

After Finitude It's a Wonderful Life

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Abstract: The much-loved Christmas classic Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) is still the subject of much popular and academic discussion. Most recently, against its apparent feel-good message, progressives have lamented the way that it shows the victory of mercantile Pottersville over communitarian Bedford Falls, while conservatives (for example, Mullen 2016) have criticised it for its attack on the town's chief businessman Henry Potter (in 1947 the film was even taken before the US House Committee on un-American Activities for its seeming Communist values). As opposed to this usual back-and-forth, this essay seeks to open up another way of thinking the "ethics" and perhaps even "ideology" of *It's a Wonderful Life* by reading it through the work of speculative materialist Quentin Meillassoux. Can we understand the film as opening up a certain thought outside of the "correlationist" circle with its introduction of "contingency" into everyday life, and indeed in its final triumphant return to Bedford Falls after George Bailey asks to be rescued by God do we not have a perfect example of Meillassoux's "resurrectionist" ethics? Put simply, to borrow the slogan from the embroidery George's wife Mary gives him when they get married, does *It's a Wonderful Life* seek to "lasso the moon" or not?

Keywords: *It's a Wonderful Life*, speculative materialism, correlationism, Quentin Meillassoux, Slavoj Žižek

The first thing that occurred to me as I watched the extraordinary opening sequence of Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) last Christmas with my family was Quentin Meillassoux's notion of the "arche-fossil". Of course, over the many intervening years since I had last seen the film, I had read Meillassoux's *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (2006), and I recalled (without telling anyone sitting next to me and spoiling the film for them) his famous thought experiment of seeing a comet pass through an empty galaxy and realising that it preceded the advent of life on earth. For Meillassoux, this comet serves as evidence that the world is not merely a reflection of human consciousness, or more exactly it allows us to think the limits of the idea that the world exists only insofar as it is filtered through the categories of human consciousness. As is well known, the great target of Meillassoux's book is Kant and his argument that the world "as such" is inaccessible and we can know it only as it is "for us" through such transcendental categories as time and space and cause and effect. We can relate to the world only as it appears to us and not as it is in itself. This is for Meillassoux what that comet arriving from the far-flung reaches of the universe makes clear: that there is a world outside or beyond and certainly before the human. It is this "great outdoors" that he wants to hold up against what he characterises as Kant's "correlationism": the idea that things only exist in some kind of relation to the subject

perceiving them. This is the much-quoted passage in question in *After Finitude*:

I will call 'arche-fossil' or 'fossil matter' not just materials indicating the traces of past life according to the familiar sense of the term 'fossil', but materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event: one that is anterior to terrestrial life.¹

In fact, if we think about that opening sequence carefully, and not quite so festively sentimentally, it hardly appears to fit Meillassoux's requirements. The film begins on Christmas Eve at that moment when the despairing George Bailey, after his careless Uncle Billy has mislaid \$8000, inadvertently passing it to the diabolical town patriarch Henry Potter, is facing the closure of Bailey Brothers' Building and Loan, the small-town bank he has devoted his life to, and possible criminal prosecution. George has gone over with Billy all of his steps during the day, hoping to make him remember what he had done with the money but has failed to. He then goes home to his loving wife Mary and four children and terribly and uncharacteristically takes out his frustrations on them. He heads out for a drink at the bar of a man he had once given a loan to so that he could buy a house, but abruptly leaves before crashing his car into a tree. Running from the car, chased by the irate neighbour whose tree it was, he stands in the middle of the town's bridge and leans over its handrail. In despair—and thinking that perhaps his life insurance might cover the missing \$8000—he looks down into the dark, swiftly flowing water and contemplates suicide. Meanwhile as all of this has been going on, the townspeople, having become aware of George's situation, send their Christmas prayers up to heaven: "Help my friend, Mr Bailey", "He never thinks about himself, God, that's why he's in trouble", "George is a good guy. Give him a break, God".

Their words—which we in the audience also hear—pass upwards through the cosmos until they reach their intended recipient. The camera cranes up from earth and we seem to see in some faraway cosmos two stars blinking back and forth as the following conversation takes place between God and the disciple Joseph:

God: Hello, Joseph, trouble?

Joseph: Looks like we'll have to send someone down. A lot of people are asking for help for a man named George Bailey.

God: George Bailey. Yes, tonight's his crucial night. We'll have to send someone down immediately. Whose turn is it?

