Alex Pepe

Professor Blackford

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Don Hertzfeldt's *It's Such A Beautiful Day* is a film that, while touching on many serious existential and postmodernist ideas, makes time for humor to be deployed to back up its disquieting points. This humor can best be described as dry, as the comedic situations are often gleaned from the narrator's deadpan tone of voice. This establishes an unreliability in the narrator, but even further cements this unreliability when the audience is confronted with the possibility of the narrator being the main character Bill himself, narrating his life in an attempt to find meaning in his mundane and everyday existence. As a result of this, the uncertainty ascribed to the narrator creates an uncanny space where the audience is not sure whether to laugh at the situations presented, or if they are supposed to take them seriously as important pieces of the story. Through the use of a deadpan narrator, Hertzfeldt creates a narrative that blurs the line between comedy and drama, so much so that the ending of the film leaves the reader caught between the two in a postmodern meshing of both, resulting in a disquieting and powerful conclusion.

The first important idea to consider when discussing the film is the deadpan narrator and his affect on the film. He is present throughout, and at first one might think that he is an omniscient narrator, but that is simply not so. Through the narrator the audience only receives the inner thoughts of Bill, while receiving the ideas of other characters in the film only through what they say to Bill. In no part of the film does the narrator describe the inner thoughts of another character (unless it is within one of Bill's daydreams), and further, the narrator's deadpan nature is non-judgmental for the majority of the film. The important point however is that for the

minority of the film, the narrator slips and voices an opinion in a word that Bill himself would use to describe a situation, for example when Bill goes to the supermarket and sees all of the customers with “giant disease ridden crotches buried in all of the god damn produce.” This is the first clue that the narrator is actually Bill himself, narrating his own life from within his head and attempting to make sense of what is happening to him from a seemingly third person point of view. This is particularly important because if one considers this idea, it creates a large amount of doubt in the narrator's storytelling, so much so that it becomes exceedingly difficult to tell what is actually happening to Bill and what is happening inside of his head.

There are several even more revealing points that support the idea of the narrator as Bill’s own narration. The narrator describes events that are not necessarily happening in Bill’s reality, such as dreams, imaginings, and flights of fancy that Bill has during his day. Some of these are introduced as such, but sometimes they are not and it is up to the viewer to determine what is reality and what is not. The deadpan narrator describes them all in the same fashion, and does not distinguish them from one another through description; only if the narrator actually says that it is a dream or an imagining is the difference between the two noted by the audience. Some examples of this foregrounding of non-reality are when the narrator describes a night where “Bill dreamed of a monstrous fish head, which fed upon his skull.” Despite this scene not taking place in reality, it does offer a clue as to what might be wrong with Bill, as the fish head imagery returns in multiple places later in the story, including one instance where Bill says to his doctor that he has a fish living inside his head: “Possibly a trout.” However an even larger example of this foregrounding of non-reality occurs during Bill's imagined deathbed speech, in which Bill “pictures himself having trouble breathing and awaking to a room full of concerned faces,” wherein he meditates on the possibility of death and the “stupid irony” of “having waited for this moment his entire life.” Thus is the power of the narrator to foreground non-reality in a way that

affects the audience's view of Bill's reality: whether comedic or serious, Bill's moments outside of reality are just as important as the events within reality. This is a prime example of the unreliability of the narrator, for one could easily mistake comedy as unimportant, and even more so comedy that exists outside of Bill's reality.

