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Amor Fati in Jaco Van Dormael's film, *Mr. Nobody*



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For the Department of Language and Culture Studies at Trinity College
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Table of Contents

Introduction

Page 3

Chapter One: Anna

Page 7

Chapter Two: Elise

Page 16

Chapter Three: Jean

Page 24

Conclusion

Page 34

Bibliography

Page 40

Introduction

Amor fati is a unique concept found in a multitude of Nietzsche's philosophical works, and while he does not discuss the topic directly it is central to much of his thought. It is an important notion within Nietzsche's philosophies and ideas, yet he never wrote about it explicitly. What exactly is 'amor fati' and why is it such an important topic even though there is little written about it by Nietzsche, himself? Amor fati is "the love of fate, the acceptance of necessity".¹ It is way of living in which one receives what life gives one and appreciates it, understands it, and even loves it. It is embodied by someone who respects life, fate, the hand one is dealt, and gratefully moves forward holding no resentments or qualms with what has happened to him. A kind of person who lives their life in this way can also be described as the "man of intuition" as shown in Nietzsche's essay "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense". In this essay, Nietzsche describes how there are two types of man: the man of intuition and the man of reason. The man of reason "submits his actions... to the rule of abstractions: he is no longer prepared to be carried away by sudden impressions, or intuitions, but he generalizes all these impressions to form less colorful, cooler concepts, to which to harness the vehicle of his life and actions".² In laymen's terms, the man of reason goes through life rationally in all his endeavors and encounters. He is not the type of man to be emotionally swept off his feet and distracted by life's wonders. He rationalizes every thought and feeling, and reason is his compass. The intuitive man is just the opposite, he is "scornful of abstraction" and at times irrational.³ This man of intuition "reaps from his intuitions

¹ Ulfers and Cohen, *Nietzsche's Amor Fati: The Embracing of an Undecided Fate*, 3

² Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, 258

³ Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, 263

a continuous flow of illumination, comfort and redemption. Of course when he suffers he suffers more violently; and he also suffers more often because he is unable to learn from experience".⁴ Someone who lives their life led by intuition revels in their experiences with the world and all of its illusions and realities. This intuitive man is in touch with emotions and thus feels them in all of their extremes, but without learning from his mistakes. While the man of reason who has learned from his experience doesn't encounter these pitfalls, he lacks the acceptance of life and the concept of fate that comes with it. The man of intuition lives a life of amor fati as he takes what is given to him and opens his heart to life and all that it offers. This way of living makes life feel valuable to the person living it, and all of the ups and downs no matter how impactful or minute are important because they are all a part of life.

Amor fati and the acceptance and love of your fate and every minute detail of it is related to the idea of eternal return, another concept from Nietzsche's thought and work. There are some scholarly works that reference amor fati and eternal return as one and the same ideas within Nietzsche's works. This particular essay sides with Brian Domino's interpretation that amor fati and eternal return are separate but connected terms and ideals. For further reading on the difference and similarities on these concepts Domino's work *Nietzsche's Use of Amor Fati in Ecco Homo* lays out these distinctions.⁵ Eternal return is the thought that your life, every second of it, is worth living over and over again for all eternity.⁶ How could a film about bifurcation, and the seemingly endless possibilities of decision making have anything to do with loving one's single,

⁴ Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, 264

⁵ Domino, *Nietzsche's Use of Amor Fati in Ecco Homo*

⁶ Han-Pile, *Nietzsche and Amor Fati*, 1

fateful life? That is the question this thesis will be attempting to answer by analyzing *Mr. Nobody* with an emphasis on a few key scenes.

Mr. Nobody embodies French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's thought that films made after World War II, the time-image as he refers to them, were "aimed at an always ambiguous, to be deciphered real" whereas films before this time "represent[ed] an already deciphered real".⁷ This idea explains how films made before WWII were movies being shown on screen as simple stories already pre-deciphered and worked out for the viewer to be seen as entertainment. Films made after the war were films that made the viewer think since what was shown on screen needed to be deciphered. No longer was cinema simply a form of entertainment, it was an art; an art that engaged you and brought the viewer into the story. These pictures changed "in order to [be] put in contact with thought".⁸ These films make one step outside of oneself and ponder one's life, one's existence, one's being, one's world, and how one relates to it.

Mr. Nobody has that exact effect on its viewers. Jaco Van Dormael's film centers on a young boy, Nemo Nobody, who is "faced with an impossible choice; to go with his mother or to stay with his father".⁹ Throughout the course of the movie we follow Nemo and are shown all possible lives he could have lived that stem from this decision. There are three main timelines in the film where he ends up with one of three women; Anna, Elise, and Jean. Within each of these broader timelines there are multiple smaller timelines tracing other decisions he makes throughout his life/lives. It is a complicated web where some events seemingly have no meaning and

⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 1

⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 1

⁹ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

“nothing happens most of the time, like a french movie”.¹⁰ Others parts are bursting at the seams with substance, much like life itself.

The film is wrought with importance but there are a few key scenes this essay will be focusing on due to their particular relationship to the idea of the man of reason, the man of intuition, and amor fati as found in Nietzsche’s works. As described, within *Mr. Nobody* there are three main timelines, within which there are further countless branches of temporal dimensions. I will be focusing on select scenes and elements from each timeline to explore the bifurcations within them and how each of his lives within these broader timelines not only differs from one another, but how each portray a very different way of life. In Anna’s timeline Nemo lives the life of intuition as described by Nietzsche in “On Truth and Lie in an Extra Moral Sense” and Anna, as his counterpart, lives life as the man of reason. Within Jean’s timeline Nemo lives as an extreme version of the man of reason until that proves unsustainable and thus he catapults himself to the opposite extreme of living as the man of intuition. The third timeline from the film revolves around Nemo’s lives with Elise. In Elise’s timelines Nemo gets to a point where he lives on neither side of the man of reason and intuition and cannot find a balance between the two. Within each of the timelines analyzed I will not only explore the type of lives Nemo does or does not chose, but also how fate acts in relation to each of them and how each of these timelines are options of possible lives that are portrayed for the viewer as the possibility be lived eternally. In other words, though the art of cinema Van Dormael is able to show the audience every different path their lives could take and offer them as options of how their life can turn out depending on what they would chose.

