

[Storytelling as Playful Practice toward Social Cohesion and Overcoming the Fear of Death]

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[Abstract] *Approaching Alfonso Gomez-Rejon's 2015 film, Me and Earl and the Dying Girl through an evolutionary literary perspective draws attention to the adaptive advantages of fictional storytelling with respect to the film's treatment of three key universals of human evolution: the propensity toward social integration; overcoming one's fear of death and dealing with grief; and transcending the emotional anxiety that accompanies the incomprehensible meaninglessness of a life that ends, inevitably, in death.*

[Keywords] *storytelling; theory of mind; cognitive play; grief; evolutionary literary theory*

Me and Earl and the Dying Girl is a quirky tragi-comedy that follows a simple, time-honoured story arch: boy meets girl, boy and girl become friends, girl dies, boy is heart-broken, but has a new appreciation for life. Beneath the surface of this cringe-inducing cliché, the film is a genuine tear-earner, a clever and heartfelt coming-of-age tale that speaks to the intrinsic benefits of cultivating friendships despite the fear of social rejection and the potential for heartbreak and the loss of a loved one. The film tells the story of an awkward teenage boy, Greg (the 'Me' of the title), and how he deals with the emotional challenges of navigating a minefield of high school social relations, avoiding the potential for embarrassment and humiliation, while ever-fearful of transitioning toward the even scarier prospect of university life. In the midst of all this, Greg is coerced by his mother into hanging out with Rachel, a classmate he knows only superficially, and who has been diagnosed with leukaemia. While *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* draws indelibly upon a predominantly teen audience buying into the premise: how would I deal with these situations?, I believe the film's genuine appeal may be more richly understood through an exploration of the film's underlying treatment of three universal principals of human evolution: 1. humankind's adaptation for social cooperation; 2. the significant role played by displays of sadness and grieving rituals in solidifying social bonds; and 3. the function of art and fictional storytelling in providing playful practice for negotiating new and unfamiliar situations, and for imaginatively transcending the emotional anxiety that accompanies the incomprehensible meaninglessness of a life that ends, inevitably, in death.

The film begins with a short narrative introduction, incorporating a voiceover (Greg's) and a mixed media sequence that presents the audience with Greg's attempt to begin the story: scenes of Greg sitting at his desk and pacing around his bedroom are coupled with a clay animation of the narrative method Greg considers adopting. I will return to the discussion of the evolutionary adaptive function of art below; for now, I believe it valuable to note how the film employs artistic meta-narrative devices to draw attention to the artistic space of creation, making the point that storytelling is not merely a by-product of lived experience, but rather, storytelling is inherently interwoven into the everyday fabric of life; the implication is that we live in and through the stories we tell. As the narrative proper begins, we are presented with a number of establishing shots that together evoke a feeling of unpreparedness, disorientation, alienation and fear: the image of Greg slouched against the window of a school bus portrays his indifferent, apathetic attitude; a wide-angle overhead shot of the tree-lined street – school buses coming and going, the American flag centre-framed – is a depiction of familiarity and order; it is an order disturbed as the camera pivots to a birds-eye view, looking directly down the façade of the high school building. The camera pivot technique is repeated a number of times throughout the film; on the surface it is a quirky, artistic flare; yet, considered more critically, the pivot is disorientating, depicting the life of a teenager as having the potential to be flipped on its head at any time. At a more extreme emotive level, the pivot, from what would be the ledge of the building's roof, is the disturbing jumper's perspective of a contemplative suicide. The film, as a whole, does not lend itself to such explicit fearful disturbance; yet there remains, throughout, a lingering anxiety that elicits empathy

and concern for the protagonist and other characters as they struggle to feel comfortable within themselves and inside their social surroundings. Further establishing shots – a crowded stairwell, a chaotic hallway – depict the hustle and bustle of high school; a long shot of Greg zooms into a close-up before the camera turns 180° to a wide-angle shot, focalized not so much on Greg's point of view, as he looks out upon an inhospitable world, but hovering above, in a consciousness that is somewhat detached from embodied experience, a consciousness that finds voice in a deadpan voiceover giving a reasoned account of Greg's threat assessment and survival strategy. The camera flips 180° again, tracing Greg's movement through the hallways as he presents the lay of the land of Schenley High School, what he calls 'a world unto itself' (2:50). It is a succinct introduction to the universal fear easily aroused in the individual entering into the potentially hostile world of other people.

