

THE CASE OF NEMO NOBODY:
A LACANIAN STUDY OF THE TRAUMATIC AND NEUROTIC
RELATIONSHIPS OF THE MAN WHO DOESN'T EXIST

by

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THESIS

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Abstract

Jaco Van Dormael's 2009 film *Mr. Nobody* introduces us to Nemo Nobody, "the man who doesn't exist." Nemo is born with the impossible gift of omniscience and exercises this ability to know several of his possible lives before they occur. His childhood is characterized by ontological questions concerning time, existence, choices, and chance. Nemo's inability to answer unanswerable questions sources the trauma that stems from the moment his life literally splits in two. Nemo's parents separate when he is nine, and they leave it up to him to decide if he wants to leave with his mother or stay with his father. To cope with the impossibility of this decision, Nemo creates a fantasy wherein he is a 118-year-old man who remembers every life born out of this pivotal moment. With his father, Nemo spends his life in an obsessional relationship with Elise, who loves another man and is depressed no matter what Nemo does; *or* Nemo numbingly maintains a perverted relationship with Jean, controlled wholly by choices, until his eventual spiral into psychosis and disassociation from his own identity. On the other hand, if Nemo leaves with his mother, he pursues a passionate, albeit hysteric, romance with Anna, whom he loses over and over due to uncontrollable circumstances. Nemo's creation of the fantasy and sometimes omnipotent control over his life and the film place him at the level of a god, but his many inevitable deaths remind Nemo he can never know *everything* and he *must* make a choice.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Section 1: Who is Nemo Nobody?.....	1
Section 2: Nemo's Relationships with His Parents.....	10
Section 3: Nemo's Relationship with Elise	21
Section 4: Nemo's Relationship with Jean	33
Section 5: Nemo's Relationship with Anna.....	44
Section 6: Nemo and the Function of the Fantasy	57
Section 7: Why is Nemo the Man that <i>Cannot</i> Exist?	70
Works Cited	83

The Case of Nemo Nobody

By Brittany N. Sanders

It's striking that the fantasy the neurotic makes use of, which he organizes at the very moment he uses it, is precisely what serves him best in defending himself against anxiety, in keeping a lid on it.

—Lacan, *Anxiety* 50

And you may find yourself in another part of the world
And you may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile
And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife
And you may ask yourself, "Well, how did I get here?"

—Talking Heads, "Once in a Lifetime"

Section 1: Who is Nemo Nobody?

We only get one shot at this life—we are born, we live, we make choices, and then we die—at least, this is true for those of us who exist outside of film. In Jaco Van Dormael's 2009 movie *Mr. Nobody*, the audience is presented with an existential dilemma: If you could pause your life, in this moment, and live out at all of the future possibilities of your life without first having to make a definitive choice one way or another, how would you eventually choose which path to follow? In the final days of his life, 118-year-old Nemo Nobody claims he is the man who doesn't exist. He is a mere mortal in a society that has achieved immortality, and the world stands in waiting for the moment when the last living mortal will die. Nemo's doctor can't get through to him with traditional psychotherapy methods, like hypnosis, to understand who he really is; nor does Nemo remember how he got to this point in his life, because as far as he remembers, he is only 34 years old. Instead, a journalist who sneaks into Nemo's room one night

is the one who is able to get Nemo to talk, to remember his life, *all* of his lives, from before his birth to the many deaths that conclude his life, over and over and over again. This project is a Lacanian analysis of the many lives and relationships of Nemo Nobody, from the moment his life ruptures in two, through his neurotic and psychotic breaks and perversions, until each individual death.

Before I begin any length of analysis, let us look at a brief synopsis of *Mr. Nobody*. The film suggests that the power of omniscience belongs to all unborn souls, but this power is necessarily removed before birth by the angels of Oblivion, from all except Nemo. With this impossible gift, Nemo can see into the future to predict all possible outcomes of his life. But this power is overwhelming for Nemo and it causes him anxiety, not just about making choices, but about making the *right* choice. For the most part, Nemo lives a happy childhood. His father is a TV weatherman, his mother is a stay-at-home parent, he doesn't know how to swim, and he fantasizes about eventually marrying one of three girls: Elise, Jean, or Anna. At nine years old, Nemo catches his mother cheating on his father in the woods with Anna's father, and soon after, her infidelity causes his parents to divorce. On a train station platform, with the train approaching, his mother asks, "Do you want to come with me or do you want to stay with your father?" Nemo cannot make up his mind, but as his mother leaves on the train, Nemo immediately runs after her to try and catch up. This is the pivotal moment of the film when his life literally splits in two.

In one scenario, Nemo is able to catch up to the train and he leaves with his mother. In the opposite scenario, his father yells his name and Nemo turns around to look at him just before his shoe falls off and he can no longer reach his mother, so he stays with his father. In the event that Nemo is forced to stay with his father, he meets Elise, who is in love with another man,

Stefano. She is depressed for the duration of Nemo's relationship with her, despite their marriage and three children. In the end, she believes her unhappiness is because she has always loved Stefano and so, in the middle of the night, she leaves Nemo. If instead, Elise rejects him as teenagers, Nemo uses Jean as a replacement and forces her into a life decided on solely by himself, so as to never leave his life up to chance again. Naturally, this lifestyle grows tiresome for Nemo and he decides to leave every single decision or whim up to a coin toss, but it doesn't take long for this reckless abandon to lead Nemo to his own wrongful execution. On the other hand, if Nemo leaves with his mother, her continued relationship with Anna's father causes Anna and her father to move in with Nemo and his mother. Nemo and Anna have a passionate romance until their parents separate, thus removing Anna from his life. After they accidentally reunite as adults, fate steps in once again and ruins the one piece of contact information Anna gives to Nemo, and he loses her yet again.

By the end of the film, we learn that old Nemo exists in a fantasy world constructed by young Nemo the day on the platform so that he can view all of his lives before deciding between parents. And when he cannot make a choice, he runs away from both. The fantasy only exists, and old Nemo only stays alive, so long as young Nemo doesn't make a choice. The moment that young Nemo eventually decides between parents is when time will reverse for old Nemo to go back and live the life he chooses. At first, Nemo cannot make a decision between parents because all the outcomes are tragic, so he runs away instead. But once Nemo envisions the day that Anna comes back to him for a final time and he knows that he gets her after all, he is ready to make a choice. In the end, it's not about his choice to go with his mother, it's about his decision to go after Anna.

Just as old Nemo is a patient in the future fantasy, we, too, will treat him as our analysand in order to untangle his many lives and to try and get at what's hiding in his unconscious. As spectator, we are allowed access to a clearer picture, so to speak, of the paths that his life follows, and this essay explores them one by one. Here, in Section 1, I discuss the constitution of Nemo's trauma, proof of the gap between the real and the symbolic through the gaze, and the importance of making choices. Section 2 looks at the ways in which the Oedipus complex functions in Nemo's relationship with his parents during his childhood, and the resulting Oedipal trauma following the split at the platform. Section 3 looks at Nemo's relationship with Elise as both obsessional and perverse, and how she serves as a direct response to the Oedipal loss of his mother's desire. Section 4 looks at the perversion in Nemo's relationship with Jean as exemplifying his anxiety to avoid fate versus his eventual psychotic break and total surrender to fate. Section 5 explores Nemo's hysteric relationship with Anna, questions about drive and desire, and the impossibility of the sexual relation. Section 6 looks at Nemo himself, from the function of the fantasy to his omnipotence. And lastly, Section 7 explores the questionable ending of the film and why Nemo fundamentally *cannot* exist as the film portrays him, and what *Mr. Nobody* teaches us about life.

We can relate to Nemo as a protagonist because many of his fears are very legitimate fears to have. Nemo is constantly concerned with time's ability to demand that decisions be made in order to keep up with the steady progression of life. His crippling anxiety that stems from the fear of making the wrong choice is a dilemma with which many of us empathize. A characteristic of film is that by drawing you into the fictional narrative, it allows the spectator to disassociate from their own life for a short time. Thus, due to the filmic setting, we allow ourselves at times to almost become Nemo. The experience of watching the film is not unlike

Nemo's experience of living multiple lives simultaneously: it is jumbled, confusing, and often leaves noticeable holes in the story. The way Nemo is able to live his life drastically differs from the way that we have to live ours; one day at a time, without a moment's pause to have access to the many outcomes of what certain choices will bring. While Nemo continues along each path simultaneously, within them, he is not always aware that he can go back and change his mind; he must live according to the natural order of things. Therefore, Nemo must remain resolute in each life that this *is* the "right" life, because "that aspect of us that we call 'I' believes that it knows what it thinks and feels, and believes that it knows why it does what it does" (Fink 4).

Nevertheless, Nemo exists within a film, and as spectators, we know that there is something missing in each of his lives, proof of which remains hidden to him, but still manages to leak into plain view for the spectator to see.

In psychoanalysis, there are three realms within existence that we use to discuss reality—the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. The imaginary is everything that we see, hear, feel; the sensory parts of our world, the material things. The symbolic is the world created by language with which we use to label our sensory world and describe it. Necessarily, when assigning words to images, there is an essence of the signified that is not fully encapsulated by the signifier, and thus, the real comes to be. The real is comprised of the essences of things which cannot be symbolized. Todd McGowan explains that "the Lacanian real is the indication of the incompleteness of the symbolic order. It is the point at which signification breaks down, a gap in the social structure" ("Introduction" 3). This gap is fundamental to language and consequently, to the filmic experience. What results from this gap is an unknown something missing, but necessarily so, in that this negativity is made positive by its absence. It is positive *as* missing, a plus minus one. It helps to picture the torus shape of a bagel. The hole in the middle of a bagel is

a void, but it's an essential element to the fundamental structure of the bagel. Without this necessary lack, the bagel ceases to exist *as* a bagel. Therefore, the gap between the real and symbolic is negative in its *substance*, but positive in its structural *presence*.

An explanation of the imaginary, symbolic, and real is necessary to understand what occurs when the gap in the signification process shows itself to the spectator of the film, which it is wont to do. When this disconnect occurs, it makes itself known to the subject within the film, but especially to the spectator. Lacan writes, "in our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision ... something slips, passes, is transmitted ... and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze" (*Four Fundamental* 73). The gaze relates to the spectator's interaction with the film, our perception of it. When we notice something missing on screen, something not symbolized, it shows itself to us by almost interrupting the otherwise harmonious image. It isn't always recognizable to the subject within the film, but as spectators, we encounter the real when it stands out as something obviously disjointed within the image. I will try to explain more about this complex concept of the gaze as I go along.

The ways in which the real shows itself to Nemo and the spectator varies from life to life—which I will discuss individually in Sections 2 through 6—but it seems that overwhelmingly so, what manifests in Nemo's future fantasy is the same imagery used in Nemo's realities to mark the leaks of the real. What's important to note before any lengthy dissections of the gaze throughout the film is that Nemo simply does not understand the importance of what these leaks of the real are trying to show him. It is impossible in real life to *see* trauma, but a capability of film is to make something impossible obvious to us as spectators. Nemo does notice some of the more obvious instances, such as people and cars walking or

driving backwards. In the cases that language itself is what shows the fractures of the symbolic—i.e., Nemo calling his son the wrong name or all three wives the wrong name—Nemo recognizes that he doesn't understand the reason for the fluke; however, he does not fixate on the fact that he does not know, because “while slips of the tongue are recognized in such cases as foreign to the ego or self, their importance is pushed aside” (Fink 4). Although Nemo notices the more obvious cases, he just as often does not notice that which shows itself and repeats itself. There are elements which we know to be overlapping from the fantasy to alert Nemo of the gap, but “we can think of the unconscious as expressing, through its irruptions into everyday speech, a desire that is itself foreign and unassimilated” (Fink 9). Therefore, Nemo's ignorance of these occurrences attributes to his misunderstanding of his own desire and furthermore, of himself.

Our advantage as spectators is to recognize that which Nemo does not and to attempt signification of the leaks of the real where he cannot, especially if what leaks is repeated. This is what we call trauma. What is traumatic to a subject is not the actual event, but the unsymbolized reminders of it after the fact that keep showing up in the unconscious over and over again. Lacan tells us that “repetition first appears in a form that is not clear, that is not self-evident, like a reproduction, or a making present, *in act*” (*Four Fundamental* 50). Both Nemo and spectator witness as Nemo's trauma makes itself known—i.e., the reminders that this is not the only life he's living—but only we are able to identify it *as such*. In real life, the manifestation of trauma is sometimes much harder to identify and analyze accordingly, but in film, the creators of the film do not wish to dupe its audience with what should recognizably be labelled as trauma, and therefore, “trauma reappears, in effect, frequently unveiled” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental* 55). The leaks of the real are therefore blatantly obvious in some cases, but whether Nemo notices or not,

he never truly comprehends what it means in the larger picture of his life. Simply put, Nemo does not understand that he is telling himself that he, in that life, does not exist.

Despite his omniscience, which allows unrestricted access to all possible lives, Nemo knows on some unconscious level that he cannot know himself completely, nor access the deepest parts of himself. But this gap in knowledge creates anxiety for Nemo as he still tries to figure out questions about desire—*What is the objet petit a? What do I desire from the Other? What does the Other desire in me?* When the object of one's desire, what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*, operates within the field of vision, it manifests as “the disruptive moments of film, the points of trauma enacted within the filmic experience” (Neroni 212). Therefore, when we encounter the gaze, we encounter Nemo's unconscious attempts to answer the questions of desire. However, because it is unconscious, Nemo does not understand the significance of what we perceive to be the gaze, if he even notices it at all.

Not having an answer to his questions of desire is what is traumatic for Nemo. Thus, “repetition appear[s] at the level of what is called traumatic neurosis” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental* 51). Nemo's neurosis takes many forms. He becomes an obsessional with Elise, and a pervert in one life with her, though the main perversion is saved for Jean. With Jean, Nemo first acts as pervert and eventually suffers a psychotic break. With Anna, he is simply a hysteric, though, this forces his neurotic questions of desire to turn introspective. With himself, Nemo takes on the role of primal father, and of god, in his efforts to sort through his myriad of anxieties. The larger questions in life concern Nemo, as they do us all—i.e., pleasure, life, choices, fate, death, existence. From childhood into adulthood, his incessant concern about *everything* never leaves him alone, regardless of his awareness of such suffering.

Like all of us, Nemo's plethora of lives are steered by making smaller choices—*should I buy a fishing rod, should I give Elise this letter, should I call Anna's friends idiots*, etc.—but there is an unmistakably important question that grounds all later possibilities for him.

Throughout Nemo's realities, while some decisions are more pivotal than others, “what all these versions have in common is the idea that there is a choice more fundamental than the choices we make within our daily social reality, a protochoice that establishes the very coordinates within which we choose” (Kornbluh 113). The expanse of Nemo's existence grows more and more chaotic as time goes on, but the film roots every one of his life's choices back to the one original choice Nemo must make the day on the platform—*should I leave with my mom or stay with my dad?* The stress the film places on the impossibility of going back once a choice has been made not only makes every choice thereafter seem anything but trivial, but it creates the space to enable Nemo's neurotic and psychotic breaks when faced with the initial choice of *which parent?* and subsequently, the ultimate choice, *which woman?*

This case study dissects Nemo Nobody's many lives full of anxiety, trauma, choices, and his wavering sense of control over all of it. The psychological state that results from Nemo's attempt to simultaneously live as many lives as possible justifies as lengthy a psychoanalytical investigation as this. In real life, people constantly worry about the authenticity of their lives and can only think of their life retrospectively. Nemo has the opportunity to see every life before it happens, and yet it does not save him from suffering from the same existential anxieties we all experience concerning the choices we've made, or more importantly, *have yet to make*. By insisting that a final decision is inevitably mandatory, *Mr. Nobody* “unambiguously asserts the importance of extracting closure from an ambiguous open field of possibilities” (Kornbluh 118). But just as unambiguously, the film also argues that there is no such thing as a singular “right”

path in life. All lives are possible, all are meaningful, and it all rests on Nemo's shoulders to decide which path to follow.

Section 2: Nemo's Relationships with His Parents

As the saying goes, in life, you don't get to choose who your parents are. In Nemo's case, though, this divine process of biological circumstance, which is ordinarily left up to fate, is instead set up interview-style between parents-to-be and baby-to-be, Nemo, so that he is free to choose which family suits him best. His options are slim: a Native American couple that doesn't speak English, teenagers who didn't mean to become parents, a couple with a disinterested father and shaky-voiced mother, presumably trying to reignite the marriage, and so on. It is ironic, then, that in such a situation usually determined by chance, now controlled by an interview, Nemo is attracted to something so primal as his mother's smell, and then to his father's insistence that the two of them met thanks to the Butterfly Effect. Nemo's first encounter with his parents is significant because it establishes three attributes which cause trouble for him: Nemo's physical love for his mother, his interest in the concept of fate, and the (dis)illusion of freedom of choice.

