

# BACK TO HER FUTURE

*ZOE STILLPASS*

There's good evidence to suggest that the universe is finite and shaped like a Möbius strip. If this is the case, a space traveler heading in one direction will eventually return to the point from which she began. But in so doing, the coordinates of left and right will be reversed. It would be like crossing through a mirror. My own experience in the making of *BIRTHDAY ZOE, SUMMER 2004* (1996) perhaps, proves this theory. As a twelve year old, I was the subject of this video by Philippe Parreno. Now years later, the movie is the subject of my essay. A mirror reflection can occur only in one dimension less than its subject.

To begin, we must travel back to Cincinnati, summer 1996. Here, an event occurs which changes the course of things. Parreno arrives in Cincinnati with the concept of making a video of Zoe's twentieth

birthday party eight years in the future. He watches her home movies and decides that, in the year 2004, there would be two "Birthday Zoe" video cassettes on the shelf. He catches fireflies. He had never seen them before. He recounts Pier Paolo Pasolini's observation that they became extinct in Europe at the same time that ideologies died. Zoe and her parents choose whomever they want to play them in the film. Their age, looks, gender do not matter. Who knows who they will become, anyway? Then he films the future. Everything is turquoise: the tablecloth, the plates, the silverware, the candles, the cake. Even the inside of the cake is turquoise, although no one knows this for sure. It is never cut. Once shot, the party is inter-spliced with actual home movies.

The narrative follows a dynamic, nonlinear course. It is topologically configured, continuously folding and unfolding, transposing slices of time. The video begins in a sunlit yard, a table revealing the aftermath

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of a party, the uncut birthday cake sitting on top. The camera moves through the interior of a house until it comes to a fireplace. Then, Zoe appears peering into her Christmas stocking. A sequence of shots of Zoe at various ages shows her at the same fireplace opening presents on Christmas morning. The speed of the cuts intensifies while amplified by the oscillating sounds of the synthesizer. The velocity reaches a turbulent pitch before leaping into the future. A radical shift of perspective, a catastrophe, has transformed our heroine into another who now sits with her family at her twentieth birthday party. She refuses to blow out her candles in spite of her mother's warning that she will remain "trapped in this time frame here in Cincinnati." The video then turns back to her previous form and the stable periodicity of past birthdays where young Zoes are unable to blow out their candles. She dissolves into an incandescent flash of light, which fades to a shot at dusk, the littered table now lit by fireflies.

The diegesis contains three temporalities. The first is the past, the actuality documented in the home videos. Parreno chose images of Zoe at Christmas and her birthday, recordings of the annual cycle of celebratory events characteristic of the genre, which perpetuate the continuity of an individual's experience. Conserving the past, they function as a form of memory. However, he disengages these images from a normal temporal sequence and transposes them in an order indifferent to chronology. Arranging them in a series, they appear not as parts of an organic whole but as a provisional set of relations among the innumerable possible relations that exist beyond the frame of the movie. This portrait of Zoe, therefore, belongs to a virtual memory of a past that includes everything that happened and could have happened.

A second temporal dimension takes place in the fictive time of the staged twentieth birthday party. It projects the future. The awkward, epic style and the stilted language that speaks of amateur actors present an image free of any imposed vision of the future. In relation to the scenes from the home video, this temporality is approaching. Yet, it also appears between the shots of the aftermath of the birthday party. This relationship would then locate it in the past. The Zoe inhabiting this temporal dimension

would share no memories with the Zoe who appeared in the home videos or with the Zoe who is writing this essay. Time has bifurcated. The future flows forward, and memory, back.

The third temporality exists between past and future, fact and fiction. It's a fractal dimension which appears in the shots between the other two. This is not the present. The present never actually occurs in the video. It's an extra-temporal realm where true and false become indistinguishable. The narrative cannot contain this time. A man takes a photo—of what? Disembodied voices sing "Happy Birthday Zoe"; a bee gathers pollen. Sight and sound become independent and autonomous. Diverse glimmers of light emitted from candles, reflecting surfaces, and fireflies form a vibrant field of sensation in an ethereal, translucent space. These fleeting impressions record the point of view of no one in particular. They emerge from a field of virtuality, which—unchained from commonsense chronology—conditions the actual.

The movie is not about the fixed identity of Zoe. And it's clearly not about any rite of passage. It's about her potential to change, to become someone else. It's about birthdays in themselves, about the experience of becoming distilled, freed from the necessities of daily existence. Like art, birthdays, although part of everyday life, are separate as well. As distinct forms, they open to a time of free play, enabling us to redirect our attention towards life and giving us the capacity to experience it in new ways. The present is bypassed in the video because the present is the realm of the actual. Blowing out the candles reinforces the notion of the succession of time. Suspending this moment, stating "let's wait," makes it possible to escape linear causality, to leave behind the historical preconditions that would determine the direction of her story.

So who is Zoe, really? I don't know. The movie never answers that question. As she returns to this place, although her left and right have remained in tact, it seems that the twist in the Möbius strip has inverted her memory coordinates. For her, the actual has become virtual, disclosing the virtual as real. Now it's no longer a matter of remembering who she was but of inventing stories of what she can become. And she sees that for this the possibilities are infinite.



