception of the inhuman. This, in turn, will provide us with the necessary aesthetic and theoretical resources for further articulating our criticism of the concept of lived experience, and help us in sketching the outlines for alternative cultural and aesthetic trajectories.

Let us begin with a brief detour into contemporary neurophilosophy by quickly summarizing Metzinger's major ideas as introduced in his magnum opus *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* and followed up in the slightly simplified but also more accessible *The Ego-Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*. From our perspective, one of the most significant aspects of Metzinger's work is that it presents a distinctively original account of the *illusory immediacy* concomitant with phenomenal, first-person experience. Building upon recent findings in contemporary neuroscience, as well as classical and contemporary philosophical accounts of consciousness, Metzinger presents a representationalist and functionalist analysis of the phenomenal first-person perspective which construes the latter as a particular form of *epistemic darkness*. According to Metzinger, humans are essentially complex information-processing systems (or biological computers) that *misrepresent* themselves as persons simply because evolution has equipped them with a

transparent, biological interface which increases practical flexibility (i.e. survival) yet decreases epistemic clarity (i.e. cognitive self-awareness) because it prevents the systems in question from recognizing themselves *as* systems (which is beneficial from an evolutionary standpoint insofar as it prevents a cognitive system from undergoing computational overload by constantly having to process the mechanisms of representation themselves). The interface in question is lived experience as such (i.e. the phenomenal first-person perspective), for what the latter indeed generates is a form of *transparent window* inwards and outwards – of inner and outer experience *qua* experience of self and the world – which the system by default fails to recognize as an ongoing representational process because it is unable to experience the underlying neurobiological mechanisms through which the phenomenon of lived, first-person experience is produced. In other words, through the latter we are experientially ‘cut off’ from the reality of sub-personal neural kinematics and are instead forced to operate under the illusory immediacy of phenomenal appearances while failing to recognize them *as* appearances, rather than things-in-themselves. This is why the concept of ‘lived experience’ is so problematic; because it operates wholly under the aegis of the ‘naïve realism’ (Metzinger) which is one of the principal characteristics of the phenomenal, first-person perspective. In short, it fails to recognize the latter as a highly complex data-format which has evolved to process information in a very specific way. Indeed, Metzinger often refers to phenomenal experience as a ‘virtual window’, and there are certainly striking parallels between his account of subjective experience and the traditional notion of virtual reality – insofar as both index representational and computational processes aimed towards presenting a transparent model of reality – except that for Metzinger the phenomenon of virtual reality does not just refer to technological but also biological computation, in the form of what we may think of as the virtual core of conscious experience. This virtual core is what Metzinger refers to as the ‘phenomenal self-model’ (PSM):

First, we possess an integrated inner image of ourselves that is firmly anchored in our feelings and bodily sensations; the world-simulation created by our brains includes the experience of *point of view*. Second, we

are unable to experience and introspectively recognize our self-models *as* models; much of the self-model is, as philosophers might say, *transparent*. Transparency simply means that we are unaware of the medium through which information reaches us. We do not see the window but only the bird flying by. We do not see neurons firing away in our brain but only what they represent for us. A conscious world-model active in the brain is transparent if the brain has no chance of discovering that it is a model – we look right through it, directly onto the world, as it were. The central claim of this book [*The Ego-Tunnel*] – and the theory behind it, the *self-model theory of subjectivity* – is that the conscious experience of being a self emerges because a large part of the PSM in your brain is transparent. (Metzinger 2009: 7)

This subsequently leads us to the functionalist side of Metzinger's PSM-theory. In contemporary philosophy of mind, functionalism has come to refer to a particular school of thought which approaches cognition in terms of the *functional roles* played by its individual components. In other words, the key for functionalism when attempting to provide a solution to the problem of the nature of consciousness is the functional infrastructure constituted by its various components – not the medium in which these components are instantiated (which could be 'meat', as in the case of humans, but also something else, such as 'silicon', as in various forms of intelligent machines). In that regard, Metzinger's account of first-person experience is functionalist insofar as it defines the latter according to a number of neurophenomenological constraints which a system (biological or artificial) must instantiate in order to be classifiable as conscious (transparency being one of the most important ones).² Accordingly, once the full list of functional constraints have been isolated by the scientist and the philosopher, we will have been equipped with an *abstract model* of the cognitive target in question (experience in this case) which then will have been objectified and opened up to systematic *explanation* and *manipulation*.

