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The Potential of Digital Death

The possibility of death frightens me. And why would it not? For all I ever see or hear of death is its suddenness, its brutality, its devastation. No matter where I turn I am confronted by it — stories upon stories of last days, hopes dashed, dreams turned to nightmares; images upon images of bodies in transition, life rendered limp, flesh decaying or torn apart. They tell me that death is a thief, that it steals from me, cheapens me, lessens me. Yet what I know of death comes from images and stories, nothing more, and just as the virtuality of death surrounds me, the actuality of death escapes me. In truth, I've known very little about the manner through which the mind and the body cease to be, because such things have been hidden from me, denied, pushed aside as little more than a taboo curiosity. Despite the pervasiveness of its image, I am left to seek the reality of death on my own, to recognize the consequences of its inevitability, to make it applicable to my experience of life. Only then can I glimpse the creativity born from death, or the role that it plays in the formation of my sense of self. Only then can I sense how essential death has been, is, and forever will be. Only then does the potential of death give me comfort.

Possibilistic to the Limit

In our first chapter, we saw how technologies of the moving image replaced the experience of witnessing death with its representation, and how the natural processes of dying have become increasingly overshadowed by our intense fascination with trauma. One substantial ramification of this process has been the pronounced assertion of *the possibility of death* as an objective, if unpleasant, truth: at any moment, for any number of reasons, we can cease to Be. On the other hand, inquiries into *the potential of death* — the full consequences of mortality and its effect on our lived experience — are often labeled as little more than subjective and morbid meditations, valid only in relation to one's own personal approach to understanding existence

and the fact of Being. It would appear, then, that our perception of death has become intimately interwoven with our subjectivity.

As Brian Massumi shows us in the introduction to *Parables for the Virtual*, our subjectivity has long been grounded within the very bodies that declare us mortal, formed through their “positioning” within a dominant, socially defined “grid” of meaning — a discursive and determinant process that he refers to as *coding*. Coding is reliant upon presumed binary antagonisms, resulting in an “oppositional framework of culturally constructed significations: male and female, black and white, gay and straight,” and so on down the line, presumably, to the most extreme of bodily antagonisms, alive and dead.¹ If we follow through the consequences of Massumi’s later discussion of *digital coding* — not just the literal act of computer programming but rather “a numerically based form of codification” — we find that one of the most significant effects of the digital turn has been an expansion in our deployment of codification, far beyond the “positioning” of bodies, such that *everything* is thought to be reducible to the same basic, binary materials: the ones and zeros of digital code.² In other words, through digital coding — or what I refer to throughout this project as digital thinking or digital logic — we’ve begun to imagine *existence itself* as if it were akin to, inseparable from, or perhaps even identical to the binary structures of the digital, all matter and all memory simply variations of the same two material themes: on and off.³

Inherent within digital thinking, therefore, is an emphasis — nay, a fetishization — of *possibility*, for it sees only the binary juxtaposition of possible and impossible things and events, which it does at the expense of *potentiality*, a recognition of many possibilities encircling and enveloping one another and therefore always already a multiplicity, always both on and off (or neither on nor off). This is why Massumi stresses that “the medium of the digital is possibility, not virtuality, and not even potential. It doesn’t bother approximating potential, as does probability. Digital coding per se is *possibilistic to the limit*.”⁴ This chapter is about a culture that has, through its adoption of digital logic, become “possibilistic to the limit.” By extension, it is also about a culture that unconsciously seeks to re-encounter potential.

To understand how the struggle between possibility and potential affects our relationship with mortality, and the way in which this struggle manifests itself within popular media, it’s useful to first consider the subtle though crucial differences between the two concepts, especially as they have been developed in Western philosophy. Massumi, for example, provides a useful (if esoteric) set of definitions by imagining an arrow flying toward a target, its possibility “a variation *implicit* in what [the arrow] can be said to be when it is on target,” while its potential “the *immanence* of [the arrow] to its still indeterminate variation, under way.”⁵ Here, possibilities become implications, in that they imply that the arrow *could or could not* land at a particular point in space given its trajectory and the conditions of its

flight (which is to say that possibilities are always both futural and virtual, concerned that the event is “on target” but not that it will actually occur). Potentials, on the other hand, are immanent, in that they are the intermixing of all of the various places the arrow could land regardless of its trajectory or the conditions of its flight, alongside the knowledge that it *will* eventually land. “Implication,” Massumi tells us, “is a code word” — the binary *juxtapositioning* of “on-target” and “off-target” things or events, which not only sees them as oppositional but also always finds the latter to be wanting. “Immanence,” on the other hand, “is process” — the continual *superpositioning* of possibilities through to the event’s actualization, the experience of which, in relation to the fullness of such a superposition, is itself found wanting.⁶

Having adopted the binary logic of the digital, contemporary culture is one of implications rather than processes — it looks ahead to the end result but not the journey, it concerns itself with that which *can* happen at the expense of that which *might* happen, it fetishizes possible outcomes while failing to perceive missed potentials. More often than not (as we saw in our first chapter) the possibilities that are pushed to the fore are the traumatic possibilities — the *anxious* possibilities — that highlight our vulnerability rather than our strength, that position mortality as the enemy of vitality. We see this in news broadcasts that declare us all possible victims (of terrorist attacks, mass shootings, car accidents, assault, and other forms of physical violence; of identity theft, harassment, prejudice, bullying, and other forms of social violence). We see it in movies that fantasize destruction on levels both intimate and extensive (the bodily horror of “torture porn,” the personal and communal devastation of disaster films, the sugar-coated chaos of action and superhero films). We see it in television shows that showcase trauma as their inciting incident (the requisite murders of police procedurals, the myriad diseases and accidents in medical dramas, the ubiquitous gun violence that floats across and throughout television as a whole). And we see it in games that batter and tear apart virtual flesh (the simulated gore of fighting games and first person shooters, the increasingly common use of ragdoll physics, the employment of death as a narrative indicator of mechanical failure). The fact that the majority of such traumatic events are relatively rare and atypical outside of fiction is no longer a concern, a reassurance, or for that matter even widely recognized; in the digital age trauma captures our attention and proliferates within our media — regardless of its potential — because it is nonetheless *possible*.⁷ Most importantly, however, we can see within the fetishization of trauma the fact that death itself has been made subject to the logic of possibility, robbed of its fullness and nuance, reduced through juxtaposition to a terrifying, malevolent, and tragic figure who opposes life. In the digital age, death has become possibilized.

With that in mind, this chapter will frame our shifting relationship to death in contemporary moving images through our new attitudes toward

possibility and potential, whose importance was first hinted at by Henri Bergson in works such as *Creative Evolution* and *Matter and Memory*, elaborated upon by Gilles Deleuze in *Bergsonism* and his volumes on Capitalism and Schizophrenia and the Cinema, and later taken up by Massumi in *Parables for the Virtual*. Yet we'll also find that possibility and potential have served as critical components of an entirely different branch of metaphysics, that of existentialism, where Søren Kierkegaard first saw possibility as the driving force behind *The Concept of Anxiety*, and where Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre traced the impact of possibility through authenticity and subjectivity in works such as *Being and Time* and *Being and Nothingness*, in the process revealing our potentiality-for-Being as part and parcel of our relationship to the infiniteness of space and time and the finiteness of existence. In fact, although it is fair to call death our only known inevitability, Heidegger saw it as both our "utmost possibility" and the fullest extension of the potential of life.

Throughout this chapter, the exploration of possibility and potential will serve as a complimentary point of intersection between these two traditions of thought, while also bringing to the surface other relevant dichotomies in relation to our contemporary digital logic of death, namely ignorance and knowledge, authenticity and "bad faith," Being and nothingness, identity and subjectivity, folding and unfolding, the binary and the multiple, the actual and the virtual. To be certain, these divergent strands of metaphysics approach the issue of mortality in strikingly different ways, yet by tracing within them various ontological oppositions, we'll uncover a culture consumed by the anxiety of possibility while also desperately searching for the potential (or what Heidegger called "the meaning") of Being and nonbeing, life and death. Just as importantly, we'll find that moving images play a crucial role in this process, presenting us with two unconscious relays through which we hope to push past mere possibility to uncover the full potential of death.

Anxiety and Angst (Possibility and Authenticity)

In 2006, the Nabisco-owned cookie company Chips Ahoy! released a claymation commercial set depicting a young girl's birthday party, replete with balloons, streamers, "Happy Birthday" banners, and a multicultural group of animated children and adults, all gleefully beaming at the birthday girl. Most notable, however, is the three-foot tall, anthropomorphic chocolate chip cookie sitting to her left, cheerfully sporting a blue cone-shaped party hat while joining the rest of the guests in wishing the girl an enthusiastic "happy birthday!" The camera cuts tight on the cookie as he looks around the room, his chocolate chip eyebrows raised high with excitement to match

FIGURE 3.1 *The possibility of death dawns on the Chips Ahoy! cookie.*

the delighted look on his face. “So, uhhh, where’s the cake?” he asks with dopey anticipation. Several hungry children lean in closer as the little girl shrugs. “We’re not having *cake!*” she exclaims, her voice quivering on the final word, as if to let the cookie know that he’s sadly misinterpreted the situation. Turning slightly, almost to the point of matching our gaze, the cookie’s expression stutters rapidly from elation to dread — *from ignorance to anxiety* — as he processes what this means: that *he* has become the main course, that this party will be his last.

In the world of advertising mascots, this anxious cookie is not alone in recognizing the possibility of death. Chik-fil-a’s “eat mor chikin” campaign features a series of digitally manipulated images of cows wearing sandwich board signs that urge readers, in the cows’ poorly written English, to do things like “take a vacashun frum beef” and “feed yer herd, sav ourz.” For the cows, an appeal to “eat mor chikin” is not so different than pleading “pleez dont kil us.” In a more recent commercial for the breakfast cereal Honey Nut Cheerios, a digitally animated version of its popular mascot, Buzz the Bee, shockingly encounters a wall covered in dead bugs, pinned and displayed behind glass in little wooden frames — the coffins of the insect world. Buzz manages to escape the amateur entomologist to whom they belong, but when he finally reminds us to “bee happy, bee healthy,”

a tremble in his voice betrays an angst that he just can't seem to shake. Some mascots even seem to be the cause of anxiety in others, such as the recent reappearance of the Kool-Aid Man (also digitally animated for the first time), who admits, with some trepidation, that "people get real freaked out when you drink from your own head. Like, *real* freaked out."

