

The Neanderthal in the anthropocene: de-extinction, representation, and public archaeology

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Abstract. This article explores the speculative biopolitics, ecological aesthetics, and representational ethics of human de-extinction as imagined in Tim Disney's 2019 film *William*, which portrays the resurrection of a Neanderthal child through genetic technology. While contemporary discourses on de-extinction often celebrate its potential to reverse biodiversity loss, *William* presents a more ambivalent vision—one that interrogates the emotional, ecological, and cultural consequences of resurrecting archaic hominins in the Anthropocene. Drawing on posthumanist theory, ecological aesthetics, and media analysis, this paper examines the film's visual and narrative construction of William's biological otherness and its broader implications for multispecies ethics. Special attention is given to the cultural portrayal of Neanderthals across visual media and how such representations shape public understandings of human evolution, identity, and archaeological knowledge. Ultimately, the article argues that *William* not only dramatizes the ethical dilemmas of species revival but also reflects deeper tensions in how science and media construct the boundaries of the human.

Keywords: Neanderthal, ecological aesthetics, visual media, public archaeology.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the prospect of "de-extinction"—the revival of extinct species through genomic engineering—has moved from the realm of speculative fiction to a credible ambition of synthetic biology. Projects aimed at resurrecting animals such as the woolly mammoth and the passenger pigeon have gained scientific and public traction, supported by advancements in cloning, genome editing, and somatic cell nuclear transfer. Proponents of de-extinction frame it as an ecological corrective, a way to restore biodiversity and re-balance disrupted ecosystems. However, such ambitions also invite complex ethical, ecological, and philosophical questions, particularly when applied to archaic humans.

Tim Disney's 2019 film *William* offers a compelling fictional exploration of these tensions. The narrative centers on a Neanderthal child, brought to life through cutting-edge genetic technology, who is raised by the scientists who created him. As the only member of his species in a human-dominated world, William becomes a figure of fascination, alienation, and tragedy. The film does not dwell on the technical mechanics of cloning; rather, it focuses on the emotional, social, and ecological dimensions of posthuman existence. William's experiences dramatize the broader anxieties surrounding the limits of scientific intervention and the fragile boundaries between species, nature, and culture.

This article analyzes *William* as a critical lens through which to examine the bioethical stakes of de-extinction in the Anthropocene. By integrating frameworks from ecological aesthetics, posthumanism, and film theory, I argue that *William* critiques the Enlightenment-era fantasy of human mastery over nature, offering instead a melancholic vision of coexistence that is fraught with power imbalances, representational stereotypes, and emotional displacement. Through close readings of the film's visual language, narrative structure, and symbolic motifs—particularly those involving wilderness, water, and music—I explore how *William* both reflects and resists dominant discourses of species revival. Ultimately, the film invites us to consider not only whether we can bring extinct hominins back, but whether we should—and what ethical responsibilities such an act would entail.

2. Background

Tim Disney's *William* (2019) tells the story of a Neanderthal child brought to life through genetic reconstruction. Drawing on DNA recovered from archaeological remains, two scientists—Dr. Barbara Sullivan, a medical researcher, and Dr. Julian Reed, an anthropologist—successfully clone and raise the first Neanderthal in modern times. Named William, the child's upbringing is

framed as both a scientific experiment and a familial endeavor. As William matures, his physical distinctions, immunological uniqueness, and unfamiliar cognitive traits become points of fascination—and concern—within the human world.

Although the film avoids elaborate technical explanations of cloning or genome editing, it resonates with real-world ambitions of de-extinction. Institutions such as Revive & Restore and scientists like Ben Novak and Stewart Brand have championed the idea of bringing back extinct species, including the passenger pigeon and woolly mammoth. As Nathaniel Rich documents in *The New York Times* article "The Mammoth Cometh," techniques such as somatic cell nuclear transfer and genome synthesis are not only scientifically feasible but ideologically compelling to advocates who see de-extinction as a form of ecological redemption (Rich, 2014).

Yet this enthusiasm is not universally shared. Scholars like Stephanie Erev (2018) have critiqued de-extinction within the broader context of the Anthropocene, arguing that the human desire to control life and mitigate extinction is often driven by anthropocentric arrogance. William enters this conversation not with a utopian vision of restoration, but with a deeply ambivalent portrayal of what it means to bring a hominin species into the present. The film's narrative raises crucial questions: Can Neanderthals be integrated into a world that rendered them extinct? And what are the emotional and ecological costs of such scientific resurrection?