¹⁰ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

Chapter One: Anna

The first step in discovering how this film about seemingly never-ending timelines actually reinforces the idea of amor fati is to understand the different timelines and how they portray Nietzsche's philosophies. Each of the broad timelines within *Mr. Nobody* has an overarching theme that ties together all possible outcomes of each respective timeline. It is important to note that the women within the three main timelines for the most part stay within those boundaries but there are a few examples in which one of the women appears in another's respective timeline but has no major impact. "In its branching plot structure and instant replay effect, the film anticipates a nascent filmmaking era—where we can choose the narrative we want and dream our possible worlds".¹¹ In a style reminiscent of a 'choose your own adventure' story, Van Dormael offers up his selection of different lives for the audience to experience and contemplate which way of living is right, not only for Nemo but for themselves.

Anna's timeline is about love, specifically emotional love. The plot of this timeline and its branches show love as the central focal point. There are also visual indicators that engage the viewer into connecting this timeline with emotional love. The color red is prevalent in Anna's timelines whether it's in the clothes she wears, the sheets on the bed, or the composition of various set elements such as the color of the walls or the lighting filters. In psychology the color red is largely and even unconsciously associated with love, lust, and sex.¹² Van Dormael uses color purposefully throughout the film to give the viewer hints as to what a particular timeline of

¹¹ Perlmutter, *Multiple Strands and Possible Worlds*, 55

¹² Stanford Encyclopedia, *Philosophy of Color*

Nemo's life is about and what is essential to understanding said timeline. Throughout our 'choose your own adventure' film the viewer is always able to distinguish which timeline Nemo is in by the aspects of color in each scene when the film cuts to and from the various temporal dimensions. The colors are also very specific to their respective timelines. Not only in Anna's timeline is there a lot of red elements but there is also a lack of blue and yellow which are colors associated with other timelines. In any scene within Anna's timeline the mise-en-scène revolves around red and purposefully excludes blue and yellow. Whichever color scheme is shown on screen reinforces Nemo's decision on choosing that life and that path over any other. For example Anna's teenage bedroom is filled with the color red; there is a shag rug of different red hues, posters of poppy flowers on the walls, her door is painted red, and whatever is not red is within the spectrum of warm colors closely associated with red such as orange. The lack of blue and yellow in Anna's timelines alludes to the fact that those other colors, women, and lives are now inaccessible to Nemo and to the viewer after he has made choices that have led him to lead these lives with Anna. Once he makes a decision that will lead him to a life with one of the women the other doors of possibility are shut to him, closing him off to experiencing those lives and thus those colors.¹³ The color red and its emotive dimensions created by the scenes involving Anna, sets up the conflict of choosing to live a life of intuition versus a life of reason. This chapter will examine how Nemo and Anna each represent the two types of lives Nietzsche describes— intuition and reason respectively— and how color speaks to intuition and emotion and not rationality.

¹³ Front, *Traumatic Bifurcation: Jaco Van Dormael's Mr. Nobody*, 254

Anna's main timeline stems from Nemo's option to live with his mother whereby he falls in love with Anna during their teenage years. There are also temporal dimensions in which Nemo and Anna don't fall in love as teenagers, or ever for that matter. While these sub-timelines are important in showing the various ways Nemo's life could have turned out, with or without this love, for the sake of this essay the focus will be on those timelines in which Nemo and Anna do fall in love, specifically a timeline in which they fall in love then lose each other, only to be brought back together by fate.

The basis for a multitude of the Nemo and Anna timelines lies within his choice to go with his mother when his parents split at the train station, aptly named Chance. He moves away to a city where eventually Anna and her father move in with Nemo and his mother due to their parents' relationship together. After Nemo and Anna fall passionately in love their parents split and she must move away to New York. This is when the two lose contact for many years until by an act of fate they meet again. In the following selected scene the elements of the man of intuition and the man of reason and how they play out will be explored.

Nemo is on a train, a symbol shown many times throughout the film to connote diverging paths and many possible tracks of life. The tracks themselves bifurcating over and over again at high speed are also shown numerous times when the film transitions between timelines. Trains themselves are shown throughout the film mostly with Nemo as a passenger. The very first life altering decision Nemo must make is at the train station choosing between living with either of his parents. This is the original bifurcation which subsequently leads to all of the different timelines within the film. In *Mr. Nobody* "railways ... [are] the articulation of all the possibilities, taking place simultaneously" whether that be portrayed in Nemo on a train or the train tracks

themselves.¹⁴ One interpretation can be made that, metaphorically, trains are a symbol of Nemo's fate which he cannot control as he is just a passenger on the train of life taking what comes and moving forward.

Once at the train station where he disembarks Nemo notices a homeless woman whom in previous scenes and timelines he has given money. She is covered in cardboard and upon further inspection Nemo discovers she has died, most likely from an overdose as seen by the used needle laying next to her. The clock shows the hours ticking by and Nemo is still at the station making sure proper care is being provided to the woman. Just as her body is wheeled away by the proper authorities Nemo turns around and sees Anna.

This scene shows how fate had its hand in the fact that many elements aligned just in time in order for Nemo and Anna to meet again. Nemo's train had to get in at a certain time to place him in the station after the homeless woman's death so that he could discover her. Had she been alive he would have given her money and walked on, missing his fated reunion with Anna. The authorities took the exact amount of time to get there and take the woman away so that the moment they were gone Nemo was in the right place at the right time due to circumstances beyond his control. It was a flawless execution of fate for Nemo to turn at that precise moment and see Anna after all their years apart.

Their reunion is intense as they rekindle both their emotional and physical relationship all at once. The pair roll around with each other at Nemo's apartment as both their adult selves, and their teenage selves. The mixing of their ages by using intercut footage of Nemo and Anna as teenagers and adults shows how their love has permeated their whole lives and is not isolated to

¹⁴ Front, *Traumatic Bifurcation: Jaco Van Dormael's Mr. Nobody*, 256

one stage in their lives or even one timeline. The sheets on Nemo's bed and the clothing Anna wears is red, further reinforcing the emotional response the color red elicits. At one point they are against a wall kissing and the entire wall is covered in polaroid photos, one of which shows Anna as a teenager in a red shirt. The camera moves in a similar fashion as the characters themselves, making the audience feel as if they are there in the scene experiencing the excitement and playfulness between Nemo and Anna. While they embrace for the first time in years they are the only two in focus in the shot while everyone around them moves at hyper speed enforcing how they are the only two people that seem to matter. In his apartment the camera bounces around panning quickly past support beams as if it and the audience are playing and teasing along with the characters who are doing the same. For Nemo and Anna everything is old and familiar between them while also being new and exciting at the same time. The intensity of emotion throughout this scene and throughout their overall reunion exemplifies the life of the man of intuition. As Nietzsche describes in "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" the intuitive "man, rooted in the middle of culture ... reaps from his intuitions a continuous flow of illumination, comfort and redemption".¹⁵ The man of intuition discovers much of the world around him by giving into and embracing his fate and thus continuously discovering his surroundings. Not only does Nemo thrive by giving into his fate within this timeline as it eventually brings the two lovers together again, but he also revels in all of the emotion that comes with it. He passionately welcomes Anna back into his life without hesitation or a sliver of doubt. Anna however has not fully given into the life of intuition.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, 264