² A thorough analysis of all of Metzinger's constraints fall outside the scope of this essay, but for his own comprehensive account of them, see Metzinger 2003: 107-212 and 299-428.

The latter is an important point as well insofar as it underlines the fact that the functional constraints underlying conscious experience have been produced by various evolutionary processes and thus may be altered or even completely removed through various technological, pharmacological, and other means. Hence, so-called 'deviant phenomenal models' - dreams, blindsight, hallucinations, out-of-body experiences, phantom limbs, multiple-personality disorder, and so on - become highly significant to Metzinger, for what they are examples of are experiential states in which some of the constraints necessary for default conscious experience have been tampered with in one way or another, which point to the vast richness of our neurobiological possibility space: the fact that ordinary conscious experience is just one phenomenal state class among many and that there are others which we so far have understood very little of. Thus, the future of cognitive neurobiology on the one hand lies in systematically investigating the vast functional complexity underlying conscious experience as such, and on the other hand in making good use of the findings in concrete, socio-cultural contexts. It is therefore a project of both cognitive *exploration* and *implementation*. Accordingly, this is the critical point where theoretical arguments regarding the functional core of phenomenal experience needs to be accompanied by engagement with the practical issues hinted to at the beginning of this essay: neurotechnologies, neuromarketing, and the commodification of experience as such. However, despite being obvious resources for entirely novel forms of commercial exploitation, it is the contention of this essay that the consciousness-technologies implicated in Metzinger's work also have important critical-productive potency which must be recognized and engaged with in a creative, non-conservative manner. This is where *Enter the Void* emerges as a significant cultural take on some of the issues raised by Metzinger, and our next step is therefore to take a closer look at exactly how this plays out in the film.

As remarked earlier, we take the main virtue of the film to be its compelling cinematic treatment of cognitively enclosed experience; of the phenomenal first-person perspective on the one hand and various forms of deviant phenomenal models on the other. In other words, the major impact of the film takes place at a

distinctively *formal* register (i.e. the story is of a secondary nature) and thus coincides with Brassier's claim that the cognitive and cultural import of art in the eradication of experience is inseparable from its formal and structural resources. (Brassier 2007) This is partly manifested in the film's unusual and uncompromising take on the phenomenal first-person perspective, which operates on the basis of the extensive use of subjective point-of-view-shots across a number of phenomenal state classes. Of course, the use of first-person-shots is nothing new in the language of cinema, yet the extent to which these are taken up in *Enter the Void* certainly is, since the entire film in fact is made up exclusively of shots from Oscar's subjective point-of-view (including personal, inner thoughts, blinks of the eyes, etc.). Normally, point-of-view-shots are used selectively in narrative films, for instance in order to invoke individual cognitive states (e.g. the image sometimes loses focus or becomes generally unstable when a character is drunk or hallucinating), yet *Enter the Void* significantly reverses this relation and makes the point-of-view-shot the basis of the entire film. This makes sense, of course, given that point-of-view shots may be characterized as distinctively cognitive shots, which thereby reinforces the animus of cognitive exploration under which the film operates. From the first to the last sequence the camera always depicts Oscar's subjective, first-person perspective – even when it is seen observing him from the outside, which we will come back to later – and thus is in tandem with Metzinger's claim that phenomenal first-person experience first and foremost involves individual *point-of-view*: a subjective perspective of oneself and the world which is immediately recognized as *one's own*.³ However, as we remarked earlier, the seeming stability of the default first-person perspective may easily be shattered through various methods of cognitive disruption which manifests itself in the mental production of different types of deviant phenomenal models. This constitutes the other side of the film's formal aesthetics,

³ Noé himself mentions Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1947) – a film shot almost entirely from the point-of-view of the protagonist – and the opening sequence of Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* (1995) as crucial cinematic influences for this stylistic choice, and also recalls that having watched *Lady in the Lake* under the influence of mushrooms, and being transported into the head of the protagonist, was a significant reason behind why *Enter the Void* was made. (Noé and Schmerkin 2010)

and its full cognitive impact can therefore only be understood once we have had a look at how it explores these atypical phenomenal state classes and how they come to modify the notion of phenomenal first-person experience. We shall therefore, as our next step, analyze two forms of deviant phenomenal models which both play significant roles in the film's overarching cinematic and cognitive architecture: hallucinations and out-of-body experiences.

