

Interview: Will Arntz: Down the Rabbit Hole

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In this exclusive interview, Andrew Gurevich finds What the Bleep director Will Arntz as surprising as his controversial new film.

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What the Bleep director Will Arntz as surprising as his controversial new film
by Andrew Gurevich

Read Andy's Review of What the Bleep?
(The Passion of the Nucleus)

My children play a game every Wednesday. They call it "Opposite Day. As far as I can tell, there is only one rule in this game: everything you say is the opposite of what it means. The children find this game hauntingly amusing. My daughter can hardly contain the sinister "Dr. Evil" laugh that my mock paternal anguish elicits as she tosses such verbal daggers as, "I hate you daddy," and "Daddy I don't want ice cream I want cauliflower," into our conversation. She consoles me, over scoops of chocolate chip mint, "Actually I love you, daddy. Remember it's Opposite Day." How could I forget?

I love the fact that my daughter is unaware of the Swiftian implications of her game. Language, in my daughter's world, emancipates itself from the usual ideological ties of correspondence and consistency, like a kite cutting its own strings, and glides effortlessly into the essential nature of its other. And it does this conveniently, although without much explanation, every Wednesday.

Why not? Opposite Day. Chisel-faced monkeys in expensive suits continue to kill and enslave in the name of life and freedom. Howard Stern and Janet Jackson are transformed before our very eyes into the demons of indecency and fornication. Stern is now off the air in many markets. But I can still get a Catholic mass on the

AM dial every Sunday. Nobody complaining to the FCC about children's access to the propaganda and sadistic pageantry of the one organization that has been responsible for more bloodshed, more murder, more intolerance, rape, oppression and deceit than any other in man's elaborate history of taking shit from one another. Why not? Opposite Day. If you think I am being too harsh, I refer you to the recent charges of rape and abuse leveled against several nuns at a deaf school in Boston.

So when I was approached to interview Will Arntz, the director of the new and controversial film "What the Fuck Do We Know?" I immediately asked my editor, "Doesn't this guy follow the teachings of a woman who says she is channeling the spirit of a 35,000 year old Egyptian king?" Joe, my witty and liberally educated editor, replied with calculated journalistic instinct, "Yeah. I think so." Dejected, I looked to the story box. Nothing left but this interview and a review of the bonus features on the "You Got Served" DVD. "Why not? Opposite Day," I muttered and went off to do what writers do.

Don't get me wrong. I had seen "What the Fuck..." and I liked it. The film was adventurous, intelligent and unique, so I expected its maker to bear the same image. What I did not expect, however, was to find a man who was refreshingly honest, humble and playfully irreverent about his film, his life and the controversial ideas behind them both.

dTheatre.com: This film is quite courageous in its attempt to not only bring some rather provocative ideas into the mainstream, but in a medium that defies traditional filmmaking genres. What were some of the unique challenges you faced in setting sail in "uncharted waters," so to speak?

Will Arntz: Well, it really was a whole different way to wire a movie together. We thought, "Hey this is a new message. We need to put it in a new wrapping to really make its point."

DT: That reminds me of the now-infamous Marshall McLuhan saying, "the medium is the message."

WA: Absolutely. So we thought we'd experiment with a lot of cutting, playing, not letting the viewer know which way we were going, down rabbit holes, and such. I think it really adds to the way someone experiences the ideas in the film.

DT: A friend of mine saw the film and compared it to Richard Link later's "Waking Life." Have you seen that film?

WA: You know, I got about half of the way through it. I was bored because it was too didactic and the animation drove me crazy. I was so agitated after about a third of the movie that I said, "OK, I'm done. I don't care what they say at this point!"

DT: Funny you should say that because my friend actually said that your film was like "Waking Life" with a soul. That the ideas were there, but the narrative pieces with Marlee Matlin really put flesh on the concepts.