After the initial fervor of their reunion, Anna's emotions settle and reason takes her over again. She tells Nemo that "When we were separated at 15, I said I would never love anyone else, ever. I would never become attached, I'd never stay put anywhere, I'd have nothing for myself; I decided I would pretend to be alive. And this is what I've been waiting for, all this time, renouncing all possible lives, for one only, with you."¹⁶ Anna chooses to live a life of reason that spites fate. She says herself that she renounced all possible other lives thus renouncing all possible fates that could become hers. She cannot give into the fact that fate brought Nemo back to her and these emotions aren't what she is accustomed to anymore. She "is no longer prepared to be carried away by sudden impressions, or intuitions" and thus tells Nemo she needs a few days apart to think and process what has happened.¹⁷ She has to step away from the emotional roller coaster they are on and evaluate these events rather than be swept up in them as Nemo can be. Her life of reason is in contrast with Nemo's life of intuition insofar as they live on either side of a mirrored glass, separated while seemingly so close, but leading their lives in opposite directions. Their relationship and this scene in particular is an exploration of both sides of life that Nietzsche describes in his essay "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" since within this one relationship the viewer is shown the life of reason within Anna and the life led by intuition within the character of Nemo.

The man of intuition has a different relationship to fate than that of the man of reason due to his appreciation for it rather than the need to conquer it. Because of this different relation to fate Nemo, as the man of intuition in this timeline, interacts with fate in its many different forms.

¹⁶ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, 258

Fate, which can be understood as its own character in this film, could be described as having many faces. It is the same concept throughout the film but it takes on multiple different forms. In some scenes it seems coincidental that a character is at the right place at the right—or wrong—time, and in others the fated occurrence is more clearly explained. An example of this explicit type of fate is the butterfly effect. The idea of the butterfly effect has roots in chaos theory and other sciences but since has become a colloquial phrase in modern society. It is the idea that a very small event can cause a massive effect; a butterfly flaps its wings in the Amazon and eventually that causes a hurricane on the other side of the world. The butterfly effect comes into play as a form of fate on several occasions within *Mr. Nobody*, one being an occurrence when Anna and Nemo part ways after their emotional reunion described previously. Anna wants Nemo to give her a few days to process everything that happened between them and gives him a piece of paper with her number on it. She walks away down the busy city street, and as Nemo looks after her a single drop of rain falls from the sky onto the paper smudging the number beyond recognition. By the time Nemo notices the number is ruined, Anna is gone.

This raindrop is the culmination of many events that was set into motion by a purchase of jeans Nemo had bought eight months prior to this moment. Nemo narrates the unfolding of the events of this butterfly effect and how he compared the price of jeans and bought the cheaper pair all those months ago. What seems like a small insignificant purchase in the large world of the garment industry actually was the smallest catalyst for a larger event. Nemo quotes a Chinese proverb that claims “a single snowflake can bend the leaf of the bamboo” showing how this one pair of jeans affected the overall company that then decided to outsource labor to other, cheaper

countries.¹⁸ Because of this outsource of labor a Brazilian man lost his job at this jeans factory. Two months prior to the raindrop falling onto Nemo's paper this Brazilian man was home due to his lost job and decided to boil an egg. The vapor from the boiling water evaporated into the atmosphere and two months later in another country thousands of miles away that vapor became the raindrop that caused Nemo to lose Anna all over again. The same fateful force that brought Nemo and Anna back together again tore them back apart.

Of all the different scenarios in the film where the butterfly effect is shown from start to finish, this is the only one that was caused by Nemo himself. "Chaos [theory] offers a way of seeing order and pattern where formerly only the random, the erratic, the unpredictable—in short, the chaotic—had been observed".¹⁹ The butterfly effect, based in chaos theory, is a way of imposing a narrative on something previously seen as a state of complete disorder and detachment of events. Narrative is something that has become so inextricably intertwined with the human mind that nearly everything in our world has a narrative; the science of evolution, literary works, film, life itself. Humans ascribe this 'beginning, middle, and end' structure to everything, even things seemingly completely chaotic and unrelated such as a boiled egg, a denim purchase, and a raindrop all can be accounted for in the mathematical systems of chaos theory. This narrative, this butterfly effect is not random; it is fate. Exactly how these events play out is fate. Nemo not only recognizes this particular raindrop as fate, but also recognizes the events leading up to the rain are all part of fate as well. His recognition and acceptance of these events lead to him "seeing everything in [his] past as fate" which "is wise. It's very close to having no regrets and

¹⁸ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

¹⁹ Brady, *Chaos Theory, Control Theory, and Literary Theory or: A Story of Three Butterflies*, 65

no resentments”.²⁰ The butterfly effect is so powerful and essential to Anna’s timeline because it is a clear instance where Nemo recognizes and accepts his fate; it is the prime example of Nemo living in amor fati. Seeing his own past as part of fate leads Nemo to experience his present—the moment the rain falls—as fate, thus he is able to position himself and his decisions within a life of accepting fate. Furthermore this acknowledgment and acceptance leads Nemo to not fear making decisions as he can see and understand the greater picture of himself within the larger world of fate. This self-actualization within the life of amor fati is not always how Nemo’s lives end up in the film within his other timelines. Van Dormael offers up this particular timeline with Anna as an option to show the audience what it would be like for Nemo, and for the audience themselves, to live a life embracing intuition, and living according to amor fati. The viewer is able to see how this ability to make decisions without fear and active choice to embrace one’s fate effects how one’s life can possibly turn out. It is always left up to interpretation for the viewer to decide which of these possible lives is the right or most compelling choice. Nemo’s lives with each woman and each way of life as described by Nietzsche are explored in many different ways. As described above there are timelines in which Nemo is able to live the life of intuition and embrace his fate but there are also timelines in which he is unable, and even unwilling to accept his fate and fully live and experience his own life.

