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Noa Levin*

Spectres of Eternal Return: Benjamin and Deleuze Read Leibniz

Eternal Return and the Structure of Expression

In several short texts written during the last twenty years of his life, G. W. Leibniz considers the possibility that worldly events recur eternally. Although his ideas on the doctrine of eternal return reappear in various forms and contexts, they have not received much attention until recently. In part, this is due to their very late publication. A full version of these texts, alongside Leibniz's correspondences on the topic, was published for the first time only in the 1991 edition edited by Michel Fichant.¹ Prior to its publication, partial versions edited by Couturat (1902) and Ettliger (1921) had appeared. To date, these texts have not been fully translated into English or German. Another reason that they are not more widely available, and have not garnered more attention, is that they do not easily fit in with the prevalent view of Leibniz as an optimist and champion of the continual progress of humanity. Moreover, Leibniz's theological and mystical concerns are often dismissed as peripheral to his philosophical project.² This article reads these texts in conjunction with two authors who provide exceptions from this trend, and do not shy away from the metaphysical aspects of Leibniz's work: Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze.

In their own readings of Leibniz, Benjamin and Deleuze both emphasise his concept of "expression", which describes the way in which each simple substance, or monad, expresses, or mirrors, the ever-changing world, thus serving

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¹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *De l'Horizon de la Doctrine Humaine (1693)*, *La Restitution Universelle (1715)*, M. Fichant (ed.), Paris, Vrin, 1991.

² See Donald Rutherford, *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995. During the twentieth century the interpretations of Couturat and Russell, which prioritised Leibniz's logics above all other domains of his thought, were especially influential. See Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz. With an Appendix of Leading Passages*, Nottingham, Spokesman, 2008; Louis Couturat, *La logique de Leibniz d'après des documents inédits*, Paris, Ancienne Librairie Germer Baillière, 1901.

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as a “perpetual living mirror of the universe.”³ In other words, the structure of expression denotes the immanence of the world and its history, in abbreviated form, in each of its simple substances. Benjamin uses this structure to describe how each work of art includes its “fore- and after-history,” just as, according to Leibniz, every monad is “pregnant” with its past, present, and future histories.⁴ Deleuze’s concept of the event similarly draws on Leibniz’s “complete individual notion”, including its predications, which Deleuze reformulates as the immanence of virtual worlds within our own.⁵

Deleuze and Benjamin are both drawn to expression as the spatial equivalent of eternal return: the notions of a multiplicity of worlds simultaneously existing within our own (Deleuze) or an infinity of ideas, each containing an image of the world (Benjamin), replace the infinite repetition of this world. This structure opens up space for virtual, other worlds that do not exist in actuality but enable heterogeneity within our world.⁶

Both authors put forward their own temporal theories of eternal return, yet these have rarely been read in conjunction with their respective receptions of Leibniz. The article argues that Deleuze and Benjamin recognise the immanent, enfolded, or virtual structure of expression as one of the guiding principles of Leibniz’s metaphysics, ontology, and theory of knowledge, and appropriate this structure in different ways into their own philosophies, as a figure of space and time. In highlighting this structure in Leibniz’s reflections on eternal return, their respective readings serve to subvert the widespread perception of Leibniz as univocally supporting historical progress.

³ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “Monadology”, § 56, in *The Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings*, R. Latta (ed.), London, Oxford University Press, 1948, p. 119.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. H. Eiland, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2019, p. 27; Leibniz, “Monadology”, § 22, p. 231.

⁵ See Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. T. Conley, London, The Athlone Press, 1993, p. 53. On the “complete individual notion,” see Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “Discourse on Metaphysics”, § 8, in *Philosophical Essays*, R. Ariew and D. Garber (eds.), Indianapolis, Hackett, 1989, pp. 40–41.

⁶ For a reading that links Deleuze’s concept of the virtual with Benjamin’s understanding of language as a medium, see Samuel Weber’s “Impart-ability: Language as Medium”, in *Benjamin’s -abilities*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2010, pp. 31–52.

This article discusses concepts of eternal return in general, and specifically the concept of apokatastasis used by Leibniz to reflect upon return. A Greek term designating restoration, and used to describe the Stoic cycle of cosmology, apokatastasis was adopted by Christian theologians, most notably Origen of Alexandria, who used it to describe the restoration and salvation of all souls. The term therefore has both a Stoic and Christian lineage, the latter based on an apostolic reference to Jewish eschatology, namely St. Peter's speech in Acts 3.21, describing Christ "whom heaven must hold until the times of that restoration of all things (*achri chronōn apokatastaseōs pantōn*)."⁷ It follows that apokatastasis is interlinked with messianic traditions, both Jewish and Christian. The return of all things is described as a universal restitution following the return of the Messiah.

Benjamin uses the term apokatastasis in different texts written in his last years. In "The Storyteller", he refers to Origen's doctrine of universal salvation from *De Principiis*, describing it as the "entry of all souls into paradise."⁷ In the *Arcades Project*, he describes apokatastasis as part of a "methodological proposal for the cultural-historical dialectic."⁸ Therein and in notes for his last text "On the Concept of History", Benjamin also discusses eternal return in relation to Friedrich Nietzsche and August Blanqui.⁹ Yet his concept of apokatastasis, although recently receiving some attention, is not often linked to his reading of Leibniz.¹⁰

Deleuze does not make use of the term apokatastasis, yet eternal return is a key theme in his work. The concept is developed in early works such as *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, *Difference and Repetition*, and *Logic of Sense*, and is later reaffirmed. Deleuze directly cites Nietzsche's concept of return developed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as the main source for his own concept. But Deleuze's con-

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Work of Nicolai Leskov", in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, 1935-1938, H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (eds.), Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 158.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, [N1a,3], p. 459.