[1] In need of a large brain – Social complexity and strategies for survival

Humans seek social connection for a variety of reasons, while wishing to avoid the pitfalls of embarrassing or negative experiences that may lead to social devaluation or outright rejection. Social integration is contingent upon the individual's capacity for assessing and negotiating the associated risks and rewards. The social brain hypothesis posits that the complex social life of humans made necessary the sufficiently large capacity of the human brain (Oatley 624). In this light, Torben Grodal draws attention to the "complex mental structures" required to assess and negotiate environments that offer opportunities for both positive and negative experiences (123). Accordingly, thinking is based on the generation of mental models that incorporate characteristics and inferences attained from an individual's experiences in the social world (Oatley 624). One would be hard pressed to think of a more complex and perilous social environment than the hallways of an American high school. At this stage of their life, teenagers are still in the process of developing the rigorous mental structures and emotional capacity necessary for their survival in the 'real' world. One way humans manoeuvre in complex environments that require a high level of informational processing is through a highly adapted capacity to recognize patterns, and a propensity to categorize (Boyd "Experiments with Experience" 227). To this end, Greg adopts a system of swift pattern recognition and classification: "By senior year, [he] had mastered the languages and customs of its various sovereign states. The head nods of Jock Nation, the fist bumps of the Kingdom of Stoners, the innocuous witticisms of the People's Republic of Theater Dorks" (2:52). Greg's strategy revolves around obtaining "citizenship in every nation. Passports to everywhere ... [being] on low-key good terms with everyone" (3:22). He maintains surface-level friendships without investing fully of himself or committing completely to any single social group, which, he explains, "can never guarantee you total security" (3:18). Greg's apathetic indifference comes at the cost of his own personal development, for he lacks the kind of

robust practice in problem solving and social interaction that interpersonal contestation and cooperation contributes to the well-rounded development of the individual; as Grodal notes, doing “nothing will not enhance fitness in the long run” (123).

In his homelife, Greg appears to have supportive, loving, open-minded parents; there is evidence of his being positively influenced by his father, a rather quirky sociology professor. He finds support also in the form of a ‘new-age’ high school history teacher, Mr. McCarthy, who Greg describes as “the only reasonable adult in all of Schenley [High School]” (4:54). Greg hides out in McCarthy’s office during lunch break, since the lunch hall is a no-go zone of hotly disputed territory, a challenge to Greg’s non-committal social strategy. Strong parental figures and role models are an integral component in the construction of a child’s potential personhood. In his theory of human culture and behaviour, René Girard points to the observation and mimicry of parental figures as fundamental to the development of human potentials (Palaver). Girard proposes that we use others as a model of how we may understand and enter into the world: “Man is the creature who does not know what to desire, and he turns to others in order to make up his mind. We desire what others desire because we imitate their desires” (Girard 122). Girard’s idea is that children from a very early stage learn by observing and copying their parents, playing and practicing at being the adults they will grow to become. Parents, in the meantime, provide the protective care and support, the encouragement and modeling that will provide the foundations of the child’s readiness for their integration into social life. As children mature, they must learn to balance greater independence and their own self-conscious insecurities with the discomforts and risks of social interaction, confounded by the ever-expanding field of potential friends and foes. Choosing a best friend is an obvious first step in developing social relations away from the protective umbrella of parental care; a best friend is a powerful asset to have at one’s side when negotiating ever-increasingly complex social situations. Greg and Earl appear to be best friends, yet despite the obvious bond, Greg is unable to commit himself to speaking of them as friends, referring, instead, to Earl as a “co-worker.” The “work” refers to their creative projects, clay-animation spoofs of classic films, such as: *Rosemary Baby*, *Carrots*, *The 400 Bros*, *Senior Citizen Cane*, and *ate 1/2*. Greg displays an emotional insensitivity in referring to Earl as his “co-worker;” yet we may perceive a certain logic in his assessment if we view friendship as something we work towards, not a pre-supposed relationship. Greg’s voice-over explains that they “come from pretty different backgrounds, but somehow like most of the same things” (17:20); the implication is that the “things” they like and “work at” together are the very things that develop and signal their friendship. The two “friends” enjoy the classics of foreign cinema, such as Werner Herzog’s *Burden of Dreams* and Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows*, which leads to their creative film projects. According to the novelist and professor of cognitive psychology Keith Oatley, engagement in fiction makes for good practice in “inference making,” for reasoning “what people mean and what kinds of people they are” (621). Oatley cites numerous cognitive psychological studies, along with brain imaging studies, that have found engagement in literary fiction to improve empathy, theory of mind capabilities, and social understanding (619–620; 625). Greg,