Together they decide to send an angel, Clarence Odbody, down to earth to

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1 Meillassoux, 2008, p. 10.

help George. After viewing as though on film the events of George's life, Clarence then heads down, and just at that moment when George decides to jump leaps himself into the water beneath the bridge where George is looking, forcing George to rescue him and putting all thoughts of his own fate out of mind (Clarence knew that George would jump into the water to save him because he remembered, from looking at the events of George's life, that George had similarly plunged into freezing water to save his younger brother Harry when the ice had cracked beneath him and he had fallen in while they were both out ice-skating as boys).

Needless to say, that opening sequence can hardly been seen as an instance of the "anteriority"² of Meillassoux's comet, insofar as the stars flash on or off according to whether it is God or Joseph talking and Clarence the angel is sent down to help George in response to the townspeople's prayers. On the contrary, it is as though the universe responds to our wants and needs and Clarence arrives to show George the errors of his ways and the purpose and meaning and not the contingency of his life.³ Indeed, more than this—and this is the comforting, sentimental reading of the film that has made it a holiday favourite when we like George supposedly reflect on the meaning of our otherwise distracted or unmindful activities throughout the rest of the year—Clarence allows George to see the world as a *reflection* of him: that the world as it is would not have been possible without him and his actions. If not for him, Clarence makes clear in that alternative reality he shows him, his brother would have drowned beneath the ice, the chemist he worked for as a boy would have gone to jail for accidentally poisoning one of his customers, his wife would have become an old maid, his mother would be running a boarding house, and the many clients of the Bailey Brothers' Loan and Trust would not have been able to buy their own houses and been forced to rent one of Potter's slums. More than this, comparatively unspoilt, idyllic, and communitarian Bedford Falls would have turned into the squalid, exploitative, and individualistic Pottersville, full of bars, burlesque theatres, and even strip clubs, undoubtedly controlled by the ruthless tycoon Potter. All of this showing of the consequences of a world without George undoubtedly corresponds to an argument *per negationem* for that "correlationism" Meillassoux speaks of, in which, just as we can "never grasp an object 'in itself', in isolation from its relation to the subject", so we can "never grasp a subject that would not always-already be related to an object".⁴

However, if that opening sequence and the visit of Clarence to

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2 Meillassoux, 2008, p. 14.

3 It is undoubtedly in this regard that we might think the embroidery Mary makes for George, "Lasso the Moon", although the question will be asked in the film whether George is ever able to do this or what would this imply if he did.

4 Meillassoux, 2008, p. 5.

show George that the world as it is would not have been possible without him appears to go against Meillassoux, read another way it can appear close to Meillassoux's fantasy of being able to look on at the world as though we were not there and see it how it really is. We might begin with that moment when Clarence arrives in order to show George what life would have been like if he had never been born. After rescuing Clarence from the river, they both first dry off in the nearby toll house keeper's shack before going to a bar that was previously run by Martini, to whom George had lent the money, but now is run by Nick, his surly assistant. There they meet Gower, the chemist George had worked for as a boy and saved from poisoning a client, when in mourning for the death of his son he had accidentally put the wrong pills in a bottle of medicine, but now has spent twenty years in jail and after getting out is homeless and mocked and reviled by the cruel townspeople. George defends Gower and is thrown out of the bar, whereupon he wanders bewilderedly throughout Pottersville, before getting in a taxi and driving to the house he and his wife Mary had fixed up and lived in, but now is the wreck it was before. After being challenged by the police for trespassing on the abandoned property, George goes and looks for his mother, who after the death of her husband and without George's support now runs a down-at-heel boarding house and who to his immense shock and horror does not recognise him, her own son. They then visit Bailey Park, the neighbourhood of low-income people in their own houses that George made possible through his Building and Loan company, but now is a cemetery, in which George finds the gravestone of his brother, who had drowned without George to save him. Finally, George implores Clarence to let him know what has happened to his wife. Clarence is at first unwilling to do so, but then points him towards an unlikely-looking woman who is the town librarian, closing up for the night. George grabs her and insists that they were once married, but she backs away fearfully before running into a nearby bar, where the locals confront George and call the police. The sequence ends with the policeman and George wrestling together in the snow outside the bar before George leaps up and runs away, with the policeman firing a shot into the air and getting into his police car to chase after him. George runs again to the bridge where he originally met Clarence, but this time, appalled at how things would have turned out without him, pleads for things to be as they once were and for him to return to the life he had once lived.

