

BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION

Thesis

**NOW IS THE ENVY OF ALL OF THE DEAD:  
AN INTRODUCTION TO DON HERTZFELDT, THE ANIMATOR**

by

**CHRISTOPHER MICHAEL WEI**

B.A., Brigham Young University, 2013

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

2019

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Approved by

First Reader

---

Roy Grundmann, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Film Studies

Second Reader

---

John W. Hall, M.S.  
Master Lecturer in Film

“Do not lose time on daily trivialities. Do not dwell on petty detail. For all of these things melt away and drift apart within the obscure traffic of time. Live well and live broadly. You are alive and living now. Now is the envy of all of the dead.”

- Emily

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am drawn to films about young suffering (*Billy's Balloon*), the pain of nostalgia (*World of Tomorrow*), the inevitable perpetuation of generational trauma (*It's Such a Beautiful Day*), and the profound precariousness and absurdity of having been created at all (*Genre; Rejected*). One might then assume that my childhood was rough—that my love of such films is how I exorcise personal and familial demons—but this is not the case; my upbringing was generally happy. For this reason, the first people I must acknowledge here are my parents. My father has been an inexhaustible source of wisdom, instilling in me a sense of wonder about the world and about the human imagination. And my mother has been an inexhaustible source of love, instilling in me a work ethic and a humanistic understanding of moral, spiritual, and ethical considerations (in other words, a consciousness of what we owe to each other). I believe it is because of the culmination of these inheritances that I was ultimately drawn to films like Hertzfeldt's.

Next, I acknowledge my thesis advisors at Boston University, Roy Grundmann and John Hall. I am deeply indebted to their knowledge of film scholarship and to their understanding of cinematic and televisual history; more importantly, I am indebted to their consistent patience and encouragement. I would also like to acknowledge my cohort of fellow students—Richanjali Lal, Cecilia Pardo, Cayce Campbell, and Laura Brown—who provided boundless emotional and logistical support as well, even while wrestling with their own large, ambitious projects. Finally, of course, it is imperative that I acknowledge the animator, Don Hertzfeldt. May he continue to shock, inspire, and confound his viewers for many years to come.

**NOW IS THE ENVY OF ALL OF THE DEAD:  
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CHRISTOPHER MICHAEL WEI**

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis is a primer on the experimental independent animator Don Hertzfeldt, whose filmography—described by one critic as “a singular universe of stick figures in crisis”<sup>1</sup>—has for more than two decades been engaging some of the larger questions of post-millennial existence, particularly with regard to consciousness, temporality, and death. First, I will briefly introduce who Hertzfeldt is as an auteur (where he comes from, where his primary interests lie, and what his impact has been); second, I will provide an overview of the historical context in which his oeuvre should be placed (i.e. the history of animation and of experimental cinema); third, I will closely analyze his work, examining questions of style and narrative, starting from his student films and continuing to his more recent films; and fourth, I will explore some of the philosophical implications of recurring Hertzfeldtian motifs and themes (particularly with regard to consciousness, temporality, and death) before concluding.

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<sup>1</sup> Ehrlich, David. “Don Hertzfeldt on ‘World of Tomorrow Episode Two’ and Expanding Upon the Best Short Film of the Century.” *IndieWire*, 17 November 2017.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Who is Don Hertzfeldt?

Don Hertzfeldt (born in 1976) is an American independent experimental filmmaker who has been making animated shorts (and one feature) since his student films of 1995–1998, which he released and toured in film festivals to great acclaim. Since graduating from the University of California in Santa Barbara, he has continued to receive critical accolades: two of his films (specifically, his 2000 film *Rejected* and his 2015 film *World of Tomorrow*) have been nominated for Academy Awards. However, Hertzfeldt remains a largely independent voice, consistently critical of mainstream animation, vocally skeptical of mainstream film practices and distribution models, and markedly subversive in both the style and the content of his work.

Hertzfeldt's films feature stick figures and shaky, trembling line work, though he sometimes mixes this aesthetic with photography and other effects (especially in his later films). Yet, despite their reliance on simple and endearing stick figure protagonists (or, in some cases, non-human creatures like rabbits or fluffy cloud-creatures with faces), the films are often extremely violent or disturbing in other ways. A woman stabs someone to death in *Ah, L'Amour*, Hertzfeldt's first student film, and in his subsequent work the theme of violence continues: for example, children are viciously attacked by sentient balloons; a dance instructor drowns in an ocean of its own blood; numerous characters are hit by a train; and man yanks stitches out of another man's mouth.

However, the films are known not only for their shockingly violent content but also for their poignancy. "His debut feature [is] more cosmically satisfying than [Terrence

Malick's] *The Tree of Life*," says John DeFore in a review of Hertzfeldt's 2012 film, *It's Such a Beautiful Day*. "The film should [establish] him as a serious artist working in a medium no one else would think to take seriously."<sup>2</sup> This sentiment is echoed in other reviews, in response to *It's Such a Beautiful Day* but also to his more recent films, *World of Tomorrow* and *The Burden of Other People's Thoughts*. Hertzfeldt's reputation among critics is that of an animator who elevates animation. He reminds us that even if we do not initially give the medium sufficient credit, great profundity can be found in something as unassuming as a hand-drawn cartoon.

### **Don Hertzfeldt's Filmography**

During his studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Hertzfeldt made four 16mm animated shorts, including a violent comedy about courtship (*Ah, L'Amour*, 1995); a meta-commentary about genre (*Genre*, 1996); an interview about an awkward blind date (*Lily and Jim*, 1997); and a story about killer balloons (*Billy's Balloon*, 1998). After graduating with a degree in film, he made several more animated shorts, including a collection of nonsensical vignettes culminating in a sort of diegesis-breaking apocalypse (*Rejected*, 2000); a series of interstitial cartoons for a touring animation festival called "The Animation Show" (*Welcome to the Show*; *Intermission in the Third Dimension*; and *The End of the Show*, 2003); an epic meditation on the nature, purpose, and future of humanity (*The Meaning of Life*, 2005); a surreal nightmare about pulling stitches (*Wisdom Teeth*, 2010); and a futuristic couch gag for *The Simpsons* ("Clown in the Dumps," 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> DeFore, John. *The Hollywood Reporter*, 5 October 2012.

One of Hertzfeldt's most notable and well-known films is his 2012 feature-length triptych *It's Such a Beautiful Day* (comprised of three 20-minute shorts, including *Everything Will Be OK*, 2006; *I Am So Proud of You*, 2008; and *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, 2011). He has also received significant critical attention for his more recent films: episodic science-fiction shorts about time-travel and the nature of memory (*World of Tomorrow*, 2015; and *The Burden of Other People's Thoughts*, 2017).

### **The State of the Research**

Hertzfeldt has been the subject of critical commentary in the popular press over the years. Throughout this thesis, I will cite several interviews, reviews, and think pieces from sources like *The Dissolve*,<sup>3</sup> *Vanity Fair*,<sup>4</sup> *AV/Film*,<sup>5</sup> *The New York Times*,<sup>6</sup> *The Wrap*,<sup>7</sup> *The Atlantic*,<sup>8</sup> *Film Inquiry*,<sup>9</sup> *Collider*,<sup>10</sup> and *IndieWire*,<sup>11</sup> among others.

Hertzfeldt's position in the culture is such that he is respected by critics and fellow

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<sup>3</sup> Bramesco, Charles. "Animator Don Hertzfeldt on not trusting happy people." *The Dissolve*, 3 April 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Carter, Spike. "Oscar Nominee Don Hertzfeldt on the Disappearing Art of Short Films," *Vanity Fair*, 27 May 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Adams, Sam. "Don Hertzfeldt." *AV/Film*, 12 April 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson, John. "Cartoons Without Computers? Silly Animators!" *The New York Times*, 26 November 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Welk, Brian and Jeremy Fuster. "How 'World of Tomorrow' Director Don Hertzfeldt Stays Independent." *The Wrap*, 18 January 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Sims, David. "The Essential Saga of Don Hertzfeldt's World of Tomorrow." *The Atlantic*, 3 January 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Lee, Kevin. "IT'S SUCH A BEAUTIFUL DAY: Depression & Mortality." *Film Inquiry*, 28 August 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Foutch, Haleigh. "'World of Tomorrow Episode 2' Review: Another Soulful Sci-Fi Masterpiece from Don Hertzfeldt." *Collider*, 29 December 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Ehrlich, David. "Don Hertzfeldt on 'World of Tomorrow Episode Two' and Expanding Upon the Best Short Film of the Century." *IndieWire*, 17 November 2017.

filmmakers,<sup>12</sup> yet still largely unrecognized by mass audiences; he is considered an outsider to mainstream animation (and to mainstream filmmaking generally).

Despite the attention given to him in popular and critical discourse, Hertzfeldt has not enjoyed the same attention in academic circles. In fact, there is virtually no existing scholarly work on Hertzfeldt himself, but there is some scholarship on animation that helps me discuss Hertzfeldt's formal and thematic concerns, even if it does not directly comment on his films. Recent theoretical writing has helped me place Hertzfeldt's films in the industrial and artisanal context of his craft: for example, Karen Beckman's concept of anthropomorphism and corporeality have allowed me to better understand Hertzfeldt's films in the context of the phantasmagoric and necromantic qualities of cinema in general. Furthermore, Hertzfeldt's interest in questions about consciousness, temporality, and death have stimulated me into reading his films through discourses of philosophy, particularly some of the concepts advanced by Martin Heidegger and Martin Buber. For instance, complex and multi-layered as it is, Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* has proven surprisingly pertinent in thinking through some of Hertzfeldt's ideas, as has Buber's philosophy of dialogue and of the "I-Thou" relationship.

### **A Brief Outline**

My introduction to Hertzfeldt's work charts his artistic trajectory, investigates the main formal and thematic elements of his films, and engages with some of the

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<sup>12</sup> For more on Hertzfeldt's impact in the community, see the final section of Chapter One, in which I briefly describe some of the ways in which the reverberations of Hertzfeldt's sensibility can be felt in the work of a variety of other filmmakers and animators.

philosophical implications of the films.

In Chapter One (“Meeting Don Hertzfeldt”), I will briefly introduce who Hertzfeldt is as an auteur. What are his biographical and artistic origins? What are his primary thematic interests? How can we assess his impact on the animation community and a larger viewership? I will provide a short biography, outline the general arc of his career, introduce some of his ideological positions, and describe his influence on the industry and the larger culture.

Chapter Two (“Don Hertzfeldt in Historical Context”) provides an overview of the historical context in which Hertzfeldt’s oeuvre should be placed, i.e. the history of animation (beginning with phantasmagoria before tracing the history of animation through the Disney era) and of experimental cinema (beginning with Dada before tracing the history of the cinematic avant-garde through modernity). Throughout each of these necessarily concise historical accounts I will connect the formal qualities of Hertzfeldt’s filmography to the history, drawing comparisons and contrasts as appropriate.

Chapter Three (“The Films of Don Hertzfeldt”) closely analyzes key Hertzfeldt films, examining questions of style and narrative, starting from his student films and continuing to his more recent films. I discuss the films with regard to their use of dark humor, their subversion of tropes and expectations, their experimental approaches to medium and structure, and their treatment of character and story, among other concerns. I also discuss the ways in which the films seem to be in conversation with each other, a dialectical dynamic which allows Hertzfeldt to occupy a space between pessimistic and optimistic, between mean-spirited and warm-hearted, between abstractly conceptual and intimately



concrete, and between jarringly violent and disarmingly gentle.

Chapter Four (“Understanding Don Hertzfeldt”) explores some of the philosophical implications of recurring Hertzfeldtian motifs and themes, particularly with regard to consciousness, temporality, and death. To aid in this analysis I will draw on film theory and philosophy, but also on scholars from psychology (regarding the experience of time), history (regarding the function of memories and memorials), physics (regarding Newtonian and Einsteinian chronology), theology (regarding soteriological questions raised by *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*), and biology (regarding death and the ways in which it is conceptualized and discussed).

## CHAPTER ONE: MEETING DON HERTZFELDT

### Biographical Background and Career Summary

As a child, Hertzfeldt avidly watched movies. His earliest memories are of seeing *The Empire Strikes Back* in the cinema as a four-year-old; he knew then and there that he wanted to be a filmmaker<sup>13</sup>—specifically, he wanted to be an animator, like the stop-motion legend Phil Tippett, who worked with Jon Berg and Dennis Muren to animate the AT-AT walkers<sup>14</sup> that Joe Johnston had designed for *Empire*.<sup>15</sup> He also fondly remembers discovering and being enraptured by Hal Ashby’s morbidly comic romance, *Harold and Maude* (1971): “it was one of the few VHS tapes my local library had,” he says, “so I would just check it out over and over again.”<sup>16</sup> Another early memory Hertzfeldt recounts is that of seeing Stanley Kubrick’s sci-fi magnum opus *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) when he was young: “I just couldn’t believe that human beings could make music and images come together like that,” he recalls, referring particularly to the ‘dawn of man’ sequence.<sup>17</sup>

Hertzfeldt has occasionally mentioned other notable influences, including a variety of classic filmmakers like Steven Spielberg (“when *Saving Private Ryan* came out, I went to

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<sup>13</sup> Timberg, Scott. “Don Hertzfeldt is the most inventive underground animator in America. Will he ever make his peace with Hollywood?” *New Times L.A.*, February 2002.

<sup>14</sup> McGowan, Chris. “Phil Tippett: Following His Imagination to the Stars and Beyond.” *VFX Voice*, 13 December 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Hartlaub, Peter. “At the AT-AT’s birth: the improvising of a ‘Star Wars’ icon.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 19 May 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. “Don Hertzfeldt’s Top 10.” *The Criterion Collection*, 22 October 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. “hi it’s don hertzfeldt (filmmaker) how are you? AMA.” *Reddit.com*, 4 January 2018.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/7o5raz/hi\\_its\\_don\\_hertzfeldt\\_filmmaker\\_how\\_are\\_you\\_ama/](https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/7o5raz/hi_its_don_hertzfeldt_filmmaker_how_are_you_ama/)

the theater two days in a row [to] study the technique”),<sup>18</sup> iconic comedians like Charles Chaplin (whom Hertzfeldt calls “[a] desperate beam of optimism, laughing in the face of evil”) and the Pythons (“heroes, all of them”), as well as avant-garde filmmakers like the surrealist iconoclast Luis Buñuel (Hertzfeldt describes *The Exterminating Angel* as something “like a wonderful fever dream of a classic lost *Twilight Zone* script, with an occasional bear”), the poetic experimentalist Stan Brakhage (Hertzfeldt describes Brakhage’s work—kaleidoscopic short films like *Mothlight* and *Dog Star Man*—as “fleeting glimpses of magic”), and the unconventional documentarian Godfrey Reggio (primarily known for *Koyaanisqatsi*, the epic nonverbal manifesto about nature and balance, which Hertzfeldt loves for its ending).<sup>19</sup>

At age 15, Hertzfeldt decided to go into filmmaking, and painstakingly taught himself animation (initially choosing the medium because he couldn’t afford to make live-action films). He worked alone for hours recording animations on VHS tapes, making little 30-second shorts frame-by-frame.<sup>20</sup> Friends and teachers acknowledged his talent and recognized his potential right away (even voting him “Most Likely to Go to Hollywood”), though he was mostly socially isolated throughout his adolescence: “people knew who I was, but they didn’t hang out with me,” he remembers. “I was [seen as] ‘that weird guy who makes the cool cartoons.’”<sup>21</sup>

Hertzfeldt studied film at the University of California, Santa Barbara. There he made

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<sup>18</sup> Mufson, Beckett. “10 Confessions from ‘Rejected Cartoons’ Animator Don Hertzfeldt.” *Vice*, 5 April 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. “Don Hertzfeldt’s Top 10.” *The Criterion Collection*, 22 October 2014.

<sup>20</sup> “Script to Screen: Don Hertzfeldt & World of Tomorrow.” *UCTV*, 1 March 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Timberg, Scott. “Don Hertzfeldt is the most inventive underground animator in America. Will he ever make his peace with Hollywood?” *New Times L.A.*, February 2002.

four 16mm animated shorts, including a bleak, rudimentary, and graphically violent comedy about courtship and gender relations (*Ah, L'Amour*, 1995); a fourth-wall-breaking meta-commentary about generic conventions (*Genre*, 1996); a partially improvised story about the awkward difficulties of romance and dating (*Lily and Jim*, 1997); and a controversial, disturbing short about inanimate objects inexplicably attempting infanticide (*Billy's Balloon*, 1998).

These student films were popular at festivals. They often received critical acclaim (Hertzfeldt was awarded more than 50 awards in total for the four of them), and each film raised enough money to fund the next one.<sup>22</sup> *Billy's Balloon* was successful enough to allow Hertzfeldt the funds to finally buy a 35mm camera, with which he then shot his first post-student film, *Rejected* (2000), a nine-minute cacophony of non sequiturs, experimental techniques, and a cast of increasingly surreal characters including an anthropomorphic banana and a dancing cloud.

*Rejected* acts as a sort of manifesto for Hertzfeldt's career generally—full of snarky anti-consumerist ideology, terrifying body horror, and a fiercely independent spirit. The diegesis feels conspicuously semi-autobiographical, with a story of an up-and-coming animator who had been commissioned to draw various shorts and commercials and whose concepts (increasingly bizarre, unsettling, and unstable as the film progresses) are

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<sup>22</sup> “All of [Hertzfeldt's] films are made from the funds of fans purchasing his other movies. He hasn't taken money from studios or even grants, and he wants to more of this model. ‘We have to reprogram audiences to actually support the things that they want to see more of,’ he says. ‘Imagine asking a plumber to come fix your pipes, except you're not going to pay him, you'll just give him great exposure and a nice review. You'd get punched in the face.’” Mufson, Beckett. “Don Hertzfeldt Explains How to Go DIY and Still Make Money.” *Vice*, 29 January 2018.

consistently rejected. When they first see the short, some audience members assume that it is based on a true story about a failed advertising career and subsequent breakdown, though this is not the case.<sup>23</sup>

Many of the challenging themes, disturbing subject matter, and bizarre aesthetics that we see in *Rejected* continue throughout Hertzfeldt's later films, including more overtly philosophical films like the existential symphony *The Meaning of Life* (2005) and the emotionally poignant epic *It's Such a Beautiful Day* (2012). He also continues to explore the body horror motif (*Wisdom Teeth*, 2010) and his discomfort with consumerism (*Clown in the Dumps*, 2014). Still, despite his consistently independent sensibility, Hertzfeldt's position is not exactly liminal. He has enjoyed considerable recognition, at least with regard to critics. To date, he has won more than 250 awards at film festivals,<sup>24</sup> and a couple of his films (2000's *Rejected* and 2015's *World of Tomorrow*) were even nominated for Academy Awards.<sup>25</sup> Eventually, his work has even been featured on *The Simpsons*—arguably the pinnacle of “mainstream” American animation. In 2017, in response to Disney's (then impending) purchase of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox, Hertzfeldt dryly tweeted: “you own this thing now, sorry,”<sup>26</sup> attaching a screenshot of the truly gonzo couch gag that he had animated for the sitcom back in 2014. The couch gag (which shows Homer accidentally triggering time travel with his remote control) hypothesizes what the Simpson family might look like

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<sup>23</sup> FBE. “YouTubers React to Rejected.” *YouTube*, 6 June 2013.  
<https://youtu.be/bV2A9GpB0-0>

<sup>24</sup> “Script to Screen: Don Hertzfeldt & World of Tomorrow.” *UCTV*, 1 March 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Kupecki, Josh. “Don Hertzfeldt Snags Oscar Nomination,” *The Austin Chronicle*, 14 January 2016.

<sup>26</sup> @donhertzfeldt (Don Hertzfeldt). “disney you own this thing now sorry. but i am available to consult on the theme park ride” *Twitter*, 14 December 2017 3:46 pm.  
<https://twitter.com/donhertzfeldt/status/941409187350962179>

hundreds of years into the future, satirizing the show's longevity—along with its precarious mix of warm-hearted sentimentality and cold-blooded commercialism—with Hertzfeldt's signature sense of grotesqueness and grandeur. One commentator compared the animation to the similarly grim couch gag that Banksy had contributed in 2010 (in which the British activist and artist imagines the repetitive manufacturing of Simpsons merchandise in bleak sweatshops overseas), and called Hertzfeldt's piece “easily the meanest thing the show has said about itself since ‘They’ll Never Stop The Simpsons.’”<sup>27</sup>

One of Hertzfeldt's projects currently in pre-production, *Antarctica*, is perhaps the best indication of the ways in which his career has been reaching an apotheosis of sorts: he has been collaborating with Phil Tippet's studio in Berkeley, workshopping still-amorphous ideas into something manageable (“the animation I had in my head for the project,” he explains, is “something I had never really seen before”).<sup>28</sup> Considering that Hertzfeldt has esteemed Tippet as one of his biggest heroes for decades, the fact that he now gets to work with the man seems both remarkable and appropriate.

### **Hertzfeldt's Philosophy**

Hertzfeldt has several misgivings about consumerist society and commercial art. He has assured his audience that he will never accept offers of advertising work, as he believes

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<sup>27</sup> Hughes, William. “Don Hertzfeldt reminds Disney it now owns his weird-ass *Simpsons* intro.” *The AV Club*, 14 December 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. “hi it's don hertzfeldt (filmmaker) how are you? AMA.” *Reddit.com*, 4 January 2018.  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/7o5raz/hi\\_its\\_don\\_hertzfeldt\\_filmmaker\\_how\\_are\\_you\\_ama/](https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/7o5raz/hi_its_don_hertzfeldt_filmmaker_how_are_you_ama/)

advertisements to be “lies.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, he is critical of the entertainment industry in general, specifically with regard to film: he calls the state of modern animation ‘Disneyfied,’ which is to say that he thinks it has limited itself, that the potentially oceanic medium is now just a kiddie pool. He calls this self-limitation “a horrible thing,” and insists that “there should be comedy animated movies, horror animated movies—there’s no reason they can’t have every genre.”<sup>30</sup>

Still, Hertzfeldt argues that a large cultural shift is needed in the industry and in how we consume (and, more to the point, how we purchase) short films: “artists shouldn’t be making art on the side; it should be their job. We need to re-train audiences who’ve grown used to the free YouTube model [and convince them] that shorts are worth paying for.”<sup>31</sup> Here, Hertzfeldt is separating commercialization from commerce: even when art can and must transcend commercial considerations and limitations, it nonetheless can and must be funded in order to exist. Put simply, as webcomic artists Drew Fairweather and Natalie Dee would say, “[even] Shakespeare got to get paid, son.”<sup>32</sup>

Hertzfeldt’s economic philosophies go beyond a mere distaste of consumerism and commercialism; he also takes digs at capitalism and class divisions during interviews and

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<sup>29</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. “‘Bitter Films’ FAQ.” *Bitterfilms.com*, archived on 4 January 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Timberg, Scott. “Don Hertzfeldt is the most inventive underground animator in America. Will he ever make his peace with Hollywood?” *New Times L.A.*, February 2002. Granted, this quote is almost 20 years old. One could argue that in the past two decades, common perceptions of animation in public, critical, and scholarly discourses have changed a bit regarding the medium’s worth and versatility beyond ostensibly shallow consumer appeal. Arguably, however, this change in the discourse(s) is largely due to the influence of the likes of Don Hertzfeldt. More on this in the next section.

<sup>31</sup> Carter, Spike. “Oscar Nominee Don Hertzfeldt on the Disappearing Art of Short Films,” *Vanity Fair*, 27 May 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Fairweather, Drew and Natalie Dee. “got to get paid.” *Married to the Sea*, 13 February 2006.

throughout his films (in his futuristic, dystopian science fiction, he shows citizens scrambling to avoid death, loss, and catastrophe, turning to all sorts of technologically advanced but frighteningly unpredictable methods—the safest of which are reserved for the wealthy, of course, while the poor must risk their lives with things like “discount time-travel”).<sup>33</sup>

He is also very interested in more personal, emotional issues. He has spoken often in interviews about the value of pain, the healing and exorcistic power of laughter, and the strange relationship between artist, art, and audience. Regarding pain, he often quotes Khalil Gibran (“the deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain”),<sup>34</sup> and stresses the importance of allowing ourselves to feel sadness. This is why he finds it important that in *World of Tomorrow*, Emily experiences loss (by losing David) and expresses that it has made her feel more alive. “People you meet who have gone through depression or loss, they always seem more interesting—they always seem more grateful,” Hertzfeldt suggests. “We all saw *Inside Out*, right?”<sup>35</sup> Regarding the power of laughter, when asked about why he seems so interested in “teasing out the humor from bleak situations,” Hertzfeldt’s reply is to say that “it’s necessary for our mental survival.” He claims that “if we can’t laugh in the face of some horrible tragedy that is happening to us, there is really nothing left.”<sup>36</sup> This is reminiscent of a common argument from

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<sup>33</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *World of Tomorrow*, Bitter Films, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Gibran, Khalil. “On Joy and Sorrow.” *The Prophet*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1923, page 18.

<sup>35</sup> “Script to Screen: Don Hertzfeldt & World of Tomorrow.” *UCTV*, 1 March 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Bramesco, Charles. “Animator Don Hertzfeldt on not trusting happy people.” *The Dissolve*, 3 April 2015.



comedians and others—that black humor can be therapeutic<sup>37</sup> (Chaplin once posited that comedy is an “attitude of defiance,” without which we will “go insane,”<sup>38</sup> and even President Lincoln darkly speculated: “with the fearful strain that is upon me day and night, if I did not laugh, I should die”).<sup>39</sup> Many of Hertzfeldt’s fans have acknowledged and affirmed this life-giving power in his films, because of their bleak humor but also because of their often humanistic, empathetic tragedy, especially in response to *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*. “When people get in touch after seeing it, sometimes with very personal things, it’s wonderful,” says Hertzfeldt, with one reservation: “but I can’t help but feel one step removed from it all.” He then goes on to speculate on the nature of art and on what it really means to have made and released a film:

“A movie like that is this autonomous extension of making sometimes deeply personal relationships out there, by itself, with strangers, people you will never meet: a weird Don-bot saying hello to millions of people on your behalf, in their personal spaces, things you will never know about unless they contact you. I raised it, but it’s moved out. So, it often feels like if someone tells you, ‘Oh hey, your son saved me from drowning last week.’ You would smile and think, ‘Oh, cool. Yeah, he’s a good kid.’”<sup>40</sup>

With comments like these, Hertzfeldt is clearly cognizant of the complicated way in which art takes on a life of its own after its creation—beyond supposed authorial intent,

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<sup>37</sup> Mobbs, Meaghan. “An Awful Joke Can Feel Pretty Good.” *Psychology Today*, 10 May 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Chaplin, Charles. *My Autobiography*, Simon & Schuster, 1964. Pages 303–304.