as an only child, works toward a comprehension of friendship through practice and experimentation in fictional projects, rather than from an a priori understanding of what friendship means. Art, in this way, provides a mimetic conduit through which Greg may develop his imaginative capacity to understand and enter into complex social situations previously unencountered.

Greg and Earl's homemade movie projects dominate the first half of the film. While the creative projects provide Greg with a tool for developing his social skills, their explicit and creative meta-fictionality within the greater film container exemplify the way in which humans employ art and storytelling as a means of imaginatively exploring potential ways of being, of negotiating uncertainty, and shaping the life they hope to participate in. Adopting ideas from performance studies and the work of theorists such as Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, we may interpret Greg and Earl's film viewing and creative projects as liminal activities in which strict cultural codes, such as definitions of friendship and the rules of social cooperation, are suspended, in favour of various creative and artistic modes of imaginative play (Carlson 8–19). The idea is that liminal activities give rise to new cultural insights and coping strategies that allow the individual to transition through challenging developmental stages of their life. Similar to Huizinga's conception of play, art and storytelling may be seen as a tool through which culture and meaning arise, rather than a direct representation of what we find in the world (Huizinga 46). 'Huizinga', Carlson notes, 'considers the development or reinforcement of a community spirit or consciousness, "communitas," to be one of the basic features of play' (22).

[2] “Hey bro, I’m not your friend” – Fears of social-devaluation

Though Greg appears comfortable with his social survival strategy, and at ease with his “co-worker” friendship with Earl, a significant challenge comes when his mother coerces him into spending time with a girl from school, recently diagnosed with leukaemia, who he knows only in his typically superficial way. Thrust into a complex social situation by his parents, the situation arouses in Greg a human universal fear, the possibility of social devaluation and rejection. He visits Rachel, and subdues his nervous discomfort through humour and self-deprecation, valuable tools of social bonding. In order to finally convince her that he is not spending time with her out of pity, Greg points to the mutual benefit of social cooperation, pleading with Rachel, “my mom is gonna turn my life into a living hell if I don’t hang out with you” (12:40). Her acceptance allows him to open up in a more honest manner, and in time he admits to his social awkwardness, telling Rachel: “I’m not in a group. I’m terminally awkward ... for a kid like me, in high school ... best case scenario ... just ... survive ... survive without creating any mortal enemies or hideously embarrassing yourself forever” (25:50). As Greg intimates, negotiating social relations is not merely an inconvenience, it is a matter of survival. Earl sums up Greg's fear of

social rejection, explaining to Rachel: “Bottom line, dude’s terrified of callin’ somebody his friend ... and they sayin’, Hey bro, I’m not your friend” (37:20). In response to Greg’s vulnerability, Rachel insists that he join her and her friends in the lunch hall. Greg’s commitment to Rachel compromises his strategy of world-citizenship, and, as he fears, his nervousness leads to social embarrassment and conflict (29:00).