Throughout this long sequence, both when he is by himself and when he is with Clarence, George looks on if not unseen then at least unrecognised by that world he once knew. Not only do his wife and mother not know who he is, but neither do the barman, taxi driver and policeman. In the sequence with Clarence at the bar, George will greet Nick, who was formerly Martini's assistant but is now the owner, but Nick to the first of George's surprises will refuse to acknowledge him before throwing him out. On several occasions, George will insist to Bert the policeman—

whom he has known throughout his life and who in fact serenaded his wife and him on their wedding night with Ernie the taxi driver—"You know me!", only for the same policemen alternately to tell him to move on, wrestle with him or fire a pistol after him and pursue him in a police car. Or when after wandering disorientedly through Pottersville and deciding to catch a taxi to go to the house where he and Mary lived, he will greet Ernie the taxi driver, whom he has also known all of his life, with the words "Ernie, take me home. I'm off my nut!", only to be coolly asked: "Where do you live?" Although George is physically present and able to speak and even occasionally accost and confront people, he is forced in effect to look on at his life from the outside, with no one with the exception of Clarence knowing who he is. And when Clarence leaves after showing him Mary, there is no one at all in the changed world of Pottersville who recognises him and remembers his place in their lives. Here perhaps we have something of Meillassoux's idea of breaking with or otherwise thinking that correlationist "two-step" in which the world and the human subject are inseparable, each existing only for the other: "From this point on [after Kant's transcendental revolution] intersubjectivity, the consensus of a community, supplants the adequation between the representations of a solitary subject and the thing in itself as the veritable criterion of objectivity".⁵

Of course, there are any number of fantasy or science fiction films that play out the fantasy of one of the characters being able to look on at the world and their lives from the outside.⁶ The first that comes to mind and that is often mentioned in the context of *It's a Wonderful Life* is Harold Raimi's *Groundhog Day* (1993), in which TV weatherman Phil Connor gets to live out the same day over and over with only him and none of the other characters realising this. But there are also other older Hollywood films from around the time of *It's a Wonderful Life* with similar plotlines, such as Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), in which a British airman shot down while flying a plane during the War is allowed to appeal his being called to heaven insofar as he has fallen in love with his female radio controller while speaking to her during his last moments on earth, or Capra's own *A Pocketful of Miracles* (1961), in which a gangster creates a whole alternative reality for a poor woman from whom he buys apples on the street so that she is able to pass herself off as an aristocrat to the lost daughter she has only recently re-encountered. There are also a number of films and TV series also cited in the context of *It's a Wonderful Life*, in which it is angels who look on at the world from the outside or a character passes away and becomes an angel, who is then able to deliver a judgement from afar about the world and its

⁵ Meillassoux, 2008, p. 4.

⁶ For an account of *It's a Wonderful Life* in relation to a number of these films, see the chapter 'Reclaiming the Real', in Walters, 2008, pp. 115-34.

failings. Examples frequently pointed to include Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1987) and *Touched by An Angel* (1994-2003), in which angels, after listening to people's prayers, render assistance to those in need; and there is also Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), in which Christ on the Cross escapes to live another life before reconciling himself to his fate and agreeing to be recrucified. However, in all of these cases, if we can generalise, it tends to be a matter of characters either entirely enmeshed in their new reality so that they have no consciousness of what is happening to them—the "human" perspective—or simply outside of this reality so that they can offer only a distanced, uninvolved view onto it. The possibilities they point to are simply inside or outside, subjective or objective, contingent or necessary. We have not yet got to what we will see is at stake in Meillassoux's argument that while it is not possible to think outside correlationism, it is nevertheless a matter of thinking a certain internal limit to it:

Facticity [contingency] thereby forces us to grasp the 'possibility' of that which is wholly other to the world, but which resides in the midst of the world as such. Yet it is necessary to place inverted commas around the term 'possibility' insofar as what is operative in facticity is not knowledge of the actual possibility of the wholly other but rather our inability to establish its impossibility.⁷