²⁰ Chapko, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 275

Chapter Two: Elise

Nemo's branches of life involving Elise are extremely complex and differ greatly from Anna and Jean's timelines. The themes are not as overtly clear because they are much more emotionally and mentally influenced than the other timelines. Nemo's lives with Anna are about love and passion, Jean's timelines focus on monetary success, but Elise's timelines don't have the same clearcut message. Elise's timelines in Nemo's life are centered around loss, hopelessness, helplessness, and the combination of these elements resulting in the inability to act. Her timelines are shrouded in these difficult, heavy emotions. In all of the scenarios in which Nemo ends up with Elise, he actually ends up—sometimes literally and other times metaphorically—without her. There are a few timelines in which he marries Elise and she dies on their wedding day, leaving Nemo alone for the rest of his life, never to marry again. Other dimensions where Elise lives, it is revealed that she has significant mental health issues such as depression or bipolar disorder. Even in these branches where Nemo spends his life with Elise, she is never really there as she is trapped in her own sadness, leaving Nemo by himself, helpless, which explains why the color blue permeates all of Elise's timelines.

The color blue is commonly associated with sadness and depression. Blue “affects us mentally rather than the physical reaction we have to red”.²¹ Anna's red timeline works very well in tandem with the content of Nemo's lives with her. Their physical relationship is shown many times and the love and passion permeate those timelines in terms of content and visual style with the color choice of red. As mentioned above, blue is a color that affects people mentally much

²¹ *Psychological Properties of Colour*

like the themes in this timeline. It is a color associated with sadness and the color that is the most prevalent in the film overall in Elise's timelines as compared to the other colors representative in other timelines. While Anna's timelines have many aspects of red, and Jean's have a lot of yellow, Elise's timeline is drenched in blue. The walls of their bedroom are blue, their bathroom is painted blue, the sheets and comforter on their bed are blue. Elise's timeline is almost suffocated by the color, drawing comparison to her suffocation by her own mental illness in which she is ensnared.

In Elise's timelines there is an essence of powerlessness to Nemo's life. In the quantum branches in which Elise is killed in a car accident on their wedding day, Nemo can do nothing to save her. In the timelines where she lives well into their married life she suffers from mental illness and in spite of all his efforts Nemo can't help her. Nemo begins his different relationships with Elise in a similar fashion as the course of their relationships unfold. The night they meet is at a school dance or party, where Elise has a public breakdown after something presumably hurtful was said to her by another boy. The whole scene is bathed in blue, the color most associated with depression and sadness. The disco lights have blue filters on them and the uplighting washes the whole scene in various shades of blue. Elise, in a blue dress, falls to the floor across the room from Nemo crying and shrieking. After she picks herself up she and Nemo leave the dance and outside while they are talking she is constantly between the throes of sobbing or being collected and calm. Nemo's action in leaving the dance with her is, in a small way, his attempt to save her from whatever hurt has befallen of her in regards to the other young boy. Nemo is constantly trying to save Elise in all the timelines in which he chooses to be with her to no avail.

In the timelines in which Nemo chooses to be with Elise there are a few in which she dies in a tragic car accident on the day of their wedding. The accident comes out of nowhere and nothing could have been done to prevent it. Again Nemo is in a situation in which nothing he can do will save Elise. No matter how hard he tries and how much he loves her it is simply impossible for Nemo to help her. Whether she lives or dies Nemo cannot save her despite his best efforts to do so. He makes all of his decisions based on how they could help benefit Elise and her mental health and happiness but his actions result in essentially nothing. Cause and effect morph into a concept that no longer applies to Nemo's life. There is no real overt cause, at least to Nemo, for Elise to always be so sad and no action that can make her any better. Slowly the act of decision making in Nemo's life becomes obsolete. Doing one thing or the other no longer matters because either way the outcome seems to remain the same. The concept of pigeon superstition comes into play in this timeline significantly.

The opening scene in the film simply shows a pigeon being taught to press a lever in order to receive food. Once that is established the experiment takes a turn and the food is given by a timer and not due to any action or inaction by the bird. Now the pigeon has no idea what it did to deserve this food. The film goes on to explain that if at the time of the first release the pigeon was flapping its wings, it will continue to flap them, convinced it is the action that will bring him food. The bird, and any other living creature subject to an experiment like this, inherently imposes cause and effect to what goes on around them, and more specifically their own personal role in this cause and effect. Nemo has become the pigeon in Elise's timelines. Cause and effect no longer are employed in his life and he has no idea what he has or hasn't done to deserve the life he is living. Nothing he does seems to matter or make any impact and thus after so many years of

this he can no longer act. His lives with Elise have conditioned him to believe his actions are void and useless and he becomes paralyzed by his own helplessness.

The scene that fully encapsulates the central theme and meaning of Elise's timelines begins with an adult Elise openly displaying her pain and suffering to Nemo. She cries and tells Nemo "the fear is back" and that she is "sick of doctors, sick of pills, it's all pointless".²² She tells Nemo she is afraid and the viewer realizes he is in no position in which he can do anything about her fear. Tortured by this helplessness Nemo describes a recurring dream he has about himself and Elise. It is set in a prehistoric time where he and Elise are cave people and a bear is about to attack them. Elise is screaming but Nemo scares the bear away and she is no longer afraid. He then tells Elise, "when I wake up there's no bear, but you're still afraid".²³ Nemo can't help or protect Elise from her mental illness no matter how hard he tries. He does everything for their children in her absence when she cannot leave her bed and he comforts her in all of her manic episodes. When she is found sobbing in the street in the pouring rain he holds her and tries to carry her inside despite her kicking and screaming about leaving him. At one point in one of their timelines together Elise says that the whole family will drown with her if she stays and Nemo replies assuring Elise they will learn to swim. Everything he says and does to try to help her is fruitless. Her mental instability cannot be saved by him so all he can do is love her and try to help her to no avail.