Having developed a genuine care and affection for Rachel, a far greater challenge comes to Greg in the form of having to cope with the very real prospect of his new friend dying. Greg and Rachel’s friendship is nourished on the emotional commitment they invest in one another, and as their bond grows, so too, their sadness and despair intensify. Rachel becomes progressively more withdrawn as she goes through the debilitating effects of chemo. She is scared and upset with how she looks and finds it much harder to deal with than she thought it would be. She laments to Greg feelings that reflect her own sense of social devaluation: “Everyone comes in here and sees me and they’re so clearly repulsed” (41:20). The thought of living in such pain compels her into making peace with the inevitability of death, and she makes the decision to abandon further chemo treatments (1:03:05). Greg’s subsequent anger at Rachel’s acceptance of her own death is understandable, as a reflection of his sadness and confusion; however, his anxiety and incapacity to deal with Rachel’s decision may be more acutely understood as a product of human evolution and his youthfulness. An evolutionary expansion in the neocortex, especially in the frontal lobes, led to higher order executive functions in memory, language, imaginative thought, planning, decision making, regulating emotions and moderating social behaviour. The problem for Greg is that the regions of the brain largely responsible for these functions, particularly with respect to social cognition, undergo significant developmental during adolescence (Choudhury, et al. 2006). As Matthias Clasen notes with respect to the psychological effects of children’s early exposure to “scary media presentations” (162–163), Greg lacks the emotional maturity to cope with the negative psychological consequences of his premature exposure to the complex subject of death.

[3] The adaptive advantages of storytelling

While theorists in the still relatively nascent field of evolutionary literary theory debate where exactly the adaptive advantages of fictional storytelling lie, Denis Dutton’s three types provide a solid foundation upon which to expand (Dutton 187–188; see also Jons-son 2020). Modifying the terminology used by Dutton, evolutionary literary theorists generally allocate the adaptive advantage of fictional storytelling to one or more of the following three types:

- **Low-cost scenario simulation**
- Stories provide the “testing grounds for hypothetical scenarios” (McAdams 156), a form of low-cost, low-risk framework for emotionally and cognitively engaging simulation (Clasen 157).

— **Instruction manual**

Dutton proposes that “[s]tories, – whether overtly fictional, mythological, or representing real events – can be richly instructive sources of factual (or putatively factual information)” (188).

— **Sharing and exploring the mental states of others**

Stories are useful tools for developing theory of mind capacity as an aid toward social cohesion and cooperation.

Brian Boyd’s contributions to the field of evolutionary literary theory are instructive in how we might advance upon Dutton’s classification. I believe that *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, in its treatment of the risk-reward aspects of social integration and a teenager’s difficulty to comprehend the meaning of life and death, also provides further insights into how we might offer amendments to Dutton’s classification. To begin, I would argue that the ‘scenario simulation’ category may be absorbed under the wider classification of ‘cognitive play’. Boyd proposes that art is a form of rigorous cognitive play that helps refine our mental capacities, particularly with respect to social cognition (“Experiments with Experience” 230). In this light, drawing again upon Huizinga’s conception of play as constitutive of cultural meaning, storytelling may be seen as an integrative bridge between existing frameworks of embedded knowledge and ideas and concepts that sit beyond the horizon of knowledge; whether these ideas lie hidden in the realm of the unconscious, or await in new experiences. Stories, no matter how far-fetched or ‘unrealistic’, typically contain a readily accessible semblance of the real, of what is already known, often in characterizations that resemble ‘real-life’ situations and concerns. We find this in Greg and Earl’s film projects, which are peculiar and outlandish, yet accessible in their resemblance to the classics of cinema. The adaptive advantage of storytelling is not to be found in its productive capacity to merely generate future-consequential scenarios, of which we will never have enough; rather, it is more likely to be found in the increased cognitive competency to integrate imaginative ideas into existing frameworks of knowledge, so as to better prepare the individual for whatever may come. I believe the second category, storytelling as instruction manual, ought to be reconsidered under the category, vehicle for the transmission of cultural complexity. Once again, Boyd’s comments are revealing:

Art ... can create work worth human attention for a long time— human instances of mastery that last, that have been designed to appeal to other humans, including those still to come, and that therefore embody a trust that humanly achieved complexity can survive even in the face of death (“Experiments with Experience” 231).

Factual information alone is less important than the human ability to share from one generation to the next (and beyond) how specific cultural knowledge and practices facilitated a mastery over one’s surrounding environment; in short, the transference of a record of the relationship between culture and nature.