WA: Then, of course, we tried to put in some pretty serious laughs as well. That was a big part of it for us. At a certain point, this material can get very heavy-handed. I just don't think we should approach it that seriously. I think laughing at ourselves can often give us the space to learn something new about ourselves.

DT: Some critics have suggested that many of the ideas in the film are simply repackaged New Age Spiritism and that they offer people a way to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. I'm thinking specifically about the part of the film that deals with the physiological aspects of drug addiction. How would you respond?

WA: Well, it's funny to me that anyone would say that because the fundamental premise of this film is: you create your own reality. So if addiction, or any imbalance

for that matter, is present in the reality that you create for yourself than it is ultimately your responsibility. End of story. I don't know what movie they were watching.

DT: So how does one go from Military weapons systems designer to Buddhist filmmaker? Sounds like quite a trip.

WA: I graduated college and was already interested in spiritual things. Remember this was the early seventies. I was a hippie so I felt kind of bad working for the government but I found the work interesting, and they gave me a lot of money. So my game plan was to work for a year and a half and then retire. Go do what I wanted.

DT: So you were "taking gold from Egypt" to later use for your own goals?

WA: Something like that. I was working on the early Star Wars stuff. Finding ways to melt missiles out of the sky. After that I drove around the country for a few years. Back to being a hippie. I got back to reading about spiritual matters. The more I read the more questions I had. Pretty soon I cared more about that than anything else.

DT: Sounds like this drive had been present in you for quite some time. Where do you think it came from? Did you go to church as a child?

WA: Yes I did and it was responsible for me turning off to most spiritual stuff. I remember I was in ninth grade and I was sitting in Sunday school and they were saying that there was only one way to heaven and it was through our lord and savior Jesus Christ. And that if you didn't believe in him, if your Original Sin was not forgiven, then you were going to Hell to burn for all eternity. So I stuck my little hand up and asked, "So a little kid that is born and lives for two years and dies of some disease or accident is going to Hell?" And they said, "Yes." And it was at that

moment that I threw a switch. I knew it was all bullshit. So for years I was completely closed off to anything spiritual. Which is why we have that section in the film where we try to "kick religion in the nuts" as I like to say. I just think that there are a lot of people in this country who are very spiritual but were just turned off to religion at a young age. Because they could think. So they just walked away from the whole thing. But now many are coming back. On their own terms. Willing to distill the difference between religion and spirituality. Religion says, "My way or the Hell way." We are saying, "There are six billion people on the planet. Six billion ways."

DT: It seems to me that in our dominant religious traditions, starting in the Garden of Eden, mankind has been discouraged, even punished, from choosing curiosity, or self-determination, over obedience? But your film seems to be saying that any useful spirituality would require our participation, our imagination, to manifest itself. Curiosity about the universe seems mandatory in your system, not something to be feared. Is that a fair assessment?

WA: Yes, I think so. I mean, based on some of the people we have in the film this is kind of an ironic thing to say but it's not rocket science to figure these things out. I think it was Bertrand Russell who said, "I find it unfathomable that God would give us these wonderful brains and then forbid us to use them." You know, the Christian church is said to be the most effective killing machine ever visited upon the planet. And that's, well, that's too bad. In the film, we're not saying God is bad, or faith is bad. We're not saying anything is "bad," for that matter. What we are saying is that we all have choices about what we want our lives to represent, and those choices come with responsibilities.

DT: Some have suggested that this film is little more than Ramtha's "Battlefield Earth." How is your movie different from some of the other more recent spiritual propaganda films such as "Battlefield Earth" or Mel Gibson's "The Passion"?

WA: Well first of all, the biggest difference is that "Battlefield Earth" was written by L. Ron Hubbard. This film was written by Mark, Betsy and myself. Ramtha and the folks at the school had nothing to do with the conception, writing or production of this movie. So to say that this is some sort of Ramtha recruitment film is simply not true. Now I can understand why some people are touchy about that because of what we were just talking about, people's aversion to religion and spirituality. It makes sense to me that people would be bothered by something that they felt was trying to get them into some weird cult. I would be bothered by that. But we were really careful when we were making this film to stress the idea that it was about the message, not the messenger. Ramtha was not the focal point, just one of the people we interviewed.