3. Seclusion and division

William's life is shaped by profound isolation—both physical and symbolic. From birth, he is confined to a laboratory setting where even his mother must don protective gear during interactions. His earliest experiences of care are mediated through surveillance and sterilization, framing him less as a child and more as a specimen. At age five, in an effort to provide him with a semblance of normalcy, Barbara relocates with William to a secluded island, where he remains until adulthood. Although he attends school, participates in plays, and engages in outdoor activities, his life is always marked by geographic and social remove. When he later moves to his father's house to prepare for college entrance exams, the pattern of seclusion continues—his presence remains anomalous and disruptive.

This narrative of isolation is reinforced visually throughout the film. One of the most telling sequences occurs early on: the wake of a ferryboat cuts through the otherwise placid river as William travels toward the island ([01:05]). The camera captures the water being violently split, an image that symbolically enacts William's separation from both nature and human society. While the ferryboat reappears throughout the film, its meanings shift—from technological intrusion to existential rupture. In a later scene, a ferry's horn startles William and foreshadows his growing alienation as his peers discuss their futures in higher education. For them, the ferry signals mobility and opportunity; for William, it marks the limits of belonging.

Supporters of de-extinction often suggest that the return of extinct species can enrich ecosystems and redress anthropogenic losses. Stewart Brand famously claimed that "one or two mammoths is not a success—100,000 mammoths is success" (Rich, 2014). In this view, biological revival must occur at scale to have ecological impact. Yet William's singularity underscores the loneliness of such an endeavor when applied to hominins. As the only Neanderthal alive, he is not part of an ecological restoration but rather a solitary anomaly. His existence does not enhance biodiversity; instead, it amplifies human ethical dilemmas.

Ben Novak's passenger pigeon project, for instance, includes a carefully staged reintroduction plan that spans decades—from laboratory to aviary to wild release. No such framework exists for William. His parents, torn between professional ambition and maternal protectiveness, cannot agree on a long-term vision. The result is a life shaped by liminality: neither fully human nor fully animal, neither wild nor domesticated, neither kin nor other. The tragedy of William's upbringing lies not in his Neanderthal identity but in the failure of the human world to accommodate difference without pathologizing it.

4. Ecological aesthetics of water

In *William*, the recurring motif of water functions as both a narrative device and an ecological aesthetic. Watered landscapes—rivers, lakes, islands—form the visual and symbolic backdrop to William's attempts at belonging. The natural world, especially when depicted as untamed and moist, becomes a site of relative comfort for William, in contrast to the sterile, surveilled spaces of laboratories and institutional life. The film's use of ecological aesthetics, particularly in scenes involving water, foregrounds the tension between human-imposed boundaries and the fluidity of the natural world.

Director Tim Disney frequently uses slow, panoramic shots of forests, rivers, and wetlands to evoke a sublime naturalism that contrasts with the human interventions surrounding William's existence. These sequences are not merely atmospheric—they shape the viewer's understanding of where William should belong. For example, when William takes his friend Sara into the woods, the film lingers on reflections in the water and the Tyndall effect created by light filtering through mist and leaves (Figure 1). William moves comfortably through the landscape, seemingly unaffected by the uneven terrain. His ease in this environment reinforces the idea that the Neanderthal's ecological home lies outside human domestication.

The presence of water serves as a visual cue for ecological embeddedness. Throughout the film, William is consistently drawn to watery spaces: the island where he grows up, the lakeside house of his father, and the bridge beneath which he takes refuge when bullied (Figure 2). These sites offer both physical and emotional refuge. Water, as Lee-Hsueh Lee notes in her work on ecological aesthetics, induces positive affective responses and enhances biodiversity through its sensory qualities (Lee, 2018). From this perspective, William's attraction to water can be read not merely as personal preference but as a biologically grounded, evolutionarily informed aesthetic sensibility. In his search for habitat suitability—consciously or not—William echoes deep evolutionary patterns of hominin life in proximity to water sources.

Yet, this preference for watery wilderness also marks William as out of step with the contemporary world. In Anil Narine's *Eco-Trauma Cinema*, the wilderness often functions as a liminal zone where characters approach death or transformation (Narine, 2015). Near the end of *William*, nature scenes are intercut with images of confrontation, sadness, and alienation. The visual beauty of the environment intensifies rather than resolves the tragic arc of the protagonist. Nature is not a space of return but a mirror to human loss, failed reconciliation, and ecological rupture.