⁹ Blanqui's doppelgänger world of "present eternalised" is described as the "phantasmagoria of history itself." *Ibid*, pp. 25-26.

¹⁰ For a reading that does make this connection, see Fabrizio Desideri, "Intermittency: The Differential of Time and the Integral of Space, the Intensive Spatiality of the Monad, the Apokatastasis and the Messianic World in Benjamin's Latest Thinking", *Aisthesis rivista on-line del Seminario Permanente di Estetica*, 9 (1/2016), pp. 177-187.

cept of return, as informed by Leibniz and Nietzsche, is most conspicuously apparent in *Difference and Repetition*.

I will first contextualise Leibniz's elaborations of return within his reflections on history, theology, and knowledge. Then I will discuss Leibniz's reflections on return expressed in three texts written towards the end of his life, and show how these play an important role in his later philosophy. His views on perfection and progress are not clear-cut, as we shall see, and moreover for Leibniz progress and return are not contradictory. Benjamin's engagement with the concept of apokatastasis and Deleuze's conceptualisation of eternal return will then be elaborated, highlighting how these are interlinked with their readings of Leibniz. Deleuze and Benjamin, it will be shown, recognised the radical potential of Leibniz's understanding of space and time and took these a step further as part of their respective criticism of progress-driven historiographies. Finally, I will suggest that not only progress but the potential for its critique derive from Leibniz's philosophy, although only the former has been privileged by most historic-philosophical accounts.¹¹

Perfection and Progress

Leibniz mentions Origen's apokatastasis explicitly in his *Theodicy* (1710), one of the only works published during his lifetime.¹² Therein he praises Origen's ideas of return as enabling the salvation of all beings, calling "Apokatastasis Panton" a "great and learned work."¹³ Leibniz uses the idea of universal salvation in order to defend the existence of a perfect, omnipotent, and just God in a world in which evil and human suffering exist.

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Leibniz's solution to the problem of the compatibility of our God-created, best of all possible worlds, on the one hand, and the freedom of human beings, on the other, hinges upon what he calls the "pre-established harmony" (*une har-*

¹¹ Reinhart Koselleck, for example, credits Leibniz with the invention of historical progress: "ultimately, the aim of completeness was temporalised (first by Leibniz) and brought into the process of worldly occurrence." See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 265.

¹² Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. E. M. Huggard, Eugene, Wipf and Stock, 2007.

¹³ *Ibid.*, § 17, pp. 135–136.

monie *préétablie/prästabilite Harmonie*). The universe, according to Leibniz, is composed of an infinite number of simple substances, or “monads”, as he calls them in his later works, each belonging to one of an infinite number of series. Since ours is the best of all possible worlds, a fine balance between these infinite series must be retained. Accordingly, all series are harmonised upon creation following a divine plan or script, yet the monads remain free agents in so far as the way this script, or “*détail*”, as Leibniz terms it, is executed.¹⁴ Leibniz illustrates this conception by describing several bands of musicians playing in separate rooms so that they do not see or hear one another, yet because each of the musicians follows the same score, their music harmonises perfectly.¹⁵

Leibniz’s system, as presented in the *Theodicy* and elsewhere, is hierarchal and directed towards what he describes as the “perfect” and the “morally good”. All monads constantly strive to moral and metaphysical perfection, motivated by their “appetition”, which drives them from less perfect to more perfect perceptions. Comparable to Spinoza’s *conatus*, “appetition” is defined as a directional force or drive that motivates the soul towards perfection or fulfilment. Leibniz’s understanding of the individual as endowed with active, vital force, her freedom consisting in a degree of spontaneity, therefore underpins his view of the moral perfection of humankind as constantly developing. Leibniz often employed the metaphor of the monad’s movement from confused to distinct perceptions, from darkness to light, in order to describe the process of perfection. As Kosseleck and others have noted, Leibniz’s ideas were influential for eighteenth century *Aufklärung* thinkers, informing the concepts of individualism and progress developed by Kant, Herder, and the Historicists in their philosophies of history.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Leibniz’s *Monadology*, § 12: “But besides the principle of change, there must also be a complete specification of that which undergoes the change [*un détail de ce qui change*], which constitutes, so to speak, the determination and [*variation*] variety of simple substances.” Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Leibniz’s Monadology: A New Translation and Guide*, trans. L. Strickland, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014, p. 62, translation modified by N. L.

¹⁵ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “Lettre à Arnauld (1687)”, quoted in *The Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings*, p. 47.

¹⁶ See Michel Serres, *Le système de Leibniz et ses modèles mathématiques: Etoiles, schémas, points*, Paris, PUF, 1990, p. 215; Lewis W. Spitz “The Significance of Leibniz for Historiography”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 13 (3/1952), p. 343; Koselleck, *Futures Past*, pp. 266–268.

This seems to point in the direction of the epitomised narrative of Leibniz as a precursor of progress, yet an internal contradiction in Leibniz's metaphysics complicates things. The state of perfection functions as a teleological goal towards which all things progress, but is also already present at their origination, through the principle of pre-established harmony.¹⁷ Although Leibniz does his best to avoid absolute predestination, his concepts of perfection and harmony force upon him a weaker form of historical predetermination. This is apparent in his repeated statements that the "marks" of the future are inscribed upon the monad, and his conviction that "the present is pregnant with the future; the future can be read in the past; the distant is expressed in the proximate."¹⁸ These statements seem to contradict linear progression into the future, a prerequisite for the idea of historical progress based on human agency. Similar ideas of temporal circularity are developed in Leibniz's late reflections on eternal return.

