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Becoming Bill: An Epistemological Look at the Career and Films of Don Hertzfeldt

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An Abstract of
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Abstract

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By Thomas J. Dempsey

For nearly two decades, Don Hertzfeldt has served as a prominent figure in a burgeoning mode of cinematic production: independent animation. Largely eschewing digital technology, Hertzfeldt's means of production have held to an older tradition of filmmaking, relying on practical animation and in-camera effects. Hertzfeldt quickly established his distinct artistic style and amassed a cult following at independent animation festivals with his early student films: *Ah, L'Amour* (1995), *Genre* (1996), *Lily and Jim* (1997), and *Billy's Balloon* (1998). Hertzfeldt achieved widespread acclaim with his Oscar nominated short Rejected (2000), which marked the beginning of a prolific decade of films to follow: *The Meaning of Life* (2005), *Everything Will Be Okay* (2006), *I'm So Proud of You* (2008) and *Wisdom Teeth* (2010). In 2011, Hertzfeldt completed *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, the final film of a trilogy that would go on to unverversal critical praise the following year. At just over an hour, and marking the culmination of 6 years of work, *It's Such a Beautiful Day* (2012) signifies Hertzfeldt as one of the great filmmakers of his generation. This thesis will attempt to chart the development of Hertzfeldt as an artist over the course of his films. This process will consist of three phases: an investigation of artistic influences on Hertzfeldt, including that of Douglas Trumbull, Stan Brakhage and Chris Marker; a formal critique of Hertzfeldt's filmography, charting the development of style and recurring motifs; and concluding with an application of affect theory (specifically that of Germaine Dulac, Carl Plantinga, and Gilles Deleuze) to Hertzfeldt's texts.

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Introduction

Since his emergence in the mid-'90s, filmmaker Don Hertzfeldt has achieved a rare designation within the realm of cinema: that of the auteur animator. It is a title one cannot help but apply to Hertzfeldt, as each film project he has created over the last 20 years has come about almost entirely by his own efforts, every phase of production realized by his own hands. This independence is significant for removing the ambiguity that typically surrounds such discussions of auteur status in relation to animation, a heavily industrialized art-form that demands the cooperation of dozens, even hundreds, of artists. With any artistic endeavor, "[t]he question of authorship becomes difficult to answer... when asked about large-scale production, particularly in the studio mode."[1] The intricacies of Hertzfeldt's mark as an author are ripe for discussion, but first it is worth understanding exactly what it means to be an author in animation specifically.

The industrialization of American animation stems back to the mid-1910s with the invention of cel animation. This technique involved the drawing upon and layering of transparent celluloid sheets in order to more efficiently integrate fluidly animated characters against detailed static backgrounds. Prior to the use of cels, animation stood as a highly experimental medium most famous for the works of individual artists like Windsor McCay and Emile Cohl. McCay himself is thought to be an early inventor of cel animation technology, though the method's precise origin is difficult to pin down, with

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1 Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 10 edition. New York, N.Y: McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 2012. Print. Pg. 33.

2 Cavalier, Stephen, and Sylvain Chomet. *The World History of Animation*. Berkeley: University of

several early animators defending and denying claims in and out of court.[2] Considering the matter of attributable authorship, it seems only appropriate that the medium of animation, so defined by cooperation and the division of labor, should have its own origins split somewhere between multiple innovators.

With cel animation soon came the rise of animation studios and the implementation of industry standards. Throughout the years, as studios have sought to turn out more features more efficiently, there have come to be recognizable ebbs and flows of creative response and artistic rebellion within the studio system. These resurgences of animation's quality and cultural import coincided with the arrival of some of the medium's most noteworthy figures: artists like Walt Disney, Tex Avery, and Don Bluth; all singular artistic personalities operating in response to the practices of their day.[3] As was necessary for the labor intensive act of feature-length animation, or even the rapid production of animated shorts, these individuals saw their push for artistic advancement co-opted by the corporate structure, which ultimately saw the return to a declining status quo. With the arrival of consumer grade animation technology in the late '90s / early 2000s, and the resurging fringe presence of independent animated projects, animation has succeeded in infiltrating and thriving within niche markets, appealing to select demographics and more faithfully embodying the artistic aspirations and immediate efforts of the individual.

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2 Cavalier, Stephen, and Sylvain Chomet. *The World History of Animation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. Print.

3 Cavalier, 14.

Don Hertzfeldt inhabits an interesting gap between these two realms of animation, that of the old studio productions and the newer digital mode of production. His films have garnered awards and recognition at film festivals, only to then go viral with millions of YouTube views. His methods are staunchly traditional, utilizing archaic animation technology and in-camera techniques, yet the end result are works of a frantic energy shared by the countless flash-based cartoons Hertzfeldt himself unwittingly influenced. The works of Don Hertzfeldt are rife with the spirit of animation's past and the promise of its future and yet to hold them solely to those parameters is to ignore a part of what makes Hertzfeldt so special as an artist.

In the early 1990s, as a student enrolled in the University of California Santa Barbra film studies program, Don Hertzfeldt did not harbor any grand ambitions towards animation. His influences and passions stemmed from the realm of live action cinema, a medium that, even at its most collaborative, allowed for the expression of an authorial vision. It is clear that this potential for control appealed to Hertzfeldt from the start; like many budding filmmakers, Hertzfeldt cited Stanley Kubrick, a director renowned for his meticulous control over his films. For an artist like Hertzfeldt, however, the barriers to achieving auteur status were unattractive, especially when he was just starting out. In an interview with New Times LA, Hertzfeldt elaborates:

> I always wanted to make movies, but when you're in high school, and even a freshman in film school, anything you shoot live-action is gonna look like a low-budget film, with your 18-year-old friends trying to play 40-year-olds... No matter what you do. You can't control the weather, and you don't have the money you need to pull it off the way you want to. But if

> you animate it, you've got complete control over every aspect, you don't need a large crew and you spend about a third as much money.[4]

In keeping with the spirit of his live action ambitions, Hertzfeldt avoided computer animation, instead embracing a distinctly tactile production method. Hertzfeldt's student films were all rendered by hand, animation achieved through the classic method of systematically photographing each successive image. To expedite this arduous process somewhat, Hertzfeldt employed a minimalistic drawing style, making use of stick figures that barely surpassed the status of doodles. By embracing the stylistically simple core aesthetic of stick figures, Hertzfeldt has been able to see his ambitions grow and transform in ways he did not expect. Looking back on his career up to the present, there are certain arcs that coalesce from all this free-form artistic invention. Before delving into considerations of Hertzfeldt's films after the fact, let us first recount each film as it progressively contributes to Hertzfeldt's realization of his artistic identity.

Consider the form of his first significant film, *Ah, L'Amour*. This non-narrative short depicts a hapless stick figure male repeatedly attempt interactions with members of the opposite sex. The figure's initial advances are romantically inclined, but are met with violence from the females, both verbally and physically. The primary focus of the animation in *Ah, L'Amour* centers on the females' responses, as they fluidly and in sharp detail set about maiming and dismembering the man after each romantic advance. The environment in which this violence takes place is equally in turmoil. Every time the male

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4 Timberg, Scott, "Don Hertzfeldt is the most inventive underground animator in America. Will he ever make his peace with Hollywood?" *Bitter Films.* February 2002. Web. April 10, 2015. <http://www.bitterfilms.com/articles-e.html>.

stick figure meets his grisly demise, the paper on which the events are drawn crumples up into itself before reforming and resetting the course of events. For this effect, Hertzfeldt physically manipulates the medium of his drawings through stop-motion animation, crumpling the paper frame by frame to emphasize its tactile reality. Animation is already a self-reflexive medium: with little pretension towards reality to be found in the violent and outsized actions of *Ah, L'Amour*'s stick figures, Hertzfeldt doubles down on this disconnect by engaging the viewer impressionistically via the manipulation of the paper on which he is drawing. Throughout his career, Hertzfeldt has displayed a ready willingness to subvert the formal integrity of his animated creations. In the process, a recurrent motif emerged wherein themes of degradation and decay (here exemplified by the tumultuous and shallow nature of romance) are applied to the materials that comprise the movie itself.

The significant short films that followed in *Ah, L'Amour*'s wake found Hertzfeldt exploring the cinematic tendencies established in that first film. His second film, *Genre*, builds upon the ambitions of his first, all the while deriving influence from some of animation's most seminal works. Rather than begin with the animated image, *Genre* starts the viewer off with a jerky, stop-motion rendering of real life, as Hertzfeldt himself sits before his easel in the act of creating an animated image. The film begins as Hertzfeldt draws a picture, a rabbit that springs to life as soon as it emerges from Hertzfeldt's pencil. For the rest of the short, Hertzfeldt's rabbit, a hapless successor to the lineage of Bugs Bunny and Oswald the Rabbit, engages with all the objects and creatures Hertzfeldt draws to accompany it, even going so far as to climb out of the

paper (an effect achieved with stop-motion paper models) and physically interacting with Hertzfeldt himself. If this is reminding you of the classic Chuck Jones short “Duck Amok,” the similarities do not end there. Carrying on in the vein of *Ah, L'Amour*'s over-the-top slapstick, *Genre* sees repeated indignities befall its bunny protagonist, ranging from humiliation to bloody violence, all framed by the artist’s exploration, experimentation, and reinterpretation of various narrative genres. Like Daffy Duck in Jones' short, Hertzfeldt's rabbit gamely approaches these narrative structures, only to come into conflict with the artist's refusal to abide by any consistent narrative vision. By playing up the absurd nature of his every impulse and whim, Hertzfeldt herein dramatizes the development of his abilities as an animator, framing it within the search for a clear artistic identity.

That search would continue with Hertzfeldt's next film, *Lily and Jim*. This short was a significant departure for Hertzfeldt, as it represented his first attempt at portraying spoken dialogue and recognizably human characters. Conceived as a melding of talking head documentary and candid recording, *Lily and Jim* depicts the titular couple in the lead-up to and aftermath of a failed blind date. The talking head portions conspicuously separate Lily and Jim, focusing on the minute details of their movements and expressions, distinguishing their respective personalities and insecurities even as it draws parallels between the two of them. The scenes depicting the two together are awkwardly scripted, playing up the pair's discomfort to escalating comedic effect. The dialogue spoken by Lily and Jim is co-credited to their voice actors, assuring the viewer of the loose and seemingly improvisational tone of the scenes. This process proved

valuable in fleshing out Hertzfeldt's confidence as a director, pushing him to recognize what he really wants out of a film project. Hertzfeldt says of *Lily and Jim*:

> I was, up to [that] point, pretty naively clinging to my written shooting scripts, basically because I didn't know any other way to do it. I thought that's what everyone did when they make a movie. But I didn't really have to communicate any ideas to anybody else creatively [with my other films] because I was more-or-less doing everything. With "Lily *and Jim*," we brought Robert May and Karen Anger to do the voices and they improvised about a quarter of the dialogue that ended up in the film. I gutted my script, included their stuff and blended it all together in the sound mix. Without Karen and Rob, I think it would be completely lost.[6]

There seem to be some key lessons Hertzfeldt took away from *Lily and Jim*. The production opened the director up to future collaborative efforts. As a director, Hertzfeldt needed to understand which aspects of his work he could delegate to others in order to facilitate the full expression of his creative vision. So it went that, on all the films that followed, Hertzfeldt turned to television producer Rebecca Moline and film effects editor Brian Hamblin to aid in the editing of his films. Furthermore, Hertzfeldt had something of a revelation regarding the use of dialogue in his film, specifically that it "is just boring as all hell to animate."[7] Hertzfeldt still had a respect for the impact of language in cinema, though. While all his subsequent films avoid the use of dialogue, the significance of the spoken word is touched on time and again in nearly all his films. The same is true even of *Lily and Jim*, where Hertzfeldt is cannily aware of and engaged with the inherent absurdity of the social interaction taking place. The dialogue is as

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6 Healy, Jim, "Dryden Theatre — Interview and Essay on Don Hertzfeldt." N.p., n.d. Web. April 10, 2015. <http://dryden.eastmanhouse.org/uncategorized/2007/04/dryden-exclusive-interview-and-essay-on-don-hertzfeldt>

7 Ibid.

strained and awkward as the scenario dictates, and the quiet moments between lines of dialogue become just as important as the dialogue itself. Jim Healy, the assistant curator at the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, writes that there is an “existential sense of dread which exists in those quiet spaces,”[8] and while Hertzfeldt would indeed explore such dread in later films, I feel that Jim overlooks another trademark quality of Hertzfeldt's work. There is something achingly human to Lily and Jim as characters, in the way their emotions stumble around each other, vainly attempting to connect. Coming as it did on the heels of *Ah, L'Amour* and *Genre*, *Lily and Jim* was all the more refreshing for the ways it allowed viewers a glimpse of its characters interiority, the hints of emotion behind all the rationalizations and posturing.

Where that dread that Healy spoke of really shines is in Hertzfeldt's two subsequent films, 1998's *Billy's Balloon* and 2000's breakout hit “Rejected.” With *Billy's Balloon*, Hertzfeldt reasserts the comedic sensibility of *Ah, L'Amour* and *Genre*, as the viewer is made witness to the calculated and protracted violence enacted upon a bug-eyed child by its suddenly sentient balloon. The film is an exercise in narrative pacing and escalation, as Hertzfeldt slyly utilizes the frame of on-screen action to dictate what the audience knows and what they can only assume. There is first the relatively minor act of blunt force trauma (again, by balloon), quickly and sharply contrasted with the act of balloon string strangulation. From there, we see the balloon's capacity to lift and drop the child from great heights, before culminating in a sudden introduction of passing aircraft. From this relatively leisurely exercise in comic sadism, the short devolves into

8 Healy.

chaos as seemingly all children everywhere are likewise assailed by roving gangs of malicious balloons. This arc of events is mirrored somewhat in *Rejected*, a film every bit as pitiless and bleak in its comedic endeavors. For the first time since *Genre*, we are introduced to the character of Don Hertzfeldt, as the film is framed as a factual account of the animator's various attempts at commercial filmmaking. Title cards frame separate segments of animated shorts, each one conceived as a television ad for the fictional Family Learning Channel and Johnson & Mills Corporation. Again, the slapstick is cruel and violent: babies fall down stairs, men are beaten to death with bats, and anthropomorphic clouds drown in oceans of their own unending flow of blood. All of this would be truly nightmarish were it not rendered in Hertzfeldt's signature style, all stick figure bodies and googly eyes. Where the conceit takes its truly dark turn is with the revelation of fictional Hertzfeldt's slowly degrading mental state, a condition represented by declining artistic capacities and the climactic collapse of the commercial's structural integrity. Where once the harm enacted on the doodles was framed with a distancing layer of irony, their ultimate demise by way of the collapse of their tactile surroundings is presented as starkly apocalyptic. This too sees the return of the physical manipulation of the animation medium: the paper on which characters are drawn is manipulated in such a way that figures are knocked over by waves of crinkled paper and sucked into voids represented by torn out holes. The film's most iconic image features two rudimentary stick figures screaming for help directly at the camera, their banging fists causing the paper they're drawn on to wrinkle and distend in response. While the short endures in popular memory for its mimetic humor, *Rejected* on the

whole represents a key turning point for Hertzfeldt, a stark realization and commitment to an artistic and thematic ethos.