<sup>39</sup> Peterson, Merrill D. “Aspects of Character.” *Lincoln in American Memory*, Oxford University Press, 1995.

<sup>40</sup> Bramesco, Charles. “Animator Don Hertzfeldt on not trusting happy people.” *The Dissolve*, 3 April 2015.

beyond the artist's personal and emotional space(s), beyond anything that can be confined to the pages of a screenplay or the frames of a storyboard. As Stéphane Mallarmé (paraphrased by Roland Barthes) might put it, "it is language which speaks, not the author."<sup>41</sup>

Finally, the three most significant philosophical concepts in which Hertzfeldt seems to be interested are consciousness, temporality, and death. His persona, his responses to inquiry, and his art are constantly orbiting complex questions about what it means to be alive, what it means to navigate space and time, and what it means when that spatiotemporal navigation is abruptly disrupted (i.e. "death"). I will explore these questions in detail, through the lens of Hertzfeldt's filmography, in Chapter Four.

### **Hertzfeldt's Impact**

During the off-hours of writing and drawing *Rejected* in 1999–2000, Hertzfeldt played with a short comic strip called *Temporary Anesthetics*,<sup>42</sup> which became a sort of predecessor for many of the ideas that ended up in films like *Rejected*, *Everything Will Be OK*, and *Wisdom Teeth*. The comic has also been cited as a possible influence for other animators like Levni Yilmaz ("Lev"), providing a Groening-esque mixture of goofy gags and dark introspection, much like Lev's work in *Tales of Mere Existence*.<sup>43</sup> Shortly after *Anesthetics*, the short film *Rejected* was released, and it became hugely popular online via

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<sup>41</sup> Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

<sup>42</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. "Temporary Anesthetics," *BitterFilms.com*, 1999–2000.

<sup>43</sup> Jessen, Taylor. "Fresh from the Festivals: July 2004's Reviews." *Animation World Magazine*, 13 July 2007.

pirated copies which Hertzfeldt allowed to spread on various instant messaging platforms and file-sharing websites.<sup>44</sup> Here is how that popularity was described retrospectively in 2018 by *The Wrap*:

The film went viral before the concept of going viral was a thing. Fans bootlegged it at midnight screenings and would spam their friends' emails with a compressed video file as though it were an actual email virus. Animators at Adult Swim and others have cited Hertzfeldt as a major influence on their work, but he's not sure if he deserves, or even wants, the credit.

"As a writer, I had never wanted to do what everyone else was doing, and suddenly it seemed like everyone else was doing some version of me. So, I felt sort of pushed away from my own work—pushed away from my own sense of humor, in a weird way—because it got to feeling so repeated and stale out there that I felt like I couldn't do anything in the same vein as *Rejected* ever again," he said.<sup>45</sup>

Echoes of Hertzfeldt's style have popped up in more mainstream contexts, too—often to his chagrin. For example, consider the FX anthology *Fargo*, in which the protagonist Gloria Burgle (Carrie Coon) reads about an android named MNSKY—"a being in search of meaning"<sup>46</sup>—wandering the earth, witnessing life and death, and watching the rise and fall of civilizations. MNSKY's adventures are portrayed in a strikingly Hertzfeldtian animated sequence,<sup>47</sup> which brings to mind the futuristic melancholy and robotic empathy

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<sup>44</sup> @donhertzfeldt (Don Hertzfeldt). "this is a nice article, however this bit is not true. i decided from the start to leave the bootlegs alone. '...the kind of thing people would share over torrents.. Hertzfeldt was quick to flag these for removal, however. YouTube regularly took down versions of the short film..'" *Twitter*, 6 November 2018 12:50 pm. <https://twitter.com/donhertzfeldt/status/1059865592042323974> (This tweet is in response to Allegra Frank's piece, "Classic viral video *Rejected* returns, looking better than ever," from *Polygon*, 6 November 2018.)

<sup>45</sup> Welk, Brian and Jeremy Fuster. "How 'World of Tomorrow' Director Don Hertzfeldt Stays Independent." *The Wrap*, 18 January 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Cameron, John. "The Law of Non-Contradiction," *Fargo*, FX, 3 May 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Handlen, Zack. "Gloria heads to Hollywood for a *Fargo* highpoint." *The AV Club*, 3 May 2017.

of *World of Tomorrow* and *The Burden of Other People's Thoughts*. On an “AMA”<sup>48</sup> on Reddit, Hertzfeldt himself noted that *Fargo* creator Noah Hawley had asked him to do the animation himself, but that he had declined the offer. “I do kind of wish they’d [ultimately] gone in a different direction,” he sighs. The similarities between the finished product and his own style “just [seem] to have confused and upset a lot of people who assumed I did do it.”<sup>49</sup> There was a similar issue nine years prior, when a series of Pop Tarts advertisements conspicuously mimicked the style of Hertzfeldt’s earlier films—particularly in their wide-eyed, loosely drawn cartoon characters undergoing bizarre, often surreal kinds of suffering and confusion. One commentator described the ads as “blatantly lift[ing] the squiggly-line style and black humor that have become Hertzfeldt’s trademarks.”<sup>50</sup> Hertzfeldt said later of the situation that it was a “double whammy” to be appropriated without compensation while also being accused of “selling out” by angry fans—“I remember walking through supermarkets for four years and you see those things staring at you from the shelves.”<sup>51</sup>

Still, regardless of how problematic these examples may be—that is, whether they should be regarded as stealing, or merely as the inevitable intercourse of constantly reverberated and reiterated ideas—there is certainly a sort of Hertzfeldt-shaped shadow on

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<sup>48</sup> Moreau, Elise. “What Exactly Is a Reddit AMA?” *Lifewire*, 11 December 2018.

<sup>49</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. “hi it’s don hertzfeldt (filmmaker) how are you? AMA.” *Reddit.com*, 4 January 2018.  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/7o5raz/hi\\_its\\_don\\_hertzfeldt\\_filmmaker\\_how\\_are\\_you\\_ama/](https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/7o5raz/hi_its_don_hertzfeldt_filmmaker_how_are_you_ama/)

<sup>50</sup> Kiefaber, David. “Don Hertzfeldt hovers over Pop Tarts ads.” *Adweek Blogs*, 18 March 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Geurts, Jimmy. “An animated conversation with Don Hertzfeldt.” *Creative Loafing Tampa Bay*, 2 April 2012.

our culture. There are predecessors to his stylistic and thematic tendencies, of course—including comedians like Buster Keaton, experimental directors like Stan Brakhage, Hollywood giants like Steven Spielberg, and independent animators like Bill Plympton (I will look more closely at some of these and others in Chapter Two), but Hertzfeldt has left a mark of his own, too. His twisted non sequiturs prefigure many Internet subcultural artifacts of the early aughts (TomSka’s *asdfmovie* comes to mind); his preoccupation with (re)configurations of time, memory, and trauma prefigures *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 2016), *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017), and *Kubo and the Two Strings* (Travis Knight, 2016); his recontextualization, humanization, and even elevation of banal or grotesque imagery prefigures *Swiss Army Man* (Daniel Scheinert and Dan Kwan, 2016), *Cameraperson* (Kirsten Johnson, 2016), and *Everything* (David O’Reilly, 2017); his sometimes menacing distortion of seemingly innocent or childlike aesthetics prefigures *Too Many Cooks* (Casper Kelly, 2014) and *Don’t Hug Me I’m Scared* (Rebecca Sloan and Joseph Pelling, 2011–2016); even his strange little fluffy cloud-creatures prefigure the shape and movement of “Lumpy Space Princess” from the popular series *Adventure Time* (Pendleton Ward, 2010–2018).

## CHAPTER TWO: DON HERTZFELDT IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

At first glance, Hertzfeldt's films appear to be breaking every rule, going against our conceptualizations or expectations of the medium. His subject matter is often provocative and unsettling. The endings of his films are often bleak. And his line work is often wavering and wobbly, which may be read as an expression of anxiety—though it is the sort of technique that traditional animators and educators like Richard Williams or Leo Salkin might call “bad animation,” or more crudely, “cock[ing] up” the “volume control.”<sup>52</sup> But unconventional as they may be, Hertzfeldt's contributions can still be understood in the context of a long tradition of animated filmmaking, from which he draws extensively.

I do not have sufficient space in this thesis to provide a perfect or comprehensive history of animation. What I aim to offer, instead, is a selective overview of the stylistic, thematic, and technical ideas to which Hertzfeldt's filmography contributes and responds. I will then offer a similarly abbreviated summary of the history of avant-garde cinema as it has influenced the more experimental side of Hertzfeldt's work.

### **Animation**

#### ***The Phantasmagoric Roots of Cinematic Animation***

In order to be able to assess Hertzfeldt's significance against the evolution of his craft, we need to be aware of the prehistory of cinematic animation, in addition to its history. In a sense, animation is much older than film itself: artists have been playing with the illusion of “moving” drawings and photographs for centuries. Phénakisticopes depicted walking

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<sup>52</sup> Sutton, Imogen. “Timing and Spacing.” *The Animators Survival Kit*, House Code, 2008.

and dancing figures in the 19<sup>th</sup> century;<sup>53</sup> magic lanterns projected skeletons removing their own skulls in the 17<sup>th</sup> century;<sup>54</sup> and rudimentary flipbook codices<sup>55</sup> showed heroes slaying giants in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>56</sup> Even Paleolithic artists (at least around 32,000 years ago, if not earlier) may have used flickering flames to illuminate cave paintings in sequence, producing a sort of proto-animation. They would show a series of images of hunting parties or other events, “framing” them with a shroud of darkness, creating a sense of temporality and narrative. “What’s more,” explains a journalist describing the findings of archaeologists like Jean-Michel Geneste and Marc Azéma, “a flickering flame in the cave may have conjured impressions of motion like a strobe light in a dark club.”<sup>57</sup> In all of these instances, what distinguishes the technology or artistry in question is its ability to give movement to something inanimate—Eadweard Muybridge’s drawing of a dancer,<sup>58</sup> Christiaan Huygens’ sketch of a skeleton,<sup>59</sup> an illuminated manuscript of a giant-slayer,<sup>60</sup> or an ancient cave painting of a tribal hunter<sup>61</sup>—which is to say that animation is

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<sup>53</sup> Prince, Stephen. “Through the Looking Glass: Philosophical Toys and Digital Visual Effects.” *Projections*, vol. 4:2, Berghahn Journals, Winter 2010, pages 19–40.

<sup>54</sup> Deac, Rossell. “The Magic Lantern and Moving Images before 1800.” *Barockberichte* 40–41, August 2005, pages 686–693.

<sup>55</sup> Here I am referring to the illustrations for the anonymous medieval poem *Sigenot*—specifically the 1470 version held at *Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg* (the library at the University of Heidelberg). Admittedly, scholars do not tend to describe *Sigenot* as a “flipbook” per se, but the images in the book depict action with an almost frame-by-frame consistency, as if they were meant to approximate a moving image.

<sup>56</sup> Millet, Victor. *Germanische Heidendichtung im Mittelalter*, Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2008, pages 349–354.

<sup>57</sup> Zorich, Zach. “Early Humans Made Animated Art.” *Nautilus*, 27 March 2014.

<sup>58</sup> Muybridge, Eadweard. “The Zoopraxiscope.” 1893.

<sup>59</sup> Huygens, Christiaan. “Pour des représentations par le moyen de verres convexes à la lampe.” *Oeuvres Complètes de Christiaan Huygens*, 1659, compiled by Martinus Nijhoff, 1950.

<sup>60</sup> Anonymous, *Sigenot*, Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, 1470.

<sup>61</sup> Azéma, Marc. *La Préhistoire du cinéma: Origines paléolithiques de la narration graphique et du cinématographe*, Diffusion Erran, 2015.

fundamentally about bringing still things into motion, or in other words it is about bringing dead things to life. (Think of the magician Paul de Philipsthal's phantasmagoria shows, which were explicitly marketed as necromantic, to the point where he was accused of fraud and expelled from Prussia.)<sup>62</sup> Arguably, other mediums, like the literary arts for example, are concerned with the same thing: through writing, a historian "exorcises death by inserting it into discourse, [thus] writing places a population of the dead on stage;"<sup>63</sup> and through rhetorical devices like apostrophe, a poet "calls up and animates the absent, the lost, and the dead."<sup>64</sup> But film (an "architecture of movement")<sup>65</sup> has always been especially interested in this problem of (re)animation—of movement, of motion, of the "living dead," and of "ontological considerations [concerning] death [and] photography."<sup>66</sup> Cinema is, by its very nature, able to "anthropomorphize inanimate objects [and] imbue abstract[ions] with a sense of life in addition to corporeality."<sup>67</sup> Hertzfeldt is invested in this notion as well, bringing to life impossible alien creatures (Simon from *World of Tomorrow*); suspending death for his protagonists (Bill from *It's Such a Beautiful Day*);

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<sup>62</sup> Tlantlaquatlapatl. *Chronic von Berlin oder Berlinische Merkwürdigkeiten*, vol. 5, Berlin, 1790.

<sup>63</sup> de Certeau, Michel. "The Place of the Dead and the Place of the Reader." *The Writing of History*, translated by Tom Conley, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, page 100 (see pages 99–102); see also Ricoeur, Paul. "History and Time," *Memory, History, Forgetting*, translated by Kathleen Blamey & David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, 2004, pages 352–369.

<sup>64</sup> Johnson, Barbara. "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion." *Diacritics*, vol. 16:1, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Spring 1986, page 31.

<sup>65</sup> Faure, Élie. "De la ciné plastique." *L'Arbre d'Éden*, Crès, 1922.

<sup>66</sup> Lauro, Sarah Juliet. "No More Room in Hell: A Half-Century of Undead Media." *Special Affects*, The University of Pittsburgh, 28–29 September 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Beckman, Karen. "Animating Film Theory: An Introduction." *Animating Film Theory*. Duke University Press, 2014, page 5.



and even imbuing ostensibly lifeless material objects with a vibrant, often violent vitality (his paper canvas from *Rejected*).

It is worth noting, however, that film (and particularly animated film) is more than a mechanism by which the (un)dead are given life; it is also a mechanism by which life or liveliness in and of itself can be explored—regardless of what, specifically, is being animated. Or, as Norman McLaren puts it: “animation is not the art of drawings that move, but the art of *movements-that-are-drawn*.”<sup>68</sup>

### ***Gertie and Other Pioneers***

Continuing to look at animation’s history, moving now into the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one sees some of these themes reiterated and reconfigured, but one also sees an increasing interest in self-reflexivity and in breaking the fourth wall (this is another motif which Hertzfeldt will regularly revisit—as seen in *Intermission in the Third Dimension*). The earliest known animation from Japan is *Katsudō Shashin*, a three-second 35mm short, likely made between 1907 and 1911;<sup>69</sup> it depicts a boy writing 活動写真 (“motion picture”) on a wall before removing his hat. The film ends with the boy turning towards the audience and bowing. A few years earlier, the world was introduced to British-American filmmaker J. Stuart Blackton (*The Enchanted Drawing*, 1900; *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces*, 1906); Blackton’s characters are similarly self-reflexive, but they do not

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<sup>68</sup> Hoffer, Thomas W. *Animation, A Reference Guide*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1981, page 5.

<sup>69</sup> López, Antonio. “A New Perspective on the First Japanese Animation.” *Published proceedings, Confia, (International Conference on Illustration and Animation)*, IPCA, 29–30 Nov 2012, pages 579–586.

directly address or acknowledge the audience. Rather, they implicitly call attention to their createdness—to the fact of their having been drawn. While we watch these characters move and morph at 20 frames per second, we sometimes literally see the hands of their creator in frame, intervening to modify or erase their lines and shapes. This diegetic acknowledgment of the animator is an idea that Hertzfeldt plays with in *Genre* (1996) and, to some extent, in *Watching Grass Grow* (2005), a time-lapse behind-the-scenes look at the creation of *The Meaning of Life* (2005).

It is imperative to acknowledge a few other pioneers of hand-drawn animation during these first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: for instance, Spanish director Segundo de Chomón scratched lines on film negatives to represent electric sparks;<sup>70</sup> French caricaturist Émile Cohl (the father of what is now called “traditional animation”)<sup>71</sup> transformed a flower into an elephant;<sup>72</sup> and on April 8, 1911, American newspaper cartoonist and vaudevillian<sup>73</sup> Winsor McCay conjured a playful, lumbering, and (sometimes) obedient dinosaur named Gertie.<sup>74</sup> Notably, in *Gertie the Dinosaur*, Gertie makes a point to acknowledge and even bow to her audience, just as the boy in *Katsudō Shashin* had done a few years prior—but Gertie also appears to interact with her creator as well. Four days after the film’s release, McCay even performed in front of live audiences with Gertie, as part of his vaudeville act,<sup>75</sup> walking in front of the screen, interacting back-and-forth with

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<sup>70</sup> de Chomón, Segundo. *El hotel eléctrico*, 1908.

<sup>71</sup> Beckerman, Howard. *Animation: The Whole Story*, Allworth Press, 2003.

<sup>72</sup> Cohl, Émile. *Fantasmagorie*, 1908.

<sup>73</sup> James, Robert. “The Father of American Animation: Winsor McCay and *Gertie the Dinosaur*.” *Artograph*, 16 October 2014.

<sup>74</sup> McCay, Winsor. *Gertie the Dinosaur*, 1914.

<sup>75</sup> Eagan, Daniel. “Gertie the Dinosaur.” *America’s Film Legacy: The Authoritative Guide to the Landmark Movies in the National Film Registry*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2009.

her. In this way McCay acted as a sort of host—the artist as a mediating link between the artifact and the audience, introducing them to each other and facilitating a shared space.<sup>76</sup> Long after McCay, this combination of animated bits with live or filmed elements would eventually evolve further—especially in stop-motion animation from Ray Harryhausen between 1953–2002 and from the aforementioned Phil Tippett between 1977 and 2013.

In examining animated films closer to the 1920s, one begins to see the development of personalities and franchise characters, most notably Otto Messmer’s and Pat Sullivan’s “Felix the Cat,” who is first introduced in *Feline Follies* (1919). On first glance, especially from today’s perspective, *Feline Follies* looks like a sort of proto-Disney production, in large part because Felix so closely resembles his future competitor and eventual successor, Mickey Mouse.<sup>77</sup> But despite its generally whimsical surrealism (cats grab musical notes out of the air to construct rudimentary automobiles), expressive characterization (tails twist and curl into question marks), and endearing anthropomorphism (speech appears in mid-air to express Felix’s thoughts and dialogue), there is something unnerving and dark about *Follies*. For example, at the end of the film, Felix discovers that his girlfriend had given birth to a litter of kittens—and apparently, he is the father—so he runs away and tries to commit suicide by sucking on a gas pipe. This is how the film ends! Even Don Hertzfeldt’s films, eight decades later, might not look quite as extreme or shocking when compared to something so blatantly macabre. This is because Hertzfeldt is not subverting or responding

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<sup>76</sup> This notion of “shared space” shows up a few times in Hertzfeldt’s films, most notably in *World of Tomorrow* (2015), in the way that Emily interacts both with Emily Prime (her audience) and with the narrative and emotional content of her memories (her artifact).

<sup>77</sup> Crafton, Donald. *Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898–1928*, University of Chicago Press, 1993.

to Felix the Cat per se. Indeed, it is more reasonable to claim that he is paying homage to Felix, especially with his frequent use of black-and-white intertitles (as in *Rejected*), floating text to indicate speech (as in *Ah, L'Amour*), and shocking violence juxtaposed with friendly aesthetics (as in *Genre*). Hertzfeldt's oeuvre is indebted to Felix—particularly his early films. Films like *Rejected* are an expansion, not a rejection, of what Otto Messmer and Pat Sullivan were trying to accomplish. The main reason why Hertzfeldt's animation feels radical in the present moment, then, is because he is subverting and responding to contemporary mainstream animation, not to Felix the Cat. And if we want to understand contemporary mainstream animation, we will need to turn our attention to the era of the Walt Disney Company.

### ***Mickey Mouse and Homer Simpson***

Walter Disney opened his studio in 1923, starting with serial franchises like *Alice Comedies* (1923–1927) and *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* (1927–1951), eventually getting significant acclaim with the introduction of Mickey Mouse in *Steamboat Willie* (1928)—which arrived “at a critical moment in the industry's transition from silence to sound.”<sup>78</sup> A decade later, Disney reached an even higher peak of critical attention with the award-winning feature-length picture *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). By 1939, *Snow White* had become the highest-grossing film ever (until the release of *Gone with the Wind* a year later),<sup>79</sup> and the Walt Disney company had grown to a staff of more than 1000

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<sup>78</sup> Sklar, Robert. “The Making of Cultural Myths: Walt Disney and Frank Capra.” *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, Vintage Books, 1994 (originally Random House, 1975), page 199.

<sup>79</sup> Gabler, Neal. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. New York: Random House, 2007, pages 276–277.

employees.<sup>80</sup> As described by Frank Thomas and Oliver Johnston, two of Disney's contemporaries, his approach to animation was primarily centered on "personality." He wanted "a caricature of realism," and "to captivate the audience by making it all believable—by making it real." Thomas and Johnston quote Ben Sharpsteen, another fellow animator, who recalls: "Walt recognized the value of personality animation and he stressed it in story development."<sup>81</sup> This notion of a personality-focused illusion of reality did not necessarily preclude Disney from wanting to explore fantastical and surreal elements or ideas in his films;<sup>82</sup> he simply believed that the best kind of fantastical surrealism is firmly rooted in something we can identify as being potentially also part of the actual world, something we can relate to in our lives. Or, as he puts it: "we cannot do the fantastic things, based on the real, unless we first know the real."<sup>83</sup>

It is important to note that Disney's approach to "reality" was not merely a strategy for maximizing engagement and entertainment on a purely aesthetic level. It was also ideological: it was about myth-making. During the 1930s, American decision-makers "in politics, industry, and the media" (and perhaps particularly in Hollywood) "saw the necessity, almost as a patriotic duty, to revitalize and refashion a cultural mythology" in the wake of the Great Depression and in response to the rise of Nazi Germany in the years

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas, Frank and Oliver Johnston, "The Early Days 1923–1933." *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation*, New York: Walt Disney Productions, 1981, page 24.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, page 35.

<sup>82</sup> see: *Fantasia*, 1940; see also: *Destino*, which Disney started as a collaborative project with Salvador Dalí in 1945 but which was never released until 2003, many years after both men had died. For more on *Destino*, see Beckett Mufson's "That Time Dalí and Disney Made a Film..." *Vice*, 11 May 2016.

<sup>83</sup> Disney, Walt. "Inter-Office Communication." 23 December 1935, page 3. (A facsimile of the transcript of this internal letter was posted to *Letters of Note* on 15 June 2010.)

prior to World War II.<sup>84</sup> This tendency was not a uniquely American phenomenon; cartoons in Japan during the same time period were also being used primarily as nationalist propaganda.<sup>85</sup> But the inevitable consequence of this trend in American animation was that Disney's cartoons grew increasingly conservative: concerned with upholding moral values, with rigidly maintaining spatiotemporal continuity, and with conforming to Aristotelian notions of narrative structure. "The world has rules," these films were saying, "and you'd better learn them or watch out."<sup>86</sup> This dogmatism can best be understood in the context of Walt Disney's position in the culture—which, by design, was fundamentally that of an educator.<sup>87</sup> This is, in part, why the acerbic, mischievous Donald Duck was added to the Disney cast in 1934—because our old friend Mickey had become too "respectable, bland, gentle, responsible, [and] moral."<sup>88</sup> However, Donald's subversive qualities could not wholly undermine Disney's position as an educator. Later, as WWII actually began, this position was solidified even further by the United States government, of which Disney had become somewhat of an appendage due to a series of state-sponsored educational and propaganda films, which were used to "teach soldiers how to use their [equipment]" and to

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<sup>84</sup> Sklar, Robert. "The Making of Cultural Myths: Walt Disney and Frank Capra." *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, Vintage Books, 1994 (originally Random House, 1975), page 196.

<sup>85</sup> Cook, Haruko Taya and Theodore F. *Japan At War: An Oral History*, New Press, 1993, page 95.

<sup>86</sup> Sklar, Robert. "The Making of Cultural Myths: Walt Disney and Frank Capra." *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, Vintage Books, 1994 (originally Random House, 1975), page 200.

<sup>87</sup> Watts, Steven. *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997, page 232.

<sup>88</sup> Sklar, Robert. "The Making of Cultural Myths: Walt Disney and Frank Capra." *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, Vintage Books, 1994 (originally Random House, 1975), page 200.

“inform civilians about the new income taxes imposed on the public in order to help fund the war.”<sup>89</sup> In many ways, World War II kept Walt Disney in business—not only strengthening his cultural capital and public image but also keeping his enterprise afloat financially. “Without this subsidy,” observes Richard Schickel, “[Disney] might have been forced to shut up shop entirely.”<sup>90</sup>

Countless volumes have been written about the history of Disney, and a full retelling of the company’s saga would be neither feasible nor appropriate here, given the daunting contrast Disney’s industrial and ideological hegemony presents in comparison to Hertzfeldt’s independent work. Suffice it to acknowledge that Disney suffered a certain slump in recognition and output during the 1940s before rebounding with several popular animated features (and the construction of large theme parks)<sup>91</sup> during the 1950s and 1960s,<sup>92</sup> and that following another small dip in prominence, there was a “Disney Renaissance”<sup>93</sup> throughout the 1990s, during which Disney’s films<sup>94</sup> were consistently both critically and commercially successful. In the two decades since that era, Disney has

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<sup>89</sup> Ribera, Robert Douglas. “Between patriotism and pacifism: Jacob Lawrence, John Huston, Bill Mauldin, and Walt Disney during World War Two,” PhD diss., *Boston University*, 2016, Ann Arbor (978136963413), page 189.