Leibniz's "Apokatastasis": Between Origen and Plato

Leibniz develops his ideas on return in three principal texts, dating from rather late in his career: "De L'horizon de la doctrine Humaine", written 1693; "Apokatastasis", and "Apokatastasis Panton", written in 1715.¹⁹ He also refers to return in his correspondence on several occasions, and briefly mentions doctrines of return in texts such as *Monadology* and *Theodicy*. As we shall see, Leibniz's position on return had shifted to an extent during the twenty years between him writing the first text and the two later ones.

In "De l'horizon de la doctrine humaine", Leibniz's first sustained engagement with eternal return, he takes inspiration from "The Sand Reckoner", in which Archimedes attempted to calculate the maximum number of grains of sand that can fit into the universe.²⁰ As noted by Fichant and others, Leibniz reworks, in this text, themes he had studied in "De Arte Combinatoria", and applies a com-

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¹⁷ This is the problem, in Serres's terms, of how progress can be possible in the best universe: "can the best become better?"; Serres, *Le système de Leibniz*, p. 218.

¹⁸ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason", § 13, in *Philosophical Essays*, p. 211.

¹⁹ Leibniz, *De l'horizon de la doctrine humaine*, pp. 35–67.

²⁰ Archimedes, "The Sand Reckoner", in *The Works of Archimedes. Edited in Modern Notation with Introductory Chapters*, T. Heath (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 221–232.

binatorial methodology popular during his time to the question of the limits of human knowledge.²¹ Instead of calculating physical particles of matter as did Archimedes, Leibniz sets out to calculate the number of possible true and false statements that the universe may contain. These make up human knowledge; that is, everything that can be uttered or enunciated in words. Leibniz argues that the number of such statements is finite due to the finite number of words and letters with which they are formed.

He concludes that if humanity persists in its current form, at some point the limit of possible human expressions will be reached, and the human production of knowledge will begin to repeat itself. Yet he remains undecided: “but perhaps the number of enunciabile truths, although finite, will never be exhausted, just as the interval between a straight line and the curve of a hyperbola or conchoid is never exhausted.”²² His struggle between the two positions is understandable, since on the surface, supporting eternal return would contradict the theory of the world’s constant striving towards perfection, a main tenet of Leibniz’s philosophy.

Leibniz does not directly reflect, in this text, upon the question of the repetition of history or events implied in his conclusion of the limited nature of knowledge. He does so, more than twenty years later, in the two texts bearing the Greek titles *Αποκατάστασις* and *Αποκατάστασις πάντων*. The argument that Leibniz repeats in both drafts, similar to that made in the earlier text, proceeds as follows. The number of books of a given size is finite because the number of letters and words is finite. If the public annual history of the earth can be related in books of a given size, then the number of public histories is limited. Hence if humanity lasts long enough in the current state, past public histories must return. This is the same with private histories; hence it follows that if humanity lasts long enough, the life of specific individuals will return.

²¹ See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “Dissertation on the Art of Combinations 1666 (selections)”, in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, L. E. Loemker (ed.), Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1976. Catherine Wilson mentions *Sefer Yezirah*, which described creation as a combination of the twenty-two Hebrew letters. See Catherine Wilson, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics: A Historical and Comparative Study*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 42.

²² Leibniz, “De l’horizon de la doctrine humaine”, quoted in Allison Codert, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah*, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic, 1995, p. 112.

The argument hinges upon the second statement, linking the repetition of events and their historiographic accounts, from which he concludes that historical events and individual lives will repeat themselves: “Hence it follows: if humanity endured long enough in its current state, a time would arrive when the same life of individuals would return, bit by bit, through the very same circumstances. I myself, for example, would be living in a city called Hannover located on the Leine river, occupied with the history of Brunswick.”²³ In both later texts Leibniz supports the idea of return more wholeheartedly than in the earlier one. In “Apokatastasis Panton” Leibniz concludes by adding that even in the event that humanity does not endure eternally, necessary truths, such as mathematical theorems, would at some point begin to repeat themselves, since the means by which they are expressed are finite.

In the longer “Apokatastasis”, viewed by Fichant as the ultimate version, Leibniz explains how eternal return is to be reconciled with his metaphysical system as presented elsewhere, according to which all individuals include enfolded, virtual scripts of their future that unfold as time goes by.²⁴ In order to do so, he puts forward a new argument, according to which return and progress are not contradictory. Rather,

even if a century is repeated, in that which concerns the sensible events, or that which books can describe, it will not be repeated in each and every aspect: for there will always be distinctions, even imperceptible ones, which cannot be described, because the continuum is divided into an infinity of actual parts, to the point that in each section of material there is an infinite world of creatures that cannot be described by any book, no matter how long. Surely, if bodies were made of atoms, everything would return precisely in the same collection of atoms, as long as new atoms do not become mixed up in these [...] but such a world would be a machine such that a creature with perfect finitude would be able to know perfectly. And for this reason, it may be that things progress little by little, even if imperceptibly, towards the better, following the revolutions.²⁵

²³ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “Apokatastasis Panton”, trans. D. Forman, 2017, <https://philarchive.org/archive/LEIAPA-4>, accessed 30 September 2021, p. 2; Leibniz, *De l’Horizon de la Doctrine Humaine*, p. 65.

²⁴ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “La Restitution”, in *De l’Horizon de la Doctrine Humaine*, p. 73.

²⁵ *Ibid.* My translation.

Leibniz's concept of eternal return is not absolute, but allows for minute, sometimes indiscernible changes that resist the historian's quill. These are explained by the infinite divisibility of the continuum that makes up the created world. The "nested" structure of the chains of organic being that comprise Leibniz's natural world, according to which each contains an infinity of smaller beings, is used to explain unpredictable variations that make absolute return impossible. Leibniz's vision of return, in opposition to atomistic and mechanistic worldviews, includes minute differences. He suggests that the slight changes in the patterns or arrangements of parts of beings cannot be recorded in books; organic life exceeds its textual representation, implying a gap between historical events and the way they are narrated.