After he recounts his recurring dream to Elise, Nemo is shown alone at a zoo, looking at the bear enclosure. The viewer learns Nemo is not a bear hunter as he was in his dream, but

²² Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

²³ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

merely an executive at a paper copying company who just quit his job. The camera shows a close up on Nemo's face; his eyes looking directly at the lens, and thus at the viewer. While slowly and subtly zooming in on his face Nemo says, "I don't dare move, I don't live, whatever I do is a disaster".²⁴ Nemo is no longer capable of making decisions after years of failed attempts and thus cannot live either a life led by reason or that of intuition. To chose to live either of those lives involves making the decision to do so but in Elise's timelines Nemo is in this suspended grey area between the two ways of life unable to choose. On one hand living a life led by emotion would seem terribly hard to do with a woman like Elise who constantly expresses her negative emotions outwardly so that the whole family is drowning in them. Elise cannot recover from her constant sadness but should Nemo chose intuition his "pain is not an argument against life, but, on the contrary, a stimulant to life, "a bait for life", an argument in its favor".²⁵ For Nemo once he recovered from suffering would be able to rise higher above this sorrow state and feel happiness in all of its glory because his sadness would be a necessary teaching to his life, it would be a stimulant to his life. But Elise is so emotionally charged that she leaves no room for Nemo to live a life full of emotion. The man of intuition feels everything there is to feel and thus "when he suffers, he suffers more violently".²⁶ In his marriage to Elise she suffers more than enough for the both of them so while Nemo could possibly feel whatever positive emotions he has to a greater extent he simply cannot live a life in which he is able to be weak and suffer because he has to be the responsible parent to their children while Elise cannot. In opposition to Elise who

²⁴ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

²⁵ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 130

²⁶ Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, 264

suffers greatly to no fault of her own, if Nemo were to choose to live a life of intuition his suffering would have a vastly different outcome.

On the other hand living a life of reason with Elise also poses serious issues. One cannot reason with mental illness or a person who is mentally unstable. There is no cause and effect, no rationality for Elise being the way that she is and thus Nemo would never be able to continue a relationship and a life with her as a man of reason. If he were to choose a life of reason their marriage and subsequently their family would fall apart. He is stuck in limbo of not knowing what to do and at the same time not being able to do anything at all. Unlike Anna and Jean's timelines in which Nemo actively chooses the kind of life he wants to live, in Elise's timelines he cannot choose. In Elise's timeline he cannot even balance his life at a midway point between the life of intuition or that of reason because he is not living a life at all. He is making no choices and decisions he cannot live either as the man of reason or the man of intuition or anywhere in between. This timeline is crucial to the film to portray a man who walks the line between these two kinds of life without actually living any of them. Because of inaction Nemo has no autonomy, no ambition, nothing to strive for, he is alive but he is not living. Life loses meaning once you stop living it. Van Dormael uses this timeline to show the audience how their lives could play out should they choose a life like this in which decisions become too paralyzingly fearful to make them. It is clear in viewing this timeline that Nemo suffers from "decidophobia (fear of decisions), feeling that choosing one person or path over another will be letting the experience of that other person or path die forever, seeing and being paralyzed by this abyss-fantasy".²⁷ Nemo is in such utter fear of making decisions because previously in this timeline

²⁷ Chapko, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 275

everything he has done has ended in disaster and hasn't made any aspect of his or Elise's lives better or happier. Earlier in the film a young Nemo describes how "if you don't choose, everything remains possible" and in this situation within Elise's timeline that is true but in a darker sense.²⁸ Since Nemo expects every outcome of his decisions in his life with Elise to turn out badly he cannot make a decision on what to do because all of these negative outcomes are possible thus solidifying his fear of making decisions.

It is clear that the question of free will versus determinism makes its way into this section discussing the idea of fear attached to decision making. Free will is the idea that the responsibility of life lies fully on man's shoulders and their decisions affect the outcome and path of their life, thus making a decision can become terrifying since the responsibility is entirely on man. Determinism on the opposite end of the spectrum is the idea that all of life is planned out before any of us are born and we live, make decisions, and die without any personal agency as to effecting our life's course. These philosophies are complex and highly studied, so much so that even Nietzsche has written about it himself. For the confines of this particular work I must acknowledge that question of free will versus determinism is a very important one, especially in terms of the act of decision making and if it is even a true act at all. This is a question that could not possibly be explored and developed further for the purposes and arguments this essay puts forth. This essay lies on the side of the debate that free will does exist and that decisions one makes do alter the course of one's life. At the same time some aspects of life are unavoidable and this is where fate comes into play.

²⁸ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

This timeline is a way of showing the viewer how a life can play out if one becomes terrified of their own decision making due to the utter responsibility one has on one's shoulders to make the right choice. The covert message in this timeline is that regardless of the outcome of one's decisions, whether they have positive or negative consequences, one must *choose* in order to live one's life at all. While fate has its hand in Nemo's life and affects him and his decisions greatly, he still holds onto his own personal agency and ability to make decisions but in Elise's timelines chooses simply not to choose, thus putting his life at a stand still. In these timelines Nemo stands in a position that is utterly apathetic to amor fati. In his lives with Anna he embraces the life of intuition and thus amor fati but with Elise he reaches a point where he refuses to make any decisions at all and thus refuses to even acknowledge fate, not standing in full rejection of amor fati, but not standing with it either. It is a truly apathetic lifestyle Nemo leads with Elise. On the other hand, Nemo's lives with Jean do take a solid stance on amor fati, in that he chooses to live in utter opposition to it.

Chapter Three: Jean

Jean's timeline begins for Nemo by an act of fate rather than a specific decision —or in-decision —by him to choose her. Nemo plays a game of chess while talking to his father. The scene opens with a shot for about three seconds where Nemo lays the king piece down on the board. In chess laying down the king signals to your opponent that you resign from the game. This resignation could be due to multiple factors one being that the player is in zugzwang. Zugzwang is a German technical term that describes a rare moment in a chess game when one is in a position where any possible move one could make is detrimental to one's success, and thus "the only viable move, is not to move".²⁹ By Nemo laying down his king he is symbolically resigning from participating actively in life by means of making decisions. The moment after he lays his king down he tells his father he is going to marry the first girl that dances with him that night. While this is a choice by Nemo in some respect, who, exactly, the girl may be is left to fate. This is where the many alternative lives within Jean's timeline commence. For this essay we will refer to this string of timelines as Jean's even though she plays a less significant role in these lives in comparison to Elise and Anna in their respective timelines. In contrast to Nemo's embrace of the intuitive life in Annas timeline, Jean's timeline is characterized by an extreme orientation towards the life of reason. He leads his lives with Jean motivated by calculation and resenting intuition. This section will contemplate how such a complete embrace of the reasonable life eventually proves unsustainable and thus drives him towards the opposite yet equally extreme life of intuition.