Hallucinations: One of the most compelling sequences of the entire film is the opening DMT-trip, which consists of roughly five minutes of abstract, colored patterns following Oscar's inhalation of the drug in his apartment. The patterns bring to mind the Jupiter-sequence in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), as well as the experimental shorts of filmmakers such as Jordan Belson and Kenneth Anger (both mentioned explicitly by Noé), but are also based on hallucinations experienced by Noé himself under the influence of the drug. In order to communicate these kinds of mental images to the digital graphics team (whose staff had not necessarily experimented with the drug personally), Noé put together a portfolio of images from films, books, and paintings, which then were handed to the graphics team who turned them into digital images for the film. This procedure brings to mind what Metzinger refers to as "a new and important scientific discipline" called 'phenomathematics', (Metzinger 2003: 243) which concerns itself with outlining abstract geometric patterns supposedly experienced by all human beings under the influence of psychedelic drugs. More specifically, the discipline of phenomathematics has so far isolated four kinds of context-free, geometric patterns - gratings, cobwebs, tunnels, and spirals (all of which appear in the sequence in question) - which, because they seem to point to invariant phenomenal properties shared across all cultures, supposedly contain information about the underlying functional infrastructure of the PSM. (Metzinger 2003: 243) For instance, the emergence of abstract geometric patterns during psychedelic experiences - and the accompanying phenomenal intensification of qualitative content, such as colors

(which also plays a significant role in the DMT-sequence and in the film as such)⁴ – may be traced back to a neurological disinhibition of dynamical activity which results in the intensification of internal stimulus-correlation (i.e. internally generated phenomenal content) and subsequently the onset of color-intense states of abstract hallucinations. (Metzinger 2003: 242-243) In that regard, hallucinations may be understood as a specific form of extrasensory phenomenal content generated by the internal simulation of perceptual experiences, presumably as an attempt by the system to maximize global coherence during states of cognitive overload. From a more general perspective, psychedelic hallucinations of the kind experienced by Oscar in the DMT-trip-sequence are an example of what Metzinger refers to as ‘pseudohallucinations’ in that they are explicitly recognized *as* hallucinations. This is highly interesting from a theoretical perspective, since, as we remarked earlier, first-person experience in its default state is characterized by phenomenal transparency and thus a *lack* of cognitive self-awareness. The system is unable to recognize phenomenal content as part of an ongoing representational process because of the global activation of the transparency-constraint. However, precisely insofar as pseudohallucinations are explicitly recognized as hallucinations by the system, they no longer operate under the aegis of transparency but are instead indexed according to degrees of phenomenal *opacity*: they are appearances which the system automatically identifies as appearances. Accordingly, pseudohallucinations may be understood as a particular form of phenomenal content in which the transparency-constraint is lost to a greater or lesser degree, thereby making it possible for the system to observe earlier processing-stages of its own first-person experience. Naturally, this has immediate experimental implications:

A controlled experience of pseudohallucinations in a scientific setting may offer a chance to introspectively observe the process of construction,

⁴ For instance, this is reason why Tokyo finally was chosen as the city the film would take place in (earlier locations included New York and the Andes): “For this specific project, with its hallucinatory sequences, all requiring very vibrant colors, Tokyo (which, as far as I know is one of the most colorful cities with the most flashing lights on the planet) was the ideal setting”. (Noé and Schmerkin 2010)

activation, and dynamical self-organization of phenomenal representata as they change along a gradient from transparency to opacity. [...] Transitions from transparency to opacity could become an object of rigorous investigation, not in terms of theoretical or empirical strategies, but by utilizing the phenomenal variant of representation itself as a starting point. Attentional availability of earlier processing stages, in a second step, could become a *variable* in controlled experiments, which finally might lead to new insights concerning the notion of phenomenal transparency itself. (Metzinger 2003: 249-250)

However, there is no reason for why these experiments have to be of an exclusively scientific nature; they could also be performed utilizing aesthetic resources (or, rather, a combination between the two). Indeed, it is precisely at this particular juncture between the scientific and the aesthetic where *Enter the Void* enjoys its most immediate theoretical and cultural relevance in the form of a *cinematic exteriorization of inner, experiential states*. Yet before elaborating further on the wider impact of this particular form of cognitive cinema, we first need to strengthen our basic argument by having a look at another type of deviant phenomenal model which occurs frequently throughout the film.