<sup>90</sup> Schickel, Richard. *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985, page 268.

<sup>91</sup> For more on this era, see Hoberman, James Lewis. *The Dream Life: Movies, Media and the Mythology of the Sixties*, New Press, 2005.

<sup>92</sup> For example, *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), and *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961).

<sup>93</sup> For more on this time period specifically, see Don Hahn’s *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, Walt Disney Studios, 2009. See also Chris Pallant’s *Demystifying Disney: A History of Disney Feature Animation*, New York: Continuum Publishing, 2011, page 95.

<sup>94</sup> For example, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), *Mulan* (1998), and *Tarzan* (1999).

continued to expand its productions, to accumulate vast amounts of capital, to sell merchandise, and to purchase and absorb other companies.<sup>95</sup>

Disney's rise to cultural prominence, aesthetic dominance, and economic power—in other words, to its ubiquity in every sense of the word—has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis and will not be regurgitated here. Noting it does, however, serve us to appreciate Hertzfeldt's relative independence, anti-commercialism, and insistent iconoclasm as a direct response to Disney and to the ways in which Disney has shaped our understanding of what animation is. As I noted in the previous chapter, Hertzfeldt thinks of the "Disneyfication" of animation as "a horrible thing."<sup>96</sup> Nothing could provide a starker contrast to the sumptuous—some would say over-saturated and overloaded—aesthetics of Disney films than Hertzfeldt's trademark minimalism. In addition, Hertzfeldt's surrender to epistemological and philosophical uncertainty—and his embrace of doubt on multiple levels (exemplified by the glib alien shrug in *The Meaning of Life*)—is at odds with Disney's sense of certainty. Furthermore, Hertzfeldt's cynical prognostications (the corpses falling from space, burning like shooting stars in *World of Tomorrow*) are at odds with Disney's unrelenting optimism. And Hertzfeldt's existential and relational angst (Bill's mother crumpling to the floor after the scissor incident in *It's Such a Beautiful Day*) is at odds with Disney's reinforcement of safe, traditional, stable societal roles. On a more basic level, Hertzfeldt's frustratingly abrupt, seemingly

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<sup>95</sup> It currently owns Marvel, Lucasfilm, Pixar, ABC, A&E, ESPN, Touchstone Pictures, Hollywood Records, and most recently, 21<sup>st</sup> Century FOX. See VanDerWerff, Todd. "Here's what Disney owns after the massive Disney/Fox merger." *Vox*, 20 March 2019.

<sup>96</sup> Timberg, Scott. "Don Hertzfeldt is the most inventive underground animator in America. Will he ever make his peace with Hollywood?" *New Times L.A.*, February 2002.



nonsensical endings (the final wide shot in *Billy's Balloon*) are at odds with Disney's soothingly predictable narrative structures. It would probably not be accurate to describe Hertzfeldt as the polar opposite of Disney in every way: for example, he, much like Disney, is interested in character personality (though he portrays it much more minimalistically, usually with stick figures). But it is clear that he provides some kind of meaningful contrast, or counterpoint, to "Disneyfication" in almost every aspect of his work.

Important distinctions must also be made between Hertzfeldt and another mainstream animated touchpoint, namely *The Simpsons* (1989–Present). While Groening's animated satirical sitcom began as an iconoclastic, rebellious expression, it has arguably become "the establishment;" when asked about this transformation, Groening does not deny the show's inherent conservatism: "at the heart of our show is a churchgoing family who eats dinner together every night and it is very traditional," he says. He even dismisses the common characterization of the show's early years as inherently subversive: "we were [supposedly] part of the downfall of civilization, [and] *Simpsons* T-shirts were banned in grade schools, [but] I felt that the controversy [was just] people pretending to be offended."<sup>97</sup> Interestingly, the way in which Groening eschews any subversive positionality here is somewhat at odds with the motto by which he himself claimed to live 18 years prior: "to entertain and subvert."<sup>98</sup> But regardless of whether *The Simpsons'* form of parody

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<sup>97</sup> Keveney, Bill. "The Simpsons' exclusive: Matt Groening (mostly) remembers the show's record 636 episodes." *USA Today*, 17 April 2018.

<sup>98</sup> Griffiths, Nick. "America's First Family." *Times Magazine*, vol. 5.16, 15 April 2000, pages 25, 27–28. Retrieved from <https://simpsonsarchive.com/other/articles/firstfamily.html> on 7 March 2019.

“dismantle[s] the hegemonic status quo”<sup>99</sup> or simply “reinforce[s] and maintain[s] established hegemonic discourses [and] already held ideological positions,”<sup>100</sup> it is clear that the show has become an established name, almost as recognizable as Walt Disney’s empire—*The Simpsons* is truly a staple of mainstream animation.

Hertzfeldt’s relationship to the show, then, is complicated. On one hand, his work exists outside of this “mainstream” in many respects, and as I noted in Chapter One, he has often expressed disdain and distance from any kind of commercialization or merchandising (both of which are large aspects of *The Simpsons*’ presence in American culture). On the other hand, much of Hertzfeldt’s work is clearly influenced by Groening. The anxious, victimized rabbit of *Genre* easily conjures up comparisons to Groening’s “Life in Hell” comics; the juxtaposition of toddling innocence and macabre destruction in the *World of Tomorrow* shorts echoes one of *The Simpsons*’ recurring themes; and the deformed-but-benign creatures littering the earth for millennia in *The Meaning of Life* would feel right at home next to the radioactively mutated squirrel or the three-eyed fish near Springfield Nuclear Power Plant. It is no wonder one critic described Hertzfeldt’s *It’s Such a Beautiful Day* by saying “[it’s] as if Guy Maddin woke up one day in Matt Groening’s animation studio and tried to make [*The*] *Tree of Life*.”<sup>101</sup> (It is worth noting that Hertzfeldt was likely at least somewhat influenced by other animated sitcoms as well; his quivering line work

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<sup>99</sup> Gray, Jonathan. *Watching with The Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality*, Routledge, 2006, page 46.

<sup>100</sup> Feltmate, David. “The Simpsons, Satire, and the Significance of Religious Humor in Popular Culture.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 81:1, March 2013, page 228.

<sup>101</sup> Pate, Steven. “Stick Figure Magician: Cult Animator Don Hertzfeldt Comes to the Music Box Tomorrow.” *Chicagoist*, 28 February 2012.

bears a striking resemblance to similar sensibilities in *Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist*, which uses an agitated, shaky aesthetic to illustrate a kind of Woody Allen-era New York anxiety.) Of course, the most obvious connection between Hertzfeldt and *The Simpsons* is that the former eventually worked directly with the latter, to animate a couch gag for their 26<sup>th</sup> season premiere.<sup>102</sup>

So, trying to determine Hertzfeldt's relative position with regard to something like *The Simpsons*—"is Hertzfeldt subverting the mainstream, or has he become a part of it?"—is a tension that will likely never be resolved, much like the same tension is ever-present in discourses about *The Simpsons* themselves, or other (counter)cultural icons. It may be fruitful to think of this tension not as a binary equation that must be "solved," but rather as a dialectic: which is to say, simply, that it is possible for artists to be both iconic and iconoclastic, both conservative and progressive, both dominant and disruptive, at the same time.

### ***Other Historical Influences***

Before concluding this overview of animated history, I should mention a few other innovators who contributed noteworthy ideas and stylistic innovations to the world of animation between the late-1970s "New Hollywood" era and today. Primarily, I will focus on two: Steven Spielberg and Bill Plympton. Unfortunately, I am forced to omit countless others,<sup>103</sup> not because they are generally unimportant but because Spielberg and Plympton

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<sup>102</sup> Moore, Steven Dean. "Clown in the Dumps." *The Simpsons*, FOX, 28 September 2014.

<sup>103</sup> For example, I must omit the many contributions of anime legends like Hayao Miyazaki; I must also ignore the rise of Pixar and the prominence of three-dimensional CGI feature films.

are the two heretofore unexamined filmmakers whose work appears to have most profoundly influenced Don Hertzfeldt's sensibilities.

When discussing Steven Spielberg in the context of animation, of course it is important to acknowledge that he is not an animator. Yet his influence is felt throughout the world of animation, and vice versa: the influence of animation is felt throughout his filmography. At the American Film Institute, he claimed that "animation is the father of cinema," and that "all directors should be animators first;"<sup>104</sup> fifteen years later, he executive produced an animated comedy television series,<sup>105</sup> and he worked closely with Phil Tippett to resurrect velociraptors, brachiosaur, and a tyrannosaur;<sup>106</sup> three years after that, he greenlit a point-and-click adventure videogame entirely animated with Claymation.<sup>107</sup> Still, Spielberg's influence on Hertzfeldt is often expressed not with specific regard to movement, animation, or verisimilitude; what really impresses Hertzfeldt is the director's general cinematographic prowess ("nobody else moves the camera like Spielberg")<sup>108</sup> and his economical narrative instincts ("he's always got kids in danger in his movies; [it's] the cheapest, easiest way to get an emotional response!").<sup>109</sup>

The legacy of Bill Plympton, on the other hand, provides a much more direct link between the early 20<sup>th</sup> century animations heretofore discussed and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century

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<sup>104</sup> Spielberg, Steven. *AFI Fellows Seminar*, 1978.

<sup>105</sup> Ruegger, Tom. *Animaniacs*, Warner Bros Television, 1993–1998.

<sup>106</sup> Spielberg, Steven. *Jurassic Park*, Paramount Pictures, 1993.

<sup>107</sup> TenNapel, Doug and Mark Lorenzen. *The Neverhood*, DreamWorks Interactive, 1996.

<sup>108</sup> Mufson, Beckett. "10 Confessions from 'Rejected Cartoons' Animator Don Hertzfeldt." *Vice*, 5 April 2015.

<sup>109</sup> "Script to Screen: Don Hertzfeldt & World of Tomorrow." *UCTV*, 1 March 2016.

milieu in which Hertzfeldt works.<sup>110</sup> Plympton started his career during Spielberg's era, with *Lucas the Ear of Corn* (1977), and has been working ever since. To date, he has animated seven animated features and about fifty short films and segments. His best-known short, *Your Face* (1987), features a man who sings beautifully about his lover for three minutes while his face twists and distorts into strange, surreal shapes, forms, and textures—until eventually he is swallowed by a mouth in the floor.

There are some obvious technical similarities between the two artists, as both Plympton and Hertzfeldt have done significant work sticking with old-school, lo-fi animation techniques. This choice reads as an attitude of defiance, given the prevalence of CGI in our modern era.<sup>111</sup> However, while Plympton insists on a commitment to this method as vital to his aesthetic (this is very meticulous work: “I do about 100 drawings a day,” he reports, “which is about 10 an hour”),<sup>112</sup> Hertzfeldt on the other hand argues that method is fundamentally irrelevant: “I’ll just use whatever format best tells the story,”<sup>113</sup> he says. “The only thing that matters is what actually winds up on the big screen, not how you got it there.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Incidentally, Plympton has, like Hertzfeldt, also worked with *The Simpsons*. He even animated a couch gag for an episode in their 29<sup>th</sup> season. (Nastuk, Matthew. “3 Scenes Plus a Tag from a Marriage.” *The Simpsons*, 25 March 2018.)

<sup>111</sup> An important distinction: Plympton's oeuvre has been almost exclusively pen-and-pencil for forty years, while Hertzfeldt's methodology has only been as strict during the beginning stages of his career, largely due to necessity and familiarity rather than philosophy. Hertzfeldt has since started to use computerized imagery in his films, e.g. *World of Tomorrow* and *The Burden of Other People's Thoughts*.

<sup>112</sup> Anderson, John. “Cartoons Without Computers? Silly Animators!” *The New York Times*, 26 November 2008.

<sup>113</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. “i am a don hertzfeldt... filmmaker: AMA.” *Reddit.com*, 4 April 2015. [https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/3lg6qc/i\\_am\\_a\\_don\\_hertzfeldt\\_filmmaker\\_ama/](https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/3lg6qc/i_am_a_don_hertzfeldt_filmmaker_ama/)

<sup>114</sup> Anderson, John. “Cartoons Without Computers? Silly Animators!” *The New York Times*, 26 November 2008.

Technical comparisons aside, one can productively compare Plympton's and Hertzfeldt's stylistic and thematic interests. Both filmmakers, for instance, are interested in the combination of melancholic beauty and grotesque comedy. Compare Plympton's use of Maureen McElheron in *Your Face* with Hertzfeldt's use of Der Rosenkavalier in *World of Tomorrow*. In *Your Face*, a melancholy piano ballad is modified to sound masculine and haunting,<sup>115</sup> all while it is juxtaposed with the imagery of an ever-morphing face (the film's primary source of pleasure is in the impossibility of anticipating these strange mutations).<sup>116</sup> The result is something uncanny: beautiful yet disturbing, entrancing yet disgusting, earnest yet farcical. *World of Tomorrow*, to similar effect, takes a gentle, majestic waltz sequence from Der Rosenkavalier—Richard Strauss's comic opera about aristocrats and young lovers—and juxtaposes it with a trick ending in which we are led to believe that the four-year-old protagonist, Emily Prime, will die alone in a cold, prehistoric wilderness due to a technological glitch. The soundtrack's warmth and splendor clash with the bleak, naked cruelty of the story beat. The result, again, is something uncanny: poignantly poetic, yet harshly humorous.

Plympton and Hertzfeldt are also both interested in the line between slapstick and horror (compare the surprising jump-rope decapitation in Plympton's *Guard Dog* with the surprising airplane appearance in Hertzfeldt's *Billy's Balloon*). It is possible that the kind of violence inflicted on Plympton's and Hertzfeldt's characters—whether that violence is

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<sup>115</sup> The version of McElheron's song that plays over *Your Face* is transposed down from E minor to Bb minor, and slows it down to 75%.

<sup>116</sup> Davide, Giurlando. "Il cinema di Bill Plympton." *Cineform*, vol. 56 (7), Aug/Sep 2016, pages 50–57.

slapstick, horror, or both—might be ontologically embedded in the core of what animation *is* (as Pascal Bonitzer puts it: “in [a] cartoon film, characters are as a rule indestructible, immortal, and the violence is universal”),<sup>117</sup> but nonetheless these two definitely appear to approach the subject of violence with a similar sensibility.

### **Experimental Film and the Avant-Garde**

In addition to being an important contribution and response to the world of independent animated film, Hertzfeldt’s work also meaningfully interacts with the history of experimental and avant-garde cinema, to which I will now turn.

#### ***Dada***

The roots of experimental film go back to the Dadaists—a short-lived but influential movement of various interwar artists who sought to reject and parody the absurdity that they saw in the world. In particular, Dadaism was a rejection and parody of the absurdity of World War I, which had recently ended after having claimed the lives of some ten million combatants.<sup>118</sup> Dadaists wanted to interrogate the supremacy of reason—after all, if “reason” can produce something as senseless and destructive as World War I, then its purpose had lastingly been thrown in to doubt. They also wanted to examine the dialectic between abstraction<sup>119</sup> and mimesis.<sup>120</sup> Thus, they were “radically non-narrative [and] non-

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<sup>117</sup> Bonitzer, Pascal. “It’s Only A Film/Ou La Face Du Neant.” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, vol. 14, 1981, pages 22–24.

<sup>118</sup> Trachtman, Paul. “A Brief History of Dada.” *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 2006.

<sup>119</sup> Abstraction, in this context, refers to the cinematic representation of an object as non-objective; i.e. the stripping away of the thing’s material, spatial, and temporal specificity.

<sup>120</sup> Mimesis, in this context, refers to the cinematic representation of a real-world referent which includes and foregrounds a full acknowledgment and recreation of the original thing’s

psychological,” constantly trying to “disrupt the viewers’ expectations”<sup>121</sup> in an “attempt to destabilize Western epistemology, science, [and] myth[ology],” as well as the prevailing “ocularcentri[sm]”<sup>122</sup> of art criticism/reception generally and of cinephilia specifically.

Important examples of Dadaist film include Fernand Leger’s *Ballet mécanique* (1923) and René Clair’s *Entr’acte* (1924). The former gives a lot of attention to close-ups of machines, tools, gears, lights, and prisms; the latter shows us unexpected angles such as a view of a ballerina’s dance from below the floor and a hypnotic, climactic canted-angle roller coaster ride (which of course both is and isn’t a literal roller coaster ride). Both films employ experimental techniques like double exposures, reversed footage, and montage editing to amplify a sense of rhythmic chaos and to remind viewers of the cinematic apparatus at work. *Ballet mécanique* even places a prism in front of the camera lens for a lot of its sequences, so what we end up seeing is distorted and refracted, as if we were looking through kaleidoscope.

Hertzfeldt echoes the Dadaists’ critique of reason (as with the largely nonverbal, post-rational hermeneutics of *The Meaning of Life*, 2005); he borrows from their disruption of narrative expectations (as with the use of language, duration, and gore in *Wisdom Teeth*, 2010); and he embraces and remixes their motif of absurdity (as with the baffling non-sequitur vignettes of *Rejected*, 2000). But perhaps most importantly, he shares Dada’s fascination with the space between abstract and mimetic—and with the role technology

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materiality and spatiotemporality.

<sup>121</sup> Kuenzli, Rudolf E. “Introduction.” *Dada and Surrealist Film*, The MIT Press, 1996, page 7.

<sup>122</sup> Grundmann, Roy. “Notes to Chapter 1.” *Andy Warhol’s Blow Job*, Temple University Press, 2003, page 195.



plays in defining and navigating that space. Hertzfeldt reveals this fascination in his method and forms, as in his recurring mixture of photography with hand-drawn animation (*It's Such a Beautiful Day*, *Clown in the Dumps*, *World of Tomorrow*, *The Burden of Other People's Thoughts*) and in his constant use of stick figures generally (as both an abstraction and a mimesis of the human body). But beyond method and form, Hertzfeldt actually touches on this Dadaist issue of “abstract” versus “mimetic” technology in the diegetic content of his stories, too. Consider the following two examples, both of which appear in Hertzfeldt's 2013 graphic novel *The End of the World* and in his 2015 film *World of Tomorrow*:

First, there is David, the cloned boy without a soul. Note especially the liminal space David occupies, as both human and non-human—i.e. as both a materially perfect doppelgänger and as an uncanny, almost alien abstraction. Emily describes her memories of David as “a child without a brain, that the public could watch grow old in real time,” whose body was put on display in a controversial art exhibit. There were “people who'd speak quietly to him in the night,” she recalls—people who found solace in his presence—until he died at the age of 72, at which point he was “mourned and deeply missed throughout the city.”<sup>123</sup> Hertzfeldt is implicitly asking: why did museum visitors mourn at the body's passing? What kind of attachment did they have to it? In what ways is that attachment (dis)similar to the ones we have to each other?

Second, consider the disturbing, uncanny depiction of certain technological

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<sup>123</sup> These quotes are identical in both Hertzfeldt's graphic novel *The End of the World* (Antibookclub, 2013) and in his short film *World of Tomorrow* (Bitter Films, 2015).

interventions meant to help with grieving. Emily explains that in the distant future, “the face of a deceased loved one can be peeled off, preserved, and stretched over the head of a simple animatronic robot, so they can still be a part of someone’s life.”<sup>124</sup> The deadpan, matter-of-fact performance with which actress Julia Pott delivers this explanation adds both to the moment’s absurd comedy and to the provocative sci-fi questions it raises—questions which needn’t be emphasized or hyperbolized by a more dramatic performance, that bring us into strange places without needing to underline their own strangeness.

These are Dadaist moments because they investigate the role of technology, with both awe and disgust—and the main subject of their investigation is the way in which technology complicates our representation(s) of life, the way in which it blurs and distorts the line between abstraction and mimesis. With this reading, David becomes a sort of Schrödinger’s cat: simultaneously, he both *is* and *is not* a boy in a tube (and likewise, the grieving survivor’s simple animatronic robot both *is* and *is not* wearing a loved one’s face).<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *World of Tomorrow*, Bitter Films, 2015. See also similar phrasing regarding the same concept as it is described in *The End of the World*, Antibookclub, 2013.

<sup>125</sup> For more on this Schrödingerian dichotomy, specifically as it relates to the abstraction (or mimesis?) of resurrecting deceased persons, see Owen Harris’ “Be Right Back.” *Black Mirror*, 11 February 2013. Another worthwhile reference point, of course, would be Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, London: Lackingdon, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones, 1818. (See also Schrödinger, Erwin. “Die gegenwärtige Situation in der Quantenmechanik a.k.a. The present situation in quantum mechanics.” *Naturwissenschaften*, 23 (48): 807–812, Springer Science+Business Media, November 1935.)

### *The City Symphony*

Broadly concomitant with the emergence of Dada cinema, several “city symphonies” were released, from directors like Paul Strand in *Manhattan*;<sup>126</sup> Walter Ruttmann in *Berlin*;<sup>127</sup> Dziga Vertov in *Kiev, Moscow, Odessa, and Kharkov*;<sup>128</sup> Joris Ivens in *Amsterdam*;<sup>129</sup> and Manoel de Oliveira in *Porto*.<sup>130</sup> These experimental non-fiction films aimed to capture the rhythms, textures, and phenomena of life in specific urban places. Some of them also wanted to call attention to the cinematic apparatus itself, like their predecessors in the Dadaist movement had done; the most explicit example of this would be Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*.<sup>131</sup> City symphonies were completely non-narrative, with “no stars, no characters, and no plot.”<sup>132</sup> Some focused more on the ebbing and flowing movement of swarming, swirling crowds of people, while others focused more on the texture and geometry of architecture.

Decades later, during a revival of the city symphony during the 1950s and 1960s, an example of the former focus would be Marie Menken’s frantic *Go! Go! Go!* (1964); two examples of the latter focus would be Shirley Clarke’s *Bridges-Go-Round* (1958) and Stan Brakhage’s contemplative *The Wonder Ring* (1955). Clarke’s film is about geometry and rhythm, “imbu[ing] inanimate steel structures with motion and emotion,”<sup>133</sup> while

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<sup>126</sup> Strand, Paul. *Manhatta*, 1921.

<sup>127</sup> Ruttmann, Walter. *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, 1927.

<sup>128</sup> Vertov, Dziga. *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.

<sup>129</sup> Ivens, Joris. *Regen*, 1929.

<sup>130</sup> De Oliveira, Manoel. *Douro, Faina Fluvial*, 1931.

<sup>131</sup> See Michelson, Annette. “From Magician to Epistemologist: Vertov’s *The Man with a Movie Camera*.” *ArtForum*, March 1972, reprinted in no. 162 (Fall 2017), pages 112–132.

<sup>132</sup> Hutchinson, Pamela. “Where to begin with city symphonies.” *BFI*, 1 September 2017.

<sup>133</sup> “To the Beat of Shirley Clarke.” *Harvard Film Archive: Film Series / Events*, 13–29 March 2015.

Brakhage's film is all about carefully and lovingly curating and assembling an assortment of curiosities, of forgotten things, of scraps and cut-out shapes that might have seemed ordinary, forgettable, or even downright ugly if we hadn't been gently invited to take another look. It is clear that Hertzfeldt, a few decades after Clarke and Brakhage (and a few more decades after Vertov), has inherited an interest in a similar kind of bricolage. We see this, for instance, in the voice-over narration during Bill's climactic, emotional epiphany towards the end of *It's Such a Beautiful Day*:

It's kind of a really nice day. He decides to walk around the block. On the side of the road, he sees a woman's tennis shoe filled with leaves and it fills him with inexplicable sadness.

He walks down his side street and sees striking colors in the faces of the people around him, details in these beautiful brick walls and weeds that he must have passed every day but never noticed. The air smells different, brighter somehow, and the currents under the bridge look strange and vivid, and the sun is warming his face and the world is clumsy and beautiful and new. And it's as though he's been sleepwalking for God knows how long, and something has violently shaken him awake.

His bathmats are gorgeous.

The grain patterns in his cheap wood cabinets vibrate something deep within him. He's fascinated by the way his paper towels drink water. He's never really appreciated these things.

All this detail he's never noticed. (Detail he's never noticed.) He's alive, he's alive. (He's alive, he's alive.) Never noticed. (He's alive.)

The stars rattled him to the core. All these lights have traveled for tens of millions of years to reach him at this moment. How somehow far away, our own sun looks just like one of these. How many of the stars no longer even exist, but whose ancient light is just reaching him now. An impression from a ghost, an amazing infinite time machine every night above his head that he's ignored for most of his life.

He wants to stop people in the street and say: "Isn't this amazing? Isn't everything amazing?"<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

In this scene, Hertzfeldt is finding rapture and connection in the exaltation of the banal, but he is expanding past what city symphonies endeavor to accomplish—he reaching out not only to the nearly microscopic textures of “gorgeous” bathmats and porous paper towels, not only to the cornucopia of smells, currents, and leaf-filled tennis shoes of his city, but beyond. He is reaching into the very fabric of space and time.

### ***Recent Experimental Film and Media Influences***

Avant-garde and experimental filmmakers working in the wake of the city symphony also look beyond the city—though their sights are not on the cosmos, like Bill’s (at least, not initially). What we see instead is a focus on more and more subjective visions of reality ranging from surrealist explorations of dream-logic to Cocteau’s symbolism to post-WWII American trance films and psychodramas.<sup>135</sup> But the 50s and 60s also produced new experimental animation to which Hertzfeldt is indebted. Spanning across several of these movements, between 1958 and 1979, Len Lye creates *Free Radicals* by scratching jagged, wiggling lines and shapes directly into film stock itself (this is an exaggerated, abstracted echo of some special effects I have heretofore mentioned, like Segundo de Chomón’s “electric sparks”). Lye’s work, as described by Andrew Johnston, “functions as a site for working through and exploring how the body sensually engages with different materials;

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<sup>135</sup> The surrealists of the ‘30s look at Freudian and Lacanian symbolism and dream-logic, a prime example being Jean Cocteau’s *The Blood of a Poet*, brimming with “religious scandal” and “a contempt for the danger that excites a large number of people” (see Cocteau, Jean. “The Blood of a Poet.” *The Criterion Collection*, 25 April 2000); or Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s “perpetually perplexing” *Un Chien Andalou* (see Liebman, Stuart. “*Un Chien andalou: The Talking Cure*.” *Dada and Surrealist Film*, The MIT Press, 1996, page 143), full of psychosexual tension and entomological obsessions; next, the experimentalists of the ‘40s and ‘50s look introspectively at issues of gender, sexuality, and juxtaposition (see Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon* and Kenneth Anger’s *Fireworks*).