This would all come to bear significantly on Hertzfeldt's next film, the even more ambitious and revolutionary *The Meaning of Life*. Here, Hertzfeldt reins in the darkness of his previous films substantially, striking a balance of misanthropy and sympathy more akin to “Lily and Jim's” talking head segments. Here, however, Hertzfeldt is dealing with a much more ambitious premise, with the grimness and grandeur of the scenario expanding accordingly. *The Meaning of Life* begins with an extended parade of stick figures, each one fluidly animated to walk across the screen reciting its own personal mantra. As the scene progressively becomes more congested, both visually and audibly, the film suddenly leaps forward in time to reveal all these passersby lying dead and decrepit in the street. This chilling segment, punctuated by the last audible human's furtive cries for help amid an unfeeling crowd, establishes the lower register of Hertzfeldt's capacity for despair. Suddenly, though, an orchestral score is introduced, and the camera for the first time zooms away from its static setting, rising up through the clouds and into outer space. The rest of the film assumes a cosmic perspective, soaring among heavenly bodies and revealing the abstract evolutionary processes taking place on the now human-less earth. Viscerally, *The Meaning of Life* is a breathless showcase for Hertzfeldt's fully realized artistic prowess. The scenes of outer space are all rendered with practical and in-camera effects, layered mat paintings of the solar system placed under selective camera exposures, giving way to sliding sheets of lights. Through it all, Hertzfeldt displays a deft grasp of composition, playing with perspective,

speed and scale with breathtaking results. The evolutionary montage is likewise captivating in the relentless fluidity of Hertzfeldt's drawings. Absurd alien creations are lent believable physiology and behavior, and the phantasmagorical climax of a perpetually evolving biological mass nearly overwhelms the viewer. This all comes crashing to a halt the final scene, wherein a pair of sentient creatures gaze skyward and pontificate in a foreign language on the meaning of existence. Returning again to the significance of dialogue in these films, Hertzfeldt utilizes the creatures' speech not to alienating effect, but to gently suggest a transcendence of human perspectives and ideals. Though frenetic and ambitious beyond anything before it, *The Meaning of Life* was to that point Hertzfeldt's most meditative work, a short film that reveled in silence and majesty as much as it did chaos and confusion. There's a distance to everything that never registers as dispassionate, and the final shot of the star-gazing creatures is as explicit a happy ending as Hertzfeldt gets. Where, philosophically, Hertzfeldt's films had previously obsessed over the cruelty and despair in life ("the dark tunnel," if you will), *The Meaning of Life* marked Hertzfeldt's first hopeful gaze towards those intangible aspects of life that make it worth living ("the light").

This decidedly more optimistic outlook for Hertzfeldt represented not so much a turning point as it did the establishing of an alternate mode of operation. The decade that followed *The Meaning of Life* was just as likely to turn out grotesque comic gags a la *Wisdom Teeth* as it was to bring about more thoughtful works. Part of what makes Hertzfeldt such a distinct and noteworthy artist is his capacity to have one sensibility heighten and complement the other. In what remains to this day his most ambitious

achievement, Hertzfeldt's concepts of the grotesque and the sublime are seamlessly melded across three short films and 7 years of production. Beginning with *Everything Will Be Okay*, Hertzfeldt began telling the story of Bill, a seemingly ordinary stick figure whose mundane life is thrown for a loop by a mysterious and highly debilitating disease. For two years, viewers were left with story, a melancholy slice of life, by turns frightening and beautifully rendered with Hertzfeldt's trademark love of practical effects and experimentation, which sees Bill's health restored just as mysteriously as it declined. In the follow-up short, *I'm So Proud of You*, Bill's story is resumed, this time supplementing the resurgence of the illness with various anecdotes concerning Bill's personal and familial past. In 2011, Hertzfeldt brought the story of Bill to its inevitable and ultimate conclusion, reaching new cinematic heights along the way by means of a melding of animated and live-action footage. All together, these three films were combined in 2012 to form *It's Such a Beautiful Day*[9] (named for that short from the previous year), a 60+ minute feature that chronicles the full story of Bill's descent / ascent into oblivion. It is with this film that Hertzfeldt's skill and ambition as a filmmaker is most visible. It is also with *It's Such a Beautiful Day* that all the themes Hertzfeldt had been engaging with for two decades were most fully realized, from his recognition of the oddities inherent in human society, to more personal, individual concerns like mortality, perception and identity.

There are distinct through-lines and arcs playing out across the filmography of Don Hertzfeldt. From those first squiggly figures audiences saw in *Ah, L'Amour*,

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9 Discussion of elements in *Everything Will Be Okay* and *I'm So Proud of You* will therefore be applied to 2012's *It's Such a Beautiful Day* unless specified otherwise.

Hertzfeldt's command of his abilities has advanced such that a figure like Bill can seem not only iconic, but subtly alive and in touch with the world around him. The ambition on display in *The Meaning of Life*'s celestial scope and *It's Such a Beautiful Day*'s apocalyptic visions go beyond pure spectacle and manage to tap into nuanced emotional cores, facing down existential questions with a calm and evenhanded resolve. Hertzfeldt's career presents us with the opportunity to witness the emergence of a true artist, one whose medium of animation has been subjected to many upheavals in recent years. Hertzfeldt graduated from film school, as he puts it, "just six months... before the digital-video revolution changed animation and moviemaking."10 Rather than let these industrial shifts effect his grasp of his art, Hertzfeldt chose to focus on the traditional animation methods with which he was familiar. As a result, he stands today as "an example of a new way forward for individual animators surviving independently on their own terms."11 In this way, and by its own merits as well, Hertzfeldt's body of work is a treasure rife with potential that this thesis shall attempt to fully and meaningfully reveal.

The arc of Hertzfeldt as an animator is so clear and synergistic with the maturing of his thematic interests that it shall serve as the framing device for this thesis. In the first chapter, consideration will be given to Hertzfeldt's most explicit artistic influences, relating his work to theirs as a means of recognizing those themes and styles that are most resonant with Hertzfeldt. The second chapter, then, will branch off into a thorough analysis of and theoretical consideration of Hertzfeldt's cinematic form. I will show how

10 Healy.
11 Cavalier, 370.

the conventions and inventions of Hertzfeldt's cinematic art support the thematic and tonal growth taking place across his films. The final chapter will aim to put Hertzfeldt's films in dialogue with several noted film theorists, specifically those engaged with the subject of cinematic affect. This will aim to show the impact that Hertzfeldt's work has on the viewer, identifying those specific qualities of Hertzfeldt's aesthetic that are most distinct and crucial to his artistic identity.

Chapter One: Crawling through the Grass: Hertzfeldt and His Influences

"How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green'?"
-Stan Brakhage, "Metaphors on Vision"[12]

"Bill looks out at the water and thinks of all the wonderful things he will do with his life."
-Don Hertzfeldt, "I'm So Proud of You"[13]

Founded in 1977 by Craig "Spike" Decker and Mike Gribble, a pair of concert promoters from Riverside, California, the Spike and Mike Festival of Animation was the first major touring festival of animated short films. The festival ran until the early 2000s, when it was phased out in order to more fully promote its partner program, the Sick and Twisted Festival. Over the years, the Spike and Mike festivals became renowned for discovering up-and-coming figures of independent animation: alumni of the festival include Brad Bird (director of *Toy Story*), Mike Judge (creator of *Beavis and Butthead*), Matt Stone and Trey Parker (creators of *South Park*), and, in 1995, Don Hertzfeldt himself.

In the book *Outlaw Animation* by Jerry Beck, Hertzfeldt affectionately recounts his history with Spike and Mike and discusses the impact it has had on his career. In a way, the festival was responsible for Hertzfeldt's path to animation in the first place, as he recalls attending it as a child:

> I was twelve or thirteen or maybe even younger, and I was instantly hooked on all of these different artful and exotic animations from around the world. They all seemed much more powerful and free than the

12 Brakhage, Stan, "Metaphors on Vision." Sitney, P. Adams, ed. *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1987. Print. Pg. 121
13 *It's Such a Beautiful Day*. Dir. Don Hertzfeldt. Bitter Films: 2012. DVD.

> cartoons I was used to seeing on TV. In high school I remember thinking how cool it would be to have something in the show one day.[14]

The animator owes a debt of gratitude to the festival, citing it as a sort of homecoming for the exhibition of his films amidst other various international and personally organized tours. There exists, however, an interesting disconnect between Hertzfeldt's sensibilities and that which typifies the Spike and Mike festival's signature stage, the Sick and Twisted showcase. Despite the over-the-top and frequently grotesque nature of much of Hertzfeldt's work, he does not personally view his own films in the same light as those. In Beck's book, Hertzfeldt explains, saying "Sick & Twisted has never interested me, aside from the one percent of films in that show that actually have something to say. There are just far too many things buzzing around our heads these days that have absolutely nothing to say."[15]

This carries through to a certain extent in his work: *Ah, L'Amour* and *Genre*, while resplendent in juvenile gore and scatological humor, are highly impressionistic and personal works that, with their crinkled, hand-worn look and acknowledgment of the artist, attempted to convey Hertzfeldt's engagement with the animated medium just as he was starting to embrace it. Even 'Rejected' is defined more by the existential dread it evokes through its sub-textual narrative than by the actual content of its vignettes. There is the matter of films like 'Billy's Balloon' and 'Wisdom Teeth,' works that are fairly basic in their depiction of absurd scenarios. At best, these shorts are more conceptually

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14 Beck, Jerry, and Todd McFarlane. *Outlaw Animation: Cutting-Edge Cartoons from the Spike and Mike Festivals*. First Edition. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003. Print. Pg. 127.

15 Ibid, 129.

grotesque than viscerally, as their use of blood and impetus to shock pales in comparison to the works of other Spike and Mike contributors.

It should not be assumed based on this particular bias that Hertzfeldt lacks respect for his fellow animators. When attempting to grasp Hertzfeldt's sense of himself as a filmmaker, there is a key sentiment that must come into play. As he put it in an interview with The A.V. Club:

> I didn't study animation, I didn't go to Cal Arts, I didn't take a lot of life-drawing classes. I went to film school wanting to be Stanley Kubrick like everybody else and do live-action. I sort of fell into animation accidentally, and it snowballed. But my heroes are still live-action guys. I still feel like a live-action filmmaker who thinks in live-action, but just happens to draw.[16]

Hertzfeldt is not one to denigrate the tools and methods of other artists, just as he is not one to identify with said artists for the sake of putting an easy label on himself. For as little formal training as he claims to wield, Hertzfeldt's work exemplifies a keen understanding of what distinguishes animation from other visual media. He is drawn in by the overt originality of animation, of the innumerable differences that arise from different artists of different styles. Animation is a striking means of expression that speaks volumes about its creator beyond the use standard cinematic conventions. "As soon as you see the artwork, there's a worldview, before the narrative starts. That's an amazing thing."[17] To Hertzfeldt's mind, then, animation is an art form for the blending of disparate artistic ideas and influences. When pressed for a statement on animation,

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16 Adams, Sam. "Don Hertzfeldt." AVClub, April 12, 2012. Web. April 10, 2015 2015. <http://www.avclub.com/article/don-hertzfeldt-72307>

17 Ibid.

Hertzfeldt explains: “I think because I saw so many of these animated shorts in the festival growing up, they sort of absorbed into me as a shapeless whole rather than via any one particular artist.”[18] Hertzfeldt's appreciation of animation, while genuine, is thus understandably lacking in the visceral and intellectual draw which live-action films hold for him. When approaching Hertzfeldt's animated films with the intent of considering their points of inception, one must turn to his live-action influences for discernible influences and parallels. That is what this chapter endeavors to do.

In terms of Hertzfeldt's aspirations towards live-action cinema, much is made of his admiration for the great British director Stanley Kubrick. In his interviews on the subject, however, Hertzfeldt always comes off as more general in his admiration of the director, as if it were something that all like-minded aspiring filmmakers shared. Still, the connection to Kubrick is often cited, and is an indelible part of the conversation surrounding one of Hertzfeldt's most pivotal works, 2004's *The Meaning of Life*. Again, this can largely be attributed to the film's similarities and derived influence from Kubrick's seminal science fiction film, 2001: A Space Odyssey. The comparisons and associative readings between the films are valid and worth a look, though it's important to consider that perhaps Kubrick's ties to that film are not the most significant. In the 2014 documentary *Jodorowsky's Dune*, it's pointed out that the direction of much of the film's more visually inventive sequences was left to the film's special effects supervisor, Douglas Trumbull. Trumbull's work on this and other films such as *Blade Runner* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was responsible for a sizable share of the credit and

18 Beck, 129.

influence typically afforded to those film's directors. This, in turn, keys us into a significant dynamic that affects the nature of Hertzfeldt's production process. Hertzfeldt, again shying away from his identity as an animator, explains that there are certain aspects of the process that appeal to him far more readily than others, saying, "I love editing, I love doing the sound work, I love working with these old cameras, obviously. But to me, the animation is the busywork. It's grinding out, it's connecting the dots that I have to do to tell this story. But the only reason I have that energy is the writing."[19] It would seem, then, that much of the creative spark that drives Hertzfeldt comes from the conceptualization of his narratives and ideas, and the later process of realizing them on screen through experimentation and cinematography. The actual drawings which convey the characters and narrative are considered less significant in Hertzfeldt's eyes.

This being the case, there certainly seems to be a debt due to Douglas Trumbull on Hertzfeldt's part. In 2014, in an interview with The Hollywood Reporter, Trumbull spoke out on his experience working on Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, saying:

> Kubrick did not create the visual effects. He directed them. There was a certain level of inappropriateness to taking that Oscar. But the tragic aspect of it for me is it's the only Oscar Stanley Kubrick ever won. He was an incredibly gifted director and should have gotten something for directing and writing and what his real strength was — not special effects.[20]

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19 Adams.

20 N.a. "Douglas Trumbull: Kubrick Didn't Earn That '2001' Oscar — but He Deserved Many Others." *The Hollywood Reporter*. September 12, 2015. Web. 9 April 10, 2015. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/douglas-trumbull-kubrick-didnt-earn-729702>

Trumbull was something like a protégé to Kubrick. After dropping out of his studies to be an architect, the teenage Trumbull became a professional spray-brush artist. In 1964, Trumbull was hired to paint space backdrops for *To the Moon and Beyond*, a space-flight exhibition film screened at the '64-'65 World's Fair. As Trumbull tell it, Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke were both inspired by his work in that film to go on and create 2001: A Space Odyssey, with Trumbull petitioning for a production job and rising through the ranks to become visual effects supervisor. From this prestigious position, Trumbull continued to find work on films and made innovative strides in high fps (frames per second) filmmaking with his Showscan 60 fps projector system.

In his THR interview, marking the occasion of his new 3D camera/projector system UFOTOG ["U.F.O. Photography"], Trumbull reminisced of his time working on movies, saying, "I feel that everything in a movie is an illusion. Makeup, wardrobe, sets props, locations, everything has been messed with in some way. As a filmmaker, I don't draw a line between "the movie" and the special effects added to the movie. I think it's all one integrated thing."[21] Between this and the earlier statement regarding Kubrick, an interesting similarity between Trumbull and Hertzfeldt becomes apparent. Both men obviously have great respect for cinematic technologies: Hertzfeldt with his camera and Trumbull with his projectors. In summing up his aspirations for UFOTOG, Trumbull states that "a filmmaker embraces all the arts and crafts of filmmaking."[22] Beyond that, there is the matter of the image's relevance to the cinema. When Trumbull states that

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21 N.a. "Visual Effects Legend Douglas Trumbull on the Future of Films." *The Hollywood Reporter*. September 02, 2014. Web Video. April 10, 2015. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/race/future-film-vfx-legend-douglas-729041>

22 Ibid.

everything about a cinematographic image is “an illusion,” he is honing in on the same instinct that drives Hertzfeldt to experiment with his camera effects. Both men are artistically motivated, not by the power of technology, but by its capacity to draw people into the world of the film. When Hertzfeldt bemoans the arduous task of animating his stick figures by hand, he is not disparaging the process. He claims that “when it comes to animation, there really are no shortcuts,”[23] regardless if the effect is achieved with practical or computerized means. It is understandable that such a mind would take a shining to Kubrick's meticulous style of direction, but credit must also be given to Trumbull as well, the man whose visual contributions have so viscerally impacted Hertzfeldt and whose artistic ideals are so similar to his own.

Let us now consider how the influence of 2001 was made manifest in Hertzfeldt's own work. *The Meaning of Life* deals heavily with the passage and impact of time. In the film, Hertzfeldt utilizes casual leaps of great expanses of time. In Kubrick's film, the passage of time is dealt with daringly and strikingly. The film begins with The Dawn of Man, only to leap several million years into the future over the span of a single match-cut. The trick is replicated at the end of the film, during the sequence of the astronaut's imprisonment in the alien cage. Here, the man is repeatedly confronted by his own aging, turning again and again to find and assume the role of gradually older renditions of himself, until he ages to a point of evolutionary advancement. For Kubrick, the leaps in time are essential to the exploration of certain thematic discussions. With the first jump, we see the film emphasizing the pervasive failing of man to truly dominate the technology he creates: the monkey's evolution is signified by his creation of weapons

23 Adams.

and murder, and man's advances into space have created a cold and cruel artificial intelligence.