However, during episodes that Bill's mental stability begins to deteriorate, so too does the narrator's descriptions of the events that surround him. This is to the point where the audience is hard pressed to determine what exactly is happening to Bill, and this is highly important because again the narrator's action as a deadpan narrator makes it hard to determine when the information being presented is a joke or if it is a serious piece of information. The narrator indiscriminately relays the information without giving a clue, which even further blurs the line between reality and what is going on in Bill's own mind. I argue that this is an even larger clue that the narrator is Bill himself, because Bill himself cannot determine whether his own reality is occurring or if the events he is experiencing are fabricated, aforementioned foregrounding notwithstanding. Thus, when describing what is happening, the deadpan narrator gives no indication that the slowly deteriorating environment surrounding Bill is nonsensical and describes it just as he does a relatively normal scene within the film. When Bill finds Lion King slippers inside of his closet, he wonders whose slippers they are and how they got in his closet. "After lunch, Bill puts on the Lion King slippers, and flies to the bus stop." Considering Lion King slippers are not generally known to have flight capabilities, this is a completely nonsensical description of Bill's reality, and because it is not foregrounded as being non-reality, the audience cannot tell if this is actually happening. As Bill's mental state deteriorates, so too does the narrator's descriptions, and another example of this is when Bill observes the "birds outside checking their voicemail," and makes nothing of it, merely pointing out the existence of these bird phones and the fact that they have voicemail on them.

The most telling clue that the narrator is Bill himself however is that whenever Bill is incapacitated suddenly, the narrator is violently cut off from speaking, often in mid-word. On the way to have lunch with his ex-girlfriend from the clinic, Bill is shown walking as the narrator says “For once, everything might be oka-” before Bill is struck with a seizure, cutting off the narrator mid-word, itself ironic because of the context in which it occurs. He does not speak because Bill’s mind is beyond the ability to describe the world around him, and thus he cannot form words to describe what is happening to him. There are several other instances of this occurring, including the entire first breakdown at the bus stop after his Lion King slippers fly him there; the narrator does not say a word throughout this entire scene, indeed echoes of his voice from previous narration in the film echoing around the scene. At the end of this breakdown Bill is shown lying in an alleyway with his hands on his head, foregrounding again that the entire previous scene took place in non-reality. Another example of this is when Bill is in the hospital getting some sort of test done. “A powerful anesthetic is introduced, and he is told to count down from 10. The test begi-” The narrator is cut off here as Bill's arm falls, presumably because he has been anesthetized and cannot comment on his situation any longer. During the test the narrator does not speak at all. All of this throws doubt onto what the narrator says, and the audience is left to make up their own mind whether he can be trusted or not, as he dips in and out of reality with Bill on a free form basis.

Despite the story's setting rapidly shifting from reality to non-reality, the deadpan voice of the narrator ensures that the comedic elements of the film are present no matter where the story goes. The comedic elements of the film can be examined by taking a singular moment of the film and looking closely at how it operates. In this moment, the main character Bill is laying in a hospital bed after what appears to be a severe epileptic seizure, his first breakdown of the film. He is there for a few days, before making a full recovery. The doctor is baffled, and Bill’s

uncle ("whom he hadn't even noticed in the room") looks "vaguely annoyed," presumably at this brighter turn of events as he is described as "having taken a lot of time off of work to fly in all the way from Tulsa." The doctor does not know what to make of Bill's recovery, and he, Bill's uncle, Bill's mother, and Bill all stare at random objects for approximately ten seconds silently while a plane passes outside of the window. As the doctor concludes that Bill is not going to die, his mother removes all of the flowers in his room and both her and Bill's uncle must return his casket that they had so thoughtfully bought for him.

There are several comedic devices at work here. The first is a constant throughout the entire film: the narrator, of course. The narrator never passes judgment on the events that are transpiring; indeed the narrator is very deadpan in his manner of conveying the story. Because of this deadpan means of storytelling, it opens up the possibility that he may or may not be joking whenever he speaks; it is up to the interpretation of the audience, based upon their own past experiences and knowledge, to find humor in the moment or not. S. Bercovitch in his article "Deadpan Huck" summarizes the device: "It denies all claims of the normative, and so refuses to indicate how the listener is supposed to receive the story (except as funny in some way). No signals are given-no winks or smiles…no changes of attitude, bearing, or expression" (91).