In this light, William aligns with Timothy Morton's critique of the nature/culture binary. In *Ecology without Nature*, Morton argues that Western environmentalism often fetishizes nature as separate from the human, thus reinforcing the very alienation it seeks to overcome. William is not allowed to be part of nature or culture. He is made a symbol—an artifact of both scientific ambition and ecological nostalgia. His relationship to water, then, becomes emblematic of a broader impasse: we recognize the value of natural harmony but lack the ethical frameworks to sustain it when that harmony includes the radically other.

5. The mushroom and the traveler

One of the most unexpected moments in *William* occurs when the protagonist encounters two travelers while camping with his classmates. The travelers offer mushrooms—hallucinogenic and "completely organic"—to the group. Although only one classmate accepts, the encounter carries a deeper significance than a mere coming-of-age drug scene. It gestures toward alternative forms of life, knowledge, and ecological attunement. The travelers, with their handmade jewelry, anti-capitalist ethos, and intuitive rapport with William, embody a countercultural model of human-nature relations.

Their offering of mushrooms evokes the work of anthropologist Anna Tsing, particularly her concept of "collaborative survival" as articulated in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Tsing, 2015). Tsing uses the matsutake mushroom as a metaphor for multispecies entanglement in degraded environments. The matsutake grows in human-disturbed forests, thriving precisely where industrial systems collapse. It is both a symptom of ruin and a possibility for resurgence. In *William*, the mushrooms function similarly. They are marginal, suspect, and transformative—suggesting that life, however precarious, can persist beyond dominant systems.

The travelers' rejection of conventional productivity—"we're not trying to make a living; we're just living"—resonates with Tsing's idea of "arts of inclusion," where human and non-human life forms coexist through practices of attention, flexibility, and improvisation (Tsing, 2011). For William, this encounter offers a glimpse of what coexistence outside mainstream society might look like. The travelers do not view him as an object of curiosity or threat; instead, they intuitively recognize his difference and accept it. Their openness allows William to momentarily drop the guardedness he maintains in most human settings. He even expresses a longing to return to "the time of the Neanderthals" [58:29], a desire that is neither nostalgic nor regressive but posthuman—a yearning for alternative ways of being.

Crucially, the film juxtaposes this acceptance with subtle hostility in other human interactions. When William visits his father's lake house, a pair of rowers visibly recoil at the sight of him. The house itself—a modernist structure with glass walls—becomes a metaphor for surveillance and exhibitionism. William is on display, a living specimen in a transparent box. The discomfort he feels is echoed by the audience. These contrasting responses—hostility versus hospitality, containment versus flow—illustrate the emotional geography of the Anthropocene. Not all environments, or people, are capable of sustaining difference.

The moral conflict between William's parents further dramatizes this tension. Julian wants William to enter the academic world as a subject of study, while Barbara wants to shield him within the illusion of normalcy. Neither parent considers the possibility that William may require a different ontological and ecological framework altogether. The travelers offer a glimpse of that other framework—not utopian, but porous, adaptive, and rooted in collaborative survival.

In this sense, the mushroom scene is not incidental but paradigmatic. It reveals that *William* is not only a film about scientific hubris or evolutionary nostalgia—it is a meditation on the fragility and resilience of multispecies futures.

6. The singing Neanderthal

One of the most poignant themes in *William* is the role of music as a medium for emotional communication and affective recognition. Unlike spoken language, which in the film often functions as a site of exclusion and misunderstanding, music operates as a form of embodied empathy—a space where William can express and receive affection, even as his difference marks

him as other. The film returns repeatedly to scenes where William sings, suggesting that while he may lack fluency in linguistic nuance or metaphor, he possesses a deep capacity for emotional resonance.

This idea draws on Steven Mithen's *The Singing Neanderthal*, which posits that musicality may have preceded or co-evolved with language in early hominins (Mithen, 2005). Mithen and others argue that Neanderthals had vocal capacities similar to modern humans and likely engaged in some form of melodic or rhythmic communication. While archaeological evidence cannot definitively confirm musical activity, the anatomical evidence suggests that the capacity for singing or tonal expression was biologically possible.

