

**Wound Cultures: Explorations of embodiment in visual culture in the age of
HIV/AIDS**

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Abstract

This thesis employs the bodily wound as a metaphor for exploring HIV/AIDS in visual culture. In particular it connects issues of bodily penetration, sexuality and mortality with pre-existing anxieties around the integrity of the male body and identity. The thesis is structured around four case studies, none of which can be said to be ‘about’ HIV/AIDS in any straightforward way, and a theoretical and historical overview in the introduction. In doing so it demonstrates that our understanding of HIV/AIDS is always connected to highly entrenched ways of thinking, particularly around gender and embodiment. The introduction sets out the issues around HIV/AIDS particularly as they relate to visual culture and promotes the work of Georges Bataille and Jacques Derrida as philosophical antecedents of queer theory, a body of ideas that emerges alongside HIV/AIDS and is intimately connected with it.

Chapter one continues to engage with Bataille through the work of Ron Athey. Athey’s work uses religious and sacrificial imagery, wounding and bodily penetration to explore living in the world as an HIV-positive man. The work of Mary Douglas, who argued that the individual body could stand in for the social body, along with Leo Bersani, who argues that male penetration is tantamount to subjective dissolution are instructive in this regard. The second chapter examines how Bataille’s work has been incorporated into the discourse of art history but subject to strategic exclusions that masked its engagement with sexuality, corporeality and politics at the height of the AIDS crisis in the western world. It argues that the work of David Wojnarowicz addresses similar concerns but in an embodied, activist form.

The third chapter looks at a film by François Ozon from 2005 and argues that, through photography and trauma discourse, it returns viewers to a time when HIV infection was invariably terminal and fatal. The film, therefore, is an engagement with mortality on the part of a young man. The final chapter looks at the films of Pedro Almodóvar to argue that his films simultaneously undercut our expectations around gender and sexuality while promoting an understanding of sexual difference as the originary experience of loss in our lives. The work of Judith Butler is instructive in this regard and also draws out its connections and implications to HIV/AIDS. In conclusion the thesis argues that HIV/AIDS, understood as a wound to the idea of an integral, stable and sacrosanct body, has made such an understanding of the body untenable and that this has enabling and productive consequences for our understanding of gender and sexuality.

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Introduction: Wound Cultures¹

In Catherine Opie's large format Polaroid photograph *Ron Athey/Suicide Bed (from 4 Scenes)* (2000) [Fig. 0.1] the performance artist is bound by the feet to a bed while he raises one arm punctured by some twenty syringes. The pose is derived from one of the vignettes that make up his semi-autobiographical performance *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* (1993), relating to his heroin addiction and recovery from it. Opie's photograph, like Athey's performances, presents the wound, the puncturing of the skin, in all its signficatory richness. The wounds represented here point to bodily and emotional pain as well as (transgressive) pleasure in the form of drug use, piercings and tattoos. The image also calls to mind, through the syringes, the prescribed and socially acceptable bodily penetrations encountered in modern medicine. In doing so it evokes a sense of resilience many of us fortunate enough to have access to invasive, yet life saving, treatment will have to find, either now or in the future, to maintain our health: Athey had to hold this position, perfectly still, many times for Opie to produce a clear image on this giant camera, which can only be focused by moving and adjusting the objects in front of it.² The wound's semiotic richness is matched by its etymological complexity: while the *Oxford English Dictionary* primarily defines the wound as "a hurt caused by the separation or laceration of the tissues of the body," it also notes that the wound is almost equally as likely to be used figuratively, to refer to emotional trauma.³ Indeed, trauma, a psychoanalytic but also an increasingly everyday term (micro-trauma) for an emotionally rather than physically distressing experience, comes from the ancient Greek for wound and is often still used to refer to the physical wound in a medical context (blunt-force trauma etc.).⁴ The psychoanalytic conception of trauma as emotional distress that reveals

¹ The term "wound cultures" was coined by Mark Seltzer, who used it to describe "the convening of the

² Catherine Opie, "Flash: On Photographing Ron Athey," in Dominic Johnson (ed.), *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 143.

³ <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/230431?rskey=la2t0Y&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> Accessed 08/02/17.

⁴ <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/205242?redirectedFrom=trauma#eid> Accessed 08/02/17.

itself, after a period of latency, through its symptomatic manifestations point to another connected, but distinct, category of bodily anguish in the form of the symptom or aftermath of hurt or illness: the scar, bruise, lesion or rash. It is the vacillation between the wound as both physical and psychic that this thesis will animate.

This thesis proposes the bodily wound as the crucial metaphor for understanding how the AIDS epidemic and HIV virus have shifted our conceptions of embodiment. Taking four meditations on embodiment from visual culture – which here denotes artistic responses from performance art and cinema as well as painting and photography – none of which can be said to be ‘about’ AIDS in any simple or straightforward way, as my case studies, I argue that each negotiates a crisis of embodied experience comparable to the effects of the virus. My argument is, precisely, that each case study represents an attempt to grapple with the undoing of a model of bodily coherence and integrity made untenable by the development of the epidemic and that each uses a manifestation of the wound to do so. This is not to say that HIV/AIDS is the sole cause of all the wounding ordeals addressed by the case studies but, I argue, HIV/AIDS gave a contour and legibility to an array of bodily experiences previously exiled from cultural comprehension and acknowledgement. My particular contribution is, therefore, to maintain an insistence on the irreducible contextual specificity of HIV/AIDS, while connecting it to longstanding anxieties about the transgression of bodily boundaries, and that bodily infraction is the source of so much anxiety because it makes visible and palpable the fact that the inviolate body and self-same identity are unobtainable fantasies. Accordingly, the field of study that this thesis participates in is the discourse around HIV/AIDS, its representation and history, as well as the art history and visual culture of gender and sexuality more broadly. It also makes a tangential contribution to what might broadly be termed wound studies, a fascinating field that pays particular attention to the central importance of wounds in Christianity. Deconstruction, particularly as it relates to psychoanalysis and the study of

sexuality, provides the theoretical grounding of the thesis and I hope to have made some small contribution to these fields too.



Fig 0.1: Catherine Opie, *Ron Athey/Suicide Bed (from 4 Scenes)*, 2000, Polaroid, 110 x 41”.

Metaphorical understandings of HIV/AIDS have long been a contentious issue in thinking, writing and talking about the virus. Perhaps most famously Susan Sontag, in a 1989 addition to her earlier study of cultural myths surrounding cancer, argued that metaphorical understandings of AIDS often had an adverse effect on those afflicted with the illness and were often used as camouflage for moralistic judgements about those at risk.⁵ While, certainly, this has often been the case, I argue that it is impossible for us to think in any depth without metaphor and the key contention of this thesis is that the metaphor of bodily wounding has been one of the most effective ways of transmitting the experiences of HIV/AIDS across the boundaries of generation, sexuality and serostatus. While Sontag's primary motivation in writing *AIDS and Its Metaphors* may have been the desire to draw attention to the potential harmful effects of certain metaphorical understandings of AIDS, and illness more generally, for me it functions as a superb and concise history of the cultural myths and meanings that attached themselves to epidemic disease (not just AIDS but tuberculosis, syphilis, rabies, leprosy and bubonic plague), it also rather reinforces the inevitability of thinking about disease in this way. In this sense I argue, regarding *AIDS and Its Metaphors* that "language trumps intention," which is to say that a speaker or writer cannot rule out, as not consistent with their intentions, all but a few chosen interpretations.⁶ This critique of artistic intention continues: "how we understand what we read depends not on the private intentions of the writer but on the potentialities inherent in the public language in which he has chosen to write."⁷ In chapter 1, through looking at the work of Ron Athey, I will demonstrate that the association of HIV/AIDS with plague and martyrdom, to which Sontag draws our attention, can be appropriated in the service of a radically destabilising critique of normativity far in excess of the

⁵ Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 1989), 12 & 14.

⁶ Bernard Harrison, "'White Mythology' Revisited: Derrida and His Critics on Reason and Rhetoric," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Spring, 1999), 508.

⁷ *Ibid.* 508.

moralistic and exclusionary motives that she ascribes to the endurance of this particular metaphor in her essay.⁸

As a puncturing or rupture of the skin, which leaves a hole or scar, the wound serves as a metaphor for what Patrick Ffrench calls “the figure of a transgressive irruption of something other (whether divine, bestial, feminine, etc.) in a defined body, limited by the contours of the *human*, the *phallic*, the *territorial (terrestrial)*.”⁹ Here Ffrench is drawing attention to the fact that philosophical definitions of subjectivity are metaphors stemming from the human body, the first place we experience ourselves as subjects:

We are obsessed by the wound because we live with a philosophy of the Subject – closed, whole, phallic, because we think of ourselves as inside, as a whole body limited by skin, which keeps us in. I am here, in this body, incarnated. Spirit inhabiting flesh. I move around in this body, a whole, closed thing, a walking phallus. I am fascinated by the wound, by violent irruption, as whatever is outside, and which threatens this phallic enclosure.¹⁰

If the body is called upon to signify wholeness, or the upright/phallic centred subject, the wound signifies our experience of this body/subjectivity as damaged or made vulnerable (open to penetration) by what is other or foreign. The wound can represent this experience in both a literal and metaphorical sense and this is particularly important when thinking about wounds in relation to HIV/AIDS. Reliant on penetration to take root in the human body, HIV can be seen as a very real foreign invasion into that body. At the same time, through its association with non-normative sexualities, sexual penetration, drug use, medical interventions like blood transfusion and the invasion of death into life, HIV also calls forth forms of being and embodiment that are abjected from that vision of centred subjectivity and that form its constitutive outside. In this way HIV/AIDS, as represented by the case studies in this thesis, is never only or primarily about the experience of infection and illness, but always impinges other social, political or philosophical issues

⁸ Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 45 & 64.

⁹ Patrick Ffrench, “Wounds/Spasm” <http://www.michaelclark.info/wounds.html> accessed 07/09/16. Unpaginated. Emphasis original.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Unpaginated.

thrown up and dramatized by the epidemic. For example, in chapter 2 I look at the work of David Wojnarowicz, whose deep seated pessimism was rooted in a disdain for contemporary consumerism, anthropocentric thinking, and US politics as well as his own biography but which he nonetheless managed to incorporate into AIDS activism. The wounds at issue in Wojnarowicz's work include those inflicted on the environment, on animals and on social and historical outsiders, in such a way that HIV/AIDS becomes the latest iteration of history viewed as a succession of wounds.

AIDS and the visual/Literature review

Though HIV/AIDS has been enormously productive of visual art since its emergence in the early 1980s extant theoretical literature of HIV/AIDS in visual culture is relatively slim. For this reason up until the late 1980s much of the literature on AIDS and visual art came from curatorial efforts and exhibition reviews and criticism as art professionals and journalists sought to respond to the unfolding crisis and the plethora of artistic responses to it. Exhibitions also acted as flash points where the coterminous and deeply interconnected AIDS crisis and the US Culture Wars met.¹¹ Shows like *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* at Artists Space, New York, in 1989 and *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, which was withdrawn from its original venue, The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., also in 1989 (Mapplethorpe had died of AIDS in March 1989), provoked the ire of prominent congressional conservatives who used these controversies to promote their own agenda of a return to moral rectitude, thinly veiled homophobia, and the reduction of government funding for the arts.¹² At the other end of the political

¹¹ The importance of exhibitions in the development of AIDS art and activism is emphasized in Theodore Kerr, Amy Sadao, and Nelson Santos, "Love Happened Here: Art, Archives, and a Living History," in Jonathan D. Katz and Rock Hushka (eds.), *Art AIDS America* (Seattle, WA. & London: Tacoma Art Museum & The University of Washington Press, 2015), 62-73.

¹² Richard Bolton (ed.), *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: New Press, 1992).

spectrum the AIDS pressure group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) mounted a protest against the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York over its exhibition of work by the photographer Nicholas Nixon in 1988. Nixon's suite of works showing emaciated people with AIDS (PWAs) in the final stages of their illness portrayed, the ACT UP protest argued, "PWAs as people to be pitied and feared, as people alone and lonely" and perpetuated "general misconceptions about AIDS without addressing the realities of those of us living every day with the crisis."¹³ The message on the protestor's flyers ended with an injunction that called for an end to immobilising or exploitative imagery of PWAs that did not allow those with the illness any agency in the construction of their own image: "Stop Looking At Us: Start Listening To US."¹⁴ In doing so they illuminated some of the unique problems facing the visual arts in its attempts to address HIV/AIDS.

While the HIV virus itself seemed to defy representation, its physical and visible effects – for example bodily emaciation or skin conditions like Kaposi's Sarcoma lesions – were easily configured into a mawkish and prurient spectacle on television, mainstream film and newspaper as well as art photography. Key to the operation of this spectacle, as the language of the ACT UP MOMA protest makes clear, is the way that it establishes the subject of the visual representation as a resolutely distanced other in relation to the viewer. The viewer of such work may feel sympathy or pity for its subject but exists at a safe distance from the virus, which is something that threatens and kills other people, not them. In this way much of the mainstream visual culture around HIV/AIDS reinforced a sense of passivity and inevitability around the epidemic and hindered efforts to change the way the virus and PWA's were approached by government and health authorities.

¹³ Monica B. Pearl, "Gazing at AIDS" in Michele Aaron (ed.), *Envisaging Death: Visual Culture and Dying* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 68.

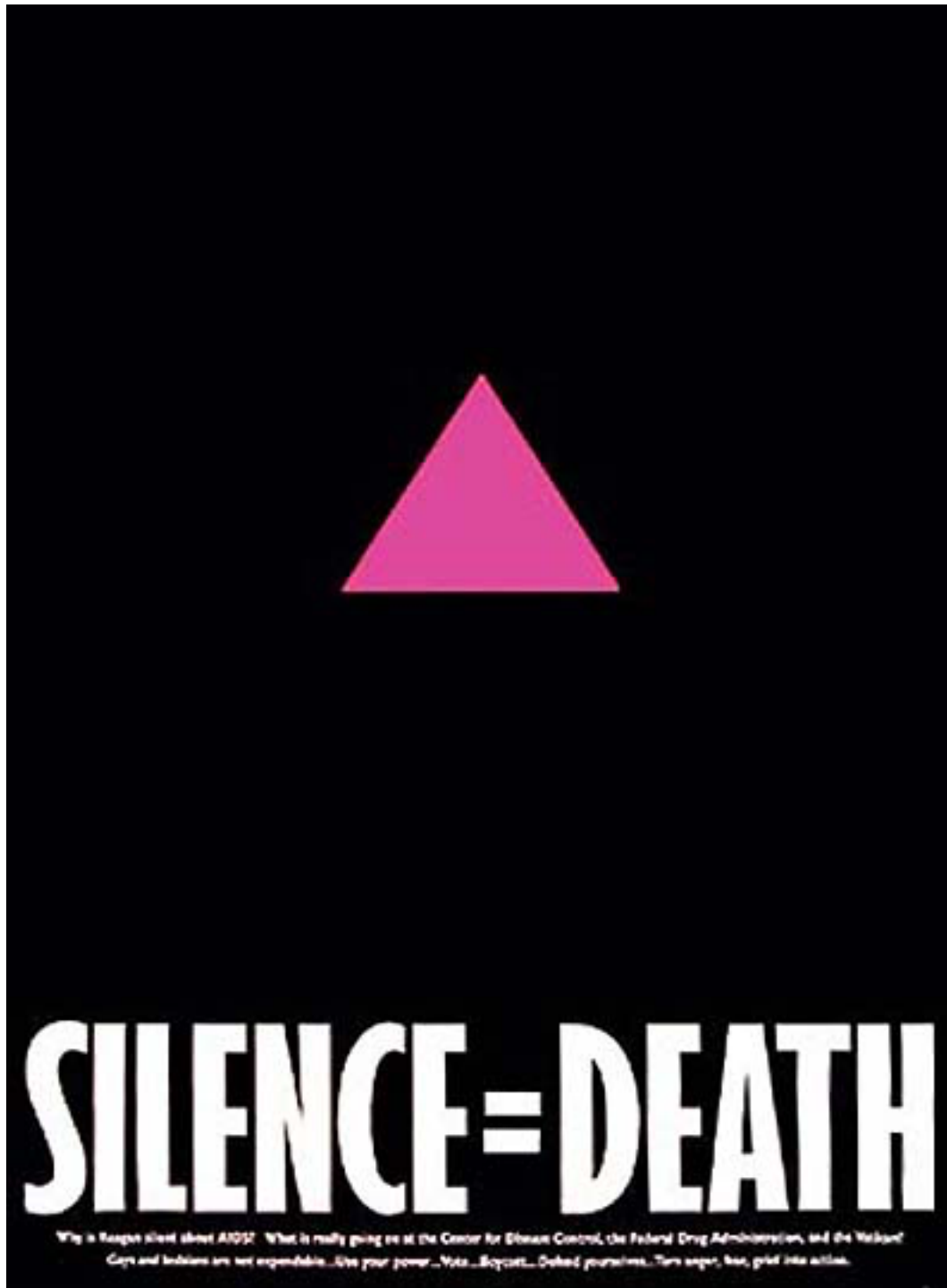
¹⁴ *Ibid.* 68.

On the other hand, however, visual culture could be so arresting that it cut through the popular media narrative that HIV/AIDS had accrued by the late 1980s. The SILENCE = DEATH emblem [Fig. 0.1], written against a black background and under a pink triangle, has been described as “a logo so striking that you ultimately *have* to ask, if you don’t already know, ‘What does that mean?’”¹⁵ The emblem, created by a group calling themselves the Silence = Death Project, slightly preceded the formation of ACT UP but quickly became associated with that group. Inspired by the pink triangles gay men in Nazi concentration camps were forced to wear, which had already been appropriated by the gay liberation movement, SILENCE = DEATH imagery initially appeared as a poster but became a common placard at demos, a T-shirt, lapel badge and sticker. Its strength as an image is that it quickly condenses and conveys information, like figurative language, to argue that “silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, *then as now*, must be broken as a matter of our survival.”¹⁶ Though a simplistic equation of the AIDS crisis with the Nazi death camps is historically problematic, what SILENCE = DEATH draws upon is the *affect* of anger, fear and grief associated with that historical memory.¹⁷

¹⁵ Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, AIDS Demo Graphics (Seattle, WA.: Bay Press, 1990), 14. Emphasis original.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 14. Emphasis original.

¹⁷ In fact, the pink triangle in the *SILENCE=DEATH* poster is the inverted form of the one worn in concentration camps.



0.2: Silence = Death Project, *SILENCE = DEATH*, 1987. Poster.

In 1988 four art world professionals who were also AIDS activists founded *Visual AIDS* an organisation dedicated to using the visual arts to promote AIDS awareness, supporting artists with HIV/AIDS and giving visibility to the growing body of work about HIV and the AIDS crisis.¹⁸ In 1989 *Visual AIDS* organised the first Day Without Art which involved over 800 museums in actions like temporarily closing while staff worked

¹⁸ Kathy S. Stolley and John E. Glass, *HIV/AIDS* (Santa Barbara, CA.: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 99.

at AIDS organisations, mounting special exhibitions to address HIV/AIDS, and covering some artworks “to represent all the work that may never be made or seen.”¹⁹ In 1998 this annual event was renamed Day With(out) Art to reflect the change in perceptions about HIV/AIDS, brought about by medical advancements, and the relationship of visual art to it.

Foregrounding the impact of HIV/AIDS on the visual arts in curatorial projects continues today. In 2010, the exhibition *Hide/Seek: Desire and Difference in American Portraiture*, co-curated by Jonathan D. Katz and David C. Ward at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C., provoked the anger of Christian campaigners and lobbyists. The controversy centred on the use of religious imagery in *A Fire In My Belly*, a video piece by David Wojnarowicz that the exhibition framed as being a response to the AIDS crisis.²⁰ In 2012 Helen Molesworth curated a major retrospective of the art of the 1980s at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Attempting to address the position of that decade as an often elided open wound within art history Molesworth contends, on the first page of her catalogue essay, “If the 1980s is an open wound, then surely AIDS is largely responsible for causing it.”²¹ Explaining that she felt unable to “approach the material at hand as if I didn’t know about AIDS, as if there was an innocent ‘eighties’ before the disease and its attendant political crisis came into full view,” Molesworth attempts to integrate the issue of AIDS into each section of the exhibition.²² A major exhibition focusing on the impact of HIV/AIDS on American art from the early 1980s to the present, *Art AIDS America*, also curated by Katz in collaboration with Rock Hushka, opened in

¹⁹ <https://www.visualaids.org/events/detail/day-without-art1> accessed on 26/08/15.

²⁰ Brent Philips, a media archivist at Fales Library, New York University, which holds the Wojnarowicz papers argues that the work presented in the *Hide/Seek* exhibition is a recreation from a “film in progress” by Wojnarowicz from 1986-87 (before he tested positive for HIV), and uses additional audio recorded separately by the artist at an ACT UP demonstration. Footage from the same film in progress was used in Rosa von Praunheim’s film *SILENCE = DEATH*, but it is unclear whether the footage labelled *A Fire in My Belly* was originally conceived by Wojnarowicz as being about HIV/AIDS. <https://wp.nyu.edu/specialcollections/2010/12/20/david-wojnarowiczs-a-fire-in-my-belly/> Accessed 20/09/16.

²¹ Helen Molesworth, *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s* (New Haven, CT. & London: Yale University Press and Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2012), 15.

²² *Ibid.* 15.