[it is] a workshop and playground of materialist phenomenology.”<sup>136</sup> Lye himself describes his process as an expression of “the stuff out of which we came, and of which we are,”<sup>137</sup> and he hopes his results produce “life-manifestations”<sup>138</sup> with a “kind of spastic look.”<sup>139</sup>

Hertzfeldt’s interest in dream-logic (cinema, after all, “is, more than any other art form, that which Plato claimed art in general to be: *a dream for waking minds*”),<sup>140</sup> introspection, juxtaposition, simplification, minimalism, and phenomenology are reminiscent of what we see from these post-symphonic experimentalists between the late 1920s and the late 1970s.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Johnston, Andrew R. “Signatures of Motion: Len Lye’s Scratch Films and the Energy of the Line.” *Animating Film Theory*, Duke University Press, 2014, page 171.

<sup>137</sup> Lye, Len. “Why I Scratch, or How I Got to Particles.” *Figures of Motion*, ed. Wystan Curnow and Roger Horrocks, Auckland University, 1984, page 95.

<sup>138</sup> Lye, Len and Laura Riding. “Film-making.” *Figures of Motion*, ed. Wystan Curnow and Roger Horrocks, Auckland University, 1984, page 40.

<sup>139</sup> Russet, R. *Experimental Animation: origins of a new art*, New York: De Capo Press, 1988.

<sup>140</sup> Michelson, Annette. “Bodies in Space: Film as Carnal Knowledge.” *ArtForum*, February 1969, page 59.

<sup>141</sup> And while there are other experimental subgenres that are important to the history of the avant-garde—the pop-art of the prolific Andy Warhol (known for *Blow Job* and *Chelsea Girls*); the queer films of Derek Jarman (known for *The Angelic Conversation* and *Blue*); the political avant-garde of Jean-Luc Godard (who was primarily known as a Nouvelle Vague director thanks to arthouse hits like *Breathless* and *Contempt*, but who became more politically and aesthetically radical in the late-‘60s with films like *Le Gai savoir*, *British Sounds*, and *Le Vent d’est*); or the relatively recent experimental pornography of Nguyen Tan Hoang (a literature and cultural studies professor whose videography includes *Forever Bottom!*, *K.I.P.*, and *look\_im\_azn*)—these others are not as relevant to Hertzfeldt’s concerns as are the movements heretofore discussed. However, one exception should be made for Warhol’s 33-minute short film, *Outer and Inner Space* (1965), which presents “a schizoid disjunction between public and private selves” (Hoberman, J. “FILM; A Pioneering Dialogue Between Actress and Image.” *The New York Times*, 22 November 1998). Consider its mixture of cinematic and televisual aesthetics, its screens-within-screens (echoed in Hertzfeldt’s *World of Tomorrow* as characters in a museum watch projections of anonymous memories); consider its quadrupled representation of Edie Sedgwick’s performance and the fractured multiplicity with which it approaches the notion of identity (echoed in the crowd from *The Meaning of Life*, or the multiple instances of “Emily” in *World of Tomorrow*—even more so *The Burden of Other People’s Thoughts*); consider its blurring of the lines between portraiture and performance (is the performance of “Emily Prime”

Common throughout the history of experimental film, avant-garde cinema, and Don Hertzfeldt's work, is a great concern with the cinematic apparatus as such. There is often a desire to call attention to the fact that cinematography is a fundamentally mechanical thing—and that any film you will ever watch will inevitably have been produced by some kind of interaction between human and machine. According to film historian Thomas Elsaesser, this tension between humanistic and mechanical has existed since the invention of cinema “towards the end of the nineteenth century, [when] the explosive development of new means of representation and reproduction [indicated] for the first time that aesthetic effects can be attributed to machine-made objects or images.” And this indication “profoundly ruptured a traditional relation between art and mimesis.”<sup>142</sup>

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in *World of Tomorrow* a captured document, a portrait of Winona Mae's youthful essence, or is it pure artifice—or is it something in between?). In light of these considerations, *Outer and Inner Space* is a highly relevant point of comparison. Hertzfeldt might not have ever come across the film, but he assuredly was familiar with the Pop Art movement in general and with Warhol's treatment of seriality in particular.

<sup>142</sup> Elsaesser, Thomas. “Dada/Cinema?” *Dada and Surrealist Film*, The MIT Press, 1996, page 14.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE FILMS OF DON HERTZFELDT

In this chapter, I will examine Hertzfeldt's films, with particular attention given to the dialectical relationships between his films. Each film acts as an elaboration of, departure from, or response to its predecessor—as if they are all speaking to each other, almost “correcting” each other. This dialectical interplay allows Hertzfeldt to occupy a variety of modes, expressing a sensibility that is at once both pessimistic and optimistic, both mean-spirited and warm-hearted, both abstractly conceptual and intimately concrete, both jarringly violent and disarmingly gentle.

I will divide Hertzfeldt's work into four sections: first, I will focus on his four student films (1995–1998); then I will look at the short films he released between 2000–2014 (but momentarily excluding the 2006–2011 installments of *It's Such a Beautiful Day*); third, I will look at *It's Such a Beautiful Day* (which I will treat as a cohesive unit, because it was released as a feature in 2012); finally, I will explore his two most recent films, *World of Tomorrow* (2015) and *The Burden of Other People's Thoughts* (2017).

#### The Student Films (1995–1998)

##### *Ah, L'Amour*

After some introductory text (hand-written black letters on a white paper background, identifying the short as “A BITTER FILM BY DON HERTZFELDT” before scattering), and a close-up of a wilting rose, the first diegetic image seen in Hertzfeldt's filmography is that of an anonymous, crudely-drawn stick figure man—the protagonist of his debut film, *Ah, L'Amour* (1995)—optimistically approaching a woman named “Jan” and asking if she



would like to go to a movie. Jan responds by violently shouting: “STOP SMOTHERING ME!” She literally rips the man’s beating heart out of his chest and hits him over the head with it before roasting it with an eruption of fire-breath and kicking the man’s head clean off. The paper canvas on which the animation had been drawn then suddenly crumples up, revealing the beginning of another scene in which a man (is it the same man?) approaches a new woman. This cycle repeats throughout the film: the man politely says hello, or offers a compliment, or suggests a date; the woman then invariably responds with a violent (and increasingly abrupt) overreaction, and murders the man in a variety of gruesome ways. Throughout the three-minute runtime of Hertzfeldt’s short, the protagonist is decapitated (twice), flayed, sawed in half, shot, stabbed, and dismembered. The film ends with the man taking a different approach: he proudly and simply announces, “I have money,” to which the (now anonymous) woman enthusiastically responds: “I love you!”<sup>143</sup>

*Ah, L’Amour* clearly and succinctly sets up many of Hertzfeldt’s early interests. The film concerns itself with violence (especially as inflicted upon the innocent); with the awkward, precarious, and often shallow performativity of social roles; with the crudity and transparency of a medium like animation; and with the comedy of juxtaposition and the subversion of generic expectations. All four of these themes come up again and again, particularly in Hertzfeldt’s earliest work.

Violence (especially as inflicted upon the innocent) is an especially noteworthy motif. The hapless victim-protagonist of *Ah, L’Amour* seems to have done nothing wrong; however, because of the film’s basic, minimalistic, and (mostly) anonymous depiction of

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<sup>143</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *Ah, L’Amour*, student film, 1995.

romance and (hetero)sexuality, its characters can be read archetypically. And as an archetype, the protagonist comes to represent an entitled man's projection of himself, and the women's reactions are projections of his insecurities, misreadings, and bitterness—that is, they represent his *interpretation* of what it means to have been rejected. This approach comes across as both heartfelt (i.e. the film acknowledges that rejection truly does hurt) and harshly, self-depreciatingly parodic (i.e. the film mocks its own perspective through its hyperbolic presentation). The parody is made even clearer about 60 seconds in, when the protagonist silently passes by a larger, bucktoothed, ostensibly “unattractive” female stick figure, choosing to flirt with the next one (“Jill”) instead. This is Hertzfeldt's way of giving us permission to keep some emotional distance from our “hero,” cluing us in that perhaps it is okay to laugh at his shallowness, his subtly misogynistic “nice guy” attitude,<sup>144</sup> and his repeated misfortune. Indeed, when the film was released, audiences laughed, and even cheered—as Hertzfeldt recalls, the women “always applauded much louder than the men.”<sup>145</sup>

In his later films, however, Hertzfeldt moves away from an exclusive focus on creating emotional distance and “justifying” his violence. Instead, throughout his filmography, his characters grow increasingly helpless and innocent while the suffering they endure remains unrelenting or is even amplified. This makes Hertzfeldt's films extraordinarily difficult at times.

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<sup>144</sup> McDaniel, A. K. “Young Women's Dating Behavior: Why/Why Not Date a Nice Guy?” *Sex Roles*, vol. 53:5–6, September 2005, pages 347–359. (See also Daniel Blomquist's “When nice guys are sexist with a smile.” *The Berkeley Beacon*, 2 April 2014.)

<sup>145</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. “Ah, L'Amour.” *BitterFilms.com*, retrieved 14 March 2019.  
<http://www.bitterfilms.com/lamour.html>

## *Genre*

Regarding the second motif mentioned above—that of awkward, precarious, shallow performativity—Hertzfeldt’s second student film (*Genre*, 1996) goes beyond the performance of dating/gender roles and explores the performance of generic character roles and storytelling tropes. In *Genre*, a hand-drawn rabbit is forced to conform to a dozen different genres, for a few seconds at a time, often at his own mortal peril. The genres are arbitrarily determined by the animator, whose hands and drawing instruments are shown interacting with the rabbit in stop-photography (as in J. R. Bray’s *Colonel Heeza Liar* animations from 1913–1924). The rabbit’s assignments progress from relatively mainstream genres (like romance, science-fiction, or comedy) to more adult, transgressive, and provocative ones (like pornography or horror), until ultimately spiraling into a series of elaborate mashups (like “abstract foreign Western”).<sup>146</sup>

The rabbit’s relationship with his animator is bitter and adversarial: immediately after having been created, he tries to fight and run away. During the film’s 60-second cold open, these repeated escape attempts are consistently thwarted by Hertzfeldt’s hand and pen, forcing the rabbit to submit, thus setting the stage for the cavalcade of nonconsensual performances we are about to see. This adversarial relationship is strongly reminiscent of the Warner Brothers short *Duck Amuck*, in which Daffy Duck struggles against the uncooperative interventions of a faceless, anonymous animator (eventually revealed to be the mischievous Bugs Bunny). However, while Daffy is vocal with his demands (“how about some scenery?”), complaints (“I’ve never been so humiliated”), and reactions (“you

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<sup>146</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *Genre*, student film, 1996.

know better than that!”),<sup>147</sup> Hertzfeldt’s rabbit is silent and disempowered. Thus, the rabbit is unable to protest his subjugation and brutalization—beyond his terrified facial expressions and squirming body language—until the very end of the film, when he angrily holds up a protest sign. This sign mocks his creator with one final genre suggestion: “the pretentious student film?”<sup>148</sup>

### ***Lily and Jim***

Hertzfeldt’s third student film, *Lily and Jim* (1997), is likewise about performances and expectations, but in a much more grounded way than either *Ah, L’Amour* or *Genre*. In *Lily and Jim*, no one is stabbed, flayed, or beaten into existential submission by an inexplicably sadistic creator. The film is much simpler: for thirteen minutes, we just watch the eponymous man and woman on an excruciatingly awkward blind date. Their dialogue—partially scripted by Hertzfeldt, and partially improvised by voice actors Robert May and Karin Anger—meanders from topic to topic, as the pair is desperately trying (and constantly, clumsily, failing) to connect. For example, as they start to get to know each other over dinner, Jim is uncomfortably unresponsive to the subject of computers, so we see Lily’s thought bubble prompting her to “say something sexy.” She decides to introduce an unusually explicit gastronomical topic, volunteering this trivia: “I read somewhere that most middle-aged Americans have ten pounds of undigested red meat in their colons.” Jim isn’t sure how to respond, but his thought bubble reveals a similar inner monologue (“say something witty, yet alluring”), and he brightly offers: “you know, that’s really

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<sup>147</sup> Jones, Charles M. *Duck Amuck*, Warner Bros., 1953.

<sup>148</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *Genre*, student film, 1996.

interesting—because my father has a lot of blood in his stool!” The clumsy dialogue of this date is occasionally interjected by documentary-style talking-head sequences in which Jim and Lily describe the date retrospectively, speaking directly to the camera as if being interviewed. During these segments, they express exasperation at the difficulty of dating, and of maintaining social/romantic momentum in general. “Relationships are a lot like those little packets of condiments,” suggests Jim. “They’re these little magical things that can last forever on a shelf, but once you open them up, they go bad really fast.” His tone lowers and his rhythm slows as he concludes his runaway metaphor with an impotent sigh: “I just don’t understand condiments.”<sup>149</sup>

Notably, while Hertzfeldt’s previous films had been animated by “twos and threes” (i.e. two or three frames per drawing, or 8–12 drawings per second), *Lily and Jim* is his first to be animated by “ones and twos” (12–24 drawings per second). This allows for greater nuance and detail in the facial performances of his characters and in the meticulous lip-syncing of their dialogue.<sup>150</sup> Because of this detail, and because of the grounded, realistic setting in which *Lily and Jim*’s drama takes place, *Lily and Jim* adds a degree of complexity and introspection to the general “dating is difficult” sentiments of something like *Ah, L’Amour*, while still subtly playing with the medium of animation (as with its pulsing, wiggling line work) and slyly commenting on genre conventions (as with the loud, abrasive images seen in its channel-surfing scene).

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<sup>149</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *Lily and Jim*, student film, 1997.

<sup>150</sup> Hertzfeldt learned to lip-sync by watching Aardman shorts, like *A Grand Day Out*, *The Wrong Trousers*, or *A Close Shave*. See Hertzfeldt, Don. “Lily and Jim.” *BitterFilms.com*, retrieved 18 March 2019. <http://www.bitterfilms.com/lilyjim.html>

### ***Billy's Balloon***

Yet much of what is accomplished in *Lily and Jim* is reversed or subverted again in Hertzfeldt's fourth and final student film, *Billy's Balloon* (1998). While the former is realistic, the latter is magical and surreal; while the former is verbally (albeit haltingly) expressive, the latter relies entirely on body language and diegetic sound effects to punctuate its action; while the former is relatively "safe" (despite some emotional discomfort and brief physical pain), the latter is a brutal, twisted tale of unfathomable danger and suffering.

*Billy's Balloon* is the culmination of a transformation to which I alluded at the beginning of this section. Gone is the archetypically entitled male protagonist of *Ah, L'Amour*, the belligerent bunny of *Genre*, or the socially inept couple of *Lily and Jim*. These had been increasingly sympathetic characters, so their misfortunes had felt increasingly undeserved; however, each felt like they had, to some degree, dug their own graves. By contrast, *Billy's Balloon* presents us with an unambiguously innocent protagonist, whose suffering cannot be ideologically or emotionally justified, much less rationally explained.

This protagonist—we can assume his name is Billy—is an unaccompanied infant, who finds himself lured, betrayed, and tortured by a magical, malicious balloon with a mind of its own. The film shows Billy repeatedly lifted up into the air by the balloon (an experience that delights him at first, like some whimsical adventure), only to be mercilessly dropped to the ground below. Towards the end of the five-minute short, we have seen countless other unaccompanied children being attacked by their balloons—either with a similar "lift

and drop” method or with a variety of other savage acts of violence. The dark comedy of *Billy’s Balloon* relies on our visceral reactions to the brutal, thudding juxtaposition of violence and silence in its diegetic soundscape,<sup>151</sup> as well as to the expressiveness of Billy’s eyes and face, and the timing and physicality of what we see on screen. In one interview, Hertzfeldt mentions the comedic timing of *Billy’s Balloon* as central to what he was trying to accomplish: he compares his film’s surprising airplane moment to a similar moment from *One Week* (1920) in which Buster Keaton’s and Sybil Seely’s house is narrowly missed by an oncoming train, only to be hit a moment later by another train. Hertzfeldt was inspired by the way in which this scene produces a sense of whiplash between ostensible safety and sudden disaster. “I always thought that was the funniest gag in the world,” he says.<sup>152</sup>

Another thing *Billy’s Balloon* accomplishes is a sly subversion of cinephilic audiences’ expectations. *Billy’s Balloon*’s title and subject is reminiscent of *Le ballon rouge* a.k.a. *The Red Balloon* (Albert Lamorisse, 1956), a French film about a young boy who meets a magically sentient balloon; however, Hertzfeldt’s approach, obviously more sinister than sentimental, defies this comparison. This combination of homage and subversion echoes how *Ah, L’Amour* is reminiscent of the titles of classic French love

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<sup>151</sup> The sound design is crucial to *Billy’s Balloon*. In his journal, Hertzfeldt complains that at the Cannes Film Festival, “there was a loud, incessant buzzing noise” coming out of the theater’s right speaker during the screening of his film, and that it sounded “like an angry giant industrial groaning hornet.” He recalls that this buzzing sound severely interrupted the film’s flow and confused the audience. Some audience members told him afterwards they had “assumed the horrible noises were intentional, like some sort of [abstract] statement,” to which Hertzfeldt responds: “ouch.” See “journal page 3,” *BitterFilms.com*, 7 June 1999. <http://www.bitterfilms.com/forum03.html>

<sup>152</sup> “Script to Screen: Don Hertzfeldt & World of Tomorrow.” *UCTV*, 1 March 2016.

stories like *Le Grand Amour* (Pierre Étaix, 1969) or *L'amour l'après-midi* (Éric Rohmer, 1972)—while Hertzfeldt's approach, more sour than sensual, defies a comparison to these, too.

## **The Short Films (2000–2014)**

### ***Rejected***

After leaving UC Santa Barbara, Hertzfeldt photographed *Rejected* on a 35mm camera and released it on July 25, 2000. In my first chapter, I briefly described this film as a nine-minute cacophony of non sequiturs, experimental techniques, and a cast of increasingly surreal characters, a film full of snarky anti-consumerist ideology and terrifying body horror. But in addition to all of that, *Rejected* is also an expansion of Hertzfeldt's structural and narrative boundaries. Unlike the story of a man seeking love,<sup>153</sup> the exercise of a rabbit demonstrating satirically reductive interpretations of genre,<sup>154</sup> the scenario of a disastrous first date,<sup>155</sup> or the nightmare of an infanticidal balloon,<sup>156</sup> what *Rejected* offers is much more uncontained, fragmented, and narratively unpredictable. The film is organized as a series of vignettes, loosely framed in a story (told with intertitles) about an animator slowly losing his sanity while doing terrible, increasingly nonsensical advertisement work for television.

The result is a jumbled assortment of bits, many of which are gruesome (a muttering

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<sup>153</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *Ah, L'Amour*, student film, 1995.

<sup>154</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *Genre*, student film, 1996.

<sup>155</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *Lily and Jim*, student film, 1997.

<sup>156</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *Billy's Balloon*, student film, 1998.



alien growth emerging from a man's forehead), absurd ("my spoon is too big!"), or some mixture of both (a man rips out another man's organs, wears them as a hat, and declares, while blood drips down his face: "I am the Queen of France").<sup>157</sup> The chaos escalates exponentially, until *Rejected*'s final 90 seconds, during which the film's stick-figure characters frantically flee for their lives as their world literally falls apart. This climax showcases Hertzfeldt's experimental tendencies in earnest. Rips, wrinkles, and even holes appear in the drawings' paper canvas. Letters from previously-seen intertitles or logos crash to the ground in a massive, messy pile of typography. And in one particularly notable image, a character repeatedly pounds with his fist at the paper on which he is drawn, trying to punch through the film itself and earn his freedom. Thus, in *Rejected*, the cinematic apparatus as such is not only an abstract, philosophical concern for the filmmaker; it is also a distressing existential concern for the characters within its own diegesis. As mentioned in Chapter Two, this concern recalls the simulation of interaction between creator and creation that has been part of the history of animation at least since Blackton shared wine with a face on an easel over a century ago.<sup>158</sup>

### ***The Animation Show***

Hertzfeldt's next films are three short cartoons (*Welcome to the Show*; *Intermission in the Third Dimension*; and *The End of the Show*), used as interstitial material for a touring festival called "The Animation Show." Hertzfeldt co-created The Animation Show in 2003 with animator Mike Judge (best known for *Beavis and Butt-Head*, *King of the Hill*, and

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<sup>157</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *Rejected*, Bitter Films, 2000.

<sup>158</sup> Blackton, J. Stuart. *The Enchanted Drawing*, 1900.

*Office Space*), and the show toured again with animators like Bill Plympton, PES, and Georges Schwizgebel in 2005, 2007, and 2008.

These Animation Show shorts feature two puffball/cloud-looking creatures (similar to the one who bled from its anus in *Rejected*), speaking to each other and to the audience, like talk show co-hosts. In the first segment, while trying to explain that “anything’s possible in the crazy world of animation,” the creatures’ bodies begin to transform: one of them gains several extra limbs, while the other grows extraordinarily tall. The now-towering character teeters and panics, channeling *Planet of the Apes* by paraphrasing Charlton Heston’s George Taylor: “damn the illusion of movement—damn the illusion of movement to Hell!”<sup>159</sup> In the second segment, the hosts explore “the third dimension” by donning 3D glasses and sharing their experience (“it’s like I can touch you!”).<sup>160</sup> The film depicts this like a bad acid trip, complete with impossible creatures, nonsense languages, psychedelic colors, *Vertigo*-esque spirals, Scandinavian music, and Buñuelian swarms of insects. And finally, in the third segment, one of the hosts delivers an earnest monologue about the “serious[ness]” and “purity”<sup>161</sup> of animation but is interrupted by a montage of violent war scenes between other fluff-creatures and giant killer robots.

All three of these segments are somewhat derivative of ideas Hertzfeldt has explored elsewhere (the meta-mockery in *Welcome to the Show* and the darkly comic descent into chaos in *Intermission in the Third Dimension* remind us of *Rejected*, while the straightforward but self-aware sci-fi parody in *The End of the Show* reminds us of *Genre*).

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<sup>159</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *Welcome to the Show*, Bitter Films, 2003.

<sup>160</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *Intermission in the Third Dimension*, Bitter Films, 2003.

<sup>161</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *The End of the Show*, Bitter Films, 2003.

But they are notable nonetheless, even if just for their willingness to explicitly talk about animation as a medium. In this way, they act not only as an encapsulation of Hertzfeldt's attitude towards his art and audience, but also as a sentiment and statement of solidarity with his peers in the animation community itself.

### ***The Meaning of Life***

Hertzfeldt's next film is *The Meaning of Life* (2005), a twelve-minute epic, "a sprawling abstract film about human evolution"<sup>162</sup> from prehistory into a distant future. The film's 60-second cold open foregrounds the image of death: in a pillar of light is a slowly falling, gradually dying and decaying human body, surrounded by blackness. What follows is a long take, a static wide shot of proto-humans and humans meandering across the screen like actors traversing a stage. Sometimes these figures interact with one another, but more often they merely repeat their own unique pattern, including a series of gestures and a line of dialogue (or perhaps more appropriately: a line of monologue). As each figure enters and exits the frame, the overall audiovisual experience of the film slightly modulates, like a symphony introducing and retiring a variety of distinct instruments and melodies. For the most part, the characters present a vision of a troubled, solipsistic, and petty humanity: repeating lines like "give me your money," "I think that he's cheating," "you people make me sick," and "animals are trying to influence my mind."<sup>163</sup> One man, wide-eyed and nervous, keeps asking: "what?" and doesn't seem sure which direction he should walk. No one responds, until another character approaches him and aggressively, almost

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<sup>162</sup> "Goat Yelling Like A Man: An Interview with Don Hertzfeldt." *Trap Door Sun*, 15 November 2009.

<sup>163</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *The Meaning of Life*, Bitter Films, 2005.

violently shouts, “no!” They bounce back and forth in an utterly nonsensical dialogue—the vague confusion of “what” met repeatedly with the equally vague belligerence of “no”—and of course, neither of them finds satisfaction. No one does.

This symphony of shallow human noise continues to escalate as the crowd grows denser, until four minutes into the film, when the rhythm drastically changes. At this point, the film seems to fast-forward, zooming past dozens of anonymous figures, and the transience of the crowd is emphasized by the overwhelming speed with which it progresses. The soundscape of shouting, speaking, joking, and arguing (backed by Tchaikovsky’s “Piano Concerto No. 1 in B♭ Minor, Op. 23”)<sup>164</sup> abruptly gives way to a soft whirr, which is occasionally punctuated by hauntingly silent, mostly still images of corpses littering the ground. Then the music re-emerges, more emphatic and bombastic, and the film whisks us away into space—offering a brief peek at the vast grandeur of the cosmos—only to return again to our planet. What follows (a sequence in which we are shown many generations of various alien-looking life forms, presumably the distant future of human evolution) is accompanied by the majestic, balletic “Waltz of the Flowers” from Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker Suite*.

In its concluding segment, the film shows two creatures standing side-by-side; one is smaller and the other is larger, implying some kind of parent-child (or at least mentor-pupil) relationship. The smaller creature asks something that sounds like a philosophical

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<sup>164</sup> This Tchaikovsky concerto has been used in many other pieces of media, including the sketch show *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (it’s unclear whether Hertzfeldt meant for *The Meaning of Life* to be a subtle homage to the Pythons’ 1983 film of the same name, though he did think highly of the comedy group); and the 1971 cult romance film *Harold and Maude*, which along with the Pythons was mentioned in Chapter One as one of Hertzfeldt’s early influences.

question—it's in a post-human language, mostly unintelligible to us save the phrase “meaning of life”—and the larger one, in a deeper, authoritative voice, responds with what seems like glib dismissiveness before walking away. The smaller creature is left looking at the sky, watching the sunset, a slight smile forming on its face as the stars emerge for the night.