In *William*, singing becomes a kind of test—both for William's humanity and for the humanity of those around him. One of the most significant moments occurs when Barbara, breaking protocol, enters the laboratory unprotected to soothe a sick young William by singing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" [30:35]. This lullaby—a song associated with maternal care and emotional bonding—establishes the first moment of unmediated physical and emotional intimacy between them. As Gamble et al. argue, music enriches early social interaction, particularly between mother and child, and serves as a mechanism for emotional regulation and social bonding (Gamble, 2005).

Two later scenes reinforce this theme. During a high school musical performance, William sings to a female peer, only to be met with avoidance and discomfort. The same song, sung again in a forest clearing with Sara [01:15:55], elicits warmth and reciprocal affection. These contrasting responses reveal the ambivalence of human society toward the Neanderthal: at times curious, at others fearful or dismissive. But the emotional clarity of William's musical expression complicates reductive views of Neanderthals as cognitively inferior. As Paige Madison writes, Neanderthals "were as cognitively and behaviorally complex as humans," and many modern assumptions about their simplicity are not grounded in evidence (Madison, 2018).

Tim Disney uses singing not merely as an anthropological gesture, but as a rhetorical counterpoint to the film's emphasis on scientific observation. Music, as a form of "communication outside the scope of language" (Morley, 2005), challenges the idea that species distinction must be defined by rational speech. In doing so, the film gestures toward an expanded posthuman ethics—one grounded not in taxonomic boundaries but in shared emotional intelligibility.

By portraying William's musical sensitivity as authentic and affectively potent, the film allows audiences to imagine a Neanderthal culture that might have included not just survival, but also art, intimacy, and beauty. This aesthetic dimension complicates scientific narratives that reduce de-extinction to a technical achievement. Instead, William raises a vital question: What kinds of relationships—and responsibilities—emerge when the beings we recreate are capable not just of life, but of love?

7. Orientalism and character paradox

While *William* attempts to humanize its titular character, it also falls into familiar representational traps—namely, those of primitivism and neo-Orientalist fantasy. William is portrayed as intellectually slower, emotionally blunt, and physically awkward. His prominent brow ridge and clumsy gait recall 19th-century caricatures of Neanderthals as "stupid cavemen." Though the film seeks to elicit sympathy for William, it also reinforces an evolutionary hierarchy in which the Neanderthal is framed as developmentally and morally subordinate to modern *Homo sapiens*.

This portrayal echoes Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, in which the "other" is rendered knowable only through Western lenses of exoticism, deficiency, or threat (Said, 1979). William's father, Julian—a respected anthropologist—exemplifies this dynamic. Though ostensibly a champion of Neanderthal revival, Julian routinely refers to his son using dismissive labels such as "caveman" and invokes stereotypes of Neanderthal stupidity. His academic expertise becomes a vehicle for rationalizing William's marginalization, mirroring the ways in which Western science historically justified imperial domination through ethnographic authority.

Julian thus embodies what Timothy Morton calls "ecological hypocrisy": the simultaneous awareness of ecological degradation and the unwillingness to abandon human exceptionalism (Morton, 2007). Though he recognizes the significance of Neanderthal revival, Julian remains emotionally and ideologically distant from William. He treats his son less as a relational subject than as an experimental object. This paradox lies at the heart of the film's tragedy: even the most informed representatives of science fail to imagine new relational frameworks that move beyond domination, containment, or pity.

Moreover, the film's representation of William is at odds with emerging paleoanthropological findings. Research by Anna Degioanni et al. (2019) argues that Neanderthal extinction may have been the result of demographic instability rather than cognitive inferiority. Penny Spikins and colleagues (2019) have provided compelling evidence of Neanderthal healthcare practices, symbolic burial rites, and long-term social support networks. These findings suggest a species capable of empathy, ritual, and social cohesion—qualities largely absent in the film's depiction.

Tim Disney's choice to downplay these capabilities reinforces a representational logic that positions William as "almost human, but not quite." His failure to understand puns or metaphors is treated as evidence of mental deficiency, rather than neurodivergence or cultural difference. This dynamic replicates colonial hierarchies of intelligence and civility. In positioning William as noble but ultimately tragic, the film invites viewers to empathize without challenging their assumptions about evolutionary progress or human superiority.

Julian, as the symbolic father of both William and the de-extinction project, stands as a cautionary figure. He epitomizes the failure of scientific humanism to extend genuine ethical consideration beyond the boundaries of species and sameness. If William represents "nature," then Julian represents the anthropocentric arrogance that seeks to control it, even in the act of revival. His paradoxical behavior—simultaneously pioneering and dismissive—reveals the ideological tensions that underlie many contemporary discourses on de-extinction.