Tacoma, Washington, in October 2015 before moving to the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 2016. In his catalogue essay Katz writes of the desire to sequester AIDS firmly in the past, “as a tragic tangent in American history, not as a generative force.”²³ While underplaying the ways in which HIV/AIDS has shaped American art and culture in the present, this manoeuvre, he argues, replicates “the us/them dynamic that haunted (and impeded) early efforts to organize against the threat.”²⁴ It is this same us/them opposition, and its deleterious political and social consequences, that the ACT UP protests at MOMA in 1988 sought to critique.

In winter 1987 *October* magazine, one of the most prominent, sophisticated and ground-breaking scholarly journals on visual culture in the English speaking world, published a special issue on AIDS edited by its then managing editor Douglas Crimp. Crimp, already a major figure in art history, had been a leading voice in the elaboration of postmodernism as it related to and took place in art and visual culture from the mid-1970s onwards. The focus of the *October* special issue can be neatly discerned from its subtitle *Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* and it took the form of academic analysis of the representation of AIDS in cultural, political and scientific discourse by the likes of Simon Watney and Paula A. Treichler combined with more direct activist/artistic interventions. Crimp’s own contributions to the special issue include a scathing indictment of moralistic analysis of the AIDS crisis that targeted not just the “usual suspects” of the religious right and mainstream media but key figures in the gay and AIDS activist movements who adopted similar rhetoric in the essay “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic.” In addition, in his introduction Crimp celebrates directly interventionist artworks that emerged from AIDS activism, which aimed to spread safer sex and drug use information in defiance of bigotry and political inaction, or attempted to counter misinformation

²³ Jonathan D. Katz, “How AIDS changed American Art,” In Jonathan D. Katz and Rock Hushka (eds.), *Art AIDS America* (Seattle, WA. & London: Tacoma Art Museum & The University of Washington Press, 2015),

24.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 24.

circulating in the mainstream media.²⁵ In opposing these activist practices to the withdrawn stance of aesthetic idealism, which saw art as powerless in the face of HIV/AIDS, Crimp's introductory essay displays a preference for directly engaged and explicitly activist – though what constitutes activism remains broadly defined – artworks and, in doing so, establishes an important precedent in critical responses to visual interventions in, and/or responses to, the AIDS crisis.

In his introduction Crimp also makes explicit the way in which artistic responses to HIV/AIDS challenge the prevailing rhetoric of aesthetic idealism, which advances a view of art as timeless, transcendent and removed from the day-to-day struggles of politics as a strategic denial of the political investments, contingency and historicity of that (world)view itself.²⁶ In this way Crimp's analysis of HIV/AIDS in visual culture is an extension of the critique of art as an institution that he had been developing, alongside many others, during the previous decade.²⁷ This demonstrates, I argue, an important aspect of how and what HIV/AIDS has come to mean in contemporary culture: as a uniquely pressing political and medical crisis and a bodily experience that gives a sense of vital immediacy and dramatic visibility to many of the cultural critiques that had been developing in the 1970s and before through feminism, post-structuralism and postmodern thought. In this respect Jacques Derrida's understanding of the importance of the HIV/AIDS for contemporary life and thought has established the ground for this thesis. Earlier in his career, long before the epidemic, Derrida, in contrast to Sontag's arguments in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, had demonstrated the necessity and inevitability of metaphor in language and understanding. Thus his theoretical output makes evident a central claim

²⁵ Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *October*, Vol. 43 (Winter, 1987), 238.

²⁶ Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA. & London: The MIT Press, 2002), 25.

²⁷ In "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," Crimp critiqued the incorporation of photography into the institutional discourse of modernism, as being a repression of the anti-modernist elements of the medium, in its challenge discourses of presence and originality. Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October*, Vol. 15 (Winter, 1980), 91-101. Other essays in this vein are collected in Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA. & London: The MIT Press, 1993).

of this thesis: that our understanding of HIV/AIDS is intimately intertwined with the political, social and intellectual developments of the 1960s and 1970s.

Metaphor/Deconstruction

While Sontag is broadly sceptical of metaphorical explanations of the AIDS crisis, Derrida is critical of the binary opposition between metaphorical or figurative language and the notion of the “concept” as that which gives access to (extra-linguistic) truth without the need for figurative ornamentation. In “White Mythology” he charts a selective history of the place of metaphor in metaphysical discourse and argues that the use of figurative language is consistently positioned as an inferior form in the transmission of meaning. Though regrettable, recourse to metaphor is often considered admissible for reasons of economy and reserve due to its ability to express ideas more effectively than long and complex explanations.²⁸ Appropriately enough Derrida mobilises a metaphor to make his critique of this position clearer: the figure of the abrasion of the obverse (front) of a coin, with the intention of making its value infinite and unlimited, as analogous to the desire that philosophical language express truth in a direct manner, without the mediation of figuration.²⁹ The implication here is that the wearing away of the obverse of a coin in fact makes the coin worthless, as it would no longer have a position in the system of exchange that bestows value upon it. Economics, like language, Derrida argues, is concerned with equating things of different orders: labour and wages, signifier and signified.³⁰ It follows that language, like units of currency, is “enmeshed in a web of contingency, temporality, and local convention,” from which it cannot be freed to give access to extra-linguistic

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” Trans. F. C. T. Moore, *New Literary History*, Vol. 6:1 (Autumn, 1974), 20.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7 & 14.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 16.

essence or truth once stripped – impossibly – of all trace of metaphorical or figurative ornamentation.³¹

In this way *White Mythology* furnishes us with an example of the more general operation of deconstruction in that it presents a pair of binary terms, in this case figurative and non-figurative language, and demonstrates the implicit privileging of one over the other in hierarchical fashion. In doing so Derrida is not attempting to invert the relationship and privilege the more marginal and debased term but to demonstrate that the privileged term, to use Bernard Harrison's gloss on the matter, "can only be rendered intelligible, via covert dependence on its marginalised component."³² The third section of Derrida's essay is titled "Ellipsis/Eclipse of the Sun: The Riddle, the Incomprehensible, the Ungraspable" and turns upon an example that Aristotle considered an acceptable and necessary use of metaphor: its use to describe phenomena with no name in a given language. Aristotle's example is of the rays of the sun: "Thus to cast forth seed corn is called 'sowing'; but to cast forth its flame, as is said of the sun, has no special name. [...] Hence the expression [...] 'sowing a god-created flame.'"³³ But as Derrida points out this analogy is not visually verifiable and only compels acceptance "because of a chain that is very long and not very visible" made up of a series of interlocking metaphors.³⁴ As Harrison points out ellipsis is a term that signifies both the oval form of the Earth's rotation around the Sun and, in rhetoric or grammar, the omission of words from a sentence that would be necessary to communicate its full meaning.³⁵ With this example Derrida is showing us that the full meaning of any sentence is not given "by relating its terms one by one to essences given externally to language, but by relating them to other

³¹ Harrison, "'White Mythology' Revisited, 516.

³² Ibid. 514.

³³ Cited in Derrida, "White Mythology," 43-44.

³⁴ Derrida, "White Mythology," 44.

³⁵ Harrison, "White Mythology Revisited," 516.

terms within the ‘chain’ of language.”³⁶ Thus the notion of a fully-expressed and direct language which is non-elliptical “evaporates into vacuity.”³⁷

In *White Mythology* Derrida gestures towards the broader implications of deconstruction through his analysis of what he calls the “metaphorical sedimentation of concepts.”³⁸ The movement of metaphorisation, he argues, consists of “a two-fold effacement” by which the metaphor first covers over the proper, direct, non-figurative term – or conceals the absence of such a term – and is in turn naturalised in language, taken for the proper meaning and conceals its original status as metaphorical substitute.³⁹ Derrida often defines deconstruction as a process of de-sedimentation.⁴⁰ A disturbing, unsettling, or shaking up of the commonplace reading or understanding of a text, concept or entity in such a way as to reveal the accumulated or sedimented internal contradictions already at work within the text/concept/entity itself and on which its appearance of unity, coherence and univocality rests.⁴¹

Paula Treichler, a contributor to the *October* special issue, has argued that in general medical professionals have attempted to reinforce the separation of medical and moralistic understandings of disease in relation to HIV/AIDS. This has had a hugely positive impact on the medical and political response to the virus. Despite this attempt to represent AIDS as “an epidemic of infectious disease and nothing more,” she argues that HIV/AIDS has inevitably “been invested with an abundance of meanings and metaphors [...] an *epidemic of signification*.”⁴² Treichler’s approach to the significations that have accrued around the signifier AIDS closely parallel Derrida’s critique of the belief in a

³⁶ Ibid. 516.

³⁷ Ibid. 516.

³⁸ Derrida, “White Mythology,” 12.

³⁹ Ibid. 8-9.

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD. & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 10. Cited in Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 25.

⁴¹ Royle, *Jacques Derrida*, 26.

⁴² Paula A. Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Durham NC. & London: Duke University Press, 1999), 1. Emphasis original.

direct and non-metaphorical language outlined above: “AIDS is no different in this respect from other linguistic constructions that, in the commonsense view of language, are thought to transmit pre-existing ideas and represent real-world entities yet in fact do neither.”⁴³ In addition, Treichler demonstrates, against the wishes of those in the scientific and medical community who would argue, like Sontag, that HIV/AIDS ought to be understood on the basis of scientific facts as nothing more than a medical illness, that “‘the facts’ themselves arise out of the signifying practices of biomedical discourse.”⁴⁴ For example, Treichler demonstrates the persistence in medical discourse of the belief that heterosexual transmission of HIV was difficult, if not impossible, during the early years of the epidemic and reveals the role that cultural misogyny and heteronormativity played in that persistence.⁴⁵

Significantly, the last manifestation of deconstruction – which Derrida argued was not a method of reading but simply *what is*⁴⁶ – was to be developed under the heading of autoimmunity. The strength of this term, once considered by medical science to be an aberration but now thought of as a constituent part of every well-functioning immune system, is that it reveals a self-destructive process of undoing, “inevitably and irreducibly at work more or less everywhere, at the heart of every sovereign identity.”⁴⁷ Derrida is explicit on the importance of the HIV pandemic, “this fact of our time that I believe to be absolutely original and indelible,”⁴⁸ in providing, “as if it were a painting or a giant movie

⁴³ Treichler, How to Have Theory in an Epidemic, 11. Treichler, like Derrida, draws attention to the importance of the work of Ferdinand de Saussure in demonstrating that language “organizes rather than labels experience (or the world). Linking signifiers (phonetic segments or, more loosely, words) and signifieds (concepts, meanings) in ways that come to seem ‘natural’ to us, language creates the illusion of ‘transparency,’ as though we could look through it to ‘facts’ and ‘realities’ that are unproblematic.” Treichler, How to Have theory in an Epidemic, 331, n. 2.

⁴⁴ Treichler, How to Have theory in an Epidemic, 331, n. 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 22-23.

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida quoted in Michael Naas, “‘One Nation... Indivisible’: Jacques Derrida on the Autoimmunity of Democracy and the Sovereignty of God,” Research in Phenomenology, Vol. 36:1 (2006), 18.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 18.

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, “The Rhetoric of Drugs,” in Elisabeth Weber (ed.), Points... Interviews, 1974-1994 (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 250.

screen [...] an available, daily, massive *readability*,”⁴⁹ to the previously denied incoherence at the heart of discourses of bodily integrity, sovereignty and self-identity. The reliance on metaphors that connect the visual arts to the communication of now unavoidable and disruptive facts is telling: it is perhaps more difficult for us to disbelieve what we see than what we read or hear.

Derrida’s insistence on the importance of AIDS is also significant in that it proposes the virus as a rupture that exposes continuity. As the above quotation suggests, he sees AIDS, like autoimmunity and deconstruction, as exposing the way in which ideas and entities have their own negation or unravelling located within them. Furthermore, he is at pains to stress that this state of affairs long precedes the appearance of anything called AIDS, autoimmunity or deconstruction: “You may say this is how it’s always been, and I believe it.”⁵⁰ Indeed, much of Derrida’s work is dedicated to revealing the deconstructive operation at work in canonical texts from the Enlightenment and as far back as Plato. The temporal dimensions of his argument also stretch into the future:

[A]t the dawn of this very new and ever so ancient thing, we know that, even should humanity some day come to control the virus (it will take at least a generation), still, even in the most unconscious symbolic zones, the traumatism has irreversibly affected our experience of desire and of what we blithely call intersubjectivity.⁵¹

These observations seem particularly prescient from the vantage point of the point of writing, where a renewed scholarly interest in HIV/AIDS appears to be emerging in an attempt to take account of the growing cultural nostalgia for the AIDS activism of the 1980s and 1990s (a profusion of recent documentary films attests to this) alongside the continuing AIDS crisis in the Global South and the renewed rise in infection rates in the

⁴⁹ Ibid. 251. Emphasis original.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 251.

⁵¹ Ibid. 251.

developed world where the virus was previously thought to have been brought under control.⁵²

Crimp is himself particularly candid in locating his theoretical interest in AIDS not just in terms of his identity as a sexually active gay man in New York City in the 1980s but as an extension of the issues that had concerned him up until that time. In his interview for the ACT UP oral history project, an extensive archive of interviews with surviving activists from all walks of life made freely available online, Crimp cites his interest in post-structuralism and postmodern thought, and his reading of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes – in particular Barthes’s late work which concerns affect, emotion, memory and loss and which was at the time often seen as apolitical in comparison with his earlier output – as intellectual preparation for his theoretical and activist engagement with the topic of HIV/AIDS.⁵³ Crimp describes his first engagements with the topic for the *October* special issue in terms of a conjunction of biographical and intellectual experience and interest:

[I]t was probably the first thing that I wrote that was a big rush of all of the things that I had thought, or that I had come to think, in all of the reading and thinking and experiencing that had taken place in my life up to that point, in my gay life up to that point, particularly in the period from, say, 1970.⁵⁴

Bersani/Bataille

In his contribution to the *October* special issue Leo Bersani also attempts to take into account the relationship between the epidemic, and the political and social crisis it perpetuated, and the intellectual legacy of the previous decades. Addressing the violent

⁵² The films *Gay Sex in the 70s* by Joseph Lovett (2005), *We Were Here* by David Weissman and Bill Weber (2011), *How to Survive a Plague* by David France (2012) and *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* by Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman (2012) all utilise archival film and video footage, voiceover and talking head interviews to portray the emergence of AIDS and AIDS activism in New York and San Francisco.

⁵³ ACT UP Oral History Project interview with Douglas Crimp, 19.

<http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/crimp.pdf> accessed 09/09/2015.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 18. Sontag, too, is aware of the threat posed by phobic responses elicited by the AIDS crisis to the social and intellectual achievements of the previous decades describing them as part of a neo-conservative “Kulturkampf against all that is called for short (and inaccurately), the 1960s.” Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 63.

fantasies he sees as being unleashed by HIV/AIDS – in terms of both the homophobic fantasies of revenge against homosexuals and the projection of homicidal motives to an imagined community of gay men who wilfully spread HIV and desire that it spread unabated amongst the “general population”⁵⁵ – Bersani takes issue with the multiple approaches that attempt to reimagine sex in a less violent and phallogocentric way, which have been developed from a wide variety of intellectual standpoints from the 1960s onwards.⁵⁶ Arguing that such approaches always consider sexual inequality and violence to be the product of social inequality and violence he claims that these well-intentioned positions fail to imagine how sex leads to politics:

[A]s if the sexual – involving as it does the source and locus of every individual’s original experience of power (and of powerlessness) in the world: the human body – could somehow be conceived apart from all relations of power, were, so to speak, belatedly contaminated by power from elsewhere.⁵⁷

Bersani also contends that such positions are (often unwittingly) examples of the widespread compulsion to sanitise sex and do not take account of the extent to which so-called “normal” sexuality is itself violent.⁵⁸ Furthermore, he draws upon the psychoanalytic conception of sexual pleasure as the result of a threshold of bodily intensity being exceeded to argue that the power dynamics of sexuality can be thought of as corresponding to an impulse towards either self-hyperbole (self-inflation, self-tumescence) or self-shattering.⁵⁹ The radical potential of gay sex, he suggests, resides in its investment in the self-shattering violation of male identity.⁶⁰ Thus, he concludes, “if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared – differently – by men *and* women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very

⁵⁵ Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *October*, Vol. 43, AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism (Winter, 1987), 198, 200 & 211.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 215.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 221.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 214 & 220-221.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 217-218.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 209 & 222

potential for death.”⁶¹ Tragically, he adds, AIDS has come along and literalised that potential as biological death and in so doing has given a renewed imperative to both the phobic and liberal-sanitising responses such potential self-shattering has always produced.⁶²

Bersani draws on recent scholarship to argue that, even in societies that do not regard male same sex relations as sinful or harmful, there is always suspicion and stigma attached to being the receptive partner in anal sex which results in political subservience: “*To be penetrated is to abdicate power.*”⁶³ Bersani’s interest in assigning cultural and philosophical value to powerlessness makes evident the exclusions operating in his own thesis as well as my own: the value of powerlessness will manifest itself differently depending upon the amount of power the subject in question is culturally endowed with to begin with. Women, Amelia Jones has argued, have not historically had access to the fantasy of coherence and impregnability bestowed upon men.⁶⁴ Likewise, the sovereign and inviolate male subject/body has historically and philosophically been a white Euro-American one. It is worth noting here the title of Derrida’s essay, discussed in detail above, on the impossibility of fully expressed truth in language, and by extension, through his later work, the impossibility of a self-same identity and an inviolate body: “White Mythology.” This mythology, as Harrison puts it, “is the characteristic mythology of the West, of the whites.”⁶⁵ It is for this reason that my argument focuses on four white Euro-American gay-identified men despite the many women affected by HIV and the crucial importance of this issue for non-White communities around the world. The results of penetration and wounding, whether they are liberatory or not, will be different when experienced and represented by those subjects not culturally endowed with the power of

⁶¹ Ibid. 222. Emphasis original.

⁶² Ibid 222.

⁶³ Ibid. 212. Emphasis original.

⁶⁴ Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis MN. & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 43.

⁶⁵ Harrison, “‘White Mythology’ Revisited,” 508.

white masculinity in the first place, this demands a separate study in itself. Furthermore, I am interested in drawing attention to the central, albeit not always openly proclaimed, position that I am arguing HIV/AIDS still occupies for white economically advantaged gay male identity. These issues are explored in chapter three through the films of François Ozon focused on bourgeois photographers in an affluent and liberal culture after the development of effective HIV treatments.

Bersani aligns his argument in “Is the Rectum a Grave?” with the work of the early twentieth century French writer Georges Bataille, who located the self-shattering impulse in both human sexuality and mystical or spiritual experience.⁶⁶ Described by Kathryn Bond Stockton as proto-deconstructionist, Bataille’s writing, critiques the binary opposition between ideality and reality in order to show “reality, by definition, as a set of failed ideals.”⁶⁷ This is akin to Derrida’s demonstration in “White Mythology” and elsewhere of the reliance of the privileged term (direct, non-figurative language) in any opposition, on its debased and marginalised component (metaphor). Of particular importance to this thesis is the way in which Bataille’s writing mobilises the body to demonstrate the capacity of our own bodies to disrupt ideality, queering us from within. In the essay “The Big Toe” Bataille proffers the image of a person pausing to contemplate a monument glorifying his nation, who is “stopped in mid-flight by an atrocious pain in his big toe because, though the most noble of animals, he nevertheless has corns on his feet; in other words, he has feet, and these feet independently lead an ignoble life.”⁶⁸ While here a minor physical ailment contaminates man with animality, elsewhere in Bataille’s writing the same disruptive power is given to sexuality, ecstatic ritual/religious practices and death. These are all aspects of human life in which the embodied connection

⁶⁶ Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” 217.

⁶⁷ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child: Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC. & London: Duke University Press, 2009), 227.

⁶⁸ Georges Bataille, “The Big Toe,” *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis, MN.: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 20-24, 22.

with others, our inter-subjectivity, is essential and desired but also poses a challenge to our drive towards sovereignty as discrete beings.

In the early to mid-1990s Bataille's writing inspired an influential critique of the modernist conception of form, within art history and specifically through *October* magazine, whose chief proponents were Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois.⁶⁹ In their exhibition *Formless: A Users Guide*, staged at the Centre Pompidou in 1996, Krauss and Bois employ Bataille's term *l'informe* or formless as an operation which ruptures modernism's opposition of form and content from within.⁷⁰ The modernist conception of the trajectory of modern art holds that once liberated from its representational function, visual art, particularly painting, discovered its essence in visuality, atemporality and the formal coherence and unity of the artwork.⁷¹ In his catalogue essay Bois utilises the term formless, which "serves to bring things down in the world," to demonstrate the exclusionary nature of the modernist "interpretive grid."⁷² For example, the term "horizontality," conceived as a sub category of the formless and elucidated in relation to Bataille's essay "Big Toe," challenges the hierarchical opposition between man and animal and questions the modernist privileging of verticality and pure visuality.⁷³ However, when they attempt to introduce temporality and corporality into their revision of modernism with the term "pulse," described by Bois as "an endless beat the punctures the disembodied self-closure of pure visuality and incites an interruption of the carnal,"⁷⁴ Krauss and Bois select Marcel Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs* (1935) and Richard Serra's film *Hand Catching Lead* (1971) as examples of this category. Their conspicuous exclusion of

⁶⁹ Crimp resigned from his position as editor of *October* in 1990 after thirteen years when his colleagues, including Krauss a cofounder of the journal, refused to publish what eventually became the book *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video* that had initially been planned as another special issue edited by Crimp. See ACT UP Oral History Project interview with Douglas Crimp, <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/crimp.pdf> accessed 14/10/16.