If there is a central argument at the heart of *The Meaning of Life*, it is somewhat ambiguous. In Chapter Two, I cited this film as an example of Hertzfeldt's surrender to epistemological and philosophical uncertainty, but the film could just as easily be interpreted as a yearning for more immediate, more productive hermeneutic tools—which is to say that instead of rejecting the notion of “answers,” perhaps the film merely wants its audience to ask better questions. A small creature smiles at the stars: this is a sympathetic moment, a moment in which we relate to the creature's earnest, childlike wonder. We certainly feel more connected to its curiosity than we do to the pettiness of the humans we had seen prior. Perhaps, despite the condescending scoffs of its elder, the little poet-philosopher is on to something.

### ***Wisdom Teeth***

Then again, perhaps poetic philosophizing is only a distraction from the reality, ubiquity, and incomprehensibility of suffering. Five years after *The Meaning of Life*, Hertzfeldt's six-minute pseudo-foreign-language film *Wisdom Teeth* (2010) finds dark comedy in our exquisite pain, and in our futile efforts to make sense of it—much less escape it. *Wisdom Teeth* is about a man who, after a wisdom tooth operation, decides to let his friend pull out one of the stitches, but the stitch is much, much longer than anticipated.

What results is a bloody, disastrous nightmare. As his friend continues to tug at the stitch, the man exclaims (as translated by a subtitle): “this is a pain of unreasonable proportions.”<sup>165</sup> The dry comedy of a line like this in a moment of anguish relies on the strange pseudo-language in which it is spoken (a mixture of exaggerated stereotypes of North Germanic languages) as well as on its conspicuously non-colloquial translation (exclamations of intense pain do not typically consist of calm, intelligible, measured phrases like this). Herein is the key to the film’s overall comedic sensibilities: *Wisdom Teeth* is interested not only in the discomfort of bodily phenomena or in the inscrutability of language,<sup>166</sup> but also in the surprising emotional spaces we might occupy as we react to this discomfort and inscrutability.

### ***Clown in the Dumps***

There is a middle ground between this Hertzfeldtian sense of inscrutable agony (as exemplified by *Wisdom Teeth*) and this Hertzfeldtian sense of rapturous poetry (as exemplified by optimistic readings of *The Meaning of Life*’s final moments). This middle ground is represented well by Hertzfeldt’s short introductory segment to *The Simpsons* episode “Clown in the Dumps” (2014). In Chapter One, I described this “truly gonzo”

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<sup>165</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *Wisdom Teeth*, Bitter Films, 2010.

<sup>166</sup> Here I am borrowing and adapting a phrase from the philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine (see “Translation and Meaning,” *Word and Object*, MIT Press, 1960). Quine argued for what he called the “indeterminacy of translation” (a theory in which uniquely and perfectly correct translations of unknown languages are supposedly impossible) by identifying what he called “inscrutability of reference” (the notion that any given sentence can be interpreted variously such that each interpretation is no more or less valid than the rest). Don Hertzfeldt’s *Wisdom Teeth* is obviously not a treatise on the philosophy of language, but both its horror and its comedy are fundamentally tied to this concept of inscrutability—to both the pain and humor in trying to understand an experience which can only be approximated or expressed, but which cannot be fully, radically understood.

couch gag as a hypothesis, one which satirically speculates about the Simpson family's distant future with Hertzfeldt's signature sense of grotesqueness and grandeur. There is something dystopian about the couch gag, to be sure—made apparent by phrases like “AMUSEMENT IS CONTROL” and “ALL ANIMALS CAN SCREAM”<sup>167</sup> flashing across the screen—but underneath the dystopia is an undercurrent of poignant humanism. A deformed, futuristic Marge with a robotic voice quietly assures Homer that she still loves him, while they stand in front of a jagged, sepia-toned landscape. She gently, affectionately slaps her husband's face with a long, tentacle-like limb protruding directly out of her neck.<sup>168</sup> The sanctity and importance of interpersonal connection—confusing and difficult as it may be—is a strong theme here, one which Hertzfeldt explores even more deeply in his triptych, *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, two years prior.

## **Feature Filmmaking (2006–2012)**

### ***It's Such a Beautiful Day***

Hertzfeldt initially released *It's Such a Beautiful Day* (2012) as three serialized 20-minute shorts (starting in 2006 with *Everything Will Be OK*; continuing in 2008 with *I Am So Proud of You*; and concluding in 2011 with *It's Such a Beautiful Day*). These were then edited together and re-released in 2012 as an hour-long feature. For the purposes of this

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<sup>167</sup> Moore, Steven Dean. “Clown in the Dumps.” *The Simpsons*, FOX, 28 September 2014.

<sup>168</sup> This moment is shown as “THE SAMPSANS EPASODE NUMBAR 20,254,” which at *The Simpsons*' current rate of production must indicate we are at least 900 years into the future. At the time, Simpsons producer Al Jean called it “the most insane [couch gag] we've ever done” (Snierson, Dan. “‘Simpsons’ producer talks character's death in premiere.” *Entertainment Weekly*, 28 September 2014).

analysis, I will refer to the film as one cumulative unit, rather than as a trilogy of three films.

*It's Such a Beautiful Day* is about a stick-figure man named Bill, whose health gradually deteriorates and whose grasp of past and present becomes increasingly distorted. The story is told through third-person voice-over narration, by which the disembodied narrator occupies a space in between objective non-diegesis and subjective diegesis: sometimes he is completely detached from the action, describing it from an outside point of view (“Bill sat down and put on a big sweater, but it only made him sleepy”), while at other times he attempts to interrupt and interfere with the action (“Wait a minute, he’s not gonna die here; [he] doesn’t die here. No, no, no. Bill, get up!”).<sup>169</sup> And as its narrative focuses on Bill’s deterioration and detemporalization, it is clear that *It's Such a Beautiful Day* is deeply interested in death and time (more on this in Chapter Four), but crucially, the film is also interested in loneliness and relationships.

Consider the way in which Bill’s relationship with his ex-girlfriend is portrayed. She is explicitly referred to as an “ex,” but the dissolution of their romance is never explained or even referenced. Thus, while the two are connected, there is a certain ambivalence in their connection. This nuanced depiction acts as a counterpoint to Bill’s otherwise overwhelming loneliness and isolation which permeates most of the film. When he is with his ex-girlfriend, it is made clear that she cares about him—that he is not fundamentally alone in the universe. In one scene, they take a walk to the park: “he noticed that every time he was near her, she sort of moved away with a tight-lipped smile on her face as

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<sup>169</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.



though everything were okay,” reports the narrator, before noting: “mostly they talked about death.”<sup>170</sup> With these two sentences, we see a complex interplay between intimacy and distance, between assurance and ambiguity, and between liveliness and morbidity.

At one point in the film, Bill is hospitalized and believes he will soon die, but the doctors do not know what to make of his situation. After a few days of observation, they conclude that he will indeed live, so Bill’s mother “[has] his casket returned at great expense and inconvenience.” The narrator notes Bill’s uncle in particular, “whom Bill had not even noticed in the room.” Apparently, he “had taken a lot of time off work to fly in all the way from Tulsa,” and “he looked vaguely annoyed.”<sup>171</sup> With a moment like this, *It’s Such a Beautiful Day* is once again exploring the complicated space between connection and disconnection, similarly to what it accomplishes with the ex-girlfriend in the park. Put another way: this is a film about the beautiful moments that bring us together, but it is also about the tragedy and comedy inherent in how those moments are subverted by awkwardness, misunderstanding, confusion, and death (or at least the looming inevitability of death).

*It’s Such a Beautiful Day* is also a film about emotional states, specifically the cyclicity of depression, and the inheritance and recycling of emotional trauma. One of the ways in which the film explores these ideas is by showing us brief vignettes of Bill’s memories. Because Bill’s grasp on reality is loosening, it is always unclear how many of these memories actually happened—but it is always clear that they *feel* subjectively real

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

from Bill's point of view (even if they were subconsciously fabricated). Some of these memories are relatively mundane, but strange (like Bill's paranoid mother making him wear a heavy coat and helmet to grade school); some are realistically but profoundly miserable (like the evening of Bill's sixth birthday, when his mother and stepfather get into an intense argument and the latter storms cursing out of the house); others are shockingly and almost comically violent (like when Bill's great-grandfather is cut in half by a train while eating an onion).

Another way in which the film explores depression and trauma is by depicting Bill's relationship with his mother, who travels from Omaha to take care of him during one of his breakdowns. One morning, she notices a loose thread in his collar and grabs some scissors to tidy it up; in an animalistic, almost out-of-body moment, Bill sees this as a threat and reactively swats her hand away. Her quivering, dumbfounded response is devastating: "how could you think I'd ever want to hurt you?"<sup>172</sup> Bill does not respond to the question, but he notices that in this moment as his mother is crumpled on the floor in grief—in this moment of vulnerability and frailty—she looks old. In another moment later in the film, after Bill's mother has passed away, he looks through an old photo album she had left behind. He finds photos of himself as a young boy, and "it depress[es] him how foreign the pictures [seem] to him now." He ponders how each cell in the human body will inevitably die and replace itself over the years—which is to say that "everyone is slowly reconstructed out of continuously changing pieces." And looking at these photos, he can't help but feel melancholy and even indignant at how, as his narrator explains it, "his ridiculous ingrown

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

cells” seem to have “long ago stolen this happy dead kid’s identity and with his own life made a complete mess of it.”<sup>173</sup> Yes, these two scenes (the loose thread and the box of photos) are both about Bill’s fascination with age, death, and the cruelty of time—but they are also about how he objectifies his mother, almost certainly without meaning to. They are about how when he thinks of her he is really thinking of himself, of his future, and of his past. They are about how familial relationships are frail and fraught; they are about how family can remind us of who we are, and of where we are headed—even (especially!) when we do not want to be reminded.

Essentially, *It’s Such a Beautiful Day* is about the tragedy of isolation. This is made most powerfully apparent in its fantastical final sequence, in which Bill endures for millions of years, eternally undying, outliving every friend and foe, outlasting every nation and species, and even surviving the Earth itself. He floats through space all alone, eventually forgetting his own name and origin. In this sequence he is robbed of his memories (i.e. his relationship to the past) and he is robbed of his connections (i.e. his relationships with others); as a result, he is ultimately robbed of even his sense of self-identity (i.e. his relationship to himself).

As one critic puts it, “Bill is a vessel [by which] the film is a contemplation on humankind’s relationship with a chaotic, indifferent universe.”<sup>174</sup> In the film’s ending, then, the chaotic and indifferent universe seems to triumph. Herein lies Hertzfeldt’s most horrifying nightmare—a threat of isolation that cuts more harshly and more deeply than

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Lee, Kevin. “IT’S SUCH A BEAUTIFUL DAY: Depression & Mortality.” *Film Inquiry*, 28 August 2018.

anything in his more extravagantly gruesome short films—but still, the horror is presented with a sense of elegance and poetry, and backed with graceful piano score.<sup>175</sup> All of this adds up to something oddly soothing, as if the film wants to reassure us that, as its title promises, there really is beauty to be found here—even in the midst of despair.

This conclusion raises some important questions, not only with regard to the nature of Bill's suffering (what is to be done with the grandeur and terror of a concept like the afterlife, and with the ways in which such a concept may feel both liberating and isolating?), but also with regard to Hertzfeldt's artistic trajectory, and with his evolution as a filmmaker (is *It's Such a Beautiful Day* a more "mature" work compared to his others, as many critics might suggest—and what does maturity even mean?).<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Frédéric Chopin's "Piano Concerto No. 1 in E Minor, Op. 11: II: Romance."

<sup>176</sup> It is worth noting here that there is something problematic about the idea of adult sensibilities ("maturity") being inherently better or more important than the sensibilities which we might associate with childhood. On this topic, J. R. R. Tolkien says the following: "if we use *child* in a good sense (it has also legitimately a bad one) we must not allow that to push us into the sentimentality of only using *adult* or *grown-up* in a bad sense (it has also legitimately a good one). The process of growing older is not necessarily allied to growing wickeder through the two do often happen together. Children are meant to grow up, and not to become Peter Pans... it is one of the lessons of fairy-stories... that on callow, lumpish and selfish youth peril, sorrow, and the shadow of death can bestow dignity, and even sometimes wisdom." (Tolkien, J. R. R. *Tree and Leaf*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965, pages 44–45. For more on Peter Pan's position as an "unreliable model" and for his version of childhood as an "incomplete, most insufficient institution," see Duncan, Dean W. "Nostalgia, Morbidity, and Moving Forward." *Stories of Childhood: Evolving Portrayals in Books and Films*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015, pages 207–208; see also Carpenter, Humphrey. *Secret Gardens: The Golden Age of Children's Literature*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985, pages 185–186.)

## The Episodic Shorts (2015–2017)

### *World of Tomorrow and The Burden of Other People's Thoughts*

The aforementioned implication of *It's Such a Beautiful Day*'s ending—the sense of beauty in the midst of despair—is arguably the thesis of Hertzfeldt's next two short films, *World of Tomorrow* (2015) and *World of Tomorrow—Episode Two: The Burden of Other People's Thoughts* (2017). These shorts offer a dialectic between two worldviews: on one hand there is the boundless creativity and dogged optimism of what one critic calls a “pure and vibrant” mind, “settled in the now;”<sup>177</sup> on the other hand there is the frustrated, hesitant, and somewhat hopeless exhaustion of a much more melancholic mind. The former of these two perspectives is personified in a little girl named Emily Prime (voiced by Hertzfeldt's niece, Winona Mae); the latter is personified in her time-traveling clones (each voiced by Julia Pott) who visit her from the future for various reasons. Hertzfeldt is searching for balance in this dialectic between the childlike wonder of Emily Prime and the brokenhearted despondency of Future Emilys. It is as if he desperately wants us to know that “no matter how horrifying the future might be... some twisted piece of humanity will still be ineffably alive.”<sup>178</sup>

On a plot level, the first film offers bleak glimpses of an apocalyptic future, venturing beyond a broken Earth and into the cosmos; the second film spends most of its time looking instead at the human mind—a close look into inner space, rather than outer space. Both

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<sup>177</sup> Foutch, Haleigh. “‘World of Tomorrow Episode 2’ Review: Another Soulful Sci-Fi Masterpiece from Don Hertzfeldt.” *Collider*, 29 December 2017.

<sup>178</sup> Sims, David. “The Essential Saga of Don Hertzfeldt's *World of Tomorrow*.” *The Atlantic*, 3 January 2018.

films are full of science fiction world-building; both are concerned with speculative musings about the ethical, metaphysical, and ontological problems introduced by potential technological advances. And crucially, both films represent the directions in which Hertzfeldt's experimental aesthetic sensibilities have been evolving over time.

These aesthetic sensibilities are more diverse in *World of Tomorrow* than they had been in anything that Hertzfeldt had done before. And in *The Burden of Other People's Thoughts* two years later, the increasing visual complexity is even more pronounced. In both films, Hertzfeldt uses color, texture, and a combination of different kinds of images to various effect: when he wants to evoke the distant past, for example, he uses hand-drawn sketches straight out of *The End of the World* (his 2013 graphic novel, the panels of which he had drawn on post-it notes and then blown up to 8"x8").<sup>179</sup> When he wants to represent depression as a physical space, he uses computer-generated imagery to approximate a rainy, murky metaphor of the mental state which Emily-6 calls a "bog of realism."<sup>180</sup> And when he wants to represent the innocent crudity of a child's imagination, he further exaggerates the hand-drawn qualities of his shapes and figures, as in *World of Tomorrow* when Emily Prime visits the Outernet and draws a triangle in mid-air, or in *Episode Two* when she envisions an entire magical place called "Triangle Land," inhabited by happy triangle-creatures.<sup>181</sup> Hertzfeldtian cinema, especially the later work (starting with *It's*

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<sup>179</sup> "I liked the way the pale yellow [of the post-it notes] looked," Hertzfeldt says of his process (Dueben, Alex. "Don Hertzfeldt Documents 'The End of the World.'" *CBR.com*, 1 May 2014). See Hertzfeldt's *The End of the World*, Antibookclub, 2013.

<sup>180</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *World of Tomorrow—Episode Two: The Burden of Other People's Thoughts*, Bitter Films, 2017.

<sup>181</sup> When asked what people do in Triangle Land, Emily Prime cheerfully replies: "they do triangle stuff; they do triangle work; they do triangle flying in the air; they do triangle driving; they do everything!" This preoccupation with anthropomorphic triangles is strikingly reminiscent

*Such a Beautiful Day*), is an increasingly apt illustration of why Susan Sontag calls cinema “a kind of pan-art, [which] can use, incorporate, [and] engulf virtually any other art.”<sup>182</sup>

Emily Prime’s dialogue in general represents one of Hertzfeldt’s most interesting choices in the *World of Tomorrow* films. Nothing she says in the films is scripted. During production, Hertzfeldt recorded his niece Winona Mae talking, playing, and drawing pictures, and he edited together her ramblings into snippets that he could use to form a coherent story. “[It was] complicated to write because she, frankly, wouldn’t stop talking, so the audio was [hard] to edit,” he says. “Finding ways to make [her recordings] connect and make any narrative sense at all with the story I was trying to write on the other side was very, very tricky.”<sup>183</sup> This assemblage of Winona’s recordings into new thematic and narrative contexts is, in a way, an encapsulation of a lot of what Hertzfeldt films are all about: a blurring of the lines between silly, nonsensical, and profound; an exploration of a child’s (sometimes morbid) curiosity; an elevation of the present; and a re-imagining of what “matters.”

Winona/Emily also serves as an exploration of the meaning and wonder of childhood itself—especially when considering the way in which the child is juxtaposed against considerable danger and despair throughout both *World of Tomorrow* films. Dean Duncan argues that the cinematic image of childhood has long been an idealistic, sentimental motif,

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of the lyrics to They Might Be Giants’ 1990 song “Particle Man” from the album *Flood*, but it is unlikely that Hertzfeldt intended this as a direct reference. After all, he technically did not write Emily Prime’s dialogue.

<sup>182</sup> Sontag, Susan. “A note on novels and films.” *Against Interpretation and other Essays*, Picador, 2001, page 245.

<sup>183</sup> Cordy, Sean. “Interview: Don Hertzfeldt discusses ‘World of Tomorrow Episode Two.’” *CutPrintFilm*, 23 October 2017.

and a counterpoint to death (“though distance and death were inevitable, the motion picture [can] ensur[e] that after a certain fashion, the lives of the beloved would continue on. And what could be more beloved, what more lovable than a little child?”).<sup>184</sup> This motif has been central to narrative film since the days of early cinema.<sup>185</sup> But what Hertzfeldt does with the motif is interesting, not because he completely de-sentimentalizes it (though he does do that—briefly in *Rejected*, with the child falling down an seemingly infinite staircase,<sup>186</sup> and of course even more conspicuously throughout *Billy’s Balloon*) but because he finds some kind of middle ground, in a child who is precocious and curious and lovable but who can also meaningfully interact with adult problems and questions (for more on Emily regarding this interaction, see Chapter Four).

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<sup>184</sup> Duncan, Dean W. “Idealism, Sentimentality, and the Advent of Film.” *Stories of Childhood: Evolving Portrayals in Books and Films*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015, page 101.

<sup>185</sup> One English film scholar has even suggested that the “Child Picture” could have been the first genre in film history. (See Lebeau, Vicky. *Childhood and Cinema*, London: Reaktion, 2008, pages 10–36.

<sup>186</sup> This “first steps” vignette feels almost like a direct response to Dean Duncan’s discussion of the image of the child in cinematic history. Specifically, *Rejected* feels like a twisted response to Duncan’s rhetorical question: “what is more delightful than the child that rolls and creeps, crawls and stands upright, toddles and then takes off?” (Duncan, Dean W. “Idealism, Sentimentality, and the Advent of Film.” *Stories of Childhood: Evolving Portrayals in Books and Films*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015, page 102.)



## CHAPTER FOUR: UNDERSTANDING DON HERTZFELDT

Hertzfeldt's persona, his responses to inquiry, and his art are constantly orbiting complex questions about what it means to be alive, what it means to navigate space and time, and what it means when that spatiotemporal navigation is abruptly disrupted (i.e. "death"). I will now take a closer look at those three interconnected philosophical ideas that appear prominently in the themes and motifs of Hertzfeldt's films—namely, consciousness, temporality, and death. This chapter will primarily focus on analyzing these ideas with regard to Hertzfeldt's three most recent films, excluding the Simpsons couch gag from 2014. I will focus on *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, *World of Tomorrow*, and *The Burden of Other People's Thoughts*. These are the three films in which Hertzfeldt most consistently shows an overt interest in philosophy. I will, however, make occasional references to his older work when relevant.

### Hertzfeldt on Consciousness

A necessary starting point is the ontological and existential question of what it means to *be*, and more precisely of what it means to be *alive*. The notion of "aliveness" is a central part of what animated cinema is trying to approximate or ventriloquize, even perhaps in a necromantic sense (as I mentioned in Chapter Two, animation is fundamentally about bringing still things into motion—about bringing dead things to life). And it is immediately clear in some of Hertzfeldt's earliest work that he wants to interrogate the process by which creators breathe life into their creations, a life which then seems to demand justification and explanation.

In *Genre*, for example, the cartoon rabbit protagonist is suddenly imbued with life, and then immediately wants to negotiate the boundaries of its own existence. In a world in which there are infinite possibilities but extremely limited realities,<sup>187</sup> it is as if the rabbit were asking: “[why] am I a part of it? How did I happen to make the existential cut?”<sup>188</sup> In other words: *why do I exist?*

Throughout his career, Hertzfeldt does not appear to land on a concrete, final answer to this question—the meaning of life, the purpose of consciousness—but his films do explore several heuristics by which we might try to find (or construct) meaning. Here I will examine three: first, what I will call *being-as-being* (existence which is inherently meaningful, the meaning of which can only be discovered if we strip away other considerations and consider it on its own terms, so to speak); second, *being-as-being-heard* (existence which is meaningful inasmuch as it can be articulated and understood); and third, *being-as-being-with* (existence which is meaningful inasmuch as it is experientially shared). My formulation of these heuristics is inspired by existential philosophers: Heidegger’s methodology, for instance, employs a particularly similar kind of terminology, e.g. *In-der-Welt-sein* (“being-in-the-world”); *Sein-zum-Tode* (“being-toward-death”); *Mitsein* (“being-with”); and, most crucially, *Dasein* (“being-there,” or “presence”).<sup>189</sup> I will now define each of my heuristics in more detail with examples from Hertzfeldt’s films.

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<sup>187</sup> In other words, in a “world [which] falls infinitely short of ontological completeness.” (Holt, Jim. “The Self: Do I Really Exist?” *Why Does the World Exist?* New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2012, page 253.)

<sup>188</sup> Holt, Jim. “The Self: Do I Really Exist?” *Why Does the World Exist?* New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2012, page 253.

<sup>189</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Sein und Zeit* a.k.a. *Being and Time*, 1927 (translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York: Harper and Row, 1962; alternately: translated by Joan Stambaugh, State University of New York Press, 1996).

### ***“Being-as-being”***

There is a sense in which Hertzfeldt’s films suggest that existence *in and of itself* is extraordinary. It is as if he is modifying the Cartesian maxim,<sup>190</sup> repeating only the latter half (“*I am*; therefore, *I am!*”) and therein discovering a sort of exhilaration. In the few moments leading up to Bill’s temporal and metaphysical transcendence, during the climax of *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, we are told that Bill “wants to stop people in the street and say, ‘isn’t this amazing? Isn’t everything amazing?’”<sup>191</sup> In this rapturous epiphany, Bill is becoming what philosophers like Martin Buber might call *attentive*: he “faces creation as it happens;”<sup>192</sup> he is “listen[ing] to the sounds of his life, to the events of the personal everyday things that happen to him;” he is in tune with “the poetry of the everyday.”<sup>193</sup>

The poetry of the everyday also plays a role in *The Meaning of Life*, Hertzfeldt’s abstract opus about the (pre- and post-) history of the world as we know it. Yet, in *The Meaning of Life*, rapture is found not by any narrator or protagonist, but by the film and its audience—as we see generations come and go, nature and society ebbing and flowing like water.<sup>194</sup> The ostensibly inconclusive conversation at the end, punctuated by a small smile

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<sup>190</sup> “Cogito; ergo, sum” (“I think; therefore, I am”). See Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 1641.

<sup>191</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

<sup>192</sup> Buber, Martin. “Dialogue.” *Between Man and Man*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1947; New York: Macmillan, 1948; page 16.

<sup>193</sup> Hodes, Aubrey. “Answering for Ourselves.” *Martin Buber: An Intimate Portrait*, New York: The Viking Press, 1971, page 23.

<sup>194</sup> I am intentionally describing the flow of this film in a way that is reminiscent of Bruce Lee (“empty your mind; be formless, shapeless—like water. Now you put water in a cup, it becomes the cup; you put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle; you put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend!”). Lee’s favorite philosophers were Jiddu Krishnamurti and Alan Watts, both of whom emphasized a rejection of rigid dogmas and an embrace of pantheistic or theosophical attentiveness, of undergoing meditative processes of “attention, observation, [and] ‘choiceless awareness.’” This democratized

(worn on the face of the character whom I called “the little poet-philosopher” in Chapter Three), seems to open up a new possibility regarding “meaning,” namely that being *is* meaning. Put simply: *what does it mean to be alive? It means that you are alive.*<sup>195</sup> To be alive means that, like the little poet-philosopher at the end of *The Meaning of Life*, you are a thinking, conscious thing who can observe and appreciate the marvels with which you are surrounded—and that is hermeneutically sufficient.