8. Neanderthals on screen

The figure of the Neanderthal occupies a unique space in both scientific discourse and popular imagination. As a close relative of *Homo sapiens*—sharing over 99% of our DNA—Neanderthals have become a mirror through which contemporary culture reflects anxieties about human identity, evolution, and belonging. In *William*, the Neanderthal body is portrayed as biologically distinct yet emotionally resonant. William's pronounced brow ridge, muscular build, and occasional cognitive awkwardness mark him as other, even as he demonstrates empathy, curiosity, and aesthetic sensibility. These portrayals, however nuanced, contribute to a long-standing cultural tradition of defining Neanderthals through selective and often stereotypical readings of their biology.

Recent paleoanthropological research presents a more complex and humanizing picture. Neanderthals had brain sizes comparable to or even larger than modern humans, and evidence from tool production, burial rites, and healthcare practices points to a high degree of social and symbolic sophistication (Spikins et al., 2019; Degioanni et al., 2019). Despite these findings, cinematic and visual cultures often reproduce tropes of Neanderthals as cognitively or socially deficient. The persistence of these images—slow-moving, grunting, emotionally stunted figures—reinforces a hierarchy of evolutionary worth, with *Homo sapiens* cast as the teleological endpoint of human development.

William complicates but does not fully escape this framework. While it imagines a Neanderthal capable of love, language, and aesthetic appreciation, it also re-inscribes biological determinism by suggesting limits to William's metaphorical thinking and social integration. His physical traits—especially his gait and facial features—are visually emphasized to signal his evolutionary difference. These aesthetic choices echo decades of cinematic and museum representations that draw sharp visual boundaries between "us" and "them."

The impact of such portrayals extends beyond entertainment. As scholars in public archaeology have noted, popular media often serves as the primary source of archaeological knowledge for the general public. Films, television series, and museum exhibits co-produce public understandings of human ancestry, shaping everything from school curricula to nationalist myths. As Cornelius Holtorf has argued, "archaeology in popular culture can promote both critical awareness and problematic simplifications" (Holtorf, 2007, p. 61). The image of the Neanderthal—whether as a tragic relic, evolutionary failure, or sentimental curiosity—participates in this dual function.

Moreover, these portrayals raise critical questions about scientific authority and the ethics of representation. Who gets to visualize the past? What assumptions guide the reconstruction of prehistoric bodies? And how do those visual choices influence contemporary discourses around race, intelligence, and human exceptionalism? In the case of *William*, the film attempts to foster empathy but ultimately reinforces a boundary between modern humans and archaic hominins that archaeology itself has worked to deconstruct.

As Neanderthals become increasingly visible in mass culture—from BBC documentaries and video games to paleoart and speculative fiction—the responsibility of scholars, filmmakers, and museum curators becomes clear: to engage in a more reflexive, interdisciplinary dialogue about how ancient lives are imagined and displayed. If de-extinction is a scientific fantasy, then representation is a cultural one. Both deserve critical scrutiny.

9. Reconstructing the past in the public imagination

As Neanderthals continue to appear in fiction, film, museum displays, and virtual reconstructions, their image becomes less a reflection of paleoanthropological evidence and more a projection of contemporary social values, anxieties, and scientific ideologies. Public archaeology, broadly defined as the interaction between archaeological knowledge and public audiences, plays a vital role in mediating this image. However, it often does so through the filter of mass media, visual tropes, and institutional narratives that emphasize spectacle over nuance.

Unlike traditional peer-reviewed research, the popular depiction of Neanderthals reaches the public through digestible stories, visual simulations, and emotionally engaging characters. In this process, complex archaeological debates about hominin diversity, interbreeding, healthcare, and symbolic behavior are frequently reduced to visual archetypes: the "primitive brute," the "missing link," or, more recently, the "tragic almost-human." These archetypes often align with what Cornelius Holtorf calls "dominant heritage discourses," which serve nationalistic, evolutionary, or moralistic purposes rather than scholarly ones (Holtorf, 2007).

The film *William* participates in this discursive field by offering a hybrid image: a Neanderthal who is emotionally accessible but biologically marked, intellectually curious but linguistically limited. While such portrayals encourage empathy, they also

reinforce subtle messages about biological hierarchy, social integration, and evolutionary loss. The emotional trajectory of the film—from curiosity to alienation to tragedy—mirrors the arc of many museum exhibits, where visitors are invited to marvel at our ancient relatives only to reaffirm their extinction as both inevitable and necessary.

