

Neither is the fall “irrational” in the way Demos understands it to be: the house in *Deadpan* is not the equivalent of the camera falling through the air in *Catch*, where the possibility of meaning is, if not denied, at least ungraspable. And yet both works make us aware, in a more general sense, of the mind’s precariousness, of the way we resort, frequently, to images that allow us to locate and fix anxiety to screen out something worse, and so delay the return of those selfsame fears and anxieties. The implications of this conclusion for the reading of *Deadpan* are by now obvious. The passage from waiting to fall, from solicitation to event, is no longer recuperable, and especially because *Deadpan* is devoid of any substitutive exchange (whether coded as suture or disruption), of any negotiated economy, (between anxiety and narrative), or any restoration of belief, (whether understood as crisis or liberation). There is one curious exception, however. The fall, in a virtual as well as vertiginous sense, goes back to Keaton’s famous scene to return us to “that state of wonderment and fear that early film induced in the audience” (Searle 1999, 8). Yet, as far as the idea of liberation is concerned, to speak of *Deadpan* in a language of crisis, and in terms of a truth blind to its own error, is to confuse the fallen image (of cinema) with a demand for authenticity from which this film has forever taken its leave. For here, as in all of McQueen’s early works, the transfer of shot into blackout no longer falls within the structure of representation, but takes place as a reflection on what is other to representation and thus what is in the fullest sense of the term “ungraspable.”

The unsettling nature of this fall acquires all kinds of political overtones in the 2002 film, *Caribs’ Leap*, where we see black figures slowly falling through gray-white mists, presumably to their deaths (Fig. 3).

Much of what has been written on the film refers to these descents as “vertiginous” and conveys the feeling of its effect in the description of the film as an allegory of resistance (to capture). A typical example of this strategy can be seen in Demos, who once again refers to the use made of the Deleuzian “interval”:

[*Caribs’ Leap*] intertwines scenes of everyday life [in Grenada] with phantasmic images inspired by colonial history. The majority of the film records beach scenes, but these are intermittently and suddenly interrupted by clips of single



Figure 3. Steve McQueen, *Caribs' Leap* (2002). Images © the artist. Courtesy of Thomas Dane Gallery.

figures falling through the sky in slow motion, which are placed seemingly without logic or connection to what precedes or follows. The film alludes to the grisly history of seventeenth-century French colonialism, when a group of Caribs, having survived the initial assault of the French, were forced back to the northern cliffs of the island, where rather than submit to the invading forces, they jumped to their deaths. The story provides yet another allegory of the resistance to capture, of the sacrifice of the body in the escape from the forces of colonization. In recent screenings, McQueen has projected the different sequences—the scenes of Grenada and those of the falling figures—onto two screens separated by an expanse of exhibition space. In this way, an interval is spatialized within the gallery, producing a gap inhabited by the viewer. The result is that the relation between the actual and the imaginary, between the facticity of each image and the possible connection between them, is rendered indeterminate, contingent upon its realization by the viewer. . . . (Demos 2005, 81–82)

At this point, it is tempting to read this allegory, in whose meaning cinema is opened onto continually evolving presents and pasts, as part of the same movement as that of crisis. The interval is the recurrent figure of that crisis, just as allegory, far from being opposed to history, is the form through which this “gap” between history and its phantasma becomes visible as, or in, representation. Once this gap “inhabits” us, time itself disperses as if refracted through a crystal as we fall, and keep on falling, into the rendered-indeterminacy that is just allegory. “This crisis [of time] is the very source of the film’s power,” writes Demos, and the term “crisis” remains associated throughout with that of an irrevocable fall into a temporality that is not that of history. The “proliferation of irrational intervals,” Demos continues, “elicits a sense of time that is open and ambiguous, freed from the irrevocability of any necessary progression” (82, 83). Such freedom does not, however, free us from the articulation of the “interval” that allows such gaps to be recognized as the spaces they are: this articulation entails that the irrationality of the gap or space, however construed, will always have a privileged referent over other such gaps, and just this is the case with interval. The temptation at once arises for the viewer to see this irrationality as the theme of the film and to act as if it existed within the expressible aspects of the film. This results in an immediate degradation of truth to a form of recognition, away from the virtual truth of time into an allegory of resistance. Indeed, the crisis at once has to allegorize its own misrecognition and to observe in turn, via those “gaps,” the image of time to which it is about to succumb (as crisis). It does so precisely by avoiding the question of cinema as a *belief* in the world mentioned by Deleuze, by reasserting the difference that separates images of people endlessly falling from any historical origin and by carefully maintaining that link as a “story” that gets “alluded” to before it too falls into an indeterminate void that remains, in a sense, always thinkable as an allegory of crisis. Here, paradoxically enough, the loss of the world “to us” is what, precisely, allows philosophy to make cinema contemporaneous with a fall (into irrationality) whose condition of possibility is to be found in an interval that makes it always perceptible, or identifiable, as philosophy. And, most clearly of all, in the films of McQueen, what we see, in the words of Deleuze, is not so much “a cinema of truth but the truth of cinema,” and precisely because modern cinema has become, in an

exemplarily paradoxical fashion, a philosophical-historical allegory for philosophy (Deleuze 1989, 151).