There is no room for Nemo to question what each of their roles are in the family. Nemo is referred to as "the little baby" and his parents are called "the daddy and the mommy." It is true that "long before a child is born, a place is prepared for it in its parents' linguistic universe" (Fink 5) and the film's self-aware inclusion of "the" in his parents' titles points to this reality. Children are fully intertwined with the pre-established familial roles for not only the parents, but for themselves; therefore, a child is left with little to no room to create their own identities without that external influence from the parents, which we will see later in Nemo's love of science in almost all of his lives. The impact of Nemo's pre-existential ability to select his own

set of parents is thus rendered rather inconsequential, since, at the start of life, he is *still* subjected to the constraints of human existence that are involved with being born into a community and the resulting attempt at environmental survival through mimicry of the parents.

Nemo's parents are typical for the mid-1970's timeframe: a working father who is the sole money-maker in the household, and a stay-at-home mother in charge of cleaning, cooking, and, naturally, raising Nemo. Nemo's mother, therefore, is shown to be the central figure in his earliest memories. She is seen playing peek-a-boo with Nemo, singing to him, and clapping encouragingly as he trips while first learning to walk. Thus, the beginning stages of Nemo's infantile confusion towards his mother's desire is revealed as he claps when she falls down the stairs, which is followed by a spanking. Darian Leader and Judy Groves write that "the child is at the mercy of the mother at the start of life, dependent on her in all senses of the word, and unable to understand the rationale of her behaviour. However marvellous [sic] or cruel the mother may be, the same question will pose itself for the child: ... what does she want" (91)? As we see Nemo grow and start asking deeper ontological questions such as, "why can't I remember the future," his mother grows increasingly frustrated and unwilling to explain why she does not know. Once Nemo leaves the infancy stage, we understand that he is not only confused by that which pleases the mother, but also confused by the parameters of his love for her.

Early fetishization of the mother is an integral part of the Oedipus complex for Nemo; eventually, the loss of which becomes a source of his trauma, which is clearly identifiable in his relationships with Elise and Jean. The film leaves no room to question the fact that Nemo forms this fetish during infancy. We don't see Nemo involved in the game of peek-a-boo with his mother, nor during the extreme close-ups of his mother's face and lips as she sings to him. Despite Nemo's laughter in the background, the spectator is essentially the one with whom his

mother plays peek-a-boo, and to whom she sings. The same absence of Nemo is true as the spectator watches his mother brush her hair in slow motion. Therefore, we are heavily implicated in the formation of the phantasy, as we will see happen again later with Anna. An aura of phantasy now surrounds the mother in a way that is never troublesome for Nemo in relation to his father. The father never provokes this sort of fetishization and proof of desire for his father is nonexistent; hence, Nemo never longs for his father the way he does his mother in any life.

The moment at the train is the single most pivotal moment of Nemo's life; it is the choice between his parents. In this study of Nemo's relationships, it is vital information that, whether he leaves with his mom or stays with his dad, he nevertheless runs after the train and after his mom in both cases. It is his most immediate reaction, he is remorseless in leaving his father standing alone on the platform, and even when he stays with his father, it is not by his own will. Until this moment, Nemo has not truly been faced with the realization that he is not the object of his mother's desire. He has not yet come to terms with this lack in himself, and therefore, Nemo hasn't felt the need to access his plethora of life-paths through the help of fantasy. Lacan says that "rupture, split, the stroke of the opening makes absence emerge" (*Four Fundamental* 26) and it is this scene at the train which causes Nemo's split in identities, his rupture in the completeness that is his sense of selfhood, and more than anything, the cause of his coming to terms with the absence of the phallus. "Phallus" in this context does not connote anything dirty, but rather that unknown *something* with which he might please his mother, make her feel whole.

The innocent naivety of Nemo's childhood has now come to an abrupt halt on the platform as he runs after his mother. Nemo is left with two choices: leave with his mother and continue his efforts to win her adoration, or stay with his father and accept that neither of them were able to satisfy the mother—an impossible decision at best. Lacan states that "the

unconscious is always manifested as that which vacillates in a split in the subject” (*Four Fundamental* 28). That is exactly what we have following Nemo’s indecision the day at the train: a split subject. The manifestation of his unconscious at work appears through fantasy, as some future reality through which Nemo can work through the loves, losses, and deaths that accompany either parent so that he may better comprehend this newfound lack and split in his identity. Either way, Nemo is rendered neurotic.

The moment Nemo starts to run after the train is more than just a mere attempt to conquer his anxiety over choice and the helplessness he feels against time’s forward momentum in forcing a decision to be made. This is, in fact, the moment when the Oedipus complex is shown taking full effect. In Freudian terms, Nemo’s attempt to leave with his mother is the slaying of the father in order to win the mother. The father is effectively “killed off,” since he becomes unable to care for himself in later years, and he is never heard from again after Nemo and his mother leave England for Canada. If Nemo is able to leave with his mother, then he successfully conquers her and remains uncastrated (or, he at least prolongs the moment in which he must accept that he isn’t the cause of her desire). On the other hand, if Nemo’s father calls out his name as he runs away, this is essentially the punishment for pursuing the mother and betraying the father; it causes Nemo to slow down and look back, and creates whatever necessary shift in tension for his shoelace to snap and his shoe to fall off. The loss of Nemo’s shoe is shown in its own frame to emphasize the importance of such a loss—it is the loss of the material with which Nemo might pursue the mother any further; it’s a metaphor for literal castration.

Presumably, if Nemo was ever capable of being the object of his mother’s desire, she wouldn’t have been able to leave him on the platform, not knowing if he’d run or not. Neither are willing to accept that they could never have satisfied the other’s needs, though. Thus, the

delusion that Nemo catching up to his mother on the train would mend all that was *almost* lost is foolish, primarily because, psychoanalytically speaking, that unknown something was *never there*. When faced with the realization that the mother is incomplete to some degree, “the child ... [tries] to be the object which it thinks the mother lacks ... It might mean being a glowing, seductive child ... Or it might mean being a dead one” (Leader and Groves 103). The romance of Nemo slowly catching his mother’s hand on the speeding train is all but erased as we fast-forward in time to see him lying “dead” on the kitchen floor, knife in hand, covered in red paint or ketchup, while his mother warns him to behave at dinner, as if nothing at all is out of the ordinary. A similar eeriness emerges as Nemo’s mother scolds him following dinner for “systematically ruining everything” and Nemo appears to jump out of the apartment window to his death. The mood of the scene changes quickly from dread to relief as we learn he’s safe on the balcony below, then comes the shock of the mother’s lack of concern, yet again, at his staged suicide when she yells at him instead: “you could’ve stayed with your father if you’d wanted to!” This sequence of events presents the audience with the stark reality of their new relationship: neither are satisfied in the slightest, and they’ve both accepted that.

Although Nemo’s mother was unfaithful to her husband during Nemo’s childhood and grew increasingly unsatisfied with Nemo’s presence in his teen years, she tries again to fill this void in her life with Anna’s father. Nemo has accepted that he isn’t the cause of his mother’s desire, but it doesn’t stop him from trying again, in true Oedipal fashion, to kill off the name of the father by telling his mom’s new boyfriend how and when he will die—on a Saturday, while he’s driving and whistling, by a train he doesn’t see coming. The only punishment Nemo receives for his first peek into the future as a child is his mother’s refusal to believe it’s possible, but as a teenager, Nemo’s mother slaps him for the same taboo ability, since she has visibly

grown agitated with his apparent insolence, and for the offense against her new boyfriend. Despite his mother's vehement claim that Nemo "ruins everything," the love affair persists, allowing his mother to satiate the fantasy that she can be fulfilled, and allowing for Nemo's subsequent taboo love affair with new "step-sister" Anna.

It is only after feeling Anna's unconditional love that Nemo completely turns away from the prospect of satisfying his mother and instead focuses on his own fulfillment. He already killed off the father in his youth and as an adolescent, he begins the path to total rejection of the mother. Nemo and Anna both aim to deceive their parents by keeping their relationship a secret. They play footsie under the table, have sex as soon as they're alone, and Nemo's morning dance from door to door in the hallway to avoid his mother finding out he slept in Anna's room is reminiscent of a Scooby-Doo chase sequence. Reminders of the unsettling circumstances of their almost incestual relationship linger throughout the rise and fall of their time as family members, though, considering their first night cuddling together included the sounds of their parents' loud sex on the other side of the wall. As the relationship crescendos sexually between Anna and Nemo, their parents are shown sleeping facing opposite directions, and the only guttural sounds coming from their room anymore are the sounds of a tennis match on TV.

The end of his mother's relationship with Anna's father necessarily ends Nemo's otherwise perfect, though neurotic, relationship with Anna, which once again provokes Nemo's anxiety over his defenselessness against his mother's selfish ways. The uncontrollable forfeiture of Anna's love is Nemo's final straw with his mother. The last time we see the two interact is over a final dinner, before yet another relocation, during which, she insists that she knows Nemo hates pools because he can't swim and that he doesn't know what he wants. Nemo's final reply is that he knows one thing: he doesn't want to be anything like her, because she doesn't know

anything about him—he loves pools. To this, she has no answer, and the end of this scene effectively ends Nemo’s relationship with his mother.

The Oedipal hold Nemo’s mother has over him isn’t too difficult an obstacle for Nemo to overcome, provided that he leaves with her; that way, the acceptance that he cannot be the object of his mother’s desire is not initially triggered by the physical loss of her. However, in the event that Nemo stays with his father, by circumstantial force rather than by choice, no less, the post-traumatic effects we see in Nemo’s relationships with the father, Jean, and Elise centralize the mother as the traumatic “residuum” (Fink 26) that haunts Nemo’s neurotic, and sometimes psychotic, tendencies (as I will show in Sections 3 and 4). In his mother’s care, Nemo is free to discover slowly that he will never be able to please her, but with his father, Nemo is left with no such closure and is instead left with the neurotic need to be desirable for the mother (without actually *knowing* about this need).

This cutting off from the illusion of effectual, or even *possible* desirability for Nemo is his castration. Zupančič says that “this is perhaps ... the best definition of castration: to give up what one never had ... to transform what one never had into something lost” (51). Nemo breaks free from his mother after losing Anna when he decides he wants to be nothing like her, but with his father, he cannot know the loss of his mother as a free-willed rejection, but rather *only* as a loss, a rape, a theft of her love. Immediately after her departure, Nemo is forced to confront the reality for the first time that his mother did not want him nor his father, hence the reason for his first question, “Is it my fault?” to which the father replies, “Of course not, it’s my fault.” Nemo explains that the breaking of his shoe, and therefore, the loss of his mother, is due to the Butterfly Effect, which, yet again, reveals that the primary anxiety of Nemo’s existence is his

utter lack of control over his life. Despite his omniscient ability to predict the future, Nemo cannot control fate.

Not unlike his relationship with his mother, Nemo's relationship with his father at 15 is quite rocky. Nemo's father is introduced to us as not much more than a cheerful TV personality during Nemo's childhood, who is scolded by the locals for inaccurately forecasting weather. Really, the only remotely tender moment we see between the two prior to the divorce is the day Nemo is mystified at how his father can in one moment leave the house for work and then instantly be on TV reporting the weather. And yet, even in this memory, Nemo's father isn't *actually* present; he is displaced as leaving, or already gone. In his teen years, we see evidence of the effect Nemo's father had on his personality, as Nemo grows into an awkward anti-socialite with a passion for science and outer space. But the apparent emotional distance between the two during Nemo's childhood only exacerbates in his teen years when his father's health declines so that their relationship no longer resembles that of father and son, but patient and caretaker.

The audience must sit in despair and watch a trapped Nemo as the nightmare of his second choice unfolds: his father is now wheelchair-bound and he cannot even bathe without Nemo's help in the shower; and to make matters worse, he no longer recognizes Nemo as his son, only someone who resembles his son. Nemo reassures his father that he's perfectly happy at home, taking care of him. He says, "I've got everything I need, Dad. Everything's fine." He delivers the lie with a smile only for the camera to cut to a close-up of Nemo on his motorbike screaming straight at the camera, over and over again. The truly tragic part of this side of Nemo's realities is that he was willing to lose his father in order to keep his mother, but regardless of his efforts, in this life, he not only loses his mother, but *still* loses his father, too. Thus, Nemo is essentially orphaned by a mother who didn't physically want to stay and a father

who mentally *could not* stay. Nemo's suffering results in the development of neurotic relationships to either Elise or Jean, which both conclude, in some way, with either Nemo's complete detachment from reality—e.g., a wholly fictional and idealized identity that is granted the ability to literally escape Earth or the reckless substitution of a stranger's identity for his own—and then death.

Nemo's relationships with both Elise and Jean reflect Nemo's failure to recognize the finality in never being that unknown missing something for his mother, as well as the lingering trauma created by his lack of control prior to and following his parents' separation. Nemo held no authority over Anna's forced departure from his life, but with Elise and Jean, Nemo makes no mistake of letting anyone but himself have a say in either woman's choice to stay. Jean gets the worst of it from Nemo because he never claims to love her. Before he even arrives at the school dance, he decides he will marry the first girl that dances with him. This premeditated trap he sets for Jean is made all the more alluring and inescapable as he kisses her at the start of their slow dance, careful to conceal that there is no love behind the act. It is merely step one of Nemo's plan of action to allow no unexpected short-comings in his life—i.e., a wife with the ability to leave, with the *option* to not love him, with any options at all. Nemo's perverted behavior with Jean, the way he creates a space for her as wife and twice-pregnant mother without her consent for either, shows a rather violent side of his trauma: Nemo transforms Jean into the mother that *cannot leave*.

On the other hand, Nemo truly loves Elise, and yet, she is still just as much a hostage as Jean in her relationship with Nemo. Despite Elise's attempt to reject Nemo's declaration of love due to her love for Stefano, he physically silences her and almost commands, "you're the one I love," which he could've just as easily followed with "and that's all that matters." Nemo's

mother causes the divorce due to the affair she had with another man, so naturally, Nemo isn't going to let the same thing happen again with his love interest. Almost 20 years later, and well into their marriage, Elise swears she always loved Stefano, but Nemo ignores this *still* and insists they can make it work, if only she stays with him. It's important that Elise is the one he compares most to his mother, physically speaking, while his background narration discusses the potentially primal origins of the laws of attraction. Nemo's obsessive behavior with Elise, and endless refusal to release her from an obviously torturous marriage reveals the desperation in his trauma: Nemo transforms her into a mother he is willing to do anything for in order to make her *want* to stay, to want *him*.

Now, my intention is not to villainize Nemo Nobody as some kidnapper of women, for he undeniably falls victim to these dysfunctional relationships, too. I won't say that Nemo never loves Elise, or even Jean, for whom I could make a much better case of it as the truth, but at the root of both relationships, it is never about love for Nemo, it isn't about finding someone to be happy with. Nemo doesn't care if Elise loves him back; she is going to stay and keep being a wife and mother, whether she likes it or not! Likewise, Nemo doesn't care if Jean loves him and he doesn't care if he loves her; she is going to marry him and bear his children, whether *she* likes it or not. In Nemo's potential lives that follow the loss of his mother, the only relationships he creates for himself are ones saturated in the trauma of his longing for a mother who cannot leave.

The climactic visual manifestation of this longing appears in the Argyle world of Nemo's fantasy. In either half of his lives, Nemo inevitably loses his mother for good, be it at age nine or 15. Within his fantasy, though, he is able to find her again, but this version of his mother is essentially the sum of all of her offenses against Nemo, a representation of a mother who did not love her son enough. The divorce only revokes her duties as a wife, and yet, she takes the

separation as an opportunity to begin life anew across the Atlantic, with or without Nemo. Furthermore, in the event that Nemo manages to catch up to her, she is not only ungrateful for his company, but she never makes an effort to really know her son or care about his feelings, especially not his heartbreak over losing Anna. With this in mind, it is understandable why, when confronted with this trauma in his fantasy, Nemo's unconscious articulates such a morbid scene in which his mother both doesn't recognize him and actually has a son that is not him. Perhaps Nemo always sensed that his mother longed for a different son. Perhaps Nemo felt that whatever version of motherhood his mother attempted, it was one that never knew Nemo *as* Nemo, but rather someone else entirely.

Nemo's ontological anxiety concerning choice versus fate, as well as the validity of his existence, predates his parents' separation, but the dysfunctional relationships throughout Nemo's multitude of lives would not manifest the way they do without the inciting traumatic incident of his mother's decision to leave her son. She gets on the train before Nemo is able to choose which parent to live with. She could've missed her train and given him longer to decide. She could've come back for him after seeing how hard he tried to go with her. Honestly, if we're going to discuss plot holes here, they could've had this very important discussion at home rather than on the platform as the train arrives. Nemo doesn't even have a suitcase. No wonder this poor nine-year-old has a complete neurotic breakdown trying to calculate every step of his life, hoping to find a way to make someone love him that doesn't end in death. But I digress. The fact of the matter is, without knowing if Nemo would run after the train, let alone if he could catch up to her, she still decides to leave without him. For the first time in his life, Nemo is forced to question who he is in the eyes of his mother, and no matter what path his life follows, he suffers over the answer.