Let us go back then to George's episode with Clarence and think how it is more complex than either of the alternatives it is usually considered in terms of. As we say, the most common reading of the film is that George's time spent with Clarence seeing how the world would have turned out without him reconciles him to the life he has led and makes him willing to go back and confront the situation with the missing money. Although he is able to see—or we are able to see in that first section of the film that shows his life in replay—his frustrations and thwarted ambitions, he also realises that the rewards and pleasures of the life he has led (his wife, his children, his satisfaction at helping people at the Building and Loan) counterbalances them and renders it, weighing up both sides, worth it. Indeed, more than this, he even understands that the good things in his life would not have been possible without the bad. He would not have run the bank unless his father had died of a stroke, he would not have continued to run the bank unless his brother got married, he would not have married his wife unless he had been forced to listen to her obnoxious boyfriend over the phone, he would not altogether have appreciated his life unless Uncle Billy had lost the \$8000 and he had been driven to the brink of suicide. Everything has its place in a logically unfolding chain of events, and if one did not happen—even the most

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7 Meillassoux, 2008, p. 40.

seemingly unnecessary or contingent—then all the rest would not have occurred either. It all makes retrospective sense, and it allows George to go back and face the consequences of his and Billy's actions, knowing that they have necessarily come out of what has come before and he could not have had what came before unless he also had these (it is the idea that, just as whatever was good in the past can be seen to have led to this terrible incident in the present, so we cannot hope for something good in the future without taking into account this terrible incident). All of this constitutes a kind of fatalism or predestination, which on the balance George would not change, even if he could.

On the other hand, as has also been said of the film, if George can comfort himself with the fact that his actions have preserved Bedford Falls and prevented it from turning into Pottersville, this is mistaken. It is not the sequence when he wanders alone through the luridly lit Pottersville alone at night that is a fantasy, but when he strolls familiarly through Bedford Falls greeting others during the day. The world of the film, in which the film was made and in which we watch the film, far more resembles Pottersville than Bedford Falls. The post-war America of the 1940s is indeed a world of rising consumerism, raunchy entertainment (including Hollywood films themselves, a selection of which we see on the hoardings of Pottersville), and the breakdown of community values.⁸ That sequence with Clarence, in which George is exposed to a supposed alternate reality, might be understood not as a nightmare-like dystopia, wedged between two moments of everyday reality, but actually takes place *after* Bedford Falls, with Bedford Falls itself as the conservative, backward-looking and now surpassed alternative reality. In this sense, all of George's actions would count for nothing; would have had no effect. If his keeping of the Bailey Brothers' Bank and Loan open and refusing of Potter's seductive offer to work for him at one point in the film were to keep the world of Pottersville at bay, he failed. The ultimate victory of Potter—who does not seem to age throughout the film as though some kind of abstract principle—has come to pass. If the test of a person's life, as Clarence at one point in the film puts it, is "how many other lives they have touched", then George did not succeed, and his failure has not even been noticed, his absence from the world as it now exists has not even created a "hole".

However, as we suggest, the film is more complicated than either of these readings: the first nostalgic, conservative, and backward-looking and the second hard-headed, realistic, and even socially engaged. Let us go back to the events surrounding George's episode on the bridge and the arrival of Clarence. As we know from the replay of George's life that takes place before Clarence arrives, George's Uncle Billy, his dutiful father's irresponsible brother, had inadvertently passed \$8000 of the Bank and

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8 For examples of this contrarian take on *It's a Wonderful Life*, see Smith, 2007; Cohen, 2010; and Mullen, 2016.

Loan money, which was meant to be deposited in a bank, to the evil Potter in a newspaper featuring a story about the heroic arrival of George's brother Harry after the end of the War. Upon returning to the Bank and Loan empty-handed and having to confess that he had lost the money and not deposited it, George angrily makes him retrace his steps, even back implausibly it seems before he arrived at the bank that day and was handed the money, to see where he might have left it. All to no avail. The money is not to be found, although we and presumably the angel Clarence who watch George's life with us know where it has gone. And it is this traumatic event that leads George just a little later to the bridge and to retrace himself (if can take the film to be something of his own thoughts as he ponders his fate) the events of his own life and to determine where it all went wrong: the stroke of his father, his brother getting married and being unable to replace him at the bank to allow him to go to college, his turning down of a lucrative offer from Potter, even his getting married to Mary and having children and of course entrusting Uncle Billy with the money earlier that day.