⁷⁰ Yve-Alain Bois, "The Use Value of 'Formless,'" in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 21.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 25-26.

⁷² *Ibid.* 25-26.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 26 & 32.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 32.

the material sexual body, despite the consistent use in Bataille's writing of a violent and transgressive eroticism to figure the formless, is connected to their wholesale rejection of "the fashion of the [1990s] for the 'abject' in art."⁷⁵

This prejudice is even more in evidence in 1994's *October* roundtable on the *informe* and the abject in which Krauss criticises Julia Kristeva's attempt to connect her concept of abjection, set forth in *Powers of Horror*, with Bataille's work. Krauss argues that Bataille's formless is an operation that is not tied to specific objects or categories while "Kristeva's project is all about recuperating certain objects as abjects."⁷⁶ In Kristeva's account these abjects are part-objects (waste, filth, bodily fluids etc.) that evoke the traumatic separation from the mother in infancy.⁷⁷ Another participant in the discussion Helen Molesworth, who would go on to curate the *This Will Have Been* show of 1980s art, adds "the fact that blood, sperm, and anality are the most charged terms of abjection now has to be understood in relation to HIV."⁷⁸ What her statement draws attention to is the way in which the affective force of the formless/abject, from which it derives its power to disrupt categories and hierarchies, issues from the human body, is inextricably intertwined with sexuality and is historically contingent.

Sarah Wilson has also drawn attention to the importance of understanding the historical context in which Bataille's writings emerge. Bataille's dark vision combining sex with negativity and death must be understood as a product of his experience in the immediate pre-War period and in Paris during the Nazi occupation. Wilson also emphasises that Bataille must be seen as part of the French libertine tradition in literature noting, "in their Anglo-American manifestations, discourses circulating around

⁷⁵ Ibid. 23. On Krauss and Bois "prudish exclusions" see Dominic Johnson, "Ron Athey's *Visions of Excess: Performance After Georges Bataille*," *Papers of Surrealism*, Issue 8 (Spring, 2010), unpaginated.

⁷⁶ Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier, Helen Molesworth, "The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the "Informe" and the Abject," *October*, Vol. 67 (Winter, 1994), 3.

⁷⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay On Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁷⁸ Foster et al, "The Politics of the Signifier II," 16.

poststructuralism exhibit a certain puritanism.”⁷⁹ In chapter 2, I examine the work of visual artist and writer David Wojnarowicz who, without engaging directly with Bataille, absorbs many of his concerns through an interest in French literature including figures like Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud and Joris-Karl Huysmans. Krauss and Bois select the category “entropy” – a slide into degradation and nondifferentiation – as one of their subcategories of the formless.⁸⁰ I relate Wojnarowicz’s own interest in ruination and decay to Bataille’s thought and to the artist’s experience of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as both a PWA and political activist. Indeed, though Bataille had a fractious relationship with the surrealist group around Andre Breton his writing is nevertheless a product of the historical avant-garde and aims at a collapse of art and life in the service of a revolutionary politics. Like his engagement with sexuality these elements of his thought are downplayed in the Octoberist account. For Wojnarowicz both art and politics were inescapably bound up with his troubled childhood, the social and financial precariousness that began when he was a teen runaway and continued into adulthood, his sexuality, his disdain for contemporary American life and politics, and the deaths caused by AIDS from which he would himself die in 1992.

Queer Theory/Butler

Bersani’s essay, discussed above, is also significant in that it is a foundational text in what would become known as queer theory. Queer theory emerged in the early 1990s from academic lesbian and gay studies utilising the formally derogatory term “queer,” which by then had been adopted by a broad grouping of individuals who saw themselves as possessing culturally marginalised sexual self-identifications for which the terms lesbian and gay was insufficient. Queer theory sought to locate and exploit the “incoherencies in

⁷⁹ Sarah Wilson, “Poststructuralism and Contemporary Art: Past, Present, Future...” in Amelia Jones (ed.), *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 434.

⁸⁰ Bois, “The Use Value of ‘Formless,’” 34.

the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire.”⁸¹ In doing so queer, theory embraces subjects like transsexuality, intersex, drag and cross-dressing as part of its figuring of identity, derived from post-structuralism and deconstruction, as an always incomplete “constellation of multiple and unstable positions.”⁸² While mainstream lesbian and gay politics is committed to a model of (relatively) unproblematised identity, recognition and the demand for respect – an identity-rights model derived from strands of the civil rights and women’s liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s – queer theory views identifications as provisional and contingent and for this reason of limited use in terms of political representation too. In this sense, queer theory is a development akin to the questioning of the stability and coherence of the category “woman” in some feminist scholarship and the denaturalisation of “race” in postcolonial theory.⁸³ Rather than articulate the legitimacy of an identity formation and campaign for its inclusion/recognition in the pre-existing political and cultural system, these discourses question the legitimacy of the system that produces such categories and exclusions in the first place.

Furthermore, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” returns questions of sexuality and homophobia to issues around the material and gendered body and, in doing so, demonstrates continuity between the concerns of feminism and queer theory. In this way Bersani’s work in some respects complements the work of Judith Butler, a scholar with whom he has other significant differences, in that both relate cultural attachment to heteronormativity to the continuation of sexism, hence Bersani’s explanation of the prejudice directed towards PWAs as the result of “the infinitely [...] seductive and

⁸¹ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 3.

⁸² *Ibid.* 3.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 77.

intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman.”⁸⁴

In *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* Butler argues that gender and even biological sex ought to be understood as a performative in that it produces that which it names: “an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates.”⁸⁵ Rather than a natural or innate understanding of sex, Butler proposes that gender and sex are only rendered stable and culturally intelligible through the regulated and constrained repetition of gender/sex norms.⁸⁶ In this way sex and gender work in a citational manner in the style of a judge who cites the law: a procedure in which the judge “consults and reinvoles the law, and in that reinvocation, reconstitutes the law.” Rather than embodying legal authority the judge citing the law draws upon authoritative legal convention that precedes him. There is no originary or primary law “and these conventions are grounded in no other legitimating authority than the echo chain of their own reinvocation.”⁸⁷ In the “common sense” view sex is thought of as biological given “on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed.”⁸⁸ However, Butler argues that sex is instead a regulatory ideal or cultural norm that, in its citational and performative operation, “produces the phenomena that it regulates and constrains.”⁸⁹ Furthermore, the assumption of an intelligible sex is a cultural imperative to the extent that the performative and citational process by which that sex is assumed “is not, strictly speaking, undergone by a subject, but rather that the subject, the speaking ‘I,’ is formed by virtue of having gone through

⁸⁴ Ibid. 212.

⁸⁵ Butler notes that her initial thinking on the performative nature of gender was inspired by Derrida’s reading of Franz Kafka’s “Before the Law”: “The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object.” Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006), xv.

⁸⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), 95.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 107.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 3.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 2.

such a process of assuming a sex.”⁹⁰ Put differently, one cannot have access to the domain of recognisable subjectivity without assuming a normative sex. In this way sexual difference is both materialised and maintained. Butler gives the example of the medical interpellation through which an infant moves from being an “it” to being a “he” or a “she”: “in that naming the girl is ‘girled,’ brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender.”⁹¹ That girling is then “reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect.”⁹² The fate of those who do not possess or refuse a legible/proper sex is to be consigned to a zone of cultural unintelligibility and abjection, “it is their very humanness that comes into question.”⁹³ This abject zone, which produces considerable psychic torment from which it gains much of its regulatory power, forms the constitutive outside of heteronormativity. This has political significance in that if sex/gender is understood as a citational and performative process that takes shape through iteration (the ritualised repetition of norms), this is also where the capacity for change, contestation and resignification is to be found. As Butler puts it, “this instability is the *deconstructing* possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which ‘sex’ is stabilized, the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of ‘sex’ into a potentially productive crisis.”⁹⁴ Once again queer theory is building upon the insights of Derridian deconstruction in recognising that repetition and return also imply at least the possibility of mutation and transformation. As Derrida puts it, “iteration alters, something new takes place.”⁹⁵

Butler’s conception of a heterosexual matrix – a structure in which other structures arise – that consigns (at the same time as it produces) non-normative sexualities and

⁹⁰ Ibid. 3.

⁹¹ Ibid. 7.

⁹² Ibid. 8.

⁹³ Ibid. 8.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 10. Emphasis original.

⁹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 40.

identifications to a zone of abject unlivability is related to Bersani's contention that embracing the passive position in penetrative sex is akin to suicide (metaphorically, in its potential rupture of coherent subjectivity) in that as a bodily penetration unsanctioned by the hegemonic order it brings one's status as an intelligible subject (which for men Bersani sees as being equated with proud, upright/phallic, centred subjectivity) into dispute.⁹⁶ Both Bersani's and Butler's arguments are attempts to account for the inextricable relationship between homophobia and the maintenance of sexual difference through sexism. The way in which the cultural norm of compulsory heterosexuality simultaneously produces and reinforces sexual difference and vice versa.

While Butler's work on gender performativity produced a paradigm shift in how we think about almost any question regarding sexuality and gender, and is therefore an important theoretical backdrop to this thesis, the aspect of her work that I engage with most directly is her turn to psychoanalysis, which, she states, was motivated by a desire to combat the misinterpretation that saw in gender performativity a kind of wilful voluntarism.⁹⁷ The concept of gender melancholia, which in chapter 4 I relate to two films by Pedro Almodóvar, adds to gender performativity a consideration of the unconscious and social constraints that we experience as we come to inhabit a gender, "those parameters that seemingly thwart our options."⁹⁸ Butler argues that in adopting a normative heterosexual identity one incorporates the prohibited homosexual attachments one must renounce in order to achieve recognition as a normatively gendered subject. The hypothesis that disavowed homosexual attachments are melancholically incorporated in the process of assuming a normative gender and heterosexual identity "sheds light on the predicament of living within a culture which can mourn the loss of homosexual

⁹⁶ Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" 222.

⁹⁷ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 161.

⁹⁸ Adam Phillips, "Keeping It Moving: Commentary on Judith Butler's 'Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification,'" in Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 156.

attachments only with great difficulty.”⁹⁹ Butler is explicit in relating this difficulty in recognising the legitimacy and grievability of homosexual attachments to the indifference of many in positions of power when confronted with the deaths produced by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.¹⁰⁰ She also suggests, poignantly, that all our subsequent experiences of loss in some way draw upon the losses that institute and structure sexual difference.¹⁰¹ This, too, can be related to HIV/AIDS, which enters the body through penetration, in that the virus infects the host through either a prick or cut in the skin or penetrative sex, and after a period of incubation gives rise to far-reaching life changes, can be compared to pregnancy in such a way that fear of HIV infection is not solely the result of its association with death and disease but is also related to fear of compromised or unstable gender identity.¹⁰²

Outline of Chapters

The thesis is structured around four case studies beginning with chapters on Ron Athey and David Wojnarowicz, two artists commonly associated with HIV/AIDS at the height of the epidemic, due to media controversy and, in Wojnarowicz’s case, involvement in political activism. The third and fourth chapters focus on François Ozon and Pedro Almodóvar, two popular European filmmakers. This juxtaposition allows me to map out the increasingly abstract and implicit ways in which the wounds of HIV/AIDS remain present in contemporary life and, in doing so, takes account of medical advancements without sequestering HIV/AIDS, or its historical memory, firmly in the past. The case studies have been chosen as instantiations of a broader trend that the thesis identifies: that HIV/AIDS animated pre-existing anxieties about the body and remains a widespread,

⁹⁹ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 133.

¹⁰⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 233.

¹⁰¹ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 164-165.

¹⁰² Monica Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity: The Literature of Loss* (New York & London: Routledge, 2013), 52.

though often disavowed, element of contemporary discourses on the body, sexuality and subjectivity. This, too, plays a role in the selection of mediums covered in the thesis. With the aim of identifying a broad trend I have covered painting, photography, performance, cinema, critical theory and to a lesser degree literature. It is in live performance – activated on, in and through living bodies – that this trend is at its most arresting, complex and ambiguous. Of all the visual arts narrative cinema is the most accessible and widespread medium in which to convey the complexities of human embodiment, sexuality and subjectivity, hence its prominence in the last two chapters. Of course, personal preference also plays a significant role: the “instantiations” I have chosen are the ones I am most drawn to and invested in, despite the distanced, objective and academic tone I often adopt when writing about them.

In chapter 1 I consider the work of Ron Athey, a performance artist who often uses the tropes of martyrdom and sacrifice in works relating to his status as HIV positive, but which also take in his wider biography particularly his childhood experiences in the Pentecostalist church. Athey’s work is notable for its use of actual bodily wounding, scarification and blood to explore martyrdom, HIV positivity, biography and queer sexuality simultaneously. In addition, Athey engages with gender and sexuality through anality, where penetration is sexual rather than aesthetic or traumatic. This, coupled with Athey’s explicit engagement with Bataille in his piece *Solar Anus* (2003), inspired by a Bataille essay of the same name published in 1931, prompts me to consider his performance in terms of Bataille and Bersani’s aforementioned arguments and the broader concerns of queer theory. The element of Bataille’s writing that Athey engages with most consistently is sacrifice, understood as the theatrical/ritualised opening of the body, which is experienced by the spectator as an opening to finitude and death. To this end I look at *Deliverance*, the final instalment of Athey’s *Torture Trilogy*, to examine the place of death and negativity in that performance, made at the nadir of the AIDS crisis, shortly before

effective antiretroviral treatments became available to those who could afford them or had subsidised access to them. This is not to suggest that Athey's work is solely or primarily concerned with death, or even HIV/AIDS. In fact, I find his body of work to have a scope and heterogeneity comparable with that found in Bataille's writing and which, like the dissident surrealist philosopher, thwarts singular and all encompassing interpretations. I have been an audience member at several Athey performances and also a participant in his *Gifts of the Spirit* (2012), a group performance that employs automatic writing and glossolalia to merge Athey's biographical writing with those of the participants. I have spoken publicly, upon introducing Athey, with embarrassing openness about the undoing, unmaning, effect that participating in this performance had upon me, despite not being a work that involves wounding. I was also in attendance at Athey's performance of *Sebastiane* (2015) in London, his final performance in the city before relocating to Los Angeles. No matter how much you read about, or watch recordings of, Athey performances nothing quite prepares you for the mesmerising sight of him bleeding and shaking in obvious pain up there on the stage, or the utterly febrile atmosphere this creates in the audience. However, in chapter 1 I focus on *The Torture Trilogy* because of the explicit use of sacrifice and bodily wounding/penetration, in conjunction with HIV/AIDS, to be found in those performances, made at the height of the epidemic in the western world. A consideration of the endurance of these motifs and performance practices in Athey's work up to the present day would demand a separate study in itself.

In chapter 2 I look at the work of David Wojnarowicz and his interest in ruins and decay, connecting this to Bataille's writing on heterogeneity and formlessness. As outlined above, this element of Bataille's writing influenced the art historians associated with *October* magazine, particularly in their use of the terms formless and entropy. However, I argue that the Octoberist deployment of Bataille omits his concern with the material body, death, sexuality and direct political action, which were the very things that

distinguished him as a member of the avant-garde. In Wojnarowicz's work entropy, decay and ruin are connected to his immediate concerns regarding the AIDS crisis but are also employed in his critique of, for example, anthropocentrism, social inequality and consumerism. In this way Wojnarowicz could be seen as the paradigmatic activist artist in that his work targets both immediate/urgent political issues as well as deeply rooted, pernicious and wide ranging social problems. To this end the chapter will discuss the literature surrounding AIDS activist art in tandem with that on Bataille, the two being very nearly contemporaneous and emerging, at least initially, in the pages of *October*. In this way the chapter extends and develops the concerns of the Introduction and first chapter and seeks to retain from Krauss and Bois's work the conception of Bataille's *informe* as an *operation*, as this makes apparent the proto-deconstructionist nature of his project, while recognising their elisions. While the wounds in this chapter are primarily emotional, or inflicted on a non-human body or environment, I also argue that Bataille's writing (whether under the headings of excess, *informe* or eroticism) has a resonance that is as much *affective*, rooted in human embodiment and emotion, as it is intellectual and it is this that makes it a compelling prism through which to view the particular confluence of art, embodiment, sex and politics thrown up by HIV/AIDS. The chapter concludes by looking at a late monochrome photo/textual work by Wojnarowicz *When I Put My Hands On Your Body* (1990), which, I argue shares many of the concerns of his earlier decay-focused, acrylic, collage based pieces and his activist work, but is more mournful and despairing in tone, reflecting the toll of the epidemic and the bleak outlook in terms of political and medical advances at this time.

In chapter 3 I turn to the work of French filmmaker François Ozon, who, particularly in his *Time To Leave* (*Le temps qui reste*) (2005) uses the themes of terminal illness and photography to approach the topic of HIV/AIDS. This chapter engages with the notion of trauma – from the ancient Greek for wound – found in psychoanalysis; a

model of experience where something distressing happens too suddenly to be experienced fully, only to be repeatedly re-experienced through the latent onset of traumatic symptoms. I argue that Ozon's film, by allegorising AIDS through a story of terminal cancer, is an attempt to re-examine a time when HIV was a terminal and invariably fatal condition from the vantage point of a time and place (France in the era of effective antiretroviral treatments) where it is a chronic and manageable condition. The film uses its protagonist's role as a professional photographer to achieve this aim, through the mediating figures of Roland Barthes and Hervé Guibert. Barthes, reflecting on the recent death of his mother and his own mortality, proposed an embodied affect analogous to the wound as the principle metaphor for understanding the power of certain photographs. Guibert, like Barthes, is channelled through visual and narrative allusions in *Time To Leave*, and was a photographer and writer whose later work dealt with his own illness and eventual death from AIDS, becoming one of the most prominent public faces associated with the epidemic in France.

The protagonist of *Time to Leave* confronts his imminent mortality through repeated interactions with his childhood self, and towards the end of the film fathers a child with an infertile heterosexual couple. This has led to the film being described as heteronormative in its investment in reproductive futurity in line with queer theorist Lee Edelman's critique of that institution in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.¹⁰³ I believe that Edelman's book, in presenting the queer subject as the personification of the negative, is an important contribution to queer theory. However, the particular way that the subject of childhood is present in *Time To Leave*, through Romain's interaction with his childhood self, specifies his childhood as a queer one. This leads me to employ the concept of *natality*, found in the work of Hannah Arendt, in order to argue that childhood

¹⁰³ For criticisms of *Time to Leave* along these lines see Andrew Asibong, *François Ozon* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2008), 107. For Edelman's account see Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC. & London: Duke University Press, 2004).

and birth are in fact when difference, change and queerness come into the world as much as sameness and normativity. Used in this way natality anticipates the concept of iteration found in Derrida and Butler and described above.

In the final chapter, through the films of Pedro Almodóvar, I return to the connections between HIV/AIDS and gendered embodiment. Engaging the concept of the uncanny – understood as a nodal point at which several different discourses (literary history, aesthetics, cinema, psychoanalysis, deconstruction and queer theory) meet – I argue that the films *Talk To Her* and *The Skin I Live In* use cinematic genre, suspense and visual pleasure to undercut our expectations about gender and sexuality rather than reinforce them. To this end the chapter also looks at psychoanalytically inspired feminist film theory and the way in which Almodóvar’s films diverge from it. *The Skin I Live In*, in particular, channels HIV and queer theory through penetration, sexual passivity and foreignness but both films throw into serious doubt any simple conception of the boundaries and definition of one’s own body and identity.

By presenting a narrative in which gender is imposed as assault, wound or intrusion but is nonetheless made liveable by the person on whom it is imposed, *The Skin I Live In* reveals the injurious structures through which the discursive categories “gender,” “sex,” and “sexuality” are created. To this end, as noted above, the chapter concludes by using Butler’s concept of gender melancholia to argue that sexual difference is our archetypal experience of loss, and subject to profound disavowal and introjection. One way that this deep disavowal can be traced is the difficulty that heteronormative society had in recognising the homo- and trans- losses of the AIDS epidemic as legitimate and grievable.

Chapter 1: Ron Athey: Martyrdom and Mutual Exposure.

In this chapter I examine the work of performance/body artist Ron Athey, principally as it engages with the themes of martyrdom, sacrifice and the bodily wound in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Athey has, for many years, used imagery derived from the representation of St Sebastian: an apocryphal figure associated with homoeroticism, plague and the wound. After discussing the issues surrounding Sebastian I shall look at the concept of martyrdom and sacrifice more generally. Sacrifice can be employed towards repressive and problematic ends, particularly in the context of the AIDS crisis. For example, it reiterates the longstanding cultural association of non-normative sexuality with death. It can also be seen to revel in the status of victimhood, and perpetuating notions of redemption and the afterlife. I will argue that Athey's work turns to sacrificial mutilation as a means by which the body is affirmed in its status as penetrable and exposed, simultaneously living and dying. Wounding and penetrability draw attention to the way in which homophobia and anxiety around HIV infection have common roots in a misogynistic suspicion of the open body and its effluents as threatening male subjectivity. The second half of this chapter will look at Athey's engagement with the philosopher Georges Bataille, who had a similarly obsessive relationship with the topic of sacrifice. Bataille rejects the conception of sacrifice at the heart of both Western religious belief and philosophy (in the work of G.W.F. Hegel) where sacrifice transforms loss into gain or redemption. Instead, his notion of sacrifice is seen as an exposure to meaningless loss and finitude.