Fichant surmises that the thesis of return is overcome by that of progress, yet it seems that in these two later texts Leibniz argues that not only are the two not contradictory, but rather that the "revolutions", or the repetitions of history, are *necessary* for the progression of humanity. That which repeats itself is not exactly the same; rather, each cycle is different in some small way from those it follows.

Thus in a letter to his correspondent Adam Theobald Overbeck, Leibniz refers to a conversation that they had about "the revolution or palingenesis of all things," describing return as the re-creation, or rebirth of all things.²⁶ In a fragment from 1701 Leibniz writes that "if human minds endure and experience Platonic years, the same men return, not simply so that they might return to the earth but so that they might progress towards something greater in the manner of a spiral or a winding path. This is to step back in order to jump further, as across a ditch."²⁷

It seems Leibniz hesitates between two different forms of doctrines of eternal return. The first is a cyclical cosmology such as held by the Stoics and Plato.²⁸ The second consists of doctrines of universal salvation that describe the restoration of the fallen world to its original perfection, such as Origen's. Both Plato's doctrine and Origen's, the latter indebted to Platonic thought, view return or

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁷ Coudert, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah*, p.114; Leibniz, *De l'Horizon de la Doctrine Humaine*, p. 59.

²⁸ See Plato, *The Timaeus of Plato*, R. D. Archer-Hind (ed.), London, Macmillan, 1888, pp. 129–131.

resurrection as intertwined with perfection. They differ in that Plato emphasises the cosmological, cyclical repetition of all events, while for Origen return brings about universal salvation and makes the world progress towards Godly perfection and unity. Leibniz's "pre-established harmony" is, however, distinct from conceptions of the restoration of original perfection in that it allows a degree of spontaneity. God created things according to a harmonious design or "script", yet they have a degree of freedom in their execution of the divine plan. Moreover, as opposed to ideas of restoration, the structure of pre-established harmony is, as mentioned, a circular one, in which perfection is "pre-established" or original, yet also consists of a goal towards which one should aspire.

Alison Coudert and others suggest that the version of universal salvation that can be found in Lurianic Kabbala distinctly informed Leibniz's work.²⁹ Coudert argues that the change between Leibniz's position in "De L'Horizon de la Doctrine Humaine" and the two later texts resulted from his acquaintance with Francis Mercury van Helmont, a leading Christian Kabbalist of the period.³⁰ Helmont's ideas were informed by the doctrine of *tikkun* (reparation), which suggests that all souls can be redeemed by God if one performs good deeds, through which the world may be restored to its former state of perfection.

By 1715, Coudert suggests, when Leibniz wrote the two "Apokatastasis" texts, he had made up his mind in favour of universal salvation following an intellectual exchange with van Helmont, whose concept of redemption allowed an easy way out from the problem of created evil, since it ensures the ultimate redemption of all beings.³¹ However, there is more continuity between the three texts than admitted by Coudert.³² They rather provide evidence of Leibniz's constant struggle with the concept of progress, a struggle which he never decidedly resolved.

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²⁹ See Coudert, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah*, p. 5.

³⁰ Fichant rather argues that the change in Leibniz's view was informed by Lutheran theologian Johann Wilhelm Petersen (1649–1727); see Michel Fichant, "Ewige Wiederkehr oder unendlicher Fortschritt: Die Apokatastasisfrage bei Leibniz", *Studia Leibnitiana*, 23 (2/1991), p. 137.

³¹ Coudert, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah*, p. 118.

³² Coudert admits, however, that Leibniz never explicitly states that he believes in universal salvation or restoration; she suggests these views were too controversial to express in his age of theological conflicts; see *ibid.*, p. 133.

Historical Apokatastasis and Disenchantment

In “The Storyteller: Observations on the Work of Nicolai Leskov”, dedicated to the Russian writer, Benjamin discusses the declining art form of storytelling (*Erzählen*).³³ The narrative form of the story is defined by the possibility of its retelling, that is, by its repeatability. Benjamin describes the process in which, while listening to the story, the listener attempts to engrave it in her memory so that it can later be retold.³⁴

Leskov belonged to a world in which experience and its repetition had value. The essay describes a process of decline in the value of experience, and therefore in storytelling as an art-form, which began in the wake of the First World War. The form of storytelling permitted continuity both between experience and its communication, and between the storyteller and her listeners.³⁵ The rise of the novel, in its dependence on the written form of the book, broke the link between experience and its communication. It dispersed the “community of listeners” constructed around the ever-repeated, told and retold stories, focusing instead on individualised experience.³⁶

Benjamin’s focus in the essay is on the transmission of personal events and experiences rather than the repetition of collective historical events as discussed by Leibniz, yet he makes the connection between the individual and collective retelling of events through the concepts of “remembrance” (*Eingedenken*) and “tradition”.³⁷ Benjamin refers to the intergenerational chain of transmission described by Jewish scripture.³⁸ The decline in the art of storytelling is also a crisis of tradition, a break in the chain of the transmission of experienced events between generations. Thus, the crisis in expressing individual and collective experience is one.

³³ Benjamin, “The Storyteller”, p. 158.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

³⁸ Oral transmission of the Torah and Passover *hagada* (deriving from the verb meaning “to say or tell”) is an important Jewish command; see *Mishna*, Pirkei Avot 1: “Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly.”