Brian Boyd is particularly instructive in highlighting the adaptive advantages of art and storytelling toward social cohesion, for it is, arguably, in light of the enhancement

of social bonding and cooperation that storytelling is most bioculturally advantageous. While humans have multiple means at their disposal for accomplishing many of the individual and social tasks required of life, what separates fictional storytelling from other tools, what makes storytelling the Swiss-Army knife of the biocultural toolbox, is its capacity to attend to such a wide spectrum of human universal needs, and to interconnect multiple cognitive functions. The incomparable adaptive advantage of storytelling lies in three specific attributes: 1. Tellability; 2. Accessibility; 3. Flexibility. Fictional stories are (to many at least) vivid and memorable, easy to obtain and share, and generally easy to relate to; stories can be adapted over time to appeal to future generations and different cultures. These attributes reinforce the view that adaptive advantage of storytelling lies not in aiding a quantitative accumulation of facts and hypothetical scenarios, but in exercising and expanding cognitive capacities that allow humans to better integrate new information into existing frameworks of knowledge and to share this information for the benefit and enrichment of social cohesion and the advantage of future generations.

[4] **Sitting here thinking death, death – Life as an artistic preparation for death**

Having examined some of the theoretical underpinnings of the adaptive advantages of storytelling, I would like to return to *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* and the film's use of storytelling as a means through which Greg deals with Rachel's death in a way that is ultimately life-affirming.

Though it may warrant its own category, I believe the preservation of cultural complexity incorporates within its sphere the universal human need to attain a 'sense of meaning', a sense of understanding life's purpose in view of our inevitable death (Carroll 2018). Death is an unescapable fact of life, our awareness of which is a consequence of enriched high-level cognitive functions, particularly with respect to imaginative thought, memory, and language. The by-product of a rich reflective memory situates humankind in an ever-unfolding temporal space, whose extremes border upon the conjectural uncertainty of what came before and what awaits us in the afterlife. In *On the Origin of Stories*, Brian Boyd observes: "To judge from grave rituals dating back at least 70,000 years, and from evidence of the fear of death and the hope of immortality in the records of early civilizations, the preoccupation with death has loomed large ever since the appearance of a distinctly human culture" (404). If the oldest and utmost fear is fear of the unknown, what greater unknown is there but death? Jonathan Gottschall points out that in light of our ineffable fear of the unknown, "[t]he storytelling mind is allergic to uncertainty, randomness, and coincidence. It is addicted to meaning" (103). Just as the capacity for reflective imagination leads our species into anxiety, imaginative thinking and storytelling may also bring comfort, in providing a sense of meaning and life's purpose, as well as positing possibly comforting scenarios in regard to the afterlife. Is this not how humankind arrived at the universal idea of God? As an act of imaginative

storytelling? Unlike universal fears of predators, contagions, and social devaluation (fears which call for an immediately response in the order of freeze, fight or flight), our imaginative awareness of our inevitable death, the exact timing of which remains largely unknown, gives cause not to fear, but to an anxiety that lingers in the background of our lives. Greg demonstrates clearly his own preoccupation with the subject: “I’m getting all weird about it. And ... I can’t get unweird because despite what you said I’m clearly still sitting here thinking death, death” (23:15). Coerced into making a film for Rachel, Greg is propelled to invest in a subject that he is not yet emotionally ready to deal with. It is not that Greg is fearful of Rachel judging the film. He simply understands that a film will not stop his friend from dying, a film cannot beat cancer. And while art has helped him navigate life and social relations up to this point, the very real prospect of Rachel’s death brings Greg face to face with the existential question, what’s the point of it all: art, life, of anything?