Athey's *St Sebastian*, first performed in 1998, begins with the artist suspended from his forearms in a squatting position, his genitals massively inflated from saline injections. An assistant wrapped in a shawl and headscarf, with hands sheathed in latex gloves, washes Athey's naked body before piercing his skin with "arrows" fashioned from large

hypodermic needles as arrowheads with red fletchings attached. Athey is raised into standing position as his assistant creates a crown of thorns from smaller needles on his forehead and another member of the company beats a drum. The “crown” is removed and Athey, now visibly distressed, is raised once more so that he is suspended above ground as blood drips from his forehead. When his body is lowered back to the ground, still prickling with arrows, he is shrouded in his assistant’s white garments. Athey’s *Sebastian* piece has most recently been performed with some alterations on the occasion of his 50th birthday between 2001-2002 and in April 2015, to mark the end of his time in London after several years as a resident, suggesting a return to the theme of St Sebastian at times of personal significance for the artist [Fig. 1.1].



Fig. 1.1: Catherine Opie, *Ron Athey/Sebastian* (from *Martyrs & Saints*), 2000, Polaroid 110 x 41”.

Athey’s utilization of the imagery and narrative surrounding Sebastian is longstanding, dating back at least to his *Torture Trilogy – Martyrs & Saints* (1992), *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* (1993) and *Deliverance* (1995) – and can be seen as the

convergence of several themes which consistently reoccur in his artistic practice. In this trilogy of works, each comprised of a series of mostly semi-biographical vignettes, Athey plays the part of a Sebastian-like figure himself and at other times in the cycle other members of the company take on the role. In Athey's performance pieces bodily wounding and pain, blood in the age of HIV/AIDS, religious imagery and ritual (associated with both the Catholic veneration of martyrs and ecstatic religious practices), sit alongside sex acts drawn from sadomasochism in a potent, and at times, controversial combination. Each of these motifs has a place in Athey's biography. Raised in the Pentecostalist church by a grandmother and aunt obsessed with the Virgin Mary, as a child Athey was noted for his ability to channel the spirit of God through speaking in tongues. Later, heroin addiction and self-harming were replaced by aesthetic body modifications – he is almost entirely covered in tattoos – and an immersion in both industrial subculture and the performance club scene in Los Angeles, and sadomasochist subculture (the three not always being separable). Together these scenes provided both the initial performance venues and part of the heterogeneous visual repertoire that Athey's artworks would deploy. This heady combination would see Athey achieve notoriety in 1994 as part of a political debate in the USA over government funding for 'obscene' art.¹⁰⁴

St Sebastian – Martyrdom

Sebastian, a captain in the Pretorian Guard who protected Christian prisoners and converted others, was sentenced to death by the emperor Diocletian. After being tied to a stake and shot with arrows he was discovered alive by Irene of Rome who healed him. The saint then heckled the emperor in the street and was beaten to death on his orders; for this reason he is known as the saint who died twice. As a potential protector of plague

¹⁰⁴ See Dominic Johnson, "Does a Bloody Towel Represent the Ideals of the American People?": Ron Athey and the Culture Wars," in Dominic Johnson (ed.), *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performance of Ron Athey* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 64-93.

victims, Sebastian was one of the most frequently invoked Christian saints in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. As Sheila Barker explains, Sebastian was venerated as a protector of the faithful long before his association with plague. This later aspect of his cult developed around 680 when he was selected to help fight plague in the city of Pavia; a decision which had more to do with contemporary politics than anything else.¹⁰⁵

Sebastian's connection with plague was strengthened by the publication of Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, a collection of hagiographies, in 1260. By the time of the Florentine Renaissance Sebastian's association with plague had been linked to his earlier role as a defender of the faithful, such that he was believed to protect entire communities from pestilence.¹⁰⁶ Along with this potential connection to the modern plague of AIDS, the depiction of Sebastian's contorted and naked body during his martyrdom by Renaissance artists made him a frequent object of male same-sex desire and identification.¹⁰⁷ In Barker's account, Sebastian's physical beauty is partially a product of Renaissance medical discourse, which cautioned against contemplation of death and the macabre and contact with beautiful and uplifting subjects and substances to fortify health.¹⁰⁸ The physicality of Sebastian's story also meant that he was a favourite subject for artists looking to demonstrate the highly valued Renaissance skill of gracefully depicting the human body, derived from the close study of anatomy and ancient art, as evidenced by the many depictions of Sebastian described and praised by Giorgio Vasari in his *Vite*.¹⁰⁹ The homoerotic qualities of many Renaissance Sebastian images help establish a legacy which continues today [Fig. 1.2]. However, while the queer credentials of this

¹⁰⁵ The transfer of some relics relating to Sebastian from Rome to Pavia during the plague was one way of cementing the alliance between the Papacy (Rome being the city where Sebastian lived and was martyred) and Lombardy, the place of his birth. Sheila Barker "The Making of a Plague Saint: Saint Sebastian's Imagery and Cult Before the Counter Reformation," in Franco Mormando and Thomas Worcester (eds.), *Piety and Plague: From Byzantium to the Baroque* (Kirksville, MO.: Truman State University Press, 2007), 92.

¹⁰⁶ Florence's dedicated plague hospital San Bastiano, after Sebastian, was built in 1448. Barker, "The Making of a Plague Saint," 105.

¹⁰⁷ For example Derek Jarman's film *Sebastiane* (1976) depicts the saint's narrative in explicitly homoerotic terms and Yukio Mishima's semi-autobiographical novel *Confessions of a Mask* (1949) contains a famous passage in which a boy experiences his first orgasm while looking at a picture of the martyr.

¹⁰⁸ Barker, "The Making of a Plague Saint," 122-124.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 114.

particular martyred saint are well established, along with his central place in the history of art, there are specific reasons why martyrdom more generally has proved an extremely productive signifier in Athey's performance work. In this chapter I explain the attraction of martyrdom imagery for queer performance art and in particular the resonance of such imagery in the era of HIV/AIDS.



Fig. 1.2: Andrea Mantegna, *St Sebastian*, 1480. Oil on canvas, 2.5m x 1.4m.

Athey is HIV positive, and the importance of this fact should not be underestimated. The AIDS crisis is the most significant issue influencing the construction

of queer art and identity from the mid-1980s onwards. I would argue, following Alan Sinfield, that as gay and lesbian individuals come to understand themselves as possessing a marginalized identity, cultural productions take on an increasingly important role in fashioning that identity. Sinfield argues that subcultures and the exchange of cultural productions and ideas, which differ from those found in mainstream (heteronormative) society, constitute *partially alternative subjectivities*. To state the case somewhat differently, subcultures and the cultural activities and works of art associated with them actually lead to the development of identity itself: “It is through such sharing – through interaction with others who are engaged with compatible preoccupations – that one may cultivate a workable alternative subject position.”¹¹⁰ This effect is amplified by the way in which Athey’s work is not only an exploration of queer sexuality but also intersects with several other marginalised subcultural scenes as detailed above. This is particularly true of the *Torture Trilogy*, which began life as a series of club performances.

Performance art, therefore, not only reflects but also can actively help to generate these identity formations. Athey’s openness about his HIV status, his heavily tattooed body and the androgynous and multicultural character of his collaborators in the *Torture Trilogy*, in short their status as visibly queer unapologetic outsiders, allows his work to be inclusive and appealing to some while making it all the more off-putting to others. The AIDS epidemic played a central role in the development of queer theory, a discourse that transforms our understanding of self-identity as it relates to sexuality. Key to this transformation is the attention queer theory, in some of its manifestations, pays to the body itself. It is on the surface of the body that the themes of martyrdom, queerness, illness and HIV, and bodily wounding converge.

As I wrote in the introduction queer theory emerged in the early 1990s and sought to locate and exploit the “incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between

¹¹⁰ Alan Sinfield quoted in Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, 7.

chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire.”¹¹¹ In doing so, queer theory embraces subjects like transsexuality, intersexuality, drag and cross-dressing as part of its figuring of identity, derived from post-structuralism and deconstruction, as an always incomplete “constellation of multiple and unstable positions.”¹¹² While mainstream lesbian and gay politics is committed to a model of (relatively) unproblematised identity, recognition and the demand for respect, an identity-rights model derived from strands of the civil rights and women’s liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, queer theory views identifications as provisional and contingent and for this reason of limited use in terms of political representation too.

Deconstruction was a key intellectual development of the 1960s and 1970s that laid the theoretical groundwork for queer theory. For Jacques Derrida, as I wrote above, deconstruction can be thought of as a process of de-sedimentation: a shaking up of the commonplace reading of a text, concept or entity so as to reveal the accumulated or sedimented internal contradictions already at work within the thing itself and on which its appearance of unity, coherence and univocality rests. Significantly, the last heading under which Derrida was to explore the operation of deconstruction during his own lifetime, at the turn of the millennium and against the backdrop of the global HIV pandemic, was the term autoimmunity. While autoimmunity had once been considered an aberration by medical science, it had come to be understood as a constituent part of every well-functioning immune system. For Michael Naas the phenomenon of autoimmunity reveals a self-destructive process of undoing, “inevitably and irreducibly at work more or less everywhere, at the heart of every sovereign identity.”¹¹³ In this way deconstruction/autoimmunity reveals normal or normative perversion. Another crucial antecedent for queer theory is Michel Foucault’s argument in *The History of Sexuality, Vol.*

¹¹¹ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 3.

¹¹² *Ibid.* 3.

¹¹³ Naas, “‘One nation... Indivisible,’ 18.

I that sexual identity, even when it is marginalised and seemingly resistant to structures of power, is actually a discursive production, an available cultural category derived from the productive, rather than simply repressive, networks of power.¹¹⁴ As Judith Butler, arguably the most influential of queer theory's proponents and whose work I shall discuss in more detail below, puts it "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression."¹¹⁵

The AIDS crisis has had both oppressive and generative effects: on one hand in the 1980s and 1990s AIDS led to a renewal of both homophobia and radical activism. On one hand conversations about public health and epidemiology focused on sexual practices rather than sexual identities and in doing so destabilised the latter category.¹¹⁶ On the other hand HIV/AIDS was persistently misrecognised as a gay disease thereby reinforcing the cultural mythology, which predated AIDS, of "homosexuality as a kind of fatality."¹¹⁷ In addition, the coalitional politics of much AIDS activism articulated identity in terms of affinity rather than essence and often framed the fight for better AIDS treatment and research as one aspect of a struggle around wider inequalities regarding race, class and gender. Most significantly however, the specific mechanics of the HIV virus – disturbing bodily integrity and the distinction between self and not self in a hitherto unseen way – which I shall discuss in more detail below, is where the context of the AIDS crisis and the emergence of queer theory's questioning of sexual identity come together. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter the theme of martyrdom is problematic in the context of the HIV/AIDS due to its potential continuation of the longstanding link between non-normative sexuality and death, the martyr's usual deployment in the service of the

¹¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998).

¹¹⁵ Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York & London: Routledge, 1991), 13-14.

¹¹⁶ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 94.

¹¹⁷ Jeff Nunokawa, "'All the Sad Young Men': AIDS and the work of mourning," in Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out*, 311-312.

oppressive power of ecclesiastical hierarchy, vulnerability to accusations of revelling in victimhood, and the perpetuation of notions of redemption and the afterlife that tend to forestall action and engagement in the present. In opposition to these lines of argument I am arguing that there are other less imaginatively constrained ways in which the topic can be approached.¹¹⁸ Martyrdom imagery, in Athey's work, goes through a process of resignification where it becomes a means to explore the body as a site of penetrability and exposure.

Excessive violence in medieval visual culture often served a regulatory function in that it was used to support existing power structures in secular contexts, while religious authorities sought to transfigure death and hardship into sublime manifestations of divine power and grace. However, the medievalist Robert Mills has argued that such imagery also had the potential to encourage more subversive forms of engagement such as “empathy with, and opposition to, the pain of the punished, fantasies of resistance and empowerment, even forms of eroticism that transgress accepted norms.”¹¹⁹ The violence present in medieval representations of Christian martyrdom reflects the persecution and violence experienced by the emerging Christian community during late antiquity, the period in which most of these martyrdom narratives take place. The tormented martyr also forms a central part in the more wide-ranging medieval conception of the individual in terms of the suffering body. Such an understanding of selfhood, Mills argues, was paradoxically empowering. In particular the virgin martyr, in her resistance to violation, “would have been an especially valuable representational trope, an icon of impregnability

¹¹⁸ Barker notes that the promotion of Sebastian and the emphasis on his bodily suffering was, in part, an aspect of the ecclesiastical authority's attempts to quell the popular and unorthodox flagellant movement. Suffering saints occupied an intermediary position between the individual believer and God, providing access the medieval Christian could not achieve through the use of their own body in mimicking the suffering of Christ. At the same time this helped counter the unorthodox position that salvation was “possible without the mediation of the priesthood.” Barker, “The making of a plague saint,” 105-106.

¹¹⁹ Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2005), 17.

and a symbolic stand-in for the beleaguered but ultimately invincible church.”¹²⁰ The abundant production of vernacular martyrdom texts between the twelfth and the fifteenth century has been explained by the assertion that martyrdom provides the ideal narrative form to depict a body – of the individual saint, of the church or Christian community – which is simultaneously coherent yet under threat, “in the space of representation, individual threatened bodies become metaphoric stand-ins for a communal body politic that perceives itself to be in danger.”¹²¹

Mills argues that the martyr in representation exists in “suspended animation” in two ways: on the boundary between life and death on the one hand, and on the cusp of having their earthly bodily existence replaced by an eternal and transcendent soul on the other.¹²² Saints also lived on through their cults and the miracles – posthumous interventions in the material world – attributed to them after their deaths.¹²³ Mills derives his model of suspended animation to interpret martyrdom iconography from the structure of masochism as elaborated by Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze argued that masochism was reliant upon deferral and suspense in order to heighten pleasure. In his analysis of the novels of Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch, after whom the term “masochism” derived its name, Deleuze argues that suspense is involved in two ways. First, that the protagonist endures ritual tortures and humiliations that involve actual physical suspension: “the hero is hung up, crucified or suspended.”¹²⁴ Second, that the woman torturer must perform a kind of tableau that “freezes her into postures that identify her with a statue, a painting or a photograph.”¹²⁵ Deleuze was keen to disentangle the sado-masochistic model and argued that sadism was dependent on repetition and instruction rather than suspense.¹²⁶ Mills argues that the scenario of martyrdom involves both: the unceasing repetition of tortures

¹²⁰ Ibid. 111.

¹²¹ Ibid. 117.

¹²² Ibid. 120.

¹²³ Ibid. 120.

¹²⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 33.

¹²⁵ Ibid. 33.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 70.

by a sadistic tyrant and a saint “who refuses to submit to his negative ambitions by asserting masochistic disavowal [...] The masochistic martyr, far from inflating the sadistic tyrant’s ego, causes its undoing.”¹²⁷

During *Martyrs and Saints* Athey plays the part of both sadist and masochist. Initially, dressed in a black PVC corset and military hat he whips male members of the company, to the point of his own exhaustion. After collapsing into a grand throne he has a “surgical crown of thorns” administered by a company member. The piercing of his own forehead with hypodermic needles has become – together with or independently from St Sebastian – a recurring aspect of Athey’s visual lexicon. After receiving his crown Athey is flogged by the female members of the company. His body is then tied to a stake and he assumes the part of St Sebastian, arrows inserted into his arms and the side of his torso. A company member dressed as a Roman soldier removes the crown of thorns, blood streams down Athey’s face and the scene fades to black [Fig. 1.3]. In *Martyrs and Saints* religious imagery is used to heighten pathos and create “shameless melodrama,” as Athey describes it in the documentary film *Hallelujah! Ron Athey: A Story of Deliverance*. Martyrdom provided a means to connect the deeply affecting and grandiose imagery he experienced as a child with the despair and loss provoked by the AIDS crisis in an iconography that does not shy away from death or the realities of bodily suffering.

¹²⁷ Robert Mills, “‘Whatever you do is a delight to me!’ Masculinity, Masochism, and Queer Play in Representations of Male Martyrdom,” *Exemplaria*, Vol. 13:1 (2001) 35.

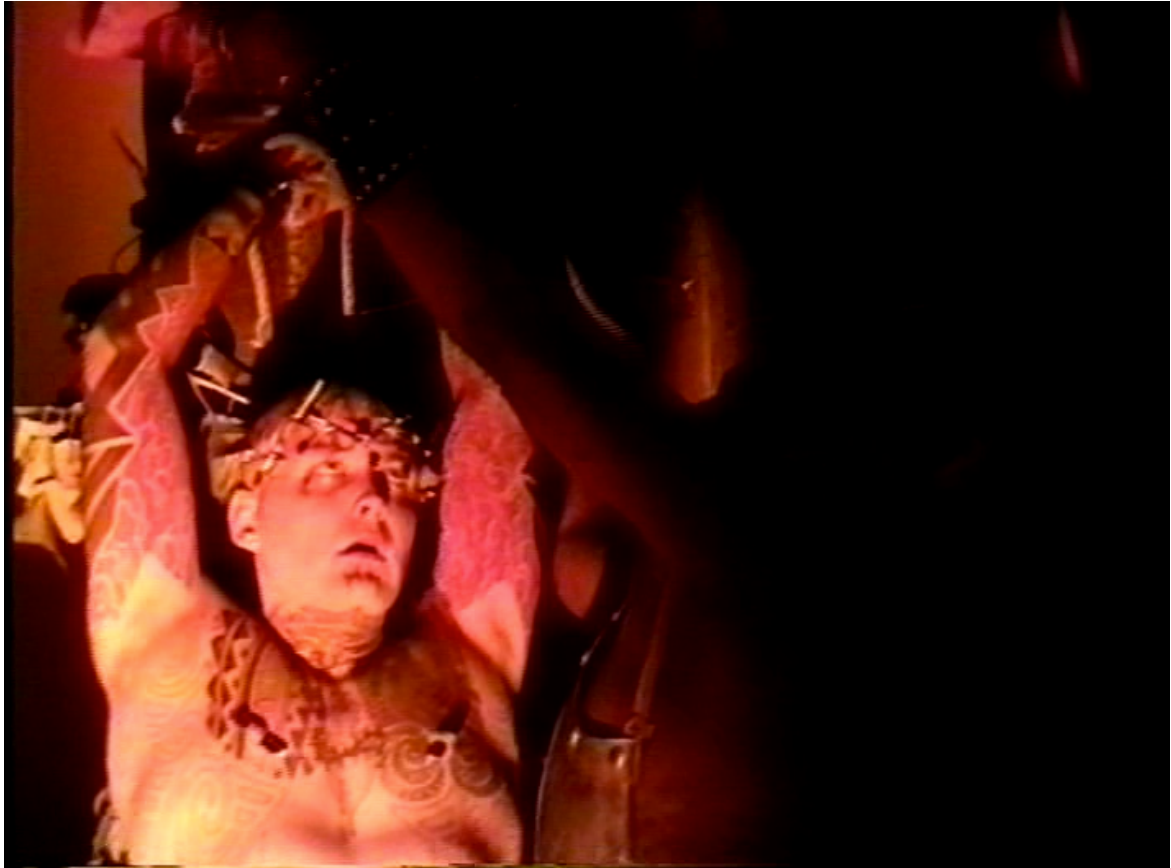


Fig. 1.3: Ron Athey as St Sebastian in *Martyrs & Saints*, 1993. Video stills.

In the Middle Ages the martyred saints of late antiquity were appealing to many precisely because of the embodied nature of their spiritual experience. Tortured saints appealed to certain strands of medieval spirituality that placed great value on corporality as a means of connecting empathetically with the pained bodies of Christ and the martyrs.¹²⁸ This manifestation of medieval devotion has been attributed particularly to the works produced by female mystics. The ideological importance of the tortured martyr was that it helped to ground and coalesce the Christian community – by representing it to itself as simultaneously coherent yet under threat – substantiating this belief by invoking the shared embodiment of Christ, the saints and contemporary Christians in a single symbolic corpus. However, Mills argues that the embodied spirituality of medieval devotion had an important side effect: “certain female readers and viewers may have discovered in martyrdom depiction a more ‘positive’ valuation of the fleshiness with which they were customarily associated as women in medieval culture.”¹²⁹ Such fleshiness could never be an entirely negative attribute in Christianity, which Caroline Walker Bynum has described as “a religion whose central tenet was that the divine had chosen to offer redemption by becoming flesh.”¹³⁰ In the same essay, published in 1995 as a response to contemporary academic writing on the body, much of which came from or engaged with queer theory, Bynum, an eminent medievalist, argues that recent writing on the body tends to focus on issues of gender and sexuality at the expense of our awareness of death and physical suffering which had much more commonly been the focus of earlier considerations of embodiment.¹³¹ I argue that it is with the HIV/AIDS crisis, and in Athey’s work in particular, that the issues of gender and sexuality converge with those of death and bodily torment.

¹²⁸ Mills, *Suspended Animation*, 126.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 128.

¹³⁰ Caroline Bynum, “Why all the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist’s Perspective,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 22:1 (Autumn, 1995), 15.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 33.