Out-of-Body-Experiences (OBE's): Even though the entire film is depicted from Oscar's first-person perspective it is only for the first 20-25 minutes where the latter is actually tied to his body. For the rest of the time it floats around incorporeally through flashbacks and across the streets of Tokyo in the form of a variety of a so-called 'out-of-body-experience'. Naturally inspired by the accounts of OBE's in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the film depicts this disembodied, floating first-person perspective through the use of a large amount of complex crane-shots where the camera often hovers above the characters, flies through walls, and circles around in the sky. It is a very impressive technical and cinematic achievement which was made possible by recent development in production techniques and a talented key grip. However, it also adds additional weight to the film's cognitive import insofar as

OBE's is an example of another phenomenal state class with a lot of theoretical and practical relevance. In its most basic form, an OBE may be defined as a phenomenally transparent and thus highly realistic experience of leaving one's own body and observing it from an external, third-person perspective (often in the form of some kind of floating 'presence'). This is interesting from a neurophenomenological perspective insofar as it is an example of a representational configuration which involves two self-models: one (passive) which is tied to the physical body, and another (active) which has departed from the first in the form of a kind of 'etheric double' (Metzinger). Another way to put this is that OBE's are characterized by a peculiar form of intentionality-relation wherein not only the subject-component but also the object-component consists of a self-model. However, in all cases it is only the second, non-corporeal self-model which is mentally and intentionally active: it is the new locus of cognition, attention, and sometimes even agency. Naturally, a lot of intricate questions arise in any discussion about OBE's (it has not until recently been considered a serious field of study so the amount of available research is still relatively poor), such as why do they occur in the first place? Metzinger - following other prominent consciousness-theorists such as Susan Blackmore - notes that OBE's (like hallucinations) usually occur in situations when somatosensory input generally is very low, such as before or after sleep or during severe accidents (like in the film), and suggests that it is a method of functional modularization performed by the PSM in order to preserve overall coherence during stressful or unusual situations, by redistributing the locus of higher cognitive functions across a new functional module. Furthermore, as we have mentioned briefly, OBE's are also characterized by a high level of phenomenal transparency in that they feel extremely realistic through and through. Indeed, the transparency associated with OBE's seem to be the underlying neurophenomenological explanation to why OBE-experiences frequently have been associated with various forms of mind-body dualism in several different cultures, such as in the form of the existence of a soul or spirit which departs from the body after death (as in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*). However, as Metzinger suggests, the culturally widespread ideas of a soul or spirit may in fact turn out to be proto-conceptual theories of the functional core of consciousness, which in this case

is instantiated in the form of a culturally invariant, functional modularization (i.e. the OBE-experience) with distinct neural correlates common to all human beings:

Under certain conditions, the brains of all human beings, through specific properties of their functional and representational architecture which have yet to be empirically investigated, allow for this set of phenomenal models of reality. Probably this set of models of reality is a discrete set, forming an individual, clearly circumscribed goal for empirical research. A minimally sufficient neural correlate for the OBE state in humans is likely to exist, and, in principle, a functionalist analysis of the phenomenon can be developed from a more fine-grained representationalist analysis.⁵ (Metzinger 2003: 503)

This is the trajectory opened up by *Enter the Void* through its explicit neurobiological account of the OBE-state which is realized by distinctively original cinematic means where the camera takes on the role of a disembodied first-person perspective in the film's many OBE-sequences.⁶ Undoubtedly, more needs to be said about the general

⁵ Naturally, this would also allow us to trigger OBE-states with the help of various neurotechnologies. This has in fact already happened in 2002 at the Laboratory of Presurgical Epilepsy Evaluation of the University Hospital of Geneva, where Olaf Blanke and his team repeatedly induced OBE-like experiences using electrical stimulation while treating a woman for drug-resistant epilepsy. (Metzinger 2009: 95)

⁶ Strictly speaking, the OBE's experienced by Oscar in the film are for the most part not OBE's in the traditional sense since they generally only involve a disembodied first-person perspective, without the object-component (i.e. without the observed physical body itself). Notable exceptions are at the beginning of the DMT-sequence and just after Oscar has been shot, when the camera slowly detaches itself from his body and briefly observes him from a bird's eye view (which is a brilliant cinematic visualization of an OBE-experience, at least given the film's rigorous commitment to the first-person perspective). There are also a large amount of flashback-sequences (both to Oscar's childhood and to recent events in Tokyo) which also involves a subject-component observing an object-component (usually from behind), although these are not OBE's per se since they lack the latter's ultra-realistic *nowness*, but are rather examples of internal reconstructions of past events (i.e. memories, which, as Metzinger and Blackmore point out, interestingly often operate from an external, third-person

cinematic formalism implicated by this kind of compositional style, but let us first conclude this part of the analysis with a few general comments on our neurophenomenological reading of the film and its wider cultural implications.