Section 3: Nemo's Relationship with Elise

Nemo never explicitly admits to his father that he wants to be nothing like him the way he does with his mother; however, Nemo's almost immediate transformation into a desperate do-anything obsessional from the start of his relationship with Elise is evidence enough of this sentiment. Before the actual separation, Nemo's parents are seen screaming at one another during a fight, presumably about her infidelity, which concludes with his father shattering a vase between them. The disconnect between this image and young Nemo's narration that "the daddy and the mommy kissed all day long" foreshadows Nemo's method of handling similar issues with Elise: despite his unrequited love, Nemo forgoes the option to get angry at Elise and instead, loves her vigorously. The first time that Nemo sees Elise as teenagers at the school dance, her love-interest Stefano mutters something to her that can't be heard over the music, which causes Elise to thrash around on the floor while screaming that she is not, in fact, crazy. Despite him yelling at her that he "didn't even say anything," Elise gathers herself and turns her attention now to Nemo, inviting him to leave with her. Thus, the precedent for obsessional behavior establishes itself in Nemo as the dynamic between Elise and Nemo-as-replacement-for-another-man takes shape.

What creates anxiety for obsessionals like Nemo is both the fear of getting too close to their object of desire and the belief that their love-interest is already finding enjoyment elsewhere, namely, in that of another man. To put it metaphorically, "Lacan points out that a man takes a woman as a vase in which there is supposed to be a hidden object, while he also behaves as if a phallus of another man is also hidden inside the vase" (Salecl 36). For Nemo, the "phallus of another man" he identifies in Elise, which never ceases to create problems in their relationship, is the mere existence of Stefano. Elise admits to Nemo that she knows Stefano

doesn't love her, and yet, she loves him anyway. Similarly, Nemo knows Elise's love is not for him from the start, and nevertheless, he chooses to love her anyway. This sort of dichotomy in their relationship creates an impasse between Nemo and Elise, which produces four different possible timelines for him: Nemo's motorbike accident, which leaves him in a coma with severe injuries; a retaliation against Elise's rejection that leads to a relationship with Jean; a marriage resulting in Elise's immediate death and Nemo's passion for reversing death; or a marriage resulting in Nemo's fearful paralysis due to his inability to fully please his wife. These paths vary in form, but they all conclude with the same fatal end for Nemo: his failure to accept his incapacity to ever locate or have the *objet petit a* ushers him towards inescapable comatose no matter what, as he always seems to question, *am I alive or dead?*

After a very short encounter with Elise at the dance, Nemo decides he's in love with her and wants to bring her a love letter, but upon seeing Elise exit her house with Stefano, his plans change. In true obsessional form, Nemo's first reaction to this attempt at professing his love to Elise is to shy away from any sort of approach of his love-object, and he turns around on his bike instead to run away. But the duration of this life path is short-lived, so to speak, as Nemo increases his speed on his motorbike, closes his eyes, and lets fate decide the rest. Because Nemo surrenders his life to fate in this way, it is no surprise, then, that his bike should slip on a wet leaf in the road—a recurring symbol for the interference of fate in *Mr. Nobody*. His accident forces him into a coma for an indeterminable amount of time; during which, he begs his body to move to let anyone know he's alive. Nemo was too afraid to confront Elise, and consequently, his first form of comatose swallows him whole. He quickly realizes this kind of living death is *not* the better option, and that in spite of Stefano's presence, Nemo's only option is to chase after what he wants, Elise.

Once Nemo decides to confront Elise with his declaration of love, we can rest assured that only viable timelines are left for him to follow. Nemo hands Elise his love letter, and says, “I believe we should always say ‘I love you’ to the people we love. I love you.” This heartfelt moment is struck down by Elise’s steadfast reminder of the phallus preoccupying her “vase” as she tells Nemo, “I love Stefano. He doesn’t love me ... I love him anyways. I can’t help myself.” Nemo’s reaction to Elise’s rejection is, in turn, a retaliation against her by means of his interchangeable prop, Jean. Nemo’s relationship with Jean is insincere from start to finish thanks to the grounds upon which it was built (e.g., Nemo makes sure to look at Elise while he kisses Jean for the first time). The façade of the relationship as sincere results in an insurmountable numbness for Jean, and especially Nemo, who only initiated the relationship to reestablish control over that which he had lost with Elise (though never really had). Because Nemo cannot be an object of desire for Elise, he insists that the first woman he dances with will have no say in the matter. Regardless of Jean’s free will, Nemo will *not* go unloved, nor undesired. (I will dissect Nemo’s relationship with Jean in Section 4).

Nemo’s other possible response to Elise’s rejection is rather similar to his handling of Jean: Nemo will not take no for an answer. In fact, Nemo accepts *nothing* for an answer. Before Elise has a chance to respond, Nemo establishes dominance over the situation by shushing Elise and physically silencing her with a finger to her lips. He gestures as if to say, “I don’t care if you love me, I love you, and that’s enough for this to work.” This neurotic attempt to force himself into a position of desirability for Elise in hopes that she will displace her problematic love for Stefano is deeply rooted in Nemo’s inability to accept the loss of his mother’s desire. He simply does not want to consider the possibility that he is not an object of desire for Elise, and his obsessional need to act a certain way and do certain things to win her over contaminates Nemo’s

treatment of their marriage and intrinsically stunts his rehabilitation following his mother's untimely departure.

What is traumatic for Nemo is the lingering Oedipal desire for his mother after he is forced to stay with his father and accept that he's been castrated from being the phallus of her enjoyment. An adult Nemo narrates from a scientific standpoint that our attraction to others most likely takes root in primal desires, much like our fears. After all, as Freud suggests, "what is more natural than that we should persist in seeking happiness along the path by which we first encountered it" (16)? This narration voices over a comparison of close-up shots between Elise's blue eyes to his mother's eyes, then Elise's pink lips to his mother's lips. This sequence is rather on the nose in regards to the analysand's displaced Oedipal desire from the mother to his love-interest, and consequently, it reveals the hidden motivation behind Nemo's tragic love for Elise. With this comparison, the audience can make no mistake that Nemo's relationship with Elise is a direct attempt to replace his mother, or perhaps, to redeem himself for failing to please her.

Once we identify Nemo's love for Elise as a displaced love for his mother, it becomes significant, then, that his marriage to Elise produces more children than those with Jean or Anna. Desperate to shape her into mother who *wants* to be a mother, who is satisfied by remaining present, Nemo makes Elise into a mother again and again. In spite of everything, Elise's crippling depression by this point of their marriage is the main inhibitor to her role as mother, leaving Nemo to act as the sole parent for their three children—i.e., waking them up in the morning, eating breakfast with them before taking them to school, chaperoning their daughter's birthday party, etc. Salecl asserts that "a man constantly tries to take on his symbolic function, since he knows that the symbolic function is what the woman sees in him. However, he necessarily fails in this attempt, which causes his anxiety and inhibition" (36-7). The symbolic

function of “dutiful husband” serves as Nemo’s redemption after his perceived failure to embody “desirable son;” hence, Nemo aims to reconcile the symbolic function of “mother” through Elise. Naturally, this is a hopeless endeavor, considering the lack of essence in any of these titles, as well as Nemo’s incomplete knowledge concerning his mother’s continued efforts at motherhood. Nemo is unaware of his mother’s hospital visit during his coma and he leaves her letters unopened, so it is by his own misconception that she should surrender the title of “mother” to invalidation. Elise cannot embody a role whose essence does not exist, thus her dissatisfaction with a life unfulfilled causes an already obsessional Nemo to sink further into his incurable neurosis.

Despite Nemo’s initial assertion of dominance over Elise, there is still the possibility for a timeline in which she dies right after their wedding in a horrible gas tank explosion. In the event of her death, Nemo no longer has a chance to act as an obsessional and, instead, clings to the now lost relationship with his deceased wife in a rather perverse manner. Nemo does not seek a new love following her death. In fact, he not only continues to set Elise’s place at the table and speaks to her as if she’s there, but he builds somewhat of a shrine of photographs around her urn in his new photography studio. His choice of subject for his photography is especially significant: his cameras are set to photograph dying things every few seconds, such as rotting fruit or a decaying mouse, so that when these photos are played quickly in reverse, the audience watches with Nemo as molded fruit returns to vibrancy and a maggot-covered mouse recovers from its grotesque post-mortem state. On the surface, Nemo mourns the loss of his wife, yet the loss of yet another woman uncovers Nemo’s much deeper anxiety about time and the desire to avoid finality, be it the finality of death or choices, alike. The fact that you cannot go back once a choice has been made troubles Nemo even as a child, but following the death of Elise, we see for

the first time Nemo's perverse enjoyment from staging an otherwise impossible reversal of time and therefore, reversal of death.

In Nemo's futuristic fantasy, the interviewer tells Nemo that it's impossible for his wife to both die and not die. Nemo corrects this contradiction without hesitation and the film returns from the fantasy to see all three children run to hug Nemo, who is washing the family car. Nemo thus utilizes his power to eliminate the possibility of Elise's death—undoubtedly, because it is less than desirable to live a life in solitude, passionate about flirting with the line between life and death—but this control is wholly illusory, since, it was not a direct decision of Nemo's that led to her death, and therefore, should not be within his control. Nevertheless, he dedicates his memory, as it were, to the exploration of a life with Elise, Nemo's fourth and most troublesome path. It is in this life that we see Nemo's neurosis transform him into an obsessional partner while trapped in an impassioned, yet, inauthentic marriage; hence, this life confronts the audience with the most encounters with the real of any of Nemo's relationships. Perhaps the audience is so frequently met with the gaze in Nemo's on-screen portrayal of life with Elise due to the true attempt at authenticity in a façade. It is easy to forget you're watching a movie when faced with the familiar tragedy of a couple trapped by their own circumstances—i.e., a woman who cannot feel enjoyment anymore and a man who can't stop trying to bring enjoyment to her.

Nemo shows signs of his willingness to do anything Elise desires from the moment their relationship begins as teenagers. Outside of the dance, she cries on a street curb, which prompts Nemo to hand her a handkerchief and say "you'll drown." His first lengthy utterance to her is a fact about Mars and it doesn't take her long before she makes him swear that he will spread her ashes on Mars, regardless of the ridiculousness of this request. Nemo is no ordinary teenager though, and is able to apply his omnipotence to make this wish come true (I will elaborate on his

omniscience versus omnipotence in Section 6). The futuristic fantasy in which Nemo is Earth's last living mortal is not the only fantasy sequence in *Mr. Nobody*. One of Nemo's lifetimes, which belongs exclusively to the world within his science-fiction story, sees him as a passenger aboard a ship inbound for Mars. Nemo begins writing this story about his journey to Mars before meeting Elise, most likely meant as an escapist fantasy in retaliation against the suffocation of living with his father. But following his vow to Elise, Nemo's space fantasy eventually reveals that his purpose for the trip is, indeed, to spread Elise's ashes on Mars. One encounter with Elise is enough to influence Nemo's fictional fantasy, and their marriage is no different. This is the obsessional tendency in Nemo, willing to do anything to please Elise.

One of the central dilemmas that troubles a person suffering from obsessional neurosis is the constant, nagging question, "what do I *do* to be an object of desire for the Other?" For Nemo, the answer to this question comes in the form of favors and the performance of his symbolic role as husband. He brings her breakfast in bed, keeps the curtains closed in their room, takes care of the children and even hosts a birthday party. In response to Elise's jab that he cares more about his car than her, he impulsively reassures her otherwise by setting the car on fire in the driveway. But this sort of impulsive pyromania does nothing to save their marriage. Renata Salecl says:

If men often try to solve their love troubles by extensively clinging to obsessional rituals and self-imposed rules that are supposed to prevent them from being overconsumed by the object of desire, women's dilemma about what kind of an object they are for the man might result in their giving up on love and immersing themselves in melancholic indifference. (39)

The key phrase here is "melancholic indifference." Unlike Anna, who, as an adult, claims she'd closed herself off from love for so long that she's forgotten how to love, Elise's mood remains

unchanged by Nemo's efforts to make their marriage work and is held hostage, instead, by her longing for an unknown something else. In fact, upon our first glimpse into their married life, Nemo tries to convince her she has an amazing life with great kids, but all she can do weep and repeatedly cry out, "what is wrong with me?" Elise doesn't particularly express guilt for her failure to embody a good wife, but her failure to be a present mother seems to consume her. Perhaps this is why Nemo participates in the masochism of trying to fulfill an unfulfillable wife—Nemo's mother did not realize her shortcomings as a mother for leaving Nemo behind, but with Elise, though she still fails as a mother, she understands it *as* failure.

One of the better days of their marriage is their daughter Joyce's birthday. Though Elise was in bed complaining of the noise at first, she asks "what kind of mother am I?" and runs downstairs to start dancing around in her nightgown. Her children and the guests appear uneasy at first, but Elise eventually becomes the life of the party as Nemo onlooks nearby, smiling. The noise of screaming children changes suddenly to the quietness of sleep as Nemo, Elise, and their three children crowd a bed together. This sweet scene concludes with Elise whispering to Nemo, "this was a nice day." This rare harmonious ending to a day in the life of their little family is severely undercut by the juxtaposing scene Nemo comes home to after work one day. Elise is in the same nightgown, in the middle of their street during a heavy downpour, sobbing, yet again, and she screams at Nemo that she's going to leave him. The neighbors watch from their porches as Nemo picks Elise up off the street and carries her screaming, flailing body indoors. As spectator, we think, poor Nemo for not accepting that there is no pleasing Elise, and conversely, poor Elise for not knowing what she wants, despite at least knowing that it isn't Nemo.

In real life, Nemo might fall victim to this kind of condemned marriage without any indication that there is anything inauthentic about his situation. But, because this all occurs in the

cinematic universe, and because Nemo's omniscient powers allow him to act as spectator to his own lives, both the audience and Nemo witness the real peeking through from his fantasy to alert us of the uncanny through the gaze. Todd McGowan describes the gaze as "a blank point—a point that disrupts the flow and the sense of the experience—within the aesthetic structure of the film, and it is the point at which the spectator is obliquely included in the film" ("Introduction" 8). The mailman who delivers a picture of Nemo and Jean's family walks away from the house in reverse, Nemo calls his son by the wrong name, who then adorns an English accent to correct Nemo, and when Nemo looks outside, he watches as workers un-pave the street, or rather roll it up like a carpet using a cartoonishly large roller. These indicators that the fantasy world Nemo created *exists* is enough to constitute the gaze. Not only can Nemo explicitly see the nonsensical imaginary parameters of his world fracturing, but we as spectators are shown that there is something fundamentally missing within these scenes.

Encounters with the gaze are not limited to the clearly defined phantasmic interruptions to Nemo's life, though. Everyday elements like the mirrors in Nemo and Elise's bedroom might not illicit from the audience the same shock and awe as the aforementioned encounters with the real, but the cinematic use of mirrors cannot be overlooked in an analysis of Nemo's disjointed life. If we remember Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, we know that a child makes use of a mirror to gain mastery over their body, recognize themselves *as* a self apart from the world, and thus, develop their ego. Mastery over the self is purely an illusion though; in other words, "the mirroring experience deceives insofar as it presents the body through a coherent image. The wholeness of the body is seen in a way that it is not experienced" (McGowan, "Introduction" 1). Evidence of Nemo grappling with these same concepts is evident during his infancy when the camera focuses on Nemo's tiny shadow on the wall and his narration asks, "do I really exist?"

While it is natural to question one's own existence due to the impossibility of seeing one's own eyes, for example, Nemo is stuck in the repercussions of his misunderstanding of the coherence of his selfhood well into his adult years.

With regards to this phenomenon of mirrored selfhood, we as spectators watch Nemo's relationship with Elise take place both on screen and within a mirror. The film wastes no time before the audience is introduced to the awaiting symbolism of the mirror. When we are first introduced to old Nemo at the start of the film, his doctor offers him a mirror to prove he really is 118 years old. Nemo only catches a glimpse of half of his face before he screams "I'm 34" and "I've got to wake up!" Immediately after, Nemo awakes rather frantically next to Elise and walks to the bathroom where the different placement of the light switch confuses him. With Nemo in front of the bathroom mirror, the camera slides over to his point of view so that we *become* Nemo, in the regard that we see what he sees: a straight-on look at himself, exclusively through the mirrored image. What appears to be a seemingly whole man is, in fact, a deception because we are not seeing the "real" Nemo, but rather, a picture of Nemo. In fact, the camera never swings back around to the "real" Nemo; we follow him into the mirror and out of the bathroom through the remainder of the scene that is, in effect, wholly mirrored. Neroni writes that "Lacan ... saw a potential screen in every mirror, which is to say, a potential disruption of the subject's sense of mastery. If the mirror is a screen, then the subject does not have mastery over the visual field" (211). This acknowledged lack of mastery alludes to the reality that the essence of the family is not in of itself complete; the dynamic between Nemo and Elise in their symbolic roles as dutiful husband/father and loving wife/mother is broken, fundamentally lacking, and only we as spectators can be made aware of this.

Though there are several instances with Elise wherein we see Nemo both outside and within a mirror, the scene where Elise believes her unhappiness is due to her unresolved feelings for Stefano is by far the most powerful in terms of its presentation of the gaze to the audience. The camera aims itself straight at the mirror, and so does Elise when she says, "I can't see any other explanation for being in this state." At first, we see Elise's back as she stands in front of the mirror but the next frame shows only their reflections, just like Nemo at the beginning of the film, while she tells him that seeing his face every morning makes her cry. As Nemo holds Elise, the camera pulls back so that the space of the screen is shared equally by their desperate embrace and their reflection in the mirror behind them so that we cannot see one without the contrast of the other.