The corporeal nature of the male martyr's suffering has been described as gender-transgressive and potentially queer. As Mills puts it, "bodily torment is the means by which martyrs negotiate their transition from positions of male-controlled wealth and power to a state of de-phallicised humility and fleshiness."¹³² As Kaja Silverman argues, the male subject under patriarchy is compelled to "see himself, and the female subject to recognize and desire him, only through the mediation of images of unimpaired masculinity."¹³³ Silverman's psychoanalytically inspired argument is that the male subject must deny castration, accept the equivalence of phallus and penis and refuse to accept lack as a defining feature of subjectivity.

However, as Silverman points out many men "*embrace* lack at the level of their unconscious fantasies and identities."¹³⁴ Mills's view is that male martyrs "express their rejection of the phallus through a lengthy process of social and economic abnegation, demonstrative exhibitionism – and even potentially 'feminising' torment – that leads to their final, castrating death."¹³⁵ By way of example Mills cites St Lawrence, who, in a version of his hagiography produced for a female Anglo-Norman patron around 1170, is an archdeacon of the church in Rome who refuses to reveal the whereabouts of church funds to a pagan prefect. Lawrence had, in fact, allowed the money to be distributed to the poor and is thrown in prison. While incarcerated he performs several miracles and conversions before being put on trial where he is stripped naked and beaten with wild rose branches until his body is covered in blood. He is then burned with hot irons, beaten with clubs and finally roasted naked on an iron grill, admonishing his persecutor with the taunt, "Unhappy one, turn me the other way. Eat on this side, it is very well cooked!"¹³⁶

¹³² Mills, "Whatever you do is a delight to me!" 9.

¹³³ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London: Routledge, 1992), 42.

¹³⁴ Mills, "Whatever you do is a delight to me!" 9.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 9.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* 10.

Lawrence's legend, Mills argues, hinges on the conversion of the saint from a position of worldly power as a cleric and controller of money, to one of abject subordination to torture, "the theme of hierarchical 'inversion' is in keeping with the general tenor of this version of the saint's legend, which constitutes an extended meditation on the reversibility of worldly fortunes."¹³⁷ In Lawrence's hagiography this reversal of fortunes is emphasized by repeated insistence on his body as bleeding flesh, "the final punishment makes explicit reference to his fleshy state by transforming him into cooked meat."¹³⁸ In this way Lawrence's narrative is part of a wider genre of saint's lives where the transformation from a position power to victim of torture and persecution is exemplified by their status as edible flesh.¹³⁹ As fleshiness in the Middle Ages was often equated with femininity and frailty – contemporary scientific discourse argued that during conception the flesh or foetal matter was provided by the woman, while the spirit was provided by the man – the representation as cooked meat served to further emphasize the transformed status of the martyr's position.¹⁴⁰ While the fleshiness of the Christian martyr was meant to communicate the wilful sacrifice of earthly wealth and material substance, to the point of enduring torture and death, this sacrifice was interpreted in the context of the Christian belief in the afterlife, resurrection and the ultimately inevitable victory of Christianity at the end of time. It is also worth noting that the martyred saint was usually represented as being in the unique position of god given freedom from pain despite enduring horrific torture. The experience of pain was instead associated with the imitation of Christ by mystics and martyrs. Christ's ability to feel pain was central to his nature as an embodied human being with pain functioning in medieval Christianity as both the punishment for sin, associated with women through Eve's fall and the pain of childbirth,

¹³⁷ Ibid. 10.

¹³⁸ Ibid. 11.

¹³⁹ For example, "the South English Legendary rendition of the *Life of St. Vincent* describes how he is fried in grease (92-95), his wounds salted (99-100) [...] After he is dead, his corpse is thrown to wild beasts to be devoured." Mills, "Whatever you do is a delight to me!" 11.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 11.

and, through Christ, as the vehicle for grace and redemption.¹⁴¹ In the more recent past, against the backdrop of the HIV/AIDS crisis and stripped of the religious belief in an afterlife, resurrection or salvation, Athey's use of martyrdom owes more to persistent focus, in that body of literature and imagery, on the subject wounding and bodily penetrability.

AIDS and the body

It has been argued that one of the most significant aspects of contracting or living with HIV/AIDS is the way in which it transforms the infected individual's relationship with their own body. Monica Pearl argues that HIV disrupts the boundaries of the body in a uniquely pronounced way. As the first retrovirus to affect humans, HIV turned the body's immune system against itself, "permeating the body's boundaries and *becoming* the body,"¹⁴² In this way the virus, writes Pearl, "puts into question and illuminates the issue of what is self and what is not self."¹⁴³ This is because HIV does not simply attack the immune system like other diseases. Instead, it injects its viral RNA into certain cells in the immune system (CD4 receptor cells); after RNA is converted into DNA the virus's genetic code remains in the human cell and can only be removed if the cell is killed. Though it remains a foreign substance, HIV troubles the boundaries of self and non-self, the virus "must be able to detect, in order to be able to obscure, what is itself and what is not."¹⁴⁴

In gay AIDS literature Pearl identifies a trend towards mourning this shattered idea of coherent bodily boundaries. The experience of contracting, living with, and possibly dying from AIDS is incompatible with our common designation of the immune system as

¹⁴¹ Ester Cohen, "Towards a History of European Physical Sensibility: Pain in the Later Middle Ages," *Science in Context*, Vol. 8:1 (2008), 53-54.

¹⁴² Monica Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, 48. Emphasis original.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* 48.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 67.

the regulator boundaries of the body.¹⁴⁵ Like the immune system, the skin is also commonly thought to mark out the borders of the body through its designation of inside and outside. Thus Pearl identifies swimming or plunging into cold water as a recurring scenario in gay AIDS fiction which, by reinforcing the individual's sensory awareness of their own skin, allows them access to a fantasy of lost wholeness, "their skin now is not penetrable, but a sharp mark of where their bodies begin and end."¹⁴⁶ As Pearl's analysis demonstrates, HIV produced an enormous amount of anxiety relating to the integrity, or lack thereof, of the human body, which often found expression in fear of bodily permeability and desire to regain a lost wholeness. It is also worth noting that representations of swimming and diving, like those of Sebastian, have a legacy (that predates HIV/AIDS) as a subject matter with homoerotic connotations; this can be seen in the paintings of David Hockney and Thomas Eakins, or the poetry of Walt Whitman. However, whereas swimming and diving are associated with wholeness, homosociality and physical vitality, Sebastian imagery draws upon a parallel tradition of queer representation that speaks to themes of isolation, pain and physical/psychological fragmentation and conflict.

The anxiety surrounding bodily permeability also has gendered implications. Exposure to HIV is only harmful where bodily penetration occurs. This is followed by a period of gestation/incubation resulting in a profoundly transformed conception of identity and bodily integrity, all of which has led to HIV being likened to pregnancy.¹⁴⁷ As well as being motivated by fear of illness and death, fear surrounding HIV is also motivated by gendered anxieties surrounding the feminine body, bodily penetration, and sexual

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. 50. Pearl uses the term "gay AIDS literature" to distinguish it from queer AIDS literature that more readily embraced the incoherence and instability regarding identity and bodily integrity that queer theory and HIV/AIDS engendered almost simultaneously, this shift can be detected in the way these two bodies of literature display formal qualities like narrative order and generic positioning. Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, 19-21.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 51.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 52.

passivity. It has been noted that the female subject has not historically had access to this fantasy of bodily coherence and impermeability.¹⁴⁸

There is, therefore, a tendency in certain AIDS texts and their counterparts in visual culture to act as a reassurance to an audience who would like this ideal of coherence and impregnability reasserted.¹⁴⁹ As Judith Butler has argued, an analysis of gender should be given a central place in discussions of queer sexuality, as “homophobia often operates through the attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abject gender to homosexuals,” most obviously exemplified by pronouncing gay men to be “feminine” and gay women to be “masculine.” “Homophobic terror over performing homosexual acts,” Butler adds “is often also a terror over losing proper gender (‘no longer being a real or proper man’).” For this reason, she argues, “It seems crucial to retain a theoretical apparatus that will account for how sexuality is regulated through the policing and shaming of gender.”¹⁵⁰

As I outlined in the introduction Leo Bersani argues that cultural anxieties surrounding sexual passivity and bodily penetration are a key factor in the generation of homophobic aversion to gay male sexuality. In support of his assertion that sexual passivity is culturally determined as “suicidal” Bersani cites a range of authors who argue that, even in societies that have been ostensibly comfortable with male same-sex desire, assuming the “passive” role in anal sex was seen as indecorous, degrading or pathological. As Foucault argued, for the ancient Athenians the only honourable sexual behaviour “consists in being active, in dominating, in penetrating and in thereby exercising ones authority.”¹⁵¹ “*To be penetrated,*” Bersani famously declares, “*is to abdicate power.*”¹⁵² Anal eroticism, in this account, has radical potential due to its investment in the self-

¹⁴⁸ See Jones, *Body Art*, esp. Introduction and Chapter 1, 1-52.

¹⁴⁹ Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, 54.

¹⁵⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 238.

¹⁵¹ Bersani, “Is The Rectum A Grave?” 212.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 212. Emphasis original.

shattering impulse at work in sexuality, in “the violation of male identity,”¹⁵³ rather than the impulse towards self-inflation he associates with “proud subjectivity.”¹⁵⁴ “Is the Rectum a Grave?” proposes that social structures that exhibit aspects of domination and subordination might themselves be derived from, or be symptoms of the sublimation of, the inextricable power dynamics present in sex itself. Following this line of reasoning sexuality cannot be sanitised to exclude the disruptive pleasure (*jouissance*) of the exertion or loss of power. Instead, the aim of his project is to extol the value of the powerlessness and self-shattering deemed abject (because incompatible with an ideal of sovereign and impregnable subjectivity) by heteronormative society. At the end of his essay Bersani suggests that recognition of the pleasure that self-debasement provides might be politically desirable in that it would temper the cultural injunction to value selfhood as sacrosanct, which is another way of saying subjectivity can only be valued when it is inviolate. The unquestioned faith in the value of uncompromised selfhood, he argues, is a sanction for violence.¹⁵⁵

Bersani also adds that, while it contains this radical potential, gay male sexuality and culture also frequently expresses sympathy with “a brutal and misogynous ideal of masculinity.”¹⁵⁶ Given the imbrication of homophobia and sexual shame with gender transgression and sexual passivity/bodily permeability, elaborated in different ways by Butler and Bersani, it is perhaps unsurprising that many consumers of gay AIDS literature sought a reassertion of their bodily integrity, of the sort epitomized for Pearl by the plunge into water and consequent forceful demarcation of the body’s boundaries by the skin. In exposing the body *as permeable* HIV amplified these pre-existing homophobic conceptions of the gay male body that are themselves founded in sexism.

¹⁵³ Ibid. 209.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 222.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 222.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 206.

On the contrary, Athey's practice has consistently worked to highlight and even celebrate the penetrability of the male body. In his co-authored text with art historian and performer Dominic Johnson "Perverse Martyrologies" Athey provides a brief "assholeography" of his work. This includes the pulling out of meters of fabric from the rectum, like strung together handkerchiefs from a magician's sleeve in *Deliverance*, the expulsion of an enormous string of pearls before penetration with giant dildos attached to stilettos in *Solar Anus* (1998), and the *Self-Obliteration* (2008) series which contains "full-throttle punch-fucking."¹⁵⁷ More specifically, after a prologue inspired by a dying friend's morphine hallucinations, *Martyrs and Saints* begins with a scene of medical interventions in the body. Some performers squat pathetically over trash cans while others are subject to the probing of speculums and douches, performed by nurses with their lips sewn together in a tribute to Athey's departed hero David Wojnarowicz. *Martyrs and Saints*, in this opening section, is a meditation on the bodily suffering, humiliations and permeability of people with AIDS. On this point Bersani's essay calls attention to the way in which AIDS has tragically literalised self-shattering as biological death. Overall, however, the *Torture Trilogy* and Athey's performance practice as a whole revels in the celebration of bodily permeability.

The medical scene of *Martyrs and Saints*, is titled *Nurses' Penance* highlighting the suffering of caregivers as well as the sick. It is intentionally over lit, overexposing the audience to its graphic depictions of misery and medicalization. In contrast, the sepia tones and subdued lighting of the latter scenes, which he describes as inspired by religious paintings, diminish the harshness of similarly invasive procedures. "Please! He must be remembered as more than just a piece of meat! Don't make him be just another one gone. No longer feeling the pain and 'in a better place now,'" Athey pleads, calling out humanistic and religious platitudes surrounding death and searching for meaning in the

¹⁵⁷ Ron Athey and Dominic Johnson, "Perverse Martyrologies," in Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (eds.), *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol & Chicago, IL.: Intellect, 2012), 534.

face of repeated loss. This plea comes just before the transition from nurse to sadomasochist then martyr, suggesting a degree of continuity between these three roles and a grappling with death and loss, as well as a familiarity with bodily wounding and penetration, inherent in each.¹⁵⁸

Bataille – Sacrifice

Georges Bataille, Bersani notes, locates a transgression of the polarity of domination/subordination in both certain mystical or ecstatic religious experiences and in human sexuality.¹⁵⁹ In the next chapter I will argue that a fascination with decay evident in many of David Wojnarowicz's paintings was an instantiation of the same impulse that Bataille sought to promote through his philosophical and anthropological texts: an overturning of the normative privileging of coherence and stability in favour of the recognition of permeability and openness. This rendering of human subjectivity as always already exposed to the violation of its integrity and coherence, glimpsed in Wojnarowicz's work through the encounter with decay as it overwhelms the man-made world, is for Bataille one of the various ways any human subject might encounter what philosophy terms the negative: the persistently denied and unrecoupable fact of one's own mortality.

Athey engages explicitly with Bataille in his *Solar Anus*, a solo work first performed in 1999, inspired by a Bataille essay of the same name from 1931. Both Athey's performance and Bataille's essay play on the dual nature of the sun as simultaneously elevated and a source of life while at the same time unapproachable (not

¹⁵⁸ I would note that Athey's work has employed medical technology in the service of working through past or continuous pain, for example the use of hypodermic needles and syringes to mark triumph over drug addiction. "Medical scenes" are a kink of their own and elements of Athey's performances, particularly those he performed with Ron Athey and Company, draw from his involvement in "technical kink," a subdivision of sadomasochism that involves the careful schooling of participants in invasive procedures.

¹⁵⁹ Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" 217.

viewable with the naked eye) and potentially destructive. For Bataille contemplation of the sun serves as a metaphor for the human drive towards abstract thought that, taken to its most extreme limit, would result in a blinding Icarian fall back to the horizontal and terrestrial level of animality. Athey's piece inverts this movement elevating the anal to the level of the sacred, embellished with a sun burst tattoo and excreting a string of pearls. It also parodies the melodramatic fall of a faded or debased "star": the way in which the skin on Athey's face is pulled back and made taut by hooks bound to the crown he wears is inspired by the DIY facelift techniques apocryphally used by an aging Marlene Dietrich. At the same time, Athey seems to be playing the part of some sort of demented high priest to an unknown solar deity while a crown of flames simultaneously devours and ordains his head [Fig. 1.4].



Fig. 1.4: Ron Athey, *Solar Anus*, 2006. Photo: Regis Hertrich.

In *Solar Anus* Bataille is concerned with the way in which human sovereignty, the desire for which is set in motion by human self-consciousness, can only truly be achieved by a total lack of self-consciousness or doubt. As he puts it: "if I search for it, I am

undertaking the project of being-sovereignly: but the *project* of being-sovereignly presupposes a servile being!”¹⁶⁰ For this reason Bataille equates sovereignty with a fantasy of headlessness. In the essay “The Pineal Eye,” the part of the brain identified as the locus of human reason by René Descartes (the pineal gland in the centre of the brain) is imagined as bursting out of the crown of the head in the manner of an explosive erection, leaving the body in an acephalous (headless) state. As Bataille puts it,

The eye, at the summit of the skull, opening on the incandescent sun in order to contemplate it [...] opens and blinds itself like a conflagration, or like a fever that eats the being, or more exactly, the head. And thus it plays the role of a fire in a house; the head, instead of locking up life as money is locked in a safe, spends it without counting.¹⁶¹

In Athey’s piece these elements are played out by the radiant and explosive nature of the devouring crown of flames, and the fallen or animalistic horizontality implied by the equivalence of the crown of flames with the anal sunburst [Fig. 2.5]. Also worth noting is the way in which the pearls are issued from his rectum at the beginning of the piece, an unapologetically excretory take on Bataille’s notion of non-productive expenditure, to which the remark concerning spending money without counting in the quotation above refers. An illuminating example of non-productive expenditure is the Native American practice of potlatch: the act of giving away or destroying without reserve all one’s possessions to display wealth, thereby negating that wealth. It is worth noting that European colonisers regarded the ritual of potlatch with horror; in Canada the practice continued underground after it was banned in 1884 as contrary to the civilised value of accumulation.

¹⁶⁰ Georges Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” trans. Jonathan Strauss, *Yale French Studies*, No. 78, On Bataille (1990), 27.

¹⁶¹ Bataille, “The Pineal Eye,” *Visions of Excess*, pp. 79-90, 82.



Fig. 1.5: Catherine Opie, *Ron Athey/Solar Anus*, 2000. Polaroid, 110 x 41”.

The example of non-productive expenditure Athey’s work engages with most consistently, through the theme and imagery of martyrdom, is sacrifice. Bataille scholar Patrick Ffrench writes that when witnessing a horse on its way to the abattoir, in one of Bataille’s examples of sacrifice,

A sensibility is enabled through the impending death of the horse and thus the degradation of its distinct objectivity[...] The death of the horse suppresses the animal *as object*, thus as something different and distinct from me. It is now (in the instant of its death), the same as me [...] ‘like me it is a presence at the edge of the abyss of absence.’ Being exposed, at the limit of non-existence, suppresses the distinction of subject and object in their common exposure.¹⁶²

Exposure to the death of the sacrificial animal is also exposure to one’s own finitude, the possibility of one’s own non-existence.

Elsewhere, Bataille cites the nineteenth-century Welsh custom of the wake where the deceased was dressed in their Sunday best and placed upright in their coffin, which was open and standing in a place of honour in the house. “His family would invite all of his friends,” Bataille writes, “who honoured the departed all the more the longer they danced and the deeper they drank to his health. It is the death of an *other*, but in such instances, the death of the other is always the image of one’s own death.”¹⁶³ The drinkers confront, face to face, the dead man they will in their turn become. Ffrench emphasises that in Bataille’s conception of sacrifice it is not the death itself but the *instant* – the cut of the butcher’s knife into the sacrificial animal and the sight of the corpse at the wake – the *given to be seen* nature of the sacrifice which is important.¹⁶⁴ Another way to describe this would be to say that sacrifice is a spectacle or performance centred on the opening of the material body, revealing flesh and finitude.

For Bataille the actual death is not necessary and, in fact, tends to be viewed not as an exposure to non-existence but as “‘mere’ destruction, as a production of death.”¹⁶⁵ This aligns sacrifice with the instrumentalisation of all facets of life to the sphere of productivity, which in his time Bataille saw as taking place in both bourgeois capitalism and fascism and to which he was fundamentally opposed. Bataille is also opposed to the

¹⁶² Ffrench, *After Bataille*, 91.

¹⁶³ Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 24. Emphasis original.

¹⁶⁴ Ffrench, *After Bataille*, 90-91.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 92.

way in which sacrifice is inevitably made into a sacrifice for or to some cause or goal and in this way becomes a productive expenditure.¹⁶⁶ Christian martyrdom is intended to be understood as dedicated to the furtherance of Christianity and its inevitable victory. But the martyrdom imagery in Athey's work, is aligned with sacrifice as Bataille described it: an immanence given to be seen that French describes as "exposure to absence" and frames in terms of theatre and performance.¹⁶⁷ Adrian Heathfield has written of live art's play "at the borders of life and death, the human and the animal, the theatrical and the elemental," to which the proximity of corporeal bodies is essential.¹⁶⁸ That this statement condenses the most prominent aspects of contemporary live art as identified by Heathfield but could equally well serve as a summary of Bataille's principle concerns suggest that a study relating Bataille's work to the general field of contemporary performance is long overdue. In fact Athey is at the forefront of such an endeavour with his curatorial project *Visions of Excess*, a title taken from Allan Stoekl's influential English language translation of Bataille's uninhibited essays from the 1920s and 1930s. First presented in 2003, *Visions of Excess* brings together a diverse array of performers to honour Bataille's writing in direct and oblique ways all of which revel in performance's refusal of permanent form and "the scandal of the carnal body."¹⁶⁹ The embodied situation of performance, particularly when it involves the laying bare of bodily interiority, engages with the most crucial aspect of sacrifice as defined by Bataille: exposure to absence. Such performances challenge the spectator's drive towards objectivity: "struggling in a charged present to accommodate and resolve the imperative to make meaning from what we see," we are in a position closer to that of the witness than the theatrical spectator.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 91-92.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 93.

¹⁶⁸ Adrian Heathfield, "Alive," in Adrian Heathfield (ed.), *Live: Art and Performance* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004) 7.

¹⁶⁹ Johnson, "Ron Athey's Visions of Excess," 4.

¹⁷⁰ Heathfield, "Alive," 9.