In Hertzfeldt’s worlds, it is implied that existence is not only hermeneutically sufficient for creatures who look like us, but for all manner of entities. Emily Prime imagines a land full of conscious triangles in *The Burden of Other People’s Thoughts*; fluffy cloud-creatures sing and dance (and bleed) in *Rejected*; the Simpson family morphs through countless inhuman iterations in *Clown in the Dumps*; and so on. One of the benefits of animation is that anything can be given motion and apparent sentience, whether it is human or not.<sup>196</sup>

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approach, divorced from authority figures or structures and centralized instead in the Self, feels right at home in a reading of Hertzfeldt’s *The Meaning of Life*, a film which depicts the coming and going of countless generations and civilizations, all of which are transcended by the nature of *being-as-being*. (Little, John and Bruce Lee. *Bruce Lee: A Warrior’s Journey*, Warner Home Video, 2000. See also Blake, John. “Enter the mind of Bruce Lee.” *CNN*, 2 August 2016—and Krishnamurti, Jiddu. *The First and Last Freedom*, Harper & Brothers, 1954.)

<sup>195</sup> Skeptics might (justifiably!) recoil at the almost tautological simplicity of this formulation, especially with regard to epistemological concerns (how do we *know* that we are alive?). A full defense of my notion of hermetic sufficiency in *being-as-being* is beyond the scope of this thesis. I will elaborate this in future work.

<sup>196</sup> Live-action films sometimes take on this life-giving task, too. For example, Godfrey Reggio, the director of the *Qatsi* trilogy, says of *Powaqqatsi*: “we were trying to look at buildings, masses of people, transportation, industrialization, as autonomous *entities*. Same thing with Nature: Rather than seeing Nature as something dead, something inorganic like a stone, we wanted to see it as having its own life form, unanthropomorphized, unrelated to human beings, here for billions of years before human beings arrived on the planet, having its own entity.” (MacDonald, Scott. *A Critical Cinema 2*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, page 390. See also “Godfrey Reggio: Powaqqatsi.” *Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, page 140.)

Another noteworthy illustration of Hertzfeldt's approach to *being-as-being* is found at the very end of *World of Tomorrow*, in which Emily Prime is transported through time back to her home (after a frightening trick ending, which leads us to believe for a moment that she might have gotten trapped in the prehistoric past, left to die in an empty, snowy field). Upon realizing that she has indeed arrived home safely, Emily Prime saunters off screen, exclaiming with a sing-song voice: "what a happy day it is!" The film then cuts to black. As the closing credits begin to roll, we hear her voice repeatedly singing the word "daffodil," followed by a handful of delighted observations: "look at these pretty colors! I can see the sun is still there. Look; the rain's still there, and then the rainbow's still there—but the rain is still there, and the rainbow doesn't go away."<sup>197</sup> This is, obviously, just Hertzfeldt's capturing of the rambling and riffing of his "actor" (four-year-old Winona Mae), but is also an expression of unadulterated joy, a celebration of color and weather, and a model of existence as an inherently extraordinary phenomenon, a self-sufficient kind of *being* that can be worthy of awe without context or caveat.

This model of existential sufficiency echoes Martin Buber's thought: when we are addressed by the Universe, confronted with the reality of reality, Buber says "we venture to respond, stammering perhaps." Indeed we must stammer, because "the soul is but rarely able to attain to surer articulation—but it is an honest stammering."<sup>198</sup> Furthermore, this notion of honest stammering in the face of the Infinite (as in *The Meaning of Life*, but also

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<sup>197</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *World of Tomorrow*, Bitter Films, 2015.

<sup>198</sup> Buber, Martin. *Between Man and Man*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1947; New York: Macmillan, 1948; page 17.

in *Clown in the Dumps*’ exclamation that “ALL ANIMALS CAN SCREAM”)<sup>199</sup> is Confucian as well as Buberian and Hertzfeldtian (Confucius asks: “of what use is eloquence?”).<sup>200</sup> All of which is to say that for millennia, there have been philosophers who have responded to the great existential question with a heartening (if somewhat frustrating) permission slip—assuring us that we are permitted to bask in the vastness of Everything, that we are allowed to not know what to make of it all, that it is okay for us to merely stammer. *Being-as-being*, then, is not necessarily clean or comprehensible—it might often feel like an unsteady, wavering sort of thing. Hertzfeldt seems to fit in line with this philosophical heritage, especially in the tremulous hand-drawn aesthetics of many of his films. His unstable line work presents an unstable existence—a kind of “being-there” (*Dasein*) which completely lacks clarity of “there”ness. Put another way, Hertzfeldt’s articulation of *being-as-being* necessarily includes trembling.

### ***“Being-as-being-heard”***

In this trembling, *being-as-being* is not always entirely satisfying. If being is, in and of itself, the meaning of being, then why does it cause so much suffering? Surely there must be something more, something to account for the absurdities, irregularities, asymmetries, isolation, and pain of existence.<sup>201</sup> Even if not, perhaps existence would gain

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<sup>199</sup> Moore, Steven Dean. “Clown in the Dumps.” *The Simpsons*, FOX, 28 September 2014.

<sup>200</sup> Confucius. *Analects: Book Five*, translated by Edward Slingerland, Hackett Publishing Company, 2003, page 41.

<sup>201</sup> Certainly, it could be argued that as suffering is an integral part of life it does not require justification in any way—that *being-as-suffering* is not necessarily problematic. This raises some theodicean and existential questions, the full expression and exploration of which is beyond the scope of my work here. See Hick, John. *Evil and the God of Love*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010 (for an Irenaean approach to Christian theodicy); Herman, Arthur. *The problem of evil and Indian thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Motilal Banarsidass, 1976 (for an example of how theodicean questions are

a sense of “meaning” if the experience were articulated, not as a stammer but as a sentence, as a fully-formed expression which can be deeply comprehended and internalized by some subjective Other. In other words, perhaps the meaning of being is to be *heard*. Hertzfeldt explores this line of inquiry in several of his films.<sup>202</sup>

In *World of Tomorrow*, Emily Prime’s brief, simple replies to her future clone’s long stories and instructions are usually played for laughs, as when she responds to a moment of complicated sci-fi exposition<sup>203</sup> and to a moment of almost lyrical guidance,<sup>204</sup> both with a comically brief “okay!” But occasionally, the gap between the child and the clone is momentarily bridged, and there are hints of genuine understanding—not true relationship or intimate interconnectivity, perhaps, but understanding—as when Future Emily is telling a story about harvesting the memory of her late husband, who had died suddenly. He had been the last survivor in a line of clones, which had come from the same source as David

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approached in theological contexts outside of monotheism); Kivy, Peter. “Melville’s Billy and the Secular Problem of Evil: the Worm in the Bud,” *The Monist* 63, Oxford University Press on behalf of the Hegeler Institute, 1980 (for a discussion of evil and suffering in a secular rather than religious context); and Kekes, John, *Facing Evil*, Princeton University Press, 1990 (for another philosophical inquiry into evil and suffering outside of religious discourse).

<sup>202</sup> One theological film critic, who thinks of cinema as a sort of prayer, might call many of Hertzfeldt’s films a “lament,” or “an expression of despair in hope of being heard,” or a series of “guttural cries cast from the grime of earth to the ear of God.” (Larsen, Josh. “Movies as Prayers of Lament.” *Movies are Prayers: How Films Voice our Deepest Longings*, InterVarsity Press, 2017, page 51.)

<sup>203</sup> “That is the memory I just shared with you. Because I have brought you inside of it, you are now mistaking the memory for your own.”

<sup>204</sup> “This is your future, Emily Prime. It is sometimes a sad life and it is a long life. You will feel a deep longing for something you cannot quite remember. It will be a beautiful visit. And then we shall share the same fate as the rest of the human race: dying horribly. The advice I give you now is the advice I remember receiving from myself at your age in this moment, so I cannot be certain where it actually originated from: ‘Do not lose time on daily trivialities. Do not dwell on petty detail. For all of these things melt away and drift apart within the obscure traffic of time. Live well and live broadly. You are alive and living now. Now is the envy of all of the dead.’”

(the boy in the tube). The memory she had harvested from him was a single moving image of a plant blowing in the wind, “flopping its fronds together in a sort of plant applause.” Emily describes how she had watched the harvested memory thousands of times; the emotional implications of this act may not be clear to her, but they are clear to us, and most importantly, they are clear to Emily Prime, who interrupts her with a simple and surprisingly poignant observation: “you missed him.” In this moment, Hertzfeldt drops the piano soundtrack, leaving only silence for a beat, and cuts to a close-up of Future Emily’s face, as she appears to internally wrestle with the ramifications of what she is feeling. “I do not have the mental or emotional capacity to deal with his loss,” she admits. “But sometimes, I sit in a chair late at night and quietly feel very bad.”<sup>205</sup> It is as if she is starting to process the emotion of grief for the first time, at least for the first time out loud. Her visit with Emily Prime has given her an audience, someone who might understand her. Her mission, then, becomes not only about retrieving information, but about being *heard*.

The desire to be heard is felt achingly in some of Hertzfeldt’s darker works, too, like *Lily and Jim* or *Billy’s Balloon*. The central conceit of *Lily and Jim* is that the eponymous couple are talking past each other, never able to really communicate; not only are they both unaware of the other’s needs and feelings, but they are also unable to clearly articulate their own. This inability has disastrous consequences. The film ends with Jim’s body violently reacting to coffee (because he is unable to express that he is extremely allergic to it). In *Billy’s Balloon*, the toddlers’ inability to articulate the suffering of their situation (of being brutally mistreated by a gang of sentient but apparently evil balloons) leads to disaster and

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<sup>205</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *World of Tomorrow*, Bitter Films, 2015.



chaos as well. The only moment of transcendence occurs when two children, both being suspended high in the air by their respective torturer-balloons, are able to actually interact with each other. With wide, ecstatic smiles and enthusiastic waving, they greet each other this way for several seconds—in a silent but clear expression of recognition—until an airplane suddenly appears and blows one of the children away, leaving the other frowning dejectedly, hanging upside-down by himself in the abyss of an empty, indifferent sky (from which he is then unceremoniously dropped). Thus, we see that the dark, brutal comedy of *Billy's Balloon* is not only about the absurdity of violence but it is also about the tragedy of failing to be heard. The horror and suffering of the children, then, is worse than inexplicable: it is ineffable.<sup>206</sup>

This sense of ineffability is explored several times in *It's Such a Beautiful Day*. When Bill is at the hospital, he has a roommate named Matthew. The narrator describes Matthew as “a paralyzed young man hidden by curtains, who communicates to the nursing staff through a row of buttons that can play five different electronic sentences—but more often than not, he only presses one of them.” Immediately after we are given this explanation, Matthew presses a button, and we hear a robotic voice utter: “I am in pain.”<sup>207</sup> Matthew does not have a character arc, and we never learn anything else about him—only that he is

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<sup>206</sup> I am certainly not the first to offer this notion that ineffability is something inherently more disturbing than inexplicability, that it is something an order of magnitude greater in terms of how powerfully it makes us feel (either horrified, or amused, or both). Consider the tagline from the original poster for *Alien*, Ridley Scott's 1979 sci-fi/horror film: “in space, no one can hear you scream.” The pitch here is not simply that there might be incredible horrors in space; the pitch is that when you encounter these horrors, no one will hear your reaction (not even a scream—not even an involuntary, guttural, nonverbal reaction, what Buber might call a “stammering”), because you will be alone. Of course, Hertzfeldt's *Billy's Balloon* is not a sci-fi/horror film like *Alien*, but it is trafficking in similar fears to create its twisted sense of comedy and absurdity.

<sup>207</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

in pain. Hertzfeldt seems to be asking some important questions here. Is the fact that we are conscious of Matthew's pain enough? Is Matthew truly being heard?

As a point of comparison, Joe Bonham (the hospitalized WWI soldier who serves as the protagonist of Dalton Trumbo's 1938 antiwar novel *Johnny Got His Gun*) comes to mind—his tragic situation lies primarily in his inability to meaningfully communicate, and when he finally finds a way to converse despite having lost his limbs, eyes, ears, teeth, and tongue, he is asked flatly, “what do you want?”<sup>208</sup> Joe receives this question with a justified rush of resentment (“who did they think they were and what did they think he wanted that they could give him?”).<sup>209</sup> Hertzfeldt's Matthew, likewise, is left with so few options (exactly five), that perhaps his repeated pressing of the “pain” button is an expression of similar resentment—as if to say, who do you think you are and what do you think I want that you can give me? On the other hand, perhaps his pressing of the button is much more elementary: perhaps all he really wants is for others to know that he is in pain. Perhaps he only wants to be heard, not with profound, conversational depth, but just *to be heard*. The truth is that we will never know whether Matthew feels like he is heard, and it is not for us to decide. The communication (and by extension, the experience of the existence being communicated) is meaningful inasmuch as the subject finds meaning in it.

Another side character in *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, whose inscrutable expressions beg the question of what he hopes to achieve—of whether he feels heard by the confused crowds who surround him—is Randall, Bill's half-brother who dies very young. One day,

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<sup>208</sup> Trumbo, Dalton. *Johnny Got His Gun*, Bantam Books, 1982, pages 217–218.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, page 220.

according to Bill's recollection, Randall spots a gull overhead and "his eyes burst with emotion, [as] he suddenly [takes] off stumbling after it." Overcome, his face streaming with tears, he stretches his arms towards the sun and howls, "boon, boon," before "disappear[ing] into the deep blue sea."<sup>210</sup> In a sense, this strange, sad vignette about Randall helps to set up Bill's backstory, particularly serving as a way to segue into an exploration of his mother's protective paranoia and overwhelming grief, but it is also striking in its own right. The story of Randall is a poignant and melancholy way for Hertzfeldt to articulate questions about communication and the incommunicable. What is the meaning of existence, for Randall? Can we ever know? And what is the meaning of his expressions? And in particular, what is the nonsensical word "boon"—is it an exclamation that he wanted others to understand and respond to? Is it something he was muttering to himself? Is it a key that, if understood by young Bill (or the other onlookers) could have unlocked a way to comprehend or explain his behavior and his death?

In Hertzfeldt's 2000 film, *Rejected*, there are scenes like Randall's, in which terrible suffering is punctuated by inexplicable dialogue. One man approaches another and asks, "say, do you want to go see a movie?" The other responds with a non-sequitur: "I'm feeling fat and sassy."<sup>211</sup> This exchange is followed by several seconds of nonstop screaming from both men, one of whom starts to spurt blood out of his eye, the sudden eruption of which is accompanied by the sound of a popping cork. This moment is over-the-top and excessive, and the pathos here is not meant to feel poignant like Randall's at the beach, or like

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<sup>210</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

<sup>211</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *Rejected*, Bitter Films, 2000.

Matthew's in the hospital. It is meant to feel silly. Still, the silliness is accomplishing something similar to Randall's and Matthew's poignancy: it is a way for Hertzfeldt to highlight the difficulty of being understood, of translating your experiences and desires into meaningful expressions, of seeing a look of recognition and acknowledgment in the eyes of another. It is about *being-as-being-heard*.

### ***“Being-as-being-with”***

The third category of ‘being’ I would like to highlight has to do with the relationships we form—not only as co-existent beings who happen to simultaneously experience the Universe as itself, and not only as beings who can be “heard” in our expressions of what that Universe is like, but as beings who cohabit a certain existential and emotional space, who are profoundly connected and who recognize and value each other’s subjectivity. In this sense, existence is *being-as-being-with*. To return to Martin Buber, this means that “all real living is meeting.”<sup>212</sup> In this context, *meeting* can be understood as “opening yourself,” or as “relating to other people and nature with the whole of your being.”<sup>213</sup> We see this theme—of subjective existence exegeted (or at least justified) through meaningful relationships—in a lot of Hertzfeldt’s work.

This theme is especially present in *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*. I mentioned in the previous chapter that Bill’s afternoon walk in the park with his ex-girlfriend shows a complex interplay between intimacy and distance, between assurance and ambiguity, and

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<sup>212</sup> Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937/1958, page 11.

<sup>213</sup> Hodes, Aubrey. “Answering for Ourselves.” *Martin Buber: An Intimate Portrait*, New York: The Viking Press, 1971, page 25.

between liveliness and morbidity. It is crucial to the film's effectiveness as a whole that we believe in the importance of their relationship. Later, when Bill has deteriorated significantly, and is failing a series of tests at the hospital, unable to identify basic objects—seemingly losing track of shapes, numbers, faces, memories, and even reality itself—the final question in his test is about a woman. We are shown a jumbled, incomprehensible stick-figure face (it is implied we are seeing the face from Bill's distorted, unreliable perspective). The doctor asks: "can you tell me who this is?" There is a beat. "Do you remember her?"<sup>214</sup> The film cuts to black, and the next thing we see is a combination of four moving images at once, arranged in a 2x2 grid as if they were two Warholian double-screens stacked one above the other.<sup>215</sup> But these, unlike almost every other image in *It's Such a Beautiful Day*,<sup>216</sup> are photographically (cinematographically) captured; they are not drawings nor are they stop-motion animation. They are a sleeping woman in close-up. In one image, we see only hair—dark, with a hint of red or pink—and in the second, we see the small of her back. The third image shows the suprasternal notch in her neck, rising and falling with her breaths; the fourth shows half of her face. Her eyes are closed for a few

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<sup>214</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

<sup>215</sup> See Warhol, Andy. *Chelsea Girls*, 1966. This is the most well-known example of a film "intended for double-screen projection, [which was] a genre" with which Warhol was "beginning to experiment" in the Fall of 1965. In these double-screen films, Warhol projected two reels side-by-side, usually only playing the audio from one of them at a time—implicitly raising questions about (juxta)position, association, emphasis, duality, the relationship between images, and the relationship between sound and image. See Angell, Callie. "Andy Warhol, Filmmaker." *The Andy Warhol Museum*, Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute, 1994, page 133.

<sup>216</sup> Other exceptions include the scene in which Bill looks up at a tree (as he is about to "die"), or the "walk around the block" scene, during which all of a sudden the world is rendered in photorealistic detail from Bill's point of view, as opposed to having been rendered with stick-figure simplicity.

seconds, until she awakens, a moment after which the screen flickers back to black and she disappears.

These are extraordinarily intimate images, and it must be assumed that they represent Bill's memory of his ex-girlfriend. She remains anonymous throughout the film, presumably because his mind has deteriorated so far by this point that he is unable to recall her name. Yet here are these images of her neck, of her hair, of her eye opening and looking at him—these images of a memory that is clearly sacred and close to him. The gentle beauty of the scene is in the implied connectedness between the two characters, but at the same time the scene reads as devastatingly tragic, because this “connectedness” is locked away somewhere in Bill's subconscious, largely inaccessible. In an interview for *Boston.com*, published the year *It's Such a Beautiful Day* was released, Hertzfeldt says, “the subconscious is an amazing place,” because “it's like a party in your head that you're not invited to.”<sup>217</sup> The question remains, then: what does it mean for Bill to *be*, when his consciousness has no access to the relationships that make him human, or to the subconscious “party” which archives and treasures the emotional context of these relationships? Is his loss of this moment with the woman a partial loss of his humanity?

Another link between connectedness and the nature of being is evident in Emily's various relationships throughout *World of Tomorrow*. First, she falls in love with a rock (“it was sparkly”), then with a fuel pump (“it was much more satisfying than the rock”), and eventually with an alien monster named Simon (“for vacations, we sailed in balloons

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<sup>217</sup> Pearlman, Alex. “Filmmaker Don Hertzfeldt (not) ‘rejected’ from the Coolidge.” *Boston.com*, 4 April 2012.

on Mars”). Finally, she marries a human man (the David clone, whom she loved “as though we were originals”).<sup>218</sup> Throughout this story we see Emily expressing a self-awareness regarding her progression and what these various relationships reveal about her, about her *being*. The impermanence of each relationship is not treated as a tremendous loss, because each one opens up another opportunity to connect to something or someone in a new way. As semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, “a healthy self is not one to which other personalities are fused or fixed in permanent relations, but one that retains the ability to negotiate among changing and competing claims.”<sup>219</sup> For Bakhtin, and for Emily, this is the definition of personality: something that “can always define itself creatively against another personality,” despite (or even because of!) the “‘unbridgeable chasm’ [which] exists between the experience and perspectives of an ‘I’ and an ‘other.’”<sup>220</sup> When describing having fallen in love with a rock, Emily disclaims that of course she has mental and emotional shortcomings, which at the time she did not comprehend. It is implied that throughout her life she develops into someone who is increasingly capable of offering love to complex, sentient, conscious beings. In a way, this makes her more complete—and the sadness of her loss (when the David clone eventually dies) makes her feel that she is “more alive.”<sup>221</sup> No other experience, spectacle, or adventure—not even Martian balloon rides—can really facilitate this transformation. As Andrei Tarkovsky’s Dr. Snaut might put it, “we

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<sup>218</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *World of Tomorrow*, Bitter Films, 2012.

<sup>219</sup> Emerson, Caryl. “Carnival: Open-ended Bodies and Anachronistic Histories.” *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*, Princeton University Press, 1997, page 199.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid. (For more about the “unbridgeable chasm” mentioned here, see Yalom, Irvin D. *Existential Psychotherapy*, Basic Books, 1980.)

<sup>221</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *World of Tomorrow*, Bitter Films, 2012.

really have no desire to conquer any cosmos... Man needs man!”<sup>222</sup> This is *being-as-being-with*.

### Hertzfeldt on Temporality

In most of Hertzfeldt’s films, his explorations of the aforementioned questions—regarding the nature of being—are directly linked to concerns about time and temporality. In 2016, a student at the University of California asked why this theme seemed to be such a focal point for Hertzfeldt, particularly recently. Here is Hertzfeldt’s answer, in part:

I’ve always been interested in memory... we take it so much for granted, but really memories are very, very imperfect. We think we remember something, but it’s actually some simulation that our heads have put together. And what’s fascinated me also is when someone says they want to live forever, whether it’s *World of Tomorrow* or somebody who just doesn’t want to die in *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, what they really mean is they want a continuation of the memory of their experience. [If] I said, “oh hey you can live for another 200 years but we’re gonna reset you,” that’s not really attractive... you want to bring your memories with you, because really in a certain way, that is who you are. Your memories, your experiences—somehow that is the sum total of what you are as a person.<sup>223</sup>

Hertzfeldt is pulling at several different threads here: the subjective, imperfect assemblage of memories; the fear of death reimagined as a fear of detemporalization; and the connection between one’s identity “as a person” and one’s access to the past through memory. But before elaborating these specific concerns, it would be appropriate to lay a groundwork regarding some general discourses of time and cinema, and of how these discourses relate to Hertzfeldt.

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<sup>222</sup> Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Solaris*, Mosfilm, 1972.

<sup>223</sup> “Script to Screen: Don Hertzfeldt & World of Tomorrow.” *UCTV*, 1 March 2016.



### *The Chronological and Kairological Arrow(s) of Time*

First, the issue of the so-called “arrow” of time must be noted. According to this model, in which we are launched through time like an arrow, the present is infinitely brief (to put it in Augustinian terms, “the present hath no space”).<sup>224</sup> Because arrow-time is by definition unidirectional, it implies that the future is our inevitable destination and that the past is an ever-expanding but inaccessible landscape behind us, appearing to careen out of sight as we fly away from it. The inaccessibility of the past is, of course, part of what makes it so haunting (Paul Ricoeur defines “the irreversible” as “an expression of the fact that man cannot return to the past, nor can the past return as past,” or more bluntly, “what has been done cannot be undone”).<sup>225</sup> Haunting as its implications may be, this model of time makes scientific sense in at least three ways, as Stephen Hawking explains it:

There are at least three different arrows of time. First, there is the thermodynamic arrow of time, the direction of time in which disorder or entropy increases. Then, there is the psychological arrow of time. This is the direction in which we feel time passes, the direction in which we remember the past but not the future. Finally, there is the cosmological arrow of time. This is the direction of time in which the universe is

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<sup>224</sup> St. Augustine. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, translated by John K. Ryan, New York: Image Books, 1960.

<sup>225</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. “Notes,” *Memory, History, Forgetting*, translated by Kathleen Blamey & David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, 2004, page 602. (A different take, similar but possibly less bleak, with regard to the irreversibility of the past, and to the irrevocability of that which has been done, comes from Vladimir Jankélévitch. He says that “forgetting does not annihilate the irrevocable,” and that “he who has been, from then on cannot not have been; henceforth this mysterious and profoundly obscure fact of having been is his viaticum for all eternity.” What Jankélévitch means here is there is a sort of immortality, for better or for worse, in the irrevocability of the past—that the judgment (or grace) we have brought upon ourselves in the past can in some regard endure into our present and future, regardless of whether we remember it or not. See Jankélévitch, Vladimir. *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie*, Paris: Flammarion, 1974, pages 233–275.)

expanding rather than contracting.<sup>226</sup>

Crucially, if time is a linear phenomenon, on which we move inexorably forward and never backward (as if riding on an arrow—or Hawking’s three arrows—soaring through the air), the “present” becomes not only infinitely brief but ultimately supreme. This is because we have direct access to the present, but our only access to the past or future is through memory and expectation, respectively; the problem, then, is that “only in the present can an individual grasp the past (through memory) and the future (through expectation);” therefore, “only in this present,” when our view is necessarily obscured by our current perspective, “is Being disclosed as ‘actual’ existence.”<sup>227</sup>

This is both a limitation and a liberation. On one hand, it means that physically speaking, we are not and cannot be time-travelers (many of Hertzfeldt’s characters might wish they could be, particularly when the duration of their present is depicted as so enduring and excruciating—see the prolonged agony of *Wisdom Teeth* or the inescapable brutalization of *Billy’s Balloon*, for example); on the other hand, it means we can be free from getting too lost in the past or distracted by the future; we can and must stay grounded in the present (as Emily repeatedly says in the *World of Tomorrow* films, “it is easy to get lost in memories”<sup>228</sup>—a maxim which proves all too true when some of her clones literally lose themselves while touring memories in *The Burden of Other People’s Thoughts*).

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<sup>226</sup> Hawking, Stephen. “The Arrow of Time.” *A Brief History of Time*, Bantam trade paperback edition, September 1998, page 149.

<sup>227</sup> Orr, James. “‘Being and Timelessness’: Edith Stein’s Critique of Heideggerian Temporality,” *Modern Theology*, vol. 30:1, January 2014. Page 123.

<sup>228</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *World of Tomorrow*, Bitter Films, 2015.