Benjamin synthesises, in this essay as elsewhere, elements from the Jewish and Christian eschatological traditions, emphasising the connection between the destruction of individual and universal experience through reference to Origen's doctrine of eternal return:

Few storytellers have displayed so profound a kinship with the spirit of the fairy tale as did Leskov. This involves tendencies that were promoted by the dogmas of the Greek Orthodox church. As is well known, Origen's speculation about *apokatastasis* (the entry of all souls into paradise), which was rejected by the Roman Catholic church, played a significant part in these dogmas. Leskov was very much influenced by Origen. In keeping with Russian folk belief, he interpreted the resurrection less as a transfiguration than as a disenchantment [*Entzauberung*], in a sense akin to fairy tales.³⁹

Benjamin links Leskov's "kinship with the spirit of the fairy tale," a narrative form created, as Benjamin explains, to fend off mythic fears, with Origen's doctrine of apokatastasis, which he elucidates as a theory of universal salvation or restitution. Yet rather than describing Origen's influence on Leskov as leading to a theory of restoration, he describes it as "disenchantment," reminding us that fairy tales contain not only magical moments but also their undoing.

Benjamin makes paradoxical use of the term *Entzauberung*, which Max Weber uses to describe the devaluation of religion by modern society.⁴⁰ Here Benjamin uses it to describe Leskov's Origen-influenced interpretation of resurrection as a reversal of the process of perfection. While Leibniz alluded to Origen's doctrine of apokatastasis to describe a process of perfection that comes about in minute steps through repetition, Benjamin turns the term on its head to denote a process of destruction of the perfect façade or semblance that is linked, elsewhere, with redemption.⁴¹

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³⁹ Benjamin, "The Storyteller", p. 158.

⁴⁰ Benjamin explicitly responded to Weber's *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion* in the fragment "Capitalism and Religion" from 1921; see Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 1913-1926, M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings (eds.), Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004, pp. 288-291.

⁴¹ See Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 1938-1940, H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (eds.), Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 390. Benjamin's conception of redemption (*Erlösung*) is understood

Weber's description of modernity as haunted by the ghosts of religion is echoed in Benjamin's suggestion that the process of secularisation, which brought about the rise of modernity, is coupled by an impoverishment of experience. Leskov's "disenchantment" therefore parallels the decline in storytelling. "The Storyteller" was written several months after the second version of the "Artwork" essay, and the decline of the art of storytelling has its counterpart in the decline of the aura described therein.⁴² The "aura" of the work of art, arising from its unique presence in time and place, vanishes with the introduction of reproducibility, the possibility of reproducing its image in multiple copies.⁴³ The mechanically repeated production of precise copies replaces the repetition of experience through storytelling, in a parallel process to the replacement of myth by history. The mythical elements do not disappear, then, but rather take another form. Benjamin, like Leibniz, uses the concept of apokatastasis in order to consider the repeatability of events, but the results of this repeatability bring about destruction rather than perfection. However, this destruction, or disenchantment, is productive in that it makes visible a new, nostalgic beauty in that which is about to disappear.⁴⁴

In a fragment from "Convolut N" of the *Arcades Project*, apokatastasis is presented contra Hegel's dialectical model of progress:

Modest methodological proposal for the cultural-historical dialectic. It is very easy to establish oppositions, according to determinate points of view, within the various fields of any epoch, such that on one side lies the 'productive', 'forward looking', 'lively', 'positive' part of any epoch, and on the other side the abortive,

by Löwy as referring to both the concept of apokatastasis and Jewish messianism. Both concepts, he writes, share a double meaning: in apokatastasis, the restitution of the past is at the same time a renewal. The same dual meaning, the restoration of the past, on the one hand, and a utopian inclination, on the other, resides in the Jewish messianic tradition. The Jewish, messianic and cabbalistic equivalent of the Christian apokatastasis is, as Scholem argues in his article "Kabbala" in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1932), *tikkun*. Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, London, Verso, 2016, pp. 83–84.

⁴² Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, Second Version", in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, pp. 101–133. See Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, London, Verso, 1995, p. 134.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴⁴ Benjamin, "The Storyteller", p. 146.

retrograde and obsolescent. [...] On the other hand, every negation has its value solely as background for the delineation of the lively, the positive. It is therefore of decisive importance that a new partition be applied to this initially excluded negative component so that, by shifting the angle of vision [*Verschiebung des Geschichtswinkels*] (but not its scale [*maßstäbe*]!) a positive element emerges in it too – something different from that previously signified. And so on, ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis.⁴⁵

Benjamin ironically suggests a “modest” proposal for a materialist historiography. Instead of easily finding dichotomic oppositions between the positive and negative in every epoch, he proposes breaking the negative into components and shifting one’s point of view to open up a view of the positive within the negative. This repeated procedure results in a “historical apocatastasis” that continues to infinity. The entirety of the past is brought into the present, which means there is no selection involved in this apocatastasis. On the other hand, each cycle is slightly different than the previous one through shifting the angle of vision. Benjamin describes, in other words, a process of infinite differentiation as an alternative to Hegelian dialectics. Return is described as seeing what already exists in a new light, from a new angle or point of view.

Eternal return takes the form, in the *Arcades Project*, of the process of commodification deriving from mass production. Benjamin’s critique of progress, we must keep in mind, is also a critique of capitalism, as motivated and preconditioned by progress. As Buck-Morss writes, commodification reveals the true nature of progress as the repetition of the ever same. Progress is exposed as producing a process of a mythical, automatised return in a phenomenon unique to capitalist society: fashion.⁴⁶

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To summarise, unlike Plato, Origen’s and Leibniz’s concepts of eternal return, which link return to a process of approaching heavenly perfection, Benjamin describes Leskov’s return as a process of destruction or decline. The decline of storytelling is part of a bigger process in which history replaces myth, only to succumb to mythical return in the guise of progress. Benjamin describes sto-

⁴⁵ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [N1a,3], p. 459.