²⁹ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

On the surface of Jean's timeline Nemo's life revolves around monetary success which sets a very different tone from the other timelines that have a more emotional drive behind them. Much unlike the other timelines, Jean is not chosen by Nemo, rather she falls into his life by an act of fate. Nemo attends the party where he sees Elise, his partner from another timeline who in this instance rejected him, in a blue dress representing the theme of her timeline. She turns away from him leaving Nemo to fulfill his promise to marry the first girl to dance with him. This moment in the diegesis is crucial to understanding why Nemo goes so deep into the life of reason when he ends up with Jean. Because of the harsh rejection from Elise for whom he had emotional feelings, he chooses to live a life where this kind of rejection can never hurt him again because he will never again put himself in such a position. The man of intuition "suffers more violently; and he also suffers more often because he is unable to learn from experience" but the man of reason "the stoic man... has learnt from experience" and thus is able to protect himself from the same types of misfortunes.³⁰ After being hurt by Elise Nemo puts himself on a path of life where he believes he can't be hurt like that ever again. This is when he symbolically lays down his king in the chess game of life. The moment Elise turns away from him is the moment he is set on the path of the life of reason. He turns around and sees Jean, in a yellow dress, indicative of her timeline's *mise-en-scène*.

The *mise-en-scène* of Jean's timeline in this film is predominantly yellow. Yellow, often associated with friendship, optimism and creativity, in this film it takes on its negative characteristics of depression, suicide, and fear.³¹ Throughout this section's analysis it will become appar-

³⁰ Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, 264

³¹ *Psychological Properties of Colour*

ent that yellow in this timeline portrays the negative side of the psychology of this particular color. The lighting of the dance where Nemo and Jean meet is distinctly yellow marking the fact that this timeline is and will be about Jean. While in Elise's timeline the party where he meets her is washed in blue, this dance has markedly yellow lighting. The disco lights are yellowed and the whole scene is distinctly lit with yellow filtered light. While he dances with Jean Nemo looks over at Elise twice, once before he kisses Jean and once after. The significance in these looks marks another subtle but important component in how within Jean's timeline Nemo spitefully chooses to live as a man of reason. Kissing Jean is further revenge on Elise for choosing to be with someone other than Nemo. Rather than take that rejection as an act of fate and move forward from it, Nemo does not give in to his fate. He lays down the piece of chess in defiance of fate, deciding he will no longer play the game of life, choosing to be the one to make decisions and control his life henceforth. He chooses Jean to spite Elise and his possible lives with her, and that is an action a man of intuition would never make. A man of intuition would accept what life had given him and not live in spite of that. Nemo feels wronged and jaded and instead of embracing this life and these emotions he turns away from them, rejecting fate and thus rejecting amor fati. "Like the Last Men in Zarathustra, the self-pitier seeks to 'move south' rather than risk hardship cultivating harsher lands. Yet it is only from such risks that higher human possibilities, including the 'new kind of happiness' brought by amor fati, can arise".³² Nemo can be described here as the 'self-pitier' who moves away from his problems and his life to avoid a life of emotion. Because of this he now misses out on the positive things that would come from amor fati such as this new kind of happiness that is referred to that comes from such emotional risks.

³² Han-Pile, *Nietzsche and Amor Fati*, 23

Nemo also shows no more deep emotions from this night on out within Jean's timelines. This is a specific trait of the man of reason who in contrast to the man of intuition "delivers his masterpiece of deception" in regards to the severing himself from his emotions.³³ He no longer gives way to his emotions either of happiness or sorrow unlike the man of intuition who would scream and shout now Nemo "does not shout nor even alter his voice. If a real storm cloud empties itself over him he wraps himself in his coat and with slow steps walks away from beneath it".³⁴ Nemo casts aside his emotions and intuition and instead becomes a monotonous being who neither is displeased or elated by the rain but simply, rationally, buttons up his coat and walks away from it. The rain symbolizes fate and life and Nemo now chooses to be the kind of man to shut himself off and steer himself away from these things.

The same night Nemo accepts the fate he has technically chosen, namely to marry Jean, he makes other promises to himself that are important in understanding his following life of reason. Nemo races with Jean on the back of his moped through the night away from the party. He drives fast, racing away from his fate and into a life of reason in which he believes he can control everything. The camera follows the couple on the bike in three successive shots. The first shows Jean from the back holding onto Nemo in a yellow jacket, of course. The second is a wider angle shot from the side and the third shows the couple from above. Each of these three shots moves with and around the moving bike in a way that isn't quite shake but also not perfectly fluid. These three shots put the audience in the spectator position to Nemo's life as we watch him from afar in a medium shot. The forth shot rests as a close up on Nemo's face—as the audience is now

³³ Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, 264

³⁴ Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, 264

privity to his personal thoughts—with a determined expression while his voice is heard as narration. He makes six decisions while on this motor bike that will define the course of his lives with Jean. The first, and most important of them, is that he promises himself to “never leave anything to chance again”.³⁵ He intensely rejects the life of intuition from this night on.

This swearing off of fate leads Nemo to live his lives with Jean as a man of reason, one who plans out his life meticulously and leaves no room for spontaneous acts of fate. The man of reason fears intuition because it is something that cannot be dealt with by abstraction. The intuition is oppressed and Nemo “desire[s] to dominate life... by knowing how to meet the greatest needs with foresight, prudence and regularity”.³⁶ Because of this first decision, the following five are extensions of his new outlook on a life lived by reason. The other decisions include that he will marry the girl on the back of his motorcycle, be rich, have a big yellow house, two children Paul and Michael, a convertible, a swimming pool, and finally that he “will not stop until [he has] succeeded”.³⁷ This is the only string of timelines in which Nemo lives as a man of reason for the majority of his life and from that evening on he fully turns away from fate and intuition and towards reason and rationality in all his successive lives with Jean.

The next time we see Nemo is after an apparent attempted suicide when Jean reads aloud a note she had found written by Nemo. It is here that we finally understand yellow’s role in these timelines, namely yellow’s connotations of suicide and depression. In the note he states “I know myself like the back of my hand and can predict my every reaction, everything in life has now

³⁵ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

³⁶ Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, 263-264

³⁷ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

become predictable”.³⁸ This life of reason has led him to this point where as an adult he has had such complete control over himself and his life to the extent that there are no elements of fate left for him, no surprises, no emotional musings. The irony of the decisions he made to live the life of reason as a teenager come to light in this letter since now years later after he realizes “[he has] done everything to reach this point, now that [he is] here, [he’s] fucking bored”.³⁹ As mentioned previously within this chapter the man of reason is able to learn from experience and control his life and himself, he who “seeks nothing but... freedom from illusions... now, in misfortune, delivers his masterpiece of deception”.⁴⁰ Inside, the man of reason is dead. His emotions oppressed, his intuition suffocated; this is the trade-off for a life lived by the security of an unwavering plan. The letter he writes shows how the life of reason affects Nemo after all this time.