Nemo is clearly not the only one faced with the illusory mastery of selfhood. Without the mirror in the filmic frame now, Elise warns that if he stays, he'll drown with her, to which Nemo replies, "I'll learn to swim." The audience watches this mournful scene with the gaze reminding us that this image is not complete. Nemo's offer is not only the crescendo of his obsessional attempts to make Elise stay, but it foreshadows what future lies ahead for Nemo if he remains in this marriage any longer. Considering every time Nemo tries to swim, he drowns, and all of his predicted deaths take place in water, the only future awaiting Nemo with Elise is death. In this case, Nemo's drowning would be purely metaphorical, but Elise is right: to stay together would be a sort of living death for Nemo, yet another comatose existence. Immediately following Nemo's last attempt to save their marriage, knowing there is no more future for them, Elise grabs her suitcase in the middle of the night and leaves.

The gaze draws the spectating audience into the film, it implicates the audience as a necessary element in the exchange. The closest the audience is drawn into the film during

Nemo's life with Elise is just before the final mirror scene. Nemo speaks to Elise, he addresses her, but she does not hear him. What appears to be a fourth wall break at first doesn't fully realize itself as such, since Nemo is not self-aware that his life doesn't really exist outside of the film. Whether he's lying down in bed next to Elise and speaking directly at her, or at the zoo speaking directly to the camera, only we can hear Nemo; it is the audience he is really addressing without really knowing we're watching. Nemo tells us, "I don't dare move. I don't live. Whatever I do is a disaster." The fact that his relationship with Elise ends in this manner of immobility should come as no surprise, seeing that "for the obsessional, the question is: am I alive or dead? He will spend his life never acting, but waiting" (Leader and Groves 68). He knows he cannot go back, but he refuses to move forward, and so his life comes to a standstill (we will explore a similar paralysis in the next section with Jean). Nemo has led himself down a path that has caused him to be so terrified of making the wrong move or the wrong choice to upset Elise that he would rather sit in this half-alive numbness than try to be an object of Elise's desire anymore; not because he knows it is impossible, but because he has run out of options.

The furthest the audience is removed from what happens on the screen, in terms of the hierarchy of spectatorship, as it were, is what occurs after Elise leaves Nemo. It feels as if we've encountered some gaze within a gaze; a metagaze, if you will. We as spectators watch nine-year-old Nemo remove himself from Elise's life and transform himself into a spectator, too. Nemo sits in a bright red theater hall as the lone attendee, there to see a vignette of adult Elise, presumably in the time after she left Nemo. The self-aware setting of the theater draws the audience's attention back to Nemo's omniscient power as if to remind us that everything we just watched with Elise was merely hypothetical scenarios and speculation; now that it's over, none of it really matters. The audience watches Nemo watching Elise on stage in a beauty salon, admiring an old

photo of teenage Stefano. As the song from the school dance plays overhead, a customer walks in, whom *we* know is Stefano, but Elise doesn't. She gives him an entire haircut service, rings him up, and lets him leave before returning to her lonely position of longing after a picture of boy that no longer exists.

What Elise is missing in her life is unattainable, and to move on from an unfulfillable life from her, Nemo must accept that he could not be that object of pleasure for her, because not even Stefano was that object for her. Salecl claims that "the major problem for the male and the female subject is that they do not relate to that which their partner relates to in them" (36). For Elise, it is Nemo's impossible replacement of Stefano, and for Nemo, it is Elise's impossible replacement of his mother. The same sentiment is true with Jean: she sees Nemo as this boy who lovingly swept her off her feet, but Nemo only sees her as a way out. Whatever we think is the thing that sustains us, that fills our desire, it is still not *the* thing, the *objet petit a*. And no matter what we do to try and get it back, that object is forever missing, to Elise, and especially to Nemo.

Section 4: Nemo's Relationship with Jean

Nemo's mother proved that Nemo wasn't a sufficient object to sustain her enjoyment, and Elise didn't even want to give him the opportunity to try and fail at the same endeavor. By age 15, Nemo hasn't managed to work through the recurring trauma of his mother leaving him. He doesn't know how to process either rejection in a healthy way, since both goodbyes from the women he loved were out of his control. His plan of action is not to stand idly by, the way his father did, or let a woman have the option to not want him, or to ever get left behind again. To enact this plan, he turns to Jean; and this is wholly circumstantial, not because he actually wants *Jean*, specifically. Nemo is no longer a neurotic partner; he slips into a darker, emotionless state,

since “men know that with the help they can get from ‘drowning their cares’ they can at any time slip away from the oppression of reality and find a refuge in a world of their own where painful feelings do not enter” (Freud 13). Therefore, Nemo’s relationship with Jean is purely a defense mechanism against the harsh reality that it is impossible to fulfill another’s desires. With Jean, Nemo doesn’t have to concern himself with her desires, and thus, he surpasses neurosis and sinks into cold perversity.

Nemo enters into the relationship with Jean with a motive: he swears her into a life-long commitment before they even have a chance to meet. Her involvement in his scheme is not to fill the position of the woman he loves, but merely the first in line to complete the social task at hand. Before leaving for another school dance following Elise’s rejection, Nemo tells his father with a hard face that he’s getting married. When his father asks, “Who’s the lucky lady?” Nemo replies, “No it’s not that. I’m going to marry the first girl that dances with me tonight.” At the dance, he spots Jean in the crowd, and pulls her close for a dance, which she thanks him for. Almost immediately, he tries to kiss Jean while dancing, and despite her hesitation at first, Jean accepts the hasty move. After the kiss, Jean holds Nemo close, smiles and whispers his name, but Nemo doesn’t exude the same overwhelming joy as Jean. For Nemo, the kiss is a performance to make Elise jealous, since he looks at Elise before, during, and after the kiss. As they leave the dance together, Nemo decides he will marry “the girl” on the back of his motorcycle, a scene which I will refer to as “the kidnapping of Jean.”

The fact is that Jean never truly matters—at least not in any romantic sense. She asks Nemo as an adult if she matters to him, to which he has no reply, and it’s because she doesn’t; or rather, she only matters insofar as Nemo, as pervert, uses her to fulfill his socially expected role of being-married. Therefore, the scene following the dance can be interpreted as a kidnapping for

several reasons. Before he meets her, Nemo refers to Jean as “the girl,” and after they meet, he still refers to her as “the girl.” Nemo doesn’t address Jean by her name, thereby stripping her of her humanity. On the bike together, while Nemo directly speaks to the camera, Jean cannot hear him, nor the plan he lays out for their lives together, which involves marriage and children.

Jean’s role as wife and mother are immediately created for her without her consent, and she must fulfill both roles whether she wants to or not. Nemo not only completely disregards the possibility that Jean might not *want* to marry him or have children, but he commands their life into manifestation so forcefully that he completely omits any potential option to reject him. For Jean’s sake, if nothing else, the scene is uncomfortable to watch.

For this reason, the kidnapping of Jean elicits the gaze. Much like when Nemo faces Elise as he speaks but she cannot hear him, Nemo shouts his six-point life plan to the camera with Jean nearby, but she only exists as part of the scenery thanks to her exemption from the conversation. Again, while Nemo doesn’t exactly show self-awareness that he’s a character in a movie, he still implicates the audience by speaking directly to the camera instead of to anyone nearby, effectively forcing both women into the film’s background as props. The Lacanian gaze, as seen with Elise, implicates the audience to alert us of the missing signifier, but the gaze as theorized by Laura Mulvey serves the purpose of objectifying the woman, specifically. In the case of Jean, “this camera/male hero camera alignment forces the woman into the position of the object of the male gaze ... [T]he viewer (both male and female) derives pleasure from this process of identification and thus derives pleasure from objectifying the woman and viewing her as a passive object” (Neroni 210). Despite these similarities, though, there is a stark difference in the impact of both camera conversations. With Elise, Nemo appears afraid; he refrains from further

decision-making for fear that something will go wrong. But with Jean, Nemo is no longer fearful of the choices he has to make, and so he makes them all with conviction, and without hesitation.

The reason this scene provokes the gaze is because the audience watches Nemo literally speak his six-point plan into manifestation, first without regard for Jean's free will, and then without regard for natural law, beginning with "I will never leave anything to chance again." Nemo says he will marry the girl on his motorcycle, and they will have two children, who materialize one at a time as he speaks their names, which are labelled on their shirts. He says he wants a sports car, which first pops up as blue, but quickly changes color when he says it's a *red* sports car. The same real-time edits occur when he wants the house that he initially imagines to be a *big* house and painted *yellow*, *with* a pool *and* a lawn *with* a gardener. As spectators, we watch Nemo exercise his omnipotence in this scene. We stand by as helpless as Jean while Nemo takes command over his life after suffering so much from his loss of control; and yet, we do not remain as oblivious as her since we cannot ignore the presence of Jean, whose voice is stolen in order to warrant Nemo's newfound authority.

Nemo shows no reserve in the organization of his perfect life and treats Jean and fate as ineffectual and wholly absent elements, respectively. As early as their first meeting, Nemo clearly demonstrates that he "does not question what the Other desires or what kind of an object he is for the Other ... [He] is certain of what brings him enjoyment, locating him much closer to perversion than neurosis" (Salecl 40). With Elise, we see Nemo's anxiety fully intertwined with Elise and what she requires to be happy, "whereas [Nemo] the pervert does not have this dilemma—he is certain that he is the object of the Other's jouissance" (Salecl 42). This certainty arguably shields Nemo from any real attempts to consider Jean's desires, which is equally liberating as it is misleading for him. While it shows real ambition on Nemo's part to make

concrete plans about where his life will end up, he does so in a manner that is not only impossible, but he neglects to factor in anyone's enjoyment, including his own; he believes freedom from the fear of choice is what he needs, when in reality, it isn't enough.

The gaze shows itself in order to alert the spectator of the disjunction between the symbolic and the real—i.e., Nemo's spoken manifestation of his life fundamentally lacking enjoyment—thus, it is all the more impactful for the film to cut from Nemo's contention on his motorbike that he “will not stop until he's succeeded” to the image of him wearing a suit, lying face down in his pool in his big green lawn of his big yellow house. Nemo's attempt to alleviate the anxiety caused from a lack of control with his mother and Elise not only backfires, but it dissipates so quickly that we never get to see him happy with his achievements, let alone with Jean. With Anna, almost every day is a happy one, even Elise gets *one* good day, but with Jean, the only emotions we get from Nemo in his adult life are blank stares, numbness, and confusion. Nemo's other deaths by drowning are unavoidable and accidental, but in this life wherein Nemo aggressively plans every detail of his life and is left in a daze, we have no choice but to interpret this scene as an attempted suicide.

The very few glimpses we see into Nemo and Jean's marriage sets the tone for how unattached Nemo really is to his most inauthentic of lives. The vignette comes immediately after Nemo accidentally calls his and Elise's son Paul, the name of one of his and Jean's sons. The scene fades away from his life with Elise and into his poolside life with Jean, where Paul wakes Nemo from sleeping by repeatedly calling out “daddy.” After Jean tells Paul not to wake Nemo, Paul runs off, thus concluding the full extent of Nemo's role as father in this life with Jean. In fact, the only proof we have that Nemo even has a second son with Jean is during his vision of the future when he speaks the otherwise absent “Michael” into existence; otherwise, Michael is

only seen for a second or two in the far-off distance with his back to the camera. The symbolic role of fatherhood is clearly of no concern for Nemo in this life, within which, his own existence is not even clear to himself.

In the next vignette of their marriage after Jean asks if she matters, she reads a letter she found in Nemo's handwriting that he cannot remember writing. The ending reads, "choices have been made. I can only continue on. I've controlled everything. I've done everything to reach this point and now that I'm here, I'm fucking bored. The hardest thing is knowing whether I'm still alive." According to Salecl, Lacan explains that "a subject ... writes letters to none other than himself ... [H]e is dealing with his own desires and fantasies, his own narcissism" (30). The question of whether he's alive or dead is similar to an obsessional's dilemma, but we cannot confuse neurosis for perversion here. Jean's desires are not in question for Nemo, and he is perversely only concerned by his own wish-fulfillment; hence, the purpose of writing this letter to himself, not Jean, is to redirect this inauthentic life, to remind himself there is still something missing and being in control of "everything" will not alleviate the problem.

Nemo is still fully capable of cornering himself into a life of comatose outside of Elise. This is his fateful end with Jean solely because Nemo has lost concern for the missing *objet petit a*. If the unknowable something that drives our enjoyment is no longer a concern for Nemo, he cannot live a life of enjoyment from the search for this object. To simplify, without desire to fuel the drive, there is no meaning to life. In his life with Jean, Nemo is a lot like Elise holding the picture of teenage Stefano—Nemo believed he knew exactly what needed to be done in order to make him happy, and yet that wasn't the *thing*. Elise believes Stefano is the solution to her unhappiness, and yet, when confronted with Stefano, she lets him go unnoticed, while still clutching to the delusion that he is the answer. This sort of impasse is aptly expressed by the

Joker in *The Dark Knight* when he says, “I’m a dog chasing cars. I wouldn’t know what to do with one if I caught it!” A dog that chases cars enjoys the chase, not the obtainment of the thing. In other words, the search for enjoyment *is* what’s enjoyable. But Nemo bypassed the search, obtained what he *thought* would fulfill him, and is now faced with the reality that he is not as in tune with his own desires as he once perceived.

Despite the unfulfillment from a loveless marriage, Nemo’s relationship with Jean is an objectively triumphant attempt to regain control over his life—at first. Nemo worried about his inability to go back in time and undo a choice well before his parents’ divorce, but it isn’t until the moment he runs after his mother on the train that he experiences for the first time a true submission to fate. Staying with his father wasn’t a matter of choice; the loss of his shoe was an act of fate, an unavoidable surrender of control. The traumatic repercussion of this moment is the clear motivator in Nemo’s perversion to leave no room for error, leave nothing up to chance again, and to let no one but himself have a say in where his life will end up. Nemo thus learns to conquer his fear of final choices by making every choice all at once. We see that, by adulthood, Nemo retains an inhuman amount of control over manifesting his life exactly the way he plans it, no matter how unlikely. So why isn’t he happy? In spite of his occasional omnipotence, this isn’t how life works!

In reality, we know that Nemo conquers nothing. In regard to his attitude towards making choices, Nemo doesn’t know how to live his life in sequential order, making decisions along the way. Just because he decides to create a concrete plan of action for himself does not demonstrate true growth in his ability to cope with the relinquishment of the infinite possibilities that precede making a choice *as they occur naturally*. Nemo behaves as if the solution to overcome his fear of making choices is to make all of them at once so that no choices remain. This approach assumes

that his life, and moreover, social law, is *only* a set of choices—a delusion we see linger within Nemo following his descent into madness, as well—thus, he disqualifies the significant role that fate proves it plays without regard for *anyone's* desires. For this reason, this life is as inauthentic as it is unrealistic.

One of Nemo's larger issues out of many in his relationship with Jean is that because he is no longer concerned with his object of desire, he stops looking for it altogether; he believes that he's achieved maximum enjoyment and that there is nothing left for him to find pleasurable. In psychoanalysis, we know this to be impossible—except for the psychotic who *only* finds enjoyment—but it is Nemo's conviction that he is maxed out on satisfaction, so to speak, and therefore, he cannot progress any further without the intervention of some radical change to his misguided ideology. Leader and Groves write that “a delusion can serve as a way of giving sense to the menacing world around one, made menacing precisely by the absence of certain fundamental significations to give order to it” (109). Nemo is no longer living a life that makes sense to him. To test the strength of this reality he created for himself, he holds his hand over a candle and lets the flame burn a hole in his hand, yet he appears incapable of even feeling pain. This is the moment when Nemo comes to terms with his utter detachment from this emotionless life of his. Desperate for newfound excitement in an otherwise stale life created by no one but himself, Nemo reverses his tactic of trying to control every facet of his life and surrenders his life completely over to the hands of chance in order to start a new, restriction-free life, so that not even his own propensity for anxiety could hinder his manic freedom from choice.

Our first introduction to Nemo's floundering in the face of a difficult decision is during his childhood. His nine-year-old voice narrates overhead, “we cannot go back. That's why it's hard to choose. You have to make the right choice.” Nemo is distraught as he looks back and

forth between two pastries while holding a single coin. Unable to decide between the two desserts, he chooses neither and flips the coin as he walks away. To conclude the scene, the narration finishes, “as long as you don’t choose, everything remains possible.” This principle becomes a key component in the creation of all of Nemo’s lives, foreshadowed in our subsequent introduction to the three girls as soon as he abandons the pastries. (I will return to this guiding principle in Section 7). We see in his life with Jean that Nemo prefers a direct rebellion against this rule to feel pleasure, by use of the coin, no less. The night his relationship with Elise begins, outside of the school dance, Nemo flips another coin, which he accidentally drops into a street gutter. This loss potentially foreshadows the minimal presence fate will play in his life with Elise in comparison to the number of decisions he makes on his own accord—albeit, in service of her needs. On the other hand, following Nemo’s initial discredit of fate’s otherwise crucial role in effecting his life with Jean, Nemo makes use of a coin again, but this time, with a YES and NO carved on either side so that his life is no longer guided by his own choices, but by unbiased, random chance.