⁴⁶ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1999, p. 97.

rytelling as a secularised chronicle; the process of secularisation detaches the story from its mythical origins, still present in Leskov. The storyteller's horizon is hence disenchantment, that is, secularised salvation. The repetition of events in storytelling is replaced, during the modern era, by their repeated narration in secularised historical accounts, while the idea of progress replaces universal salvation.

Although Leibniz is not mentioned by name in the Leskov essay, the "life" of the story, as described therein, resonates with the idea of the work of art as a monad that virtually contains its "fore- and after-history" from the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*.⁴⁷ In "The Task of the Translator", Benjamin similarly describes translation as the "after-life" (*Nachleben*), which is in a sense virtually contained within the original work.⁴⁸ Benjamin is informed by Leibniz's description of future events as contained within the "complete individual", and elsewhere, ideas and truths as existing virtually within us.⁴⁹

In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin returns to this idea, describing a "critical point" in time in which the artwork accedes to legibility.⁵⁰ Critique or translation, the "afterlives" of a work, are inscribed or virtually present within it, and can be actualised through its imperfect repetition. As in the case of the "methodological proposal" cited above, repetition enables novelty to emerge through minute variations of one's point of view. This imperfect repetition, or repetition with a difference, is to be distinguished from the commodification of objects that produces perfect, identical copies as in August Blanqui's alarming model of eternal return, to which Benjamin refers in his "Exposé" of the *Arcades Project*.⁵¹ Hence the "founding concept" of historical materialism, according to Benjamin, is the "actualisation" of virtual histories, in which the new is produced through

⁴⁷ Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, p. 27.

⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, pp. 253–263.

⁴⁹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Preface", in *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 49. Serres notes that, for Leibniz, both knowledge and existence develop in a manner analogous to reading, and the fundamental state of being is the "impression of expression" (*l'impression de l'expression*). Serres, *Le Système de Leibniz*, p. 543.

⁵⁰ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [N3,1], p. 463.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

imperfect repetition, as opposed to “progress”, in which the identical is repeated without allowing novelty to emerge.⁵²

The Eternal Return of Impossible Worlds

In his concept of eternal return, Deleuze puts forward, like Benjamin, a critique of historical progress, seeking to challenge, first and foremost, Hegel’s dialectic thought. Eternal return alone, according to Deleuze, can transcend dichotomic thought through unlimited repetition, reaching beyond the oppositions between negative and positive, identical and different. By consisting of continual movement, always “becoming”, yet never striving towards or reaching any external goal, eternal return challenges Hegel’s teleological, progress-driven conceptions of thought and history.

When outlining his concept of eternal return, Deleuze insists he is not referring to the repetition of the “Same” or of the “Identical”, but rather of that which is different. This seems to indicate that his concept of eternal return drastically breaks from the traditions of cyclical cosmology and universal restitution that Leibniz and Benjamin draw on.

How could the reader believe that Nietzsche, who was the greatest critic of these categories, implicated everything, the Same, the Identical, the Equal, the I and the Self in the eternal return? How could it be believed that he understood the eternal as a cycle, when he posed ‘his’ hypothesis with every cyclical hypothesis? How could it be believed that he lapsed into the insipid idea of an *opposition* between a circular time and a linear time, between ancient and modern time?⁵³

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Deleuze does not mention, in his readings of Leibniz in *Difference and Repetition*, *Logic of Sense*, or *The Fold*, the texts in which Leibniz directly discusses eternal return, probably because Leibniz’s “Apokatastasis” and “Apokatastasis Pantou” were not translated and widely discussed until the appearance of

⁵² *Ibid.*, [N2,2], p. 460.

⁵³ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton, London, Continuum, 2004, p. 299.

Fichant's edition in 1991.⁵⁴ Deleuze nevertheless often mentions Leibniz when discussing eternal return, for example in *Difference and Repetition*:

Leibniz's only error was to have linked difference to the negative of limitation [...] because he linked the series to the principle of convergence, without seeing that divergence itself was an object of affirmation, or that the impossibles belonged to the same world and were affirmed as the greatest crime and the greatest virtue of the one and only world, that of eternal return.⁵⁵

Deleuze is referring to Leibniz's concepts of "compossibility" and "impossibility". According to Leibniz, as mentioned, the existence of our world is contingent upon its selection by God from among from the multiplicity of possible worlds. Leibniz distinguishes between the "possible" and the "compossible", the latter designating that which conforms with the actual system. In order to exist in actuality, all things must fit together, according to the principle of pre-established harmony. There is an infinity of possible yet "impossible" worlds; however, only our world exists in actuality because it contains everything that is jointly possible, or *compossible*. As opposed to the current day "multiverse" argument for the actual existence of infinite universes, or David Lewis's modal realism, for Leibniz, the multiplicity of worlds, or universes, do not all exist in actuality.⁵⁶ This does not mean that they do not exist at all; rather, they exist on a different modal level than our own world. Leibniz highlights that not every possible substance must be actualised at some point; only those that are jointly possible, or compossible, are actualised by God's choice of our best of possible worlds.⁵⁷

In Deleuze's radical reading of Leibniz, all impossibles, or "virtual worlds" as Leibniz sometimes refers to them, must exist together in our one and only world. That is, the infinite "returns" are in fact a multiplicity of worlds that ex-

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⁵⁴ "De L'horizon de la doctrine humain" was published by Louis Couturat in 1901, but not in full. See Michel Fichant, "Avant Propos", in Leibniz, *De l'horizon de la doctrine humaine*, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 51.

⁵⁶ See David K. Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986.