Public archaeology is not a neutral conduit of scientific facts; it is a space where meanings are negotiated, often unconsciously. The ways Neanderthals are shown in interactive exhibits, school textbooks, and documentary narration scripts actively shape public understandings of who we are, where we come from, and who qualifies as “human.” This has broader implications beyond hominin studies. As scholars like Moshenska (2017) argue, public archaeology participates in shaping collective memory and political identity, often reinforcing dominant narratives about race, progress, and civilization.

Furthermore, the spectacle of de-extinction, now increasingly popularized through institutions like Revive & Restore or speculative fiction, has introduced a bioethical layer to public archaeology. Neanderthals are no longer just figures of the deep past—they are now imagined as potential subjects of future revival. This shift transforms the archaeological imagination into a form of speculative bio-politics. As these ideas enter the public sphere, they carry with them implications for how society prepares (or fails to prepare) for the ethical treatment of revived or reconstructed beings.

In this sense, films like *William* are not just entertainment or narrative thought experiments; they are key actors in public archaeological discourse. They offer affective entry points into difficult conversations about scientific responsibility, species boundaries, and the construction of human ancestry. By dramatizing the return of a Neanderthal to modern life, *William* invites audiences to grapple with more than the question of “what if?”—it asks what kind of past we want to remember, what kind of future we want to build, and who we are willing to include within it.

10. Neanderthals and the politics of public archaeology

The public understanding of Neanderthals is shaped not only by scientific research but also by the ways that research is visually and narratively framed in museums, documentaries, textbooks, and popular media. These representations are not passive translations of data; they are active cultural productions that reflect and reinforce broader assumptions about progress, human superiority, and evolutionary destiny. Public archaeology—defined as the interface between archaeological practice and public engagement—thus plays a pivotal role in shaping how Neanderthals are imagined and remembered.

In recent decades, museum displays have become central arenas for the construction of Neanderthal identity. Institutions such as the Natural History Museum in London, the Neanderthal Museum in Mettmann, Germany, and the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York offer immersive experiences that blend scientific authority with theatrical presentation. While these exhibits often aim to correct outdated images of Neanderthals as brutish or subhuman, they still tend to emphasize physical difference through reconstructed busts, forensic sculptures, and dramatized dioramas. The attention to brow ridges, robust bones, and heavy musculature frequently outweighs narrative attention to social life, symbolic behavior, or emotional complexity.

For example, at the Natural History Museum in London, the human evolution gallery features life-sized reconstructions of hominin species including *Homo neanderthalensis*. These figures are anatomically precise, yet visually distinct from *Homo sapiens*, reinforcing the notion of a “close, but not quite” evolutionary sibling. Visitors are invited to read evolutionary charts and touch interactive tools, but the sensory and emotional distance between Neanderthals and modern humans remains stark. Similarly, at the Neanderthal Museum in Germany, which sits near the original Neander Valley discovery site, the exhibition uses glass, lighting, and audio narration to present Neanderthals in a stylized and often pathos-laden manner—encouraging curiosity, but also pity and a subtle sense of closure.

Documentaries such as *Neanderthal Apocalypse* (National Geographic, 2015) and *The Incredible Human Journey* (BBC, 2009) use CGI reconstructions and dramatized re-enactments to bring Neanderthals “back to life,” but these portrayals often rely on familiar visual tropes: fur-wrapped figures in dimly lit caves, grunting rather than speaking, gazing longingly at passing *Homo sapiens*. Even when the narration acknowledges cognitive equality or interbreeding, the cinematic language maintains a narrative of difference, loss, and evolutionary supersession. The Neanderthal becomes, once again, a cautionary tale or emotional foil for modern humanity.

This visual culture directly shapes public archaeological consciousness. As Cornelius Holtorf (2007) and Laurajane Smith (2006) have argued, heritage spaces and media representations co-create “authorized heritage discourses”—frameworks that legitimize particular versions of the past while marginalizing others. In the case of Neanderthals, the dominant discourse remains evolutionary: they are presented as intelligent but doomed, sympathetic but inferior. Such framing has consequences not only for how the public views prehistory, but also for how it understands concepts like progress, identity, and otherness.