In this particular moment, the deadpan voice is particularly poignant as a tool for humor because of the way the action on screen is so sudden. As the narrator describes Bill's mother removing all of the flowers from Bill's room, the very next frame has them suddenly vanish from the room entirely. As well, as the narrator describes the return of the casket, Bill's mother and uncle are immediately shown carrying it off to parts unknown. The deadpan voice is excellent at conveying simple ideas with no judgment, letting the actions take place as they are, letting the audience decide for themselves if the moment is funny. In this case, simply because Bill is not going to die, his mother must immediately remove all of his flowers and return his casket, and

treats it as an inconvenience rather than a happy recovery. Or perhaps the idea here is that with every happy recovery comes the expense and inconvenience of continued life, as evidenced in these two actions by Bill's mother. Either way, the deadpan voice relates what is happening, leaving it to the viewer to decide on the meaning behind it. What is further important in this moment of the film is the point where the narrator stops talking entirely. He stops talking for exactly ten seconds after the doctor hypothesizes that Bill's body is "simply rallying before giving up." During this period of time, the characters seem lost, not sure what to do with themselves, trapping the audience with them without the presence of the narrator, creating an awkward space for character and viewer alike.

This awkwardness is huge in the second device at work in this moment, the idea of "cringe" comedy. This type of comedy is derived from social awkwardness, but it is highly dependent on the viewer being aware of the proper social norms in order to get the joke and laugh, get the joke and be offended, or miss the joke and have no reaction at all. Noël Carol provides an example of such a situation:

> "Imagine the cutlery laid out for a formal dinner. Suppose that the salad fork is in the wrong place. If you are the sort of person who is disturbed by such deviations from the norm, you will not be capable of finding this amusing. On the other hand if you are more easy-going about such matters and also aware of the incongruity, it may elicit a chuckle. That is, you may find the error amusing or not. But if you find it genuinely amusing you cannot find it annoying" (34).

This scene is entirely full of this type of cringe comedy in the way the characters interact with each other. In this entire scene all of the characters avoid looking at each other; the doctor looks at his chart or stares off into space. Bill's uncle stares above Bill, above the doctor, and finally out towards the viewer. Bill's mother pointedly stares at the ground, while Bill never stops

staring out of the window. Indeed during these ten full seconds of screen time that the narrator does not say a word, they simply stare at nothing while the viewer stares at them in kind. This awkwardness is cringe inducing, hence the name of the comedy type.

Awkwardness goes hand in hand with alienation however; alienation is characterized by the loss of control of something by someone who should have a say in what is happening. In this manner Bill is a passive observer in the hospital; he does not have an active sense of agency during his stay. Through this entire moment in the film he remains in bed and does not say a word; indeed his medical condition seems to have more agency than he does, getting better or worse as described by the narrator. The humorous aspect of this alienation comes in when Bill's mother removes the flowers from his room: Bill has utterly no reaction to the sudden disappearance of his flowers, and indeed does not even blink when they suddenly pop out of existence in the frame. Considering that Bill is the person who is in the hospital bed, by all rights he should have control over whether the flowers can stay in his room or not, but he says nothing at all.

This humor via alienation can be categorized under the "Incongruity Theory of Comedy," in which humor is derived through the subversion of expectations. The expectation here is that Bill would protest the removal of his flowers or at the very least show some sort of agency in acknowledging their removal, but he has no such reaction. Indeed, the viewer themselves reacts for Bill through laughter. Paul Wells uses the phrase "expectation and exploitation" to define this reaction, and indeed Hertzfeldt is "establishing a recognizable context in which characters have specific roles or immediately identifiable traits or qualities, even if these become subject to quick change or redefinition" (Wells 134). During the long ten-second span of time that the audience is staring at the characters who are in turn staring at nothing, the flowers in the hospital room are present. With their sudden disappearance, Hertzfeldt exploits and subverts the viewer's

expectations with barely any preamble, and the viewer cannot help but laugh at the unexpected disappearance of the flowers, and indeed Bill's total lack of reaction to their disappearance.