Except that it was also Uncle Billy's losing of the \$8000 that led to this examination of George's past to see how everything came to this (whether this is understood as George's own recollection or God's replaying George's life for Clarence). In other words, the losing of the \$8000 does not lead George merely to go through the events of Billy's day to see where the money went, but to go through the events of his own life to see where it went (in effect, God does for George what George does to Billy). That is to say, it is exactly this contingent event—contingent because it cannot be located, cannot be explained, cannot be placed within a narrative of cause and effect—that allows the construction of that fate or necessity that George is retrospectively able to see constructing his life so that things appear as though they could not be otherwise or he had no choice in the matter. And it is *this* that blurs that previously strongly held opposition between those two understandings of the George's life: that, on the one hand, it was necessary and meaningful and, on the other, arbitrary and meaningless. That George's life changed those of those all around him and things wouldn't be the same without him and that he had no real impact at all and things turned out exactly the way they were always going to. For, we might say, George's life was meaningful and had an effect on others, but this only because of an event that was arbitrary and contingent (which is why the events of the film have to be told in a temporal flashback or even circle with the prayers of the townspeople after Billy has lost the money leading to the telling of the story in which Billy loses the money).

It is at this point that we return again to Meillassoux. For, as we say, in his quest to overcome Kantian correlationism, he does not suggest that it possible simply to think outside of the transcendental categories. Indeed, to the extent that we are human, we must inevitably think within them. Nevertheless we *can* think—and this is the real point

of that example of the “ancestral fossil” of the asteroid—that it is the “unknownness” or “contingency” of the world outside of these categories that is not a limit to our knowledge but in fact the very thing we are trying to think. Indeed, pushing the consequence of this to its furthest extent, Meillassoux is able to say that it is this contingency or what he calls “factuality”⁹ that characterises the universe. Against any attempt to impose rules or insist upon the necessity of categories, nothing remains the same, everything is able to be different. From one moment to the next, there is no way of predicting or proposing physical laws that will hold into the future. And even the proposing of the laws of contingency can only be the effect of contingency, so that any confirmation of such a law would only be the consequence of the equally contingent possibility that things do not change for a moment. It is only this contingency that is necessary, of which we can be certain, even though it is also the end of all necessity and certainty. However, Meillassoux in *After Finitude* insists in very clear and unambiguous terms that it is only the taking of contingency to this limit that would stand against correlationism: it is not that we can know things in themselves but that we cannot know things in themselves, and it is *this* that tells us we are thinking the thing itself:

In other words, instead of construing the absence of reason inherent in everything as a limit that thought encounters in its search for the ultimate reason, we must understand that this absence of reason *is*, and can *only* be the *ultimate* property of the entity. We must convert facticity into the real property whereby everything and every world *is* without reason, and is thereby *capable of becoming otherwise without reason*.¹⁰

But in *After Finitude* and the larger doctoral thesis from which it originally comes—and this material has appeared in a number of essays such as ‘The Divine Inexistence’ that have appeared subsequently—Meillassoux also draws out what we might call the “ethical” and he more accurately calls the “immanent”¹¹ consequences that result from this. For, astonishingly—and here is where undoubtedly Meillassoux's interest in science-fiction comes from—if contingency is the only rule of the universe and absolutely all physical laws are able to be overturned with none necessarily remaining consistent from moment to moment, then it must be possible to imagine, for example, the resurrection of the dead.¹² In fact, Meillassoux insists, this possibility of resurrection—of course,

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9 Meillassoux, 2008, p. 75.

10 Meillassoux, 2008, p. 79.

11 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 195.

12 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 189.

against the usual religious understanding—goes *against* the very idea of a God, insofar as what is required for it is the breaking of the connection between cause and effect, the doing away with of any omniscient intelligence overseeing the inevitable unwinding of things. Conversely—and showing that within Meillassoux's conception even God or the idea of God is subservient to or an effect of this chaos or contingency—it must also be logically possible that, if there does not presently exist a God, in the future there might be something like one.¹³ Again breaking with correlationism or any limit to what is imaginable, it is entirely possible that the dead might rise up and a God be born. There is no limit to how a future world might turn out. And it is on this basis that Meillassoux insists that must think an ethics. For him the idea of something like historical justice or the correction of “existent and irreparable wrongs”¹⁴ has no meaning unless justice can be rendered to those same people to whom injustice was originally done. However, in Meillassoux's system it is entirely possible that these figures from the past *can* come alive again in the future, and it is on *this* basis that we should think and prepare justice in the present.