The version of life as self-sacrifice, that the religious vision of sacrifice and martyrdom was intended to promote, amounts to the appropriation to the self of its own negativity. It does not undo, but in fact shores up, the coherent western subject. In this way sacrifice shares much of its paradoxical nature with male masochism, from which Athey's performances also clearly draw inspiration. As has been noted by theorists of body art and visual culture the male masochist "commands the very action by which he suffers."¹⁷¹ Here, male masochism amounts to a testing of the boundaries of the male body, in order that the body's integrity is reaffirmed. While it has been argued that Christian masochism in particular has "radically emasculating implications," due to its reliance on the spectatorial gaze of the witness, from which the term martyr is in fact derived.¹⁷² It has also been argued on the contrary that the Christian model of masochism, "as epitomised in the case of Jesus Christ, assigns the sufferer an incomparable role of centrality and power in relation to those who view him."¹⁷³ For this reason queer and feminist scholars have tended to take an ambivalent stance towards male performance artists who make use of masochistic scenarios in their work.

Bataille's work is responding to the development of philosophy since the Enlightenment where, with the rise of rationalism and religious scepticism, the attributes generally ascribed to the divine subject have become associated with man. As Mark Taylor puts it, "through a dialectical reversal, the creator God dies and is resurrected as the creative subject."¹⁷⁴ This subject is defined by his creative and productive activity, including the projection of his own self into the world as he encounters it: "what seems to be a relationship to otherness – God, nature, objects, subjects – always turns out to be an aspect of mediate self-relation that is necessary for complete self-consciousness."¹⁷⁵ In

¹⁷¹ Jones, *Body Art*, 233.

¹⁷² Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 198.

¹⁷³ Jones, *Body Art*, 327. n. 113.

¹⁷⁴ Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (Chicago, IL. & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 3.

this way the subject of Enlightenment philosophy is able to convert the difference encountered in the world into a problem of his own identity or self-relation, offering the promise of “a total presence that is undisturbed by absence or lack.”¹⁷⁶ Drawing upon Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, Hollier recounts an episode from Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King*, in which, travelling to Thebes, Oedipus meets a Sphinx, a creature with an animal body and the face of a woman. The Sphinx poses a riddle to Oedipus: what animal walks on four feet in the morning, on two at midday, and on three at night? Oedipus is the first to work out that the answer is man (crawling in infancy, walking on two legs thereafter and with the aid of a stick at the end of his life), and in so doing causes the death of the sphinx. For Hegel this episode allegorises the injunction to “know thyself”: self-knowledge being that which distinguishes man from animal, or destroys any trace of animality from man.¹⁷⁷ On the contrary Bataille, argues Hollier, “transforms man into a sphinx, into the riddle of his own contamination by animality.”¹⁷⁸

This thrust towards self-knowledge and coherence can also be seen in Hegel’s use of the term *Aufhebung* (sublation), which signifies simultaneously “to eliminate” and “to preserve.”¹⁷⁹ Hegel’s work can be seen as aimed at resolving the tensions between Enlightenment philosophy, which saw the human as composed of distinctly opposed elements (mind/body, reason/emotional or sensible feeling etc.), and the Romantic reaction to that philosophy which proclaimed the human to be a living expressive unity. For the Romantics, as Charles Taylor puts it, “this science not only cut into the unity of

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 3.

¹⁷⁷ Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 85. I am repeating Hollier’s gloss here. Hegel’s point is that one of the important aspects of architecture historically is that it separates, frames and encloses the image of the gods, or something that is considered sacred, from the natural environment. He wants to stress that these sacred elements are, in fact, projections of human creativity. Hence the tendency of divine figures towards ever greater anthropomorphism: “such productions, and still more the humanly shaped figures of the gods, are derived from a sphere other than that of nature in its immediacy; they belong to the realm of imagery and are called into being by human artistic activity. Consequently a purely natural environment is insufficient for them. On the contrary, for what is outside them they require a ground and an enclosure which has the same origin as themselves, i.e. which is likewise the product of imagination and has been formed by artistic activity.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2:655.

¹⁷⁸ Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 85.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. 123.

human life, it also isolated the individual from society, and cut men off from nature.”¹⁸⁰ Hegel agrees with the Enlightenment philosophers that rationality and the ability to make conscious distinctions between things is an important facet of human life and terms this ability “Understanding.” He uses the term “Reason” to denote a higher mode of thought in which ever-growing consciousness of these sharpening distinctions is brought to eventual reconciliation and unity.¹⁸¹ For example, the thinking subject can only exist as an embodied being, but in Hegel’s view the subject has a tendency towards perfection (increasing reason and freedom) at odds with this condition of embodiment: “The conditions of its existence are in conflict with the demands of its perfection; and yet for it to exist is to seek perfection.”¹⁸² In this way the subject is in a state of conflict with itself. The reconciliation comes when the subject sees this opposition as the catalyst for a higher form of reason. Man’s action in the world, his cultivation of raw nature into an expression of his own higher capacity and striving for reason allows the subject to recognise a larger rational plan underlying this opposition bigger than any autonomous individual, to which he gives the name *Geist* [Spirit]. A still higher form of subjectivity is reached when the subject not only recognises this “plan” but comes to identify with it: man is the vehicle for *Geist*. This higher unity “preserves the consciousness of division which was a necessary stage in the cultivation of nature and the development of reason.”¹⁸³ *Aufhebung* describes this dialectical movement in which an earlier stage is simultaneously eliminated and preserved in a higher or later one.¹⁸⁴

The Hegelian legacy of an embodied subject that carries with him/her its own inner conflict, dependent upon his/her others (the external world and other subjects) for its own dialectical progression has been hugely influential in undermining the Cartesian conception of subjectivity based on the pronouncement “I think therefore I am,” which

¹⁸⁰ Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 2.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* 12-15.

¹⁸² *Ibid.* 22.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* 22.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 49.

assumes, as Amelia Jones puts it, a subject who is “centred and fully self-knowing in his cognition.”¹⁸⁵ In this model the body is thought of as a “hollow vessel” to be transcended through pure thought by a subject unencumbered by alienation or the exigencies of the material body.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, this framework has exclusionary, masculinist dimensions. Jones draws heavily on Butler, who in turn is inspired by a reading of Simone de Beauvoir, to argue that the disembodiment inherent in such an understanding of subjectivity has historically been achieved through the masculine projection of immanence – subjection to the limitations of the material world – and debased corporeality onto women.¹⁸⁷ Modernist art discourse aligns the art historian or critic with a decorporealised model of the artist made transcendent, “through masculinized and heterosexualised (not to mention imperialist and Anglo) tropes of genius and mastery.”¹⁸⁸ This too is in part a legacy of Hegelianism with its language of overcoming opposition, triumph and mastery, and quasi-transcendence in the form of man as vehicle for *Geist*. In contrast, body art, Jones argues, enacts the artistic subject as embodied “in all the particularities of race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on,” in a way that is deeply informed by the rights movements and identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s, and thereby undermines this exclusionary model of subjectivity.¹⁸⁹

It has been suggested by Fintan Walsh that Athey’s performance works are an attempt to work through his own childhood trauma at the hands of his mother, grandmother and aunt and the later trauma of HIV infection, which as I have argued above can destabilise gender coherence, through the way in which it penetrates and is incubated in the body. In doing so his body of work has been read as a misogynistic attempt “to

¹⁸⁵ Jones, *Body Art*, 10.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 39.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 43.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 52.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 11 & 38.

conjure and master abject and abjecting female subjectivity.”¹⁹⁰ Conversely I argue that Athey’s work – in its simultaneous negotiation of HIV positivity, religious and childhood experience, sacrifice and wounding – embraces the instability, materiality and penetrability that is usually culturally associated with “femininity” in a way that avoids a simplistic narrative of mastery and triumph. One of the ways in which his work achieves this is through its use of blood and the wound. I shall turn to these issues now before returning to Bataille, whose engagement with Hegel was aimed at challenging his triumphalist language of mastery and closure with the absurdities of chance, meaningless loss, and death.¹⁹¹

Embodiment, gender and subjectivity

In Catherine Saalfield Gund’s documentary film *Hallelujah!*, performance artist and member of Ron Athey and Company Julie Tolentino states: “If *Martyrs and Saints* was going to show you what it felt like to be ‘beat down’ *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* was going to tell you *why* some people get ‘beat down.’” In most iterations the piece begins with a scene known as *The Holy Woman* in which Athey, dressed as a female evangelist in white dress, recounts a story from his childhood in which he was taken to see a preacher known as Miss Velma who was famed for her ability to channel the spirit through exhibiting stigmata. Her failure to bleed on this occasion was a source of immense disappointment to the young Athey and, he recounts, was partially responsible for one of his first theatrical wounding actions, performed on himself and his younger sister in his back yard, and a step on the road to losing his faith.¹⁹² Athey then re-enacts the St Sebastian motif, this time

¹⁹⁰ Fintan Walsh, *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 115.

¹⁹¹ Taylor, *Deconstruction in Context*, 27.

¹⁹² The story is recounted, including a subsequent visit to Miss Velma’s ministry in 1994 by Athey in Ron Athey “Raised in the Lord: Revelations at the Knee of Miss Velma,” in Johnson (ed.), *Pleading in the Blood*, 180–193.

administering the surgical crown of thorns on Pigpen, an androgynous member of the company, establishing continuity with the themes of the earlier *Martyrs and Saints* [Fig. 1.6]. In the next section, sometimes known as *Steakhouse Motherfucker*, sees Darryl Carlton in the drag persona Divinity Fudge parading around to a saxophone soundtrack in an outfit fashioned from balloons. Other members of the company, uniformly dressed in blue shirts and trousers, encourage Divinity in her dance then burst her balloons with lit cigars to expose her body. Finally, they tackle her to the ground, beating and restraining her. *Steakhouse* is a take on everyday racism and sexism, highlighting the objectification and violence the female, queer or non-white body is subjected to.



Fig. 1.6: Ron Athey and Pigpen, *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life*, 1994. Video still.

Jones describes Athey's work in ways that align it with femininity and precursors in feminist inspired body art, "[H]is penetrable male body opens to my sense of feminine

vulnerability.”¹⁹³ She is discussing Athey’s collaboration with opera singer Juliana Snapper *The Judas Cradle* (2004-05), which takes its name from a medieval torture device, a giant pyramid, upon which Athey sits during part of the performance such that his anus is penetrated by the tip and his legs splayed apart. *The Judas Cradle* continues to work with a repertoire of images sourced from the Middle Ages and which derive their affective force from the bodily violence associated with that period. The piece is also very much about probing the limits of the body through the exploration of the human voice: Snapper performs the feat of singing opera, at times she even does so upside down, while Athey revives his childhood gift of speaking in tongues, which he had formally performed in order to channel the holy spirit in Pentecostalist religious services. In the same article Jones also draws a comparison between Judy Chicago’s *Red Flag* (1971) [Fig. 1.7], a photo-lithograph of a tampon being removed, and Catherine Opie’s large-format Polaroid photograph entitled *Pearl Necklace* (2000) based on Athey’s *Solar Anus* performance [Fig. 1.8].¹⁹⁴ Athey himself comments on his affinity with feminist performance pioneers like Gina Pane, Marina Abramović, Carolee Schneemann and others, and the early inspiration he took from them: “who touched me deeper were [...] the ladies! [...] I’ve always been an extreme mix of butch and femme.”¹⁹⁵ The women body artists Athey cites as inspirations all mobilized their bodies in a way which Jones describes as “claiming the immanence and intersubjective contingency of *all* subjects (as well as the particular oppressive history of women’s bodies/subjects) in white, Western patriarchy.”¹⁹⁶ In addition, their work can be seen as further complicating embodiment through a focus on the unsecure boundaries of bodily interiority and exteriority, which they sometimes brought to the fore through a concentration on the culturally dense signifying properties of

¹⁹³ Amelia Jones, “Performing the Wounded Body: Pain, Affect and the Radical Relationality of Meaning,” *Parallax*, Vol. 15:4 (2009), 54.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 54.

¹⁹⁵ Athey in Martin O’Brien, “A Dialogue with Ron Athey,” *Martin O’Brien Performance* (14 February 2011), <http://martinobrienperformance.weebly.com/dialogues-ron-athey.html> [accessed 16/01/2013].

¹⁹⁶ Jones, *Body Art*, 51.

the open wound and blood. For example, Jones's points to the feminist body artist Gina Pane's 1973 piece *Sentimental Action*, in which the artist wounds herself, first with the thorns of a bouquet of white roses so that they become red, then with razor blades, as an example of the artist "activating her body into a signifier of women's suffering [...] the pain of being female can be viewed as signified through the female body, felt but also *signified* as open and bleeding."¹⁹⁷



Fig. 1.7: Judy Chicago, *Red Flag*, 1971. Photo-lithograph, 20 x 24”.

¹⁹⁷ Jones, "Performing the Wounded Body," 54. Emphasis original.



Fig. 1.8: Catherine Opie, *Ron Athey/Pear Necklace (from Trojan Whore)*, 2000. Polaroid, 110 x 41”.

The *Steakhouse* vignette, destabilizing gender binaries through drag, and foregrounding the sexual objectification of women and of people of colour, engages with the legacy of body art as outlined by Jones. However, it was the interrogation of this other issue thrown up primarily by women body artists from the 1960s onwards – where the body begins and ends – explored in the next section of the performance, *The Human*

Printing Press, which was to make Athey notorious in the 1990s. Closer examination of the cultural significance of blood helps to explain the deeply embedded anxieties it provokes.

Blood

Blood has connotations of menstruation for these feminist artists and, as Jane Blocker has expressed it, “is an effective metaphor for the ‘mess’ of the body.”¹⁹⁸ Blocker argues that blood, particularly menstrual blood, is the site of acute anxiety in western culture due to its ability to reveal the liminal status of the body as simultaneously living and dying.¹⁹⁹ Blood is commonly interpreted as either a life-giving substance when it is contained in the enclosed body or a sign of vulnerability, even death, when it flows from the ruptured body. This is despite the frequency of non-lethal blood loss in human experience and the increased preponderance of deaths that involve no loss of blood over those that do.²⁰⁰ In response to this paradox Bettina Bildhauer argues that, “the seeming complexity of blood depends on the seeming stability of the body, and vice versa.”²⁰¹ To state the case somewhat differently I would argue that blood is understood as a troubling or confusing substance, in its disruption of bodily boundaries and transgression of the life/death dichotomy, only because the body is normally and erroneously understood as a bounded impregnable entity, which clearly exists on one side of an easy division between life and death. Therefore, blood becomes a site of considerable anxiety due to its unsettling of such cherished binaries.

¹⁹⁸ Jane Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance*, (Minneapolis, MN. & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 107.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 114.

²⁰⁰ Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), 5–6.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.* 6.

This anxiety is compounded in the age of “blood-born infection” where the potentially polluting nature of blood becomes enshrined in biomedical discourse and used in the service of homophobia. This was the case when Athey achieved public notoriety in 1994 as the subject of a political furore over public funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in the United States directly inspired by his use of blood in performance.

The controversy erupted after a rendition of *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* at a cabaret venue in Minneapolis associated with the Walker Arts Center. In the *Human Printing Press* section Athey cuts small symbols into the back of company member Darryl Carlton (Divinity Fudge), which are then blotted with squares of paper towel and pegged to a clothes line which is strung out towards the audience. Though video footage shows the audience to be calm throughout the performance, taking part in a question and answer session with the cast after its conclusion, one letter of complaint was sent to state health officials expressing concern that audience members “could have contracted the AIDS virus if blood had dripped on them.”²⁰² The story was picked up by a local journalist, then the Associated Press, several national newspapers, conservative religious groups, and eventually Jesse Helms, the Republican Senator for North Carolina.

Despite the fact that Carlton was HIV negative and Athey had received only \$150 towards travel expenses from the Walker, the performance, depicted in congress as involving the “slopping around of AIDS infected blood,” was placed at the centre of the debate around public funding for the arts.²⁰³ Helms’s animosity towards the right of minority groups to engage in self-expression or be afforded civil legal recognition and protection is well known.²⁰⁴ Between the late 1980s and mid 1990s Helms used the issue

²⁰² Johnson, “Does a Bloody Towel Represent the Ideals of the American People?” 69.

²⁰³ *Ibid.* 72.

²⁰⁴ “Helms opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964,” writes Johnson, “and defended the constitutional rights of Klansmen to march against racial desegregation; moreover, he resisted the sexual revolution, frowned

of public funding for the arts to attack artists he defined as “obscene” and “perverted” largely on the basis of their use of the body and/or sexuality in their work. In doing so he played a significant part in the culture wars which aimed to overturn the cultural legacy of the 1960s and 1970s in place of a narrowly defined “family values”, as hugely influential pundit and politician Patrick Buchanan expressed it, “America needs a cultural revolution in the ‘90s as sweeping as its political revolution in the ‘80s.”²⁰⁵

The initial letter of complaint to the Minnesota public health department about *4 Scenes* needs, to some extent, to be understood in the context of confusion, misinformation and fear surrounding HIV/AIDS in the public imagination in 1994. The actual subject of the congressional debate was public funding for the arts, Buchanan’s comment above aligns the social-conservatism of the culture wars with the rise of neoliberal political and economic ideology which came to dominate American politics in the 1980s, advocating severely restricted public spending. More specifically though, the NEA scandal can be seen as an attempt to degrade and render facile a particular approach to making art that is acutely influenced by feminist body art of the 1970s, which directly mobilized the body as porous and pregnable, and which Jones invokes to explain her emotional response to it. As I detailed above, Jones sees body art as undermining an exclusionary masculinist and imperialist model of subjectivity in which the material body was disavowed. The body’s boundaries, its exigencies and its effluents played an important role in this form of art making and the revulsion it caused in some quarters.

upon feminism and the Equal Rights Amendment, and was a spokesperson for a whole range of unpleasant political stances.” Ibid. 75.

²⁰⁵ Ibid. 78. Jonathan D. Katz has also argued that HIV, arts funding and censorship were essentially secondary targets in the culture wars, the primary cause of which was rightwing homophobic anxiety over the end of the regime of silence and oppression that had governed gay and lesbian art and life up to that point. As increasing media attention was directed towards AIDS as a global pandemic also affecting heterosexuals conservatives shifted their attention towards the prohibition of gay marriage and military service. See Jonathan D. Katz, “Homophobia and the Culture Wars,” in Amelia Jones (ed.), A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) 231-248.

In her influential book on pollution *Purity and Danger* Mary Douglas argues that before the discovery of pathogenic organisms and their ability to transmit disease dirt was conceived as “matter out of place.”²⁰⁶ Dirt, seen in this way, implies the existence within a society of social ordering and categorization and the disruption of that order. Following this logic, fear of dirt or pollution she argues, stems from anxiety surrounding ambiguity or uncertainty: “our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.”²⁰⁷ Douglas also conceptualizes the body as symbolic of the social structure of society, “a model which can stand in for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious.”²⁰⁸ This argument highlights an important paradox in how the body is normally understood in its acknowledgement, however latent, that the body is not a sacrosanct and impermeable container that clearly demarcates the boundaries of the individual body, and the overwhelming desire to ignore this realisation.

Blood, and other substances issuing from the body can, therefore, generate a double anxiety in that they appear out of place, confounding categorization as internal/external, life giving/death inducing etc., and, in troubling the boundaries of the body and notions of bodily integrity, can be seen as potentially threatening to the social order. This notion of the individual body as metaphoric stand in for the social body is also in evidence in the scenario of martyrdom where, as I argued above, the corporeal body was called upon to signify a social body/order that was simultaneously coherent yet threatened.

Douglas adds that anxieties surrounding pollution and the policing of bodily boundaries take on greater significance when the society and social organization is perceived by its members to be vulnerable. Thus the ancient Israelites, throughout their

²⁰⁶ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), 44.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 45.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 142.

history a vulnerable minority, thought all bodily effluents to be polluting, “blood, pus, excreta, semen, etc. The threatened boundaries of their body politic would be well mirrored in their care for the integrity, unity and purity of the physical body.”²⁰⁹

Douglas’s work demonstrates that social anxieties are often played out on individual bodies and, vice-versa, anxieties about the integrity of the individual body are often policed through structures of social control.

Martyrdom narratives also gained efficacy by evoking the historical memory of a time in which Christians were themselves a victimised and threatened minority, as most narratives took place during the violent persecutions of Christians in late antiquity. In the Middle Ages imagined threats to Christian society could be external, for example the Ottoman Turks, or internal but often excluded or marginalised, for example Jews; blood could play a role in assigning truth value to these claims. As Bildhauer notes in her study of medieval blood it was alleged that Jewish men menstruated affiliating them with women as not fully coherent bodies.²¹⁰ She argues that blood functioned to give unquestionable credence to ideological constructs, “blood is another one of these physical facts that is used to substantiate cultural assumptions.”²¹¹

The political climate of the contemporary American culture wars has tended to provoke a style of debate where one side posited the other as an existential threat to the body politic and nation framed in militaristic terms. It was in this spirit that Helms warned, in an earlier NEA scandal provoked by the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano in 1989, of the dangers of “pander[ing] to the whims of the militant homosexual minority.”²¹² Such rhetoric, and the technique of presenting deeply conservative views as the voice of a “silent majority” of the American people, has

²⁰⁹ Ibid. 153.

²¹⁰ Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, 91-96.

²¹¹ Ibid. 20. Bildhauer’s work on blood takes inspiration from Judith Butler’s powerful arguments on sex and gender where she demonstrates that “physical sex is artificially distinguished from social gender, only in order to use the former to ‘prove’ the inevitability of the latter.” See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 3-44.

²¹² Jesse Helms quoted in Johnson, “Does a Bloody Towel Represent the Ideals of the American People,” 76.

repeatedly allowed the more reactionary elements in US politics to further their own agenda by presenting their views as self-evidently true and representing the spirit of the nation, and, at the same time, presenting that “silent majority” as facing an existential threat from a tide of social liberalism.