When Deleuze speaks, then, of cinema's truth as originating at the cost of history, the statement has to be taken seriously enough to convey a new model of truth: the truth of modern cinema is its consciousness of time, itself the end of transcendent truth, a revelation of truth from inside cinema. "If we take the history of thought," Deleuze suggests, we see that it is "the pure force of time which puts truth into crisis" (1989, 130). This explicit linking of crisis and truth in *Cinema 2*, with all the difficulties it entails, also has consequences for how time appears in cinema, which takes on the burden—if we take on this philosophical history—in the forms of its narration. Briefly, allegory is again involved, and this is a version of the double allegory of truth and falsity, history and narration mentioned above. For example, to be truly modern cinema must employ a "narration [that] ceases to be truthful . . . and becomes fundamentally falsifying." On the other hand, for Deleuze it is precisely "the power of the false" in cinema (which he says "replaces and supercedes the form of the true," and, presumably, does so historically) by posing "alternatives which are undecidable between true and false in the past" (131). It must be thought that immanence was never lost *elsewhere* than in transcendence. Or that the livable, believable image has never been elsewhere than in the representational truth that disfigures it, that makes it a copy of something outside of itself, as its inaccessible beyond, and thus it is never elsewhere than this falsely falsifying representation unveiled by the "truth" of philosophy. And yet, even beyond this rhetoric of falsity or crisis, the revelation of cinema's truth is made possible only by the double allegory of philosophy: the filmmaker invents a form that is "irrational" but that does not know its own irrationality; only the philosopher can interpret the form and appearance of that irrationality, who then proceeds to present this untimely truth via an image of time. It establishes a necessary ambiguity: Deleuze's philosophical cinema can only come into being when it turns cinema back into allegory, and at the very moment when the primacy of philosophical over historical knowledge is shown to rely on the unwarranted claim to understand the implications of an historical crisis which philosophy, allegorically, invents.

Yet the effect of McQueen's images of falling, and of the despondency and

desire that follow such moments, is much more tragic than the mere fatigue of someone who no longer believes in the world, or in the meaning of events, that Deleuze here proposes. Almost in opposition to such a reading, by means of which the interval is used to suture the disjunction of race with the novelty of cinema, in McQueen's films, a new disjunction is taking place. McQueen's *Caribs' Leap* is a case in point. It presents two simultaneous projections as continuous loops. In one the camera shows unidentified, nameless figures falling without end, beyond and below the screen.³⁷ In the other, we see various scenes on the island. The relation between the two is akin to a stutter, or flaw, or a nonrelation in which the doings below do not mirror, or reflect, the beings above. In the first loop: what is deferred forever and hence without end is entry into time itself, which is nothing other than that which dictates the delay—of the landing which would allow burial and mourning to commence. In this interminable falling, there is neither event nor becoming; indeed the falling figures do not come to their end, nor is there any possibility of destination; in this perpetual, endless falling the figures—single, companionless—fall without ever arriving at their final ends. The elegy here makes disaster conceivable, but not representable: the unending falls are not part of an allegorical idiom, nor are they symbols of an unbounded narrative of impossibility, specifically destined and determined by crisis. These falls are unending, and precisely because they fall into nothing it is impossible to read this nothing and its inconclusive greyish-white mist as anything else: neither loss nor negation, neither virtual or actual. The figures keep on falling, but this is a repetition that neither takes us forward nor back: at the very moment that the figures appear and then disappear from the screen, too soon or too late, these are events where nothing happens, until it happens again, and then nothing happens; in fact, these falls inaugurate nothing but waiting, a sort of nonevent, an event of nothing which both calls for and annuls repetition. Dying without event, pure dying where nothing happens, as we wait for that dying to not happen again, the all-but-dying without meaning or possibility or interval. But even this reformulation is saying too much. Are these fallen figures in an interval? Perhaps. But they are also falling in a way that is *meaningless*, that has no meaning at all, and so beyond any “thematic” axis; interminable and incessant, they do not hover between belief and the

possibility of meaningful events. These falls present figures whose pure and purely awaited ending takes place against a background that is precisely *not* the world, adrift in gray white mists. Far from returning us to the world, they ask us to think about what it might mean to pass through it perpetually suspended in nonarrival. If this is how McQueen envisages these “suicides,” the rent in history they leave behind, it is not to return us to the world. He presents instead a passionless fall into nothingness, into a void in whose worldliness one is neither compelled to believe nor disbelieve. A fall into neither immanence nor transcendence, but one interminable and immemorial, and from which there is no return, no way back. The moment when these figures enter the screen is precisely the moment when we are made to confront the impossibility of narrating what has happened, is happening, or is about to happen, in a void of repetition. In *Caribs’ Leap*, the structure of the event is such that the time-image, like the question of belief, is irremediably suspended by a fall forever deferred beyond its end.