Nemo breaks even further away from the guiding principles of reality and his initial perversion to embark upon a dangerous path in which everything is transformed into yes or no questions, whose answers are entirely out of his control. As Nemo falls down this rabbit hole of careless decision-making, his mannerisms no longer resemble a pervert, but rather, a psychotic who is “not at all bothered by social prohibitions[,] ... has no feeling of guilt and is not in the slightest way sorry” (Salecl 41). With his YES/NO coin making all of his decisions for him, Nemo resembles yet another Batman villain, Two-Face, who uses a coin to determine other people’s fate, and at times, his own. We see how quickly this game of chance spirals out of control, since Nemo’s first coin flip decides whether or not to buy a fishing rod, which is then

immediately followed by the coin flip to decide whether or not to step out of the way of an oncoming train. Nemo throws all inhibitions aside and finds complacency in having no control whatsoever over his actions. Nemo takes it one step further than Two-Face though: Nemo allows himself to saunter along in this dangerous game until it eventually forces a complete dissociation from his own identity.

Nemo's psychotic behavior is best embodied in the coin flip at the airport that causes him to leave behind his life as Nemo Nobody and spontaneously take on the life of Daniel Jones, who's awaiting chauffeur escorts a disillusioned Nemo to his limo and new life. In Daniel Jones's hotel room, Nemo searches through Daniel's personal belongings in a suitcase, finds his ID, and proceeds to fix his hair to match the photo of Daniel. We watch Nemo watch himself in a mirror smooth down his hair and recite his new name, "Daniel...Daniel Jones." While perverts know the line of law and find enjoyment in pushing the boundaries of that law, psychotics are governed by no such line, and eventually society will try to hold psychotics accountable for their characteristic lawlessness.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud warns that "unbridled gratification of all desires forces itself into the foreground as the most alluring guiding principle in life, but it entails preferring enjoyment to caution and penalizes itself after short indulgence" (12). Nemo makes a mockery of fate, but no more so than he makes a mockery of his own life, so it is only appropriate that this life should end more violently than any other. After his hotel room receives a call for Daniel warning him of imminent danger, Nemo leaves it up to a coin toss to get out of certain death, yet again; but this time, the wind from an open window blows the coin mid-air and changes the result. Thus, fate steps in to quite literally put Nemo in his place. As Daniel Jones, Nemo is murdered in the bathtub of his hotel room and his body is abandoned in the middle of

the woods. I hate to say that Nemo was “asking for it,” but perhaps he truly *was* asking for death. The laws of nature oblige to remind Nemo that despite his omniscience and reckless enjoyment, he is still only human.

Obviously, when offered the choice between Elise or Jean, Nemo prefers a life with Elise. Jean was not only Nemo’s back-up plan after losing Elise, but the dim life the two have together, wherein Nemo’s symbolic roles of father and husband are of no relevance to him, becomes an example of worst-case scenario for Nemo. To combat the pain of losing his opportunity with Elise, Nemo shuts himself off from emotion completely when he decides to marry Jean. But “a man thinks himself happy if he has merely escaped unhappiness or weathered trouble;” and in the end, “the task of avoiding pain forces that of obtaining pleasure into the background” (Freud 12). Nemo’s plight to reestablish control over his life results in a complete disregard for seeking pleasure beyond the material items he convinces himself are the only key to happiness. He finds himself unburdened by the question of his own desire, let alone that of Jean’s desires—consideration for what she wants was never an option for him to begin with. When the perverted ultimate control over his choices fails to fulfill Nemo, his eventual decent into psychotic abandon seems to stroke his enjoyment just fine. But just because he discovers enjoyment in the total relinquishment of control doesn’t mean he’s learned anything about the mitigation of his many existential anxieties. If he has any chance at an endurable life, Nemo has to accept that fate cannot be silenced into the background, and conversely, it cannot be the only thing that controls you. Authentic living does not instantly equate to non-anxious living, but the only way for Nemo to live authentically is to find harmony in the crossover between his own authority and the inevitability of fate’s unpredictable interference.

Section 5: Nemo's Relationship with Anna

It is undeniable that Nemo's relationship with Anna is the most meaningful and genuine of his three love interests. But her role in Nemo's life is crucial for more than just the conclusion of the film, because unlike Elise or Jean, no matter which life Nemo leads, he always finds a way to unconsciously incorporate Anna. Nemo's dysfunctional marriages to Elise and Jean emerge from the inciting incident of the loss of his mother, and therefore, each neurotic, perverse, and psychotic relationship directly responds to this Oedipal trauma. It is important, then, that Nemo's pursuit of Anna only takes place so long as he manages to catch up to his mother on the departing train. The loss of his mother is no issue for him in the pursuit of Anna, since, his eventual voluntary rejection of his mother does not traumatize him the same way it does when he is forced to stay with his father. Consequently, Nemo's neurotic relationship with Anna does not unconsciously linger on the failure to be his mother's desired object, but the loss of something else exclusive to Anna.

Nemo's neurosis with Anna differs from his obsessional actions with Elise since his concern for the Other's desire no longer begs the question "what must I *do*?" and instead asks, "who must I *be*?" His constant concern for the proximity to his love object and relation to her embodies the traits of a hysteric as "one who is always questioning what kind of an object [he] is in the desire of the Other" (Salecl 33). Before I demonstrate that his hysteria is not confined to just one life, it is essential to first look at the ways in which Nemo directly copes with his uncertainty of Anna's desire. One of the more remarkable scenes in the film is Nemo's first encounter with Anna at the swimming pool—if we had to pinpoint the moment in which he falls in love with her, it's this scene. Among a group of boys, we see young Nemo almost drowning. He cannot swim, he is never able to swim; in fact, he fears drowning so much that it's the

number one cause of death across his lives. And yet, once Anna enters the pool, Nemo watches her perform an impressive dive, which convinces him to ignore his limits in the water and attempt the high dive, too. It's not that he forgets who he is—he tries to change who he is because of Anna. Just like Nemo's promise to spread Elise's ashes on Mars begins his life of obsession, Nemo's attempt at the high dive begins his lifelong hysteric's concern for who he is in the eyes of Anna—be it a step-brother, neighbor, fellow space traveler, stranger on the street, or lost love.

The only time Nemo directly interacts with the three girls during childhood is when he passes the three of them on a street bench and they each say hello to him, one by one. Anna is a special case, because after this introduction of his love objects, Nemo doesn't interact with Elise or Jean again until their teen years, but he does encounter Anna two more times as children, albeit, from afar. The lack of direct communication is not an issue for Nemo though, because “the [hysteric] subject does not need to actually encounter the other person to fall in love. It is enough that the subject creates a sublime fantasy scenario around the sublime object that he...perceives to be in possession of the other.” (Salecl 31) Now, I cannot act as though I know exactly what this sublime object is, since it is necessarily known to *be unknown*; we only know that Nemo perceives Anna to have *it*. The way the film makes us watch Nemo watch Anna at the pool proves that his attraction to this unknown object within her is all-consuming for him and it takes control of his imaginary perception, so much so that it invokes the gaze.

The film draws the spectator in to take part in this intimate moment through the use of cinematic elements such as the replacement of loud pool noises for romantic music, and camera angles that are not from Nemo's perspective on the ground. Nemo and the camera watch Anna from a stationary position when she first enters the pool, but once Nemo hides himself in a dark

room with the door barely cracked to spy on her, we are met with the gaze due to his voyeurism. Once Nemo is hiding, the camera moves with Anna; she is no longer seen through Nemo's perspective, but ours. The audience watches Anna walk across the diving board in slow-motion, then watches her from above complete a graceful dive into the water straight below. Anna swims toward the camera underwater, the shot follows her as she does the backstroke, and finally, the camera ascends above her as she floats on her back. Hence, our experience of Anna in this scene is much more evocative of the gaze than what Nemo is able to see from behind the door. That is to say, we are more involved than Nemo in the creation and perception of the aura of fantasy surrounding Anna. When she gets out of the pool, she sees Nemo watching her. He instinctually closes the door more to conceal himself further, because "a gaze surprises him in the function of voyeur, disturbs him, overwhelms him and reduces him to a feeling of shame" (Lacan, *Four Fundamental* 84). Because the gaze causes the spectator to function as voyeur as well, we are equally as startled as Nemo when Anna looks straight at the camera to catch both Nemo, and us, watching her.

The pool scene exemplifies the feeling of "love at first sight." Nemo never experiences anything remotely similar with Elise or Jean, and yet, for some reason, Nemo does not show immediate confidence at the end of the film to choose a life with Anna; at least not right away. A surface-level comparison of the three women suggests the choice should be incredibly easy for Nemo, but the open-ended conclusion to his relationship with Anna after the rain destroys her number reinvigorates the trauma of losing her for, now, a third time. On a deeper level, we know Nemo is neurotic dealing with Anna and that he, as "a hysteric[,] is constantly concerned with questions about desire ... Since the subject can never get a satisfying answer to the question about the desire of the Other, the subject interprets and finds an answer in a fantasy that he

creates” (Salecl 32). The fantasy world is an imperative mechanism for Nemo to deal with his many lives; but, characteristic of trauma, there are repetitive elements within both the fantasy itself and in Nemo’s reality in order to remind him of his false sense of mastery over his experiences.

Whether Nemo has the chance to pursue Anna or not, he always finds himself concerned with his proximity to her—i.e., to avoid her by hiding in the shadows, to find her by mentally speaking to her, or to be near her by planting her into his other lives, whether he’s conscious of this effort or not. The power of Nemo’s childhood hysteric anxiety overwhelms him, and thus, the trauma of losing Anna later in life enables him to incorporate her into his other lives, however this incorporation manifests itself. First, Nemo and Anna run into each other years after their failed introduction as teenagers and, as adults, they have an awkward conversation in passing. In a different life, Nemo notices Anna driving the car next to him in traffic. In Nemo’s science-fiction voyage to Mars, they are fellow passengers aboard the spaceship. And finally, in the life wherein Elise dies, following the death of his coworker, Nemo meets Anna at the funeral. The conversation they have after the funeral is definitely important, because Nemo proves by the end of the film that he’s starting to figure out that her presence is too uncanny, that perhaps this all isn’t actually real. Despite the evidence that Nemo is figuring it all out, it isn’t the most important encounter.

The most influential encounter occurs within the Mars fantasy that Nemo originally creates to flee his unwanted life with his father. Considering Nemo’s incessant concern for who he is for Anna no matter his station in life, it’s easy to understand why she emerges so prominently in his escapist fantasy. Anna discloses to Nemo that her purpose on this voyage is to study the sun’s gravitational pull. Similarly, in one of Nemo’s lives, he is both a TV personality

and physicist who studies string theory. In one episode, Nemo discusses the big crunch, which states that the aftermath of the big bang can only allow the universe to spread out so much before gravity reverses itself and pulls the pieces of the universe back together, necessarily reversing the temporal dimension along with it. According to Anna's calculations, anyone who is alive on February 12, 2092 at 5:50 am will get a "free ride" to live their life in reverse. With this newfound knowledge, old Nemo tells the reporter, "I've got to stay alive." And so, Anna's interaction with one fantasy inherently structures the main future fantasy. By assigning Nemo the guiding principle by which to follow so that he can go back, Anna fundamentally generates a purpose for the otherwise nonsensical fantasy—an essential aim of both old Nemo and of the fantasy itself to *stay alive*.

It is wrong to assume that our proof of the traumatic repetition of Anna is limited to Nemo's physical interactions with her. A structural quality of the real is its composition of that which cannot enter the symbolic. To put it simply, there are things that exist in this world that simply cannot be represented *adequately* within the fundamental *inadequacy* of language. Consequently, what is traumatic for a person is not the actual event of something, but the inability to symbolize some unknown real element that lingers and repeats itself in their mind following the event. The randomness of this phenomenon is explained by Lacan, who confirms that "what is repeated, in fact, is always something that occurs...*as if by chance*" (*Four Fundamental* 54). Many repetitive elements in the film relate to something traumatic—e.g., the wind blowing to show the natural quality of the interjection of fate—but one repeated element that is obvious to the spectator and never to Nemo is the repetition of the color red.

Strict color contrast proves to be a vital element in each of Nemo's lives to distinguish which woman he is with. Everything is based on the color of the dress each girl wears when

we're first introduced to them on the park bench: he met Elise in blue, which is what she wears the night of the school dance, and it becomes the color of their house and bedroom walls; Jean only wears yellow, which is also the color of what she wore the night of the school dance and the color of their house; Anna wore pink as a child, pink and red as a teenager, and only red in adulthood. The three different weddings have three different colored flowers. The leak of the real reminds us of Anna's absence in the lives he leads without her by repeating the color red, primarily, in the timelines involving Elise. In the opening scenes of the film, we are introduced to the nonsense that is Nemo's fantasy, wherein everyone drives the same red car. Much later, when Nemo sets his car on fire for Elise, every house on the street has the same red car parked in the driveway. Furthermore, on the way to Mars, all passengers are seen wearing assorted pieces of red clothing, and everyone is in red socks.

Because the repetition of this color occurs in the lives with Elise, it is tempting to blame the traumatic image on the loss of his mother, since the vase that Nemo's father shatters during the marriage-ending argument, and then reassembles during the final reversal of time, also happens to be red. But I believe this is a false assessment of the cause of repetition. It is crucial to note that these repetitions of red only occur in Nemo's adulthood; it is wholly absent during his adolescence. The Oedipal trauma of the disconnection from his mother really only appears to be in effect during his teenage years. Once he reaches adulthood, Nemo's neurotic anxieties fully dedicate themselves to whichever woman he is with. Perhaps, then, it is true that Nemo's life with Anna isn't the only life wherein he rejects his mother, since she is no longer a concern to him in any life of adulthood. Therefore, I contend that what is *more traumatic* for Nemo's lives following his mother's departure is not in fact the forfeiture of his mother's desire, but, in fact, the inability to be Anna's object.

Repetition of an unknowable object is not exclusive to trauma; the same fundamental component occurs in enjoyment as well, especially in the hysteric. Now that we recognize that Nemo's anxiety over his mother in childhood transforms into anxiety over his love-object in adulthood, we can conclude that what Nemo finds traumatic in his mother, he enjoys in Anna. Restuccia claims that, "desiring nonfulfillment, the hysteric ... avoids desire and wallows in a jouissance of dissatisfaction" (205). So, too, does Nemo "wallow" in the repeated unavoidable losses of Anna so that he may derive intense pleasure from their reunion. Neither loss nor reunion is a controlled facet of their relationship and while this kind of surrender to fate is not particularly pleasurable to Nemo, he does enjoy it in the sense that it perpetuates the longevity of his cyclical desire.

Desire does not operate in a subject with a decisive beginning and absolute end. The nature of desire is cyclical, meaning that its sole prerogative is to never end, to keep the subject endlessly searching for things to enjoy. The object of desire, the *objet petit a*, is fundamentally unobtainable both because it lacks essence to make it a material entity, and because it defeats the aim of desire to obtain the object that drives it. McGowan explains that "desire has this masochistic quality because its goal is not finding its object but perpetuating itself ... Though an object triggers desire, the subject actually enjoys not attaining its object rather than attaining it" ("Introduction" 9). Referring back to what I said in Section 3, a dog chases cars not for the car, but for the chase. Thus, what Nemo enjoys most in his relationship with Anna is the *coming back to her*. That is not to say Nemo prefers not to have Anna in his life, but since he cannot control when he loses her, he takes pleasure in the search for her and his sustained longing for her in her absence.

This analysis is Lacanian, but it is imperative to look at the originally Freudian “death drive” if we want to discuss this perpetual cycling of desire in Nemo, fully. The conceptualization of this term differs between Freudians and Lacanians, but the different definitions *do* refer to the same question of that which drives us in life, in relation to death. Moreover, a discussion of both definitions is valuable to understand Nemo’s latent motives in his hysteric pursuit of Anna, and to appreciate the significance in our observance of his many deaths, which complete each life. Freud believes that the aim of life was death, rather than living itself, and thus, his theorization of the death drive reflects this. Zupančič notes that Freud saw the death drive as “the instinct to return to the inanimate state,” while Lacanians, like Žižek, saw it instead as an aim “to maintain a state of tension, to avoid final ‘relaxation’” (qtd. in Zupančič 94). The contrast between Freudian and Lacanian thought seems to be a matter of concern over the ends versus the means, respectively. The Freudian school of thought assumes that life is an interruption of death, and therefore, it is of concern throughout one’s chaotic life to return from this interruption to the “inanimate” end of being. I believe this is a rather perverse view of life itself, or at least pessimistic, to speculate that living ends death, not the other way around. On the other hand, I think the Lacanian school of thought on the death drive is aptly summarized in the final lines of Dylan Thomas’s famous poem—“Do not go gentle into that good night. /Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” Freud focuses on death as the finish line. Lacanians focus on life as the continuation of the race.

