

"Clocks Without Hands": Subjective Disorientation, Mnemonic Collapse, and the Absurdity of Long Life in Florian Zeller's *The Father* (2020)

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Abstract

Florian Zeller's *The Father* (2020), an adaptation of his acclaimed 2012 stage play *Le Père*, constitutes one of contemporary cinema's most formally and philosophically audacious engagements with cognitive decline. By narrating the film entirely from within the fracturing consciousness of Anthony — played with devastating precision by Anthony Hopkins — Zeller refuses the comfortable distance of the observational gaze and compels the viewer to inhabit dementia rather than simply witness it. This paper argues that the film operates on three interlocking registers. First, it exposes what Margaret Morganroth Gullette terms the "decline narrative" — the cultural scripting of ageing as inevitable deterioration — from the inside, rendering the cultural blessing of long life a source of existential horror rather than uncomplicated celebration. Second, drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodied consciousness and Simone de Beauvoir's meditation on ageing, the paper examines the film's dramatisation of the rupture between mind and body, tracing how Anthony's desire for control — displaced onto his flat, his routines, and above all his watch — figures the self's struggle for coherence in the face of mnemonic collapse. Third, the paper offers a sustained semiotic reading of the watch as the film's controlling metaphor: a mechanism designed to locate its wearer in shared, measurable time that becomes, for Anthony, evidence of his irreversible displacement from that time. The argument concludes that *The Father* does not merely depict dementia as tragedy; it stages the tragedy as a philosophical provocation — interrogating what it means to have wished someone a long life, and what obligations that wish silently carries.

Keywords: dementia narratives, ageing, mnemonic collapse, phenomenology, Florian Zeller, decline narrative, identity, temporality, the watch, absurdity of long life

1. Introduction

He is looking for his watch again. The scene — recurring, varied, and each time more disquieting — shows Anthony (Anthony Hopkins) moving through rooms he half-recognises, touching surfaces that should be familiar, conducting a search whose urgency far exceeds the occasion. It is only a watch. And yet the desperation that organises his search reveals that what is really lost is something altogether larger: the self as timekeeper, the mind as the mechanism that situates a person in the ordered flow of hours, days, and years. When the watch cannot be found, or when it appears and then is claimed to have

been stolen, or when it is held in the hand and still cannot be read, the film is not merely depicting forgetfulness. It is staging the disintegration of the very faculty by which a human being experiences continuity, coherence, and identity. This is the argument — and the image — from which the present paper proceeds.

Florian Zeller's *The Father* (2020) is an adaptation of his own stage play *Le Père*, first performed in Paris in 2012 and subsequently staged internationally to widespread critical acclaim. The film, co-written by Zeller and Christopher Hampton, stars Anthony Hopkins as Anthony and Olivia Colman as his daughter Anne, with supporting performances by Mark Gatiss, Imogen Poots, Rufus Sewell, and Olivia Williams. It received six Academy Award nominations and won two: Best Actor for Hopkins and Best Adapted Screenplay, a recognition that acknowledged both the consummate artistry of the central performance and the formal daring of the screenplay's construction.

The film's most consequential formal decision — one that distinguishes it sharply from comparable works such as *Still Alice* (2014) or *Away from Her* (2006) — is its refusal to offer the viewer an external, stabilising perspective on Anthony's condition. In *The Father*, the narration is embedded entirely within Anthony's own disoriented subjectivity. Rooms shift. Faces are interchangeable. Timelines collapse and contradict one another. The viewer, denied any privileged vantage point from which to correct the protagonist's confusion, is made to experience what cannot ordinarily be witnessed: the world as it presents itself to a mind that can no longer reliably order it. This is not a film about dementia; it is, as far as cinema can achieve this, a film that is dementia.

The Father arrives at a particular cultural and demographic moment. The global population of individuals over sixty-five is projected to double between 2015 and 2050 (World Health Organization). Dementia, affecting approximately fifty-five million people worldwide, has become one of the defining health and social crises of the twenty-first century. In this context, scholars such as Aagje Swinnen and Mark Schweda have argued that "dementia narratives" in literature and film constitute an emerging genre with its own conventions, ethical stakes, and cultural politics. *The Father* is among the most formally sophisticated and philosophically searching contributions to that genre.