In mobilising the visibly queer bodies of the members of Ron Athey and Company into a self-consciously melodramatic, witty, and hyperbolic critique of the exclusionary mechanisms of heteronormative American society, *4 Scenes* might have evaded the attention of Helms et al. However, its use of scarification and blood lent it – at least in the minds of conservative politicians – an unquestionable truth value, demonstrating the wanton perversity and disregard for “traditional values.” Ironically, if predictably, the ostracising and demonising techniques that *4 Scenes* targeted were turned against Athey when it received national attention. This process, termed abjection, plays an important part in psychological development and coherence as well as social exclusion, and it is to these arguments that I will now turn.

Abject

Julia Kristeva also sought to explain aversion to bodily fluids by looking at their relationship with bodily boundaries. For Kristeva the notion of the bounded individual body develops through the process of abjection, the expulsion of matter that was once internal to the body. This process of differentiation is painful but essential to the development of subjectivity, entrance into the symbolic order (language) and the assumption of identity. Kristeva sees this process of abjection as played out in the first instance with the child’s abjection of its mother, a painful but essential step in the assumption of individual identity and the conception of the individual body as a single

bounded entity.²¹³ From an initial “oneness” with its mother the infant goes through a separation process, two of the most important aspects of which are learning to control its bodily discharges and learning language, thus gaining access to the symbolic order. In this way the infant eventually becomes an individual.

While it may desire on some level to return to its original state of integration with the mother, it is on another level horrified and repulsed as this would represent the end of individual existence, “a stifled aspiration towards an other as prohibited as it is desired.”²¹⁴ Following the rejection of the maternal embrace, matter that must be continually expelled from the body, being neither subject nor object, threatens the symbolic order. Excrement, because “maternal authority is experienced first and above all [...] as sphincteral training”²¹⁵, and blood, specifically menstrual blood, constitute threats to this hard won individual identity:

Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference.²¹⁶

Kristeva’s argument has several significant deficits including a naturalistic conflation of femininity with motherhood, the unquestioned assumption of longing on the part of the subject for a lost plenitude located in infancy, and “a merging of women and physicality.”²¹⁷ Nonetheless, Kristeva has contributed a powerful and evocative account of the disruptive potential of bodily emissions to normative conceptions of psychic, as well as corporeal, integrity. Her work also foregrounds the place of gender and sexuality

²¹³ Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 46.

²¹⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 47.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.* 71.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.* 71.

²¹⁷ Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, 12. See also Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 107–127.

in that unsettling capacity. The first part of the quotation above largely corresponds to Douglas's account of the body, individual or social, as threatened from without by substances/entities that transgress its borders and render its definitions/boundaries uncertain. In the second sentence above Kristeva describes the potential instability in psychic coherence – identity (social or sexual) – that arises from confrontation with the abject. This problem has been thoroughly re-examined by the contemporary philosopher Judith Butler who has argued that abjection is a process oriented towards social exclusion, operating through the production of psychic incoherence, or as she terms it psychic “unlivability.”²¹⁸

In her examination of Douglas's work Butler argues that rather than understanding the limits of the body as representative of the limits of society as such we might understand “the boundaries of the body as the limits of the socially *hegemonic*.”²¹⁹ Hegemony describes the form of social control that does not necessarily rely on political power but rather dictates a particular worldview (notion of reality, human nature and relationships etc.) that is accepted “by those in practice subordinate to it.”²²⁰ Butler goes on to argue that the media and political response to AIDS, presented as a “gay disease” in, she argues, a hysterical and homophobic manner sets up “a tactical construction of a continuity between the polluted status of the homosexual by virtue of the boundary-trespass that is homosexuality and the disease as a specific modality of homosexual pollution.”²²¹ Drawing a parallel between gay sex acts, which establish “certain kinds bodily permeabilities unsanctioned by the hegemonic order,” and the actual existence of a virus transmitted through bodily fluids it is possible to view HIV/AIDS as confirming a viewpoint of the homosexual as a polluted/polluting person that pre-exists and anticipates

²¹⁸ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3.

²¹⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 179.

²²⁰ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1988), 145.

²²¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 179–180.

the virus itself.²²² Such a point of view would seem to lie behind the uproar caused by Carlton's HIV-negative blood in Minneapolis in 1994. The ritualistic scarification of the back of a gay man, inspired by a minority body-modification subculture which privileges the transgression of bodily boundaries and hegemonic injunctions of appropriate permeability, was seen not just as having nothing of value to say to the rest of society, but also as being a direct insult and an explicit endangerment to them.²²³

Like Kristeva, Butler sees subjects as coming into being through a process of exclusion, though this process is continual rather than confined to infancy. Butler reformulates the concept of abjection as a process that designates certain identifications as permissible or liveable and others as abject. These abject beings designate,

[P]recisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject.²²⁴

Butler sees the formation of the subject as taking place in, and being a product of, an exclusionary "heterosexual matrix."²²⁵ With a function similar to that of hegemony, the heterosexual matrix is a structure (compulsory heterosexuality) in which other structures (non-normative sexualities/gender identities) emerge. Though designated as the abject "site of dreaded identification" these competing structures are, in fact, the necessary and formative demarcations of the limits of acceptability or livability within the

²²² Ibid. 180.

²²³ The "Othering" of the performance – the rejection of the idea that it might have anything to say to the "average" American – is obvious in the rhetoric and simplistic reductions employed by those attacking it, and the NEA, in Congress. Note the statement by Senator Cliff Stearns (R-FL) "does a bloody towel represent the ideals of the American people?" which provides the title for Johnson's essay on the controversy. Stearns, Johnson argues, contrasts Athey's work "to humanist platitudes about the transcendental effects of good art." Johnson, "Does a bloody towel represent the ideals of the American people?" 84.

²²⁴ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 3.

²²⁵ Ibid. 3.

heterosexual matrix.²²⁶ In the same way that, for Kristeva, abject bodily matter constituted a threatening spectre in its evocation of the dissolution of the subject and regression to infantile dependence, Butler's domain of abjection threatens to disrupt the security of those beings who have fashioned a livable or acceptable place within the heterosexual matrix by its insistence on the reaffirmation of this founding repudiation. Following these arguments we could conclude that the homophobia and revulsion on display during the 1994 NEA debate was a product of the need to silence the uncensored expression of these constitutive abjections.

Abjection however, as Butler is keen to stress, by virtue of its fundamental role in the production of the sexed subject of heteronormativity, can be rethought as a valuable resource in the contestation of the regulatory norms of the heterosexual matrix. "The task will be to consider this threat and disruption," she writes, "not as a permanent contestation of social norms condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure, but rather as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility."²²⁷ The emancipatory potential Butler sees in the very mechanisms that produce the abject as a state of being is crucial to bear in mind when confronting work such as *4 Scenes*, which, with its visual lexicon of martyrdom, suffering and struggle, could so easily be assimilated to a longstanding association, compounded exponentially by the AIDS crisis, of queer sexuality with pathos, death and mourning.²²⁸

Following the *Human Printing Press*, *4 Scenes* segues into a section in which Athey, in voiceover, narrates his history of drug addiction and suicide attempts, whilst inserting numerous syringes into his arm and needles into his forehead. His first suicide attempt, the voiceover recounts, was "a temper tantrum designed to reject the choices I saw for life." Butler argues that individuals who refuse to accept the "normativizing

²²⁶ The abjected outside, Butler writes, is "after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation." Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 3.

²²⁷ *Ibid.* 3.

²²⁸ See Nunokawa, "All the Sad Young Men," 311–323.

injunctions,” of the symbolic order of compulsory heterosexuality are threatened with “psychosis, abjection and psychic unlivability.”²²⁹ This scene, in an unashamedly melodramatic yet deeply affecting manner that Athey has made his own, asserts the potential ramifications these normative directives can have when one is forced to confront the abject spectre one had previously disavowed.

Ultimately, however, *4 Scenes* does not descend into tragedy. Removing the syringes from his arm and rising from the sick bed in which the scene takes place Athey climbs a rope ladder. At the same time the voiceover recounts a dream in which Athey is confronted by a figure similar to himself but with his body completely black with tattoos. This vision is credited with inspiring Athey to complete the tattooing of his own body, and he has written elsewhere that he sees his tattooing and performance work as a creative manifestation of the same spirit that led him into drug addiction, self-harming and self-destruction.²³⁰ The dream and body modification practices, therefore, helped Athey negotiate a “livable” place in the world.

Although cautious about presenting aesthetic culturally sanctioned bodily modification practices as equivalent to pathological self-wounding it has been argued that they serve similar purposes in that they work to, “correct or prevent a pathologically destabilising condition that threatens the community, the individual, or both.”²³¹ Body modification, Victoria Pitts has argued, often functions for queer-identified people as a positive declaration of their queerness, a method of reclaiming their body as their own, as “a symbolic resources for *unfixing heteronormative* inscriptions.”²³² One gay man, for example, tells Pitts that his stretched earlobes mark a point of no return, placing him

²²⁹ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 14–15.

²³⁰ Ron Athey, “Deliverance: The ‘Torture Trilogy’ in Retrospect,” in Johnson, *Pleading in the Blood*, 106, 100–109, and Marla Carlson, *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics and Artist, Mystics and Artists* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 126.

²³¹ Carlson, *Performing Bodies in Pain*, 126.

²³² Victoria Pitts quoted in *Ibid.* 126. Emphasis original.

visibly and irreversibly outside of the mainstream.²³³ By embracing an abject position so wholeheartedly and visibly through body modification such individuals affirm one another and work towards a position of livability.

Butler has noted a paradox in her model of the development of subjectivity through abjection, which she argues is a continual *process* of subjectivation, in that, “the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms.”²³⁴ This cautions against any simplistic model of transgression and instead, “locate[s] agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power.”²³⁵ Another way of arguing this point would be to say that reclaiming and subverting the structures, processes and identifications that secure heteronormativity can effectively call its legitimacy into question and undermine its force. For this reason Butler advocates a model of subversion through hyperbole and parody, a “refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command.”²³⁶

Specifically, Butler has pointed to drag as “subversive to the extent that it reflects the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality.”²³⁷ This makes more sense when considered in the context of Butler’s wider project of undoing the ‘naturalness’ of sex and demonstrating how this natural status is produced through citation and performance in the service of heteronormativity. Sex is always performative, she argues, in that the sexed body is always constituted by the discourse that describes it. Butler provides the example of a doctor pronouncing the sex of a child, which she argues is in fact an interpellation –

²³³ Ibid. 126. Previously “extreme” body modifications such as full-length sleeve tattoos, facial tattoos and stretching earlobes with plugs or gauges appear to have become much more common in the last decade and would perhaps not serve this function to the same extent.

²³⁴ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 15.

²³⁵ Ibid. 15.

²³⁶ Ibid. 122.

²³⁷ Ibid. 125.

an address or injunction that brings into being the subject that it addresses – that initiates the process of “girling.”²³⁸ This ‘girl’ is then forced to “cite both sexual and gendered norms in order to qualify for subjecthood within the heterosexual matrix that ‘hails’ her.”²³⁹ The need for continual citation of these norms reveals the corporeal sexed body to be as much a product of discourse as gender identity, sex and gender are revealed as relying on reiteration and citation to be perceived as natural/intelligible and do not refer to an ‘original’ existing outside of, or prior to, discourse. What is significant for our purposes here is that parodic or hyperbolic *recitations* have the potential to reveal the non-original status of gender, to de-naturalise heterosexuality and call the authority of normativising injunctions and exclusionary mechanisms into force.

4 Scenes engages extensively in the parody of normative identities: in the opening section Athey recites a narrative of (failed) divine intervention playing the part of a modern day female mystic, elsewhere Divinity Fudge calls attention to the sexual objectification of people of colour, her oppressors mostly played by butch lesbians dressed as working class men. Butler, however, cautions that drag and gender denaturalisation are not automatically subversive and can be, “the very vehicle for the reconsolidation of hegemonic norms.”²⁴⁰ But adds that the practice of drag attests to an ambivalence resulting from the situation of “being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constitute and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes.”²⁴¹ However, it is precisely because one is implicated in the regimes of signification that are constituted through violent exclusion that resignifying projects attain their affective resonance and emotional efficacy.

4 scenes concludes with Athey acting the part of minister in conservative shirt and tie over a wedding of “three passionate daggers.” “Dagger” in queer argot is a term

²³⁸ Ibid. 232.

²³⁹ Sara Salih, *Judith Butler* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), 89.

²⁴⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 125.

²⁴¹ Ibid. 125.

denoting a particularly butch androgynous gay woman. In this wedding cum bacchanal cum modern primitive celebration the three daggers are unwrapped from under masses of tulle fabric that had previously cocooned them, revealing that they have bells stitched to their skin. “Where are queers to draw their traditions from,” Athey’s preacher asks, “Eastern body rituals? Paganism? Wicca? Or should we continue aping straight people in America?”²⁴² Athey then strips naked and inserts spikes through their cheeks before they join hands and dance with the rest of the company to Athey and Fudge’s drum beat.

For individuals who are rendered abject by the normativising imperatives of heteronormativity, and we could include all members of Ron Athey and Company under that banner,²⁴³ the rearticulation of kinship structure is not a hollow and futile repetition but a sustaining and enabling project that helps mitigate the material and psychological deprivations that the heteronormative regime can produce.²⁴⁴ Butler also emphasises the uses of such strategies to cut across the differences between identities or abject positions such that “anyone outside of the privilege of heterosexual family (and those within those ‘privileges’ who suffer there)” can receive sustenance, affirmation and inspiration from them.²⁴⁵

Illness and Queer Theory

As I argued above the specific nature of HIV infection, with the virus injecting its RNA into the immune system cells, in such a way that the virus will remain present until the cell dies, is key to the particular devastation it causes to bodily and psychic coherence.

Though it remains a foreign infection HIV in some sense becomes part of the body, hence

²⁴² Ron Athey quoted in Johnson, “Does a Bloody Towel Represent the Ideals of the American People,” 68.

²⁴³ Marla Carlson comments on the company members’ appearance: “Both the tribe as a whole and the individual performers were remarkable for confounding any binary gender analysis.” Carlson, *Performing Bodies in Pain*, 126.

²⁴⁴ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 137.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 137.

its capacity to disrupt stable notions of self and not-self. This is one of the reasons that the HIV virus and AIDS epidemic were particularly central to the emergence of queer theory, a discourse “specifically about the self, about self-identity, and about self-identity as it is constructed and performed specifically with regard to sexuality.”²⁴⁶

In addition, the AIDS epidemic and associated activism led to a questioning by activists themselves of the identity categories that separated them. A new style of politics developed in response to the epidemic that sought, not always successfully, to build alliances rather than maintain boundaries. In contrast to the earlier wave of gay liberation, which had placed its faith in identity politics and civil rights arguments, queer activism necessitated a critique of identity politics to the extent that it recognized the ability of different groups to transcend identity in joint resistance to heteronormative society.²⁴⁷ Such questioning was, at least initially, motivated by the practical imperatives of disease control. Thus the initial designation of the illness as GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency) was abandoned as it became apparent that the virus was, in fact, unconcerned with an individual’s self-identity regarding sexuality. Furthermore, terms like MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) entered the epidemiological and public health lexicons in an attempt to appropriately target services and information without making assumptions about an individual’s sexual self-definition. Viewed in this way it could be argued that having AIDS made one queer by virtue of one’s proximity or inclusion within a group of sexually non-normative subjects, due to the conflation by wider society of AIDS with homosexuality.²⁴⁸ To state the case somewhat differently, queer theory’s challenging of identity categories regarding sexuality and its troubling of stable notions of bodily, psychic, and sexual coherence, is intimately connected to the AIDS epidemic. This is due

²⁴⁶ Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, 59.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 240. Dean also cautions, “Its anti-identitarianism gives rise to both the promise and the risk that queer offers for progressive politics – the promise that we may think and act beyond the confines of identity, including group identity, and the risk that in doing so the specificities of race, gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity might be overlooked or lost.” Tim Dean, “Lacan and Queer Theory,” in Jean Michel Rabaté (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 241.

²⁴⁸ Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, 59.

to the specific effects the virus has on the individual body, the shattering of an easily maintained conception of self and other, and to the constellation of activists from disparate identity categories, motivated by a shared interest in prompting and extending effective information dissemination and treatment.

In addition to individuals infected with HIV or afflicted by AIDS it has been argued that the discourse of queer theory can be applied to illness more broadly. For example, there have been attempts to view breast cancer as an illness that makes one queer. Like AIDS it is now a ‘chronic manageable’ disease, it is associated with gender and sexual identity, and it has been politicised through community activism in an attempt to find more effective treatments and combat stigma and perceived indifference on the part of the government and medical institutions.²⁴⁹ What is significant for our purposes here is that certain ‘chronic manageable’ illnesses could be described as queer because, like the martyr before torture, they simultaneously straddle the borders of life and death. Sue- Ellen Case has argued that queer desire represents a challenge to the conflation of heterosexual sex with procreation and life, and by extension the right to life itself. “In contrast,” writes Case, “homosexual sex was mandated as sterile – an unlive practice that was consequently unnatural, or queer, and as that which was unlive, without the right to life.”²⁵⁰ As a result, she argues, queer desire revelled in the taboo, “by imagining sexual objects and sexual practices within the realm of the other-than-natural [...] new forms of being, or beings, are imagined through desire.”²⁵¹

Case develops her argument in relation to the figure of the vampire but also identifies the writings of religious mystics as early examples of, as she puts it, “the

²⁴⁹ Ibid. 59.

²⁵⁰ Sue-Ellen Case, “Tracking the Vampire,” in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanburg (eds.), *Writing the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 383.

²⁵¹ Ibid. 384.

compound of wounding desire, gender inversion, and ontological shift.”²⁵² The poems of St John of the Cross, the sixteenth century priest and mystic who produced his *Spiritual Canticle*, one of the most influential works of mystical literature, while being held prisoner by religious rivals in conditions that amounted to torture, are deployed as a compelling account in which the binaries of gender and life/death are continually refracted through the prism of same sex desire. John’s *Spiritual Canticle* follows the progress of a bride wounded by love, the human soul, in the search for union with her bridegroom, Christ. Case argues that, “the wound of love liberates the lover from the boundaries of being – the living dying envelope of the organic.”²⁵³

As I have argued above martyred saints can represent a blurring of the boundary between life and death, likewise the mystic’s encounter with God disrupts any concrete separation of the earthly or bodily realm and the spiritual. These medieval and Early Modern examples are more disruptive by virtue of their refusal to conform to stable ontological categories, a trait they share with AIDS as a “chronic manageable” illness. In 1988, prior to the development of effective anti-viral combination therapies to combat the development of HIV, Michael Lynch spoke of the difficulty of finding a language in which to discuss AIDS that was not “firmly ligatured to death,”²⁵⁴ He attributed this difficulty to a fear of the uncertainty that decoupling HIV/AIDS and death would represent. While inevitable death from a terminal illness might be a terrible burden to bear, this reasoning dictates, it is in some sense preferable, because more stable and certain, to the long life of illness, vulnerability – under threat from opportunistic infections – and senescence, that living with HIV as a chronic illness would represent.²⁵⁵

²⁵² Ibid. 384.

²⁵³ Ibid. 385.

²⁵⁴ Michael Lynch quoted in Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, 60-61.

²⁵⁵ Ibid. 60-61.

Deliverance

Deliverance, the final part of the *Torture Trilogy*, engages extensively with illness and mortality. In Catherine (Saalfield) Gund's documentary Athey describes the piece as an attempt to think through his feelings about death, which necessitated working through both his feelings of shame in relation to HIV infection and the emptiness he feels over his loss of religious faith. The performance begins with a section called "Walk of the Sick Man" in which three naked male performers, one of whom is Athey, walk on to the stage covered in grey body paint hunched over and carrying bundled wooden crutches on their backs. They surround a female performer who interacts with a pile of earth in the centre of the stage [Fig. 2.9]. Three "daggers" prepare the bodies of the three men by washing their bodies clean of white paint and hooking the skin on their backs on to scaffolding. Athey's body is then put through a purging ritual that involves the pulling of knotted handkerchiefs from his anus, douching with fluid in which glitter is suspended, and his castration, performed by using surgical staples to enclose his penis with his scrotum. In the next section Athey implores an unspecified divine figure, played by Carlton, for forgiveness, though the deity readily grants this, Athey is unable to hear it. He continues to rant about having corrupted others, committed abominations and led others astray. Eventually, Athey accepts the forgiveness on offer, this is symbolised when Carlton hands him an enormous brown velvet gown to wear. Athey then addresses the audience, lamenting the fact that his "healing" has come at the expense of his castration, that we are entering "sexual judgement day," and that he is viewed by some as "scum of the earth [...] thriving on fornication, spreading and enhancing my disease." Were the Gods to take pity on him, he could "walk forth and take my place as a royal and holy eunuch." He recites more of this grandiose fantasy of redemption until another member of the company shouts "Oh my god you are so fucking deluded" as the scene fades to black.



Fig. 1.9: Ron Athey and Company, *Deliverance*, 1995. Photo: Nicholas Sinclair.