Still, even with the brevity and supremacy of the present, the linear model of time may allow us the ability to transcend (or feel as if we are transcending) the confines of physical time through our minds. That is, even though our bodies seem to indicate that time is unidirectional, deterministic, measurable, and inexorable (“as physical [embodied] creatures, we cannot separate ourselves from physical time”),<sup>229</sup> we are still able to “grasp” past and future events and pull them toward us, experiencing them “as effectively Now.”<sup>230</sup> It is this concept of the “effectively Now” which is particularly provocative in light of cinema generally, and of Hertzfeldt’s films specifically.

About three minutes into *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, we are told that “Bill drop[s] his keys on the counter and [stands] there staring at them.” We see a crude drawing of the keys, in the center of the frame, surrounded by blackness, as if we are peering through a peephole in a door. We are told that Bill “suddenly [starts] thinking about all the times he’d thrown his keys there before—and how many days of his life were wasted repeating the same tasks and rituals in his apartment over and over again.”<sup>231</sup> The black emptiness of the screen gradually fills up with various depictions of Bill performing these “tasks and rituals,” like washing his dishes in the sink, turning a lamp on and off, and watching TV. These images appear one by one, and they play out simultaneously in an asymmetrical arrangement, like a collection of GIFs, with the keys-on-the-counter moment remaining centered. The scenes’ diegetic sound effects—mundane and simple on their own—combine and stack

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<sup>229</sup> Kaethler, Andrew T. J. “The (Un)bounded Peculiarity of Death: the Relational Implication of Temporality in the Theology of Alexander Schmemmann and Joseph Ratzinger,” *Modern Theology*, vol. 32:1, January 2016, page 93.

<sup>230</sup> Ratzinger, Joseph. “Beyond Death,” in *Joseph Ratzinger in Communio*, vol. 2 *Anthropology and Culture*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013, page 7.

<sup>231</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

and overlap, crescendoing into a cacophonous symphony. And all the while, the voice-over narrator is explaining Bill's point of view with an air of bemused detachment, his deliberate enunciation and relatively low affect juxtaposed against some non-diegetic classical music.<sup>232</sup> The "arrow" of time in this sequence is fragmented, split into some kind of temporal buckshot, as various points of its path (or what Deleuze might call various "peaks of present")<sup>233</sup> are spread out and made simultaneously accessible. Each moment is "effectively Now," and each moment appears to coexist. The effect in this scene is a strange mix of gravitas and paradox: we immediately feel as if something important is happening, but we are given images of extraordinarily *ordinary* moments.

The narration tells us that "then [Bill] wondered if, realistically, this *was* his life, and the unusual part was his time spent doing other things."<sup>234</sup> Here we see the film's interest in the endless loop of mundanity and repetition. By showing these "tasks and rituals" in unison and by letting them play out side-by-side, the choreographed simultaneity of *It's Such a Beautiful Day* evokes a sense of culmination.<sup>235</sup> A routine task (e.g. Bill putting his keys on the counter) becomes part of a collective presentation of images.

This collective presentation is a good illustration of kairological time. "In chronological time, it is we who are in motion while time stands still," explains Richard Gault, "whereas in *kairological* time the roles are reversed as it were... future times come

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<sup>232</sup> Throughout, the film uses Smetana, Strauss, Wagner, and Rachmaninov.

<sup>233</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. "Peaks of present and sheets of past: fourth commentary on Bergson." *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

<sup>234</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

<sup>235</sup> It is also worth noting here that even the present-tense title of *It's Such a Beautiful Day* acts similarly—as a marker of simultaneity and culmination, and as an indicator that everything in the film's narrative (past, present, and future) is experienced as Now, because *today* is the "Beautiful Day."

toward us, then we experience them, and finally they recede from us into the reaches of the past.” With this reconfiguration, “events [always] emerge, from a futural source.”<sup>236</sup> Time could still be construed as an arrow, but instead of it soaring through the air, the air is soaring around it. This seems like a minor alteration of the metaphor, but it allows us to better understand temporality as “a situation constructed right in the ‘time of now,’”<sup>237</sup> as Philippe Theophanidis suggests; in other words it allows us to understand—as Bill begins to in *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*—that the timeline of our life is not a path that we necessarily walk down, but rather it is a sweeping wind (with its own rhythms, patterns, and sense of collectivity) which washes over us.

Bill explicitly questions whether this sense of collectivity is connected to ontology (maybe “this *was* his life”).<sup>238</sup> In the context of film and philosophy, it may be difficult to talk about ontology without brushing up against mythology: so much of the question of *what we are* is wrapped up in questions about *what stories we tell ourselves about what we are*. And in *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, the narrator’s framing of these moments as “rituals” reminds us that ritual, by nature, is about connecting mythology and mundanity. According to John C. Lyden, ritual “provide[s] a link between [a mythical] world and the realm of the everyday.”<sup>239</sup> Even the word “everyday” here in Lyden’s definition connects us to temporality and to the existential and hermeneutic questions in which we are trafficking

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<sup>236</sup> Gault, Richard. “In and Out of Time.” *Environmental Values* vol. 4, Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 1995, pages 155–156.

<sup>237</sup> Theophanidis, Philippe. “Giorgio Agamben on Gesture.” *Aphelis*, 3 August 2014.

<sup>238</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

<sup>239</sup> Lyden, John C. “Rituals and Morals,” *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*, New York University Press, 2003, page 79.

via Hertzfeldt's films: if we do something every day, is it ritual? Is it mythmaking? Is it inherently meaningless or meaningful? If "the world is not a collection of things, [but] a collection of events,"<sup>240</sup> what does that collection add up to? How do these events and activities we have "collected" help us examine our relationship to time? If time is an arrow, affording us access only to the present (or to the collected experiences of Deleuzian "peaks of present"), then where is that arrow headed, and how can we make sense of its movement while we are tethered to it?

### ***An Alternative Model: Eisensteinian "Plasmaticness"***

In response to some of these existential and hermeneutic questions, some philosophers have devised an alternate model of temporality, in which time does not fly like an arrow, but might be conceptualized rather differently. This alternate model "may prove more productive than traditional [Newtonian, that is, arrow-like] models of time," argues one psychologist: "when Heidegger refers to time as 'temporality,' he is emphasizing 'the temporariness or 'unsettledness' of *Dasein*'<sup>241</sup>... Time in this temporal sense is not uniform and continuous but dynamic and variable."<sup>242</sup> Put simply: what if the past, present, and future simultaneously co-occur? What if "our perception of the *flow of time* [is] an

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<sup>240</sup> Rovelli, Carlo. "The World Is Made of Events, Not Things." *The Order of Time*, translated by Simon Carnell and Erica Segre, New York: Riverhead Books, 2018, pages 97–98.

<sup>241</sup> "*Dasein*" literally translates to "being there" (German: *da* "there"; *sein* "being"), but the general concept is much more complex than a demarcation of existence and presence. The word is found frequently in Martin Heidegger's existential writings, especially *Being and Time*. Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* has been widely influential in ontological philosophy but has also been criticized for its mystical aspects. (See Melchert, Norman. "Martin Heidegger: The Meaning of Being." *The Great Conversation: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Oxford University Press, 2007, pages 644–647.)

<sup>242</sup> Slife, Brent D. "Alternative Assumptions of Time." *Time and Psychological Explanation*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993, page 257.

illusion?”<sup>243</sup> This “dynamic and variable” view of time as an illusory flow is echoed explicitly in *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*,<sup>244</sup> and it is championed by philosophers like Jack Smart<sup>245</sup> and Huw Price,<sup>246</sup> among others.<sup>247</sup>

Most importantly, this alternate temporal model is uniquely suited to facilitate an understanding of cinema. Cinematic time can flow in all manner of ways; transitions between shots can “complicate and enrich narrative motivation and meaning”<sup>248</sup> by “mobilizing a temporal constellation, [moving us] like a song or a prayer,”<sup>249</sup> as Lee Carruthers describes with regard to filmmakers like Terrence Malick. In the book *Your Brain is a Time Machine*, Dean Buonomano writes that the idea of a reel of film in general can act as a metaphor for how time works. “Even though a movie contains many different frames—each representing a moment in time—all the frames can be said to coexist within the reel,” he explains. “Much like the frames of a home movie, you are present in many of

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<sup>243</sup> Buonomano, Dean. “Flavors of Time.” *Your Brain Is a Time Machine: The Neuroscience and Physics of Time*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017, page 13.

<sup>244</sup> Bill’s coworker tells him that “the passing of time is just an illusion because all of eternity is actually taking place at once.” Hertzfeldt, Don. *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

<sup>245</sup> “Talk of the flow of time or the advance of consciousness is a dangerous metaphor that must not be taken literally.” Smart, J. J. C. *Problems of Space and Time*, Macmillan, 1964.

<sup>246</sup> “Flow and the present... are mere artifacts of our subjective perspective of the world.” Price, Huw. *Time’s Arrow and Archimedes’ Point: New Directions for the Physics of Time*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>247</sup> See Davies, Paul. *About Time: Einstein’s Unfinished Revolution*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

<sup>248</sup> Carruthers, Lee. “Deep Time: Methods of Montage in Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life*.” *Doing Time: Temporality, Hermeneutics, and Contemporary Cinema*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016, page 127. (See Perez, Gilberto. “Film Chronicle: *Days of Heaven*,” *Hudson Review* 32:1, Spring 1979, pages 97–104. See also Neer, Richard. “Terrence Malick’s New World.” *Nonsite.org* vol. 2, June 2011.)

<sup>249</sup> Carruthers, Lee. “Deep Time: Methods of Montage in Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life*.” *Doing Time: Temporality, Hermeneutics, and Contemporary Cinema*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016, page 116.

the frames of the block universe.”<sup>250</sup> And the reverse of this metaphor (using time to talk about film, instead of vice versa) appears in the writings of Sergei Eisenstein, who compares cinema to G. W. F. Hegel’s notion of fire (as “physical time, absolute unrest... the passing away of the ‘other’ but also of itself”).<sup>251</sup> Eisenstein argues that film is like Hegelian fire: there is “a rejection of once-and-forever allotted form,” a “freedom from ossification, [and] the ability to assume dynamically any form,” he says. This is “an ability that [we can] call ‘plasmaticness.’”<sup>252</sup>

Don Hertzfeldt maneuvers this “plasmaticness” in most of his films, even in *Ah, L’Amour*, his first student film from 1995. *Ah, L’Amour* plays with temporality by repeating essentially the same 20-second narrative six times in a row, suggesting that either the protagonist is six different men (the first five of whom are killed), or—in a more likely reading—that these men are six versions or manifestations of *one* man’s perceived experience. With this latter interpretation, the film resembles the structure of a piece of sketch comedy, repeatedly remixing its own parameters to land on a punchline. In this way it is reminiscent of Buñuel’s surrealist film *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, at least in the way that it treats temporality (Deleuze describes *Discreet Charm*’s timeline much like I have described that of *Ah, L’Amour*, “less [as] a cycle of interrupted meals than [as]

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<sup>250</sup> Buonomano, Dean. “The Spatialization of Time in Physics.” *Your Brain Is a Time Machine: The Neuroscience and Physics of Time*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017, page 171. (For more on the concept of “the block universe,” also see Gale, Richard. *The Philosophy of Time*, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1968; and Schlesinger, George. *Aspects of Time*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1980, pages 52–56.)

<sup>251</sup> Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 1: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, translated by E. S. Haldane, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, page 287.

<sup>252</sup> Eisenstein, Sergei. *The Eisenstein Collection*, edited by Richard Taylor, London: Seagull Books, 2006, page 101.



different *versions* of the same meal in irreducible modes and worlds”).<sup>253</sup>

In *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, time is treated in increasingly plasmatic ways; one quick, interesting manifestation of this is when Bill notices the cheap wall clock in his kitchen, the batteries of which had been dead for years. “It was forever stuck on 11:57,” says the narrator. “He couldn’t remember why he’d put a clock there in the first place, since it was sort of in an awkward nook around a corner where he’d never wonder what time it was.”<sup>254</sup> This line foreshadows the idea that Bill’s sense of “present” is different than what we are used to; he has a unique relationship to time (a relationship which I will explore in more detail later).

Another film in which Hertzfeldt takes a plasmatic approach is *The Burden of Other People's Thoughts*. About five minutes into *Burden*, Emily Prime finds herself in what appears to be an endless swamp, surrounded by a sea of murky green and radioactive orange, under the billowy blue of a dark, swirling sky. “This is the bog of realism,” her future clone explains. “My mind was young and idealistic once, like yours. Then I grew up. I haven’t seen a new glimmer of hope in many years.”<sup>255</sup> The glimmers of hope to which she refers are in one sense literal, physical artifacts that Emily Prime keeps picking up and curiously examining (more on that in a moment)—but in another sense she is talking about an *emotional* reality. She is talking about the psychological ramifications of her relationship to past, present, and future. Heidegger says that while “understanding is

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<sup>253</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. “Peaks of present and sheets of past: fourth commentary on Bergson.” *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, page 102. Emphasis mine.

<sup>254</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

<sup>255</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *World of Tomorrow—Episode Two: The Burden of Other People's Thoughts*, Bitter Films, 2017.

grounded primarily in the future,” it is “one’s *state-of-mind* [which] temporalizes itself *primarily* in *having been*. Moods temporalize themselves—that is, their specific ecstasis belongs to a future and a Present in such a way, indeed, that these equiprimordial ecstasies are modified by having been.”<sup>256</sup> In the bog of realism scene, Hertzfeldt’s approach to temporality allows him to occupy all these equiprimordial states (i.e. states which exist together as equally fundamental, or as “coöriental”)<sup>257</sup> at the same “time.” He is able to shed light on Future Emily’s understanding of self *and* on her state-of-mind, and on how both of those are affected by her temporal relationship to the universe—to what has been, to what might have been, to what is, and to what will likely be.

### ***Hertzfeldtian Memory as Artifact***

It is significant that the “glimmers of hope” Emily describes are primarily rooted in some idea of the past but are manifested by a physical object in the present—which is to say that they are artifacts of memory. This theme of storing memories in an artifact (or of imbuing an artifact with memorial significance) appears in several of Hertzfeldt’s films. This is particularly prominent in the *World of Tomorrow* episodes, though there are precursors of the concept in some of his other films as well. Consider the ever-shifting use of “props” in *Genre*—comedic precisely because of our memory of what they had been mere moments prior—or the depiction of artifacts in *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, as items which fail to be meaningful (though they feel as if they should be meaningful), because

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<sup>256</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Sein und Zeit* a.k.a. *Being and Time*, 1927 (translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York: Harper and Row, 1962, page 390; alternately: translated by Joan Stambaugh, State University of New York Press, 1996).

<sup>257</sup> Kisiel, Theodore. “Appendix D.” *The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time*, University of California Press, 1995, page 498.

Bill's connection to his past and to his heritage has been disrupted. For example, Bill finds an old storage box after his mother's funeral, and it contains inexplicable photographs of bacon and lumber, and strange portraits of strangers, among other items which he can neither connect to nor explain.

In the *World of Tomorrow* films, the motif of memories-as-artifacts comes through even more strongly. In the sequel, Emily Prime's future clone wears a metal bracelet, which she says was given to her by her "experimental sister, who lived in a tube in the stars... Her name was Felicia." She pauses, pondering for a moment, and then remarks: "This is just an object, without value, like any other object. Yet I feel a great attachment to it. Why should this object matter?"<sup>258</sup> And in the first *World of Tomorrow*, it is explained that with futuristic technology, memories can be "harvested from the dead; the images [are] fished out blindly, from random clusters of neurons." Emily recalls that she had "opened an art gallery of anonymous memories,"<sup>259</sup> and the film shows us crowds of patrons, respectfully looking at the exhibits on the walls of her museum. These exhibits—like the mysterious photographs Bill finds in his mother's storage—are divorced from any personality or specificity, yet still represent a yearning for meaning.

In this regard, Hertzfeldt is deeply in tune with the way memory, history, heritage, and monuments work. As Daniel Bluestone explained at a Boston University forum on memory in 2018, we tend to store memory on temporary media (e.g. our brains, or our computers), but also on more permanent media (e.g. the Vietnam Memorial). Brains and computers are

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<sup>258</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *World of Tomorrow—Episode Two: The Burden of Other People's Thoughts*, Bitter Films, 2017.

<sup>259</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *World of Tomorrow*, Bitter Films, 2015.

private, but monuments are emphatically public. The imperative of collective memory (“you must remember this because *we will not forget*”) is complicated, and sometimes contentious, because meaning, memory, and “heritage” are always fluid. Bluestone’s conclusion is that “memory is deployed by those with the power to do so,” particularly in the public sphere, and only those with resources are privileged to be iconographers and iconoclasts.<sup>260</sup> Still, regardless of our varying levels of iconographic or iconoclastic privilege, we all want to believe (like Bill, or Emily) that physical artifacts carry some kind of significance—perhaps as a temporal skeleton key, an access point to the past which we fear could not otherwise be reclaimed.

### **Hertzfeldt on Death**

Questions about temporality are inherently linked to death. Regarding the aforementioned idea from Eisenstein that film acts like a Hegelian fire, and contains an ability he calls temporal “plasmaticness,”<sup>261</sup> Gertrud Koch goes on to elaborate: “film goes by in physical time, but over and over again it takes on form; it burns up and is animated once again in the apparatus.”<sup>262</sup> It is especially Koch’s last phrase—*it burns up and is animated once again in the apparatus*—to which I want to call our attention regarding Don Hertzfeldt, because this notion of being burned and (re)animated (which is to say, the

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<sup>260</sup> Bluestone, Daniel. “Memory: Its Public, Private, & Political Meanings,” *The Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground*, Boston University Student-Faculty Forum, 30 October 2018.

<sup>261</sup> Eisenstein, Sergei. *The Eisenstein Collection*, edited by Richard Taylor, London: Seagull Books, 2006, page 101.

<sup>262</sup> Koch, Gertrud. “Film as Experiment in Animation: Are Films Experiments on Human Beings?” *Animating Film Theory*, Duke University Press, 2014, page 140.

notion of death and rebirth) is essential to understanding his body of work. In what ways does Hertzfeldt stage death, the (un)dead, and the concept of (re)birth?

### ***Death and the Inevitability of “Waste”***

One way to understand death is through the lens of *waste*. When we say that we are afraid of “wasting time,” we really mean that we are afraid of dying. Hertzfeldt expresses this directly through Emily (“do not lose time on daily trivialities; do not dwell on petty detail... now is the envy of all of the dead”),<sup>263</sup> but even more powerfully through Bill, during the “perpetual mundanity” sequence I have described earlier in this chapter. (This is the sequence from *It’s Such a Beautiful Day* in which Bill washes his dishes in the sink, turns a lamp on and off, and watches TV—each image appearing one by one, and playing out simultaneously in an asymmetrical arrangement.)

The interrogation of perpetual mundanity in this sequence is not just about *tasks as such*. It is also about the specific temporariness and disposability connected to these tasks in particular. In addition to the aforementioned sink, lamp, and TV images, Bill is also shown using a toilet, brushing his teeth, and vacuuming his floor—all three of which involve waste, trash, or abject excess of some kind. Even the image of Bill watching television invokes disposability, because we are reminded of the inherent ephemerality and unidirectionality of broadcast. We are reminded of the fleetingness of each moment, while paradoxically we are shown the moment as anything but fleeting (because it, like the moments on display beside it, is presented as a seemingly eternal loop). In this way, the

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<sup>263</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *World of Tomorrow*, Bitter Films, 2015.

film wants “to somehow ‘fix’ the ephemeral,” in the sense that “cinema [generally] seem[s] to offer the capacity” to do so via its “represent[ation] of contingent moments [as] repeatable.”<sup>264</sup>

Implicated in the disposable *excess* of crumbs to be vacuumed, debris to be brushed/washed, and excrement to be flushed (excrement, as one biologist explains, “is, essentially, death... it is where dead things go through living things; it is arguably the single biggest currency of death that we see in day-to-day life”),<sup>265</sup> is the unidirectionality of time. “Time’s ravages,” as Emily Apter explains, include “decay, fade-out, erosion, [and] trash.”<sup>266</sup> When we consider things which are (or which can be) disposed of, we are reminded of the unavailability of death. Yet the simultaneity of disposability in this sequence from *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, along with other reconfigurations of time throughout the rest of the film, acts to defy unidirectionality (complicating and problematizing the “arrow of time” model in ways which I have heretofore explored), thus in some sense defying—or attempting to defy—death.

In another confrontation with waste and death, about 34 minutes into the film, Bill pictures himself in a hospital bed, “surrounded by people he no longer recognizes.” He “feels no closer attachment to them than [his] thousands of relatives who’d come before.”<sup>267</sup> He imagines that he is about to die. A moment previous, the narrator had told

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<sup>264</sup> Mroz, Matilda. “Time, in Theory,” *Temporality and Film Analysis*, Edinburgh University Press, 2012. Page 15.

<sup>265</sup> Howard, Jules. “The Grotto Salamander and the Guano.” *Death on Earth: Adventures in Evolution and Mortality*, Bloomsbury Sigma, 2016, page 171.

<sup>266</sup> Apter, Emily. “‘Women’s Time’ in Theory.” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Duke University Press, vol. 21:1, 1 May 2010.

<sup>267</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

us that over the years, death had grown more and more immanent in Bill's mind.<sup>268</sup> The realization had hit him in his 40s—as he had considered it, his “halfway point, at best”—that he will “*only get older.*” (This, again, is an enunciation of the unidirectionality of time: though it is made much more direct and explicit here than in the “tasks and rituals” scene.) So, in his imagined hospital bed, Bill “comes to realize the dumb irony in how he'd been waiting for this moment his entire life—this stupid, awkward moment of death that had invaded and distracted so many days with stress and *wasted time.*”<sup>269</sup> On the surface, this line is merely an articulation of regret—it is simply about feeling foolish at the end of the line—but when put in conversation with the rest of the film, this is also an examination of fleetingness, accumulation, and the aforementioned concept of “waste.” What does it mean to die having “wasted” one's time—having “expended [it] without product?”<sup>270</sup> Does the “wasting” of one's time feel like a precursor to death itself?

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<sup>268</sup> Bill is not alone in this, of course. Cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker posits that “the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else.” (Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973.)

<sup>269</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012. Emphasis mine.

<sup>270</sup> Doane, Mary Ann. *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Harvard University Press, 2002. Page 160. It is also worth noting, at least parenthetically, that the notion of time being primarily a site of productivity—that it is possible for time to be “wasted,” because it is a “precious commodity [which makes] possible the production of all other commodities,” or put simply the notion that “time is money”—is a relatively modern idea (see Meyerhoff, Hans. *Time in Literature*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955, page 106). Furthermore, this paradigm of time as a commodity is probably best understood in the historical context of a newfound world of wage labor, in which clocks and watches had suddenly become widespread, and in which “the value of time [is] reduced to money, [thus] time is now currency: it is not *passed* but *spent*.” (See Thompson, E. P. “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism.” *Essays in Social History*, edited by M. W. Flinn & T. C. Smout, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, pages 39–77 [originally published in *Past & Present*, no. 38, Oxford University Press, 1967, pages 56–97]. Emphasis mine. See also Feltes, N. N. “To Saunter, to Hurry: Dickens, Time, and Industrial Capitalism.” *Victorian Studies*, 20:3, Indiana University Press, 1977, page 248).

### *Death, Fear, and Pride*

There is more to our fear of death than only an apprehension about having wasted our time. Wrapped up in our attitudes toward death are also a fear of the unknown, a fear of pain, a fear of judgment, and a fear of losing control. The culmination of these fears often results in a “total terror about anything that reminds us of our own mortality.”<sup>271</sup> Nothing is more disempowering or chaotic than the pitch-black void, the exact nature of which we cannot know for sure until we arrive there. When we watch Hertzfeldt’s work, we see that the frightful nature of death and of the unknown is exactly why the characters of *Rejected* flee during the film’s climax, and it is what the unnamed masses of *World of Tomorrow* are trying to avoid through a variety of risky technological inventions. In a close examination of stories like this—stories about the end of the world, so-called “apocalyptic” stories like *Rejected* or *World of Tomorrow* (or, similarly, Hertzfeldt’s aptly named graphic novel *The End of the World*)—we can better “understand what we fear, whether supernatural or natural.”<sup>272</sup> And arguably, this is in large part why artists tell apocalyptic stories in the first place: creators use their creations to help exorcise their fears.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Howard, Jules. “Fear and Loathing in Birchwood.” *Death on Earth: Adventures in Evolution and Mortality*, Bloomsbury Sigma, 2016, page 55.

<sup>272</sup> Ostwalt, Conrad. “Apocalyptic.” *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden, Routledge, 2009, page 382.

<sup>273</sup> For example, in her graphic novel *Why Art?*, Eleanor Davis allegorically suggests that the destruction we inflict on the worlds we have created, that the havoc we wreak on the small pockets of existence over which we have some semblance of control, are probably the echoes and reverberations of the destruction we have endured—of the havoc that has been wreaked on us by forces even larger. It’s a sort of macrocosmic vision of generational trauma—where the generations stretch infinitely in all directions. The gods stomp on our houses, and in the wreckage, we must create something new, so we turn to art: we fashion little people and little houses, constructing a tiny world not unlike our own, but perhaps a little bit better. And ultimately, inevitably, we continue the cycle of destruction and creation by stomping on their little houses, too. “let’s see what we do,” we might say, then turning to our micro-doppelgängers



The other side of this fear is pride; there is a sense in which what we really fear is losing our firm footing on what we “know,” on how stable we think our position is, and on how confidently we can navigate the world. Death takes these away from us. Recall the man in Hertzfeldt’s *Wisdom Teeth*, who exclaims: “this is a pain of *unreasonable proportions!*”<sup>274</sup> It is not only the pain (and the possible risk of death) that makes his situation unbearable—it is the violation of his ostensibly rational expectations of what *reasonably portioned* pain should feel like. The savagery and humor of *Wisdom Teeth*, then, comes from the recognizable indignity we feel when we are being hurt and when our (arbitrarily) preconceived rules are being broken. “The Universe is not obliged to conform to what we consider comfortable or plausible,”<sup>275</sup> as Carl Sagan teaches—yet we act as if it were,<sup>276</sup> and when the Universe breaks its “obligation,” we must surrender our pride. Such a surrender, C. S. Lewis writes, “is a kind of death.”<sup>277</sup>

Don Hertzfeldt’s films seem to argue that this pride is something we all need to get over, that it would do us good to look death in the face now and then.<sup>278</sup> To this end, the

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and pleading with them: “show us how to be brave. Show us how to save ourselves.” (Davis, Eleanor. *Why Art?* Fantagraphics Books, 2018.)