Meillassoux in his thinking is implicitly critical of someone like Slavoj Žižek. In *After Finitude*, he will speak of the attempts to circumvent or circumscribe that contingency he sees at the heart of the universe, to think that there is some outside to it or that the very ability to think it implies some kind of reflective space beyond it. It is something he sees in undoubtedly the most profound attempt before him to take contingency into account with Hegel, who will oppose Kant's correlationism only to propose a higher philosophical order in which contingency exists only insofar as it can be thought. This is Meillassoux in *After Finitude* paraphrasing Hegel: “It is necessary that there be a moment of sheer irrationality in the midst of the unfolding of the Absolute. But this contingency is deduced from the unfolding of the Absolute, which in itself is devoid of contingency”.¹⁵ And Meillassoux will sharpen his critique of this Hegelian refinement of Kant by more directly critiquing undoubtedly the leading Hegelian today, Žižek, in an interview he gives at the end of Graham Harman's book on him, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (2011). In Žižek, Meillassoux is able to see even more directly than in Hegel this effective limiting of contingency by turning it into a necessary and retrospective rule. In effect, that is, if for Meillassoux it is a matter of the *contingency of necessity*, for Žižek it is a matter of the *necessity of contingency*, so that in the end we can always find something higher than or an exception to it. This is Meillassoux in the interview responding to Harman's question prompting him along these lines:

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13 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 231-2.

14 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 192.

15 Meillassoux, 2008, p. 80.

I am opposed to two points of view: A) that of Žižek, and perhaps also Badiou, which would consist at bottom of making of materialism a ‘misfired correlationism’. [These materialisms] are supposed to detect the trace of an impossible coincidence of the subject with itself, and thus of an extra-correlational residue in which one could localise a ‘materialist moment’ of thought. But, in fact, such misfires are only further correlations for others: it is always *for a subject* that there is an undecidable event or failure of signification.¹⁶

Žižek, for his part, has spoken of Meillassoux and the school of speculative realism he at least in part helped found on several occasions, most notably in *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2012) and in an interview he conducted for the anthology *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (2011). Žižek, in fact, is extremely impressed by Meillassoux's intellectual project, and reading his responses to it it is frequently hard to distinguish his own Hegelian-influenced position and his summary of Meillassoux. In a sense, he both makes Meillassoux his own and turns his own argument to sound like Meillassoux's. But there are at the end of his lengthy engagements a number of criticisms and distinctions he consistently makes. Most straightforwardly, he *does* assert a certain necessity in relation to contingency, but it is a necessity he says that allows contingency and not as Meillassoux characterises it any kind of exception to contingency (importantly, Žižek uses the Lacanian notion of not-all in this regard: there is no exception to contingency, but not-all is contingency¹⁷). This is Žižek's particular conception of Hegelian necessity, which again against the usual readings does not stand outside contingency but rather is what makes it possible. As he puts it in his interview in *The Speculative Turn*: “Consequently, not only does Hegel deduce the necessity of contingency, but he also develops the opposite, the contingency of necessity”.¹⁸ This leads Žižek to his second qualification of Meillassoux: he insists on the necessity of a certain *subjectivity* in the thinking of contingency, but once more it is not the unified subject that Meillassoux imputes to Hegel and implicitly Žižek himself. Rather, for Žižek what is opened up by Meillassoux's pushing of the contingency of the world to its limit is not a “correlation” between the subject and the world but a movement from S to \$, substance to subject. The subject has to lose its object in order to become the subject of the signifier and the object has to have the subject withdraw from it in order for it to constitute itself as reality. It is not any kind of correlation between the subject and object but rather an

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16 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 166.

17 Žižek, 2012, p. 636.