With Hertzfeldt, the leap of time is quite varied in its implications. From the depictions of various milling human crowds, we see Hertzfeldt surging forward in time, crucially utilizing fast-forward motion rather than a jump-cut in order to emphasize continuity. This speedup pauses briefly upon the lifeless corpses of the humans, throwing their myriad concerns and obsessions from earlier into stark perspective before leaping out into the cosmos beyond all human concerns. This portion is particularly indebted to *2001*, both in Kubrick's direction and to the now iconic visual effects created by Douglas Trumbull. Hertzfeldt's effects are, naturally, less financially expensive than those Trumbull brought to the screen: brief cosmic views of earth and its neighboring planets are clearly standard animation base on still, painted images. Once our familiar galaxy has been reduced to a single pinpoint of light, Hertzfeldt engages in another simple yet striking effect, having a static fields of lights shift across the frame in a manner intended to simulate the movement and orbit of celestial bodies. The effect is noticeable, as a background field of lights move in a distinct square field diagonally across the screen, as opposed to the more convincing lights made to pass horizontally across the screen to create a forced perspective effect where larger lights register as closer and smaller ones read as further away. All the while, orchestral compositions play over the imagery, evoking *2001*'s own use of classical scores. This brief segment is a new realm for Hertzfeldt, living up to the claim of being his most ambitious work to that point. While the scenes to follow literally and figuratively find Hertzfeldt coming back

down to earth, they still exercise his great capacity for fluid animation and even his preoccupation with motion and time.

This entire segment, indeed the majority of the film, takes place within a single unbroken shot. When the camera zooms back to the earth, it reveals first one new strain of alien life before blurring rapidly and revealing another. The conditioned association is thus to associate these blurs with a forward movement in time. Each blur brings about a new step in an evolutionary chain, one gradually discernible through a subtle arc of action and interaction between the alien creatures (those that wave their limbs as if attempting to fly give way to those fully capable of gracefully soaring in flocks). This segment too reaches a daring conclusion, as a single entity is shown to evolve again and again at an ever increasing rate, the motion blurs eventually vanishing amidst the constant fluid shifting of its physical form. As the motion reaches its most frantic, the music swells in kind, and the film finally engages in its first unambiguous cut to a separate time, place, and subject. Now we see two stubby creatures beside a field of blue water. These creatures speak in a language unintelligible save for the titular quote, and their interaction is nuanced and human in a way even the segment on human life didn't depict.

The most striking difference, aside from the nature of their production, between *2001* and *The Meaning of Life* is one of perspective. Kubrick was often known, perhaps unfairly, for being an emotionally cold artist more concerned with the technical construction than depictions of humanity. It might be more apt to say that Kubrick obsessed over the darker elements of the human condition, siding with a more

pessimistic impression of humanity where others might be inclined to be more generous. With *2001*, for all its wordless reveries and refusal to explicitly delineate its plot, Kubrick makes a statement on the recurrent nature of humanity to inevitably assault itself with its own "progress." From the bone wielded by the monkey at the Dawn of Man to the homicidal H.A.L., the audience is given no indication that the evolutionary phase signaled by the star child will yield better results for life as we know it. Of the two directors, Hertzfeldt is certainly the more optimistic, another trait he shares with Trumbull. While Trumbull may contribute to the cold atmosphere of films like *2001* and *Blade Runner*, remember that he is also responsible for the visuals of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *The Andromeda Strain*, and even Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*. In each of these films, Trumbull's use of flashing and moving lights convey many things, including fear of the unknown, but are predominantly imbued with a spirit of hope for the future and mankind's capacity to reach it. Hertzfeldt too is content to have *The Meaning of Life* see some semblance of the human spirit endure, and by doing so ultimately aligns himself with Trumbull's brand of optimism.

The impact of Trumbull and Kubrick on Hertzfeldt's artistic eye is tempered by another artistic influence. In the construction of *The Meaning of Life*'s celestial imagery, one can recognize the influence of Stan Brakhage's 1993 film *Stellar*, an abstract short film that is meant to evoke the feeling of looking into outer space. Brakhage's images are highly impressionistic, conveying the scenery of space through the very implication of the film's title. In fact, all of the images presented in *Stellar* are of distorted film

strips: the wash of various chemicals standing in for nebulae and galaxies, while the flickering pricks of white caused by holes in the film stock act as stars. All of this is to show the power of visual suggestion, a capacity of cinema that Hertzfeldt draws upon extensively throughout his animations. Indeed, Hertzfeldt himself acknowledges the influence of Brakhage on his own work.

In a post for the Criterion Collection's web-site, Hertzfeldt praises the work of Stan Brakhage, citing his filmography as "a miniature film school. [His] visuals have encouraged lots of my own in-camera special effect attempts and failures."[24] Both Hertzfeldt and Brakhage were relentless in the creation of their craft, with the latter famously producing over 350 films over the course of his 50 year career. Unlike Hertzfeldt, Brakhage was not bound by the strictures of narrative conventions or even the concept of causality. His films sought primarily to explore the impact of the moving image, frequently eschewing even the use of sound in the process. As Fred Camper explains in "The Art of Seeing...," "the rhythms of almost any soundtrack tend to dominate the rhythms within an image, and visual rhythms are crucial to [Brakhage's] work. Thus the interruptions of chatting, people coming into and leaving the room, the phone ringing, and so on can prove almost completely destructive to these films' subtle delicacies."[25] Brakhage conceives of his films as soundless from the ground up; Hertzfeldt, meanwhile, regards the soundtracks of his films as crucial to their overall

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24 Hertzfeldt, Don"Don Hertzfeldt's Top 10." *The Criterion Collection*. n.d. Web. April 10, 2015. <http://www.criterion.com/explore/225-don-hertzfeldt-s-top-10>

25 Camper, Fred, "By Brakhage: The Act of Seeing …" *The Criterion Collection*. N.d. Web. April 10, 2015. <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/272-by-brakhage-the-act-of-seeing>

emotional impact. From the orchestral score of *The Meaning of Life* and *It's Such a Beautiful Day* to the terse sound effects of *Billy's Balloon* and ambient drone of *Rejected*'s finale, sound effects and music have always been a signature element to Hertzfeldt's work. This is not to say that the similarities between Brakhage and Hertzfeldt's visuals are invalid, just that they are intended to elicit different reactions. David Grundy, an online critic of Avant garde art, sums up Brakhage's avoidance of sound succinctly:

> it's almost as if the absence of sound is made up for by what might at first seem to be and overcrowding of visual events; and watching the film silently, as intended, provides a very different experience of how one experiences the medium – one's eye trained to become more active, more able to discern connections, cohesions and fractures.[26]

The lack of sound in Brakhage is thus emphasized not as a lack, but as a conscious avoidance for the purposes of expanding the viewer's perception of other cinematic elements. Hertzfeldt's embrace of sound, then, points to the divergence between the two artists in terms of their artistic aspirations and voices. The influence of Brakhage on Hertzfeldt may result in parallel imagery, but end result is far from the same.

Hertzfeldt's admiration of Brakhage's visuals branches off too, with the younger director borrowing elements that appeal to him and putting his own spin on them. Consider the imagery of Brakhage's landmark film *Dog Star Man*, a 75-minute barrage of kaleidoscopic stimuli built out of live footage and in-camera manipulation of film stock.

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26 Grundy, David. "Streams of Expression: Dog Star Man - by Brakhage." *streams of expression*. November 27, 2009. Web. April 10, 2015.<http://streamsofexpression.blogspot.com/2009/11/dog-star-man-by-brakhage.html>

Counter to the claim positioning Brakhage as a filmmaker with little interest in narrative, *Dog Star Man* does indeed feature a story, albeit one depicted through vague allusions and a handful of recognizable touchstones. Set in a snow covered mountain range, the titular man (Brakhage himself) wanders perpetually through the forest with an axe, seeking a tree to cut down with only his equally titular dog as company. As the man's progress becomes more and more bogged down by his harsh surroundings, his quest to cut down a tree appearing increasingly Sisyphean, the viewer is bombarded with flashes of images, presumably of the man's life, including an infant child, a nude woman, and the outline of a giant flaming star.

This story, what of it there actually is, rests predominantly behind an extensive, 25 minute long prologue densely packed with random images and segments of painted film. It is during this segment in particular that the influence of Brakhage on Hertzfeldt is particularly apparent, specifically with regards to *It's Such a Beautiful Day*. Brakhage's film employs a frantic, near subliminal style of editing that one can immediately recognize in the various nightmares and mental breakdowns suffered by Bill. *It's Such a Beautiful Day* plays these scenes in panels surrounded by a hellish flame. Various nightmare images are overlaid on vaguely biological backdrops, wet and pulsing organic tissue. Each of these elements are borrowed from Brakhage's film, though in this new narrative context they are fundamentally altered. *Dog Star Man* is constructed like a waking nightmare, fading in and out of a distorted reality, rife with signifiers that point to no clear subject. In the case of *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, the viewer is able to draw upon established cinematic context and convention. We know the film employs absurd

and striking visual imagery, as has been shown in the depictions of Bill's various dreams and hallucinations: Bill is haunted by visions of screaming shoes and giant fish heads. We understand that Bill suffers a degenerative mental condition, and the movie's propensity for bringing us into his perspective likewise primes us to understand Bill's nightmarish visions as having a narrative context. For Brakhage, there is no such context, no character to whom the images on the screen belong or are being inflicted upon. There is only the audience itself, left to recognize whatever speaks to them personally amid the tumultuous visuals. So it is that Hertzfeldt's emulation of Brakhage sets up a dynamic of ascribed purpose. The fleeting shots of roadways in *Dog Star Man* become the late-night driving sessions that find Bill fleeing his impending demise. The dimly lit footage of rough surfaces is transformed into young Bill's imagining of the lunar surface upon his ceiling. Each of these scenarios in *It's Such a Beautiful Day* speak to a hyper-awareness and acceptance of the visual image. This chapter opened with a quote from Brakhage's essay "Metaphors on Vision," wherein the director outlined a natural course for the human visual experience. From the open, optimistic acceptance of that which it sees Brakhage states that the human eye undergoes a loss of innocence as a result of indoctrination to spoken language. He writes,

> But one can never go back, not even in imagination. After the loss of innocence, only the ultimate of knowledge can balance the wobbling pivot. Yet I suggest that there is a pursuit of knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication, demanding a development of the optical mind, and dependent upon perception in the original and deepest sense of the word.[27]

27 Brakhage, 121.

Throughout *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, we are not given the sense that Bill is a particularly imaginative man. What wonder he may have possessed in his youth has been worn away to form the blank slate that is the man we meet at the start of the movie. For all the pain it causes him, Bill's condition brings about poignant moments of pause: watching the rain on the bus, gazing at beams of light from the confines of his hospital bed. Upon receiving his death sentence from the doctor, Bill is thrown into a perpetual state of childlike amazement with the visual world around him. It speaks to Brakhage's "pursuit of knowledge," that restless lust for life that carries Bill, or at least some part of him, to the end of all existence. With *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Hertzfeldt takes a fairly conventional narrative moral, live life to the fullest / never take life for granted, and utilizes Brakhage's visual appeal to have those morals register on a deeper level.

One last influence of note is the filmmaker Chris Marker, whose mark on Hertzfeldt's style is all the more potent for stemming from a single movie. Chris Marker's 1967 short film *La Jetée* is a significant work both for its experimentation with the form and its implications regarding concepts of cinematic depictions of time. The story begins in a post-apocalyptic future, where scientists have devised a way to send individuals back into the past in a last-ditch attempt to gather resources. A prisoner, known only as The Man, is used as a test subject for this technology, and the film is essentially a depiction of his experiences, in his own time and in the past. Marker presents this narrative almost entirely by way of still photographs, with the primary

narrative conveyed through narrative voice-over. Along with the narrator, the sounds of the man's world creep into the soundtrack, creating an atmosphere of physical and emotional isolation and claustrophobia. The movie's story hinges on the man's burgeoning romance with “the woman,” a figure who is revealed to share a bond of destiny with him stemming back to his youth. The film ends with the establishing of a cycle, the man dying in the woman's arms as the man's childhood self-watches on, ignorant of what he's witnessed and doomed to live it out in the future.

Hertzfeldt cited *La Jetée* as a personal artistic touchstone, specifically at a point in his career when the conception of *It's Such a Beautiful Day* was still in its latency. Both thematically and ironically, Hertzfeldt's film bears tangible influences from Marker's work. The fatalism of La Jetée's ending is relevant to the story of Bill, a figure

Figure 1 - It's Such a Beautiful Day (Don Hertzfeldt, 2012) [left] / La Jetée (Chris Marker, 1967) [right]

who, in light of all his suffering and degradation, can only be fated to die. As with “the man,” “death would forever be a stranger to Bill;” while the man lives eternally via temporal recursion, Bill is shown to endure as a metaphysical universal constant, an

embodiment of being and existence itself. This evokes a definite tone of melancholy in both films, though interestingly, the more abstract nature of Hertzfeldt's scenario (as well as his willingness towards levity where Marker, however romantic, comes off as distant) seems more triumphant or at least poetically vibrant. While time is of concern to the films' narratives, there is also a distinct link in their exploration of cinematic time, a quality *La Jetée* is particularly noteworthy for. Jonathan Romney's essay on the film, "Unchained Melody," deconstructs the nature of the film's aesthetic:

> By breaking his narrative down into a series of discontinuous stills, each held at some length, Marker reminds us that the filmic illusion of motion is always composed of a series of still images – as it were, the single atoms of cinematic flow. It is the often infinitesimal differences between these still images that make the picture appear to move.[28]

This same situation plays out for Bill. In the wake of his stroke, he is sent into a semiconscious state wherein the instructions of the doctors meld with his own memories of his ex-girlfriend. Far from the long-haired doodle depicted just moments prior, Bill's memory depicts his ex as a flesh and blood woman, lying in bed and flickering away just as her eyes open to see him (we even receive the only hint as to her actual name via a caption of Bill's inhibited speech). This stands as one of the film's most emotionally charged sequences, and is furthermore a technical allusion to *La Jetée* as well. The tests enacted upon "the man" likewise render his view of "the woman" in a new light: namely the film's only use of actual motion to depict her lying in bed, blinking (Figure 1). The feeling of melancholy evoked in both scenes is quite potent, signaling

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28 Romney, Jonathan. "La Jetée: Unchained Melody." *The Criterion Collection*. N.d. Web. April 10, 2015. <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/485-la-jetee-unchained-melody>

points of divergence for their respective narratives. For “the man,” it signals his commitment to his love for the woman, thus setting into motion his ultimate demise. In the case of Bill, this dream is a final fleeting flash of his crumbling identity. Whereas Marker's protagonist longs to lose himself in the past, Bill has no such option, and instead must find his peace in the present moment. When considering influences such as these on Hertzfeldt's work, there may be the impulse to assume that the integration of various stylistic flourishes, the co-opting of said influences would be done consciously. For as much as the evidence would seem to bear such claims out, and without condemning such a practice even so, I perceive an alternative course of events as resulting in this. Consider the manner through which *It's Such a Beautiful Day* was produced. Three separate short films, constructed over a seven year period, with only the reappearance of visual motifs and narrative cues bridging them together. Hertzfeldt said of the endeavor that little effort was made to adhere to stylistic continuity between films. It was only at the very end, during the process of connecting the three films together for their exhibition as a single feature, that Hertzfeldt came to realize how well they came to coalesce. “None of this was calculated. Many of these movies are written as I go, and a lot of it is hindsight. Its things that kind of feel right and intuitive.”[29] That element of the intuitive spark is crucial to Hertzfeldt's artistic voice, and a key attribute of his highly independent production style. Consider that the ending of *I'm So Proud of You*, with Bill's cruel stroke and bittersweet return to childhood, was intended to cap off the eventual third film, or that even the structure of a trilogy only came about when the span of *Everything Will Be Okay* proved insufficient for Bill's story. This element of

29 Adams.

inspiration and intuition will serve as the crux for the third chapter of this paper. Before that, let us now move on to looking more in depth at the films themselves as artifacts. The construction of these films, their enduring design that truly defines Hertzfeldt's artistic legacy, are rich with thematic import and theoretical nuance. We spent this chapter looking at how other works of art have come to shape Hertzfeldt and his own films. Now, let us see how the artist resolved to shape himself.