DT: Why, then, in the early cuts of the film was the decision made to leave Ramtha's biography out? If there was nothing to hide?

WA: Well to be honest, we didn't quite know what to do. After watching some initial screenings without the bio, we decided that was not the right thing to do so we put it back into the film. We wanted to be clear that we have absolutely nothing to hide. These are the people we interviewed. Here's who they are. Now think about what they are saying. Everybody that we interview in the film has a complete biography on the Web site and I think you will find them each to be well respected and qualified to talk about the things they discuss in the film.

DT: But if the message of the film is that everyone creates their own reality, then what if an individual creates a reality where reincarnation does not exist? How would that affect the presence and the teachings of Ramtha?

WA: That's an interesting question. I guess I'd like to answer that question with another one: Is the creation of reality an "a la carte" affair, or must one take the whole buffet?

DT: Fair enough. You should write political speeches.

WA: (laughs) Well, it's about understanding that the reality you create will bump up against everyone else's. That's where the responsibility comes in. Let's just say that you were going to do something to fundamentally change the nature or the course of human history. You gotta figure at that point that other intelligent people are going to join you in that pursuit. Now did you create that specifically, or are you are participant in that package deal? What matters is, you are creating your space in it, how you respond to it.

DT: Our current administration seems to be guided by a more essentialist attitude. Things are a certain way in the universe and they will respond accordingly, often in the face of clear evidence to the contrary. But the President seems to also say that as long as his statements correspond to his other statements, then no other justification is needed. How do the ideas in the film differ from this sort of mindless tautology?

WA: Well first of all I'd say that the guy is almost a complete idiot! No, we say over and over again in the film, "Don't take our word for it, GO check out the information, the research, the ideas for yourself. That's the whole point. We are not trying to take power away from individuals and force them to buy into our way of seeing the world. We are doing the opposite. The other difference is that we don't kill those that disagree with us.

DT: What was it like working with Mark Vicente and Betsy Chase?

WA: Well, what can I say? It was fantastic. A real challenge at times. When you make a film, especially a film like this one, there is no blue print, no manual. You make the manual and you do it by making a thousand little decisions a day, until you have a film. Someone needs to be able to see it, where you are going. And since, well, since I put up the money for the film, that fell to me. But Betsy and Mark

would sometimes see things differently, a particular shot, or how to order some of the interviews, and I had to go with that. It's like, this thing is so big and it just kept getting bigger and bigger and soon you feel like you are in over your head. That's when it was really good to have someone else to look to, to keep the thing going. During one of the Ramtha interviews, in fact, I interviewed Ramtha for about 10 Minutes and he interviewed me for almost 45 minutes! He told me that I was ruining this film because I was keeping too much control for myself. That I needed to get out of the way and let this film be made the right way. Imagine hearing that, in a room full of cast and crew.

DT: The film has opened to limited release in the Northwest but has done well. How do you feel about the reaction audiences have had so far?

WA: Well, we're quite pleased. We feel that we made a good film. An important and interesting film and people are responding to it. The two things that I have heard over and over again that I am very happy about are that people are going to see this film multiple times and that there is a tremendous word of mouth campaign. People are calling their friends and families around the country and telling them that they have to see this film. To me, that speaks to the fact that this film is delving into issues that people care about and find value in. You know, there is still such a distrust in the film industry about how interested the public is in films with spiritual subject matter.

DT: I think "The Passion" answered that for us. What was it 400 million worldwide and growing?

WA: That's exactly right. We knew that if we made a film that respected the audience's intelligence, if we just made our film the way we wanted to make it, then people would respond. And so far they are.

DT: So what are your thoughts on God now? In five words or less...

WA: (laughs) A work in progress.

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