18 Žižek, 2011, p. 414.

impossible overlap between the In-Itself of reality and the internal split in the subject. It is the very gap between the In-Itself and the For-Itself, the subject that always gets in the way and thus is divided from itself, that *is* the very In-Itself that is being looked for. As Žižek says, it is *this* that finally escapes correlation: not the In-Itself of any object, but the subject as object.¹⁹

It is at this point that we might return to the film for the last time to think what might be at stake in this relationship between Meillassoux and Žižek. We spoke before of the paradoxical fact that it is the contingent act of Uncle Billy losing the \$8000 that allows George to construct the necessity of his life, including Billy losing that \$8000 (it is, after all, his losing of the money that leads to the townspeople calling upon God, who sends down Clarence to show George what the world would have been like if he had never been born). It is this that Meillassoux means when he speaks of the fact that “a world that is capable of everything ought *also* to be capable of not accomplishing those things of which it is capable”²⁰ and Žižek when he says it is not a matter of the “discovery of some pre-existing inner Essence, but a ‘performative’ process of constructing that which is ‘discovered’”.²¹ But there is also another remarkable contingency in the film, which is the equivalent, if apparently the inverse, of the first, and that might allow us to think the proper “ethics” at stake in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. As we say, the usual reading of the film is that the second sequence with Clarence showing George the world as if he had never been born must be seen in opposition to the first: one happy and connected and the other unhappy and atomised, one nostalgic and old-fashioned and the other realistic and up-to-date. They are inevitably seen as alternatives, with the first being real and the second a dream or nightmare, but occasionally this is reversed and it is the first that seen as fantasy and the second as authentic. However, one disallows other and both cannot be real, forcing us to choose between them, as George does when he calls upon God the second time, this time to go back to Bedford Falls.

But what happens—and this was my second Meillassoux moment as I watched the film that Christmas—if we imagine instead of any *return* to Bedford Falls the second time we have something like that “rebirth”²² or “resurrection”²³ Meillassoux points to as the consequence of a truly contingent world, in which the dead could hypothetically come back to life because God is absent (and this moment is indeed marked by the absence

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19 Žižek, 2012, p. 644. See also Žižek, 2011, p. 412-3.

20 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 178.

21 Žižek, 2011, p. 414.

22 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 214.

23 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 192.

of Clarence or any divine intervention). That is to say, what happens when we are not forced to choose between the reality of Bedford Falls and the imaginary of Pottersville but are able to think that both are *equally true*? That it is not so much a shift away from reality in Pottersville and then a shift back at the end but that what we have is rather an example of Meillassoux’s hypothesis that the “world is destined for a transformation without reserve, in which there remains no determinate substance that remains unchanged amidst change”?²⁴ That it is not an imaginary Pottersville in between two Bedford Falls realities or even Pottersville as reality against the illusion of Bedford falls, but simply three different and discrete worlds? So that when George returns to Bedford Falls at the end – this is why we suggest it is equivalent in contingency to that first passage to Pottersville—it is not any kind of return or making up but an entirely different reality. If the first is as sudden as Clarence suddenly jumping from out of the shot into the water—for George appears not to see him previously on the bridge when he looks—the second is just as sudden with Bert the policeman one moment firing a pistol after him and getting into his police car to chase him and the next rounding the corner (exactly the same kind of impossible entry into the world as Clarence) and saying to the incredulous George that he has been looking for him everywhere and that he should go home where his family waiting for him.²⁵

What then of the status of this return to Bedford Falls if we must imagine it as a possible coming to life of the dead in an utterly contingent world? It is, to begin with, against what we have said of the relationship of Pottersville to Bedford Falls, not to be understood as any retrospective revelation of the truth or making up for what is lost. And this is, we suggest, the truth of the townspeople gathering together to raise the money in the famous heart-warming scene at the end. It is a matter not of making up for any missing money but of *new* money that has nothing to do with the old (it is this, we would contend, that is the real meaning of the much-debated fact that the film does not render retrospective justice upon Potter for not returning the \$8000 he got from Billy, even though he knows exactly where he got it from. Just as it is not a matter of compensating or making up for the losses of George’s life, so it is a matter of taxing or taking a cut of the gains of Potter’s life). In a sense, the money comes out of nowhere, just like that copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* that Clarence leaves behind as a Christmas present to George. It is the same resurrection we see with Martini, who has come back after being missing from his bar, his wife who remarries him after

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24 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 177.

25 Altogether on the incessant contingent “novelty” of the film, we might think that Bert deals with George no fewer than three times while he is in Pottersville without apparently remembering that he has previously met him. It is also undoubtedly important on this matter of a “crack” opening up in reality that George’s encounters with Clarence and Bert take place on a bridge. We might also recall along these lines the dancefloor opening up the night George first properly meets Mary.

being an old maid and of course most spectacularly his brother Harry, who in the previous world was buried in the cemetery where Bailey Park used to be, now returning as a war hero. We think we even see something of this in the famous grin of George as he hugs his wife and holds a child in the last shot of the film. It is exactly not a matter of returning to reality with a sense of how good things actually are, but as we read it a slight reserve and even startlement, as though he is now inhabiting a new world, as unrecognisable in its way as Potterville in that second sequence of the film (certainly, he could tell no one about what had just happened to him, so that there is the same loss of shared memory he had there).