Yet perhaps no mascots are quite as "angsty" as the M&M's, who, in a series of commercials spanning more than a decade, have been constantly on guard amongst various people — strangers, friends, even lovers — who want nothing more than to eat them. In one commercial, we hear panting coming from off screen as we watch a grocery store clerk scanning items that come sliding in on her conveyer belt. A moment later, Red — each character is named for the color of her/his candy shell — is pulled into frame, desperately trying to outrun the scanner that, in identifying him as food, might as well be a weapon. Realizing the futility, he bitterly scans himself. In another ad, Orange — the mascot for Crispy and Pretzel M&M's, whose central identifying characteristic seems to be his neurotic angst — is standing in a cold, sterile medical laboratory, protesting the notion that there might be an oversized pretzel lodged in his body. The commercial ends as he anxiously holds up an X-ray of his pretzel-filled interior, the image reminiscent of a cancer patient glimpsing the previously unseen chaos within their body. Most alarmingly, the extended Super-Bowl ad from 2013 features Red singing a rendition of Meatloaf's 1993 hit "I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That)" over a montage of romantic scenes with a beautiful woman, whose desire for him quickly transforms into a more literal hunger. What he won't do, it turns out, is be eaten with ice cream, popcorn, or in a

FIGURE 3.2 *Red, unable to sing after being overcome with angst.*

birthday cake, be beaten and battered as the prize in a piñata, or be baked alive in an oven as part of a giant cookie. Red's singing breaks down as his paranoia grows, resulting in him screaming at no one in particular, crying as a whipped cream topping burns his eyes, and (most disturbingly) rocking back and forth in a fetal position, utterly overwhelmed with angst while whispering to himself "happy thoughts, happy thoughts."⁸

On the surface, the anxiety exhibited by these mascots may seem inconsequential — it is, after all, played as comedy. Yet the very fact of its presence, not to mention its frequency and prominence, makes visible an increase in both our *acceptance of angst* as a natural aspect of the condition of Being — seen also in our increased employment of psychotherapy, the over-abundance of antianxiety medications, or the anticipation of PTSD in victims of abuse or veterans of combat — and our *expectation of angst* as a natural aspect of contemporary life, whether it be the stress of our jobs, the difficulties of raising a family, the lack of control we have over our economy or our government, or our cultural obsession with trauma.⁹ Over the next few pages, we'll examine the recent proliferation of anxiety in contemporary moving images, a response not only to our growing concerns about violence (both real and represented), but also to our adoption of digital logic, whose fetishization of possibility and disregard for potential have fostered a new culture of angst. At the same time, we'll see that such angst has, in a world both frightened and fascinated by mortality, granted many characters in popular media a new sense of credibility and *authenticity*, elevating them above the ersatz caricatures so often found in fictions of the past. The defining characteristic of animated commercial mascots, for example, had long been their happy-go-lucky demeanor, which was supposedly afforded by their love for and singular focus upon the products they represent. Yet in an age of terrorist attacks, mass shootings, drone strikes, surveillance, police brutality, etc., it appears that we can no longer accept happiness when it is the product of ignorance, and thus the very nature of these characters has taken on an air of inauthenticity. Only by seeing the world as we see it — full of the *possibility* of violence and death — can they regain our trust; only through displays of anxiety can they be read as *authentic* in their actions and in their claims.¹⁰

To explore the many links between possibility, anxiety, ignorance, authenticity, and death, let's turn first to Kierkegaard, the so-called "father of existentialism" who, as Paul Tillich wrote, "realized that the knowledge of that which concerns us infinitely is possible only in an attitude of infinite concern" — that existential attitude that we can call angst or anxiety, whose genesis Kierkegaard sought to uncover in order to establish it as not a pathology but rather an inherent condition of consciousness and free will.¹¹ Before he could do so, however, Kierkegaard first needed to distinguish anxiety from fear, for fear is a response to an objective, material threat (a presence) while anxiety is a response to a subjective, immaterial concern (a

sense). When Buzz the Bee notices the wall of dead insects, for example, he experiences fear, but when the threat has passed, what remains is anxiety. Put another way, as Kierkegaard might have, the shock is fear, the tremble anxiety. Seeing as fear is an essential survival instinct, it would be easy to assume that anxiety serves as a sort of primer for fear, a sense that dangers could manifest themselves at any moment and therefore a warning system to be on guard. Yet Kierkegaard, realizing that anxiety is a concern not for the present but rather always for an imagined future, found something more complex and essential at play within it: the recognition of *possibility*.

Given that his existential philosophy always grappled with the character of his Christian faith, it's perhaps unsurprising that Kierkegaard traced the origins of anxiety back to the narrative of Adam and Eve and the fall of man, which positioned mankind (through the character of Adam) as initially existing within a state of grace or innocence. Unlike many of his contemporary theologians, however, Kierkegaard did not read innocence as simply being without sin. Rather, he claimed that "the narrative in Genesis," in which God placed a prohibition on the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, "gives the correct explanation of innocence. Innocence is ignorance."¹² Adam was innocent only because he was ignorant, for to be ignorant is to be without knowledge, and Adam was only without sin because he was, quite literally, without the fruit that would provide him with a knowledge of sin. To take this a step further, Kierkegaard positioned such ignorance as not simply a lack of knowledge but rather, as Ed Cameron puts it, "nothing less than the structural limit of conceptualization itself," for although Adam *recognized* the prohibition, in his ignorance he lacked the ability to truly *comprehend* it: "How could he understand the difference between good and evil when this distinction would follow as a consequence of the enjoyment of the fruit?"¹³ In lieu of knowledge, the prohibition left Adam with naught but *anxiety*, as it's in the breakdown between recognition and comprehension — in our ability *to know that we cannot know*, so to speak — that anxiety appears. To put this more eloquently, as Natalie Wulfging does in her analysis of Kierkegaard's text, anxiety arises "out of ignorance that has knowledge for its horizon."¹⁴

Yet if anxiety is born out of ignorance, why would Gordon D. Marino claim that "anxiety is virtually synonymous with possibility" in Kierkegaard's thought?¹⁵ Or, for that matter, why does Rollo May find "the relation between anxiety and freedom" to be the "keystone idea" in *The Concept of Anxiety*?¹⁶ To explain, we must note that when Kierkegaard revisited the story of the first prohibition, he found not only that Adam was ignorant of its meaning or consequence, but also that its very pronouncement was enough to provide Adam with a horizon of knowledge: an implication, however slight, of his inherent freedom — the ability to respond to the prohibition in the manner of his choosing — which not only assured his desire to disobey but also *made visible to Adam his possibilities*. Indeed, the relationship between

anxiety and freedom may be the keystone idea in Kierkegaard's text, but only insofar as "Kierkegaard *defines freedom as possibility*."¹⁷ Freedom is but a middle term in the existential reading of angst — we recognize our freedom only when we have caught sight of both our possibility and our future, and it's in our awareness of possibility and ignorance of the future that we become anxious — which we see in Kierkegaard's adoption of the phrase "freedom's possibility" as an analogue not only for anxiety but also, on occasion, for consciousness itself.¹⁸ Subsequently, if consciousness entails a recognition of the possibility of freedom, then "the distinctive characteristic of man, in contrast to the merely vegetative or the merely animal, lies in the range of man's possibility and in his capacity for self-awareness of his possibility" — *an awareness that cements anxiety as an essential aspect of consciousness*.

Such awareness also leads us back to one possibility in particular, for we find again and again in Kierkegaard — just as we also saw in Massumi — that possibilities are always bound up in a futurity, such that "as freedom's possibility manifests itself for freedom, freedom succumbs, and temporality emerges."¹⁹ Of course, the road of temporality always leads to death, as Kierkegaard's biblical reading of anxiety made clear:

After the word of prohibition follows the word of judgment: "You shall certainly die." Naturally, Adam does not know what it means to die. ... Because Adam has not understood what was spoken, there is nothing but the ambiguity of anxiety. The infinite possibility of being able that was awakened by the prohibition now draws closer, because this possibility points to a possibility as its sequence.²⁰

In other words, any and all possibilities point to that possibility which Heidegger would later call our "utmost": the possibility of one's own death, the last event in every sequence of life which is revealed only through the attitude of anxiety. Once again we find that a possibilistic culture will undoubtedly reveal itself to be engulfed in anxiety, for it will always point to the possibility of death as its conclusion.

Kierkegaard thus showed us that anxieties regarding death are amongst our most fundamental, and as such they have been and always will be an essential component of the human condition. At the same time, however, our willingness to address such anxieties within the boundaries of popular culture tends to wax and wane depending on social, political, and economic influences, which Fredric Jameson made clear in his thesis on the "waning of affect" in postmodern culture.²¹ In fact, Jameson's classic text *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* begins with a brief epistemology of angst in public consciousness, a transition from "the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation" — which characterized the modern era as nothing less than

“the age of anxiety” — to the “flatness or depthlessness” of postmodernity, “a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” which led Jameson to conclude that “concepts such as anxiety and alienation ... are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern.”²² In regard to the anxiety of death, this certainly lines up with our observations about the repression which characterized the mid-to-late twentieth century, in which representations of death consistently increased in “intensity” while simultaneously eschewing realism and discouraging contemplation.²³ Yet in our “possibilistic” digital culture, still stumbling in the aftermath of 9/11, anxiety has not simply returned to the level of the appropriate, but rather rocketed to that of the expected, the anticipated, and at times even the required, a clear indication that we’ve moved beyond postmodern logic into an era of digital thinking. All of this is to say that anxiety, in the digital age, has become *normalized*, far more than even Kierkegaard could have ever anticipated. To see this in action, as well to expand our focus to include the desire for authenticity that accompanies our acceptance and expectation of angst, let’s look to another example of anxiety’s hyper-presence in contemporary moving images, this time in a medium whose central purpose had been, since its inception several decades ago, to allow us to escape authentic reality and immerse ourselves in virtual fantasy: the digital game.

Although it features four playable characters, the narrative of David Cage’s *Heavy Rain* (developed in 2010 by the French studio Quantic Dream) hinges around one central protagonist: an architect named Ethan Mars, desperately trying to rescue his kidnapped son while still coping with the loss of another child in a fatal car accident some two years prior, an event that led to the dissolution of his marriage and a crippling depression. On the surface, it would be easy to read Ethan as a typical video game protagonist, whom the player controls in a number of typical videogame scenarios: racing a car through heavy traffic, exploring dark and foreboding environments, wielding guns and other weapons against dangerous criminals, etc. Yet for Ethan these activities are highly atypical: a series of increasingly dangerous and morally ambiguous “trials” arranged by the Origami Killer, who kidnaps his young victims and then secretly demands that their fathers overcome challenges in order to save their children (a gauntlet that no father has yet passed). Ethan’s anxiety intensifies with the introduction of each new trial, manifesting itself through his explicitly voiced recognition of numerous possibilities: that he could fail to save his son’s life, that the Origami Killer’s challenges could result in his own death, that he could become responsible for the deaths of both his children, and even the suspicion that he himself could be the Origami Killer (the trials an unconscious punishment for his failure to save his older son two years earlier).

Throughout the game, the player not only controls Ethan’s physical exploits during the action-heavy trials, but also his dialog choices and interactions with other characters in a variety of seemingly mundane

situations, including doing chores around the house, picking his son up from school, sketching out architectural blueprints for work, navigating a busy train station, and even attending several sessions with his psychologist. Yet every scenario proves an ordeal, as Ethan's agoraphobia and guilt lead to frequent, debilitating anxiety attacks. Mechanically, the game represents this anxiety by having the player's dialog and action choices float in circles around Ethan's head — a jumble of possibilities he is constantly sorting out in his mind — which, along with their corresponding input icons, grow blurrier and more jittery as the anxiety increases. This makes it difficult for the player to assess their options and choose the best course of action (especially in situations where time is of the essence), and frequently leads to hurried or mistaken inputs on the side of the player. Adding to the player's anxiety is the fact that the game attaches significant weight to every action by prohibiting them from resetting or restarting a chapter once it has begun — even when the player's actions lead to the death of a central character! — a defiance of standard game design, which has long presumed that players can always insert another quarter, find a 1-up, or “press start to continue.”

Given that the *Origami Killer*'s trials involve difficult, ambiguous moral dilemmas — would you cut off a finger for a clue as to your kidnapped child's whereabouts? drink poison? murder another parent? — it would seem to be against the player's best interests to frequently decrease their control over their onscreen avatar. Yet rather than becoming a frustration, *Heavy Rain*'s simulation of our inability to think and act clearly in the face of anxiety is one of its most successful experiments, in that it often denies

FIGURE 3.3 *Ethan Mars anxiously considers shooting another father in order to save his son.*

the player the ability to make choices using anything beyond pure instinct or impulse, at times forcibly revealing otherwise inhibited attitudes toward difficult moral questions by compelling us to play and act *authentically* (meaning not simply according to some ideological standard but rather in accordance to our deep-rooted understandings of the consequences of life and death). In fact, it's not some vague sense of the "everyman" nor even the mundane experiences which we share with Ethan that make him feel "authentic," but rather his anxiety, for he reacts to the possibility of danger and death the same way we do: imprecisely, with fear and trembling, with caution and with angst.