Now, all of this effects Nemo in that it is the hysteric’s propensity to maintain a state of dissatisfaction in order to enjoy, while it is the traumatized subject’s burden to envision that which troubles it most. To put it simply, Nemo exemplifies both conceptualizations of the death drive as one whose life is both driven by an aim towards death and by the avoidance of it. With

all three women, Nemo's actions in the end do not matter because fateful death takes away all that he has worked for. His escape from Jean leads to his murder, his separation from Elise results in his drowning in his office, and even his original happy marriage to Anna is cut short when his car plummets off the road and into a lake. Young Nemo proves he has the ability to return from an unfavorable path to correct his actions, and yet, he does not go back to choose an action that would avoid each particular death. Once Nemo dies, his freedom to explore that life is over; proof of this is best illustrated when he crashes into the lake and the deployed airbag says "GAME OVER." His death is never his choice, but an event forced upon him, and thus, he must necessarily consider death as the end game to all lives—all except one.

Nemo's fantasy, which we know to have meaning thanks to Anna, is dedicated instead to prolonged life and the prevention of death—so much so, that the very purpose of Nemo's fantasy is to enjoy all lives until they result in death. But this plentitude of deaths does not deliver old Nemo to the "inanimate state;" he somehow manages to not let each death effect his life in the fantasy until he is able to realize that Anna is the one with whom he is able to "maintain a state of tension." The society within the fantasy is wholly concerned with the question of *when will Nemo die* rather than *how long will he live?* Thanks to Anna, Nemo is the only one concerned anymore by his avoidance of death so that he can go back and live more. His anxiety concerning death is not about the inevitability of death, but the fact that it's an end to the possibilities of life. He reveals his attitude towards life when he tells the interviewer, "I'm not afraid of dying. I'm afraid I haven't lived enough." Therefore, Old Nemo epitomizes, and actually literalizes, the Lacanian sentiment that what drives our desire towards enjoyment in life is the escape of the "final relaxation."

Let us return our focus, more specifically, to Nemo and Anna, keeping in mind the previous discussion of drive. If we look at Nemo the way string theory looks at the universe, then, justifiably, the moment on the platform is the big bang through which all that *is* in Nemo's multifaceted existence comes into being. None of Nemo's lives would be possible without the event of Nemo running after the train. From the initial spark of creation, like all matter in the universe, Nemo's lives diverge and grow increasingly abstracted from their point of origin. But unlike the universe, which is ordered by the physical law of gravity, primal father Nemo is not governed by law, and so his lives quickly grow out of his control. Another word for this increasing sense of chaos is entropy. The word "entropy" is the only thing written on the classroom blackboard in the scene where Anna returns to Nemo's life as teenagers, and he references the word again as an adult in the TV episode that discusses the concept of the big crunch. The fact that this word only appears in his life with Anna, and the fact that Anna is the one who tells Nemo about the "free ride" he'll get when the big crunch takes effect, leads us to an important conclusion about Nemo's death drive. Because Nemo embodies characteristics of someone who is driven both by "the return to the inanimate" and life itself, we can deduce that Nemo's "inanimate state" is not in fact death, but a time before the traumatic day at the train, and additionally, before the traumatic loss of Anna. If the big crunch is the reversal of entropy, then Nemo's desire to return to anti-chaos is thus a desire to start his life over, this time, with Anna.

Nemo's hysteric relationship with Anna impacts his life so much more than his relationships with Elise or Jean, who, in the end, are essentially ineffectual backup plans; mere collateral damage following Nemo's loss of Anna. Even within the life where Nemo *can* pursue her, Anna's absence still generates a traumatic response from him. Nemo's aptitude for science leads to a scientific career in several lives, but after Anna exits his life as teenagers, he deviates

from the scientific path for a career in pool maintenance. Recreationally, he enjoys photography and dedicates an entire wall of his studio apartment to photographs, which, notably, are polaroids. Both traits expose Nemo's hysteric response to Anna's departure. Nemo first creates the fantasy around Anna at the swimming pool as children. Then, as teenagers on the beach, after Nemo takes a photo of the water, Anna both talks to him for the first time since their initial hello as children, and then, she physically touches Nemo for the first time, closing the physical gap between the hysteric subject and his love-object. Consequently, both the pool and the beach recall for Nemo the illusion of the presence of the sexual relation—I will elaborate on this next. Furthermore, once Nemo and Anna are living together as teenagers, their sexual intimacy seems to progress overnight when they fall asleep after kissing, and wake up half-naked. But the proof that a considerable amount of time has passed to allow for their sexuality to develop is marked by the sudden appearance of several polaroids on Anna's wall above their heads. Therefore, Nemo's hysteric attempt to keep enjoying Anna once she leaves manifests in the recreation of the experiences that recall for him their sexual intimacy.

The showcase of sexual intimacy between Anna and Nemo is unique to their relationship because we don't witness anything more physical than a kiss on-screen between Nemo and Elise or Nemo and Jean, despite Nemo having children with both women. But with Anna, nothing is hidden from the camera—the spectator sees extreme closeups of body parts on both Anna and Nemo, hairs raise slowly from skin, teenagers roll over together in bed to become adults, and as adults they roll over to become teenagers again. Sexual intimacy is an attempt to make one out of two, but due to the essential gap between the real and the symbolic, this perfect union is structurally impossible. When we say cliché things like “our hearts are one,” or “you complete me,” or what Nemo says, “no matter what happens, there is no life without you,” what we're

really saying is, “I myself am lacking, and you fill this void.” Regardless of the amount of passion behind such sentiments, though, the object of desire is fundamentally unobtainable, and “the messiness of our sexuality ... emerges only from, and at the place of, this lack, and attempts to deal with it” (Zupančič 43). The fact that the sexual intimacy is undisguised on the screen does not mean that they have overcome the boundary between them, that of the real, but their participation in sex demonstrates their willingness to try and close the gap insofar as they perceive it as open.

In the end, Nemo struggles with the decision of which parent to choose, and furthermore, which woman to choose. Despite the passion between Nemo and Anna, he does not choose to pursue her immediately because as far as he can see, he still loses her in the end, for a third time. And as we know, the multiple losses of Anna prove to be traumatic for Nemo whether he pursues a life with her or not. To discuss the pivotal reunion of Nemo and Anna as adults, it is helpful to consider Fink’s statement that “the ‘first’ real, that of trauma and fixation, returns in a sense in the form of a center of gravity around which the symbolic order is condemned to circle, without ever being able to hit it” (28). The climax of Nemo’s hysteric response to the loss of Anna is on the pier by the lighthouse after she told him to wait for her. He levitates off the bench and envisions that Anna walks up to him, puts her hand on his face, and slowly lowers him down to the bench. Referring back to my claim that Nemo is not governed by any laws the way that the universe is governed by gravity, by the end of the film, we see that this is no longer the case. In this scene, Anna is literally gravitational, and thus, the scene perfectly aligns with what Fink says when Nemo immediately wakes up from this vision to draw a literal circle around the spot where Anna stood.

Not being able to hit the mark is key here, because once Nemo knows that Anna returns to him in the end, he acts as though there is no more essential lack between them, that he can close the gap. He rushes into the circle to hug Anna and thanks her repeatedly. Because old Nemo's primary purpose was to stay alive until he knew which life to lead, he necessarily dies once he knows it's Anna in the end. Old Nemo's final words are so impactful that I must insist they invoke the final gaze of the film. In the fantasy, cameras hover over his face to broadcast his final words to the world. He speaks directly to their cameras to say, "this is the most beautiful day of my life." But we are not met with the gaze until the world of the fantasy seems to fall away—we no longer watch Nemo speak to the floating camera in the fantasy that displays him on a massive TV in the streets, but instead, he speaks to *our* camera on *our* screen, that of the film itself. We know that he no longer addresses the fantasy world, rather, he addresses the spectator.

If we look at the fantasy as the process of analysis, then "bringing the analysand to pronounce the word ... around which he ... had been circling, that inaccessible, untouchable, immovable cause is impacted, the avoidance of that absent center is mitigated" (Fink 28). Nemo looks at us and repeats, "Anna" until he dies. In the end, he chooses her and thus tries to touch that center of trauma his neurosis circled around his entire life, but outside the film, we know a true encounter of this center is impossible, and the impact of the final moments isn't necessarily rendered meaningless, but we recognize ambiguity in it. We know that starting over and choosing Anna means he will still lose his mother and that he will still lose Anna as a teenager at 15 until he's 34. The other options considered, Anna is the easy choice, but the spectator should remain wary of the implications of the final moments of the film. I will elaborate on this questionable ending in Section 7; for now, we can be happy for Nemo that he found a life that

makes him happy, but this harmonious reunion of Nemo and Anna leaves the spectator with questions about how this all impacts his larger anxiety of fate.

Section 6: Nemo and the Function of the Fantasy

Before Nemo is born, he knows he is a special case of being. The film assumes that before you are born, you know everything, and the angels of Oblivion silence this knowledge before you actually exist. Nemo's pre-existential power of omniscience is never taken from him the way it is supposed to be removed from every unborn soul; hence, Nemo knows everything that will happen (or could happen) in his life and other's lives. But I will demonstrate in this section that his powers are not always limited to mere omniscience. Every life path that Nemo accesses has twists and turns that almost always result in death, or at the very least, the unfavorable outcome of loneliness. Nemo does not simply follow along each path, without interjection, until each possible fatal end; instead, Nemo exercises control over these lives by rewinding time and altering the characters' actions so that a different result is produced. Based on his control over his lives yet to be lived, I argue that Nemo transcends his powers of omniscience into god-like omnipotence.

Nemo isn't subjected to the same fundamental loss as everyone else during his childhood since he is not stripped of his power to see into the future. His abilities, therefore, equate him to the status of primal father—one who is uncastrated, who is able to enjoy all without restriction or repercussion. According to Lacan, in order to have a closed set of those who are castrated, there exists one who avoids this fate. Lacan's sexuation graph essentially formulates that "the law of prohibition always supposes at its horizon an exception, someone who escapes the law. If all men are subject to a law, one man escapes" (Leader and Groves 158). In this case, it is Nemo

who escapes this initial castration. Nemo, thus, has the ability to simultaneously know all lives, keep both parents, and have sexual and romantic relationships with three different women. One life does not take away from another, one death does not kill a separate living Nemo. Each path remains exclusive and separate from the others without draining any other path of legitimacy or viability. Nemo's omniscience allows him to act out all of his lives without first needing to finalize the initial choice between his parents. He simply does not abide by the same rules as the rest of humanity.

The function of the primal father is to close the set of rules around those who *are* castrated. The film setting only exacerbates Nemo's role as primal father to remind the spectators of his possession of abilities that we, in turn, cannot possess. Young Nemo's enjoyment is not restricted because "law is understood as a prohibition of *jouissance*, it is based, at its origin, on a *jouissance* which is obscene, perverse and unregulated—that of the primal father" (Leader and Groves 157). Young Nemo's perspective takes the spectator on the journey through all of his lives in a manner that shouldn't be possible for *either* of us, hence the perversity in the act. We cannot help but remember at every turn that this is an impossible ability made possible solely through the filmic experience, for both Nemo and the spectator. The element of plot that enables Nemo's omniscience—the negligence of the angels of Oblivion—is first demonstrative of cinema's ability to grant inhuman powers to Nemo, and subsequently, on another level, its ability to grant permission to the spectator to experience non-castration, as well.

Nemo never has a moment of genuine realization that he only exists in film or even that there is anything particularly odd about his god-like powers. The spectator has to assume that Nemo thinks he's a regular human being, too, subjected to the same laws as everyone else, unaware of the depth of his primal fatherhood. He isn't always conscious of the ways in which

the real leaks into his lives to reveal the fractures. Repetitions of the color red are the traumatic repetitions of the real, and yet, Nemo doesn't just ignore them, he doesn't even notice the predominance of the color red throughout his lives. This ignorance is to be expected though, because "when we see things going in the direction of trauma, we necessarily turn away. Consequently, we cannot consciously will ourselves toward an encounter with the real" (McGowan, "Introduction" 12). As an adult, Nemo doesn't necessarily face his trauma, but he also isn't totally oblivious to the more blatant leaks of the real such as the price tag on his lamp in his and Elise's bedroom, just like the price tags that label everything in the strange argyle world. As a child, Nemo designates a place whereby he *can* confront the real, a place wherein he can work through the plethora of lives and recurring nonsense, which is, of course, the fantasy.

At the start of the film, following the presentation of his many deaths, the world of Nemo's fantasy is the first glimpse into Nemo's life that the film presents to us. In 2092, Nemo is 118 years old and he's the world's last living mortal that will die of old age. This future world counts down to his death in a true exhibitionist manner—i.e., the general public casts their votes via text message to determine if Nemo should even be allowed to die or if he should be artificially preserved. All the while, Nemo receives therapy with the sole aim of recovering who he is, what his life was like before he came to this futuristic facility, etc. His therapist helps to hypnotize Nemo so that he may "go to sleep" and wake up as the real Nemo, but within the fantasy, he is not successful in the effort to truly uncover Nemo's secret life. Instead, it is the journalist who sneaks into Nemo's room to interview him who actually helps Nemo "remember" his many lives. This practice nods to Freud's "talking cure" in that Nemo is only able to remember all of his lives, to access his repressions, and to realize the nonsense of having contradictory memories, by simply talking through each of them. The journalist thus serves as

the analyst in this dichotomy, and old Nemo, as analysand, is young Nemo's fantasmatic agent who accesses and confronts the real.

One might be tempted to interpret old Nemo as the primal father of the film, since he initially appears to be the one who enjoys all lives without any restriction of natural law acting upon the expanse of his memories. This is an improper reading of his function, though, for two main reasons: for one, it is revealed by the end of the film that the entire fantasy world is of young Nemo's creation, and therefore, the old man does not exist; and two, because he only exists within a fantasy, it is in fact young Nemo who lives uncastrated, with unrestricted desire, and unregulated access to all possible lives. This future fantasy is not a "fantasy" because of the science-fiction structure of the world—e.g., humans paired with pigs for stem cell compatibility, or "quasi-immortality"—instead, it is the means through which young Nemo *notices* and then works through the separation between his false sense of mastery and each self within every future of his. In other words, "it is a fantasy in the strict psychoanalytic sense: a screen that conceals the fact that the discursive reality is itself leaking" (Zupančič 76). Without the creation of the fantasy, Nemo could not access every life that follows the critical moment on the platform by postponing the impossible decision at hand, and more than this, he would not otherwise realize in any of his lives the fundamental disconnection between what he sees, and what is real.

The multiple realities Nemo experiences are all susceptible to fractures at one point or another. The creation of a separate world wherein all of Nemo's lives have already been lived enables the real Nemo, while he lives each life simultaneously, to have access points through which he can confront the lack in each case. No matter the level of "authenticity" that I previously analyzed in each of Nemo's relationships, the real leaks through, regardless. Outside of film, in real life, it is much more difficult to acknowledge the indicators when a gap between

what is experienced and what is truth emerges, but in the filmic setting, these moments are much easier to recognize, at least for the spectator. Due to the radical contrast between the relatively averageness of Nemo's three relationships and the futuristic world he creates to catalog these lives, "the spectator ... experience[s] the real as the piece that does not fit, the element from one world that obtrudes into the other" (McGowan, "Introduction" 20). For example, a common sign of the real infringing upon each life is Nemo's mixing up of the names of each woman: he wakes up next to Anna and calls her "Jean;" he calls for "Elise" when Jean wakes him; and when he looks at Elise, she actually *turns into* Jean, but has Elise's voice, still. To exhaustively list every breach of Nemo's realities here would be superfluous, since, by this point in the essay, I have already identified several examples that demonstrate that Nemo's reality is never what it seems. This is primarily due to the fact that each life plays out exclusively within his mind, and not by any *true* experience of them.

The film creates the illusion that each life has already occurred by the time old Nemo remembers them; that Nemo's story is told in past tense. As a child, he tells his mother that he can remember things before they happen but she tells him that you can only remember the past and not things that haven't happened yet. The function of the fantasy, therefore, is structured to abide by this law, which governs everyone but omniscient little Nemo, so that he remains uncastrated and can avoid his fear of making a decision. Thus, old Nemo is a vessel through which young Nemo can objectively observe all lives from afar without being held accountable to engage directly with any particular life, and without restricting him to the law we all must eventually follow, thanks to the unstoppable progression of the temporal dimension. This is to say that Nemo uses the fantasy as a shield against that which causes him anxiety—being forced to make a choice and choosing wrong. The film necessarily cannot reveal too soon that the story

is told in future tense, from the perspective of young Nemo on the platform, instead of in past tense, from the perspective of old Nemo on his death bed, so as not to assign the responsibility of making a choice to Nemo before he's had the opportunity to grapple with his many anxieties, and trauma, however it may appear.