The film *William* enters this ecosystem of representation with a distinctive twist: it transposes the Neanderthal into a contemporary setting, exploring not just who Neanderthals were, but what it might mean to live alongside them again. Yet even here, the film does not fully depart from the visual and behavioral codes established by museums and documentaries. *William*’s physicality is foregrounded; his cognitive and emotional life is framed as exceptional but still limited. The audience is invited to feel empathy, but also to accept his exclusion as inevitable.

These cultural narratives influence more than just education or entertainment—they shape policy imagination, bioethical assumptions, and the terms of future scientific debates. As synthetic biology moves toward plausible scenarios of de-extinction, the public's readiness to accept or reject such interventions may depend not on genomic data but on the stories and images they've absorbed through cultural experience.

Thus, public archaeology is not simply a matter of translating academic findings for lay audiences; it is a site of political and ethical contestation. The figure of the Neanderthal becomes a proxy for debates about what counts as human, whose histories are preserved, and how we envision the boundaries of care, rights, and kinship. Films like *William*, and the museum spaces that precede them, function as speculative laboratories—not just for ancient life, but for the ethical imagination of our collective future.

11. Conclusion

Tim Disney's *William* offers a speculative but incisive case study for interrogating the bioethical, emotional, and ecological ramifications of de-extinction in the Anthropocene. While the film's premise—a cloned Neanderthal child raised in modern society—invites fascination, its narrative ultimately functions as a critique of the scientific hubris and representational assumptions underpinning human efforts to resurrect lost species. William's life is not one of reintegration but of perpetual marginalization: isolated, instrumentalized, and emotionally dislocated. His tragedy is not the result of biological deficiency, but of a society that refuses to accommodate difference outside the terms of human normalcy.

Through careful analysis of the film's visual culture, narrative structure, and symbolic motifs, this article has argued that *William* dramatizes the ethical limits of species revival when undertaken without adequate frameworks for multispecies justice. The film's use of ecological aesthetics—particularly through water imagery—frames William's yearning for the wild as a search for relational wholeness. Yet even in nature, he is never truly at home. Encounters with countercultural figures like the mushroom-gathering travelers hint at alternative modes of coexistence, but these remain fleeting in a world still governed by surveillance, containment, and fear.

Furthermore, the film's ambivalent portrayal of William—both emotionally rich and stereotypically primitive—underscores the dangers of neo-Orientalist narratives that reproduce evolutionary hierarchies. The figure of Julian, as both William's father and scientific creator, personifies the contradictions of post-Enlightenment rationality: simultaneously knowledgeable and dismissive, progressive and patriarchal. His failure to see William as a subject deserving of ethical agency encapsulates the broader failures of contemporary discourses on de-extinction, which often prioritize technological possibility over relational responsibility.

Through the figure of William—a singular Neanderthal resurrected into a world unprepared for his presence—the film dramatizes the social, ethical, and emotional costs of reviving extinct species without sufficient frameworks for inclusion, relationality, or justice. While scientific discourse increasingly recognizes the cognitive and cultural sophistication of Neanderthals, cinematic representations continue to vacillate between empathy and stereotype, innovation and nostalgia.

This article has shown that *William* both participates in and critiques these representational traditions. On one hand, the film explores William's emotional life through ecological symbolism and musical expression; on the other, it reinforces visual and behavioral tropes of Neanderthal otherness. This article extends this critique by situating *William* within broader media portrayals of prehistoric humans, emphasizing how such narratives contribute to public understandings of archaeology and human ancestry. In doing so, it underscores the power of visual culture not only to reflect but to shape the epistemological and ethical contours of evolutionary science.

As synthetic biology advances and species revival moves closer to reality, *William* offers a timely cultural meditation on what it means to "rewild" the human. The film invites viewers—and, by extension, scientists, ethicists, and media scholars—to imagine not only the technical feasibility of de-extinction, but its social, emotional, and ecological consequences. Can a species be resurrected without reproducing the structures of domination that led to its demise? And if we succeed in bringing the extinct back to life, are we prepared to live with them—not as curiosities, but as companions?

In this sense, *William* does not reject the idea of de-extinction outright. Instead, it challenges us to reimagine it: not as a spectacle of scientific triumph, but as a radical call to expand the boundaries of empathy, ethics, and ecological belonging.

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Appendix



Figure 1. William and Sara's reflections in the forest stream, illuminated by the Tyndall effect



Figure 2. William seeks refuge on a bridge suspended over a stream after being bullied