⁵⁷ For Leibniz's distinction between the metaphysical and physical necessity that underlies these various modal levels of existence, see Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "On the Ultimate Origination of all Things (1697)", in *Philosophical Essays*, pp. 149–154.

ist simultaneously, constantly generating differences within our own universe. Deleuze's main critique of Leibniz, whom he describes in *Difference and Repetition* as a thinker of the identical, targets the "limitation" of Leibniz's philosophical system, manifest in his contention that the infinity of series that make up the universe converge towards God. Deleuze seeks to surpass these limitations through what he views as Nietzsche's Dionysian, open-ended eternal return.

In *The Fold*, this critique becomes implicit to the extent that Badiou accurately describes the voice of Deleuze, in this work, as that of "Deleuze-Leibniz".⁵⁸ Thus, he excuses the lack of diverging series in Leibniz's philosophy by suggesting that these were only imaginable after Leibniz's time, during the neo-Baroque. In order to avoid diverging series existing side-by-side, Deleuze writes, Baroque thinkers like Leibniz relegated each to different worlds. "With the neo-Baroque, with its unfurling of divergent series in the same world, comes the interruption of compossibilities on the same stage, where Sextus will rape *and* not rape Lucretia, where Cesar crosses *and* does not cross the Rubicon."⁵⁹ Although this modern "restaging" of Baroque drama can only happen in the neo-Baroque, Leibniz comes closest to its articulation in his description, in his *Theodicy*, of the "crystal pyramid", as Deleuze calls it.

The myth that seals Leibniz's *Theodicy* is described elsewhere by Deleuze as "a source of all modern literature."⁶⁰ Leibniz retells the story of Sextus Tarquinius, son of the last Etruscan king ruling Rome, who raped Lucretia, wife of Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus – an act that led to the foundation of the Roman Republic. His version of the myth centres on the priest Theodorus, who travels to Athens at the bidding of Sextus, and falls asleep in the Goddess's temple, waking up before a palace. "You see here the palace of the fates, where I keep watch and ward. Here are representations not only of that which happens but also of all that which is possible," says Pallas Athena, daughter of Jupiter, who appears at the gates.⁶¹ She accompanies Theodorus through the palace halls, showing him

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⁵⁸ Alain Badiou, "Gilles Deleuze, The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque", in C. V. Boundas and D. Olkowski (eds.), *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy*, London, Routledge, 2019, pp. 51–69.

⁵⁹ Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, p. 82.

⁶⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 303.

⁶¹ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, § 414, p. 375.

a multiplicity of possible worlds, brought to life by her voice, every one of which representing a possible fate for Sextus. These worlds, virtually existing side-by-side in the magical palace and activated by sound and touch, each populated by its own Sextus, are impossible yet simultaneously possible.

In one of the halls Theodorus sees a grand volume, and, asks Athena what it is; she replies that it is the history of the world they are in.⁶² In Leibniz's myth, a multiplicity of virtual worlds, each with its own history, is contained in a unique spatial construct, Athena's pyramid-shaped palace. In a sense, it comprises a spatialised version of the doctrine of eternal return: instead of the infinite repetition of our single world and its history, there is an infinite multiplication of worlds and histories all converging at the magical locus of the palace.

Leibniz's "crystal pyramid" is the most complete expression of his theory of multiple compossible worlds, serving as final proof of his theory of God's selection of the best world out of an infinity of possible ones. Theodorus finally reaches the "real true world" at the top of the pyramid, where he understands that Sextus's sin, committed freely, had served the greater purpose of founding the Roman Empire. One of the morals of the story being that although everything has a reason, according to Leibniz's "principle of sufficient reason", these are often hidden from mortal eyes.

For Deleuze, there is no best of possible worlds, and the immanence of multiple worlds within our own articulated in *The Fold* by "Deleuze-Leibniz" was pre-empted by the figure of eternal return as described in *Difference and Repetition*. As Ansell-Pearson writes, in his concept of eternal return Deleuze expounds an "ethics of the event."⁶³ This concept forms part of Deleuze's challenge of Kant's transcendental system through the relational, open-ended thought

⁶² *Ibid.*, § 415, p. 376.

⁶³ Keith Ansell Pearson, "Living the Eternal Return as the Event: Nietzsche with Deleuze", *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 14 (1997), p. 66. Ansell-Pearson suggests these ethics are inspired primarily by Bergson, but as manifest in *The Fold*, it is Leibniz's understanding of predication as event-producing change that underlies Deleuze's concept of the event and its ethical implications, expressed in early works through the concept of eternal return.

of the event, or in other words, through the articulation of “planes of immanence”.⁶⁴

Selection and difference, principles Deleuze later outlines in relation to Leibniz’s philosophy, are crucial to his reading of Nietzsche.⁶⁵ However, while in Leibniz’s system it is God who selects the best, actual world from among many; in Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche, eternal return serves in itself as a principle of selection. Deleuze describes eternal return as a reformulation of Kant’s categorical imperative, in which universalisation is replaced with repetition: “whatever you will, will it in such a way that you also will its eternal return.”⁶⁶

In Leibniz’s differential and infinitesimal calculus, difference is understood through a common ground, or system, rather than by converting differences into one another. The principle of continuity, which follows the same logic of infinitesimal differences, underlies his relational metaphysics, in which things are comprehended not by their stable essence, but rather through their function in a system and their relations to other components. This forms the basis for Deleuze’s understanding of “intensity”. As he writes in the fifth chapter of *Difference and Repetition*, “every intensity is differential; by itself a difference.”⁶⁷ Deleuze describes difference as internal, “intensive” or qualitative, unlike quantitative differences such as size or number. The differences produced by returns are variations in intensity, or degrees of power. Deleuze comes close to Leibniz’s description, in “Apokatastasis”, of minute, sometimes imperceptible differences between repeated events. Leibniz seems to be referring, like Deleuze, to differences in intensity, that is, differences in degree rather than in kind.