Because Nemo's life progresses solely in imaginary prediction rather than physical action, he witnesses the trauma of the real alerting him of this detachment from reality in every life following the day at the train station. Despite Nemo's many encounters with the real in each life, he never fully comprehends at any time that what he considers to be his reality is essentially mere simulation. McGowan claims that "keeping these experiences [of desire and fantasy] distinct doesn't, as we might expect, ensure a healthy ability to distinguish reality from illusion, but it does allow the subject to have a direct experience of the traumatic real" ("Separation" 167). The closest Nemo ever comes to this realization is in the timeline of Elise's death when he interacts with Anna after her husband's funeral. He asks if she also feels like they've met before, in some other life, because none of this actually feels real. Of course, if Nemo is held to the same standards as those without the power of omniscience, this is a crazy thing to ask, and he's not offered any consolation for simply coming close to the solving the puzzle of illusion. Just because Nemo creates a fantasmatic persona through whom he lives all lives, it does not mean that he is safe from the trauma of the inevitable choice that *will have to be made* in order to get to any later period in his life. Even though he does not have to make a choice right away for all lives to occur, he has the power to witness each one of these lives in full effect—including the subsequential trauma of such a choice, which manifests as cracks in the symbolic.

The individual elements of Nemo's fantasy are mostly nonsensical and sometimes absurd, though, not to the same degree of surrealism as the fantasy worlds in *The Imaginarium of*

Dr. Parnassus. Instead, the film presents us with a society that seems to abide by certain rules—i.e., strict fashion and automobile uniformity, infrastructure of hospitals and construction workers, etc.—but that doesn't mean we are able to make sense of these elements, nor do we need to. If we understand the fantasy as an unconscious construction, like that of a dream, “Lacan proposes that the unconscious processes have little if anything whatsoever to do with meaning” (Fink 21). Therefore, any attempt to painstakingly link every facet of the argyle world to some deeper meaning is entirely superfluous. For example, worrying about why everyone wears sweater vests in the argyle world or why he has two shadows doesn't help us understand Nemo's trauma any more than figuring out the unconscious decision to put price tags on everything—because it's meaningless. Moreover, Fink suggests that “the goal of analysis is not to exhaustively symbolize every last drop of the real, for that would make of analysis a truly infinite process, but rather to focus on those scraps of the real which can be considered to have been traumatic” (26). It's not that we should completely disregard these elements as fundamentals of the fantasy structure, but it is wholly unnecessary to try and claim something like “the price tags reveal Nemo's trauma following his inability to choose between pastries and thus a larger commentary on consumerism is at work here.” An endeavor as meticulous as that would be ineffectual in the development of the bigger picture within the analysis of Nemo.

In fact, the goal of analysis is just the opposite. When looking at an element, such as the red cars, for example, we should not try to determine the reason *why* it is a red car, because “Lacan notes that interpretation does not so much aim at revealing meaning as at ‘reducing signifiers to their nonmeaning (lack of meaning) so as to find the determinants of the whole of the subject's behavior’” (Fink 21). In life, trauma manifests in the real through images that are not always a direct link to it (for example, when I was younger, I had the recurring nightmare

about my teeth falling out and I was told it meant I felt out of control). What analysis finds advantageous in cinema, though, is that filmmakers don't want to trick their audience too much, representing trauma with an image that has so little correlation that the significance is missed completely, and thus, cinematic leaks of the real offer a much less veiled representation of the trauma which controls it (cinematic trauma relates much closer to the real reason I was having these nightmares—I was constantly afraid that my braces were so tight that my teeth would fall out any minute). I want to avoid contradicting myself—in general, the goal of analysis is still to *not* explain why it's red, but the filmic setting calls for such an interpretation of meaning since our experience of Nemo's trauma is largely determined by a recognition of direct correlations from the images repeated in one life to the next.

Within the fantasy, an example of an undisguised encounter with Nemo's trauma is near the end of the film when an adult Nemo goes to the apartment of his now, older mother, who does not recognize him. Not only does she not recognize Nemo, but she actually claims to have a different son. Certain details in the fantasy directly correlate to the day on the platform—e.g., the “Exit” sign we see behind Nemo while he waits on his mother's doorstep stylistically resembles the “Way Out” sign next to his father when he calls Nemo's name as he runs after the train. Other included details are rather meaningless in the overall scope of what this encounter reveals about Nemo's Oedipal trauma—e.g., the fact that the son is played by a down-syndrome actor, or the fact that his name is Henry. Lacan says that “desire manifests itself in the dream by the loss expressed in an image at the most cruel point of the object” (*Four Fundamental* 59). Knowing how affected Nemo was by the loss of his mother, it is a heartbreaking moment to hear his mother shout “I don't know you!” and watch as Nemo desperately holds her in his arms and calls her “mother.” What is hardest for Nemo to accept is that the relationship they had during his

childhood, and especially his infancy, is completely irradiated during his teen years, the trauma of which manifests in the fantasy as his mother having a different son altogether. Perhaps, as a teen, Nemo understands in all lives that he will never have his mother the way he used to, and even though this understanding is still traumatic to him, he manages to turn his anxieties towards the other women in his lives who eventually replace his mother.

Moving now from trauma to anxiety, one particular element in the structure of the fantasy that directly correlates to reality is Nemo's mortality. In each of his lives, Nemo's deaths are accidental, unnatural, and unavoidable—while death by drowning is arguably natural, the crash leading up to it is unnatural (and I need not explain why an office suddenly flooding with water is an unnatural death). The opposite is true in the fantasy: Nemo's imminent death is a natural death of old age, made unnatural by the circumstances of the fantasy. Lacan says that “the world is all-seeing, but it is not exhibitionistic—it does not provoke our gaze. When it begins to provoke it, the feeling of strangeness begins too” (*Four Fundamental* 75). The “strangeness” we encounter in the fantasy is precisely caused by the confrontation with an exhibitionist world that reacts grossly to a mortal in their immortal world. The gaze is provoked simply by the juxtaposition between young Nemo who sees all and old Nemo who sees all. The presentation of young Nemo shows us one who is omnipotent at times, but omniscient always; furthermore, he is unaffected by death insofar as one death does not kill off Nemo forever, but he is able to avoid a particular death by choosing a different path. Old Nemo on the other hand is still one who escapes the law, but in a perverted twist of the fantasy. His status as god while he was a younger Nemo is taken from him and mocks him. He is the one who escapes immortality, and despite his god-like powers to see all and to die and not die, he is still, in the end, condemned to live only this one life in the fantasy.

As a child, Nemo is basically a god. In religious contexts, God is the primal father who escapes law so as to close the complete set of rules which surround and govern the castrated collective of humanity. There is a passage in Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* that I think is significant in relation to Nemo's primal fatherhood:

Long ago he formed an ideal conception of omnipotence and omniscience which he embodies in his gods. Whatever seemed unattainable to his desires—or forbidden to him—he attributed to these gods. One may say, therefore, that these gods were the ideals of his culture. Now he has himself approached very near to realizing his ideal, he has nearly become a god himself. (23)

Arguably, the “gods” of Nemo's culture are the evermore troubling concepts of choice and fate. Perhaps, on a metaphysical level, the gods for Nemo are the creators of the movie *Mr. Nobody*. For the sake of this argument, we will act as if both are true: first, Nemo is god-like for his control over his own lives, his control over other's actions, and his creation of the fantasy; and second, Nemo is god-like in the metatheatrical sense of transcending the film itself to control the props, control the pace of the film, and act as a middleman spectator between us and the film.

In the film, Nemo is in control of his array of lives in a way that the spectator could never be within our own lives. Nemo is simultaneously allowed to stop in his tracks without progression of a decision while he continues on in two different directions as if he does make the decision. Thus, Nemo is free to explore each life without any actual consequence, since, if he doesn't like where a certain set of actions takes him, he can reverse time to change both his actions *and* the actions of other characters. For example, when Nemo tries to deliver the love letter to Elise, the path he follows when he runs away shows Elise and Stefano exiting her house together, but after Nemo changes course and decides to actually confront Elise, it is vital to the

scene that Stefano exits the house first so that Nemo can be at the door before Elise has a chance to exit. It's a detail that's easy to miss, but within such a small change, Nemo drastically alters the situation he has to deal with—i.e., confronting Elise *and* Stefano versus just Elise. Another example of a change in character actions that's not only more noticeable but pivotal to the entire film is the day at the train station. In the event that Nemo catches up to his mother, Nemo's father stands silently on the platform as the train pulls away. But in the event that he stays with his father, it is because his father now yells "Nemo!" as he runs away. One might suggest that the difference in character actions is not up to Nemo, but up to the characters themselves, and their free will just so happens to coincide with Nemo's change of heart. But I contend that it is Nemo's fault for the change, since all characters are nevertheless actors within Nemo's visions of his future.

There is some middle ground between Nemo's two modes of godliness with his creation of the Mars fiction and the future fantasy. As Nemo writes the science-fiction story on his typewriter, it comes into being, though not immediately like some kind of reverse bubble-bursting, but gradually, smoothly. The future fantasy already exists at the start of the film, but when Nemo eventually exits the "arena" of the fantasy, we see helicopters fly blocks of water to their designated spots to create an ocean. On the flip side of that, after Nemo knows the ends to all lives, he takes the world apart. Old Nemo, the interviewer, and the spectator watch as the buildings of the fantasy dissolve into fractals like the mental fragmentations that put it together in the first place. Though old Nemo calls young Nemo "the Architect" for having created the fantasy, we do not see Nemo himself literally build the fantasy, which is why this likening of Nemo to God as "the Creator" only operates at the middle level of proof of Nemo's omnipotence.

The most drastic way Nemo demonstrates omnipotence is through his transcendence of the filmic structure. His transcendence is not so severe that he manages to become self-aware of his role within a film, like Ryan Reynolds in *Deadpool* or Matthew Broderick at the end of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, but he definitely participates in the film in a way that elevates him above the rest of the characters. Nemo actually manages to take himself out of the film and act as a spectator in a movie theater as he watches his wedding day with Elise as well as her adult interaction with Stefano. On top of treating the film *as* a film, while still remaining bound within it, Nemo controls the pace of the film. Similar to the way he creates the Mars fiction, Nemo appears to be writing the vignette with Elise on his typewriter, yet this instance seems to exercise more control over the film *itself*. The beauty salon scene stutters and clicks to a stop when Nemo's typewriter keys jam and it continues again following the *ding* of the resetting typewriter. Nemo manages to even more literally control the film by affecting the setting. During a real shot of the street, we see Nemo's hand come from the sky and place a toy car on the road. Similarly, his hand flies a toy plane over a map of the Atlantic Ocean when him and his mother move. And in the fantasy, his foot comes from the sky to crush the house where adult Nemo learns the truth about his many realities—that young Nemo, “the Architect,” created it all. In the way that “the Architect” relates Nemo to God as Creator, so too do his giant hands and foot appearing from above relate Nemo's interjection into the film to the hand—and foot, as it were—of God.

The fantasy is created to help Nemo make a choice, and yet once he knows all lives, he cannot choose. But it isn't because he wants to live in the fantasy forever, never having to make a choice. Nemo knows there is something fundamentally absent from all choices, something out of his control, no matter how much omniscient planning goes into his decision. On the platform, Nemo stops running after the train but he does not go back to his father, either; instead, he runs

away from both parents and into the woods where he finds a leaf and blows it upwards into the wind. We know that throughout the film, wind and leaves symbolize fate and the Butterfly Effect, two things that always seem to work against Nemo—i.e., the leaf in the road causes Nemo's accident and coma, the wind shifts the coin toss that would've avoided his murder, the raindrop erases Anna's phone number, and his shoelace snaps as he runs after the train.

I keep using the phrase “surrender to fate” because up until this point, Nemo has not had a positive relationship with fate. Nemo is initially attracted to his parents because his father claims they were “meant to be” thanks to the Butterfly Effect, but since then, the only experiences of the Butterfly Effect that Nemo recalls are destructive. He spends his many lives overly concerned about which choice will lead to what path and that fate will step in unannounced and ruin his plans, but this pessimism could never give Nemo a positive outlook on his life. The gesture to blow the leaf into the air shows his own enactment of the Butterfly Effect, a combination of choice and fate that will ultimately lead his life to its destination, in the circle with Anna. By the end of the film, Nemo's primal fatherhood enables a false sense of mastery that he is capable of controlling everything, which we as spectators know is impossible. But the only way to have Anna in the end is to accept that it is not a set of choices that will lead him to her, but lucky fate. In this sense, “achieving love ... might be seen as the ultimate masochistic act, requiring one's own blissful obliteration” (Restuccia 190). To have Anna, Nemo must willingly give up the possibility of all lives, accept death as an old man, and thus the dissolution of the fantasy. More than this, Nemo has to overcome the illusion that he is in control and accept the castration of choice that relates him to everyone else. Nemo's story isn't about which parent to choose, or which woman to marry in life, it's about his search to find harmony between choice and fate and the acceptance that both have just as much meaning as the other.

Section 7: Why is Nemo the Man that *Cannot Exist*?

Fantasy in cinema often acts as an escape for the protagonist who feels stuck, in some capacity, within their current reality—i.e., they either want to control it (e.g., *Click*), change it (e.g., *The Butterfly Effect*), or escape it (e.g., *The Wizard of Oz*). In Nemo's case, he's faced with an impossible decision at hand and builds the fantasy in attempt to *know* his life. The creation of fantasy is commonplace in films, like those listed above, since, “the standard alternate reality vision (i.e., *It's A Wonderful Life*) concerns the construction of a universal perspective/plentitude of knowledge whereby a particular choice can be undertaken” (Kornbluh 123). In reality, each of Nemo's lives should be wholly inaccessible to him so long as he doesn't make a choice about which parent to live with; however, the fantasy acts as a new reality and establishes a new set of rules by which his life must follow, or rather, doesn't have to follow. Nemo creates a version of himself that does not have to *experience* each of these lives to *know* them, and thus, his fantasy self is not responsible for making a decision until his real self is satisfied in this knowledge.

Unfortunately for Nemo, it is impossible to know oneself completely, or to access one's own unconscious for that matter. Omniscient access to all possible realities doesn't somehow automatically warrant Nemo unrestricted access to his unconscious, no matter how tempted we might be after the film's ending to think otherwise. And so, Nemo must confront the traumatic open-endedness of his questions about desire in creative ways, so to speak. Where the silence of the unconscious cannot put Nemo's mind at ease, “fantasy fills in the empty space in the world of desire and provides an answer to the question of that world” (McGowan, “Separation” 168). Since Nemo hasn't accepted yet that *there is no real answer* to the question of desire in himself, nor the Other, in place of an answer, his fantasy introduces the spectator to many instances of the gaze, Nemo's many lives to the real of trauma, and Nemo himself to the weight of neurosis,

perversion, and psychosis. It is an understatement to insist that Nemo's endless circling back to *what am I for the Other?* and *what is the Other for me?* directly impacts his dysfunctional romantic relationships later in his life. Arguably, Nemo's unshakable fixation to answer an unanswerable question is the very *cause* of the dysfunction itself in each relationship with Elise, Jean, and Anna.

The fantasy also enables Nemo—and consequently, the spectator *through* Nemo—to experience the complexities of existence without the need of a final choice first, and thus, life without irreversible loss. He simultaneously explores multiple contradictory lives side by side to have a more substantial—that is to say, material—comparison between options. Even after knowing all lives, Nemo does not immediately have his answer. The fantasy's sole purpose is to help Nemo decide which life to choose, but his hesitation illustrates that “underlying the paradigmatic narrative expression of ‘freedom of choice’ (the alternate reality story) is thus a contrary impulse, the wish to live *free of choice*” (Kornbluh 116). The anxiety that roots itself in the inevitability of the loss that follows choice overwhelms Nemo his entire life, from childhood through each and every version of his adulthood—except, perhaps, psychotic Nemo, who truly couldn't care either way. As a result of this, arguably, it isn't the *act* of making a choice that worries Nemo, it is the fact that some decision must necessarily be made *eventually*. What provokes Nemo's anxiety is similar across all fields: it's what he cannot know about the Other, what he cannot know about himself, and what he cannot see despite his omniscience; he knows that the lack is *there*, and yet, he cannot know what is missing. Therefore, it isn't the act of making a decision that generates Nemo's anxiety and perpetuates his trauma—it's that he cannot know what gets lost in the transaction.

And so, in the end, when Nemo brings himself to finalize the long-awaited decision of which life to choose, we're supposed to celebrate with our tragic protagonist, right? He chooses Anna, his true love, and thus, he overcomes his fears and all of his anxiety is silenced, all of his trauma is erased, all of his problems are perfectly and neatly resolved, right? This is what the ending wants you to believe. We watch as Nemo desperately searches for meaning across his lives and then, once he seemingly finds it, "the brief nature of the common Hollywood ending allows for the fantasy of resolution to remain especially strong as it provides a glimpse of the ultimate satisfaction but it does not have to reveal what happens after the momentary conclusion" (Neroni 216). Now, don't get me wrong, I love a heart-warming "true love conquers all" finale as much as the next person; but if we take into account the comprehensive plight of this essay to prove once and for all that Nemo's fundamental lack is not just unknowable, but unattainable, I am not so easily convinced.