Chapter 2 – Making Grass Grow:
Thematic Expression through Technique

Hertzfeldt's proclamation of himself as a live action filmmaker who uses animation can seem a bit presumptuous at first. It operates on the assumption that animated film and live-action film are applicably similar in form and execution. Granted, the two mediums have naturally come to influence each other over the years, adopting the same basic visual grammar while establishing recognizably distinct conventions (hence the applicable designations either way of “cartoonish” and “realistic”). Hertzfeldt himself has proven that, regardless of distinctions, he is fully capable of working within the medium of animation. If the techniques and form of either visual medium are therefore fairly open to conflation, that leaves the realm of theoretical consideration to establish the distinctions between the two mediums. It is with respect to this notion that the pull between Hertzfeldt's live-action upbringing and his embrace of animation introduces a compelling dynamic to his films' mechanical forms.

Despite the construction of the animated film being significantly distinct from the mechanism put into place for live action productions, the general perspective is inclined to conflate the two mediums as far as artistic technique is concerned. In Esther Leslie's essay “Animation and History,” a key aspect of animation is put forth: the inability of the medium to strictly dictate the temporality, or even contextual societal conditions, of a given production30. Unlike cinema, which is inextricably bound to the

30 Leslie, Esther, “Animation and History.” Karen Beckman, ed., *Animating Film Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2014. Print. Pg. 26.

technological advancements and societal state of its time, animation is more directly linked to more tactile art forms like painting. As the basic tools and principles of animation have remained relatively consistent since the medium's creation, one is less inclined to judge the aesthetic employed, as it is always in a state of self-evidence. The difference between an old animated film and a new one, allowing for equivalent mechanical processes, are far less apparent than the same differences that exist for live-action films.

This principle carries across Hertzfeldt's oeuvre as well. Granted, the stick figures of *It's Such a Beautiful Day* are smoother and refined than those of seven-teen years prior. Still, without the proper context, one could easily see *Ah, L'Amour* and *Genre* as being contemporary productions. And even Hertzfeldt's recent films, with their blending of real and animated components and steadfast eschewing of computerized processing, have their roots in films like *Anchors Aweigh* (George Sidney, 1945) and *Mary Poppins* (Robert Stevenson, 1964) that blended live-action with animation. In fact, the melding of mediums is a quality that follows Hertzfeldt's entire development as an artist. Hertzfeldt's earliest films, segmented and resistant to narrative as they may be, are all the more ambitious for the means by which Hertzfeldt makes their tactile nature known. I have already touched on *Ah, L'Amour*'s tactile aesthetic, with the crumpling of the on-screen page conveying the feeling of stubborn determination while also providing the basic function of scene transition and framing device for the male figures repeated and disastrous failures at courting female suitors. This visual effect brings the supposed mental state of the animator into direct relation to the work itself, signifying

Hertzfeldt's own emotional perspective on the subject.[31] This dynamic is employed again in his follow-up film, *Genre*, wherein stop motion footage of the faceless animator himself is shown drawing directly on the easel and sitting contemplatively at his desk. Here the manipulation of the filmed material is a direct textual reference to "Duck Amuck" (Chuck Jones, 1953), and so feels slightly less personal as a result. In all of Hertzfeldt's films, the method and style of the animation is crucial, often singularly so, in the conveying the thematic concerns of the piece. This makes it apparent that, when Hertzfeldt claims to be a live-action filmmaker working with animation, the crucial point is less that there is a distinction between the two art-forms, but rather that Hertzfeldt is aware of a difference. This chapter will consider the development of Hertzfeldt's formal cinematic techniques over the course of his career.

One aspect that Leslie's essay does not account for is the arrival of the animator as auteur, a single individual whose own evolving capacities within the medium shape their films. Beginning with *Rejected* especially, Hertzfeldt's arc as an artist is typified more by the scope of his ambition, his productions becoming longer and more technically dense. This arc exists even within the complete assemblage of *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, where the ever more elaborate effects of each successive chapter signal Hertzfeldt's real life development as an artist. Fortuitously, this progression also finds itself becoming rooted in the narrative conventions of the film, with the ever more

31 Hertzfeldt on gender in his early films: "I was eighteen years old and I think every male goes through that in college. But at the first screenings of the film, women were cheering louder than the men. I also did my best to make the guy not so innocent himself by having him pass by the big fat woman. That's my favorite part. He's kind of a prick himself. It all evens out I think. I think the man and the woman are both equally inept in *Lily and Jim*." -Healy, Jim, "Bitter Films: A Don Hertzfeldt Odyssey."

vibrant visuals corresponding to Bill's subjective state. As we go through Hertzfeldt's films, and especially *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, we must be aware of correlations in the escalation of his cinematographic technique over the course of his career.

The Frame

Leslie asserts that animation as a medium is free from chronological considerations and limitations in a way live-action cinema perhaps is not. This conceit opens up a wealth of potential theoretical approaches to considering the technical makeup of Hertzfeldt's work. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze was a potent influence on film studies during the late 20th century, with his writings on movement bearing particular significance. Early in his book *Cinema 1*, Deleuze defines cinema as "the system which reproduces movement as a function of any-instant-whatever that is, as a function of equidistant instants, selected so as to create an impression of continuity."[32] The any-instant-whatsoever that he writes of, the connecting thread of live action cinema, is the incidental element, a tangible truth that is ultimately outside of the author's control, even as the end result of motion reproduction is achieved. The concept of equal distance is admittedly a debatable presence in the realm of animation, as the ultimate movement evoked on the screen is not drawn from a full range of motion. With traditional animation, the relation between a subject's being and its movement on screen is intrinsically reversed: whereas the subject of the live action film

32 Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. 1 edition. Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1986. Print. Pg. 5.

dictates its motion, the motion in an animated film dictates the subject. Deleuze says as much himself: “The cartoon... does not give us a figure described in a unique moment, but the continuity of the movement which describes the figure.”[33] Continuity of movement is a significant element of Hertzfeldt's aesthetic, applying to the entire framed image.

In *Billy's Balloon*, the audience is treated to a sequence wherein an infant is violently assaulted by a sentient balloon. In the shots of Billy and the balloon, the entire frame is alive with movement, that signature squiggle that reveals the technicality of Hertzfeldt's animation process. Rather than have figures animated over a static background a la traditional cell animation, Hertzfeldt draws each frame as a complete unit, creating a subtle discrepancy between each successive image that all the same lends them an organic vibe. It's suggestive of the uncontrollable quality that goes along with live-action cinema, where aspects of a subject's movement or that of their surroundings are beyond control and chalked up to a natural state of being. This is suggestive of Deleuze's any-instant-whatever, implying a state wherein the animated figure would be subject to the full range of motion that one has in live action. The film accomplishes this all the while adhering to Deleuze’s stipulation that the animated form, in this case both the figures and the setting, be defined by its continuity of movement.

A few minutes into *Billy's Balloon*, we are shown a truly static shot of a cloudy sky, with none of the squiggles or shifts that have dominated the film thus far. The sky remains like this until the balloon (using its string to lift Billy into the air) moves into

33 Ibid.

frame, at which point the whole frame resumes its previous state of motion. This subtle revelation as to Hertzfeldt's method of animation is both indicative of his early development as an animator (appropriate enough, given the student film stature of his pre-*Rejected* work) and is telling as to his priorities as a filmmaker. The empty sky is necessary for the elongation of time in accordance with the previously established pacing of the scenario (the rising and falling of the balloon and Billy), but it is not the focus of the short. The subjects are the only aspects warranting the expenditure of motion. In this sense, it is motion itself that is the subject of Hertzfeldt's short. He did, after all, create it on the heels of *Lily and Jim* with the intent of just wanting to do something that was action again—no dialogue.[34] *Billy's Balloon*, like several of Hertzfeldt's early films, reveled in the intimate and awkward creation of action from still images more than it did the creation of a greater narrative or theme. Still, “Billy's Balloon” is more than just a lark of an animated skit, but stands as evidence of an artist learning the capacities and limits of his favored craft.

With the disparity between the still drawing of the sky and the overt movement of the entire framed image, we come to understand the importance of continuity, of continual motion in Hertzfeldt's art. Throughout his filmography, still images are lent this sense of motion time and again, signaling narrative anticipation of further movement and paying respect to the metaphysical implications of the animated image. For Hertzfeldt, movement is more than just the effect achieved by animation, but is a significant element of what the animation itself is trying to convey. This movement is

34 Healy.

lent greater resonance when one applies it further to Deleuze's concepts of relation and composition.

While Deleuze perceived animation and live-action to fundamentally differ with regards to their relation to motion, his general view of them within the context of cinema seems fairly inclusive. He even concludes his acknowledgment of animation with the qualifier, “If [the cartoon] belongs fully to the cinema, this is because the drawing no longer constitutes a pose or a completed figure, but the description of a figure which is always in the process of being formed or dissolving through the movements of lines and points taken at any-instant-whatevers of their course.”[35] (This transient state of becoming will bear special relevance with regards to Deleuze's concept of the “time-image). Deleuze's apparent display of flexibility regarding his own definitions indicates a thematic focus on the movement itself, at least ahead of such concerns for matters of authenticity. One is therefore free to consider the works of Don Hertzfeldt by the same cinematic parameters and speculation put forth by Deleuze without the threat of contradiction of intent. In doing so, there are revealed to be formal elements to Hertzfeldt's films that meld to Deleuze with a remarkable cohesion. These elements, the basic building blocks for much of the Deleuzian movement-image, are grounded first in three levels of movement as outlined by Henri Bergson.

Bergson, the Nobel winning French philosopher, was one of the foremost influences on Deleuze's own movement theories. For his cinema studies, Deleuze frames a concept of motion as relating to Bergson's “third thesis,” the result of two

35 Deleuze, 5.

earlier theses pertaining to the reconstitution of movement (Deleuze's views are expressly incompatible with these earlier theses, though he recognizes their informing of the third). With the third thesis, movement is shown to function within a series of multi-leveled relationships. The first level is that of the “set,” a deceptively simple concept that, in layman terms, can be typified as a distinct group of elements. More accurately, it is a term for a group specifically definable by the sum of its parts. This is important, as a set is a closed concept that loses its initial meaning if it experiences subdivision or expansion to reveal its place in a greater set. Once these considerations come into play, the second level of motion has effectively been engaged: that of the relative position between the objects in a set. This is where the perception of motion takes place, as any object's movement can only be discernible in relation to another object. I specify that it is the perception of motion taking place so as to make way for the third level: the concept of the “whole.” Where Deleuze's set is closed off with its defining objects, the whole is an open plain of being, not defined by that which it excludes. Rather, the whole itself is the defining aspect of motion, aptly embodying the concept of “duration,” that period representing the active implication of the relation between objects.

Deleuze's method of conceiving of this three-level structure of relation and motion involves a glass containing water and sugar cubes. Eventually, the sugar will dissolve into the water, and the essential state of the glass will be altered. In this example, the initial glass characterizes a set of objects (the water and the cubes), and the relation between these objects is established in the reconfiguring of the sugar

molecules in the water. With the water and sugar ultimately becoming sugar water, the relationship between the objects has been altered. The concept of the whole, meanwhile, is not so much evident in the change taking place as in the "duration" of the change, the active process of it. That therefore leaves the change to be emblematic of motion, that which identifies the shifting stance between the first and third level; "Through movement the whole is divided up into objects, and objects are re-united in the whole, and indeed between the two 'the whole' changes."[36] This structure can be applied to the cinema as well, with the myriad still images composed on a film reel, the components of the camera used to record them, and the projector made to reveal them representing sets. The whole of this scenario would be the duration of the film, its playing out in time and the conceptual changes at work during that time. Such a scenario presents a conscious and purposeful establishment of the pivotal notions of Deleuzian film theory: the concept of the motion-image as perceived by way of this dynamic of sets and wholes.

This ties directly into the cinematic use of the frame. Deleuze views framing quite simply as "the determination of a closed system... which includes everything which is present in the image."[37] Any given frame, then, is a prime example of a set of objects, and the action taking place is characterized by the relation of objects to one another within the frame. In the case of *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, we must seek to qualify the frame's parameters as Deleuze establishes them. Frequently throughout the movie, the screen contains multiple round panels, each one illustrating a distinct event, action or

36 Deleuze, 11.
37 Ibid, 12.

element of the scene. This means of framing makes explicit the sets and relations present in the film: each panel is a set unto itself, with its own internal relation of objects, while the frame demarcates its own set, effectively rendering each contained panel an object as well. Deleuze makes clear the implication of this relationship:

> The divisibility of content mean that the parts belong to various sets, which constantly divide into sub-sets or are themselves the sub-set of a larger set, on to infinity. This is why content is defined both by the tendency to constitute closed systems and by the fact that this tendency never reaches completion.[38]

In appreciating this flow of set construction, we come to two separate concepts at either extreme: the rarefaction resultant of separation and the aspiration towards wholeness that comes from expansion.

For each frame where an arrangement of objects takes place, we bear witness to the method of "rarefaction." This is the method of altering the frame in such a way as to lend specific prominence to a select object or group of objects; by reducing the number or significance of objects in a set, those objects remaining are made more prominent. Deleuze makes rarefaction out to be a purposeful act, attributing the stylistic flourishes of various directors to this very aim. Hitchcock is put forth as a prime instigator of rarefaction, as many of his most iconic shots lend acute focus to specified minutia of the frame: the glowing cigarette from the darkened living room in *Rear Window*; the static face of the killer among the uniform turning of heads at the tennis match in *Strangers on a Train*. Alternately, filmmakers like Ozu and Antonioni implement rarefaction via

38 Deleuze, 16.

isolated settings and desolate landscapes. In the case of Hertzfeldt, rarefaction is intrinsic to his method of production as well as his artistic aspirations. Within any given panel of *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, the number of objects may be quite few, allowing for a simple and straightforward rarefaction to take place. Indeed, these panels are generally rarefied themselves, as they exist as glowing balls of light among the black backdrop of the frame. A scene wherein Hertzfeldt aims to focus your attention will be careful to use as few panels as possible. The single shot of Bill as he is left to contemplate his declining health in the doctor's office resonates with the poignancy of Bill's suffering, but is also heightened by its isolation from external imagery or even sound. Other scenes instead display a purposeful derarefaction, by means of cramming the screen with as many overlapping and contradictory panels and objects as possible. Right before the aforementioned shot of Bill alone in the doctor's office (Figure 2), there's a scene of Bill's doctor explaining his diagnosis to him. This shot features no less than 4 separate panels filling up the screen: one containing Bill and the doctor, and the others featuring oblique geometry and emitting overwhelming sounds. Before long, the whole screen is consumed by the chaos, only to then return us to that shot of quiet contemplation. Hertzfeldt is constantly aware of how to guide and dissuade the attention of his audience, in this case through the method of rarefaction framing.

On the other hand, the seemingly infinite conception of sets into larger sets is significant both as an illustration of the framing and montage at work in *It's Such a Beautiful Day* and as a further exemplification of what exactly constitutes "the whole." Each panel in the film is a set unto itself, as well as a defining object in the set that is the frame. Furthermore, we perceive each constructed frame as an object in the set that is the film's narrative, a connection that is easily facilitated by the fluid movement of panels in and out of the frame. While the sets may functionally be capable of carrying on into infinity, it can never attain the status of the whole, which is thus clarified as the intangible and pervasive state of change, not the product of change.