One could object here that the house falling in *Deadpan*, with its risk and threat of injury, is the very figure of a fall that is not nothing: the mind, the consciousness of fear and mortality assuaging the affect of fascination, could be read here as it too “falls” for the joke, both yielding and captured. But this, again, is reading the fall as if we were watching *Tarzan*, or Edison and Porter’s *What Happened in the Tunnel*, all films organized around the trope of the *nègre* as the imprint of an abysmal darkness, or vertiginous absence, and in whose narration there is always the enchantment of an absence whose pathos is covered over, veiled, represented. Yet in *Deadpan*, is there not also an attempt to present the pure violence of an event that exceeds representation? The camera lets the inside of the frame come into view—but the black interior spaces are empty, and the fall itself is a meaningless occurrence, because it depends on the gaze of an object that makes life and death indistinguishable. Through this gaze a fall into nothingness emerges here, too. This fall into the possibility of nothing, or the mere random event, presupposes a violence or threat that has no inner or necessary relation to the subject about to be felled. The relation of the film to its end is not that of an interval, but one of a precarious, indiscriminate, near-missed catastrophe. Within the logic of this passing through, McQueen’s radical passivity in no way depends on the oppo-

sition between blackness and narration, or time and crisis. Such precariousness is entirely absent from the scene of the image when read as time-image, for the idea of a near-miss cannot confer significance on what is believable, or livable, or on what is sacrifice or redemption. There is nothing *spiritualized* in *Deadpan*.³⁸

The contrasts drawn between McQueen and Deleuze are perhaps not the issue here. What is important is what these two accounts have in common: the limit of what is graspable, or knowable, can become foundational for a new ethics of imaging and a new possibility of belief. In both cases, that possibility is derived from the loss of the world to cinema. Both accounts strive to present that loss as the efficacy of a certain modernity in cinema. Yet what is not assumable, for McQueen, is a world commonly possessed before being lost, as if such a world could ever reveal itself before difference, or racism. Far from being a return to the world, the unreality and absence where nothing happens, where neither the virtual nor the virtuality of the virtual can reconcile the world of cinema with the actual world: this is where McQueen's cinema begins, and in this nothing without destination is the pure abandon of a fall, one that can only maintain its suspenseful character by stating the continued impossibility of landing. What would it mean to represent such waiting as an historicism, or as a logic according to which what is past is always virtually, transcendently present, and what will have been is indiscernible from what will be, or what has been from never was? At this point it becomes apparent that these are not McQueen's questions, nor are they the political predicament of modern "black" cinema.

Well before McQueen and Deleuze, Frantz Fanon knew this very well when he defined a feeling of nonexistence, following his response to Mark Robson's *Home of the Brave* (1949) as one of being "[w]ithout responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity [*le Néant et l'Infini*]" (Fanon 1967, 140). Nonexistence is understood here as an aspect of being stranded *en abîme*, with the sense of being suspended in a kind of dead passivity, unable to rise, voiceless, disembodied. Indeed, Fanon refers to *Home of the Brave* just after the "I cannot go to a film without seeing myself" sentence. Fanon makes clear, however, that the effect of this *waiting* is not that of heightened anxiety, an affirmation of the priority of will over destiny; but that it has the very opposite

aim and effect; it serves to prevent the all too readily “amputated” self from “rising” into a world “without limit” and so falling back down to earth “paralyzed” and weeping in a “disembodied silence” (140). Thus, we are led once more from interval to crisis to loss of the world, back to how philosophy inscribes itself, always fallen or waiting to fall, within cinema. We do not propose here a reading of Fanonian “philosophy.” Rather, our concern is with the distinction between wounding and crisis being qualified here: the moment when this difference is asserted is precisely the moment when the black viewer does not return to the world. (The task is therefore to understand why, each time, racism in cinema is bound up with a fall into nonexistence.) Fanon asserts instead the moral necessity of not becoming the dupe of what is awaited and discovers that there is no way back from his imaginary self to his actual self, or, alternatively, no way back from the interval-gap between infinity and nothingness.

It is also at this point that the link between a racialized loss of the world and ethics becomes apparent. For it is at this point that the question of “responsibility” toward cinema begins to emerge. Fanon first links responsibility to cinema in the opening chapter of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, “The Negro and Language.” In a sentence to whose complexity we shall return, he writes: “To make him speak *petit-nègre*”—and by this term he specifically refers to how English-speaking black actors are overdubbed in French colonial cinema—“is to attach [*l’attacher*] him to his image, to fix him to it [*l’engluer*], to imprison him, the eternal victim of an essence, of an *appearing* [*d’un apparaître*] of which he is not responsible [*dont il n’est pas le responsable*]” (34–35, translation modified). Why responsibility?: this is what we have to account for. Fanon evokes the effect of seeing several American films in France—films where the voices of black actors are overdubbed—as a situation in which an “apparition” appears between sound and image (this doubling being just what Fanon will attempt to name as a “contrecoup,” bespeaking both the doubling of the black by the *petit-nègre* that the onscreen image is forced to mime and the *repercussive* affect of that doubling, in whose appearing there is indeed an obligation to be responsible that goes along with the absence of criteria according to which one can be responsible). The point is—and here we come back to the gaze of the Other and to the train journey in which Fanon first