The final moments of the film pack so much imagery into such a short time that, for argument's sake, it warrants a detailed review of the concluding scene. In the fantasy, Nemo says "Anna" before he takes his last breath. At 5:50am, as Anna predicted, time stops. The planets stop. Nemo and the universe are frozen for just a moment until the minute hand ticks once in reverse and the big crunch begins. The planets gravitate in the opposite direction, leaves drift back into the air, the text of the Mars fiction un-types itself, and breath is restored to old Nemo's lungs. Everything is now in reverse: he laughs in reverse, gets out of bed in reverse, and walks backwards out of the hospital, laughing along the way. Leaving the fantasy now, underwater, in the lake, air bubbles return to Nemo's mouth, he awakes from his coma as a teenager, and the shattered vase between his parents reassembles as they smile and kiss. On the dock where Nemo first ran away from Anna as children, he now runs to her in reverse, sits next to her, and she

smiles at him. Skipping rocks fly back into their hands as we watch Nemo and Anna in the center of the lake. The song “Mr. Sandman” plays overhead with the conclusive line, “*and tell him that his lonesome nights are over.*” And then the screen cuts to black. The film’s perfect resolution invites the spectator to believe that there is no more to see—i.e., Nemo has Anna in the end, and that is that—and even if the spectator doesn’t buy this ending, the film doesn’t allow any time to debate the implications of Nemo’s happy-go-lucky, smiles all the way, return to Anna. But we cannot let ourselves so easily be fooled by Hollywood into thinking that Nemo has somehow achieved the impossible; that he’s found his object *as* Anna, and his life is now complete.

Now, I’m not calling this scene impossible due to Nemo’s contradictory statement “we cannot go back” despite the fact that he literally goes back in time. The highly questionable ending creates several plot holes that we’re not supposed to notice or even care about because the film is over too soon after this revelation of their reunion as children for us to even ask! For example, the entire timeline with his father takes place *because* Nemo cannot catch up to the train, so doesn’t his missing the train to run away into the woods erase Nemo’s chances of pursuing Anna? Or was it possible all along to get sent to Canada with his mother, after the fact? If this was always possible, why didn’t he do this from the beginning, since he clearly didn’t stay with his father out of choice? Let’s assume it is possible to be sent to his mother after missing the train. We don’t know if Anna and her father move to Canada immediately, too, or wait another six years before they leave England. We are led to believe the latter since Anna is the “new student” in Nemo’s class after the school year has already begun. So, is Nemo’s plan to build a relationship with Anna until 15 and then him, Anna, and her father all move in with his mother? Also, Nemo and Anna never interact as kids, and a key feature in their relationship is the fact that Nemo keeps losing her, so won’t this new interaction fundamentally change the dynamic of their

relationship? Are we supposed to believe Nemo never loses Anna again? Even if the end scene at the lake never actually occurs and it's purely metaphorical, it still leaves the first three questions I point out unsolved as to how it is possible to go with his mother anymore now that he's missed the train. I cannot act as though I have the answers to these questions, and clearly, the film makes no such attempt either.

Such a convincing illusion of mastery is only possible in film. It would be easy to let ourselves accept what seems to be the final message of the film—i.e., all of Nemo's problems are solved because he finally managed to make his way back to Anna—especially considering Nemo proves he is the exception to the *one* rule he insists is in place for all being things: “we cannot go back.” Nemo wields inhuman abilities, and god-like powers at times, so by the end of the film, it makes sense for the film to try to convince us that Nemo has achieved some sort of elevated, desire-fulfilled existence for himself, especially if we take into account the fact that Nemo maintains his omniscience throughout the timeline with Anna. In other words, we are presented with the possibility that perhaps Nemo is never castrated after all. But we know better. Desire is an endless facet of existence. Due to the void associated with all enjoyment, “any resolution of desire and achievement of mastery is ultimately fantasmatic. For the nature of desire is to perpetuate itself, and the fantasmatic resolution it seeks never actually delivers *THE objet petit a.*” (Neroni 215) This is why we must avoid the analytical faux-pas of assuming that Nemo has yet again done the impossible and found *the* object in Anna.

But this is why we enjoy these types of films so much, isn't it? The spectator derives pleasure first from the fantasy that it is possible to erase trauma and anxiety completely, then, that it is possible to completely fulfill oneself by means of the evermore fantasmatic “true love.” The film's overhanging question of “which life?” is answered when Nemo says “Anna,” and yet,

“the achievement of resolution—although it may look like it—is not the *objet petit a* but instead an inadequate stand-in” (Neroni 216). That is not to say that Anna is an inadequate choice for Nemo to lead his best possible life. But in the endeavor of filling in the gap of Nemo’s lack and thus, satiating his desire once and for all as *the* object, Anna is necessarily not enough, no matter how much the film might try to convince you otherwise.

In Section 5, I argued that Nemo evokes the gaze when he calls Anna’s name on his death bed, but my reasoning for this claim is more than just because he speaks directly to the camera to give us an answer to the main question of the film. “Anna” is the answer to the question about which life to lead, not the answer to Nemo’s desire. His and Anna’s desire is still unknown, and so, his hysteric reaction to not knowing still looms in the future he chooses. His neurosis is inevitable, assuming the life Nemo leads with Anna is the same one the film shows to us, despite the ending of the film immediately contradicting this possibility. Nevertheless, Nemo’s hysteric anxiety of *Who am I for the Other?* does not end with his decision to love Anna. Leader and Groves aptly summarize this impasse when they say, “if someone asks you if you love them and you say yes, that will not stop them from asking you again and again and again. The impossibility of really proving one’s love once and for all is well known. Hence demand is a continuing spiral” (81). So long as his life with Anna plays out in the same manner as what the film shows us, Nemo will still demonstrate all the hysteric qualities I discussed in Section 5—i.e., anxiety over their proximity, the traumatic repercussion on his personality after her loss as teenager, etc. He has not somehow transcended his vulnerability to neurosis.

Up until this point in this section, I feel as though I’ve been rather pessimistic in my interpretation of Nemo’s resolution to choose Anna when, in all fairness, the final scene is a rather touching moment, impossibilities and open-endedness aside. So let us move away from

the investigation of what is misguided in this ending, and now focus on what this ending *does* mean for Nemo; and ultimately, since films are created with the audience in mind, what the ending means for the spectator, as well. The fantasy does its job of allowing both Nemo and the spectator to experience a life unbound by the finality of choices. But in its demise, when it is no longer needed to house all possibilities, the fantasy's effect on Nemo is more than the mere establishment of himself as a neurotic who can't choose one way or another, or as "a crazy old man who mixes everything up," as old Nemo says. We have to remember Nemo as our analysand in this final scene to appreciate the significance of his utterance of "Anna" because "part of the psychoanalytic process clearly involves allowing an analysand to put into words that which has remained unsymbolized for him" (Fink 25). Nemo gains access to the real through the fantasy, but that does not mean he immediately understands what he sees upon his encounter of it. Nemo faces his trauma, as well as the indications of the real, through the fractures in the symbolic world of his lives but he never understands what is being shown to him, *why* it's being shown to him. Hence, when Nemo speaks Anna's name, he finally understands.

Just before old Nemo speaks Anna's name, he reveals for the first time to the spectator and to the now very confused journalist interviewing him that their so-called reality is, in fact, only a fantasy. Nemo tells him, "You don't exist. Neither do I. We only live in the imagination of a nine-year-old child. We are imagined by a nine-year-old child faced with an impossible choice." Thus, from the perspective of young Nemo running after the train, none of what happens after he starts to run after his mother really exists, at least not in any material sort of way. The old man, the fantasy, every one of Nemo's lives—none of them exist. Therefore, his entire relationship with Anna after childhood does not exist, either; it's all mere speculation. For a subject like Nemo who encounters trauma through a multitude of leaks from the real, "what

cannot be said in its language is not part of its reality; it does not exist” (Fink 25). And no life can exist for Nemo until a choice is made. Thus, when Nemo speaks “Anna,” it serves the dual purpose to name that in the real which has been a source of unsymbolized trauma for Nemo, as well as bring his relationship with Anna into existence.

The construction of the fantasy is originally imagined by Nemo to cope with the formidable task of deciding between parents. Old Nemo even emphasizes that the creation of the fantasy is due to the “impossible choice” Nemo is given. So, it is especially significant that Nemo’s choice of word is not “mother” but “Anna.” I would like to preface my attention to the significance of this difference with a key passage from Alenka Zupančič’s *What Is Sex?*:

The turn to the Real ... is part of the ideological warfare that diverts us from the only way in which we can touch something of the Real, which is precisely with the right word. The right word is not the same thing as a correct word, and it is certainly not about someone being ‘right’ (or not) ... It is about words that name something about our reality for the first time, and hence make this something an object of the world, and of thought ... But then there comes a word that gives us access to reality in a whole different way. It is not a correct description of a reality; it introduces a new reality. (139)

Nemo discovers that there is no such thing as the “right” path, because all paths are right insofar as they are all legitimate possibilities for his life. But on the other hand, only the “right” word can identify something in the real that has remained unsymbolized, in the form of trauma.

Nemo’s dilemma is no longer about which parent to live with once he knows neither parent exemplifies a healthy or practical relationship after his childhood. Hence, the traumatic imagery that reveals itself to Nemo is not reminders of his parents per se, but of Anna—e.g., Anna holds a

bike the first time we're introduced to her and later in Nemo's lives, he almost hits a bicyclist with his car twice, a bike is underwater with him as he drowns, and the main factory export of Mars is, of course, bicycles. After Nemo manages to truly touch the real, to understand what his trauma means, a new reality is created with Anna on the dock as children. It's a stark contrast to the first time we see their encounter on the dock, when Nemo realizes that it's Anna's father that his mother was just kissing, and he runs away. The new reality reverses Nemo's initial running away from her, which takes the form of him running back *to* her.

What the spectator finds relatable in Nemo more than his search for true love is the anxiety caused by the inevitability and inescapability of death as it's portrayed in the film. All three marriages are cut short by the interjection of death, no matter the state of the relationship. With Elise, she dies in the gas tank explosion, Nemo is drowned in his office, and both he and Anna die on the spaceship. With Jean, Nemo is murdered in a bathtub. In his original marriage to Anna, Nemo crashes into the lake and drowns. Despite Nemo's somewhat elevated existence thanks to his omniscience and occasional omnipotence, he is not irreversibly "all-powerful" since, "death is, as Hegel claims, the absolute master: it deprives the subject of any sense of mastery" (McGowan, "Introduction" 7). The very first look we get of Nemo in the film is a close-up of his shocked, post-mortem expression while lying on a table in the morgue as the narration asks, "What did I do to deserve this?" Nemo was never some evil-doer, and despite his indifference towards Jean, he was never a villain. Nemo's abilities *did* allow him to be a god, though, so it's fitting that the look on his face in death is shock; because unfortunately for Nemo, he is still only human, and sadly, the only explanation there is of what he did to deserve death is that he lived.

The montage of Nemo's deaths is not *the* opening of the film, though. The opening sequence of the film shows a pigeon during experimentation that learns when it pushes a lever, the action rewards the pigeon with a seed. The experiment changes and rewards the pigeon whether it pressed the lever or not, to which Nemo's narration tells us the pigeon's response is, "what did I do to deserve this?" If the pigeon flapped its wings when the seed is released, it believes it's found the reason for the reward and continues flapping its wings convinced it now understands what controls the rewards. In this regard, what is called "pigeon superstition" is a lot like neurosis. Nemo, like the pigeon, is overly concerned about what to do, how to act in order to control what happens to him. Nemo flaps his wings, so to speak, also convinced that he, too, understands what makes life work, that his blind actions are somehow in control of it all.

Death delivers humility unto Nemo—it silences his misguided belief that he is ultimately in control and it reminds him that all the omniscience in the world cannot predict the elusive hand of fate. We already know that Nemo as omniscient being cannot exist, but the fact that he cannot, even in fantasy, exist as immortal restores our relation to Nemo as the on-screen version of ourselves who is still susceptible to the same fate as the rest of us. Though he manages to continue on in other lives after any particular death, he still dies in *all* lives. He learns that no matter what he does or where he goes, death will follow, and there is nothing he can do about it. This knowledge is vital for Nemo's growth in the end. He believes that once he knows all lives, his omniscience will provide him with the necessary knowledge to make his choice easy; and yet, it isn't enough for him in the end because there *is* something still missing. Thus, Nemo has no choice but to readdress his relationship with fate, because up until the concluding moments of the film, Nemo still only experiences the interruption of fate in his life *as* an interruption; as some cruel, mocking twist of unwarranted mutiny against him.

The pigeon will never be able to understand that its actions have nothing to do with what happens to it; it does not somehow see behind the curtain. But for Nemo, “what distinguishes the human animal is that it knows (that it doesn’t know)” (Zupančič 16). Even though Nemo sees the entirety of his many neurotic lives and still cannot recover the *objet petit a*, what he *does* recover is a newfound sense of his own lack; which, he can’t fully understand until he surveys all lives in full, and finds himself *still* unsatisfied. In a final surrender to fate—not as a victim, but finally, as a companion—Nemo enacts his own Butterfly Effect to decide which life to lead. He runs away from both parents to disappear into the woods and immediately picks up a leaf and blows it into the wind, which lands at Anna’s feet in the circle Nemo draws for her to appear within. It’s a sign of good faith that Nemo demonstrates his realization that he is not always in control and he is not in fact all-knowing. Consequently, the only way for Nemo to handle his anxiety over that which he does not know, in himself and the Other, is to acknowledge the presence of this lack, and thus, acknowledge his own fundamental unfulfillment.

If Nemo accepts that he cannot fill the void of his own lack, then we should expect no less of an acceptance from him that Anna cannot fulfill his desire once and for all, either. In the psychoanalytic sense, “true love” cannot exist so long as it proposes the possibility of the sexual relation or that two halves join to become one whole. The total erasure of lack through sex is impossible, but through *love*, “the impossibility disappears, and is simply replaced by necessity; but this disappearance of impossibility is not its solution, but its repression or foreclosure” (Zupančič 138). If we reconfigure our understanding of the purpose of love for a subject, for Nemo, then we won’t think so pessimistically about the resolution with Anna. Salecl claims that “love is linked to the fact that at the end we know nothing about the object that attracts us in the Other” (42), but despite not knowing, we love anyways, and we love furiously. The same is true

for Nemo. He has finally reached a point where he can relinquish the neurotic need to identify exactly what it is that he needs to do or be for the Other, and he lets love answer this for him. In the end, love replaces the fact that we cannot get a satisfying answer to the question of desire; but it's ok, because at least we have love. We know it is impossible to be "completed" in essence, but having love, at least, gets you close enough.

When we watch *Mr. Nobody*, we should not feel envious of Nemo's omniscient ability to know all lives without having to make a choice first. Instead, the spectator should feel relief that we have the opportunity to watch this freedom-from-choice fantasy play out from afar, on the other side of the screen, without suffering the same neurotic and fatal repercussions as Nemo. Because in the end, the fact that Nemo knows everything that's going to happen is ineffectual towards his overall sense of mastery over the self or in the attainment of the fundamentally unattainable object of desire. Nemo is still just as human, just as driven by death, just as castrated as the rest of us. In fact, the only thing omniscience really creates for Nemo when it comes to accessing the real is the perpetuation of anxiety for him, and thus, more trauma to remind him of his detachment from himself. And who wants that?

I choose to commend Nemo's final willful harmony between choice and fate, but not everyone is as optimistic. Kornbluh warns that "we should avoid the trap of celebrating the 'ambiguity' in representation of multiple possible realities ... [It falsely conveys that] reality is open/life is subject to choice *and* that reality is closed/life is fated, even if fate takes the form of chance" (117). But I don't agree with Kornbluh that it has to be one or the other, because what she claims to be misleading in the ambiguity of life, Nemo proves to the spectator that neither one is the sole master of existence. Through Nemo, we see that the best way to live is with the understanding that life is both determined by choice *and* fate at different times, no matter the

unpredictability of this transfer of power. Thus, the spectator lives vicariously through Nemo to safely realize that regardless of the help (or lack) of impossible abilities, we should trust that the best life for us in the end is not always something you can plan; sometimes, it just happens.

What's most realistic about Nemo Nobody is his overwhelming and never-ending anxiety over choice versus fate, right versus wrong, and life versus death. It's true what Nemo says—once a choice is made, you cannot go back. Perhaps *he* can in the end, because he exists in film, and thus, we can too, so long as we are spectators of the film; but in real life, there is no going back, there is no open-endedness for all lives to remain possible. We *have* to make choices and we *have* to trust in what we decide. There is no reset button on this one life we lead and “because of death, it matters how we are and live, what we do” (Zupančič 88). Through Nemo, the spectator witnesses the kind of damage that is done to a person whose life is not finalized by such choices—i.e., what kind of psychological access is gained (or lost) and how this type of overwhelming responsibility of having *no* responsibility affects his subsequent relationships. He worries about choice because of the finality of it and the fear that perhaps his decision isn't the “right” one. But old Nemo's revelation at the end of the film serves as a credence for the spectator—“Each of these lives is the right one. Every path is the right path.” And so, life is not about being right, it's not about being correct. It's about authenticity, it's about happiness. This case of Nemo Nobody shows us that we have to accept fate as it comes and understand that our choices may not create the easiest life for us—or lead to a total understanding of ourselves, or what drives us in life, or attracts us to the Other—but we must be confident that wherever life takes us, it is *always* the “right” path.

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