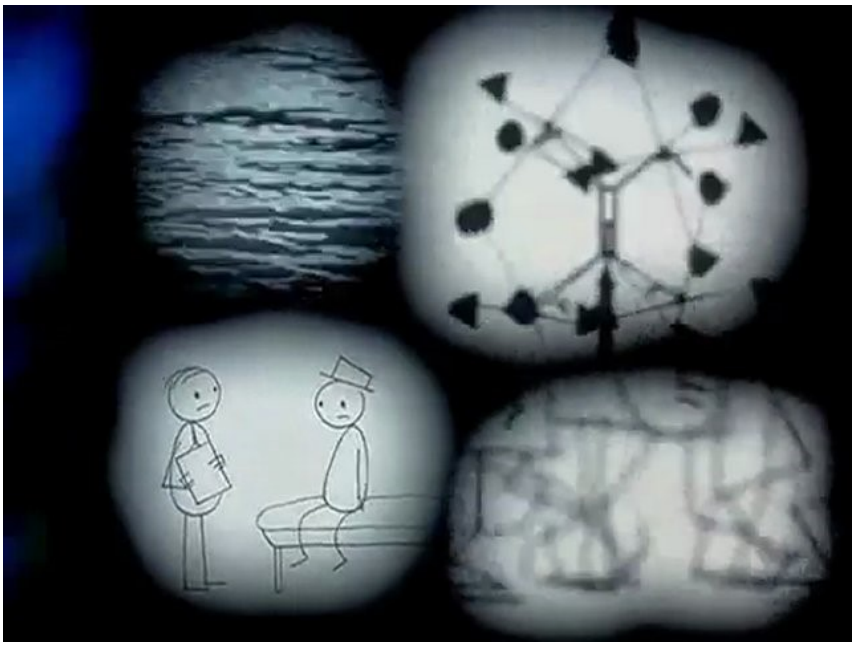

Figure 2 - It's Such a Beautiful Day (Don Hertzfeldt, 2012).

The element of montage plays a pivotal role in Deleuzian concepts of cinematic motion, but framing is just as capable of expressing the same as well. In fact, it is uncanny the degree to which Deleuze's outline of dynamic framing coincides with that seen in *It's Such a Beautiful Day.*

> "The iris method in Griffith, which isolates a face first of all, then opens and shows the surroundings; Eisenstein's researches inspired by Japanese drawing, which adapt the frame to the theme; Gance's variable screen which opens and closes 'according to the dramatic necessities', and like a visual accordion."[39]

The irising of the panels, though not prominently used for establishing shots, is pivotal to the film's narrative aesthetic; the references to Russian and French framing techniques further exemplify the greater impact of the framing at work here. Like Gance's variable screen, the panels and frames in *It's Such a Beautiful Day* are highly malleable, subject to the deterioration and perspective of the central character.

Consider Bill's phone conversation with his ex-girlfriend, all the while accompanied by the ruckus of the television broadcast and the remains of Bill's nightmare occupying their own spatial panes in the screen. These events overlap, though their diegetic placement is not concurrent, largely through sound cues designed to alienate the viewer and thus provide insight to Bill's troubled psyche. At this point, and similar ones throughout the film, Hertzfeldt's grounding narration is nearly drowned out by the cacophony of the disparate events being projected on the screen. That Deleuze goes further still in equating this screen table with the human brain makes the film's subjective perspective all the more crucial to understanding it. We are made to understand that these scattershot images are indicative of Bill's mental state of being, and these moments resolutely find Bill at his most disoriented or vulnerable. The most brutal execution of this method comes near the end of the second chapter, when Bill's

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39 Deleuze, 13.

violent stroke interrupts Hertzfeldt's eponymous declaration (“Everything is Going to Be Okay”), its cruel irony grounded both in the film's established comic sensibility and in the bitterly bleak nature of said chapter on the whole. It is this point in particular that renders the following scene of Bill as a child, wondering about “all the amazing things he will do with his life,” especially potent, as both a point of empathy for Bill's suffering and the culminating statement on all human suffering.

Montage

Most of the action in Hertzfeldt’s early shorts is conveyed through long takes, a formal indication of the process utilized in creating these scenes. As Hertzfeldt draws all the action independently, the flow of the action being realized from a single artistic perspective, the use of unbroken scenes is both a benefit of his creative freedom and a limitation of his available resources. At its best, these long takes are employed with a sense of purpose, complementing the tone and intent of the work in question.

With much of Hertzfeldt's slap-stick oriented material, the playing out of action on a single plain distances the viewer subjectively. The implications of this can shift frequently and suddenly over the course of a film or even a scene. With “Billy's Balloon,” the initial setting is a single shot of land, wherein Billy and his balloon act out the first phase of their confrontation. The lack of editing here builds suspense early in the scene, the gradual escalation of the balloon's assault playing out in real time. There is even fun to be had with the passing of objects through the frame: adult passersby bring the

action to a halt, and Billy's attempts to flee the balloon become more pitifully comical as he runs off screen to the left, only to reemerge being pursued to the right. This objective perspective is dropped with the attempt by the balloon to lift Billy into the air, an action displayed through 5 distinct continuity cuts. As Billy and the balloon reach the top of the frame, the scene cuts to the next unit of vertical space, the subjects now again rising from below. Here the same perspective is maintained, but the cutting is an effective means of conveying space. Where a long shot of the balloon rising would have been vague and visually dull, the editing imparts on the viewer a discernible metric for the height of their journey, as well as a clear illustration of Billy's emotional arc through the sequence: with each cut, Billy's expression changes to match his rising concern with his predicament. The final shot of the balloon coming to a halt is doubly effective, both for the implicit connotation of what will come next and the depiction thereof. The viewer can guess that a long drop is in store for Billy, and the tension of the scene is heightened when Billy summarily falls out of frame, his descent and landing indicated only by the sound of impact. The scene that follows, of the balloon repeatedly lowering, picking up Billy, and repeating the act again, plays out in a single take, this time from a much greater distance. The perspective of this shot significantly alters the dynamic of the scenario: the dropping of Billy is so coldly objective as to feel uncomfortable, removing the viewer from the dark schadenfreude of the previous scenes.

The humor of "Billy's Balloon" is tied to its ability to surprise the viewer through revelation and escalation of events. After the harshness of the balloon's repeated dropping of Billy, we return to the previous medium shot, this time introducing another balloon with another child off in the distance. The use of perspective lines in this scene introduces the element of depth to the film, building off the vertical and horizontal establishing shots from earlier. It also affords Hertzfeldt the opportunity to engage with reverse shot editing, showing Billy's response to the other boy, then the boy's own continued waving and so forth. This introduction of another identifiably human element exposes an alienating trait of Hertzfeldt's work: oftentimes, his characters are isolated in their scene, prompting the audience to more readily empathize with their situation. With the introduction of this new character, and the utilization of more open spaces via editing, the viewer is relieved of the stress the previous segment instilled. All of this, of course, is for the sake of comedic pacing, with the sudden dispatching of the new boy via a passing by plane. (Figure 3) Again, Hertzfeldt explores the comedic potential for the passing through of onscreen space by off-screen objects, subverting the audience's

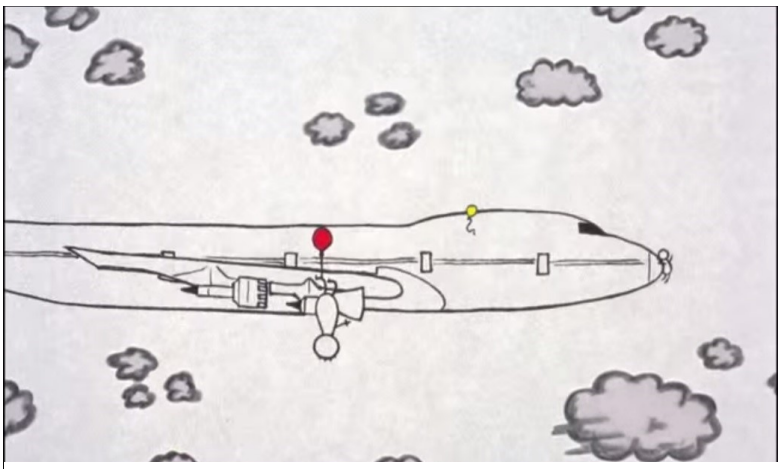

Figure 3 - Billy's Balloon (Don Hertzfeldt, 1998).

previously established expectations. That the sequence ends with Billy being dropped again reveals the capacity for editing to reset rhythms to comedic effect.

The montage was seen by Deleuze as “the determination of the whole... by means of continuities, cutting and false continuities. Eisenstein continually reminds us that montage is the whole of the film, the Idea.”[40] Looking back at the interaction between Bergson's three levels, we recall that the whole is that spiritual element of change that occurs over the course of a duration. In the case of cinema, montage is the establishing of duration, the signifier of rate and rhythm by which all those first and second level relations take place. The discussion of *It's Such a Beautiful Day*'s use of framing to this point has also, in its way, been a discussion of montage.

There is a delightfully accessible quality to Deleuze's consideration of the various national schools of editing as characterized in the movement-image. From each cinematic industry, he selects those most exemplary and affirming aspects of style and philosophy as they apply to his views on movement. It is prudent, then, to see how each of these national montage techniques figures into *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, a film for which montage is a predominant mode of expression and movement. Deleuze's focus on movement plays into cinematic locations which possess a tangible depth. This arrangement accounts for the camera's capacity to engender movement relative to its changing position to its subjects, as well as the subjects' movements relative to it. Seemingly, this would put us at risk of discounting the very nature of Hertzfeldt's animation, a medium that does not immediately convey a sense of physical depth

40 Deleuze, 29.

(though depth does exist and makes its presence known via live action superimposition and use of lens focus). Even so, the broader matter of Hertzfeldt's animated photography is brought into the conversation by nothing less than an eager qualification: following his accounting of depth in terms of framing and montage, Deleuze is quick to cite the methods of early American filmmakers (D.W. Griffith in particular) who dealt more with a tableau style rather than dynamic framing depth. Deleuze cites the theatrical perspective of these early films as an equally viable means of movement-image expression, with the straight facing shots often being cut up and divided into close-ups and points of focus, a method that may as well characterize Hertzfeldt's entire style. As individual images come to inhabit the screen, their position and sequence of appearance is utilized to be expressive of emotional and dramatic dynamics. Griffith's montage as viewed by Deleuze was that of an organism seeking stasis among its parts. Separate cuts and frames were thus poised to operate parallel to one another, operating to the same, typically narrative, ends. While narrative is not the chief artistic concern of Hertzfeldt, his film still achieves a discernible progression of events on a broad scale, largely with relation to the ebbs and flows of Bill's illness. When Bill is of a relatively sound state of mind, the events of his life play out clearly and explicitly, thanks in further part to the ever-present narrative voice. This association of linearity with health expresses Griffith's concept of montage nicely.

In his assessment of pre-war French montage practices, Deleuze hones in on a concept of abstracted montage, a conceptual and technical implementation that finds significant relevance throughout *It's Such a Beautiful Day*. Whereas montage as it is

traditionally known focuses on the linear interactions between different images, either in parallel existence or in the soviet context of opposition, abstraction as it is conceived in the French school operates via a mechanical range of movement, with the intent of achieving a “maximum” expression of movement through individual parts. This abstraction, in turn, puts less focus on the precise nature of each object, allowing its relative movement to speak as to its identity or function. Instead, French montage aspires to achieve and expression of the whole, of realizing through montage an approximation of that which the whole embodies. Deleuze summarizes this aim: “it is no longer the interval as variable present, but the fundamentally open whole as the immensity of future and past. It is no longer time as succession of movements, and of their units, but time as simultaneism and simultaneity (for simultaneity, no less than succession, belongs to time; it is time as whole).”[41] This element of simultaneity can be found in the scenes that depict multiple instances of non-chronological action. The display early on of all the minute tasks that comprise Bill's “real” life (dropping his keys, turning on lights, vacuuming, etc.) is a key moment of French style montage (dubbed Cartesian by Deleuze with respect to its mechanical nature) and an early evocation of one of the film's overriding motifs. The earlier reference to Deleuze's conception of the frame as a data sheet hone in on the film's pervasive equivocation between the mind and a mechanical device. Industrial noises are littered throughout the ambient soundtrack, and every significant moment of turmoil for Bill accompanied by the sound of malfunctioning machinery. For a less aggressive conceptualization of this mechanical

41 Deleuze, 46.

motif, one need only consider the relation, once again, to the panel frames and their interaction with the larger frame.

Hertzfeldt's impressionistic aesthetic conditions the viewer to regard the appearance of each panel as illusory and unbound to the diagesis of the film, yet their entrance into the frame is oddly functional and even mechanical. Rather than simply appear, most panels are preceded by a shimmering white dot entering the frame; the panel then irises out from said dot to comprise the selected moment. Once said moment has served its purpose, the panel shrinks back down and leaves the frame, often in synchronicity with other present panels. This method of montage creates a fascinating dynamic whereby the majority of the film is revealed to consist of prolonged single shots.

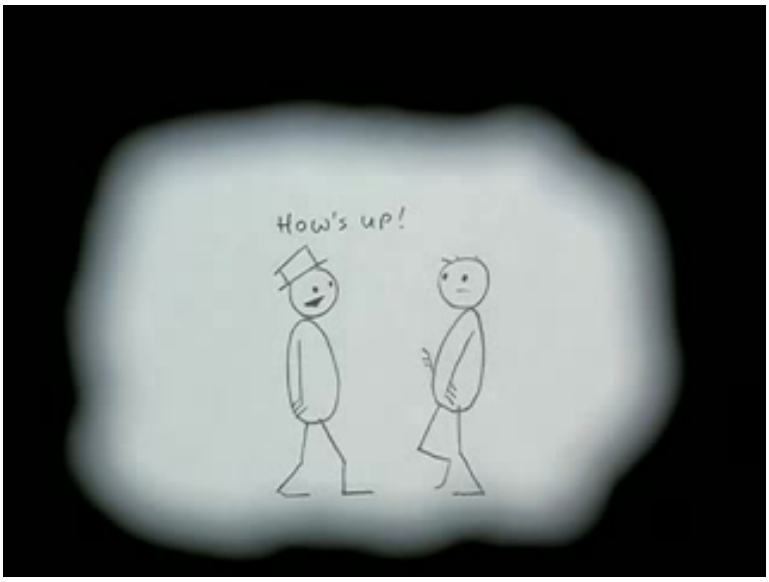

Figure 4 - It's Such a Beautiful Day (Don Hertzfeldt, 2012).

The very first sequence (Figure 4) is that of Bill encountering a familiar stranger, an event meant to mirror its comic strip origins by the sliding from right to left of each

successive movement contained in its respective panel. The film is thus not that of the montage of the images within the panels, but rather of the panels' trajectory through the omnipresent black backdrop. This too plays into the film's grander thematic conceit, as the events of Bill's life play out amid the blank void that gradually consumes him and ultimately comes to identify him. It is perhaps a purposeful use of symbolism that the film should end with Bill floating in a black void, surrounded by gradually disappearing dots of white; in this perceived death event, the viewer comes to recognize the scope of Bill's existence, supposedly infinite and yet confined to any of those bubbles of light through which we have been conditioned to view it. Such a concept invites one to consider the diegetic state of each of the moments we are shown. With their arrival and departure from the frame, we are made to consider them as more permanent elements, not done away with once they have played out, but enduring afterward just as they must have existed prior to our viewing of them. The movie accounts for this within the text, as we are treated to the relation by Bill's co-worker of the theory of temporal permanence. As outlined in the film, the passage of time is not a flowing state of existence, but a static, pre-realized one that those experiencing it traverse through linearly. Cinema is much the same way, it must be said: the world and narrative represented on the film is a wholly singular landscape that we, the audience, can only traverse in the one way available to us. Deleuze harbored similarly aligned perceptions of time himself, as expressed in his book Differences and Repetition. Therein, Deleuze outlines a perspective of time akin to Nietzsche's "eternal return," specifically for those

whose "being is becoming."[42] This also accounts for much of the film's temporal fluidity, a structural conceit that again is initially disguised as one cinematic convention (the flashback) before presenting itself as a potential other. Those moments, then, where the entire screen is fit to be consumed by a single unbroken image (the appearance of Bill's head in the satellite, etc.) are all the more striking, a purposeful artistic flourish that subtly draws us temporarily from the films established rhythm.