Through his concept of eternal return, Deleuze proposes a new way of thinking time, in which a difference of intensity replaces hierarchisation. Unlike Ben-

⁶⁴ Deleuze describes Nietzsche’s “eternal return” as a “plane of immanence”; see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell, London, Verso, 2011, p. 65.

⁶⁵ Catherine Malabou argues that Nietzsche does not have a concept of difference; see Catherine Malabou, “The Eternal Return and the Phantom of Difference”, *Parrhesia*, 10 (2010), pp. 21–29.

⁶⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. H. Tomlinson, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 68.

⁶⁷ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 222.

jamin, who viewed Nietzsche's eternal return as a form of a mythic repetition, and described commodification – the result of repeated production – as perpetuating capitalism and progress; Deleuze calls for a form of eternal return, based on his interpretation of Nietzsche as delineating an opposition between ancient and modern figures of return.⁶⁸ In the former, ancient version, Deleuze writes, time is subordinated to a cyclical, eternal movement of the world. The eternal cycle is predestined, resulting from divine decision. In the latter, modern version, time is no longer subordinated to movement and the cycle results from blind chance or necessity.⁶⁹ In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze describes how, for Nietzsche, the inseparability of chance and necessity guides the notion of eternal return, “the necessary result of all chance.”⁷⁰

Although Zarathustra is a teacher and prophet-like figure, the becoming (*devenir*) of eternal return is not oriented towards a future (*avenir*) of messianic expectation nor of capitalist progress. For Deleuze, return does not lead to perfection, salvation, or destruction. It simply affirms becoming, thereby posing a challenge to dialectical and transcendental thought. Deleuze's model of return is therefore unlike the one Benjamin refers to in many ways, yet they share the critique of progress-driven thought and history, as well as supporting an anti-historicist, unhinged, interrupted temporality.

Spectres of Return

While the radical critiques of progress offered by Benjamin and Deleuze in their concepts of eternal return cannot be found in Leibniz's discussion of apokatastasis, the widespread casting of Leibniz in the role of an optimist anticipator of historical progress is just as misleading. It forms part of a prevalent historical narrative, according to which the Enlightenment concept of progress was the result of a process of secularisation, through which Judeo-Christian eschatological theories were replaced by historical teleology. Hans Blumenberg challenges

⁶⁸ As he writes, “thinking the idea of eternal recurrence once more in the nineteenth century, Nietzsche becomes the figure on whom mythic doom is now carried out.” Walter Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On a Concept of History’”, in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, pp. 403–404.

⁶⁹ See Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. D. W. Smith and M. A. Greco, London, Verso, 1998, p. 27.

⁷⁰ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 29.

this view, tracing the lineage of the concept of progress to ancient astronomers that preceded Leibniz by thousands of years.⁷¹

Rather than reaching a decisive standpoint supporting progress or universal salvation, Leibniz's last ruminations on return describe repetition as that which brings about difference and produces novelty. In the final pages of his text, he uses a range of examples that contradict the notion of a precise cyclical repetition of all that exists. Thus, he writes, using a melodic image, that "we can conclude that the human species will not always stay in its current state, because it does not conform with divine harmony to always strike the same cord."⁷² For Leibniz, nature, guided by divine harmony, dynamically unfolds like a piece of music, and therefore any repetition of notes, or events, would have to include variation.

The possibility in which humanity will reach a point in which humans are in possession of complete knowledge is incompatible with his metaphysics, according to which only God has perfect knowledge, and our knowledge as finite beings will always be limited. However, he distinguishes between logical theorems or statements, which, he argues, might at some point all be known, and sensible truths, derived from experience rather than reason, which may be varied to infinity. Since short logical statements will reach a finite point, Leibniz writes, they should be extended and enriched by sensible truths garnered from experience, implying that science should become more diverse and detailed in order to better reflect the complexity of nature. If science adopts these guidelines, Leibniz argues, we will be able, in the future, to analyse the precise structure of a fly, which, Leibniz writes, is far more complex than that of a circle.⁷³ Leibniz uses this example of organic life as requiring the most intricate form of knowledge, which may only develop across centuries.

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Leibniz describes return with minute differences as necessary for scientific advancement in complex fields such as biology or psychology in which individual contributions are limited and achievements may only be advanced by each

⁷¹ See Hans Blumenberg, "On a Lineage of the Idea of Progress", *Social Research*, 41 (1/1974), p. 6.

⁷² Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Apokatastasis", in *De l'horizon de la doctrine humaine*, p. 75.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

generation contributing to the collective amassment of knowledge. Thus the arguments in favour of progress are interwoven with those for return. Moreover, the notion of return as necessary for progress fits with the tensions in Leibniz's metaphysics more generally. As mentioned, despite the apparent unidirectionality of the monad's movement towards perfection, Leibniz's concept of pre-established harmony is at the same time inherently circular. Pre-established harmony is not a mere given, but a continual, repeated process of actualisation, following God's selection of the best possible world. As Benjamin and Deleuze highlight in their readings of Leibniz, the fissures in his system are necessary for maintaining its perfect façade.

Although neither refers directly to Leibniz's late reflections on eternal return, Deleuze and Benjamin link Leibniz's spatial structure of expression, which allows the inclusion of multiple, virtual worlds within our own, with the structure of eternal return. Their readings make manifest that what is at stake in Leibniz's reflections on eternal return is the inherent repeatability of events rather than their actual repetition. Benjamin and Deleuze draw on Leibniz's immanent, enfolded, or virtual forms in their own conceptions of virtuality; whether termed the "fold" or "virtual history", these serve the critique of teleological thought and progress, enacting a spectral return of Leibniz's apokatastasis in the twentieth century "neo-Baroque".

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