It is at this point, to pick up something of Žižek's analysis in relation to Meillassoux, that we might say we pass from *desire* to *drive*. Žižek makes the point in his transcribing of Meillassoux's speculative materialism into Hegelian Lacanese that what is properly implied by the transposition of the gap separating us from the Thing-in-Itself into the Thing-in-Itself is a move from the "longing" of desire to the stuckness" of the drive.²⁶ If in desire there is a "lost object", in drive this "loss itself is an object".²⁷ It is part of Žižek's insistence that in the proper conception of what is at stake in Meillassoux's attempt to think against correlationism is a New that "retroactively posits/creates its own necessity".²⁸ In drive, as opposed to the attempt to refind the lost object, with the always subsequent disappointed realisation that what we have is not it, it is the very repeated action itself that is the satisfaction. What is at stake is not the attempt by the subject to make itself whole again by finding that object that would fill its "hole", but the equivalence between an always divided subject (\$) and an always lost object or world (S). This is Žižek in *Less than Nothing* outlining what he sees as the real consequence of that chaotic anti-correlationism Meillassoux opens up: "The problem is not to think the Real outside of transcendental correlation, independently of the subject; the problem is to think the Real *inside* the subject, the hard core of the Real in the very heart of the subject, its ex-timate centre"²⁹ And again this is the best way to understand George's final return to Bedford Falls at the end of the film: not the last in a series of compensations, each seeking to make up for what was previously missing (Potterville to make up for the disappointments of Bedford Falls, the return to Bedford Falls to make up for the meaninglessness of Pottersville, with the implication that George will eventually find Bedford Falls once again disappointing and beg God to take him away when things settle down). Rather, it is this *repetition* itself that George now finds satisfactory: he at once realises

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26 Žižek, 2012, p. 639.

27 Žižek, 2012, p. 639.

28 Žižek, 2011, p. 415.

29 Žižek, 2012, p. 644.

that he will never get what he wants and that nothing remains the same. But if we could inflect Žižek with Meillassoux at this point, it would be that drive here is not just the repeated return to the same, like any kind of restorative desire, but the fact that *everything* always different, with absolutely *no* turning back to the past.

Of course, *It's Wonderful Life* is a perfect example of what Meillassoux calls not just science-fiction but extro-science-fiction, with its breaking of the physical laws of the known universe with angels coming down from heaven, the positing of alternative realities and the impossible appearance of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as a Christmas present.³⁰ But it also helps us think—Meillassoux's real point—that our universe itself is a kind of extro-science fiction, with the ever-present possibility if we can think outside of the correlationsist circle that the known laws of the universe could change at any moment, the dead could rise from their graves and a retrospective justice might be rendered to those previously gone. Why not indeed think *It's Wonderful Life* in terms of Meillassoux's *After Finitude*, or better subtitle *After Finitude It's a Wonderful Life*? And in fact is not the conclusion to *It's Wonderful Life*, its for-generations celebrated Christmas message, ultimately not the same as Meillassoux's? That the possible presence of God is not the inevitable guarantor of the necessity of the world, so that some underlying order might be discerned in it, but on the contrary only possible insofar as the world is contingent? The true passage of the film is from the idea that it is only insofar as we can think of some higher order to the world that could dispense justice—as the townspeople and George call upon God at the beginning of the film—to the idea that it is only insofar as the world is utterly contingent—as George realises by the end of the film—that He exists. That is to say, God exists in our very ability to think his absence, which is why it is only with the *disappearance* of Clarence and George's realisation that there is no other world than this one that Christmas can be celebrated at the end of the film and He can appear again in the form of Tom Sawyer. It is only at this point, when George realises that everything is always different and that there is absolutely no one he can talk to about what happened to him that he gathers himself and starts singing with the others. But he is alone as the only Meillassouxian in the room, insofar the other townspeople do not realise that their prayers touched the stars and believe that they raised the money themselves, instead of it appearing miraculously.

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30 Meillassoux, 2015, pp. 3-57

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