2. Age Studies and the "Narrative of Decline"

In *Aged by Culture* (2004), Margaret Morganroth Gullette argues with sustained persuasiveness that Western culture systematically constructs ageing as a narrative of inevitable deterioration. This "decline narrative," she contends, is not a neutral description of biological processes but a culturally produced story — one that carries ideological weight, shapes social policy, organises medical discourse, and determines the degree of value a society attaches to its older members. The aged body, in this cultural script, is above all a failing body: a site of loss, diminishment, and subtraction. The cultural presupposition is so pervasive, Gullette argues, that it operates even in apparently benign registers — including in the rituals of celebration and well-wishing that attend a long life.

The blessing "May you live a hundred years" is among the most ancient and universal of such rituals. Its origins in longevity as unambiguous virtue are traceable across cultures: from the Hebrew phrase "ad meah v'esrim shana" ("until a hundred and twenty years") to Roman and Sanskrit traditions of invoking long life as the supreme gift. The implicit logic of the blessing is that years are equivalent to value — that more life is categorically better than less. Yet this equivalence is precisely what *The*

Father, along with a significant counter-tradition in Western literature and thought, places under sustained interrogation.

The paper's central counter-proposition is that *The Father* dramatises Gullette's decline narrative from within, in the first person of deteriorating experience, stripping it of the sentimentality and the consoling narrative distance that more conventional treatments afford. Where Gullette's analysis operates at the level of cultural critique — examining how stories about ageing are produced and consumed — *The Father* enacts the decline narrative as phenomenological reality, situating the viewer inside the structure of the experience rather than outside its representation. The result is a film that functions both as cultural diagnosis and as philosophical argument about the nature of selfhood, time, and the conditions under which life can be said to be worth wishing for.

3. The Absurdity of Long Life: Curse, Boon, and the Cultural Politics of Longevity

The cultural and literary tradition of wishing long life is among Western civilisation's most durable inheritances. The Greek concept of *makrobios* — the long-lived — carried with it an entire ethical and philosophical complex: longevity was associated with wisdom, virtue, divine favour, and the fullness of human possibility. Cicero's *De Senectute*, composed in 44 BCE, is perhaps the most sustained classical attempt to reconcile the fact of ageing with the valuation of life — arguing, through the persona of an aged Cato, that old age well-lived represents the fulfilment rather than the attrition of human potential.

Yet literature has always maintained a counter-tradition that refuses this reconciliation. The myth of Tithonus — granted immortality by Zeus at the request of Aurora, his lover, who forgot to ask for eternal youth alongside eternal life — presents the most concentrated classical version of the long-life paradox. Tithonus lives on indefinitely, but his body continues to age without terminus, until he becomes a creature incapable of movement, speech, or fully human experience. Jonathan Swift, in Book III of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), revisits and extends this myth in the figure of the *Struldbruggs*: inhabitants of Luggnagg who are born immortal but continue to age, becoming by their two-hundredth year not merely physically decrepit but legally dead — stripped of property, relationships, and civic personhood — because the society around them refuses to continue acknowledging a life so thoroughly evacuated of vitality.

The film belongs, then, to this counter-tradition — the tradition that exposes the absurdity embedded in the blessing of long life. It does not argue that long life is inherently without value, nor does it traffic in the reductive claim that dementia renders a life not worth living. Its argument is at once more specific and more philosophically serious: that the cultural equation of longevity with blessing depends on a set of assumptions — about cognitive continuity, relational coherence, temporal orientation, and the preservation of selfhood — that dementia systematically destroys.

4. Wrestling Between Mind and Body: The Phenomenology of Dementia on Screen

One of the film's most psychologically acute observations is that Anthony's dementia does not extinguish desire — it displaces it. The will to coherence, to control, to self-possession remains operationally urgent even as the cognitive structures that would normally give it purchase continue to erode. This displacement is most visibly registered in Anthony's relationship to his flat: his obsessive

insistence on its boundaries, his hostility toward those he perceives as intruders, and his anguished confusion when the furniture changes or the walls seem to shift.

