

TIFF

'Everytime' Review: Sandra Wollner's Infinitely Beguiling Portrait of Grief in the Digital Age Is One of the Most Haunting Films of the Decade

TIFF: Picking up where the likes of "Aftersun" and "Personal Shopper" left off, Wollner's unforgettable third feature explores the modern world's changing relationship to death.

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'Everytime' 1-2 Special





I don't believe in an **afterlife**, but that's OK because the people I love most are never going to die. Not to me. At least, not in the way they used to before our species began to migrate online, to store our memories in the cloud, and to digitally encode the raw data of our existence onto everything we touch.

My father was born in 1939, the same year that Iowa State College scientists John Vincent Atanasoff and Clifford Berry built the prototype for the first binary-based computer; in the months after he died 75 years later, I often felt the reflex to reach down and call him from the iPhone that fit inside my pocket. To ask if he'd seen the Rangers game, or to tell him that I'd gotten engaged. I knew that he was gone, of course, but the piece of consumer technology I'd used to connect with him when he was alive had created a separate neural pathway between my brain and his being — a crude one-way network that didn't begin to break down until much later in my grieving process.

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A decade later, those pathways have grown exponentially more complicated and convincing. The emergence of AI has led to a variety of ghoulish attempts at deathlessness and resurrection (from bots that feed on your grandma's Facebook data to the ChatGPT Theodore Roosevelt who Trump was **"honored to be with today"** at the former's Presidential Library), but such products and publicity stunts miss the fact that *everyone* is already being (temporarily) immortalized on a server farm somewhere, the traces of our existence shed into the digital ether like a Pollock-like splotch of

invisible ink.

Charlie Kirk's face is Twitter's most ubiquitous meme. My long-deceased college friend you've never heard of sends me hacked emails full of links to "old pictures they found of us together." The cancer-stricken hedgehog I fostered for a few months in 2016 still cycles onto my home screen at random sometimes, and he's now been buried behind a house in suburban New Jersey for longer than he was ever alive. People have always looked for errant glimmers of the dead in the world around them, but now the past runs parallel to — imprints upon, and circles around — the present to a degree that can severely confuse the relationship between the two.

Sandra Wollner doesn't believe in an afterlife either, but she's certainly attuned to the mysteries of this one. Picking up where the equally spectral likes of "**Personal Shopper**" and "**Aftersun**" left up, the Austrian writer/director's mystical and magnificently beguiling "**Everytime**" takes a rather ambivalent stance towards what happens when people die these days, or at least — per its curious title — towards how we mourn them from inside the flat circle of a temporal overlap where yesterday and tomorrow are folded into the pockets of an ever-expanding now.



There are no clear answers to be found in this astonishing third feature, which shares a number of thematic similarities with Wollner's "The Trouble with Being Born," but retains one crucial difference (that **film**, about a man who has an implied sexual relationship with a child-sized android coded with the memories of his missing 10-year-old daughter, unsurprisingly had trouble securing American distribution). Indeed, the grounded portraiture of the movie's first 70 minutes eventually gives way to a final act so cosmic and surreal that it becomes all but impossible to pinpoint the precise location of Wollner's characters in space-time; to say for certain whether "Everytime" has glitched into another dimension, or if it has invited another dimension to glitch into our own. Initially timeless in its nuanced and deeply recognizable depiction of loss, and then even more so as it gets devoured by the meta-modern flourishes that have fringed its story from the start, this is perhaps the most forward-thinking film I've ever seen about the changing face of grief.

The premise couldn't be simpler, though Wollner's incredible prologue — a careful arrangement of low-event long takes that emphasize how people move through spaces in time — trains our eyes to privilege texture over incident. While there's little to distinguish single mother Ella ("Everyone Else" star Brigit Minichmayr) and her children from any of the other families strolling through the soft orange haze of a summer afternoon in Berlin, our senses pick up on the uneasy tension between the watchfulness of Gregory Oke's 35mm camera work and the vivid intensity of the film's sound design (it's worth noting that Oke also shot "Aftersun"). The voices are close, but the bodies far away. Teenage Jessie (Carla Hüttermann) turns her head to look at an unseen *pop* as her family walks home through their local metro station, but we don't think much of it at the moment. It's probably nothing. And yet, I suppose it could be anything.

At the very least, that sharp noise is enough to suggest that the film's environments may not be as benign as they seem, and a silent but soon unbearable tension starts to mount as the day wears on. As Jessie's boyfriend Lux (Tristán López) comes over to hang out while her kid sister

Melli (Lotte Shirin Keiling) annoys the shit out of her by banging on a keyboard; as Ella cooks dinner; as Jessie plays “Minecraft” late into the night on an island bathed in the light of a sinking square sun.

Later, in the waning hours before Jessie’s family is due to leave for a holiday in Tenerife (where she once vacationed as a toddler), Jessie and Lux will sneak out to a dance club, take a few pills, and watch the next day begin from their perch atop the roof of an apartment building. He will note that he’s recently noticed a strange number of seagulls in Berlin, and then fall asleep. She will stand up to film one of them flying past on her iPhone, and then — in one of the most arresting screen images in recent memory, a vertiginous collision of everything and nothing all at once — she will fall off the edge of the building to her death. The city doesn’t notice. The camera scans the treetops. The euphoric synth-pop of David Schweighart’s score kicks in as we suddenly begin to soar through the skies of Jessie’s “Minecraft” world, eventually plunging down through the dirt and into the unrendered levels of code below.