Neurophenomenologically speaking, the two (or three, if we include dreams – see note 6 below) phenomenal models previously discussed are examples of what Metzinger refers to as ‘offline activation-states’ (Metzinger 2003: 179-184) in that their phenomenal kinematics consist of internal simulations rather than external representations. Arguably, this is an important neurophenomenological feature of the group of phenomenal models commonly referred to as ‘altered states of consciousness’ in that it points to the underlying neurobiological depth and plasticity not only of these kinds of psychedelic experiences, but to experience in general. In other words, deviant phenomenal models such as these have an immediate epistemic import in that they force us to rethink what ‘experience’ actually is: an internal representation/simulation of external events in the form of a biological interface operating across degrees of phenomenal transparency and opacity. But there is also an immediate practical side to this, which concerns the previously mentioned commodification of experience; if experiential plasticity gradually will become neurotechnologically available then what kinds of socio-cultural resources does it provide us with? Of course, altered states of consciousness already have long cultural traditions of cognitive exploration and discovery, but the difference now is that we are gradually coming to understand the underlying neurobiological dynamics to these experiential states, which will make our ability to control and systematically implement them (as well as other states of consciousness) significantly greater. According to Metzinger, what is necessary for addressing these issues in a non-

perspective). Thus, the many sequences involving Oscar’s incorporeal first-person perspective rather seems to be something like a dreamt or hallucinated out-of-body experience (which, interestingly, would mean that it is a hallucination within another hallucination). This is perfectly consistent with the present analysis, however, insofar as dreams, like hallucinations and OBE’s, occur in situations when somatosensory input is very low and when the system instead has to manufacture complex *internal* phenomenal models, presumably as a way of stabilizing overall coherence during states of cognitive deviation (during accidents, when drifting in and out of consciousness, etc.).

conservative manner is the creation of 'a new cultural context' (Metzinger 2009: 237-240) organized around the cultural implementation of the naturalistic image of humankind in the form of a theoretical and practical extension of the scientific disenchantment of the world to the more recent neuroscientific disenchantment of the self. In particular, Metzinger continues, this new cultural context requires the creation of 'neuroanthropology' as a new form of intellectual discipline, whose purpose is to create the rational foundation for normative issues concerning what we *ought* and *ought not* to become by drawing attention to and systematically exploring the depth and complexity of our experiential state space and its neurobiological dynamics. If successful, rational neuroanthropology will inevitably lead to the emergence of a genuine 'consciousness culture' operating under the aegis of the cognitive exploration of altered states of consciousness using a variety of ancient and modern resources: "The interplay of virtual-reality technology, new psychoactive substances, ancient psychological techniques such as meditation, and future neurotechnology will introduce us to a universe of self-exploration barely imaginable today". (Metzinger 2009: 239) Naturally, it is in this context where we want to position *Enter the Void*, as a particular form of cinematic contribution to the emerging consciousness culture outlined by Metzinger. As we have argued above, there is an intimate link between Noé's account of 'the shimmering vacuity of the human experience' and Metzinger's PSM-theory that is manifested in the conjunction between cinematic formalism and cognitive exploration, and which in our view is the defining characteristic of the film. As Noé has pointed out, the purpose of the film was to cinematically reproduce altered states of consciousness, which have had the effect of people in the audience feeling stoned and sometimes even perceptually uncomfortable. (Noé and Stephenson 2010) Yet this is not a shortcoming of the film; quite the opposite, since it points to the fact that *Enter the Void* is not just an example of a particular kind of cinematic experience (whether characterized as 'genuine', 'productive', 'disturbing', etc.), but rather a form of cultural material which forces us to question our basic conception of experience *tout court*. In that regard, it may be characterized as a particular kind of film which uses the cinematic medium in order to progressively deconstruct our notions of 'self' and 'experience' in a way similar to

Metzinger's theoretical work, by drawing attention to and creatively utilizing the culturally invariant, neurobiological underpinnings of phenomenal experience through techno-cultural exteriorization and manipulation. It is therefore an example of what we may think of as a genuine *cognitive cinema* which borrows from such divergent resources as cognitive science, psychedelic exploration, ancient mysticism, and experimental cinema in a way which not only requires an analysis operating from the perspective of a new (consciousness-) cultural context, but also confronts us with fundamental speculative issues regarding the relationship between the subjective and the objective (in cinema but also in general, as we will see below).