Heavy Rain demonstrates that anxiety and authenticity are not only intimately connected within the digital, they are *visibly* connected as well. Yet although the visibility of this connection may be new to us, its intimacy is not, for in continuing Kierkegaard's project to explore the concept of anxiety, among the most significant contributions of Heidegger and Sartre was their recognition that anxiety is a crucial aspect of authenticity and their view that authentic Being requires the acknowledgement of one's mortality (though, as we will see throughout the rest of this chapter, they differed greatly on how one should practice such acknowledgment). Alongside Merleau-Ponty and following Hegel, the pair were instrumental in establishing phenomenology as a key component of existential thought, an attempt to uncover the role of conscious experience and sensation in our everyday existence, especially in relation to our ability to conceptualize the difference between Being and nonbeing, life and death. As much as any theorists before or since, they grasped the role that our knowledge of death plays in our comprehension and negotiation of the world around us (what Heidegger called both our Being-in-the-world and Being-toward-death, and Sartre saw as the nothingness inherent in Being-for-itself), and although they used this understanding to arrive at significantly divergent attitudes toward death, they nonetheless introduced anxiety and the recognition of mortality as critical components of the authentic experience of Being.

Heidegger began his analysis of anxiety — found primarily in Section VI of the first division of *Being and Time*, "Care as the Being of Dasein" — in a manner similar to Kierkegaard, first by laying out the differences between fear and anxiety (fear as a response to something "definite" which is always an "entity within the world," anxiety as a response to the "indefinite" and the unknown) and then by linking anxiety to possibility: "What oppresses us is neither this or that, nor is it the summation of everything present-at-hand; it is rather the *possibility* of the ready-at-hand in general; that is to say, it is the world itself."²⁴ Likewise, in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre quickly established anxiety (or, as it is often translated in his work, anguish) as a response to our recognition of possibility, though with a greater focus on the *self* as the locus of that possibility: "Anguish in fact is the recognition of a possibility as *my* possibility; that is, it is constituted when consciousness

sees itself cut from its essence by nothingness or separated from the future by its very freedom.”²⁵ Although Heidegger and Sartre borrowed heavily from Kierkegaard’s reading of anxiety, their own differed on several significant counts, including an understanding of existence as preceding essence (as opposed to Kierkegaard’s notion that spirit exists before body or soul) and a belief that Being is finite (as opposed to the infiniteness of the spirit in Kierkegaard). Not the least of these, however, was their utmost concern regarding the question of Being, which for Heidegger implied an understanding of the differences between “thingness” and conscious existence (beings vs. Being), for Sartre meant an understanding of nonbeing or nothingness as fundamental to the fact of Being, and for both meant an understanding of authentic Being as refusing to lie to oneself regarding the inevitability of one’s own death.

To unpack these ideas, we must first confront Heidegger’s central figure in *Being and Time*, that of *Dasein*, the being for whom “in its very Being, that Being is an *issue*.”²⁶ As conveyed in the aforementioned title of Section VI, *Dasein cares* about existence, its “analytic” is “to prepare the way for the problematic of fundamental ontology — *the question of the meaning of Being in general*.”²⁷ *Dasein*, then, is not simply one who is conscious of its existence, but rather one who is profoundly concerned with the *meaning* of that existence (its ontological or phenomenological constitution, not its reason or purpose). Fundamental to *Dasein*’s project is anxiety, which Heidegger referred to as “a disclosive state-of-mind,” in that it *discloses the Dasein as itself a possibility* while enabling it to “individualize” and granting it the capacity for being authentic. When we consider this phrase — “being authentic” — we might assume that authenticity is the result of recognizing or comprehending, to the best of one’s abilities, the structure of one’s consciousness and its relation to the world in which it is situated — authenticity as the fulfillment of *Dasein*’s quest for meaning. Yet such meaning is put at risk by *Dasein*’s fundamental freedom and the possibilities that follow, for “this openness of possibility,” as Natalie Wulfin explains, “implied [for Heidegger] that there is no fixed and determining meaning. It means that freedom is a loss of meaning.”²⁸ Similarly, Meghan Craig follows Heidegger in concluding that “our freedom to choose allows us to interpret the world as we will, and since there is no ultimate interpretation, we can no longer be completely certain about anything.”²⁹ If the same recognition of possibilities that produces anxiety also results in an uncertainty and loss of meaning that confounds *Dasein*’s project to question Being, then why would Heidegger argue that anxiety is critical to *Dasein*’s authentic existence?

Perhaps Sartre can help us to understand, for in his definition of consciousness (i.e., Being) we find an expansion of Heidegger’s *Dasein*: “a being such that in its being, its being is in question *in so far as this being implies a being other than itself*,” and whose nature “is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being.”³⁰ These statements follow Sartre’s contention

that Being can only be defined in terms of its opposition or its negation — negation is “not a judgment”; Sartre contends, “it is a disclosure of being on the basis of which we can make a judgment” — which on one hand implies any and all beings apart from and surrounding the Being, while on the other implies a nothingness or nonbeing.³¹ Just as nothingness is positioned here as an essential, ontological characteristic of Being — what allows the Being, according to Hazel E. Barnes, to “stand out from Being and to judge others by knowing what it is not” — so too are all of the things that make up the world outside of consciousness (our bodies, the people and things that surround us, the socio-cultural-economic circumstances of our time, etc.) which Sartre, in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and elsewhere, followed Heidegger in calling our *facticity*.³² Sartre saw our sense of self as always indebted as much to our facticity as to the fact of consciousness, and in our attempt to construct an identity — to “transcend” the world of the *in-itself* (*en-soi*, the object, the being which simply *is*) — we cannot but respond to the world in which we are situated, and to the desires of other Beings in particular. As such, inherent within the human condition is the struggle between being *for-itself* (*pour-soi*) and *for-others* (*pour-autrui*), between subjectifying oneself and being objectified by the Other. “Herein lies the ultimate human paradox,” Richard Pearce writes, “we seek to construct a self, but always fail,” precisely because our *self* is never ours alone.³³ Yet here is also where authenticity enters the picture, because in our “vacillation between transcendence [*Being-for-itself*] and facticity [*Being-for-others*]” and our refusal “to recognize either one for what it really is or to synthesize them,” what we are truly failing to do is to *be authentic*.³⁴

In our attempt to work through the existential reading of authenticity, it might be easiest to follow in Sartre’s footsteps by continuing to define in terms of opposition. This means turning first to the question of *inauthenticity*, what Heidegger saw as Dasein’s “fallenness” in the world of the “they” (the world of others) and its “fleeing in the face of itself,” and Sartre (alongside Freud, Simone de Beauvoir, and many others) referred to as “bad faith,” the act of lying to oneself, a self-deception designed for the benefit of the Other. Indeed, the fact or difficulty of living in the world with others was central to existential thought, so much so that Heidegger saw in each person a “they-self” — an aspect of consciousness constructed according to the desires of the universal or the “they” — while Sartre argued that we act “with all of mankind in mind,” that we orient ourselves against the universal as part of our facticity.³⁵ Yet for both, inauthentic existing meant more than simply acting with others in mind, it was to act *for* the Other, without letting the Other in on the act — a performance where the performer lies not to the audience but to her/himself. Not simply “conforming with the crowd,” as Craig explains, bad faith and falling are rather “the tendency we have to fall into the socially agreed web of meanings, *and to take them as givens*” — to view oneself and the world as if through the eyes of the Other

(despite the true impossibility of such) by momentarily repressing one's own individuality, beliefs, and desires.³⁶ In doing so, one fails to be what Robert D. Stolorow calls a "differentiated, self-responsible individual," because one lies to oneself *about* oneself in order present as truth what Sartre called "a pleasing untruth."³⁷ Our "they-self" *is* this lie, just as the lie *is* our bad faith, what for Sartre "presupposes my existence, the existence of the *Other*, my existence *for* the Other, and the existence of the Other *for* me."³⁸

To that end, we can now read authenticity as more than a matter of relating to others, and still more than a matter of understanding consciousness, even one's own. Authenticity is, rather, *existing for oneself* — a literal transcendence through the Being's act of Being-for-itself. It is to cease lying to oneself, to decline to take socially agreed upon meanings as givens, to avoid performing for the Other, and to refuse to submit oneself to their objectifying gaze (or, for that matter, to make an object of the Other). Of course, it would be impossible to hold ourselves to such standards at all times, and both Heidegger and Sartre make it clear that authenticity and inauthenticity form a dialectic, that they are each essential aspects of Being which, at any given moment, play significant roles in the formation of our sense of self. Yet there is also a clear sense that authenticity is the "one new and absolute virtue in existentialism," that as conscious Beings we should strive to act authentically whenever possible.³⁹ As Craig Stolorow, and many others have pointed out, the German word Heidegger used for authenticity is *Eigentlichkeit*, literally translating into "ownedness" or "mineness" — to Be authentic is to *own* one's existence, to be held accountable for one's Being and to hold others accountable for theirs.⁴⁰

Sartre, too, saw authenticity as a responsibility, that one must have courage to accept one's freedom and come to terms with one's possibilities. This is crucial, for to recognize possibility *is* to be anxious, and thus we find that existentialism paints authenticity as not only inseparable from anxiety but also the *result* of anxiety, for anxiety disavows inauthenticity by forcibly revealing one's ownmost, individualized attitudes and ideals. Indeed, as Heidegger reminds us again and again, anxiety *discloses* Dasein as authentic because it reveals what matters most to Dasein, the "meaning" of life and death. Though we all vacillate between existing for ourselves and existing for others, it is only through the recognition of possibilities and *the acceptance of anxiety* that we are able to come to terms with our existence, to be disclosed as Dasein and as authentic Being-for-itself.

If we return to contemporary representations of anxiety, we find that what stands out in the digital age (even more so than the proliferation of anxiety) is a desire for authenticity, for characters to represent not a fantasy but rather the reality of Being-in-the-world. Such desire not only emphasizes that such Being is *always finite*, it also overturns the long-standing assumption that the primary purpose of moving images is escapism. Despite the fact that he's a piece of talking candy, for example, the Red M&M's

feels real to us not because of the quality of the digital animation, but because *he owns his existence* by struggling against the gaze that perceives him as object (only for comedic effect does he submit himself to the desires of others). And the trials of Ethan Mars register as authentic because *he refuses to play the part of a hero*, instead allowing his anxiety (and ours) to drive his quest to rescue his son. Above all, they are each acutely aware of their possibilities — especially the one instance in which possibility is overcome by inevitability — and yet they refuse to suppress or flee from the resultant anxiety. So, let's add one more aspect to our definition of authenticity: to refuse to flee from anxiety. For this, as Heidegger will show us, is the very essence of authenticity, to take ownership of one's existence as an individual by *resolutely* acknowledging one's ownmost possibility, an act that contemporary moving images have adopted as one of two unconscious relays through which we seek to re-encounter the potential of death.