It's Such a Beautiful Day is a movie of degradation, of a life's flickering spark in the face of entropy. Though it disguises itself initially as a mere framing device, evocative of all of Hertzfeldt's short form storytelling and of the panel-based comics from which several segments are directly derived, the movie makes the moving panels within the frame a means of conveying nuanced and affective meaning. When Bill descends into the nightmare realm of the first act, the blank spaces surrounding the paneled images are filled with dark colors evoking hellfire. Then, at the moment following Bill's stroke, the screen in its entirety is taken over by distortions and damage, conjuring the intensity of Bill's suffering even in the face of his faltering consciousness. It is no mistake, then, that when all is said and done and the ultimate, uncertain state of Bill's life has been reached, that the irising effect is supplanted for full screen shots and direct cuts between scenes (of real world locations, no less). This conventional means of framing appears at select moments throughout the film, especially in the final, post-stroke chapter. We see it utilized when Bill is confined to his hospital room, again when he takes his forgetful walks around the block, and the extensively during the live action

42 Roffe, Jon. "Deleuze's Nietzsche." Ashley Woodward, *Interpreting Nietzsche: Reception and Influence*. A&C Black, 2011. Print. Pg. 76.

sequences at the very end. If we are to relate with the mechanical motif of the film, then the conclusion arises that, in his final state of depersonalization, Bill has attained in himself a kind of mechanically facilitated clarity, unbound by the fear of death and instead overpowered by the desire to experience all of the world around him. In association with the movement image, it finds Bill attaining a sense of acceptance with the world around him, a Cartesian attainment of the whole, if you will. With Deleuze's own conception of death tying into a loss of self, we here see the full arc of Hertzfeldt's film as a metaphor for the movement-image itself. All throughout his life, Bill has perceived his existence as a confined assemblage of sets, viewing the world only in direct terms of those sets' relations to each other. At the culmination of his life, the perspective of the whole is attained, and not only does it relieve him of the weight of the physical realm, but it imbues him with an immortality born of the whole's freedom from material connections and processes.

The Perspective-Image

In dealing with the subjective viewpoint of *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, we are made to consider that element of the Movement-image Deleuze designates the Perspective-image. With Deleuze, the nature of narrative objectivity and subjectivity is never as clean cut as the perspective of a character versus the depictions of a camera. Likewise, we are not granted assurances of the veracity of Bill's narrative simply because the events, however mundane, are depicted from a medium distance; likewise, those

sequences which play out before the eyes of Bill are not necessarily the most fantastical. Given his dire physical state, this may indeed account for an objective recreation of his perceived reality. Operating from a grounding in montage theory, Deleuze identifies the subjective as comprising the relationship between a central figure (in this case, the protagonist Bill) and those cinematic elements shown in relation to it. Objectivity, meanwhile, grows from the relation of said elements with each other, taken on their own merit, without the context of the central figure to unite them. This is an important dichotomy to remember, especially given the easy traps of the unreliable narrator evident in Hertzfeldt's pervasive voice-over narrations. As the chronicler and near-sole vocal presence in the film, Hertzfeldt nevertheless spends much of his time rotely explaining, with varying degrees of poetry, the psychedelic and perplexing events playing out on the screen. This narration is then but another element in the film's realm of perspective, its claims to objectivity and subjectivity laying in its situational relation to Bill and the narrative elements surrounding him. During the significant central portion of the film, wherein Bill is abandoned so that Hertzfeldt may lay the groundwork of his familial lineage, many events are described which, for all their grounding in human behavior, strike the viewer as surreal and darkly comic. The viewer proceeds through the film with these events functioning as a narrative canon, their details informing the character of Bill and the events of his adult life. When it is later revealed that many, if not all, of these past events could merely be broken recollections of Bill's degenerating mind, we find the previously objective has now been rendered affectingly subjective in its relation to the central character.

A more sustained implementation of objective perspective on Hertzfeldt's part comes from *The Meaning of Life*. For a significant portion of its duration, Hertzfeldt's film is staunchly objective, refusing any explicitly central figure in favor of depicting a barrage of action and stimuli. The film's first significant set piece (Figure 5) depicts a teaming crowd of people, each one displaying its own emotion and reciting a single line

Figure 5 - The Meaning of Life, 2005.

of speech. As the first individual walks across the screen, a chipper male reciting “Give me money,” we are presented with no other contextual elements in relation to him; he is thus rendered a subject through sheer circumstance. As the film progresses, more people come to inhabit the frame, again entering from off frame and continuing across in a manner reminiscent of *Billy's Balloon*, This framing element, paired with the

generally inane contents of each figure's speech, renders this section a largely comical affair, even as certain individuals distinctly display pained and emotional states of being. The segment ends, perhaps appropriately, with one female figure distraught and crying out in grief.

This sequence is noteworthy for the way its visual and sonic elements contribute to the dynamic between subjective and objective perspective. At any given moment during these crowd scenes, the audio track is mixed with the intertwining, nigh indistinguishable voices of dozens of characters, and their movements are frequently obscured amongst each other as well. Such an instance is that of objective perspective, as the audience is presented with no distinct subject around which to frame the context of the scene. As the scene progresses, though, and select individuals do make their presence known by virtue of distinct actions or audible dialog, we are seeing subjects emerge from the objective mass. Even still, the capacity for these figures to assume the status of subject is largely dependent on the viewer's own cognition, rendering the subjective viewpoint arguably separate from the work altogether.

This dynamic of subjective and objective perspective is especially poignant here, and furthermore is characteristic of shorter sequences throughout Hertzfeldt's other works (the final assault of the balloons in *Billy's Balloon*, the abstract sequences of kaleidoscopic imagery in *It's Such a Beautiful Day*.) It speaks to the collage effect as described by Kit Laybourne in *The Animation Book*. Though Hertzfeldt rarely deals with non-illustrative sources, Laybourne's evocation of the collage holds just as true: “The technique is much like kinestasis in the kinds of images used and in the various ways

that they can be given movement by means of animation camera and setup. But the feeling that a collage film engenders in the audience is distinctive... There's often a feeling of being inside a visual maelstrom."[43] The significance of this technique is further validated by how one can see both iterations of it apparent in Hertzfeldt's work. First there is the impressionistic collage, "a blitz of imagery... likened to that of a kaleidoscope... The animator creates a flow of images through his or her creative use of duration, association, proximity, and, of course, the selection of the images themselves."[44] The scenes of cosmic grandeur in *The Meaning of Life* evoke this style, with their orbital symmetry, utilizing light and colored textures to evoke the imagery of celestial bodies. *It's Such a Beautiful Day* employs collage as well, though more frequently in a narrative style.[45] Bill's hallucinations throughout the film are kaleidoscopic in their impact on the viewer, as the burst of light and nightmarish imagery don't quite obscure the personified depiction of Bill's suffering (his rampage as the fanged beast is itself a kind of primal narrative).

When applying formal designations to the cinematographic techniques utilized by Hertzfeldt, it is important keep in mind the deeper meaning behind each technique's implementation. It is one thing for a filmmaker to operate under the grammar of cinema, but for an artist as freeform and improvisational as Hertzfeldt (especially where his use of in-camera effects is involved), a consistent mode of operation may not always

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43 Laybourne, Kit, and John Canemaker. *The Animation Book: A Complete Guide to Animated Filmmaking--From Flip-Books to Sound Cartoons to 3- D Animation*. Rev Sub edition. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998. Print. Pg. 126.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

be appropriate. As we shall see in the next chapter, concepts for understanding art require a flexible application in order to illuminate alternate interpretations and readings.

Chapter 3: He Lives and He Lives:
Opening Hertzfeldt to Theoretical Discourse

"This is amazing! It explains everything." -Don Hertzfeldt, *The End of the World*[46]

The opening shot of "The Meaning of Life" sees a levitating corpse in a shaft of light, gradually decomposing and shriveling into a black husk. The exact context of this image is never touched upon, but then the film is oblique by its very construction, forgoing vast swaths of time between each singular image. Over a decade after the film's release, Hertzfeldt has appeared to illuminate somewhat the ambiguities of "The Meaning of Life," through a separate artistic medium. Released in spring of 2015, *The End of the World* was in fact written by Hertzfeldt over a period of 12 years, predating "The Meaning of Life" and, in all likelihood, informing it as well. The book, initially seeming like a scrapbook for the assorted absurd non sequiturs typical of Hertzfeldt's comedic voice, gradually reveals itself as a kind of fictionalized historical account of the end of human civilization through obscure and apocalyptic means. Seeming like an oral history with no accredited speakers, each page consists of a single smudged panel depicting a random scenario; only rarely do these pages coalesce to convey a persistent narrative thread. Certain motifs, scenarios and figures recur sporadically, the most frequent among them an anonymous female survivor dressed in pink who acts as the de facto protagonist. Any overarching plot beyond these signifiers is left up to the reader's own capacity for interpretation.

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46 Hertzfeldt, *The End of the World*. Austin, TX: ANTIBOOKCLUB, 2014. Print.

Framing the book within the context of *The Meaning of Life*, however, reveals some striking continuities. In the animated short, the viewer is shown masses of dead bodies littering the ground, with nothing but the implicit suggestion of an apocalyptic event to account for their demise. At that point, the film engages in the fast-forwarded pan off into outer space, returning to earth presumably millions of years later to observe the emergence of newly evolved lifeforms. The happenings on earth during that celestial pan are not addressed in *The Meaning of Life*, but it can be assumed that the events depicted in *The End of the World* offer a suitable suggestion. Hertzfeldt even provides the reader with a synchronous framing device: the occurrence of the apocalyptic event is signified by the masses of dead bodies on the ground, just as in the short film. At the end of Hertzfeldt's book, we are shown a seemingly sentient, amorphous creature traversing the beach. The creature's playfully odd design is quite similar to those that Hertzfeldt depicts during “The Meaning of Life's” second half, that depicting the evolution of life on a post-human earth.

The application of a loose continuity between *The Meaning of Life* and *The End of the World* (even their titles offer an appealing symmetry) is not all that difficult a prospect, given the vagaries of Hertzfeldt's narratives in general. Much of it can be chalked up to the natural organic means by which Hertzfeldt progresses from one endeavor to the next, or even the way the engages with them concurrently. Hertzfeldt, in explaining the book, comes right out and states that much of it has served as the basis for other artistic endeavors, both past and in development. As well as the allusions to *The Meaning of Life*, we see again the fish-headed man from *Everything Will Be Okay*,

and Hertzfeldt points out snippets of dialogue that have made their way unaltered into other films. For all these touchstones and points of reference, it ultimately seems futile to pursue a literal reading of *The End of the Wor*ld in relation to its author's other works (let alone arguing for a kind of "Hertzfeld-iverse" diagesis). Of the book, Hertzfeldt states, "it is sad and jazzy… and reminds me of something sort of lost and ghostly that I can't quite put my finger on."[47]

Though not dismissive, Hertzfeldt's stake in the work seems rather dispassionate, a level of humility that is at best bemused. In its way, the point *The End of the World* makes most abundantly clear is the creative process and mindset of its creator, a mindset that can in turn be extrapolated towards all his other works. Hertzfeldt's method of film production is, up to this point in career at least, resolutely free-form to the point of improvisation. Chief among his skills as an artist and filmmaker is his knack for honing in on organically emerging themes and motifs over the course of his independent development of his abilities and interests. What is more, Hertzfeldt make a point of constructing his works in such a way as to encourage intellectual engagement with the viewer. As a result, the viewer is more likely to ascribe their own significance to Hertzfeldt's work, an approach that Hertzfeldt consciously promotes. In this way, Hertzfeldt puts himself forward as an auteur figure, and specifically engages with what Michael Foucault conceived of as the author function. As expounded upon in his 1969 essay "What is an Author?", Foucault posited that the author of a given work existed tangentially to the discussion surrounding said work. The author's primary purpose,

47 Hertzfeldt, Don. "The End of the World." *Goodreads*. n.d. Web. April 10, 2015. <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/19546180-the-end-of-the-world>

rather than dictating the terms of the art they produced, was to act as a facilitating force for discussion and contemplation. Knowingly or not, Hertzfeldt has wholly embraced his fulfillment of the author function. Again, consider the very nature of *The End of the World*. I compared it to an unattributed oral history for a reason. The fleeting, anecdotal nature of each scenario play to Hertzfeldt's affinity for free-form, improvisational storytelling; indeed, the general takeaway from each page amounts to a vague memory of a secondhand story, with only specific and striking details carrying through. Conceptually, the book is a historical document for these fictional events, and Hertzfeldt takes specific measures to ensure that the document feels as unbiased as possible (it should be noticed, in passing, the aptness of the book's distribution through the Antibookclub publishing house). Some story threads are introduced seemingly just to be abandoned, at one page is even illustrated as having been torn in half, playing literally at the role of a fictional document. Even the identity of the author is downplayed in the book's printed state. Hertzfeldt is never explicitly cited as the author, either on the cover or the title page. In fact, the most prominent evidence of Hertzfeldt's involvement, the list of his other published works, is comprised entirely of nonexistent texts. Throughout his filmography, Hertzfeldt's role as the author has often been explicit and central to the work's themes: *Ah, L'Amour*, *Genre* and *Rejected* cast him as an exaggerated self-parody, a creator visibly and tangibly frustrated by the state of his creations. In *It's Such a Beautiful Day,* Hertzfeldt plays the part of the omniscient narrator, affecting an objective distance up to a point. With Bill's apparent death, Hertzfeldt "breaks" character, willfully denying the passing of the figure he had devoted

7 years of work towards bringing to life. As with the perceived connection between “The Meaning of Life” and The End of the World, one could make a case for these insertions of Hertzfeldt into his own texts as an overt contextualization around and assertion of himself as the definitive author. Given the general tone taken with his position of authorship, though, it seems that “Hertzfeldt” as he exists within the texts is consciously constructed to address the very subject of authorship. In short, Hertzfeldt is giving primacy to Foucault's author function before his own stature as author.

Throughout the rest of the chapter, this application of the author function towards Hertzfeldt will be carried out through various layers of theoretical readings and interpretations of Hertzfeldt's texts, with It's Such a Beautiful Day, his most formally and thematically accomplished work, serving as the primary object of focus. The first section will consider Hertzfeldt's formal aesthetic through the lens of Germaine Dulac's theories on movement. The significance of Hertzfeldt's most overt artistic signature, the stick-figure, will be engaged with and shall serve as a springboard for further consideration of the impact of Hertzfeldt's films on the viewer. The discussion shall then turn to the topic of affect theory as explored by Carl Plantinga, who relates affect to narrative convention, and Gilles Deleuze, with his emphasis on the affection image as facial component. Finally, the ultimate themes of Hertzfeldt's artistic output will be addressed, drawing upon the writings of Deleuze, Foucault and Rodowick to consider the artist's relationship with existentialism and mortality. While Foucault's author function does relegate the significance of Hertzfeldt's own relationship to these topics,

consideration of Hertzfeldt as an artist of the current moment is a vital topic, and should serve as an appropriate ending point for this study.

So far, this thesis has explored the concept of motion as explained by Deleuze, with specific consideration to his concepts of the motion-image and Bergson's three-levels of motion. These concepts, as Deleuze claims of all concepts, are:

> Both absolute and relative… relative to [their] own components, to other concepts, to the plane on which [they] are defined, and to the problems [they are] supposed to resolve; but [they are] absolute through the condensation [they] carry out, the site [they] occupy on the plane, and the conditions [they] assign to the problem.[48]

Deleuze reasons that philosophical and theoretical concepts, while definitive in how they apply to themselves, are meant to be flexible in their application to various subjects. It is in this capacity that we are able to apply the writings of many disparate authors to a given subject in order to arrive at a more cohesive and comprehensive understanding of it.

Moving Lines

As both an influential film maker and theorist of films during its early days, Dulac spoke of the "burgeoning power [of cinema] that breaks through the still well-established barrier of incomprehension, of prejudice, and of laziness in order to reveal

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48 Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *What Is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. Print. Pg. 21.

itself in the beauty of a new form, nobly substantiates its claim (to be an art)."[49] Though Dulac was writing of live action film, those sentiments expressed in 1926 are as relevant to animated films like those of Hertzfeldt as they are to any other. When she writes of the cinema being "the creator of synthetic movements,"[50] among other things, she is emphasizing movement as the pivotal characteristic of the art-form, akin to sound's relevance to music or rhythm's import to dance. Dulac spoke inclusively when she gave voice to her vision of cinema's ultimate achievement: "that a shifting of lines can arouse one's feelings."[51]

For Dulac, there was an inherent emotional connection to cinematic movement that much of popular commercial cinema was not properly utilizing. The Vincennes train arriving at the station sparked something visceral within the earliest of moviegoers that conventional narrative films (derivative as they were of theatrical and novelistic works) did not even aspire to. There existed in Dulac's estimation "a curious preoccupation with dramatic reconstructions composed of pantomimes, exaggerated expressions, and ridiculous subjects, in which characters became the principal objects of concern when, perhaps, the evolution and transformation of a form, or of a volume, or of a line would have provided more delight."[52] Admittedly, there are elements of this critique that find their way into Hertzfeldt's film, though not strictly in ways Dulac would have conceived. As a purposefully minimalist work of art, Hertzfeldt's drawings do invite the use of terms

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49 Dulac, Germaine, "Aesthetics, Obstacles, Integral Cinegraphie." Richard Abel, ed. *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology, 1907-1939. Volume 1: 1907-1929*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993. Print. Pg. 389.