From there, “Everytime” settles into a crushingly quotidian register. Months have passed, and everyone is doing what they can to move on with their lives. Ella takes work calls while visiting her daughter’s grave, while the stoic young Melli texts life updates and other messages to her dead sister’s phone (she’s big on emojis). But things are not as settled as they seem, and Lux’s return from a semester abroad forces Ella and Melli into a more direct confrontation with Jessie’s memory — with the unresolved feelings she left behind. The girls keep running into Lux (and to his nice new girlfriend) around town, and soon begin spending time with him on purpose. They are bound together not only by their shared grief, but also by the unspoken guilt and blame that Lux and Ella can only hope to expiate through each other.

While Jessie is seldom mentioned by name, the bizarre mutual reliance between a middle-aged woman and her dead teenage daughter’s former boyfriend makes her the subject of every scene (much to the annoyance of people who would prefer to compartmentalize the pain of her loss). Jessie is

the reason why Ella and Melli attend Lux's birthday party; Jessie is the reason why Lux joins Ella for a tense lunch at her ex-husband's house, and why he begins sleeping over at her apartment.

But these domestic frictions are — largely, but not *merely* — a means to an end so far as Wollner is concerned, as her film leverages them to focus on a series of increasingly abstract phenomena. Jessie is certainly the reason why each of the locations we saw her walk through before her death feels haunted when “Everytime” revisits them, but could she also be the reason why the shadow that falls across her bedroom at night appears to resemble a polygonal cube? Why a seemingly pilotless drone shows up to beckon Ella into a pitch-black parking garage? Why the dead girl's computer glows with an unnatural brightness whenever the lights turn off?

Wollner's characters never ask such questions aloud, but she poses them to all three of her leads in a way that compels them to look for signs in the digital detritus that Jessie left behind. Lux is drawn back to the old pictures and voice notes on his phone, while Mille stares at the WhatsApp chat with her sister as if waiting for a response. These signs complement, but never overwhelm, Wollner's attention to the analog poetry of the natural world — to the shimmer along the surface of a lake, or the sound of the wind rustling through the trees in the woods where Jessie and Lux got high on her last night.

It's easy to imagine a version of this film that more explicitly addressed how digital technology is transforming how we mourn the dead, but Wollner would rather plumb the mysteries of the present than speculate about the answers of the future; the portals between worlds have already been ripped open, and will only begin to lose their power as they get labeled and branded.

Eventually, Ella makes the spontaneous decision to bring Mille and Lux to Tenerife for the trip they never got to take. That's where things get weird, and the math of the universe starts to contradict itself. It would be a terrible



disservice to reveal anything specific about what happens next (and so I won't), but the extraordinary magic trick that "Everytime" pulls off in its final stretch is rooted less in incident than in execution.

Its ineffable power belongs to how matter-of-factly Wollner tears apart the fabric of her film's reality at the same time as she threads it together, and how the look on Minichmayr's slacken face — her restrained but masterful performance a wonder of tightly bottled pain and lingering disbelief — reconciles those opposite energies with the instinctive naturalness of a mother's love. It also belongs to the almost unquestioning acceptance that Keiling endows within Melli, the young actor's posture embodying how this movie teeters on the precipice between a child-like vision of the world (soft and malleable) and the more hardened sense of reality that arrives with adulthood.

Wollner may not trace the character's arc in the legible terms of a typical coming-of-age story, but Melli experiences a remarkable transformation over the course of the film, her petulant first line ("You always leave your stuff lying around!") assuming an unforeseeable new context by the time we arrive at her closing narration.

As a medium born from — and once dependent upon smoothing over — the friction between stillness and movement, stasis and change, cinema has always been uniquely adept at conveying the radical effect that technology can exert on how we perceive time and space in the world around us. The switch from celluloid to computer chips saw the movies transform from an illusory art form to a representative one, at the great and continued risk of forfeiting its original power. Engaging in a thrilling and increasingly contested negotiation between 35mm film stock and crude DV video formats, "Everytime" pulls at that tug-of-war from both ends until the uncertain space at the center grows large enough to sail through, and still enough to hang like a painting in the sky.



I am now a father myself, the parent of two young kids whose faces

sometimes remind me of my own dad in the same tactile way that people have been survived by their children since before the invention of the wheel. We keep a framed 4×6 photograph of him with a cigar in his mouth on the Blu-ray shelf in our living room, and I sometimes catch my kids talking about it as if the *picture itself* were their grandfather, rather than just a capture of his likeness. Ask my six-year-old to draw a self-portrait and he'll sketch you the image of his Roblox avatar. If I ever were to lose him, I wonder how long it would take my nervous system to process that he was gone.

Like many 21st century parents, my wife and I take photos and videos of our kids throughout the day without thinking, and — after wrestling them to bed at night in an exasperating forever war of attrition — we invariably scroll through our phones and take stock of their cuteness in peace. Stills, videos, stickers, and more, these two-dimensional images, I sometimes feel with an uncertain pang of dismay, are our *real* children. The versions of them we commit to memory. The after images we see in our dreams. They are the kids we mourn as our son and daughter eagerly outgrow their current models every time you look away for too long, and the ones we would cling to in the unthinkable event that either of them disappeared from this mortal coil before we did.

And so, Wollner's staggering new film suggests with a tender but uneasy twinkle in its eye, we've gradually steeped ourselves in a world that guarantees they never will. How strange and unnatural is that? Compared to the alternative, I fear it may not feel that strange or unnatural at all.

Grade: A

"Everytime" is screening at the 2026 Toronto International Film Festival. 1-2 Special will release it in theaters in the United States.

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