Being-toward-Death (Potentiality, Resoluteness, Immanence)

In the pilot episode of David Chase's HBO mafia drama *The Sopranos*, a New Jersey gangster finds himself, after having passed out during his son's birthday party, in a place utterly foreign to fictional gangsters: a psychiatrist's office.⁴¹ As a high-level member of a struggling crime family, his life is a near-constant performance of confidence and bluster, an inescapable state of bad faith in which any admission of weakness — including the anxiety that led to his collapse — is tantamount to suicide ("the wrong person finds out about this," he tells his wife, "and I get a steeljacket anti-depressant right to the back of the head"). Though initially reticent to discuss the details of his criminal past with his psychiatrist, he soon embraces the opportunity to articulate the angst that comes part and parcel with his profession, to set aside the mask that hides the insecurity and uncertainty that has haunted him since his youth. "I find I have to be the sad clown," he admits, "laughing on the outside, crying on the inside" — his assuredness a self-deceiving lie, a pleasing untruth. In the psychiatrist's office, however, his authenticity spills out, he accepts the possibilities that stem from his actions, he owns his anxiety rather than fleeing from it. In doing so, Tony Soprano represents not only one of the first truly *anxious* gangsters in moving images, but also one of the first truly *authentic* gangsters as well.⁴²

The trigger for Tony's anxiety appeared several months earlier in the form of a family of ducks living in his backyard swimming pool. For several happy weeks he watched as the ducklings grew and developed, aware of the possibility that one day they would grow strong enough to fly away, yet

ignorant of the consequences of their departure. When that day finally came — the day of his son's party — Tony was overwhelmed not simply by his feeling of loss (what his psychiatrist sees as an analogy of his own children growing older and leaving home) but also, and more importantly, by his recognition that all things must eventually come to an end. "It's good to be in on something from the ground floor," he tells his psychiatrist. "I came too late for that, I know. But lately I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end." If Tony felt, at the start of the series, that he was approaching an end — or, more astutely, that he was approaching *his end* — he had good reason, for his death was in fact the very goal, the ambition, of *The Sopranos*.

Six seasons and eighty-five episodes later, *The Sopranos* concluded with one of the more infamous sequences in television history, in which Tony — having successfully brokered peace with a neighboring New York family — sits down in a small diner to eat with his wife and children. Though very little action occurs, things immediately feel wrong. The family's conversations are inconsequential and benign (as opposed to the high drama that punctuated nearly every other scene throughout the episode), his daughter is shown repeatedly failing to parallel park her car outside the restaurant (creating a feeling of frustration and urgency not present inside), and the music Tony plays from a jukebox grows increasingly louder in comparison to the dialog. Then there are frequent, seemingly unmotivated insert shots of other guests in the restaurant (a hunter in camo gear, a young couple at a nearby table, a boy scout troop, a group of young men who enter shortly after Tony's son, and most prominently a man who, over the

FIGURE 3.4 Tony Soprano in his last moment.

course of several shots, enters, sits at the bar, looks suspiciously in Tony's direction, and then finally walks behind him toward the restroom). As the music crescendos into a fever pitch, the family casually orders an appetizer while Tony's daughter finishes parking her car and is shown running across the street. The entry bell chimes as Tony, in a close-up, raises his gaze, but suddenly we smash cut to black, the music ceasing just as violently as the image. For ten seconds (an eternity in screen time) we sit on black before the credits appear, which play out in silence for the first and only time in the series.

As those credits rolled, many fans of the series felt that they were left with little more than a gangster's version of Schrödinger's Cat: had Tony's survival against all odds been reaffirmed by the reunion of his broken family, or did that unnervingly extended pause over black imply that something more sinister had occurred? Though left ambiguous, astute viewers knew that Tony's fate was anything but uncertain, sealed years before when he first confessed his anxiety and his recognition that all roads lead to an end, that all lives lead to death. No gunshot is heard and no blood seen, no pain felt nor defeat tasted, yet these things are only denied to us because they were denied to Tony himself. Instead, his last moment of consciousness, one of simple though profound curiosity, *is* the last moment — *can only be* the last moment — of *The Sopranos*, for *The Sopranos* was, from the very beginning, always being-toward-(Tony's)-death.

Through Tony Soprano's refusal to flee from anxiety and his subsequently authentic acknowledgment of the possibility of death, we can begin to sense one significant epistemological shift in the manner through which we have come to negotiate and contemplate death in the moving image, an unconscious relay through which we *resolutely* project ourselves toward our utmost possibility as a means to grasp our own potential. On the surface, this shift entails an increase in the number of narratives that approach the problem of mortality through "the death of the self" rather than the "the death of the other," in that they foster an identification with the figure of the dying rather than the figure of the bereaved. More significantly, however, it also exposes a virtual enactment of the Heideggerian *Being-toward-death*, a projection toward an end that positions death as not simply one's future but also an *immanent* aspect of both one's past and one's present.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger presents us with several modes of Dasein's Being — such as Being-in, Being-with, and Being-toward — which each characterizes Dasein's existence in specific ways. For example, Dasein's Being-in-the-world is not simply an observation of one's existence among other beings, but rather a declaration that one can only grasp its own Being *through* its relationship to the world, and thus "in their indissoluble unity," as Stolorow and Robert Eli Sanchez put it, "our Being and our world always contextualize one another."⁴³ Likewise, our Being-with-others implies both that Dasein is never alone and, dialectically, that Dasein is always alone, its

sense of self a response to “the everyday experiences of shared interactions and interpersonal relationships” that is nonetheless made in the “solicitude” of Dasein’s ownness.⁴⁴ As we flirted with in the previous section, Dasein’s authenticity is reliant upon the recognition of its Being-toward, which is always for Heidegger a “futurity” (Dasein’s “Being-ahead-of-itself”) and therefore always *toward-death*.⁴⁵ In fact, its Being-as-care aside, what truly defines Dasein is its Being-toward-death, for what it truly *cares about* is time and the fundamental finitude of Being.

To work our way closer to an understanding of authentic Being-toward-death, we’ll need to first pass through a number of Heideggerian concepts — namely, thrownness, uncanniness, ecstatic temporality, and most importantly resoluteness — that contextualize Dasein’s possibility for authenticity, its relationship to the world in which it is situated, its understanding of temporality as being fulfilled within the recognition of death, and its “mood” regarding its own finiteness. In doing so, we’ll come to see not only why a continual recognition of death is fundamental to Dasein’s project of questioning the meaning of its Being, but also (and most importantly for this project) how such Being-toward-death has been adopted, in response to digital logic, by contemporary moving-image narratives as a way to address death both directly and indirectly, an unconscious relay through which a possibilistic culture attempts to find potential in a life that is always leading toward death.

We can begin, then, with Dasein’s *thrownness* into the world — that through birth one comes into a place not of one’s choosing or making, yet *in which* one must then learn to exist (and *with whom* one must then learn to coexist) — which situates Dasein within a facticity that encourages inauthentic action while also revealing the possibilities through which anxiety and authenticity emerge. For Heidegger, thrownness reveals that Dasein “is and has to be,” that existence is never a choice but rather a circumstance into which one is thrown involuntarily and *in medias res*. When coming to terms with its thrownness, what Dasein is truly facing are its possibilities, for as Michael Inwood points out, thrownness implies “the fact that Dasein is ‘always already’ in a specific situation that determines the possibilities available to it.”⁴⁶ Because Dasein is otherwise “determined in its thrownness by the specific choices it is compelled to make,” the first step in Being-toward-death must always involve a coming to terms with one’s thrownness, for the first step toward authenticity (which we might think of as the overcoming of one’s determinants) is to acknowledge one’s possibilities and one’s anxieties.⁴⁷

Accompanying Dasein’s thrownness is an *uncanniness* — from the German *Un-heimlich*, which literally translates to being “not at home” — that Brent Adkins calls Dasein’s feeling of being “a stranger in its own skin,” of being at sea in a world that is both recognizable and yet foreign.⁴⁸ Despite its obvious similarity to Freud’s notion of the uncanny — in which a subject encounters

an object in the world as uncomfortably familiar, often through some form of repetition — Heidegger's conception of uncanniness is really about one's uncomfortability with oneself, especially in regard to the identification of oneself *as an object* for others.⁴⁹ As with thrownness, we see in Heidegger a direct relationship between uncanniness and authenticity, for when we run from the feeling of uncanniness, we do so by inauthentically falling into the comfort and "the home-ness" of the "they."⁵⁰ Conversely, to be authentic is "to stand in the uncanniness" of Being — to face the anxiety that comes with being not-safely-at-home, which in turn forces us to consider our Being from outside of our own existence by facing the objectifying gaze of the other.⁵¹ This is partially why Heidegger saw within authentic Being-toward-death an implicit recognition of the structure of temporality (and the finitude of existing within it), because although Being-toward is always a futurity, it is born from a thrownness that makes visible a determinant past and an uncanniness that reveals a determinant present.

As the title of his magnum opus suggests, time was every bit as central to Heidegger's exploration of existence as was the very fact of Being, and its text was an attempt at nothing less than the "phenomenological destruction of the history of ontology, with the problematic of Temporality as our clue."⁵² To that end, Heidegger conceived of an *ecstatic temporality*, which David A. Stone and Christina Papadimitriou succinctly describe as "three equiprimordial moments or 'ecstasies': having been, making present, and the future, none of which exist *in* time, but all of which, experienced together allow us to exist *as* temporal beings."⁵³ Time as such is not an object seen from within a moment, nor is it a series of "nows" piling up one on top of another, but rather (following the meaning of *ek-stasis* as being outside or apart from oneself) three distinct parts of the "event" of Dasein that can only emerge through one another or be seen from the perspective of one another, which Heidegger also described as the processes of reduction (of a past), destruction (of a present), and construction (of a future).⁵⁴ Put more simply, one cannot recognize a present moment without first coming to terms with the prior-existence of a past or the possibility of a future, nor can one sense a past without being in a present, and so on and so on.

Through its various modes of Being, Dasein's existence fluctuates between and within the three ecstasies. As Inwood points out, for example, our Being-with is always a recognition of the present — a concern for the here and now of our facticity — while our sense of thrownness is always "past-directed," a looking back to the moment of *being thrown* and a recognition of our lack of agency in relation to a past that cannot be changed. In fact, Heidegger frequently refers to Dasein as a "thrown possibility," which, according to Graham Harman, "could easily be rephrased as 'past future,'" for it is always torn between turning back and forging ahead.⁵⁵ Yet only in the authenticity of Being-one's-Self (akin to Sartre's Being-for-itself) can Dasein strike a balance between the three, because such authenticity

requires the acceptance of an anxiety through which Dasein is aware of its past, Being-with its present, and Being-toward its future.

To bring all of this into perspective, let's turn for a moment to Jack Shepard, the central protagonist of Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof's sci-fi television drama *Lost*. Like Tony Soprano, Jack strives for authenticity through an acceptance of anxiety and an (eventual) acknowledgment of death. As the de facto leader of a group of plane crash survivors marooned on a dense, tropical island, it wouldn't have been a surprise if Jack had followed in Tony's footsteps by faltering in a state of bad faith, by creating an image of authority in order to appease those who looked to him for guidance and support. To the contrary, from the moment he regains consciousness after the crash, Jack is resolutely authentic, as passionately assertive and honest in his encounters with others as he is anxiously aware of the possibilities that lie before them.

On the one hand, Jack's *thrownness* and *uncanniness* are quite literal: he was, after all, ejected from a passenger jet that broke apart mid-air onto an ancient and mysterious island, whose impenetrable jungles hide strangely out-of-place secrets. On the other hand, as we come to learn through flashbacks that fill in his backstory, Jack was *thrown* long before he stepped foot aboard Oceanic Flight 815, having pursued a surgical career largely to placate his alcoholic father, despite the fact that he was never "at home" in that high-stakes world of life and death. In fact, though the island may not have cured Jack of a physical malady (as it does for several other survivors), his sudden embrace of authenticity *is a cure*, because it reverses the inauthentic Being-for-others that haunted him prior to the crash. Life on the island may be a source of great anxiety for Jack, but through its embrace he finds new meaning to existence and, ultimately, a resolute acknowledgment of the progress of time and the inevitability of death.