When writing about cinematic perception in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Gilles Deleuze argues that the fundamental innovation of experimental cinema (from the early French surrealists and Soviet auteurs to the American avant-garde) was the cinematic realization of an objective perception which transposed the subjective perception concomitant with the human (the molar) into an objective realm of non-human materiality (the molecular). Taking the Bergsonian definitions of subjective and objective perception as the variation of images in relation to a central image and to each other as his starting point, Deleuze argues that what was discovered by filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov and Michael Snow was the 'genetic element' of perception *tout court*: the vibratory potency of pure materiality where molecules move about in a free, gaseous state. This is no longer a cinema of variation according to a privileged perspective, but one of universal variation where perception is put back into its non-human state through the use of montage *qua* cinematic expression of the Open. (Deleuze 2004: 78-88) In that regard, Deleuze advocates what we might think of as a panpsychist metaphysics of pure perception in the Bergsonian sense, according to which the two poles of the subjective and the objective are formulated along the lines of the human and the non-human. This model has recently been updated by Steven Shaviro (see Shaviro 2014) in the form of a wider aesthetic panpsychism which criticizes cognitive-rational accounts such as the present one for their epistemic anthropocentrism on the basis of a non-human ontology of inner experience (or 'feeling') which argues that all entities, not just humans or even

organic ones, are capable of primordial experiences or feelings, and that these precede and exceed the limited realm of sapient reasoning. Hence, aesthetics becomes first philosophy (since entities 'touch' each other aesthetically before being cognized) and the fundamental speculative, or de-anthropocentric move, is one of democratization between the human and the non-human by putting all entities on equal footing. However, from our representationalist and functionalist account of experience, we take the fundamental relationship between the subjective and the objective to be not one between the human and the non-human, but between the human and the *inhuman*. Simply put, whereas the injunction towards the non-human is a speculative attempt of de-anthropocentrism by levelling the difference between sapience and sentience – and that between thinking and being – by distributing acts of cognition (whether characterized as primordial 'feeling', 'agency', 'experience', etc.) across all organic and inorganic entities (this is essentially the thesis of panpsychism), the doctrine of the inhuman instead organizes the speculative and the de-anthropocentric around the unveiling of what Brassier has referred to as the "necessary inhumanism implicit in humanism". (Brassier and Malik 2014) Hence, whereas non-humanism operates according to an ontological democratization of cognition across all kinds of entities, inhumanism instead seeks to unbind the cognitive from its contingent instantiation in the medium 'sapience' by uncovering the inhuman underpinnings of human experience and reason. In that regard, it may be characterized as a revisionary-constructive extension of humanism which takes as its starting-point the functionalist infrastructure of cognition and its autonomy from the human (as introduced earlier). This rational-functionalist project is what Reza Negarestani has referred to as 'the labor of the inhuman':

Inhumanism is the extended practical elaboration of humanism; it is born of a diligent commitment to the project of enlightened humanism. A universal wave that erases the self-portrait of man drawn in sand, inhumanism is a vector of revision. It relentlessly revises what it means to be human by removing its supposedly self-evident characteristics while preserving certain invariances. At the same time, inhumanism registers

itself as a demand for construction: it demands that we define what it means to be human by treating the human as a constructible hypothesis, a space of navigation and intervention. (Negarestani 2014: 427)

With this in mind, we take the perceptual experiments in *Enter the Void* to be indexes not of an objective pole according to a double system (as in Deleuze), but rather of an objectivity located *within* the subjective as such. This objectivity is the functional infrastructure of cognition and its potential for systematic exteriorization and technocultural implementation, which is utilized in the film in the form of a cinematic visualization of a number of deviant phenomenal state classes and their neurobiologically instantiated relationship to the functional core of consciousness.⁷ Of course, the idea that human cognition, *qua* thinking and experience, can be objectified has been strongly criticized by major strands in contemporary philosophy and critical theory – from Frankfurt School-enthusiasts and phenomenologists to neo-Heideggerians and postmodernists – since it is generally thought of as a dangerous practice of ruthless rationalization which in the end will alienate man from his true self. However, it has been the aim of the current essay to show why these resources should be defended from their conservative critics, using the example of a cultural program of cognitive exploration and implementation operating under the aegis of Metzinger’s neuroanthropology on the one hand, and Negarestani’s inhumanism on the other. It is at this critical juncture where the fundamental