Aggression and manipulation — recurring features of Anthony's conduct toward Anne, toward the nurses, and toward the men he suspects of living in his flat — are not, the film insists, departures from the self that was. They are symptoms of a self fighting for coherence by the only means still available to it. Anthony's manipulation is the manipulation of someone who senses, beneath the level of explicit articulation, that he is losing the war for his own continued existence as a subject.

Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* — "I think, therefore I am" — has long served as Western philosophy's foundational articulation of the relationship between thought and existence. For Descartes, the certainty of one's existence is guaranteed by the activity of thinking: whatever else might be doubted, the act of doubting is itself evidence of a doubting mind, and therefore of a self. What *The Father* asks, in its most philosophically serious register, is what happens when the thinking fragments — when the very cognitive activity that Descartes identified as the ground of being becomes unreliable, contradictory, and finally inaccessible to itself.

Yet *The Father* suggests, with considerable delicacy, that something persists below or beyond the intentional arc when it fails. In the film's climactic scene, Anthony — reduced to a state of naked vulnerability, no longer certain of his name, his daughter's name, or where he is — cries out for his mother. It is an image of enormous and quiet power. The affect is real, urgent, and communicative even when the cognition that would normally be its vehicle has collapsed.

5. The Watch: Time, Identity, and the Semiotics of an Object

The watch is introduced early in the film as an object of pride. Anthony shows it, speaks of it, handles it with the proprietary satisfaction of a man who knows the value of what he owns. In this initial presentation, the watch is not merely a possession but an extension of identity — a material correlate of the self-possessed, competent, and temporally oriented man Anthony once was and, in his better moments, still believes himself to be. The watch is, in the Marxist sense, invested with use-value and sign-value simultaneously: it tells the time, and it tells the world something about the man who wears it.

Roland Barthes's analysis of objects as signifying systems provides a useful analytical lens here. The watch, in the semiotic economy of *The Father*, signifies order, continuity, and mastery — the capacity to situate oneself in shared, social, measurable time. It is the kind of object that defines ownership in a double sense: Anthony owns the watch, and the watch, in a more subtle register, owns Anthony — it defines his place in the temporal and social order that gives his life its structure and meaning. When the watch begins to disappear, to migrate, to be claimed as stolen or misplaced, it is not merely a prop losing its location in the frame; it is a symbol enacting the film's central argument.

Under ordinary circumstances, a watch grounds its wearer in shared social time — in the common, measurable flow of hours and minutes that organises collective life. For Anthony, the watch increasingly becomes an instrument he cannot read — not because the watch is broken, but because the cognitive infrastructure required to make its reading meaningful is itself disintegrating.

This is the film's most precise irony: the object whose function is to impose order upon time becomes, for Anthony, the most eloquent evidence of his disorder within it. Time is still passing — the watch continues to function perfectly — but Anthony can no longer locate himself in it. He exists in time as an untethered consciousness: aware, at some level, that duration is occurring, but unable to construct the narrative of self-in-time that would give that duration its meaning.

The recurring scenes in which Anthony accuses members of his household of having stolen his watch are among the film's most carefully constructed passages. They are, on one level, instances of confabulation — a clinical feature of certain dementias in which the mind fabricates plausible narratives to fill the gaps that memory has left. Anthony cannot account for the watch's absence, and so his mind generates an account: someone has taken it. The accusation of theft is, in this sense, a symptom of the cognitive process it conceals. The mind still requires causation — still insists that events must have explanations — even when it can no longer supply those explanations from accurate memory. It will invent them instead.