Bill's lack of reaction can also be considered a mechanical reaction as opposed to a human reaction. This idea of mechanical action and practicality can induce laughter in an audience in response to the strange, inhuman ignorance of empathy and focus on practical necessities. This is Henri Bergson's theory of comedy: "…this view of the mechanical and the living dovetailed into each other makes us incline towards the vaguer image of some rigidity or other applied to the mobility of life, in an awkward attempt to follow its lines and counterfeit its suppleness" (Bergson 24). As a human audience we cannot help but laugh at Bill's non-reaction to the disappearance of his flowers, but there is a largely better example of this strange mechanization of reactions in this moment of the film.

When Bill's mother and uncle are hauling away the casket, the narrator calls this a matter of "great expense and inconvenience," for Bill's non-death has given the casket no reason to still be in their possession. Rather than celebrate Bill's continued life in a happy show of human empathy, Bill's family instead mechanically haul away his casket for its purposelessness necessitates its removal from their lives. As Bergson states, rather than adapt to the mobility of life in a positive manner and a jovial mood, they "counterfeit its suppleness" by instead choosing to focus on the negative aspect of Bill's continued existence, and must focus on the practical task of hauling it away rather than celebrating. Indeed, this moment of the film ends with Bill's return to his day job rather than any sort of celebration whatsoever. A smaller instance of this mechanical practicality is inherent in the form of Bill's uncle himself, looking "vaguely annoyed" "having taken a lot of time off of work to fly in all the way from Tulsa." Rather than empathize with Bill, who could well be dying, he is instead annoyed that he has to get on a plane and miss out on money on his next paycheck, viewing the whole death business as impractical.

On the business of death however, this moment of the film relies on a very decent amount of black humor in order to operate. Black humor "acknowledges the implicit relationship between horror and humour [sic], carefully playing out the notion that something may be frightening for an individual if it is happening to them, but amusing if the very same thing is happening to someone else" (Wells 133). The key idea here is that it may be frightening: pulling once more from the mechanical ideas of Bergson, Bill does not seem to have any sort of fear in response to his hospitalization. During the seizure scene earlier in the film, he runs through a wide range of intense emotions and a dizzying array of horrifying images play across the screen, but he is less moved by the hospital and the imminent threat of death itself. This lack of fear can be considered amusing, for his lack of human empathy for his own position takes on a mechanical practicality that he is still alive, and thus does not need to feel fear. Indeed, because Bill does not feel fear, the audience does not feel fear either.

This lack of fear leaves room for the aforementioned feelings of awkwardness and alienation. The awkwardness of waiting for someone to die is highlighted in the aforementioned ten seconds of silence, but Hertzfeldt revisits this theme in a long monologue by the narrator in the aforementioned non-reality deathbed scene:

> "And now, at the climax of all those years of worry, sleepless nights, and denials, Bill finally finds himself staring his death in the face, surrounded by people he no longer recognizes and feels no closer attachment to than the thousands of relatives who'd come before. And as the sun continues to set, he finally comes to realize the dumb irony in how he'd been waiting for this moment his entire life. This stupid, awkward moment of death that had invaded and distracted so many days with stress and wasted time"

This moment is the spirit behind the former moment then: the awkward nature of waiting for someone to die is in itself humorous in a rather postmodern and black fashion. The idea of

waiting one's entire life to die is at first a ludicrous idea, but that ludicrous nature is the crux of the humor: the awkward ten seconds allows the audience time to laugh in the face of death in a rather sterile fashion, while the second film shames them for doing so.