We learn much of this through the series' unique employment of flashbacks and flash-forwards, as each episode is evenly divided between a storyline set during the "present" events on the island and another which follows a member of the ensemble cast in either their "past" (before the crash) or their "future" (after several survivors escape the island). In fact, the narrative structure of *Lost* could practically serve as a model for Heidegger's ecstatic temporality, in that any given episode demands its viewers negotiate multiple ecstasies of time — to reduce the past through the unfolding of the present, to allow that present to construct the future, or even to destroy the present through the acknowledgment of multiple possible futures. To this last point we can add the "flash-sideways" that appeared in the later seasons, storylines that take place in an alternate timeline and often follow characters who have been killed off in the narrative proper, which present us with what-if scenarios that usually involve a character fulfilling an unresolved desire or finding redemption for a past transgression. For the audience, these flash-sideways allow us to imagine or acknowledge disparate possibilities

for both the narrative and its characters, while in turn giving us hints of the full potential of life beyond the event of death.

As for Jack, his storyline, the heart of the series, resolves itself through the discovery of the literal “heart of the island” — a cave filled with flowing water and a brilliant light that, according to the series’ convoluted mythology, is the very source of all life and death in the universe. Because of its potential to be used for ill, the “heart of the island” requires a protector, and Jack finds that he has been “chosen” to fulfill that role. For a brief moment, it appears that he will live forever as the island’s guardian, but instead Jack comes to realize that he must sacrifice himself in order to plug up the escaping water and light. Likewise, the final episode’s flash-sideways finds all of the show’s deceased characters together in a church, and as Jack finally arrives, they ready themselves to “move on” into the light (presumably that of the “heart of the island”), an act that requires their resolute acceptance of the fact of their deaths. Having accomplished both of his tasks (the plugging of the heart and the acceptance of his passing) Jack awakens in the series’ final scene to find himself in the very same spot where he regained consciousness in the pilot episode, although this time mortally wounded. Rather than struggling against death, Jack continues to resolutely accept his fate, bringing a smile to his face even as the life fades from his eyes. In doing so, Jack finds, in his last moment, a meaning to his life — not some fateful, mystical purpose but rather a simple glimpse of his own capacity for authentic Being and his own potential for self-determination — while *Lost* reveals that it was, from its very opening moments to its final image, always being-toward-(Jack’s)-death.

FIGURE 3.5 *In Lost's final moment, Jack resolutely accepts his death.*

The thrownness, uncanniness, and ecstatic temporality visible in *Lost* are central to Heidegger's thought because they reveal both our responsibility to ourselves — a responsibility for authentic Being that can only be fulfilled through one's Being-toward-death — and our capacity for self-determination. As Bruce Baugh puts it, "Dasein does not bring itself into existence and yet is *responsible* for choosing itself in light of its ability-to-be," which is both an act of self-identification and the act of *choosing not to undo itself*, to not take itself out of the world through suicide or self-destruction.⁵⁶ Considering this responsibility — recalling again authenticity as owning our existence and our possibilities — we can see that Being-toward-death is certainly not a push to die. Nor, on the other hand, is it a push to live. Instead, Being-toward is *the push* itself, the act of *projecting oneself* toward a future and *toward an end*. But if this end is always death — a return to non-existence or non-Being — would not the push be a push into despair?

Perhaps, though for Heidegger such despair would be the result of an inauthentic understanding of death, a recognition only of the end and not of the present or the space in-between (the Being-toward). In fact, Kierkegaard had already warned against such despair in *The Sickness unto Death*, which he saw as a sin of hopelessness, a torment in which the sick are not the dying but rather those who are *unable to die* — "it is the greatest misfortune and misery actually to be in despair; no, it is ruin."⁵⁷ For Kierkegaard, the remedy to the sickness unto death was a faith in life beyond death, but this solution falters under Heidegger's nontheistic philosophy, which saw in death an absolute end to all Being. Rather than falling into despair, however, Heidegger proposed that authentic Being-toward-death requires *resoluteness* — to resolutely face the uncanniness of one's anxiety, to always and resolutely acknowledge the possibility of death. In fact, Heidegger explains in *Being and Time* that "when we master a mood, we do so by way of a counter-mood," and in following this statement we can read resoluteness as a counter-mood to anxiety, through which we not only come to accept anxiety but also to *use* it, to allow it disclose our authenticity.⁵⁸ Resoluteness is not an overcoming of anxiety nor a recognition of possibility; instead, it is the *mastering* of anxiety and the search for potential, in particular our *potentiality-for-Being*.

We'll return to Heidegger's understanding of our potentiality-for-Being in a moment, but first let's examine what it means to resolutely face anxiety or death, which for Heidegger always involves a resolution, for "resoluteness 'exists' only as a resolution."⁵⁹ Considering that the colloquial usage of the term "resolution" (as in, say, a New Year's resolution) implies a promise for the future and a declaration that one can and will act in a specific way, we might mistake it as, in the words of Heidegger, "taking up possibilities which have been proposed and recommended, and seizing hold of them."⁶⁰ Yet Heidegger advises us against this error of bad faith by instead proposing that "resolution is precisely the disclosive projection and determination of what is factically possible at the time."⁶¹

Let's pause on this statement for a moment, for it is vitally important to understanding anxiety, authenticity, and Being-toward-death in a possibilistic culture. First, a resolution is seen here as a projection — a looking-ahead, the act of Being-toward a future — which is disclosive, meaning that, like anxiety, it opens up or makes visible an otherwise closed or invisible concept. Next, we find that a resolution is determinate, in that it allows Dasein to *situate itself* within its world and to *find for itself* a sense of meaning through an examination of its possibilities (otherwise Dasein would be determined only by its “facticity and falling”). This suggests that although Dasein is thrown into a world which ensures its feeling of uncanniness, it nonetheless possesses some potential to shape itself and its world, if in no other way than simply separating, to the best of its abilities, possibilities from impossibilities. Most important, then, is the final phrase “factically possible at the time,” in which such a separation takes place, a disclosure which makes known both the indefinite potential of Being and the definite possibility of death. This is because when we look ahead, death is always, as Heidegger repeats again and again throughout *Being and Time*, our “utmost” and “ownmost” possibility; it is at all times our most factically definite possibility.

Let's return to the ending of *Lost* as an example. When Jack resolves to enter the “heart of the island” in order to prevent its destruction, he is in that moment projecting himself toward an end, and what such projection discloses to him is the certainty of his death, for he knows that one cannot survive an encounter with its brilliant light. Jack chooses not to sacrifice himself, but rather to *determine for himself* the meaning of his Being, which would otherwise be determined by the island, his father, and all the other components of his facticity that attempted throughout the years to declare who Jack Shepard was or who he could be. Yet Jack's triumph is not entering the “heart of the island,” it is instead his subsequent resoluteness, lying in the jungle, facing death. Resolution is the manner in which Jack weighs his possibility to find his utmost — the only logical, certain, and definite outcome of a thrown and uncanny life — while resoluteness allows Jack to be-toward-death, because it allows him to put aside his inauthentic Being-for-others and find his potentiality-for-Being.

So what is our potentiality-for-Being? According to Heidegger, “Anxiety makes manifest in Dasein its Being toward its ownmost potentiality-for-Being — that is, Being-free for the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself.”⁶² Our ownmost potentiality-for-Being *is* authenticity, the freedom to *determine ourselves*, to recognize that our lives are too complex and too sublime to be fully “positioned” or coded by the objectifying gaze of the Other. Yet this determination requires resoluteness, for it requires a recognition of our utmost possibility. Let's allow Heidegger to continue: “to resoluteness, the *indefiniteness* characteristic of every potentiality-for-Being into which Dasein has been factically thrown, is something that

necessarily belongs,” and “in resoluteness, the issue for Dasein is its ownmost potentiality-for-Being, which, as something thrown, can project itself only upon definite factual possibilities.”⁶³ In these almost-mirrored statements, we find that even though Dasein is capable of certainty only when it projects itself toward known possibilities (potentials being simply too vast or complex to fully perceive), through its resoluteness the sublime or indefinite nature of potential is nonetheless disclosed to Dasein, whether it be the potentiality contained within the world itself (to move away from what Heidegger would call seeing the world as only ready-at-hand) or Dasein’s own potentiality-for-Being. Following this, although Dasein is thrown into and thus determined by its world, resoluteness allows Dasein a chance to determine itself — to take ownership of its existence — by projecting itself upon its ownmost possibility: death. Only through resoluteness can we approach the certainty of death (our most factually definite possibility); only through resoluteness can we begin to glimpse the potential of life (the indefinite characteristic of beings and Being); only through resoluteness can we fulfill our desire for authenticity (the acceptance of possibility, anxiety, temporality, and the uncanniness of being thrown); *only through resoluteness can we Be-toward-death*.

In contemporary culture, resoluteness is found not only in one’s own personal ruminations on death, nor is it only an attitude affected in the name of authenticity. Instead, we’ve also adopted resoluteness as a mode of viewing, a mindset through which we approach moving-image narratives in which death is the only possible outcome (whether we are conscious of that fact or not). Of course, like authenticity, such resoluteness always oscillates, in that we both adopt and dismiss the counter-mood as fluidly as we face and flee from anxiety. Yet through narratives of those who refuse to flee (and thus narratives which are themselves *resolutely toward-death*), we too can momentarily adopt a resolution, a projection toward an end that hints at our own utmost possibility. As the first of the two unconscious relays discussed in this chapter, we can refer to the narrative being-toward-death found in contemporary moving images as a *relay of immanence*, for it is an attempt to make death materially present to life, to bring it within and between, even if but for a moment. Moreover, to glimpse such immanence is to grasp for potential, to authentically face the world and resolutely face our limits, and to disclose even just a few of the uncountable ways in which our recognition of death impacts our everyday lives.

Let’s briefly consider one last televisual example of this relay of immanence: Vince Gilligan’s *Breaking Bad*, the story of an unassuming high school teacher who decides to use his knowledge of chemistry to produce high-quality methamphetamines, in the process ruthlessly taking control of the international drug trade in the southwestern United States. The catalytic agent, so to speak, for Walter White’s sudden career change is a diagnosis of inoperable lung cancer, which, when mixed with his wife’s pregnancy

and his son's disability, reacts to form *a resolution* — to amass a substantial nest egg that can support his family after his passing — which *projects him toward an end*. Walt's resoluteness is certain from the very outset of *Breaking Bad* — he knows that he will die, and he knows what he wants to accomplish before he does — just as the show itself is always being-toward-(Walt's)-death.⁶⁴ Yet as the series progresses, it also becomes increasingly clear that Walt's gambit is not simply a resolution to support his family, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to redefine his authenticity — to determine for himself the meaning of his existence rather than letting others define it for him. To grab hold of his potentiality-for-Being, Walt has no choice but to accept his anxiety and his utmost possibility, to not flee from his cancer but rather embrace it. Likewise, through narratives such as *Breaking Bad*, we too can seek our ownmost potential through an acknowledgment, however slight, of *our* utmost possibility, for in our identification with characters like Walt, we can allow ourselves to momentarily think like they do — to consider our potentiality-for-Being not through the mortality of another but rather our own, to resolutely view death as an immanent characteristic of life.