But the film invites a reading that goes beyond the clinical. The watch, in these scenes of accusation, has become a displaced object for the self. The logic of Anthony's desperation — if I can find the watch, I can find myself — is the logic of a consciousness that has externalised its most fundamental anxiety into the nearest available object. The search for the watch is the search for the self: for the ordered, coherent, temporally continuous self that the watch, when it could be found and read, once anchored. Sigmund Freud's analysis of displacement in his essay on "The Uncanny" (1919) is relevant here: the uncanny arises when something familiar becomes strange — when the home, the face, or the object that should confirm one's security in the world instead becomes a source of dread. Anthony's watch is an uncanny object: it is his, and yet it cannot be made to confirm his possession of himself.

The watch, in the end, is the film's controlling metaphor for the relationship between time, memory, and identity considered together. It is a mechanism that requires a functioning mind to make it meaningful: to read it, to understand what it says, to take its information and convert it into the experienced sense of being located at a particular moment in a particular life. Without that functioning mind, the watch continues to exist and to operate — its hands continue their circuit — but the correspondence between its movement and any experienced sense of temporal location has been severed. Anthony is a clock without hands: still present, still in some sense alive, still capable of affect and relational connection — but no longer able to tell the time of his own life.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Florian Zeller's *The Father* (2020) operates on three interlocking registers that together constitute a sustained philosophical provocation about the nature of ageing, selfhood, and the cultural politics of longevity. The argument can be restated, in light of the analysis that has preceded it, in the following terms.

First, the film exposes the decline narrative — in Gullette's formulation, the cultural scripting of ageing as inevitable deterioration — by staging it from the inside, in the first person of a consciousness whose disintegration the viewer is compelled to inhabit rather than observe. In doing so, it strips the decline narrative of the sentimentality and the consoling distance that more conventional representations afford, and places the cultural equation of longevity with blessing under an interrogating light. The counter-tradition to which *The Father* belongs — running from Tithonus through Swift's *Struldbruggs* to de

Beauvoir's phenomenology of ageing — is here given its most formally accomplished cinematic expression.

Second, the film dramatises the body-mind rupture through its very form: by refusing an external perspective, it enacts phenomenologically what Merleau-Ponty described as the disruption of the intentional arc. Anthony's aggression, his disorientation, his desperate manipulations, and above all his final cry for his mother together reveal a self that persists — affectively, relationally — beyond the point at which the Cartesian cogito would have declared it non-existent. This survival of affect below the ruin of cognition is not consoling; it is, rather, what gives the film its deepest and most unresolved tragic power.

Third, the watch crystallises the film's central concerns into a single, recurrent, and semiotically dense object. As a mechanism for temporal orientation that can no longer be read; as a possession that has become a displaced figure for the self; and as a memento mori transformed into evidence of ongoing erosion rather than anticipated death, the watch enacts in material form the paper's central argument: that the relationship between time, memory, and identity is not a natural given but a fragile achievement, one that dementia unmakes with methodical and irresistible patience.

We return, then, to the opening image: Anthony moving through half-familiar rooms, conducting his search. The watch, we should note, is always there. It is on the shelf, or on his wrist, or in the drawer where it was placed. He simply cannot find it — cannot locate it in the spatial or cognitive field in which it would need to be located to be genuinely found. This is not a story about losing time, though it is about a man for whom time has become inaccessible. It is a story about losing the self that time was keeping — the self whose continuous existence was maintained, day by day, by the small and ordinary acts of temporal orientation that a watch, among other instruments, makes possible.

The film's broader stakes are not difficult to name, though they are difficult to sit with. What does it mean to wish someone a long life? The blessing is offered freely and received with gratitude, as it has been for millennia. But *The Father* asks what the blessing silently assumes: that the years it wishes forward will be inhabited by a self capable of experiencing them as its own; that the time given will be time the recipient can use; that quantity and quality will maintain the proportion the blessing implies. These are not assumptions the universe is bound to honour. And when they are not honoured — when the years arrive but the self that was to have lived them has begun its long dispersal — the blessing reveals within itself the structure of the curse it never meant to be. To reckon seriously with this is not pessimism. It is, rather, the beginning of an honest conversation about what we owe to those we have wished, with such warmth and such inadvertence, to live a very long time.

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