⁷ Arguably, similar points can be made about a number of filmmakers associated with the experimental tradition, such as Stan Brakhage, whose films Deleuze credits with exploring a non-human world of pure perception in its molecular state. (Deleuze 2004: 87) However, it seems to us that Brakhage’s concept of the ‘untutored eye’ – an eye freed from the limitations imposed by our default perspectival modes of vision and engaging in a constant adventure of perception by, for instance, observing all the shades of green in a field of grass – also could be read as an example of phenomenal opacity in Metzinger’s sense. In other words, the untutored eye may be understood as a cinematically informed attempt to systematically explore earlier processing-stages of perception and their relation to an overall functional profile from within an aesthetic context. It would therefore be an index of the functionalist inhumanism defended in the current essay, rather than Deleuze’s panpsychist non-humanism (Deleuze is right, however, in linking the American experimental tradition to drugs as its so-called ‘collective assemblage of enunciation’).

cognitive import of a film such as *Enter the Void* must be located, as it opens up broader questions concerning the overall ambitions of a cultural project operating under the aegis of a scientifically informed rationalism, and how it must be distinguished from familiar postmodern critiques of cognitive and cultural alienation. We will consequently end this essay with a few additional thoughts on these important issues.

Conclusion: Cinema, Culture and the Vector of Alienation

In his recent book *Film, Nihilism and the Restoration of Belief*, Darren Ambrose criticizes the prevailing cultural nihilism which he argues is characteristic of our current context. For Ambrose, this cultural nihilism is the effect of its entwinement with the logic of late capitalism, and whose immediate symptoms include skepticism, indifference, and hopelessness because of our increased alienation from an ontologically impoverished reality of simulacra, mass-media representation, and surface without depth. In Ambrose's view, this severe cultural situation cannot be cured through knowledge alone, but must rather be challenged with the help of a particular form of counter-sense which will alter our habitual modes of perception through a process of re-enchantment and the production of a vital faith in the possibility of living differently. This is where cinema emerges as a particularly crucial medium, since when at its best, Ambrose argues, it offers us a unique way for achieving this kind of re-enchantment and renewed faith because of the capacity of certain forms of cinematic experiences to transform our habitual modes of thinking and perceiving the world. Ambrose traces this transformative power of cinema to its emergence as a medium of reconciliation for the modern, enlightened subject, who has lost his religious fidelity to God – as well as his social and collective identity – through the Enlightenment's vector of scientific disenchantment. According to Ambrose, the scientific abolition of God also meant the abolition of collective meaning and thereby a general epistemological crisis because of the enlightened subject's increased rational autonomy, which resulted in a fundamental alienation of man from nature. Cinema, however, has the capacity to help us overcome this collective alienation through the production of analogical images of the world, and

subsequently of experiences which will re-connect us to the deep fabric of reality in a way similar to the religious transcendentalism of the pre-Enlightenment era; but not through a simple appeal to 'truths' or 'facts', however, since this would be to operate exclusively according to knowledge and an essentially mechanistic world of illusory appearances. On the contrary, following Deleuze's Nietzschean reading of the powers of the false, Ambrose argues that it is the power of cinema to restore a vital faith in a world which is not static and unchanging, but in a constant state of change through the composition of multiple forces of becoming. This is a philosophy of life rather than knowledge, and of experience and affectivity rather than reason and representation: "Cinema is a uniquely *affective* way of capturing and preserving our experience and our collective dreams, translating them into *affective* cinematic images". (Ambrose 2013: 121)

Naturally, we find Ambrose's account problematic on many levels, which we will address by focusing in particular on the concept of *alienation*. Although never really spelled out explicitly, Ambrose's criticism of Enlightenment-rationality and late capitalism echoes familiar critical narratives which attempt to forge a destructive link between the two through the supposedly pathological nature of scientific rationality. Ambrose, similarly, pits the capitalist-scientific subject of nihilistic alienation against the affective subject of vital re-enchantment through the transformative powers of the cinematic experience. However, the positing of a continuity of alienation between enlightenment-rationality and late capitalism fails to index a crucial difference in the nature of alienation which ultimately vitiates the attempt to critically link the latter to the former. Whilst the phenomenology of alienation characteristic of late capitalism certainly can be diagnosed in such a way as proposed by Ambrose (i.e. using the examples of mass-media representations, simulacra, surface-appearances, etc.), this is merely a regional model of alienation whose immediate effects operate entirely within the surface-logic of phenomenal experience, or the PSM.⁸ However, the kind