Split Subjectivity (Potentiality, Reflection, Ecstasis)

In resolutely Being-toward-death, Walter White has mastered his anxiety.⁶⁵ At the same time, however, his meteoric rise to the top of the meth trade was the result not simply of some newfound sense of authenticity born out of a recognition of the approach of death, but also of the appearance of another figure altogether: Heisenberg. Heisenberg is Walt's alter-ego, a persona of control, ingenuity, and mercilessness who appears, on the surface, to be the "bad faith" version of Walt, a lie that Walt tells to himself in order to flee from the anxiety that arises from his diagnosis. Yet despite being initially adopted as a means of maintaining his anonymity when dealing with the criminal underworld, Heisenberg is increasingly called-upon not to mask Walt's authenticity but rather to redefine who the "authentic" Walter White really is. Heisenberg, as such, is not a fallen, inauthentic version of Walt, but rather a lens through which Walt sees himself from the outside, through which he begins to transform himself, to re-position his own subjectivity, to determine his own potentiality-for-Being.

It's clear throughout the series that Walt needs Heisenberg, whose strength comes from the fact that he's not determined by Walt's failures: he's not a vastly overqualified and yet underappreciated and overlooked chemistry teacher, nor is he an illiterate criminal unschooled in the rules and

dangers of the drug trade, nor does he have a family whose personal and financial struggles are the direct result of a missed business opportunity and a bruised ego. More importantly, though, Walt needs Heisenberg because Heisenberg *does not have cancer*, because Heisenberg *is not subject to death*: he's a myth, immortal, both larger than life and beyond death. In fact, Walt imagines Heisenberg to be in control of death — to be the harbinger of death — as he claims in the series' most infamous monologue, a response to his wife's plea to get out of the drug business before it gets too dangerous: "Who are you talking to right now? Who is it you think you see? ... I am not in danger, Skyler. I am the danger. A guy opens his door and gets shot, and you think that of me? No. I am the one who knocks." The slippage that occurs here — in which Walt's *actual subjectivity* is momentarily supplanted by the *virtual subjectivity* of Heisenberg, i.e., "the one who knocks" — is no accident, nor is it a rupture of some inauthentic desire to deny the inevitability of an impending death. Instead, Heisenberg is what allows Walt to master his anxiety — to be authentic, resolute, and toward-death — because Heisenberg allows Walt to *ecstatically reflect* upon his own mortality and his own potential.

Although the details may be extreme, the split subjectivity on display in *Breaking Bad* is, in fact, increasingly common in the digital age, thanks in large part to the myriad online platforms that necessitate the adoption of virtual identities. Whether it be the screen-names through which we maintain our anonymity in online message boards, blogs, and news sites,

FIGURE 3.6 Walt adopts the "virtual" subjectivity of Heisenberg to grasp at his potential.

the complex characters that we develop in massively multiplayer games and other online worlds, or the calculated and heightened personalities that we cultivate across a variety of social media networks, the development of virtual subjectivity forms the crux of a potentializing relay through which we begin to ecstatically examine the parameters of our identity, redefine our capacity for authenticity, and accept our utmost possibility.

Having been one of the most visible new developments of the digital age, the impact of online communications technologies on the individual's construction of identity has also been a primary concern of scholars for more than a decade. Sherry Turkle set the stage only a few years after the eruption of the digital when she declared that "in the mirror of the machine" we develop a "second-self," a subjectivity independent of our physical body through which "more of us are experimenting with multiplicity than ever before."⁶⁶ Lisa Nakamura agrees that our identity — both actual and virtual — "shapes and reshapes every time we log on" (while also arguing that the dream of a utopian virtual landscape free of race, gender, and class is little more than a fantasy, that we do not entirely escape our fleshy body with the simple click of a button).⁶⁷ Steven Shaviro claims that, in a constantly connected society, "identity is implanted ... from without, not generated from within," and that "selfhood is an information pattern, rather than a material substance."⁶⁸ And posthumanists like Donna Haraway and Judith Butler demonstrate that our identity is grounded in bodies that are quickly becoming fluid and interchangeable, a notion which we'll explore in greater detail in our final chapter.⁶⁹

That said, the type of subjectivation presented in *Breaking Bad* — in which an individual structures their sense of self as an aggregate of various personalities or personas employed in different social situations — is not an entirely new phenomenon in the digital age. Rather, one could argue that it was hallmark of identity construction in the twentieth century, when theorists like Kenneth Burke and Erving Goffman developed "dramatist" and "dramaturgical" terminologies, respectively, in order to argue that the self is a series of performances, that one's actions are little more than theatrical responses to various "settings" and "audiences."⁷⁰ As with their contemporary digital counterparts, such performances were in every way *virtual*, yet at the same time they lacked the primary concern of modern virtual subjectivity: the desire for authenticity that has accompanied the overflow of angst. Indeed, the dramaturgical view of identity left little room for authentic action, because one was rarely thought to be acting without consideration for the desires of others, without seeing oneself as a character in the eyes of an audience. In turn, the very fact of Being was frequently positioned, prior to the digital turn, as innately inauthentic, an implication that we could not overcome the determination of our thrownness and uncanniness, that our sense of self could only account for one possibility at any given moment, and that any attempt to perceive our potentiality-for-Being would fail.

We might be tempted, then, to say that the self *as subject* had long been merely virtual, unable to grasp at its authentic actuality. Then again, we might ask ourselves if one's actual subjectivity would, in turn, be innately authentic? To find out, we needn't go far, for most of the theorists that we've drawn upon, from Bergson and Deleuze to Heidegger and Sartre, shared a belief that there is no *transcendental* subject — no "true self" *a priori* to the circumstances and events of one's existence — an implication that the self is inescapably split, always already both actual and virtual.⁷¹ Bergson, for his part, strongly challenged Kant's notion of the "transcendental unity of apperception," which positioned all conscious experience as a necessarily unified and unquestionable truth. Deleuze defied such transcendentalism by cheekily referring to his own thought as a *transcendental empiricism*, in which all experience is seen to be an experience of difference which brings to the surface new forms and new thought, a "philosophical position which determines the conditions of real rather than possible experience."⁷²

Both Heidegger and Sartre, on the other hand, took issue with the thought of Husserl; Heidegger taking to task his former mentor's "transcendental perspective" on Being — not so much akin to Kant's *a priori* determination but rather an abstract view of consciousness as an "unparticipating observer," a failure in Heidegger's eyes to account for *Dasein's* Being-in-the-world — while Sartre "urges us to abandon ... the 'transcendental ego' that allegedly stands behind, initiates, and directs all conscious acts," and to instead view the self as an empirical ego "constituted in the *reflective* acts of consciousness."⁷³ Together, they show that one's actual subjectivity is not some intrinsic "truth" or even the only authentic piece of the puzzle that is the self, but rather something much more literal: those few potentials of the self that have become *actualized*, those desires and attitudes that have been rendered concrete or tangible within reality.

To clarify these rather complex views of subjectivity and authenticity (and to trace a path through which our contemporary acts of virtual subjectivation reconfigure our attitude toward our own mortality), let's turn our attention to Deleuze, in whose thought we find an explication not only of one's subjective, determinative relationship *to oneself*, but also of the relationship between the actual and virtual and, by extension, possibility and potential. Deleuze's account of subjectivity is relayed primarily through his concept of *the fold*, the bringing together of the outside and the inside and the *envelopment* of forces and events, which Deleuze borrows in part from Leibniz. In Leibniz's "dynamics" or "calculus," Mogens Lærke tells us, "the essence of physical objects is not, as it is for Descartes, quantity, motion and shape, but *action* and *force*," meaning that the object's essence is just as much informed by *that which acts upon it* as it is by *its own actions*.⁷⁴ As such, forces are folded *into* actions, and events are seen to be (at least for Deleuze) constituted not only by a happening, but also by the causal, affective relationship between one object and another (or, better

yet, by the relationship between all objects). The *self* in Deleuze, as both object and event, is inherently folded, its exterior brought into and made part of its interior, such that one's body and one's actions and one's world are folded into one's thoughts and one's attitudes and one's consciousness. There is unity here, but not the transcendental unity that we find in Kant (whereby the self interfaces with the world as a preformed whole). Instead, one's self is seen to be continually folded into the world both temporally and spatially, unified with it, immanent to it — the unity is a unity of affect, it is that plane of immanence where all things are rendered wholly affective to one another.

Likewise, though one's virtuality and one's actuality may be distinct (even oppositional) aspects of one's subjectivity, for Deleuze they are also folded into one another, forming a complete image of the self that exists within and through time. To explain, let's step back up for a moment to examine the relationship between the virtual and the actual, which both Bergson and Deleuze saw as explicitly developed in Marcel Proust's claim that the virtual is "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract."⁷⁵ On second thought, let's step back up even further, for that observation is but a side-effect of a much more important relationship for Deleuze: that of *virtuality and possibility*:

The "virtual" can be distinguished from the "possible" from at least two points of view. From a certain point of view, in fact, *the possible is the opposite of the real*, it is opposed to the real; but, in a quite different opposition, *the virtual is opposed to the actual*. We must take this terminology seriously: the possible has no reality (although it may have an actuality); conversely, the virtual is not actual, but *as such possesses a reality*.⁷⁶

Two oppositions: the possible and the real, the virtual and the actual. Possibility opposes reality because once it is actualized, it can no longer remain a possibility (it has instead come to pass). At the same time, virtuality opposes actuality despite the fact that it nonetheless possesses a reality. What stands out here is first the difference between reality and actuality — the former an existence outside of or independent from material essence, the latter an object or event made tangible, the coming-into-being of a material substance — and second the essence of the virtual, which is opposed to the actual in that lacks a material substance yet has a reality because it is nonetheless affective. In his short essay on "The Actual and the Virtual," unpublished at the time of his death, Deleuze defined the virtual as a cloud of ephemeral images that surround the actual, such that our immaterial *conception* of the world is folded into our *perception* of its material presence — each side impacting our understanding or negotiation of the other, neither side existing independent of the other.⁷⁷

While the possible opposes the real and the virtual opposes the actual, there are other relationships at play between and amongst them. For example, not everything that is real is also actual, but anything actualized has a reality. Likewise, not every virtuality is possible, but every possibility is virtual. What strikes me, then, about Deleuze's account of virtuality is not the two oppositions he presents, but rather the care with which Deleuze goes about *separating virtuality from possibility*, despite the fact that they unmistakably overlap. This begs a question: If virtuality and possibility are so clearly related, why then does Deleuze go to such great lengths to "distinguish" the two? The answer is that the virtual is also our avenue to *potential*, it is the thoughts and images through which we access those strands of the actual that are beyond our ability to perceive. Indeed, Deleuze states that "the varyingly dense layers of the actual object correspond to these, more or less extensive, circles of virtual images. These layers, whilst themselves virtual, constitute the total *impetus* of the object," an always-already-folded *force* that we might choose to read as the *energy* of potential, whose unfolding (through the process of actualization) backforms possibility.⁷⁸ If possibilities are *virtual*, then potentials are *real*; they are the fullest image of the real that could ever exist, too expansive and complex to perceive even when they are actualized and as such accessible only within the folds of the virtual.⁷⁹

If we return to the digital's employment of virtual subjectivity, we find that although screen names, digital game characters, blog posts, and comments posted on social media are so often intangible, ephemeral, and incorporeal, they are nonetheless also wholly affective; they impact our sense of self because they are continually folded into those aspects of our subjectivity that have been actualized, in the process creating a total impetus of the self which reveals (if only in fragments) one's authentic potential. Deleuze himself hinted at this process when he suggested that "actuals imply already constituted individuals, and are ordinarily determined, whereas the relationship of the actual and the virtual forms an acting individuation" — a folding of the virtual self into the actual self in order to form a self-determined, authentic image of an individual.