While he has achieved everything he set out to do, living life as a man of reason has taken a grave toll on Nemo, making him become utterly bored with his life. He no longer can live this way and thus makes a decision to leave all of his subsequent decisions up to chance. He completely reverses his lifestyle and relinquishes all of his control to fate. While watching television at home Nemo carves ‘yes’ and ‘no’ onto either side of a coin and for the rest of this timeline makes all of his decisions by the toss of this coin. The first decision is trivial; whether or not to buy a fishing rod advertised on TV. Nemo flips the coin and after it lands on yes he leaves the house. But just as he flips the coin to decide whether or not to buy the fishing rod, the TV program changes to *Wheel of Fortune*. Nemo flips the coin as the title screen shows on his TV and

³⁸ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

³⁹ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra Moral Sense*, 264

when the camera zooms in on a close up shot of his hand over the coin, the title of the show is heard simultaneously as Nemo lifts his hand and the coin reveals 'yes'. The 'yes' is yet another subtle visual and the TV program an audible indicator that Nemo is giving up his life of reason for a life led by fate as *Wheel of Fortune* is essentially a game of chance.

The following coin toss decisions have much higher stakes. The camera follows Nemo from above while he walks in the middle of train tracks at night. The train tracks are again used as a symbol for his life/lives and the possible ways they can end up. In this scene he is walking on a single set of tracks towards an oncoming train. He stops walking next to a large stop sign and takes his time flipping the coin. The camera rests on his face that behind sunglasses seems calm and apathetic. After a moment the image of the coin in his hand comes into focus showing 'no'. We see Nemo step off the tracks at the very last second before the train would have hit him. The next decision we see Nemo make is in an airport where he seemingly is coming into the arrivals terminal and a flips the coin to decide whether or not he should take on the identity of a man whose driver is awaiting him. The coin reads 'yes' and Nemo ends up in a hotel room trying on this man's clothing and brushing his hair in order to look like him. While trying on this man's life for size he gets a mysterious phone call presumably from a friend of the man he is pretending to be urging him to leave and that he is in danger. Nemo tosses the coin once more to decide whether to stay or go. The camera follows the coin as it rises in the air and rotates around and around. Suddenly we are shown the window where the curtains softly billow out indicating there is a breeze coming into the room. Back at the coin the camera shows the subtle change in course the coin makes because of this gust of wind, forever changing the following events of Nemo's life in this temporal dimension.

The Nemo who led his life by reason would never be tossing this coin, but for argument's sake he is tossing this coin. As a man of reason he would have either wanted a re-toss because of the winds effect on the original trajectory of the coins flip or could have chosen to go with the opposite of what the coin displayed since it could have been the other side had the wind not interfered. But Nemo has changed from this life of rationality and he leaves his life fully in the hands of chance within the coin toss— whether or not the wind had an effect. The coin lands on 'no' deciding that Nemo stays in the hotel, disregarding the warning phone call. He wakes up in the bath sometime later facing a man with a gun who shoots him dead on the spot. This all could have changed or been avoided had the coin toss been disregarded but the commitment to giving into chance Nemo had was unwavering. He lived the majority of this temporal dimension as the strict and regimented man of reason but living to such an extreme as that forced him eventually to not only give up that lifestyle, but go so far to the edge of the man of intuition that it led to his own demise. These two extremes are unrealistic ways to live and this is a concept Nietzsche acknowledges in his later work, *The Birth of Tragedy*. In this work he describes a somewhat different version of the lives of intuition and reason in terms of the Greek tragedy. The Apollonian man is a differing version of the man of reason who lives reserved with control over his life and the Dionysian man a varying version of the man of intuition who is motivated by desire and intuition. In this work, Nietzsche touches on the fact that the only way to live sustainably is to recognize what each way of life has to offer and not attempt to live purely and extremely as one or the other.⁴¹

⁴¹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

This timeline specifically explores this problematic paradox with living on either side of the life of reason or intuition to such extremes as Nemo did. Living the life of reason in its purest and strictest sense is so rigid there is no room for emotional growth and thus lacks that type of substance. On the other hand the life of intuition in its most extreme sense, while it is emotional and spontaneous, leaves no room for growth and learning from your mistakes. The issue in this timeline is that Nemo does not recognize, appreciate, or respect what either side of life can offer him. In the most extreme way he jumps from one side to the other without real consideration of what that entails and that is his fatal flaw. This timeline is Van Dormael's way of showing the audience a life in which one lives on either end of the spectrum and what would be the result of that choice to always be so extreme. He is giving the audience this choice as one way they could choose to live their lives eternally and leaving them to make what they will of it whether it be a good or bad, right or wrong kind of life.

This timeline also portrays how the time-image works. As mentioned previously in this essay "for Deleuze the time image is that fundamental difference which is the passion of thought".⁴² The time-image makes one think about not only the film but also oneself. The time-image is about the "passion of thought" that can change the way we perceive things like truth. Watching Nemo live these intensely extreme lives within this timeline has the effect on the viewer in which they are forced to truly engage with the film in terms of reflecting on the content. Questions as to how he has lived as the man of reason for so long, how he manages to completely switch over to the man of intuition and if that is a possible and viable way of living are all

⁴² Bell, *Thinking with Cinema: Deleuze and Film Theory*, 2

questions the viewer is forced to ask and contemplate. Not only must they ask if these lives are sustainable or viable, but their worth in terms of eternal recurrence must also be pondered.

Conclusion

The mixing of Deleuze's philosophies on film and how the time-image draws the viewer in retrospectively with Nietzsche's philosophies on the various ways to live one's life culminates into Jaco Van Dormael's incredibly complex and fascinating film. It is not a film simply for entertainment to be passively watched by the viewer; it demands to be engaged with, pondered, explored. Even after over thirty pages of exploration there is still one major question left to be answered fully; how can a film about every possible outcome of a man's life be connected to the concept of eternal recurrence, or the idea that one's singular life, every minute detail of it is worth living the exact same way over and over again for all eternity? The answer lies in one of the final scenes of the film, and arguably the most important. The first two and a half hours of the film are spent exploring Nemo's various lives, the decisions he makes, the women he ends up with, and the way in which he chooses to lead each timeline. In some cases he embraces fate by living as the man of intuition and thus practices *amor fati*, in others he rejects his fate and turns his back on emotions. This tangled web of timelines and lives is finally resolved in an interview between a young reporter and a very old Nemo in the year 2092.