On black humor, Sigmund Freud paints a clearer example:

> "When [a] criminal who is being led to the gallows on a Monday observes 'Well, this is a good beginning to the week', he himself is creating the humour; the process works itself out in relation to himself and evidently it affords him a certain satisfaction. I am merely a listener who has not assisted in this functioning of his sense of humour, but I feel its effect, as it were from a distance. I detect in myself a certain humorous satisfaction, possibly as much as he does" (1).

In this manner, Freud states that black humor can be considered a denial of reality and the refusal of suffering, evading the compulsions to suffer and in its place find pleasure as a defense mechanism. Hertzfeldt then, in the first moment is allowing the audience to deny the seriousness involved in the expiry of life, gleaning a chuckle from the idea of death, only to bring the seriousness back into play in the second moment, shaming the audience for laughing at the first moment as it reintroduces the intimate closeness of death in the second moment.

Here is where we bring in the deadpan narrator again. The seriousness of Bill's situation cannot be understated, but somehow the narrator manages to do so, allowing for these moments of comedy amongst Bill's situation. The previous deathbed scene for example is both comedic as it is absolutely riveting as the narrator nails down a very human way of looking at death and the stigma that surrounds it. Despite the gravity of the situation and the existentialism dripping from the monologue, the levity of the awkwardness is still there. It makes for a very surreal blending of both gravity and levity, and this is mostly due to the deadpan voice. The deadpan voice is particularly apropos when discussing the points of the film where serious information about

Bill's condition is revealed, such as the second hospital scene in which Bill's ex girlfriend is there by his side. The voice tells of Bill's loss of memory, and how his brain is simply "filling in the blanks," which throws entire scenes of the preceding narrative into question as to whether they actually happened or not. Once again the narrator proves to be untrustworthy, and extends that to the entire film, throwing the entire narrative into question. If Bill and the narrator are one in the same, it shows that Bill himself cannot be trusted primarily because his condition offers so much deception as to what his reality actually is.

This seriousness of Bill's condition as described by the narrator culminates in a scene that is more performative by the narrator than it is informative. Bill closes the door to his apartment and walks outside, with the narrator remarking "It's such a beautiful day!" before describing Bill's walk around the block. Only there is a brief cut in the audio, and Bill is once again standing outside of his apartment door. "It's such a beautiful day!" the narrator remarks once again, describing in the exact same fashion the path that Bill takes around the block, before once again there is another cut in the audio, and Bill is once more outside of his apartment. "It's such a beautiful day!" the narrator remarks for a final time. This repetition highlights Bill's state of mind as that of in extreme disrepair, and because of this the narrator is damaged as well, resembling a broken record as Bill attempts to go about his day but the series of events of what he has already done that day keeps slipping out of his head. This entire scene is of course reminiscent of works of existentialism that came before it, specifically *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. Repetition is a big indicator of this existential idea of pointlessness on a cosmic level, as exemplified by Vladimir's insistence upon "waiting for Godot," and Estragon's repeated response of "Ah," as if he had forgotten their purpose in remaining in the same spot. So too does this apply to Bill, standing in front of his front door, the memories of his walk around the block slipping out of his head as soon as he completes the revolution. This entire walking around the

block scene repeats itself once more after Bill is told that he does not have long to live, but this time it is in vibrant color and detail, differing from the rest of the film up to this point. In a sense, because Bill is told that he is dying, he appreciates the world around him for its vibrant color and detail. “His bathmats are gorgeous,” the narrator says, choking emotion seeping into his deadpan voice as he goes on to describe how the wood of Bill's cabinets stir something deep within him. This scene speaks of the impending doom that Bill feels in response to something “shaking him violently awake” as the narrator puts it.