An excellent example of this process playing out in digital games comes from the first season of Telltale's episodic zombie adventure *The Walking Dead*, a spin-off of the Robert Kirkman comic which inspired the hit television show. The game places players into the role of Lee Everett, a former history professor at the University of Georgia who must protect and mentor Clementine, a young girl orphaned after a zombie outbreak occurs. As with the aforementioned *Heavy Rain*, *The Walking Dead* is a game built around choices, and though it may appear to be modeled after classic point-and-click adventure games, it is almost always concerned more with the player's sense of morality and integrity than with their ability to wield a weapon or solve esoteric puzzles. Sure, players are occasionally tasked with

FIGURE 3.7 *Lee mentors the orphaned Clementine in The Walking Dead.*

dispatching some of the rambling corpses that litter the game's apocalyptic version of Georgia, but more often than not they are tasked with making more mundane yet profound decisions, such as who to support as the leader of their band of survivors (picking oneself is, refreshingly, not an option), who to feed when provisions get low, whether or not to trade supplies with other groups of people, whether or not to let other survivors join the group, or how to explain Lee's checkered past to a frightened and lonely eight-year-old girl.

Through a combination of specific narrative and mechanical methods, the game encourages players to not only create a coherent persona for Lee, but also one that acts as a virtual offshoot of their own subjectivity, a mirror through which they can reflect upon their own attitudes and values. On the narrative side, for example, the game deters players from acting recklessly or erratically by ensuring that Lee is not the only character affected by their actions. Instead, Clementine's fate is strongly tied to Lee's, and the game's remarkably nuanced writing and vocal performances give a sense of weight and significance to many of its morally ambiguous scenarios, creating an anxiety which compels the player toward authentic actions. Added to this, the game's mechanics are built around a complex system of choices and consequences, in which its many characters remember not only the physical actions of the player, but also smaller details that arise within the game's conversation system, such as their attitude toward certain events or ideas, or their choice of words when dealing with delicate issues like the loss of a friend or loved one. As such, players are expected (or perhaps required) to maintain a *consistent* persona throughout the game, to thoughtfully consider every response and every action.⁸⁰

Despite its fantastical elements, *The Walking Dead* is, at its core, a simulation of rather quotidian social dynamics, through which the player creates a virtual persona in order to imagine how specific actions and attitudes might affect the world around them. Such virtual subjectivities may lack real-world consequences, yet they are nonetheless *real* because they say something about who we are (or better yet because they allow us to say something about who we *think* we are). Lee Everett may be nothing more than an image, a backstory, and a few interchangeable lines of dialog, but through him we catch sight of our possibilities, fold them into our perspective of the world, and reflect upon our full potential, the very sort of *reflection* that Sartre understood to be essential to the constitution of the self.

As mentioned earlier, Sartre disagreed with Husserl's assertion of a transcendental ego, and his pointedly titled volume on *The Transcendence of the Ego* was an attempt to move beyond a philosophy structured around a unified self and toward a philosophy in which nothingness always stands *behind* consciousness, such that consciousness is itself "no-thing" or a nonbeing.⁸¹ Standing *before* consciousness, on the other hand, is an intuitive sense of the self as something divided or apart from the world — an outwardly directed perception of one's facticity which Sartre referred to as "pre-reflective consciousness" — which we then structure *within* consciousness through the act of *reflection*, a sort of memory of oneself that undergirds one's very understanding of self.⁸² One may intuitively recognize that one is not the same as the thing that one sees and touches, for example, but only through reflection can one think of oneself as *a thing that sees and touches*, which Richard Pearce describes as "a way of representing ourselves to ourselves in order to know, to have knowledge of, ourselves."⁸³ From Sartre's perspective, the ego is not an inherent part of consciousness but rather an object *outside* of consciousness, formed through a reflection upon one's existence within and amongst a facticity. As such, the self is not transcendental but rather empirical, an object experienced through consciousness, such that "the I is not *discovered* in reflection," as David Detmer puts it, "but rather *constituted*."⁸⁴

The folding of virtual subjectivity into the actual is itself a form of reflection, whereby one creates an imagined memory of oneself in order to constitute a fuller, more accurate sense of the meaning of one's Being. As the second of our unconscious relays, we can refer to the reflective folding of virtual subjectivity into the actual as a *relay of ecstasis*, for to reflect is to see oneself ecstatically, as an object viewed from *outside* of one's consciousness. Yet if we seek unconscious relays as an attempt to grasp at potential, and if our potentiality-for-Being is authenticity — the one "absolute virtue in existentialism" — then we must ask: Are virtual subjectivities authentic? Or, for that matter, what does virtual subjectivity have to do with our recognition of mortality? Sartre broke down his understanding of reflection into two

categories: pure and impure. Impure reflection is *engendered by affect*, imbued with and classified by past experiences or memories, a “bad faith” vision of the present influenced by the merely similar past. Pure reflection, on the other hand, is *affect-less*, a dispassionate understanding of experience that is not swayed by irrational desire or prejudiced by coincidence.⁸⁵ When we consider that the virtual is ephemeral, past-preserving, and wholly affective, it’s clear that Sartre would see virtual subjectivity as wholly inauthentic, so how then can we say that its creation and consideration can lead to authenticity?

When we create virtual subjectivities, our intention is not to live within them but rather to use them — to fold them — in order to reflect upon our actual subjectivity (the self as we tangibly present it to the world). Virtual subjectivities are alternative experiences of Being, and as Deleuze tells us, all experience is an experience of *difference*: “It is difference that is primary in the process of actualization — the difference between the virtuals from which we begin and the actuals at which we arrive.”⁸⁶ Difference is also primary to reflection because reflection is a memory of the past that is juxtaposed against the present, and when we juxtapose our virtual and actual subjectivity — when we lay them atop one another or fold them into one another — we find that the difference between our virtual self and our actual self is nothing less than death. Though our fleshy bodies will eventually wither and decay, our digital profiles on social media websites will live on, an archived and eternally youthful image of the self we wish we could have been; and likewise we’ve already seen how our gaming avatars — with whom we not only identify but also shape and imbue with our own attitudes and desires — die again and again and yet return and relive again and again. Like Walter White, we *desire* virtual subjectivities because the virtual self *is not subject to death*, and yet we often *employ* them to *accept the fact of mortality*, for they present a difference through which we can ecstatically recognize death’s inevitability. To put this another way, immortality is the virtual from which we begin, death is the actual at which we arrive.

The Road to Awe

Let’s briefly recap our journey thus far: the binary logic of the digital fetishizes the thought of possibility at the expense of the perception of potential, leading to a culture (and a cultural imagination) that is “possibilistic to the limit.” Seeing as the recognition of possibility results in an anxiety for the future, and that anxiety discloses one’s authentic potential, we find that our possibilistic culture both accepts and expects anxiety as never before while also desiring authenticity in equal measure. Finally, in our enactment of such

desire, we find two unconscious relays through which we attempt to grasp our lost potential, one a resolute being-toward-death whereby our utmost possibility is made immanent to our potentiality-for-Being, and the other an ecstatic reflection whereby our virtual possibilities are folded into our actual potential. Over the last few pages of this chapter, then, let's look to a set of science-fiction films that, in their attempts to explicitly and unabashedly examine the ramifications one's death holds for one's life, embody or employ *both* the relay of immanence and the relay of ecstasis. In doing so, they allow us to catch sight of not only our authentic potentiality-for-Being, but also another potential we've thus far left relatively unexplored: *the potential of death*. Indeed, contemporary media reveals death to be not an event outside of or oppositional to life, but rather an immanent, constitutive event whose definite possibility paves the road for self-determination and self-individuation. Although they are intimately connected, the potential of death is not simply our potentiality-for-Being, nor is it merely the fact or inevitability of death, nor is it the risk of trauma or disease or decay. Rather, the potential of death is the continually unfolding ramifications of mortality on our lives, our culture, and our very interpretation of the meaning of Being.

The films that we'll examine — primarily Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain* and Steven Soderbergh's *Solaris*, with references to *The Tree of Life*, *Melancholia*, *Enter the Void*, and *Cloud Atlas* — do not by any means represent an exhaustive list of contemporary moving-image narratives which employ multiple potentializing relays. That said, sci-fi as a genre is exceptionally concerned with the impact of technology on culture and the human experience, so it's perhaps unsurprising that it would prove to be a fertile ground for exploring or analogizing the impact of the digital on our relationship to mortality.⁸⁷ In each of these films, then, we find a unique account of virtual being-toward-death and split subjectivity, and together they provide a broad perspective on the forms that such potentializing relays can take. This is not to say, however, that they present a uniform perspective on the meaning of Being or the potential of death, nor that they agree upon what happens to consciousness after the body ceases to function. In fact, within the six films we can trace three separate traditions of thought: *The Fountain* and *Melancholia* present us an atheistic stance in which death is the absolute end of one's consciousness, *Solaris* and *The Tree of Life* are more in line with the Abrahamic religions in their positioning of death as a transition of consciousness to another plane of Being (whether it be a heavenly space or something more liminal), while *Enter the Void* and *Cloud Atlas* give us hints of reincarnation akin to Eastern religious philosophies like Buddhism and Hinduism. Nonetheless, when considered together they make visible something much more essential to our experience as consciously mortal individuals: the role that death plays in our capacity for Being.

To begin, we can first state that there are two Tommy Creos, just as there are two Kris Kelvins. Well, technically speaking there is only one Tommy, and only one Kris, but then again perhaps there are three Tommys, and any number of Krises. But really there are two Tommy Creos, and there are two Kris Kelvins. Okay, let's back up for a moment to explain. In Darren Aronofsky's 2006 sci-fi film *The Fountain*, viewers are confronted with three narrative timelines, spread across three seemingly distinct temporospatial settings. Yet each of these timelines revolves around the relationship between the same two basic characters — a man and his dying lover — who are, in turn, played by the same two actors in each timeline, Hugh Jackman and Rachel Weisz. The first timeline is set in sixteenth-century Spain during the Inquisition, where Queen Isabella sends the conquistador Tomás to the jungles of “New Spain” in search of a Mayan-protected secret that would defeat not only the power-mad Grand Inquisitor but even death itself: the biblical “Tree of Life.”⁸⁸ In the second timeline, we find contemporary neuroscientist Dr. Tommy Creo desperately searching for a cure to his wife Izzi's cancer, going so far as to forgo the few precious days he has left with her in order to pursue what he imagines will be a miracle cure. Finally, in the third timeline we have the future space traveler Tom, haunted by the memories of his dead lover Isabelle as he sails across the Milky Way in his bubble-like spaceship toward the dying star Xibalba, which he hopes will prolong the life of his only companion, a tree whose bark has in turn sustained his life for countless hundreds of years. No matter the timeline, one thing remains constant: Tomás/Tommy/Tom is eternally haunted by his lover's inescapable mortality, a fact made all the more unsettling by his inability to recognize his own.

FIGURE 3.8 *Tom and the dying tree float through space in The Fountain.*

In Steven Soderbergh's 2002 film *Solaris* — not so much a remake of Andrei Tarkovsky's sci-fi classic as much as a new adaptation of Stanislaw Lem's original novel — we find a somewhat similar set of circumstances. In an unspecified future, psychiatrist Kris Kelvin, played by George Clooney, is asked to investigate an international space station orbiting a nebulous planet called Solaris, where the crew have mysteriously cut off contact with the outside world. Once on board, Kelvin finds that Solaris itself appears to be a sentient Being, capable of reading the thoughts and memories of those nearby and, more troublingly, replicating or re-animating figures from their past. In Kelvin's case, this results in the appearance of his deceased wife Rheya, who committed suicide several years earlier back on Earth. Throughout the film, Kelvin is forced to come to terms not only with his anger and bitterness regarding his wife's suicide, but also with significantly more existential issues such as the nature and temporality of his own existence.