⁸ In Metzinger's words (using the example of the Internet): "For those of us intensively working with it, the Internet has already become a part of our self-model. We use it for external memory-storage, as a cognitive prosthesis, and for emotional autoregulation. We think with the help of the Internet, and it

of alienation congruent with the Enlightenment's scientific vector of disenchantment is fundamentally different in its nature in that it is a *universal* model of alienation whose cognitive import stretches far beyond the regional surface-effects associated with late capitalism. In that regard, it marks a fundamental *gain* in intelligibility, as Ray Brassier has argued: "[T]he disenchantment of the world understood as a consequence of the process whereby the Enlightenment shattered the 'great chain of being' and defaced the 'book of the world' is a necessary consequence of the coruscating potency of reason, and hence an invigorating vector of intellectual discovery, rather than a calamitous diminishment. [...] [It] deserves to be celebrated as an achievement of intellectual maturity, not bewailed as a debilitating impoverishment". (Brassier 2007: xi) In other words, while it certainly is true that the Enlightenment's labor of disenchantment produced a fundamental split between man and nature – which now has been extended into a cognitive split between the immediately experienced self and the image of the self which is being unveiled by modern science – this is not the mark of a deplorable pathology which must be cured, but of a cognitive achievement which must be insisted on. It is a form of alienation, but a fundamentally productive one in that it indexes a general intellectual emancipation of man from myth, experience and theology, and a subsequent gain in rational autonomy. Neither nature, nor even ourselves, may be our 'home', yet it is about time that this insight is defended as a rigorous intellectual achievement and starting-point for future theory and practice, for it has for too long been castigated as both totalitarian and outright dangerous. It is this particular form of universal alienation which we aim to rehabilitate in our work, since we believe that it harbors massive critical potency for theory and practice, in the form of a general 'vector of alienation' which will turn default conceptions of ourselves and of nature on their heads. Going back to our example with the concept of experience, we

assists us in determining our desires and goals. We are learning to multitask, our attention span is becoming shorter, and many of our social relationships are taking on a strangely disembodied character. "Online addiction" has become a technical term in psychiatry. Many young people (including an increasing number of university students) suffer from attention deficits and are no longer able to focus on old-fashioned, serial symbolic information; they suddenly have difficulty reading ordinary book". (Metzinger 2007: 234)

might say that whilst regional alienation merely is an experience of alienation (in late capitalist culture, for instance), universal alienation instead marks an *alienation from experience* tout court. In other words, whereas the former operates entirely within the 'myth of experience' (Brassier), the latter instead forces us to question the epistemic and cultural validity of the concept of experience as such. This is one of the principal virtues of a film such as *Enter the Void*, which also indicates that this particular form of intellectual trajectory does not need to culminate in a kind of anti-aesthetic rationalism or scientism, but on the contrary harbors entirely new sets of aesthetic resources which have yet to be explored. This, in our view, is the path contemporary cinema, and cultural production as such, must insist on; that is, utilizing the cognitive split indexed by universal alienation as an enabling condition for practice, rather than following the conservative path outlined by Ambrose in order to stave off the threat of alienation. Indeed, whereas Ambrose's account of the vitality of the cinematic experience – much like Shaviro's ontologization of inner experience – risks ending up as a mere pawn within a late capitalist culture organized around its inevitable commodification, the present account not only is better equipped for critically approaching such issues, but also harbors novel cognitive and conceptual resources which we believe have far more potential for future cultural progression. However, if we are to be able to utilize these resources on firm intellectual grounds, what is necessary first and foremost is to overcome the opposition between reason and imagination which has haunted much of 20th century thought. In other words, rather than pitting the coldness of instrumental reason against the authenticity of artistic creativity, what is necessary is a 'genuine synthesis' between the two, which "embrac[es] both the imaginative dimension of mathematics and science and the cognitive dimension of artistic and cultural production". (Wolfendale 2014) Ultimately, reason and imagination must not be thought of as polar opposites but as intimately entwined, since rationality is never without imaginary influences. Indeed, as Brassier puts it, "reason is fuelled by imagination, but it can also remake the limits of the imagination". (Brassier 2014: 487)

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