50 Ibid. 390.

51 Ibid.

52 Dulac, 391.

like “pantomime” and “ridiculous,” most notably during the more frenzied dream and hallucination sequences. As Bill's physical and mental connection with his world deteriorates, he is plagued by surreal and frightening visions expressive of his mental state: raging headaches and mood swings see him transform into a fanged monster, while his drifting sense of attention literally sees his head spool off on an endless thread, floating away into space. The key distinction here perhaps lay with the designation of “exaggerated.” For as wild and unnatural as *It's Such a Beautiful Day*'s imagery may become, the visual style is always delicately controlled by Hertzfeldt (the sole animator) in order to retain the viewer's connection with the protagonist. Bill's movements, be they wildly fantastical or painfully human (the absent rubbing of his illness-ravaged scalp; the slight bend forward to observe a message written in the sand) are implemented to illicit a genuine emotional response from the viewer, a feat Dulac assures us can be accomplished without even a human fact to express it.[53]

It is important at this point to gauge the precise application of Dulac’s theories to Hertzfeldt’s film. Dulac may speak of the soul of cinema as being distinct from the narrative form, but she is not asserting that any segregation should be vehemently enforced. She speaks rationally on the matter: “the cinema that assumes so many varied forms can also remain what it is today. Music does not disdain to accompany dramas or poems..., Narrative and realist films can make use of cinegraphic plasticity and continue along their chosen paths.”54 *It's Such a Beautiful Day* is, for all its digressions and idiosyncrasies, a narrative film: we are always moving towards the culmination of Bill's

53 Dulac, 392.
54 Ibid, 397.

illness, witnessing the ways it progressively impacts his life and worldview. Admittedly, the bulk of this narrative focus is conveyed through a highly non-cinematic means: the omniscient narrator. Voiced by Hertzfeldt himself, the narrator is the sole significant voice of the film, describing the exact nature and correlation of the images on screen both where necessary and when readily apparent (this latter implementation is a common comedic device throughout the film, the deadpan assessment of characters and their actions asserting a droll perspective for the audience). Hertzfeldt's narration may then change how the motion of the animated image affects the viewer; at the most pivotal of moments, however, it can also enhance said movements. Late in the film, Hertzfeldt's narration is jarringly cut off by Bill's sudden seizure, as the entire screen is subsumed by flashing colors and torn bits of imagery meant of wordlessly convey Bill's state of being. At times like these, it is made apparent that, above all else, the narration used in *It's Such a Beautiful Day* has more in common with the film's musical score than with its narrative composition. Of music in film, Dulac writes:

> Just as [it] works on the rhythm and the sonorities of a musical phrase, the filmmaker sets himself to work on the rhythm and the sonorities of images. Their emotional effect became so great and their interrelationships so logical that their expressiveness could be appreciated in its own right without the assistance of a text.[55]

The cinematic image is always respected and dominant in Hertzfeldt's film, because, just as Dulac writes, that is the aspect of it that is most uniquely qualified to speak to the viewer.

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55 Dulac, 395.

For Dulac, the advancement of cinema was an ongoing process, one that has been unique to it in comparison to all other, significantly older art-forms. In place of all those mediums that were afforded centuries and even millennia to develop, Dulac sought for cinema to strike its own path far more rapidly, and with conscious deviation from other art-forms to boot. According to her, "We are entitled to question whether cinegraphic art is [in fact] a narrative art form. In my opinion, cinema seems to progress much farther by means of tangible suggestions than by means of its unquestionable accuracy."[56] Visually, *It's Such a Beautiful Day* is very much a film engaged with this same debate. Scenes and sequences, though tinged with suggestions of chronology, are presented in isolation to one another, viewed through discreet panels and frames lacking in geography or even mise-en-scene. In this way, *It's Such a Beautiful Day* distinguishes its narrative from its cinematic aims, relying on the separate sum effects of one to comment on and enlighten the other. The narrator reveals late in the film that many visual sequences presented as factual history were in fact delusions of Bill's sick mind, and at the movie's climax, the narrator himself must summon Bill back from death into the realm of the moving image. Hertzfeldt, like Dulac, is in this was shown to be personally aware of the affective power of the moving image, regardless of its veracity, and expresses the importance of its sustained continuance.

56 Ibid. 395.

Passive Affect

Noted film theorist Carl Plantinga begins the fifth chapter of *Moving Viewers*, "Affective Trajectories and Synesthesia," with a concession regarding interpretive textual analysis: "If the notion of intention is problematic to the reader, we may alternatively think of such responses as broadly intersubjective, as opposed to idiosyncratic."[57] Any discussion of a work is complicated by the fact that subjective perspective and understanding will tend to set individuals on uneven ground. Plantinga acknowledges this fact further as, within a book predominantly focused on the impact of popular commercial cinema on viewers, he takes a moment to consider the application of his affect theory on less broadly conceived works. In speaking of affect in art cinema, Plantinga sites Barbara Klinger's concept of the "arresting image," an occurrence whereby "the narrative seems to momentarily slow to a crawl and an affect-laden image is foregrounded, allowing ... the spectator's associations and memories [to] reverberate with the image."[58] The theories Plantinga develops here, though mainly considered regarding the impact of mainstream films, are often just as applicable to those movies of higher artistic intent or reception.

Though *It's Such a Beautiful Day* overtly defies many standard conventions of popular cinematic narrative, it is still arguably Hertzfeldt's most recognizably narrative work to date. It is certainly the most cohesive: up to this point, Hertzfeldt had dealt largely in the realm of absurdist short films, honing his craft through crude yet inventive

57 Plantinga, Carl. *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. Print. Pg. 140.
58 Ibid. 144.

cartoons brimming with slap-stick and dark comedy. These films, from 1998's “Billy's Balloon” to the landmark 2000 short “Rejected,” are largely episodic in nature and make no attempt to register with their audience through means of narrative investment or character empathy. Plantinga might argue that much of this lies in the general absence of a distinct protagonist: he writes that “a film's intended spectator response is guided by a film's narration, and more particularly, by narrative structure in relation to point of view.”[59] With *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Hertzfeldt addresses both of these methods, deliberately utilizing narration in the form of his own pervasive voice-over, and a point of view courtesy of the protagonist Bill. Throughout the film, for as jumbled and impressionistic as it can become, these two grounding elements guide the viewer through a definite narrative: Bill is an ordinary man whose reality starts to unravel after he is diagnosed with a mysterious degenerative disorder. The elements that convey this narrative, those that impart synoptic (pertaining to narrative) and synthetic (pertaining to emotions) affect upon the viewer, are recognizable in Plantinga's writing, though not wholly limited by it.

Synoptic and synthetic affect comprise crucial halves of a film's resonance with its audience. In *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, both affects are grounded significantly in the character of Bill. All narrative events depicted either involve him directly or inform his character, and the emotive visuals are all derived from his subjective perspective. As Plantinga explains, there are many ways for an engaged audience to relate with a film's protagonist: “The spectator's affective arc is sometimes congruent with that of a

59 Plantinga, 140-141.

sympathetic protagonist, but never wholly congruent and sometimes widely divergent."[60] The nature of this affective arc is often tied in with the nature of the protagonist relative to their core dynamics in the story. These dynamics are quantified by various metrics put forth by Plantinga, relating to A.) The demeanor of the protagonist, B.) The protagonist's place relative to other potential figures in the narrative, and ultimately C.) The assumed perspective the film adopts to regard them. Films can have a single main character or several, with degrees of conflict between protagonists and antagonists widely varying; the protagonist can be a hero or a villain, strong or weak; and the audience's investment in the protagonist's story/goals can vary and even shift over the course of the narrative.

These specifications serve valuable illustrative purposes for Plantinga's espoused dynamics of synoptic construction, but they reveal themselves to be lacking in the face of Hertzfeldt's film, which offers a couple of important deviations. Bill, as a protagonist, does not fall easily anywhere on Plantinga's spectrum: he is never called upon to be particularly heroic or malevolent (outside those fantastical sequences divorced from the narrative reality of the film), and his interactions with others are of little consequence to the progression of the overall plot. Bill is a character Plantinga, with his focus on the popular rhythms of commercial cinema, doesn't readily account for: the passive individual whose actions, even when they occur, rarely speak to any of said character's desires or goals. These vagaries are tangibly manifested in the character's design: Bill is depicted as a simple stick figure, his most complex, direct affect facial expressions

60 Ibid, 141.

conveyed with naught but a few lines. The character is not even given a voice, his every sentence and thought instead conveyed by the relatively monotone narration of Hertzfeldt. All this raises the simple question of why any viewer would even care to become invested in Bill's story, a story seemingly devoid of so many aspects of conventional narrative.

Yet over the course of *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Bill is rendered sympathetic and compelling, almost entirely through the viewer's own volition. It's true that, while Plantinga did not articulate a character such as Bill in his spectrum, he also did not explicitly account for the synesthetic affect inherent to animated cinema. Bill's blank depiction and flat demeanor serve not as an obstruction but as an invitation for the viewer to see in him all that they realize in themselves. Bill, as a stick figure, is a supremely endearing creation, his soft round shape and long gaze seemingly designed to play upon the inherent sympathies and affections of the audience. This furthermore makes it all the easier to contextualize Bill's emotions relative to his given place in the film's narrative. When Bill blankly sits on the steps after learning of his mother's death, the viewer imparts upon him the deep, disquieting sadness that must surely accompany such an event. Plantinga says that, "[emotions] depend primarily on concern-based constructs that are provided through a narrative construct."[61] As the narrative of Bill is simultaneously that of Bill's illness, the audience is placed in a position to root for and feel for Bill from the very start. Though *It's Such a Beautiful Day* may conventionally function as an "art film," with its frequent surreal digressions and high-minded thematic

61 Plantinga, 142.

preoccupations, the structure by which the audience aligns with the protagonist is hardly that which Plantinga typically prescribes to “art films”; the place of “distanced and/or ironic observation.”[62] Instead, the viewer is by turns of “congruence” and “benign incongruence”[63] with Bill: they wish for his explicit triumph over his illness, and in lieu of that hope for his finding relief from that which assails him.

Though esoteric in visuals, *It's Such a Beautiful Day* deals with universal concepts of mortality and identity. Such themes can be found in many a crowd-pleasing blockbusters; the major difference rests with how each film expresses those themes in such a way as to reward the viewer's natural intrigue and desire for understanding. Affect is the way by which we come to understand, or at least feel as though we do. Plantinga specifies affect as being an intensifier and enabler of emotions[64]. Ergo, Bill is a creation of almost pure affect through whom the audience may realize their emotions.

The Face of Bill

There is a striking moment that comes late in *It's Such a Beautiful Day*. By this point in the story, the protagonist Bill has suffered significant brain damage as the result of a degenerative disease, and is beginning to lose his grasp on reality. To illustrate Bill's loss of facial recognition, Hertzfeldt constructs a brief montage of faces, all framed identically in the center of the screen. There is a subtle gag at work here: Hertzfeldt's

62 Plantinga, 153.
63 Ibid, 152.
64 Ibid, 146.

signature style of animation is ardently simplistic, his characters rarely being represented as anything more complex than rotund doodles with stick-figure appendages. When we are treated to the montage of faces, we are in the same position as Bill: each face appears identical, comprised of two dots for eyes and a horizontal dash of a mouth. Of course, to the viewer, this is how the faces have always looked, and the diegetic acknowledgment of this could be read as Hertzfeldt engaging in gentle self-effacement. All the same, the drama of the scene rings true, and we are reminded that though these characters are simply rendered, we have come to emotionally connect with them. Much of this indeed lies with Hertzfeldt's ability to manipulate emotions by way of the viewer's innate capacity to sympathize, a dynamic that lies at the heart of what philosopher Gilles Deleuze calls the “affection image.”

As with much of Deleuze's philosophical standings, the affection image exists not so much as a singular entity but as the relationship between separate points. The affection image is, somewhat obviously, an image intended to affect the spectator, conveying an emotional significance not inherently linked to the object itself. Deleuze's explanation of how the affection image operates stems from Bergson's biological conception, relating it to “a series of micro-movements on an immobilized plate of nerve... It is this combination of a reflecting, immobile unity [the nerve] and of intensive expressive movements that constitutes the affect.”[65] The reflective unity and the intensive movements embody alternate extremes of the spectrum along which Deleuze posits affection images fall. At one end of the spectrum is the image's quality, that

65 Deleuze, 88.

reflective unity by which an object is most readily identified and related with other objects; at the other is the image's power, the intensive movements that characterize that object specifically in relation to others and even itself.

To more fully appreciate this dynamic at work, we will apply it to the aforementioned montage scene in *It's Such a Beautiful Day*. In this sequence, the heads of each individual are relatively the same shape and size, though there are discernible distinctions between them in the styles of their hair and the shape of their bodies. The people presented here are of varying qualities, though this is not the point the narrative wishes to emphasize. The montage functions by emphasizing each face's shared power. An image's power comprises the minute and variant details that exist within its qualitative form. The people of Hertzfeldt's montage are all identical in the composition of their faces, in the power of their affect. More than that, they are shown to be neutral in affect, each face blankly registering no emotion on the part of the person. With this, we are shown two aspects of Bill's perception: he is incapable of distinguishing individuals effectively, and furthermore cannot engage with them emotionally, a narrative clue as to the vanishing of his personality from the illness.

The stillness of this sequence is of relevance as well: in the scene, the people all exist in photographs, and are therefore immobile. Movement and lack thereof are crucial elements of the affection image, often a key signifier of the prominence of an image's quality and power. When seen as a part of the moving image, Deleuze writes, "The intensive series discloses its function, which is to pass from one quality to another,

to emerge on to a new quality."[66] An image's power is tied to that image's serial alteration, a means of movement that Deleuze ties specifically to facial expressions. The unifying subject of his chapter on the affection image is realized through the image of the face, going so far as to typify the recognition of power and quality in an object as "faceification." When studying the gaze and face of cinematic figures, Deleuze extends his spectrum of affection to a cognitive realm. This new dynamic is outlined by a pair of questions: "what are you thinking about?" and "how do you feel?" These questions neatly connote the affective elements they are meant to represent. With the concern of thought, the quality of the face is of importance, its direction and stillness indicating an exertion of focus on external matters. Deleuze pithily equates here the use of "wonder" to indicate both thought and awe, attributing that state to the realm of the reflective quality. As for the question of feeling, this is to be found in the registering of emotions through changing facial expressions, minute movements reaching beyond the qualitative limits of the face to express the power of the internalized focus.

This defines the affective dynamics of movement in Hertzfeldt's films: the registering emotions necessitates the progression of expressions, whereas the stillness of the face is all that is required to indicate attention. When Bill is first tasked with identifying objects, the camera moves about from one still image to the next, progressing from those items Bill recognizes to those he finds alien. In this scene, we can see the power of the affection image at work: Bill engages emotionally with the task at hand, recognizing and failing to recognize the images before him. When it comes to the

66 Deleuze, 89.

identification of faces, however, a more qualitative affect is assumed. Even the editing reflects this, with one face replacing the next in the frame through cuts instead of pans. The visual language of the film abandons movement just as the sequential images relinquish serial distinction. Bill reflects on the qualities of what he is seeing without connecting with them personally. Within this single sequence, the dynamic struggle between the two poles of the affection image spectrum conveys the narrative arc of the protagonist, of Bill's gradual loss of intensive emotion in favor of reflective wonder.

This is an arc that Hertzfeldt has explored in his films before. In *The Meaning of Life*, the human beings depicted are considerably more powerful in their affect than Bill. The first portion of the film shows dozens of individuals walking across the screen, each of them reciting a mantra representative of their state of mind. It's significant that it is the characters themselves who are speaking, as the act of doing so contributes directly to their internalized affection image. Characters smile, grimace, cry, etc. in a manner far more overt than anything seen in *It's Such a Beautiful Day*. Their faces are slightly more detailed as well: their eyes are full and round rather than merely dots, their mouths are clearly defined with lips and movements articulating the pronunciation of their speech. In moving across the screen, each character is perpetually engaged in serialized motion, whereas *It's Such a Beautiful Day* often reduces its characters movements by way of cuts and editing. Throughout this protracted scene, the affection image is one heavily couched in intensive power, while the quality is often jumbled and obscured by the sheer number of individuals present on the screen.