Both *The Fountain* and *Solaris* are films about angst, their protagonists painfully, willfully ignorant of the future even as their utmost possibilities float visibly across the horizon. In a moment we'll see how these protagonists attempt to come to terms with their angst through the creation of inauthentic, virtual subjectivities which are not subject to death, but it's worth noting that we also find various incarnations of angst (and various positions toward it) in other contemporary sci-fi films as well. In Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia*, for example, two sisters adopt strikingly different attitudes toward the sudden appearance of a rogue planet that threatens to destroy Earth; one a pathological fetishization of death, the other an absolute denial of its possibility. In Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*, an architect recalls a bittersweet summer when he first developed a close relationship with a brother who would later die in combat, a fluidly anxious recollection into

FIGURE 3.9 *Kris Kelvin first steps aboard the space station orbiting Solaris.*

which the film ambitiously folds not only the creation of life on Earth but also its inevitable destruction. Gaspar Noe's *Enter the Void* presents us with an anxiety not so much toward-death, but rather within-death, seeing as it is staged entirely (and quite literally) through the eyes of a character who is killed within its opening act, and who subsequently haunts a seedy urban district of Japan as a specter anxiously searching for some form of release or closure. And in *Cloud Atlas*, co-directed by Tom Tykwer and the Wachowski sisters, we find six intertwined storylines, each taking place in different time periods ranging from the mid-nineteenth century to sometime in the twenty-third, yet each connected through shared recollections of the past and an anxiety toward the future. Like *The Fountain* and *Solaris*, each of these films traces its angst through the development of virtual subjectivities, which in turn reconfigure the central character's perception of the possibility of death.

Let's return then to *The Fountain*, and to understand *The Fountain*, one must first solve its puzzle. Indeed, *The Fountain* is a classic example of a puzzle film, darting back and forth between various timelines, fluidly mixing visual and narrative elements which frequently disorient the audience and make it difficult to tell how or even if its disparate storylines coexist. Upon careful analysis, however, it's clear that (although each individual viewer's experience is subjective and open to interpretation) the film itself has one ultimate "solution," one narrative configuration that clarifies its overall thematic structures and ambitions. Although the film presents various visual clues as to this "solution" — such as the appearance of the twentieth-century Izzi within the frequent hallucinations of space traveler Tom, or the reading of Izzi's book as a transitional device into the sixteenth-century timeline — there are ultimately two key sequences that help to cohesively situate the film's narrative, both of which are contained within its central, contemporary storyline.

The first of these takes place in a hospital where Izzi, a writer, hovers on the edge of succumbing to her cancer. When Tommy comes to visit, Izzi tells him that she's no longer afraid of death, and that she's purposefully leaving her latest book unfinished so that Tommy can write the final chapter after she has passed. With Tommy unwilling and unable to accept Izzi's recognition of the inevitable, she attempts to comfort him by telling the story of a Mayan tour guide she once met, who, equally unable to accept the death of his father, planted a seed over his grave. "Moses said his father became part of that tree. He grew into the wood, into the bloom, and when a sparrow ate the tree's fruit, his father flew with the birds. He said death was his father's road to awe. That's what he called it ... *the road to awe*." Later that day, just after Tommy is pushed out of the room when Izzi goes into cardiac arrest, he is informed that one of his experimental cancer treatments — a compound derived from an "old growth tree in Guatemala" — has radically reversed not only the signs of cancer in its test subjects, but also the signs of aging.

When Tommy rushes back to Izzi's side to give her news of the cure, he finds that it has come too late to save her.

The second key to *The Fountain* is the short final scene of the film, where we find Tommy standing over Izzi's grave holding a seed pod in his hand, which he drops into a small hole in the ground at his feet. Piecing together Izzi's story with the breakthrough cure from Tommy's research, we can surmise that the cure came from a tree planted atop a grave, and that space traveler Tom's tree is not the biblical Tree of Life from the sixteenth-century plotline (a common misinterpretation of the film) but rather a tree that Tommy planted over Izzi's grave, its bark — somehow imbued with Izzi's body or life-force in the film's most quasi-mystical sci-fi conceit — having been used to sustain his life for centuries, meaning that Tommy and Tom are in fact the same person. Added to this, Izzi's unfinished book (inspired by her tour guide's story and her husband's inability to cope with her impending death) is in fact the sixteenth-century storyline, a fictional tale of a conquistador who searches for the mystical tree of life in order to both save his lover and cheat death. In Izzi's narrative, Tomás finds the Tree of Life guarded by Mayans who worship a dying star known as Xibalba — whose eventual explosive death will, they believe, one day renew life on Earth, just as the death of the original "first father" created the seed for life — which we can assume was the inspiration for Tom's journey to the star, and his hope that its death will continue to sustain the life of Izzi's tree (and, by extension, not only himself but Izzi as well).

Stepping back from these complex narrative threads we find that the three seemingly disparate timelines, which we could easily call the past, present,

FIGURE 3.10 *Tommy plants a tree over Izzi's grave.*

and future, can instead be summed up with another triptych: that of fantasy, memory, and reality. This reading — which positions space traveler Tom as the diegetically central character, the twenty-first-century storyline as Tom's memory of his wife's passing, and the sixteenth-century storyline as the plot to Izzi's last novel (which Tom cannot bring himself to finish) — is essential for glimpsing the film's employment of split subjectivity, for it requires an ecstatic view not only of time but also of Being itself. On the one hand, we have Tom's memories of the death of Izzi at the turn of the twenty-first century, through which we witness his "actual" self, defined by an outspoken view of death as a "disease" that cannot be reversed, and therefore a belief that death is both a physical and an intellectual failure. On the other, we have the conquistador Tomás, a virtual subjectivity through which Tom clings to the notion that there was (or is) a possibility of indefinitely averting the deaths of both Izzi and himself. Crucially, Izzi left this story hanging right at the moment when Tomás is about to discover the Tree of Life, and as such appeared to be challenging Tommy: Would he write an ending in which Tomás uses the Tree to "live together forever" with his queen, or would he write an ending in which Tomás fails in his quest for immortality just as we all must?

Solaris, too, presents a clear narrative strategy for making visible the actual and virtual subjectivities of Kris Kelvin, a strategy that is in fact the film's most significant departure from Tarkovsky's classic version of the story. Rather than leaving the circumstances of Kris's past and Rhea's suicide ambiguous, as does Tarkovsky, Soderbergh deftly intertwines flashback sequences into the narrative flow that show us the disintegration of their marriage and Kris's role in the depression that eventually led to Rhea's overdose. Most notable is their inability to agree upon the existence of a higher power, the genesis of life, or the meaning of death, an argument that spills out during a dinner party with Kris's friends. "Given all the elements of the known universe and enough time," Kris condescendingly explains, "our existence is inevitable. It's no more mysterious than trees or sharks, we are a mathematical probability and that's all." Rhea, who sees in death not an abstract probability but rather her only definite possibility, frustratedly asks in response: "How do you explain that of all the billions of creatures on this planet, we are the only ones who are conscious of our own mortality?" "You can't explain that," Kris fires back, "that doesn't mean there's God!"

In moments like these, Soderbergh allows us to glimpse Kris's *actual* subjectivity, a worldview which, on a basic level, makes it all but impossible for him to see life or death as anything beyond "mathematical probabilities," yet more importantly a disposition that prevents him from recognizing *Solaris*'s replications as anything more than aberrant monsters who cannot possibly be truly alive. This is, of course, Kris's response in his first encounter with a resurrected Rhea, whom he immediately launches out into space in

order, it would seem, to reject the explicit existential questions that were resurrected with her. Once he recognizes that these “visitor” Rheyas — as the few crew members left on board the ship call them — will continue to appear, Kris takes a different tact: he carefully and purposely chooses to adopt a new subjective position, an admittedly affected, performative, and thus *virtual* persona that allows for a greater sense of religious and philosophical ambiguity and in turn makes it easier for him to find contentment with his resurrected (and therefore quite literally virtual) wife.⁸⁹ This virtual subjectivity, like Tomás the conquistador, comes to view death not as necessity, or even inevitability, but rather as a transitional moment between existences.

In both *The Fountain* and *Solaris*, we find the split between one’s actual and virtual subjectivities located within the split between memory and fantasy (or perhaps memory and bad faith), a distinction reversed within *The Tree of Life*, where the recollections of its protagonist, Jack, are presented not as proof of subjectivity made actual, but rather a hazy, dream-like, *cloud-like* series of images; a virtual, past-self juxtaposed against an actualized, present-self mired in fantasies of death and resurrection. The protagonist of *Enter the Void* is also certainly split, but split by the literal event of death — his virtual persona left behind on the bathroom floor where he died, his actual desires visible within his prolonged and transitory wanderings into and out of buildings and bodies. In adapting David Mitchell’s labyrinthine novel to the screen, the most significant change or conceit in *Cloud Atlas* was the choice to cast a small group of actors in multiple roles across each of the six storylines, creating not only narrative connections between them but also the hint of resurrected or reincarnated personas, an infinite virtual experience of Being that outlasts the finite experience of actual life. Most interesting is perhaps *Melancholia*, where the split subject is not one person but two, each of the sisters representing an extreme version of authenticity or bad faith. It would be fruitless to declare one the actual subject and the other virtual, but suffice it to say they are nonetheless, in their final moments, folded into and through one another, such that their acknowledgment of possibility and vision of potential are one and the same.

Both Tom and Kris eventually encounter a moment in which they must choose not only between living and dying, but also between an inauthentic fallenness into the world of others or an authentic self-reflection and a resolute Being-toward-death. For Kris, this moment arrives when *Solaris* begins to take on mass and threatens to swallow the ship, presumably killing the humans left on board. As he stares into the only escape pod, he imagines the course his life will take back on Earth: exactly the same as the one he left behind, a continual state of bad faith where he smiles and nods while feeling nothing inside. Stepping back from the pod and closing its doors, Kris chooses to face his anxiety rather than flee from it. Kris chooses death.

FIGURE 3.11 *Kris and Rheya's favorite poem, and her last request.*

As for Tom, his moment occurs when Izzi's tree, already frail from sustaining his life for hundreds of years, dies within moments of reaching Xibalba (an echo of Izzi's death moments before the discovery of Tommy's "cure"). Recognizing not simply the inevitable or irrevocable nature of death but also its necessity, Tom decides to finish Izzi's story, whereby Tomás greedily drinks the sap of the Tree of Life and, like the Mayan's first father who gave up his body to create the seed of the world, becomes not immortal but rather a part of the everlasting cycle of life, his flesh erupting into blooms of flowers which blanket the ground surrounding the tree. Following this lead, Tom prepares himself for the moment which he had

FIGURE 3.12 *Tom's body pulled apart by the blast of a dying star.*

denied for centuries, launching himself out of the ship and into Xibalba's exploding body, his own flesh disintegrating into particles which flow into the tree and burst forth as flowers in full bloom.

What we see in these last moments, these final instances of death, is not simply a decision to recognize or accept the fact of mortality, but rather a reflective folding of subjectivities and a resolute Being-toward-death that results in an authentic self-determination. When Kris turns away from his last chance of escape, he is not submitting to death (whether through suicide or a refusal to fight), but rather rejecting the possibility of once again being thrown into a world and a life that he finds uncanny. Instead, he begins to synthesize his experiences, to stand outside of life not only to catch sight of its trajectory but also, and more importantly, to nudge it in a new direction. Likewise, in projecting himself into Xibalba, Tom is not killing himself, but rather refusing to deny a death that was always his utmost and only possibility, a death that was always already immanent to his entire Being. Without death, these films show us, we could not possibly recognize the necessity — let alone our capacity — for self-determination, for *situating ourselves* within a world that is unequivocally determinative and utterly sublime. Indeed, as both Tommy and Kris discover, without the unfolding potential of death, we could not possibly Be.