Throughout the film 118 year old Nemo and child Nemo have been narrating the different outcomes of their various lives and once 118 year old Nemo is done speaking the reporter is visibly confused. He asks Nemo "of all those lives which one, which one is the right one?" and Nemo's answer ties the entire film and all of its timelines together.⁴³ "Each of these lives is the right one. Every path is the right path. Everything could have been anything else and it would

⁴³ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

have just as much meaning”.⁴⁴ By deeply exploring every single outcome from every decision Nemo has made, or could make, throughout his life and showing how all of his various timelines unfolded the viewer gets to experience one life lived a thousand different times. By laying out Nemo’s entire existence Van Dormael is able to show that no matter what life Nemo chose it still would have “just as much meaning”. Each version of Nemo’s life would be worth living from beginning to end over and over again for all eternity regardless of the woman he chooses or the type of man he chooses to be. By showing every life he proves that one’s life is worth living regardless of what they do or do not decide because as long as you make the choice to live everything will have meaning. The film portrays Nemo’s life as “an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent convergent and parallel times. That fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are snipped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contain *all* possibilities”.⁴⁵ This type of philosophical exploration of life and all of its possibilities could seldom be done within another art form. This narrative style of combining and infusing together all of Nemo’s possible lives is extremely unique to Van Dormael. While in a ‘choose your own adventure’ book the reader gets to pick one outcome, go back and see what would have happened if they chose another, cinema is able to do this in a different visual art form that portrays Nemo’s lives as happening all at once. By not having to flip through pages and restart the adventure, film allows all of his lives to happen all at once. “Cinema... offers the freedom of not choosing but trying out all the possibilities instead”.⁴⁶ That is a luxury not available to living human beings but through

⁴⁴ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

⁴⁵ Front, *Traumatic Bifurcation: Jaco Van Dormael’s Mr. Nobody*, 255

⁴⁶ Front, *Traumatic Bifurcation: Jaco Van Dormael’s Mr. Nobody*, 260

film one is able to explore the idea of different ways one can live one's life. Van Dormael uses the art of film to give the audience all of Nemo's lives and furthermore, to give them the opportunity to place themselves inside the diegesis and reflect on their own human experience in comparison or contradiction to that of Nemo.

The concept of eternal recurrence is an intimidating one to a living human on earth who cannot, unlike Nemo, go back and see what could have happened to him had he made a different decision. If eternal recurrence is true then

“this life, as you now live it, and have lived it, you must live it once more, and also innumerable times; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh, and everything unspeakably small and great in your life must come to you again, and all in the same series and sequence - even this spider and this moonlight among the trees, and even this moment, and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence will ever be turned over and over again, and you with it”.⁴⁷

It is difficult to make decisions in life because we cannot go back and change them, and because of eternal recurrence if we make the ‘wrong’ decision we will have to live with that choice until the end of time reliving it over and over again.

118 year old Nemo describes himself as a nine year old child at the train station running between his mother and father “faced with an impossible choice”.⁴⁸ A choice like this with so much at stake puts Nemo in a conundrum. In the beginning of the film we learn that before Nemo was born the angels of oblivion forgot to mark him along with the other unborn children

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 237

⁴⁸ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

so that they would forget their future lives. Because of this throughout the film he ‘remembers’ the future and is able to foresee things before they happen. Thus in the moment of decision that nine year old Nemo must make between going with his mother and father, he cannot decide. “He is unable to make a choice because he didn’t know what would happen” in the moment at the train station. The entire film details what he sees in those brief seconds at the station where he can ‘remember’ his entire possible futures. These futures are shown as “not a probability distributed over several throws [of a dice] but all chance at once”.⁴⁹ They are all combined and intertwined and we are able to see all of the outcomes of his life overlapping one another in these few seconds of Nemo’s ‘remembering’. Much like a dice thrown in the air, the entire film is what happens before it lands on a number; the film explores all of the possible outcomes before they happen, all while the dice is still in the air. Once we see every outcome, “now... he knows what will happen he is unable to make a choice”.⁵⁰ The concept of *zugzwang* resurfaces from Jean’s timeline in this moment when Nemo as a child is stuck in a position where he cannot make a move, he cannot make a choice. The different timelines in Nemo’s life have varying meaning, but they all *have* meaning, they all have significance. Regardless if the meaning is emotional or monetary they mean something to Nemo and will mean something to Nemo no matter what he finally chooses. Anna’s timelines offer him love and Jean’s offers success. Elise’s timeline is somewhat problematic in that he lives in a state of indecision after a certain amount of time with her. Elise’s timeline is able to show the viewer that there will be meaning in one’s life as long as one makes a decision to live. Once Nemo stops making choices in Elise’s timelines he stops liv-

⁴⁹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 27

⁵⁰ Van Dormael, *Mr. Nobody*

ing, but even this timeline has meaning in that it shows one must make choices in order to truly live.

With all of the various ways Nemo's life can play out it seems impossible to make a choice; I conclude Van Dormael intended it to effect the audience in this precise way. He presents the audience with these different options and throughout the film one is compelled, even unconsciously, to judge each timeline not only for Nemo but for themselves. Some viewers find Nemo's timelines with Jean troubling due to his attempted suicide and thus could judge that that timeline is not a good or right path to take and yet it is a very possible reality for Nemo. "The time-image places thought in crisis" for the viewer as these kinds of films demand to be considered not only superficially but also personally.⁵¹ While making judgements and evaluations about Nemo's life choices the viewer is also making these judgements about themselves. This is not a film in which a viewer can sit back, removed from the diegesis, and simply watch the events unfold. It is a film that engages its audience, it makes them *think* and that is exactly the effect of the time-image as described by Deleuze, to decipher the undeciphered. By truly engaging with the film and with all of Nemo's lives the audience is able to not only live them alongside him, but discover meaning in their own existence. This film is able to calm the incessant fear that one is making the wrong decision by having an 118 year old man who has seen every branch of life assure the audience that each life is the right life. *Mr. Nobody* reflects life itself in those moments where one is faced with a seemingly impossible choice and unlike Nemo one cannot know where either decision will take them. After having viewed this film one can confidently go forth and take solace in the fact that whatever one chooses one's life will have meaning regardless if one

⁵¹ Bell, *Thinking with Cinema: Deleuze and Film Theory*, 2

chooses to live as either the man of intuition who accepts amor fati or as the man of reason who rejects it. This film is able to reveal that there is no right or wrong choice and thus no need to be afraid to make decisions for they are all the right decisions, they are all the right life.

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