Art and storytelling are the core and container of Greg’s coping mechanism. The container story is the film proper, the one narrated by Greg’s voiceover; it begins with Greg admitting: “I have no idea how to tell this story” (1:02), which draws immediate attention to the difficulties of artistic creation and comprehending the enigma of life. Greg sums up the container story as: “how I made a film so bad it literally killed someone” (2:14). The audience is instructed up front that this is a story that ends in death; yet it is not so much a story about death as it is a story about life, life as story; stories we tell ourselves in order to navigate and lend meaning to life, while simultaneously preparing for life’s inevitable end. Prepared for Rachel’s death, the audience shares in Rachel and Greg’s journey and their respective struggles as a catalyst of social bonding; for, even if we do not watch the film together, film viewing is a collective, shared experience. Greg shapes the container narrative with the aid of animated side-storylines and ironic self-reflection, building layers of artistic expression that open up possibilities of meaning and avenues for interpretation. *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* may not rank with the likes of *Goddard* or *Herzog*, but it is decidedly and self-referentially artsy; and, as such, it welcomes the audience into what Stanley Fish calls an “interpretive community,” a space of co-creative meaning-making. Oatley explains that when faced with a piece of artistic literature, readers tend to experience their own emotions through the simulations they are running, not those of abstract literary characters; by contrast, faced with a narrative written to persuade, readers’ feelings and conclusions tend to align with those specified by the author (625). If we expand Oatley’s consideration of artistic literature to include non-literary texts such as film, we may understand art films like *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* as invitations for emotional self-reflection that draw on simulations of imaginary worlds running in the mind of the viewer.

I believe fictional storytelling and art have another adaptive advantage that seems to be under-examined in the evolutionary literary field; storytelling provides a distraction from the negative by-product of our high-level capacity for imaginative thought; that is, an escape from thinking too much, particularly about the meaninglessness of life in the face of our inevitable death. Research by Dor-Ziderman, Lutz, and Goldstein found

that reminders of death, as simple as death-related linguistic stimuli, result in the downgrading of self-sentient predictive processes (9). Whether or not such a coping mechanism has adaptive advantages for the individual remains the topic of further empirical research and discussion; suffice to consider:

Existential philosophers have long argued that boldly facing the prospects of dying; truly knowing we, rather than everybody else, are going to die, is the factor which can summon the mental resources necessary for overcoming a deeply ingrained acculturation and facilitate an existential shift towards a more authentic and meaningful life. (Heidegger [1962] and Kierkegaard [1983] in Dor-Ziderman et al. 9)

In this light, storytelling may provide the necessary elixir to our troubling thoughts, deep-seated anxieties and cognitive inhibitions in the face of death; for, as Brian Boyd determines, focusing on life provides only a marginal distraction to the anxiety of our inevitable death (“Experiments with Experience” 227).

Inside the container story, Rachel works her way through Greg and Earl’s film oeuvre between chemo treatments. At its core, Greg’s film for Rachel represents both purpose and distraction. As though to illustrate the notion of art as creative living, Greg works on the film all winter, doing virtually zero schoolwork. Greg delivers the film to Rachel at the hospital, and before hitting play, he explains the film as the best he could come up with after numerous failed attempts. The film is vivid, abstract and ethereal, devoid of any attempt to eulogize or provide meaning. There is no narrative or speech that we are made aware of. In its geometric abstraction, there are similarities to the Heider and Simmel experiment. Though, in contrast to the Heider and Simmel film, we are unable to impose a narrative upon the visual images, since Greg’s film is only momentarily or partially accessible to the audience. Instead, we are largely presented with Rachel’s reaction to the film, along with images of the reflected light on the walls of the hospital room, as nurses and doctors and Rachel’s mother rush to attend to her, while Greg stands aside, powerless and overwhelmed by grief. Rachel’s complete absorption in the flickering images suggests her recognition of the film as the unspoken connection between Greg and herself; the film speaks for his investment and commitment to her life as the best version of himself, an artistic, playful exuberance beyond rules and strategies and classification. Like a Swiss Army knife, the container and the core fold in upon one another; Rachel watches the film, as we watch, captivated by Rachel’s blank, comatose expression, illuminated by the light of the film in her last moments of life. The low-order effects of Rachel’s blank facial expression convey neither joy nor sadness; rather, we are left with the intersubjective transference of awe (Grodal 129). The abstract meaninglessness of Greg’s film and Rachel’s transfixed expression are a synthesis of life and art, an expression of life as art in a Socratic preparation for death. Greg is ushered out of the room and a voiceover explains that Rachel slipped into a coma shortly after and died 10 hours later.