<sup>274</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *Wisdom Teeth*, Bitter Films, 2010. Emphasis mine.

<sup>275</sup> Sagan, Carl. “A Universe Not Made for Us.” *Pale Blue Dot*, Random House Publishing Group, 1994, pages 44–45.

<sup>276</sup> “Every man believes what he wishes.” (Demosthenes. *Third Olynthiac*, section 19 (349 BC), translated by Charles Rann Kennedy, 1852.)

<sup>277</sup> Lewis, C. S. “Human Pain,” *The Problem of Pain*, Harper Collins, 2001, page 89. (See also the Prodigal notion of “a rebel [who] must lay down his arms” in John Henry Newman’s “The New Testament,” *Newman on the Bible: Commentaries on Scripture*, ed. William Park, Scepter Publishers, 2006, page 159.)

<sup>278</sup> As Caitlin Doughty puts it, there is a “power [in] disrupt[ing] people’s polite complacency about death, [because] reminders of death [can] cast each day in more vivid tones... Rather than denying the truth, it [can be] a revelation to embrace it, however disgusting it might sometimes be.” (Doughty, Caitlin. “Unnatural Natural.” *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes & Other Lessons from the Crematory*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2014, page 125.)

films are often confrontationally violent and disturbing, but they are also frequently funny. The juxtaposition of death and humor is intentional: when asked in 2008 for his “favorite joke,” Hertzfeldt dryly responded, “I guess it would have to be the one where everything in the world one day has to die.”<sup>279</sup> But the point of the “joke” here is not to make light of people’s misfortunes and mortality per se; it is to call out the self-seriousness with which people contextualize and describe (or, on the other hand, deflect and ignore) their misfortunes and mortality. Put another way: Hertzfeldtian humor embraces death not because it is funny in its own right, but because we are funny about it.

One of the most emotionally complicated moments in *World of Tomorrow*, which exemplifies the approach I am describing, is when Emily Prime lightheartedly practices her counting skills on the millions of burning corpses falling out of the sky:

FUTURE EMILY: 60 days from now, a meteor will strike the Earth and most everyone here will die horribly. Our wealthiest individuals are now uploading their digital consciousnesses into cubes that they are launching into deep space. Our lower classes are desperately trying to escape the meteor through discount time travel, causing untold millions to die in orbit. Their dead bodies burn as they return to Earth and now light up our night sky.

EMILY PRIME: What’s this up in the sky?

FUTURE EMILY: Dead bodies!

EMILY PRIME: Look, another one!

FUTURE EMILY: Yes. It is very pretty.

EMILY PRIME: They’re OK?

FUTURE EMILY: No. They’re all dead.

EMILY PRIME: I’ll count them!

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<sup>279</sup> Tobey, Matt. “Don Hertzfeldt: The CC Insider Interview.” *Comedy Central*, 29 May 2008.

FUTURE EMILY: We are all doomed, Emily Prime.

EMILY PRIME: One... two... three... <sup>280</sup>

The interaction we see in this scene is gently humorous, but death and suffering itself is not the butt of the joke. The butt of the joke is the juxtaposition between Emily Prime's innocent, childlike wonder and Future Emily's more complicated state-of-mind. Future Emily's demeanor begins with a mature, matter-of-fact explanation of a harsh reality ("their dead bodies burn as they return to Earth"), after which it briefly turns into annoyance and indignation ("dead bodies!"). Then, in response to Emily Prime's unperturbed positivity, Future Emily's affect transforms into a sort of resigned sigh ("yes. It is very pretty"), and eventually lands on a gentle expression of melancholy ("we are all doomed, Emily Prime").

***"Don't Forget to Die!"***

The irony of Hertzfeldt's interest in exploring death, and of his insistence on making us confront the notion of death, is that he is an animator—and animated characters cannot really die. In a book about the ontology of film for Harvard Film Studies, the philosopher Stanley Cavell writes that "[cartoon characters'] bodies are indestructible, one might almost say immortal."<sup>281</sup> This lines up with what film theorist Béla Balázs wrote a half-century prior: "the worst that can happen to images is that they can be erased or faded out or painted over—they can never be killed off."<sup>282</sup> On the surface, this may seem too

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<sup>280</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *World of Tomorrow*, Bitter Films, 2015.

<sup>281</sup> Cavell, Stanley. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Harvard Film Studies, 1979, page 170.

<sup>282</sup> Balázs, Béla. *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and the Spirit of Film*, translated by Rodney Livingstone, Berghahn Books, 2010, page 172.

obvious of a point to make. But it is imperative to an understanding of Hertzfeldt's use of death that we understand the way in which he negotiates his creations' immortality. Sometimes he intervenes and seems to prevent death (repeatedly resurrecting the suitor in *Ah, L'Amour*; rendering the children impossibly impervious to fatal injuries in *Billy's Balloon*; allowing various characters to survive numerous grisly incidents in *Rejected*) and at other times, it is as if he wants to do the opposite, threatening to kill his creations by any means necessary (destroying the fabric of the diegesis itself in *Rejected*; suddenly introducing killer robots in *The Animation Show*; fast-forwarding the geological clock by thousands of years in *The Meaning of Life*; supplying onlookers with giant knives in *Wisdom Teeth*). But Hertzfeldt's most conspicuous intervention regarding death occurs towards the end of *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, when he flat-out refuses to let Bill die.

After a particularly harrowing crescendo of stress and disorientation, culminating in a stressful but beautiful shot of a car speeding down a seemingly empty highway (while the voice-over narrator's comments stack on top of each other, iterating and re-iterating that Bill "wants to keep going"),<sup>283</sup> the film cuts suddenly to an image of Bill looking at a tree. He looks shaky, ragged, confused, and yet strangely comfortable. Several moments pass by in relative stillness and serenity. We see a close-up of grass; we get a medium shot of Bill lying on the ground; then, we see the sky from his point of view. The sky is soothingly blue—a kind of blue that Derek Jarman (in his own experimental, existential meditation on death) might perhaps call "the universal love in which man bathes," or a "transcend[ence above] the solemn geography of human limits," or a "stretch[ing], yawn[ing], *awake*" kind

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<sup>283</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

of color—“an open door” and an “infinite possibility.”<sup>284</sup>

“It’s such a beautiful day,” says the narrator, almost sighing. And we cut to black. Is Bill dead? It feels as if Bill is dead. This feels like it will be the final image of the film—the logical endpoint towards which every bit of madness, hallucination, and illness that we have heretofore seen must have been building. Plenty of other films end this way. Sure, the cut to black is sudden—but it is also poetic and peaceful.<sup>285</sup>

And yet, it is not the end. Instead, the film pushes back, trying to defy the apparent inevitability of death. Elsewhere, I have called this moment an “abrupt, almost *angry* interruption from the narrator,”<sup>286</sup> in which the film verbally insists that Bill cannot die. It’s an almost fourth-wall-breaking moment: “wait a minute,” the narrator says, a hint of panic in his voice. “He’s not gonna die here—but he doesn’t die here.” His voice raises: “No, no, no. Bill, get up. Get up, Bill. Bill, get up. He can’t die here. He’s not gonna die.

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<sup>284</sup> Jarman, Derek. *Blue*, Channel Four Films, 1993.

<sup>285</sup> The deathly implications of pitch blackness are common not only in movies but throughout (pre)history. When a film cuts to black after a “last sigh” kind of moment, or a violent confrontation—or when it fades to black before its closing credits—this can often be read as an approximation of death, or at least as an invocation of the primal fear we have of nighttime (which is to say the primal fear we have of *not seeing*). The dark of night has long been associated with fear and death, for example, “Nyx, the ancient Greek goddess of night, is the daughter of Chaos; her own children include sleep, but also, more ominously, anguish, discord, and death. [And] Nott, a night goddess from Germanic and Scandinavian traditions, wears black and rides in a chariot drawn by a dark horse, pulling darkness across the sky like a drape.” (Pastoureau, Michel. *Black: The History of a Color*, translated by Jody Gladding, Princeton University Press, 2009, pages 21–36.) “Through fear, pitch black has also laid symbolic claim to death, which is, in the most desolate view, a night without end.” (St. Clair, Kassia. *The Secret Lives of Color*, Penguin Books, 2016, page 280.) As a final example, The Egyptian *Book of the Dead* says: “what manner [of land] is this into which I have come? It hath not water; it hath not air; it is deep, unfathomable, it is black as the blackest night, and men wander helplessly therein. (Harvey, John. *Story of Black*, London: Reaktion Books, 2013, page 29.)

<sup>286</sup> Wei, Christopher. “On Heaven, Hell, and Bill,” *Mormonism and the Movies*, BCC Press, not yet published.

*He can't ever die. Bill? Bill?"*<sup>287</sup>

Countless films look death in the eye and respond, either with melancholy mourning (David Lowery's *A Ghost Story*), desperate bargaining (Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*; Pete Hewitt's *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey*), snide mockery (Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*), peaceful resignation (Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*), or a mixture of sick curiosity/pleasure and abject terror (Rob Reiner's *Stand By Me*; also just about every crime and horror film). But Hertzfeldt's insistent, interruptive intervention here is different—it feels like something in between emboldened indignation and fantastical denial (as in Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void*; Daniels' *Swiss Army Man*; Joe Wright's *Atonement*; or Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*), with a hint of panic.

I will return to this intervention—and to what happens soon thereafter—in a moment. For now, what it is important is Hertzfeldt's apparent interest in a sort of negotiation of the middle ground between dead and not dead, or between what Slavoj Žižek would call two different *kinds* of death—one a “natural death, which is a part of the natural cycle of generation and corruption, of nature's continual transformation,” and the other an “absolute death, [which is] the destruction, the eradication, of the cycle itself, which then liberates nature from its own laws and opens the way for the creation of new forms of life *ex nihilo*.”<sup>288</sup> The “natural” death happens to Hertzfeldt's characters all the time when they are killed or die of natural causes; however, because they rarely suffer a final “symbolic” or “absolute” death, they can usually come back in a subsequent scene, apparently

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<sup>287</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

<sup>288</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. “You Only Die Twice.” *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, 2008, page 149. (See also de Sade, Marquis. *L'Histoire de Juliette, ou les Prospérités du vice*, 1797.)

unharmful. Žižek compares this concept to that of “multiple lives” in a video game—natural death is like losing a life, while absolute death is like losing the game.<sup>289</sup> Or, to use a Shakespearian example, Žižek says the ghost of Hamlet’s father “represents [an] actual death unaccompanied by symbolic death, without a settling of accounts—which is why he returns as a frightful apparition until his death has been repaid.”<sup>290</sup> Helpfully (for our purposes anyway), Žižek also directly uses the metaphor of animated film to drive his point home:

We all know the classical, archetypal cartoon scene: a cat approaches the edge of the precipice but she does not stop. She proceeds calmly, and although she is already hanging in the air, without ground under her feet, she does not fall—when does she fall? The moment she looks down and becomes aware of the fact that she is hanging in the air...

When the cat finally looks down, she remembers that she must follow the laws of nature and falls. This is basically the same logic as in [the] dream, reported in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, of a father who does not know that he is dead. He continues to live—he must be reminded of his death or, to give this situation a comical twist, he is still living because he has forgotten to die. That is how the phrase *memento mori* should be read: “don’t forget to die!”<sup>291</sup>

This brings us back to Bill, who—due to an intervention from the narrator—seems to “forget to die,” as Žižek puts it. The fantastical scene that follows spans several centuries and millennia.<sup>292</sup> Hertzfeldt shows us what might happen if, indeed, Bill were to never die.

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., pages 149–150.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., page 150.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., page 148.

<sup>292</sup> My use of a word like “fantastical” to describe this scene is only useful in the sense that the scene comes with the trappings of fantastical stylistic presentations; the purpose is not to assert whether the Hertzfeldt would definitively call the sequence “fantasy” versus “real.” There is no definitive proof either way in the text, and the diegetic “reality” of the sequence is most likely meant to be ambiguous.

He “spend[s] hundreds of years traveling the world,” and “learns every language.” He learns to create art, to “meditate and control all pain,”<sup>293</sup> and he falls in love—over and over again. These fanciful notions feel utopian, and they gesture towards the theory that perhaps immortality is the best possible version of life (such theoretical approaches and metaphysical stances have been around for a very long time, running from Parmenides of Elea to Søren Kierkegaard).<sup>294</sup>

But Bill’s accumulation of memories and relationships build up, to the point where the narrator even describes them as “an endless loop” (thus recalling the language of perpetuity we had been using before). We are told that Bill will father hundreds of thousands of children, and that he will slowly lose track of his progeny throughout the years. This immediately problematizes the utopian model, gradually transforming our sense of dreamlike wonder with something more nightmarish. We are left wondering: what does it mean if Bill cannot maintain relationships with those around him, not even through memories? What is the nature of Bill’s time/temporality, now that he seems to have grown not only beyond death but also beyond the accessibility of memory and community? Is he detemporalized? Is he eternal? Is this a moment of liberation? Or is he, on the other hand, even *more* trapped by temporality and *less* connected to eternity than the rest of us? What kind of (un)death is this?

Is Bill’s immortality comparable to being stuck in some sort of intermediate state, unable to pass on but unable to start again? In the soteriology of Tibetan Buddhism, there

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<sup>293</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

<sup>294</sup> See Theunissen, Michael. *Negative Theologie der Zeit*, Suhrkamp, 1992, pages 321–371.



is a great concern with how to bring benefit to souls like Bill's whom they believe may be trapped between death and rebirth, a great concern with how to "contravene without contradicting the law of karma,"<sup>295</sup> and how to ensure that "the fear of the awesome and terrifying intermediate states [can] be annulled."<sup>296</sup> Bill is not a Tibetan Buddhist (nor is Hertzfeldt), but the "awesome and terrifying" grandeur in this scene is on a similar wavelength to these soteriological concerns.

Bill's transcendence continues and escalates, even though "the Earth is swallowed beneath his feet." He continues to live, despite the world literally crumbling around him. Ironically, the film's refusal to annihilate Bill, its defiant unwillingness to let him blink away into the void, actually brings about a new type of annihilation, brought about by (and ultimately defined as) a profound isolation. Eventually, Bill has lived for millions of years, and the narrator tells us that he even "forgets his name and the place where he'd once come from."<sup>297</sup> Thus, the last relationship possible—not one between him and others or between him and his memories, but one between him and himself—is taken away from Bill. Another way of looking at this moment—this *taking-away*—is in the sense that Bill is robbed of his own existence and identity.

The existential nightmare presented in *It's Such a Beautiful Day* is rather complex. What we see here is not just a reversal of *cogito ergo sum* ("I think; therefore, I exist" twisted into something like "Bill cannot think; therefore, he cannot exist"). And it is not

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<sup>295</sup> Gayley, Holly. "Soteriology of the Senses in Tibetan Buddhism." *NVMEN* vol. 54, International Review for the History of Religions, 2007, page 459.

<sup>296</sup> Padmasambhava and Karma Lingpa. "Aspirational Prayers." *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, translated by Gyurme Dorje, Penguin Books, 2007, page 314.

<sup>297</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

even just a reversal of the relational, almost theological model I have alluded to earlier (“I am capable of connection and communion; therefore, I exist” twisted into something like “I am no longer capable of connection and communion; therefore, I cease to exist”). It is deeper and more personal than both of those configurations. What we have in this scene is something more like “Bill cannot think *of himself as himself*, therefore he cannot exist *as Bill*.” Or, put another way: this ending is a reversal of Edith Stein’s use of self-reflection/identification/affirmation to re-construct the Cartesian proposition (her version is “*I live and am*”),<sup>298</sup> twisted into something like “*Bill does not live and is not*.” This, strangely, is much more horrifying than the film’s *other* ending, in its cut-to-black four minutes prior—the implication of which is, simply and elegantly: “Bill dies.” So why can we not just let Bill die?

### ***Grieving the Dead***

The bluntest way to answer this question is to say that it is difficult to let people die. The very act of grieving is an awkward, complicated process that no one knows quite how to navigate. The acute challenge of figuring out what it means to “let go” is a strong Hertzfeldtian theme. In *World of Tomorrow*, Emily explains that in the distant future, “the face of a deceased loved one can be peeled off, preserved, and stretched over the head of a simple animatronic robot, so they can still be a part of someone’s life.”<sup>299</sup> The image accompanying this description is alarming, and the mourning widow we see does not

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<sup>298</sup> Stein, Edith. *Endliches und Ewiges Sein: Versuch eines Aufstiegs zum Sinn des Seins*, Gesamtausgabe, Herder, 2006. Pages 36–41.

<sup>299</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *World of Tomorrow*, Bitter Films, 2015. See also similar phrasing regarding the same concept as it is described in *The End of the World*, Antibookclub, 2013.

appear to be comforted. But the film is saying: *that is precisely the point—no one knows how to be comforted.*

In *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Bill thinks he is on his deathbed, but the doctor determines he will not die after all—so Bill's mother returns his casket "at great expense and inconvenience," and Bill's uncle ("whom Bill had not even noticed in the room") is described as looking "vaguely annoyed."<sup>300</sup> Compared to the protracted grieving of the widow with her animatronic robot, Bill's (well-intentioned) family have the opposite problem: that is, they have jumped the gun—they have "let go" prematurely, accepting the inevitability of Bill's death before it had actually become inevitable.

In both of these examples, part of the difficulty of grieving is, simply, the timing. A mourner can easily find themselves either too far ahead or too far behind where they think they ought to feel. In America, the difficulty in syncing up with some imagined "ideal" timeline is exacerbated, too, by the fact that people generally do not have a healthy proximity to death. Mortician-turned-author Caitlin Doughty points out that, in the United States at least, "death has been big business since the turn of the twentieth century, [and] in an impressively short time, America's funeral industry has become more expensive, more corporate, and more bureaucratic than any other funeral industry on Earth. If we can be called best at anything," she says, "it would be at keeping our grieving families separated from their dead."<sup>301</sup> What Doughty is identifying here is a sense in which American mourners generally do not have a healthy proximity to their dead, the consequence of which

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<sup>300</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

<sup>301</sup> Doughty, Caitlin. "Introduction." *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017, page 3.

is that they might have particular trouble navigating grief.

Also consider David, from *World of Tomorrow*, a presence whose significance I have already briefly mentioned in Chapter Two (as a reference point to Dadaism): the film tells us that David is a cloned boy without a soul, both human and non-human. But of particular interest is how the boy is regarded in the community. Emily recalls that when David was alive, there were “people who’d speak quietly to him in the night,” who found a sense of peace just being near him. But he dies at the age of 72, at which point he is “mourned and deeply missed throughout the city.”<sup>302</sup> David’s passing raises intriguing questions: what is it that the people are mourning, when they find that they miss the boy in the tube? Are they really mourning *him*—or are they disturbed by the very fact of death itself? Or is it the very ambiguity of their relationship to the boy that makes his passing so saddening? (In other words: are they troubled by the fact that there are no social scripts in place letting them know how they should feel about this?)

Or, to circle back to the issues of temporality I have heretofore discussed, is David’s death upsetting primarily because it is a marker of time having passed—of opportunities lost, of years “wasted,” of futures diminished? By extension: is this the real, underlying reason why deaths in general are upsetting?

The narrator of *It’s Such a Beautiful Day* tells us that Bill had “brushed shoulders with death on occasions, but in his carefree youth it had almost seemed like an abstract, impossible thing to ever happen to him.” This gradually changes as Bill grows older: “with

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<sup>302</sup> These quotes are identical in both Hertzfeldt’s graphic novel *The End of the World* (Antibookclub, 2013) and in his short film *World of Tomorrow* (Bitter Films, 2015).

each passing decade,” we are told, “he began to gauge the time he probably had left.”<sup>303</sup> This process of death transforming from an abstraction to an ever-looming threat is, ironically, an animating process. In this way, Hertzfeldt’s preoccupation with death is not unlike any other idea or motif in his filmography (or, for that matter, in animated film generally). Hertzfeldt is taking something seemingly “abstract”—a stick figure, a cloud, or the notion of death itself—and forcing us to imagine the ways in which it might move, the ways in which its shapes and lines might maneuver the world, and the ways in which its behavior might disrupt or violate what we think we know. In other words: Hertzfeldt brings death to life.

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<sup>303</sup> Hertzfeldt, Don. *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, Bitter Films, 2012.

## CONCLUSION

The intention of this thesis is to offer a significant starting point from which a reader can better understand the films of Don Hertzfeldt in light of his aesthetic tendencies, his philosophical sensibilities, his thematic concerns, and his position as an independent experimental animator within larger historical, cultural, and industrial contexts. I have given an overview of Hertzfeldt's life so far as an artist (Chapter One); a rundown of major filmmakers and film movements which seem to have influenced his work (Chapter Two); a roughly chronological close examination of his films (Chapter Three); and a deeper investigation into his treatment of consciousness, temporality, and death (Chapter Four).

Ending with a focus on consciousness, temporality, and death was intended to hone in on the three most important themes toward which Hertzfeldt gravitates, particularly in his recent films. In each of these chapters, I hope to have shown Hertzfeldt's filmography to be a dynamic body of work, constantly in conversation with itself and with the world, always (re)negotiating its approaches to provocative philosophical questions and to structural and aesthetic conventions.

### *Directions for Future Research*

There is of course further work to be done on Hertzfeldt. My methodology here relied on putting philosophers, film theorists, critics, artists, novelists, historians, physicists, biologists, and psychologists in conversation with each other and with Hertzfeldt's films. An alternate approach could productively take a more technical look at the filmmaker, analyzing his work with particular attention given to his use of color (or lack thereof), his lighting, his tendency to combine drawings with photography and other elements, and so

on. This thesis does not have the scope to fully accommodate such lines of investigation; therefore, these will be added to an expanded version.

Of course, my decision to leave these technical and stylistic considerations relatively untouched for now has not only been a logistical necessity but also an intentional framing of the subject: I simply felt other considerations were more vital to a deep understanding of what Hertzfeldt accomplishes (Hertzfeldt himself might agree: in a 2012 interview with *The AV Club*, he reports that “[in] article[s] about animation, [he] almost never see[s] anything about story. It’s almost always about technology.” He seems a little frustrated by this observation, adding that “nobody writes about writing. That’s such a strange thing”).<sup>304</sup> Still, Hertzfeldt makes some very interesting technical decisions in his work, and a closer look at these (especially in comparison with other filmmakers with a similar interest in experimentally mixing media) will undoubtedly prove fruitful in the future.

Furthermore, despite my detailed study of Hertzfeldt’s interest in the notion of death, an expanded version of this thesis in the future could more closely examine his treatment of violence specifically—not in the context of threatening life necessarily, but simply as the infliction of pain in and of itself—and given the violent nature of many of Hertzfeldt’s films, there would definitely be sufficient material for a robust analysis. Other methodologies I have left largely untouched include that of gender or sexuality studies (despite a discussion I briefly entertained regarding the satirical take on romance in *Ah, L’Amour*), race studies (do Hertzfeldt’s stick figures have a race?), and political economy (I touched on the attitudes towards commercialism and classism in *Rejected* and *World of*

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<sup>304</sup> Adams, Sam. “Don Hertzfeldt.” *AV/Film*, 12 April 2012.

*Tomorrow*, but there is much more that could be done in this area).

Analysis along these lines is prepared and positioned by the discussion I have laid out here, which will hopefully act as a launching pad for further discussion.

### ***Implications***

As proclaimed by the subtitle of this thesis (“Don Hertzfeldt, the Animator”), Don Hertzfeldt is an animator. While this sounds initially like a facile observation or a relatively meaningless taxonomical claim, the word “animator” is actually a profoundly telling summary of what Hertzfeldt is all about. He *animates*, which is to say, he imbues shapes and objects with the illusion of movement; he manipulates paper and film and other physical artifacts to create artifice and to conjure emotion; he crafts and tells stories; he gives vitality and meaning to lifeless things.

It is my hope that academics, critics, and cinephiles will pay closer attention to Hertzfeldt’s powerful work. Filmmakers like him (along with his innovative contemporaries, some of whom I have named in Chapter Two) can revitalize the world of animated cinema, and of cinema generally. *To animate is to give life*: and in that sense, Don Hertzfeldt’s films are not only animated—they are animating.



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## **CURRICULUM VITAE**

### **Contact**

- Email: [christophermichaelwei@gmail.com](mailto:christophermichaelwei@gmail.com)
- Phone: 571.286.0580

### **Education**

- University of Iowa. PhD Film Studies. [Expected] 2023.
- Boston University. MFA Film & Television Studies. May 2019.
- Brigham Young University. BS Psychology & Philosophy. April 2013.

### **Academic Research Experience**

- Graduate Assistant. Dr. Ray Carney. BU. September 2018 – December 2018.
- Research Assistant. Dr. Dennis J. Packard. BYU. April – December 2012.
- Research Assistant. Dr. David Paulsen. BYU. July – September 2011.

### **Teaching / Advisory Experience**

- Teacher's Assistant and Writing Tutor. Professor John W. Hall, Dr. Lindsey Decker, and Professor Alexander Svensson. BU. September 2017 – May 2019.
- AP Office Assistant. Accounts Payable. BU. May 2018 – August 2018.
- Program Director. Kaizen Academy. Fairview, UT. September 2015 – September 2016.
- Fine Arts Co-Teacher. Maple Lake Academy. Spanish Fork, UT. May 2013 – October 2015.
- Mentor. Maple Lake Academy. Spanish Fork, UT. December 2012 – September 2015.

### **Other Professional Experience**

- Kitchen Manager. Provo Beach Resort. December 2010 – January 2013.
- Crew Leader Assistant. US Census Bureau. April – July 2010.

### **Volunteer Experience**

- Part-time volunteer. Utah State Mental Hospital. September – December 2011.

### **Projects in Progress**

- Creator. "The Suggestion Box" video series. January 2019 – Present.
- Organizer and Editor. "Mormonism and the Movies" Book Project. February 2015 – Present.