This scene is starkly contrasted by one near the film's end, wherein two alien creatures gaze up at the sky and ponder the meaning of life. The creatures are significantly removed from human physiology, though the quality of their form is still identifiable: they possess hands with which to gesture, mouths to speak their alien language and eyes to gaze. It is this gaze that proves to be most relevant, as the final moments depict the younger alien alone, gazing happily up at the encroaching night sky. In this moment, the affection image's quality is made dominant, and in it the film seems to arrive at an emotional consensus. The peace of this final scene is positively contrasted with the cacophony of the earlier crowd shot. Thus, Hertzfeldt seems to be making a statement for reflective quality over intensive power, seeing greater virtue in the former.

This plays out to more spectacular ends in *It's Such a Beautiful Day*. Now largely deprived of the ability to register internalized emotion, Bill is informed by his doctor that he doesn't have much longer left to live. In light of this revelation, Bill turns to the familiar routines of his life with a renewed, indeed even euphoric, vigor, seeing fuller and more beautiful details in all that he once took for granted. The wonder of these scenes is displayed by having Bill's world transform into that of live action reality, his stick-figure body moving about in and interacting with real physical environments. He opens cabinets and travels down highways, lays in real grass and gazes up at real stars. Though Bill never speaks to any of his experiences aloud, Hertzfeldt takes us into his mind: “He wants to stop people in the street and say 'Isn't this amazing? Isn't everything

amazing?'"[67] All of this emotion and significance is conveyed not through nuanced facial expression or dramatic acts, but through Bill's still regard for it, a full assumption of affective quality over power.

Therein seems to lie the grand thesis of Hertzfeldt's work: the virtue of reflection over internalization, quiet regard in place of emotional intrusion. In his writing, Deleuze espouses the concepts of "firstness" and "secondness" as put forth by C.S. Pierce. Secondness characterizes duality, the relation of separate objects to each other; "It is the category of the Real, of the actual, of the existing, of the individuated... in which power-qualities become 'forces,' that is to say are actualized in particular states of things... It is here that the action-image is born and developed."[68] Firstness, Deleuze continues, "is an immediate and instantaneous consciousness... it is not a sensation, a feeling, an idea, but the quality of a possible sensation, feeling or idea."[69] When viewing affect through this perspective, Deleuze considers two means of approach: "either as actualized in a state of things, or as expressed by a face."[70] In his films, Hertzfeldt finds the essence of firstness, the quality of possibility, in the qualitative image, in the reflective form of the face rather than its intensive movements. The arc of *It's Such a Beautiful Day* is Bill's progression from a state of secondness to one of firstness: having lived a life comprised of simple action, he is delivered to a realm of pure affect, a state that, in the movie's final sequence, renders him immortal, existing to the end of time and beyond. He is, as Balazs puts it, abstracted from all spatio-temporal coordinates,

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67 *It's Such a Beautiful Day*. Dir. Don Hertzfeldt. Bitter Films: 2012. DVD
68 Deleuze, 98.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid, 99.

raised to the state of an entity.[71] This too serves as Balazs conception of the cinematic close-up, and for Deleuze, the affection image itself.

Identifying Bill

As the previous sections have made evident, the creation of the character of Bill is a significant development for Hertzfeldt as a storyteller. Prior to *Everything Will Be Okay*, Hertzfeldt traded exclusively in figures whose blatant vapidness played into the main themes of their respective works. In *Ah, L'Amour*, the male figure's emotional state consisted exclusively of happy face and sad face, while the enraged faces of the females do not even register as human. This degree of abstraction, combined with the framing aesthetic of the crumpled paper, signifies the characters as literal and emotional sketches, with emotions every bit as broad and fleeting as the name suggests. For *Genre*, Hertzfeldt introduced a greater range and dynamism to his character's emotional and mental states. The rabbit protagonist conveys more nuanced and varied reactions to scenarios with exaggerated expressions, not the dead-eyed faces that *Ah, L'Amour* implemented. An emotional core was further pursued in *Lily and Jim*, as the faltering and uncertain inner state of the titular pair imbued a greater depth to what were generally more low-key facial expressions. From one project to the next, the emotional depth of the character is tailored to the themes being explored. *Everything Will Be Okay* is Hertzfeldt's first genuine character piece since *Lily and Jim*, though here he affords

71 Deleuze, 96.

himself a larger narrative framework in which to work. While *Lily and Jim* was content to have its characters just behave as they would, Bill's behavior required a greater emotional fidelity for the aims of *Everything Will Be Okay* and its subsequent films to be achieved. To that end, Bill is shown to be the first genuine “character” that Hertzfeldt has created, albeit one grounded in the style and sensibilities of all the works that preceded it.

This specificity of Bill's character extends into *It's Such a Beautiful Day* as well. Throughout the film, Bill is contrasted against a variety of minor and one-off characters. Be they co-workers, neighbors, or strangers, many of the other people inhabiting Bill's world seem to be at odds with Bill's personal perspective, his humanity. While Bill wrestles with the realities of his condition, those around him behave obliviously, offering advice or statements that the viewer and, given his position as audience surrogate, Bill find to be inane, either comically or bleakly so. This distinctive vision of Bill the protagonist is not dissimilar from that which one typically ascribes to the concept of the artist. While Hertzfeldt has made it clear that *It's Such a Beautiful Day* is not significantly autobiographical, there is still a natural impulse to conflate the artist's sense of self with that of the protagonist. In this sense, when trying to arrive at a better understanding of who Bill is as a character, there is the sense that we are trying to better understand Hertzfeldt as well.

In his book *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*, D.N. Rodowick considers the French philosopher's perspective of the writer Pauline Harvey. Rodowick sums up Harvey's noted consideration of the philosopher, stating “they give the impression of having

passed through death and returned to life, fatigued and cautious, and with a great sensitivity to the cold."[72] This in turn prompted Deleuze to take Harvey's consideration further. When writing *Cinema II: The Time Image*, Deleuze shores up Harvey's notion: "the philosopher is someone who believes he has returned from the dead, rightly or wrongly, and who returns to the dead in full consciousness."[73] Working off of this formulation of the philosopher, one finds there to be some compelling consideration regarding the character of Bill. Throughout *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Hertzfeldt's animation and narrative voice-over reveal Bill's awareness (or lack thereof) of his perceptions. The understanding of Bill that the film affords us positions him as a figure with a profound grasp on his mental state, an individual for whom the loss of his mind is, to a point, the loss of everything he has. So it goes until the climactic scene of *I'm So Proud of You*, where Bill suffers a profound stroke and, so far as the knowledge of the viewer goes, dies. Barring the bittersweet flashbacks, the image of Bill prostrate on the ground was the last word on the character for years, all of the span between the releases of Hertzfeldt's two accompanying shorts. As it goes, the first scene the viewer is treated to with *It's Such a Beautiful Day* is the jarring confirmation that Bill is indeed alive, or rather that he has returned from the dead. The film that follows reveals to us a Bill profoundly different from the one we knew. Where Bill's character once felt informed by a certain vacantness, it now seemed defined by it. In *I'm So Proud of You*, Bill envisions himself as an aged man, trapped within the prison of his own physical

72 Rodowick, David. *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 1997. Print. Pg. 170.

73 Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*. 1 edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. Print. Pg. 209.

form and staring down the very demise he has so long feared. With his "return from death," such as it is, Bill affects a profoundly different perspective of his mortality, one of rapture with the world around him. This state of ecstasy is further implicated by the disinterest of the bystanders. Rodowick elaborates on this aspect at length. With regard to those around Bill:

> [F]ew wish to hear the message; more often than not, it is hard to understand and harder to accept. Moreover, most people are caught up in the perpetual present of their daily survival, and for them the philosopher is always untimely. ...Few find time to mourn the philosopher's absence or celebrate his or her return. Thus death marks the horizons of thought and existence. It is the philosopher's task to traverse these horizons and return with new possibilities for life.[74]

From what we see in *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, we can recognize Bill himself as having once been one of those who "did not wish to hear or have time to mourn." From his casual acceptance early on that his life if but the sum collective of all the innocuous activities he performed, Bill's story is one of having that complacency stripped away from him. The illness afflicting him quite literally drags him to the "horizons of thought and existence," exposing him to perspectives of the world around him he, and perhaps many people, had never truly considered. With these revelations, even the specter of death seems beyond Bill at this point. For all his racing down highways, Bill bears no conscious understanding of where he is going or from what he is running, only knowing that he wants to keep going. This state of constant pursuit is the state of becoming that, for Deleuze, marks the philosopher's true aim.

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74 Rodowick, 171.

After conceiving of Bill as the diegetic philosopher figure of *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, how then to consider him from outside the text? There is something of a problem in attempting to transpose the function of Bill onto his creator, a difficulty illuminated by the conceptual persona put forth by Deleuze. In *What is Philosophy*, Deleuze writes:

> The conceptual persona is not the philosopher's representation but, rather, the reverse: the philosopher is only the envelope of his principal conceptual persona and of all the other personae who are the intercessors, the real subjects of his philosophy… The destiny of the philosopher is to become his conceptual persona or personae, at the same time that these personae themselves become something other than what they are historically, mythologically, or commonly. The conceptual persona is the becoming or the subject of a philosophy.[75]

From this, it can be said with certainty that Bill is not the conceptual persona of Hertzfeldt. Rather, Bill and characters like him are much more readily identifiable as aesthetic figures, an aspect of philosophical discourse that Deleuze is quick to differentiate from the conceptual persona:

> [Conceptual personae] are the powers of concepts, and [aesthetic figures] are the powers of affect and percepts. The former take effect on a plane of immanence that is an image of Thought-Being (noumenon), and the latter take effect on a plane of composition as image of a Universe (phenomenon). The great aesthetic figures of thought and the novel but also of painting, sculpture, and music produce affects that surpass ordinary affections and perceptions, just as concepts go beyond everyday opinions.[76]

Through Rodowick and Deleuze's writings, we have managed to prove the affective power of Bill both in terms of his design and his function as a character. He is therefore

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75 Deleuze & Guatarri, 64.
76 Ibid, 65.

already much more recognizable as an aesthetic figure even before one attempts to determine the precise conceptual persona to which he is related. One could naturally look to Bill's creator, Don Hertzfeldt, for some clarity on this subject, but Hertzfeldt himself has remained noncommittal on that subject. In "An Evening with Don Hertzfeldt,"77 which assembles Q&A sessions from throughout the promotional tour of *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, Hertzfeldt explained that he felt it was a far better service for his art to stimulate the viewers' own considerations and interpretations rather than try to push forth his own agenda. Such is it with Bill, that blank slate who lives on to "read every book and learn every language," but who does not seem to divulge any of it to the other people of earth. Bill's concerns with mortality and identity are shared by everyone, and like Bill, each of us must come to terms with those matters on our own terms. As was noted at the start of this chapter, Hertzfeldt as an artist seems particularly set to fulfill Foucault's author function. It only makes sense, then, that Hertzfeldt's films and characters would be so generous in allowing us our own thoughts on the matters at hand.

77 Bitter Films Vol. 2. Bitter Films: 2012. DVD

CONCLUSION

At the time of this writing, Don Hertzfeldt has produced two works beyond 2012's *It's Such a Beautiful Day*. The first was a two minute short commissioned by the FOX television network to be aired alongside the 26th season premiere of The Simpsons. The short takes the form of the standard Simpsons couch gag, that fleeting visual touch that adorns the end of the opening title sequence. In Hertzfeldt's couch gag, Homer Simpson stumbles upon a time travel device disguised as a TV remote. After accidentally morphing himself back into his Tracy Ullman era design, Homer winds up 8,500 years in the future. Sure enough, The Simpsons is still airing, only the characters and setting have mutated into bizarrely alien forms, with Homer's head resting atop a floating squid body, Marge being reduced to a mound of blue hair with a face, and the children each just a twitching mound of catchphrase reciting meat. Whilst in this strange future, Homer is overcome by memories of a past he never knew, other incarnations of his family that, while still quite alien in appearance, still held an abiding love for one another.

Hertzfeldt's couch gag quickly went viral the next day, racking up millions of views online and being heralded as “the most bizarre couch gag ever.” Not only was Hertzfeldt given the opportunity to associate his name with one of the most significant American cultural touchstones in television history, but he created a legitimately affecting piece of art while doing so. The Hertzfeldt couch gag is gently cynical on its face, poking fun at The Simpsons' protracted series lifespan and the commercial trappings that keep the whole enterprise profitable regardless. With Homer's flashback

sequence, however, Hertzfeldt manages to wring genuine emotion out of a blatantly absurd premise. In Homer's memories, the love of his family is not just something from the past, but something that was gradually lost. Consider the image of the Homer and Marge creatures adrift in a tumultuous landscape, with Marge assuring Homer “I will never forget you,” only to smash cut to squid Homer looking at the strange, vacant hair creature Marge and uttering a mournful “d'oh.” Not only has Hertzfeldt imbued this fleeting and absurd premise with a dramatic emotional core, he may have done so while critiquing The Simpsons' much debated decline in quality since the golden age of the 90s.

Two factors establish Hertzfeldt's couch gag as a significant departure for the artist. First, there are the obvious commercial implications of contributing to one of the most popular shows on television. This would seem to go against the staunchly “anti-Disney”[78] persona that many sought to ascribe to Hertzfeldt in the wake of his wave making debut following *Rejected*’s Oscar nomination. Granted, Hertzfeldt did actively decline offers for commercial work that did not afford him creative control, but this framing of Hertzfeldt as an anti-corporate rebel has outlived its usefulness. The problem with this idealized rebel animator persona is that it imposes conditional restrictions on Hertzfeldt. It suggests that, were Hertzfeldt to accept the terms of film production within a corporate system, he would be rendered incapable of creating anything on the same level as his independent works. If the couch gag is proof of anything, it is that such claims are completely unfounded.

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78 Timberg.

The couch gag's second factor is one it happens to share with Hertzfeldt's other post-*It's Such a Beautiful Day* film, *World of Tomorrow*. Put into production concurrently, both pieces marked Hertzfeldt's first major experiments with digital animation. I say experiments because that is how Hertzfeldt continues to treat the process, as every bit the trial and error labor of love that defined his work on the 35 mm Richardson animation camera stand. In an interview about *World of Tomorrow*, Hertzfeldt explains:

> My main goal for animating [digitally] was to complete it in record time and to enjoy it (which can sometimes be hard). I don't think I storyboarded anything. Every day I'd just sit down and look at the script... I'd design the new shot from nothing until something looked right and I'd carry on... Probably I wanted to try and keep things as intuitive and light as I had it when I'd experiment with cameras.[79]

Interestingly, there is also an element to *World of Tomorrow* that frames it as something of a return to form: with the exception of voice actors, it is the first film since *Genre* Hertzfeldt has produced without any external help. It may very well be his last though, as the director was last seen gearing up to direct his first self-contained feature length film, complete with studio backing and a team of animators at his command.[80] How this may come to impact his films and his artistic voice remains to be seen.

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79 Erlich, David. "Sundance 2015: Don Hertzfeldt – Articles | Little White Lies." January 20, 2015. Web. April 10, 2015. <http://www.littlewhitelies.co.uk/features/articles/sundance-2015-don-hertzfeldt-29015>

80 Wilmore, Alison. "Meet The World's Greatest Stick Figure Artist." *BuzzFeed*. February 11, 2015. Web. April 10, 2015. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/alisonwillmore/the-man-whos-made-masterpieces-out-of-stick-figures#.wsMXvpRmME>.

For as acclaimed as Hertzfeldt has become, there remains little in the way of academic or theoretical considerations of his work. It is my hope in writing this thesis that all that may soon change. There's an adaptability to Hertzfeldt that manifests itself in his films and in his career. The once aspiring live-action filmmaker turned full-fledged animator now finds himself immersed in the realm of digital art. It is heartening to think that, whatever changes Hertzfeldt embraces in the years to come, the spirit of his work that has been cultivated these last 20 years will remain recognizable and strong.

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