[5] Sadness as social cohesion

The hospital scene is a genuine tear-earner and evokes feelings of profound sadness and joy. Facial expressions of joy and sadness are contagious, and appear to be hardwired, suggesting that displays of joy and sadness promote social cohesion by creating emotional resonance within a social group; this helps to explain ritual or collective joy and sadness, such as an audience feels when watching a tragic ending, or the bond we feel in attending a funeral, where feelings of overwhelming love, joy and sadness intermingle (Grodal 129). Grodal cites Nico Frijda in pointing out that “weeping centrally expresses helplessness and in that sense is a surrender and detachment response, a giving up of coping” (127). The implication is that watching sad films relaxes our coping mechanisms, opening us up to social bonding and the care of others. As we were forewarned, Rachel does die; Greg is noticeably sad, though the many months of storytelling, creative play and projects have been valuable practice in cultivating social bonds and developing an emotional maturity that will see him through. Family and friends gather at a service for Rachel, which lays bare the social implications of the death of a loved member of a family and community. Funeral and memorial rituals are an integral aspect of social gathering, bonding and remembrance (Boyd “Some Comments” 25). At this stage, the film steps back into the container of Greg’s narrative voiceover, and the audience has a moment to wipe the tears from their eyes and perhaps question the appeal of such a sad film. Torben Grodal points to various hypotheses seeking to explain our attraction to sad stories, though he stops short of fully accepting that we are attracted to sad stories for the boost in mood we gain from perceiving a persons’ relatively sadder story, or that we take pleasure in exercising our own capacity for empathy; instead, he suggests the reasons behind our enjoyment of sad stories can be found in bio-evolutionary explanations and our adaptation for socialization (123). Grodal explains that the evolutionary roots of sadness are rooted in the mechanisms which attach mothers (parents) to their offspring and vice versa (126); he suggests that attachment mechanisms have expanded to support other social attachments, such as pair-bonding, kin bonding, and tribal bonding (126). Grodal draws upon James Averill’s argument that “grief, as a painful response to separation and loss, is a biological reaction: an evolutionary adaptation to secure social cohesion” (130). As the viewer shares in Greg’s grief and sits back to ponder their attraction to sad films, they likely lean in to hug the person next to them, surrendering coping mechanisms and opening up to the care of others.

Finally, the film’s closing scenes lend themselves to an aspect of storytelling that we may trace back to Homer and the notion of *kleos apthiton*, or eternal renown. The idea is that in order to attain a certain immortality one’s deeds in life must couple with a (re) telling of these deeds. Rachel continues to be a present in Greg’s life after her death; she submitted a letter to Pittsburgh State University on Greg’s behalf, in an effort to convince the university to reconsider Greg’s admission request, explaining how he had neglected his academic responsibilities because of his friendship and generous care. This reiterates the lesson Greg’s teacher tried to impart: “Even after someone dies you can still keep

learning from them. You know, their life. It can keep unfolding itself to you just as long as you pay attention to it” (1:10:50). In the letter, Rachel adds that she hopes it works, “because that would mean I have powers from beyond the grave” (1:33:47). Greg also discovers in Rachel’s room evidence of her creative vitality in life and her affection for their friendship far beyond what he had ever realized during the time they shared. Rather than think of this “speaking from the grave” in terms of immortality and one’s eternal renown, we may consider it as exemplifying the way in which storytelling functions as a vehicle of cultural complexity, carrying one’s presence and life lessons beyond the grave for others to continue to learn from. Like the myths conveyed in the stained-glass windows of gothic cathedrals, stories and art are monuments to the people and ideas that bring communities together in remembrance and reflection.

[6] Conclusion

Me and Earl and the Dying Girl overcomes a façade of cliché to present a thoughtful tale of friendship, life and death. Adopting an evolutionary perspective toward the film proves fruitful to uncovering the tremendous value of art and storytelling as a tool of cognitive play. Creative storytelling and art projects can be viewed as liminal spaces through which the individual may practice and develop their capacity for understanding the mental states of others and forging social bonds. Fictional storytelling, particularly of an artistic nature, invites an emotional self-reflexivity through the viewer’s simulation and construction of imaginary worlds. The highly adaptable, engaging, and accessible nature of storytelling makes it a powerful instrument for training high-level cognitive capabilities in language, imaginative thought, planning and decision making, regulating emotions and moderating social behaviour. Finally, the facilitation of cognitive play and practice through storytelling may allow us to more boldly work toward the creation of authentic and meaningful lives as a preparation for the inevitability of death.

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