With all this established: the unreliability of the narrator (and further Bill himself), the unreliability of the film itself, and the uncertain mix of comedy and seriousness that the deadpan narrator provides, all culminates into the final scene of the film. Bill lays down in the park and stares at the sky, and the screen goes black. The narrator however protests, insisting that “Bill’s not gonna die here” and telling Bill to “Get up,” his deadpan nature shedding ever so slightly as concern seeps into his voice. The scene comes alive again as the narrator describes Bill’s never-ending life, with his never-ending loves, and his never-ending children, until finally Bill watches floating in the middle of empty space as the stars all around him one by one go out, having outlived them all. All of the work that the film has done to get the audience to distrust it, the narrator, and Bill himself, all culminates here in this ending to become quite a profound experience. Is this Bill imagining all of this while his brain slowly shuts down? It is a possibility, for Bill ends up by himself in an empty and pitch black space. Is this Bill actually rallying and managing to live forever? Bill is shown as walking and talking and journeying just as he did in the film proper, so this too is another possibility. But in my opinion this ending encapsulates the entirety of human fear of death in one scene: Bill dies kicking and screaming, imagining all of the things that he could have done with his life and all the things that he wishes he could do. He does not want to die and instead offers up to the universe what he wishes his existence could

consist of. Death forever a stranger, he lives both within and outside of the universe. Roland Barthes has a quote that sums up this entire ending scene; “Such are the two ways of the Photograph. The choice is mine: to subject its spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusions, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality” (119). Insofar as “perfect illusions” go, I would argue that this entire ending scene is just that: ideals of someone on their deathbed, wishing that they could go on. This is a theme that is prevalent in existentialism as well, a prime piece of evidence from Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* comes to mind. As the title characters await their certain death, Rosencrantz reflects on the inexorable passage of time: “Couldn't we just stay put? I mean no one is going to come on and drag us off...They'll just have to wait. We're still young...fit...we've got years…” (125). This in the face of the “intractable reality” (Barthes 119) of death is exactly what Bill is experiencing as the last few minutes of his life are spent imagining what would happen if he were able to go on.

To consider postmodern thought in this ending is to consider the idea of ambivalence. The postmodern “does not seek to substitute one truth for another...it braces itself for a life without truths, standards, ideals” (*Postmodern Reader* 3). Indeed, the entire rest of the film is in complete opposition with the ending of the film. Bill is often shown to be lethargic, passionless, and forgetful, as opposed to his imagined self at the end that travels the world, has many loves, and reads every book to possess the most knowledge of anyone on earth. In this manner Bill in his dying breath is butting heads with the forces of his own reality itself, because while he was alive he did not capitalize on his own abilities, opportunities, and chances. Before he was informed of his imminent doom, he indeed took his life for granted in a world with no plot and no meaning, and his illness combined with the narrator have already lost the audience in their ability to discern what is even real and what is in Bill's head. Thusly, the ending of the film in, le mans terms, makes even less sense than Bill's actual life because of its sheer implausibility from what

the audience knows of Bill as a character and the narrator's descriptions of his reality. There is simply no way that the ending is possible, and in that realization lies the crux of the ending's emotional power: Bill is so desperate to cling onto life that he is willing to completely reinvent himself as a person in order to stay alive. The futility of the ideas within it and the manner in which the deadpan narrator describes it as non-judgmentally as usual evoke an existential sadness within the audience precisely because of its sheer impossibility. As the scene ends, Bill is left in darkness, implying his death despite all his hopes and final imaginings.

In conclusion, Don Hertzfeldt uses a deadpan narrator within It's Such A Beautiful Day to create a sense of existential distrust within his audience for the express purpose of the postmodern ideas in the ending of the film to create a powerful and emotional ending. Because of the evidence that the narrator may be Bill himself narrating his own life and what is happening to him, it makes Bill himself an untrustworthy character because the audience has a difficult time telling what is real and what is not within the film, or if certain scenes in the film actually happened. With the ending as it is, it can be jarringly emotional upon first viewing, which is strange considering the fact that Bill is little more than a stick figure drawing. But because the audience becomes so invested in his story through the mixture of gravity and humor that the deadpan narrator provides, the existential distrust combined with those two are a recipe for an extremely potent and emotional ending.

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