Significantly *Deliverance* was developed in 1995, at the nadir of the AIDS crisis just before effective treatments became available, at a time when many, including Athey, were experiencing the deaths of many loved ones and were pessimistic about their own prospects for survival in the absence of medical advances. *Deliverance* simultaneously acknowledges the pressing need to search for redemption when one finds oneself overcome by calamitous events and makes fun of the persistence of that belief. The enduring faith in redemption was an aspect of Hegel's work that Bataille sought to dismantle. Hegel was keen to emphasise the importance of mortality and negativity in his

philosophical system, writing, “Spirit [*Geist*] is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it.”²⁵⁶ But in keeping with the dialectical logic of his system even this loss could be converted into gain: “the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself.”²⁵⁷ For Hegel even the death of the individual subject could be recuperated as a scenario in which the subject confronts, rather than nothingness, arbitrariness or absurdity, their position as “a member of, and moment in this unfolding whole,” man as vehicle for Spirit/*Geist*.²⁵⁸ For Bataille this attempt to simultaneously recognise and recoup negativity in death represents the ultimate attempt to suppress negativity/death in all its guises: “what Hegel cannot tolerate is senseless sacrifice, meaningless loss, and profitless expenditure.”²⁵⁹ This process of transforming loss into gain is, in the final analysis, “constructed upon the religious belief in crucifixion and resurrection” though the transcendental presence of *Geist* is quite different from the theistic notion of God.²⁶⁰ Bataille’s writing, under the heading *dépense*, proposes a theory of the need for loss and aims to radicalise the force of this negativity by resisting the circuit of reciprocal exchange where loss is always converted into gain and meaning. Its force can also be grasped by the way in which Bataille describes poetry as “transgressive language that risks anarchy by saying nothing.”²⁶¹ While Hegel’s system aims at closure, ascribing meaning and redemption to everything including death and tragic losses, Bataille replaces this closure

²⁵⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 19.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 19.

²⁵⁸ Taylor, *Deconstruction in Context*, 9. See also Taylor, *Hegel in Modern Society*, 49-52.

²⁵⁹ Taylor, *Deconstruction in Context*, 27.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 27.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.* 28.

with the explosive openness of the pineal eye's "hole at the summit" that I quoted above in connection with Athey's *Solar Anus*.²⁶²

Athey himself affirms that the piece is concerned with binary oppositions and their confusion:

Divinity Fudge's character and the actions follow trickster mythologies, and there is a continual polarization of filth and glitz. Exact movements in the dirt. Strings of pearls and shit. Cleansing rinses and smelly herbs. Santeria queens and penitents. Ambiguities: castrated sinner or holy eunuch? Reinfection or sexual freedom? Does anything present as what it means? Krishna orange becomes fake-tanned muscle Marys.²⁶³

The trickster is a common character in many mythological traditions particularly those of Native North Americans. Usually male, tricksters are characterised by their extensive appetites for food and sex and their frequent bending and breaking of the rules of both social morality and physical possibility. The trickster uses his wits, creativity and lack of conventional morality to overcome obstacles, in the process often helping humans (tricksters are often the cultural heroes of tribes) but also frequently allowing realities as pain and death into the world in mythological accounts. Douglas interpreted the trickster mythology of the Winnebago people as a poetic statement on the development of differentiation where the trickster character learns that the extremities of his own body are a part of his own person – her analysis centres on an episode in which the trickster treats his anus as if it is an independent being, only to learn through failure that it is not able to guard over food while he sleeps – and gradually separates himself from his immediate environment.²⁶⁴ He also learns the difference between animate and inanimate things and develops social relations.²⁶⁵ This is the same impulse that Hegel described as “the

²⁶² “And thus it plays the role of a fire in a house; the head, instead of locking up life as money is locked in a safe, spends it without counting.” Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 82. See also Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 122.

²⁶³ Ron Athey, “Deliverance: The ‘Torture Trilogy’ in Retrospect,” 107.

²⁶⁴ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 99-100.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 100.

‘frightful power’ by which men analyse their world, divide themselves from nature and fix the distinction between things.”²⁶⁶ Though inevitable and, in Hegel’s teleology a step in attaining true self-consciousness, this impulse has been described by Taylor as “in a sense like the power of death which removes things from the stream of life.”²⁶⁷ Douglas argues against the interpretation that aligned cultures that exhibited bodily symbolism and excremental magic in their religious mythology with infantile psychology and sexuality. Instead, she sees such mythology and the rituals associated with it as “making the greatest effort to affirm the physical fullness of reality” using it “to confront experience with its inevitable pains and losses.”²⁶⁸ The sophisticated use of Native American spirituality in *Deliverance* is a testament to the diverse array of sources that Athey engages with on the most profound level. My aim in this chapter has been to take these engagements seriously, primarily through a focus on the martyr’s embodied spirituality, rather than treat them as merely repositories of imagery.

The following section sets up another quest for redemption as Athey and the two other male performers from the “Sick Man” section are again covered in white body paint. They sing a song dedicated to Miss Velma, the stigmatic preacher from Athey’s childhood, and her “healing altar.” The piece then transitions to a section in which the three men pace between two raised figures of divinity, one of whom is Miss Velma, in her elaborate yellow evangelist’s dress, played by Carlton/Divinity Fudge. Again, a fade to black emphasises the futility of these hopes for redemption and closure. Miss Velma, as I noted above was an evangelist famed for performing stigmata, and her failure to do so in Athey’s presence during his adolescence can be seen as a key component in the genesis of his artistic practice which has consistently re-used the open and bleeding wound to articulate the bodily and psychic disruptions wrought by HIV/AIDS. I have argued above

²⁶⁶ Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 49.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 49.

²⁶⁸ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 148.

that the martyr represents a body suspended between life and death in a way that aligns it with the chronically ill body. It has been argued that the stigmatic represents a reliving of Christ's passion and crucifixion in a way which also "suspends the stigmatic between the moments of death and birth."²⁶⁹ The stigmatic and the martyr are part of a Christian tradition that proposes a beyond to our embodied temporally bounded existence in the form of a redemptive afterlife, like the closure posited by Hegel's philosophical system. In Athey's hands, however, the open wound is evocative of something closer to Bataille's ontology signifying openness and lack of closure or end.

The penultimate section of the performance is known as the "Post-AIDS boy-boy Show," in which Athey and one of his collaborators (Brian Murphy) ride a double headed dildo while mocking the heteronormative muscle-bound aesthetic that has become so prominent in gay culture during the AIDS crisis [Fig. 2.10]. He also discusses the sexuality of HIV-positive men, condomless sex and his own fears of reinfection (also known as 'superinfection' and now discredited medically), further exposure and death. The scene ends when Carlton walks on stage and severs the dildo connecting the two men with a pair of shears. This scene manages to be at once touching and outrageously funny: *Dépense* is experienced not just in death and loss but also in eroticism and laughter. In the final scene of the performance the three men are wrapped in body bags and covered in dirt by the other members of the company.

²⁶⁹ Karmen MacKendrick, "Sharing God's Wounds: Laceration, Communication, and Stigmata," in Mitchell and Winfree (eds.), *The Obsessions of George Bataille*, 142.



Fig. 1.10: Ron Athey and Brian Murphy, *Deliverance*, 1995. Video still.

The documentary film *Hallelujah! Ron Athey: A story of Deliverance* ends, after excerpts of the performance *Deliverance* have been shown and Athey has described the piece, with a montage of candid footage of Athey interacting with his friends and collaborators in the development and performance of the *Trilogy*. This montage is sound tracked by a 1904 recording of Alessandro Moreschi, the last castrato singer, performing *Domine, salvum fac regem* (Lord, save the King) and has a distinctly elegiac quality. The reality, of course, is that Athey is still alive, while others, like Brian Murphy for example, have not survived. The continued use of martyrdom and the bodily wound in Athey's performance practice allows him to both bear witness to that experience and maintain an openness to the future.

Deliverance was staged at a time when, as Judith Williamson has written, HIV was endowed with a meaning and purpose to the extent that it was said to “claim” its victims,

as if they belonged to it.²⁷⁰ Instead, Athey's work stages sacrifice, in line with Bataille, as an opening of the material body and confrontation with finitude. It does not try to shy away from death or posit a beyond to our embodied existence here on earth while still recognising the pain it causes and our, perhaps inherent, need to search for meaning in it. In the next chapter I will discuss the work of David Wojnarowicz, in particular his interest in ruin and decay, alongside Bataille's writing and the relevance this has to art in relation to HIV.

²⁷⁰ Judith Williamson, "Every Virus Tells a Story: The Meanings of HIV and AIDS," in Erica Carter and Simon Watney (eds.), Taking Liberties: AIDS and Cultural Politics (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989), 74.

Chapter 2: “Soon All This Will Be Picturesque Ruins”: Entropy in the work of David Wojnarowicz.

In 1982-83, while working in the abandoned and crumbling Hudson River Piers, David Wojnarowicz produced two gigantic murals depicting the head of a screeching pterodactyl and a terrified cow. In the first image the dinosaur, “an icon of extinction,” conveys Wojnarowicz’s belief in the supreme indifference of nature to narratives of progress [Fig. 2.1].²⁷¹ The desire to resist what, in his published writings, he would term “the clockwork of civilisation” and “the pre-invented world” would find expression in Wojnarowicz’s 1986 series known collectively as the Elements Paintings and comprised of *Earth, Fire, Water* and *Wind*. Other works from this period, for example *Crash: The Birth of Language/The Invention of Lies* (1986), envisioned a catastrophic clash of the technological human-centred world and its accumulated history with unstoppable natural forces that would leave the former – much like the Hudson River Piers as they actually existed at this time – a dilapidated ruin ripe for re-colonisation by nature rather than human intervention.

The gagging cow’s head also prefigures Wojnarowicz’s later work by conveying the terror of a sacrificial animal and, through the association of cattle with the nearby Meat Packing District, some of the brutalising tendencies of consumer capitalism and American society that he had consistently engaged with [Fig. 2.2]. For example, many of Wojnarowicz’s earliest surviving artworks utilise supermarket posters reworked to include scenes of eroticism and violence, suggesting the uncomfortable and veiled coexistence of these primal forces with the stifling mundanities of contemporary culture. From 1987 until his death from AIDS in 1992 Wojnarowicz continued to explore these themes as they played out alongside the dramatically expanding AIDS crisis. In these later works the relentless onward march of the “clockwork of civilisation” is troubled, not just by a

²⁷¹ Mysoon Rizk, “Reinventing the Pre-invented World,” in Amy Scholder (ed.), *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Rizzoli & New Museum Books, 1999), 49.

seemingly unstoppable virus, but also by the welling anger of those who, like the pterodactyl of 1982-83, seemed to be facing extinction. From 1986 until his death Wojnarowicz's works transfigure the immediate tragedy of AIDS that pervaded his world through what Jennifer Doyle has called "a poetics of scale at once eschatological and intimate."²⁷²



Fig. 2.1: Wojnarowicz with the pterodactyl pier painting, ca. 1983. Photo: Marion Scemama.

In addition, Wojnarowicz is also notable for his very direct involvement in the political struggles that emerged from the AIDS crisis. He launched successful legal battles against the misrepresentations by Donald Wildmon and the American Family Association and his published writings, performances and artworks acted as a clarion call to a generation of AIDS activists. Wojnarowicz's injunction to "throw my body on the steps of the FDA" inspired the political funerals undertaken by members of the pressure group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). These funerals, one of the first of which was for Wojnarowicz himself, can be seen as an extension of ACT UP's earlier

²⁷² Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC. & London: Duke University Press, 2013), 146.

Die-In actions/performances and led to the Ashes Actions of October 1992 and October 1996 where activists scattered the remains of their loved ones on the White House lawn. Many of ACT UP's tactics involved mobilising this kind of affective politics and, I argue, blur the lines between art and politics in a particularly moving and spectacular way. As the activist, writer and historian Sarah Schulman puts it when writing about the performance art of the 1980s: "Nothing on stage could match ACT UP carrying the bodies of Jon Greenberg, Tim Bailey, or Mark Lowe Fisher in open caskets through the streets."²⁷³



Fig. 2.2: The gagging cow drawn on the wall of the Ward Line Pier, 1982-83. Photo: Andreas Sterzing.

Wojnarowicz's interest in the aesthetics of decay in conjunction with eroticism led him to identify with a vein of French literature that included the Symbolists and Decadents

²⁷³ Sarah Schulman, "Making Love Making Art: Living and Dying Performance in the 1980s," in Helen Molesworth (ed.), *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s* (New Haven, CT. & London: Yale University Press & Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2012), 423.

in the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century included figures like Jean Genet.²⁷⁴ While Wojnarowicz did not engage directly with Bataille, he too is part of this tradition. Moreover, Bataille's fascination with the abject, excessive and non-productive was politically as well as aesthetically motivated. His work on eroticism and non-productive expenditure from the late 1920s to the late 1950s is an important precedent for the concerns that Wojnarowicz would term "the clockwork of civilisation" and "the pre-invented world" in the 1980s and early 1990s. In addition, responding to the monumental political crisis of his own time – the rise of fascism – Bataille sought ways to harness the affective energies employed by fascism and re-direct them towards a counter-reactionary politics.

Both Bataille and Wojnarowicz found inspiration in Symbolist poetry as epitomised by figures like Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud. Wojnarowicz's politics, like Bataille's and the Symbolists, was expressed in his identification or affiliation with an abject or ostracised other; an experience of passion and eroticism as violent, wounding and transgressive; and a disdain for the morality and politics of his own time. This chapter begins with a consideration of the themes of decay and ruin in Wojnarowicz's work in parallel with Bataille's writing on the subject. As I wrote in the introduction, decay was subsumed into the influential Octoberist reading of Bataille – advanced by Krauss and Bois – under the heading "entropy." However, their account of Bataille's formless (*informe*) largely neglects the bodily, sexual, and political basis of his philosophy, elements that, I argue, come to fruition in Wojnarowicz art as well as – crucially – his life and activism. Collapsing the distinction between art and life was the primary aim of the historical avant-garde, which counts Bataille among its foremost members. The chapter will therefore consider avant-garde theory as it relates to Bataille's

²⁷⁴ As evidence of this see Wojnarowicz's works *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* (1978-1979), *Untitled (Genet)* (1990) and repeated references in his diaries and other writings which appear in Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

work as well as Wojnarowicz's and propose a model of avant-garde practice that is direct and embodied in its political engagement and on a continuum with everyday life.

Ruination and Decay

Wojnarowicz's attraction to the disused Hudson River Piers was stimulated both by financial necessity – some of the buildings were isolated and provided a large, secluded workspace for experimentation at a time when he was perennially poverty stricken – and by a fascination with ruination and decay which would continue throughout his career. Furthermore, since falling out of use the piers had become a notorious cruising ground for gay men where the transgressive thrill of public sex was augmented by the additional physical peril provided by these decaying structures.²⁷⁵ Later, he would tell Cynthia Carr that he saw the piers as “symbols of what was essentially a dying country.”²⁷⁶ Ruination was also the inspiration for the first incarnation of the *Elements* series as a mural on a courtyard wall at the Norton Gallery of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida, where the commission stipulated that the work would be destroyed after the corresponding exhibition closed. One of Wojnarowicz's essays, “In The Shadow of The American Dream: Soon all this will be picturesque ruins,” utilises the mural's title as its subtitle and combines a searing critique of American society with a mystical and erotic immersion in that culture.

Wojnarowicz's interest in ruination forms part of a wider discourse on ruins that has taken shape since the Romantic period. Brian Dillon has described the virtue of traditional ruin aesthetics as being located in the ruin's ability to both, “place us at the end

²⁷⁵ See Fiona Anderson, “Cruising the Queer Ruins of New York's Abandoned Waterfront,” *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, Vol. 20:3 (2015), pp. 135-144.

²⁷⁶ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 140.

of a historical continuum or cast us forward into the future ruin of our own present.”²⁷⁷

Wojnarowicz’s repeated returns to this sensibility of decay throughout his career were motivated, I would argue, by the ability to combine within this theme his identification with human culture’s perceived outsiders or losers with the prospect of either a gradual, or catastrophic, decline of the prevailing political, social, moral and economic order.

Not only was Wojnarowicz queer, he had lived for some time as a homeless and destitute street hustler. While he lived in constant fear of returning to this way of life, he simultaneously proclaimed his continued affinity with other social outcasts and the energy and freedom of the street and the open road. Throughout his life Wojnarowicz recorded his meetings with bizarre and colourful street characters; these recollections would be posthumously published as *The Waterfront Journals* in 1996. He was also drawn to those non-human life forms seen by others as most repellent; the reptiles, rodents and insects that thrive in decaying structures had fascinated Wojnarowicz since childhood.²⁷⁸

In *Crash: The Birth of Language/The Invention of Lies* (1986) [Fig 1.3] a steam locomotive hurtles towards a tiny planet throwing up dirt or dung in its wake, toppling over a classical column and exposing a ground of supermarket posters. Above the planet parts of an animal or dinosaur skeleton are embedded in a tangled morass of weeds or vines while alphabetical letters explode above them and fail to form words. There is a ruined building in the background and another building on fire in one of the cut away sections of the train. In another section, this one in the centre of the painting, a corpse is pegged and tied to the ground in a desert while two vultures pick away at the body.

The painting attests to Wojnarowicz continued interest in ruins and the conjunction of loathsome animals with fragments of human civilisation. In other paintings like *Dung Beetles* (1986) the bugs transport a pellet of faeces containing an image of the American

²⁷⁷ Brian Dillon (ed.), *Ruins* (London & Cambridge, MA.: Whitechapel Gallery & MIT Press, 2011), 13.

²⁷⁸ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 15.

eagle at its centre. For Wojnarowicz the steam locomotive was a particularly potent symbol that evoked both the artificial acceleration of time fostered by human society and the outmoded technological relics left in its wake. The clockwork mechanisms and mechanical gears often found in his paintings also function along these lines. As he put it, “For me, the image of the gear or the defunct machine is the image of what history means, reached through the compression of time [...] Society is almost dead and yet it continues reproducing its madness as if there were a real future at the end of its collective gestures.”²⁷⁹ In addition, the steam locomotive, as a catalyst of US westward expansion had helped destroy indigenous culture. Native American motifs are common in Wojnarowicz’s work and in *Crash* a Hopi Kachina doll and a pueblo can be found around the engine’s wheels.



Fig. 2.3: David Wojnarowicz, *Crash: The Birth of Language/The Invention of Lies*, 1986. Acrylic on masonite, 72 x 96”.

²⁷⁹ David Wojnarowicz quoted in Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 328.

Wojnarowicz often expressed his antipathy to contemporary society and culture with the phrase “pre-invented world.” In “Living Close to the Knives,” an essay chronicling the illness and death from AIDS of his close friend Peter Hujar, once again interwoven with mystic episodes and condemnations of American life and politics, he describes some of the disparate elements that constitute this “other” world:

The world of the stoplight, the no-smoking signs, the rental world, the split-rail fencing shielding hundreds of miles of barren wilderness from the human step. A place where by virtue of having been born centuries late one is denied access to earth or space, choice or movement. The bought-up world; the owned world. The world of coded sounds: the world of language, the world of lies. The packaged world; the world of speed in metallic motion. The Other World where I’ve always felt like an alien.²⁸⁰

The “pre-invented world” is constituted by rules and restrictions placed on one’s behaviour and one’s access to nature. It takes shape through the confines of the laws of property and language and demands the unnatural, accelerated and productive temporality of the machine, or, in his terms, “the clockwork of civilisation.” While this passage seems to suggest the existence of a real or natural world that the structures of the “pre-invented world” impede our access to, Wojnarowicz is also aware of the limitations of this concept: “But there’s the World where one adapts and stretches the boundaries of the Other World through keys of the imagination. But then again, the imagination is encoded with the invented information of the Other World.”²⁸¹ This suggests that the phrase “pre-invented world,” where it appears in his written works, points to a combination of what might otherwise be called ideology with the concept of the symbolic order: the simultaneously productive and alienating realm of experience entered into with our assumption of language, also suggested by the subtitle of the painting *The Birth of Language/The Invention of Lies*.

²⁸⁰ David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1992), 87-88.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.* 88.

Wojnarowicz's affinity with cultures other than his own is expressed later in the same paragraph: "Traveling into primitive cultures allows one a sudden and clear view of the Other World; how the invention of the word 'nature' disassociates us from the ground we walk on."²⁸² Though there appears to be an element of romantic Orientalism at play in Wojnarowicz's understanding of Native American and Mexican culture, I would argue that he was also appreciative of the way in which remnants of a lost culture (in this case destroyed through genocide) could function as symbols of the finite nature of all social and cultural structures including his own. These motifs have the additional capacity to signify the brutality and violence perpetrated in the name of western civilisation.

The particular set of references that Wojnarowicz chose to identify as sites of resistance to the pre-invented world, or those places where its pernicious and anthropogenic (caused by human activity) nature become most apparent have much in common with the themes that occupied Bataille. The skeletons, corpses and excrement found in *Crash* would give birth to the insects, scorched landscapes, sperm and rubble of Wojnarowicz's series of paintings on the four elements of 1987 that I discuss in greater detail below. For the time being I would like to demonstrate how Wojnarowicz's interest in these motifs can be seen as his engagement with a set of philosophical problems that Bataille would group under the heading heterogeneity. A substantial portion of Bataille's output was devoted to the exploration of heterogeneity through a number of sub categories including excess, non-productive expenditure, formlessness and eroticism.

Bataille: Heterogeneity and the formless

For Bataille, heterogeneous or abject matter could take multiple forms that one might summarise as animality and its remnants as they disrupt and disturb anthropocentric

²⁸² Ibid. 88.

thinking. Described by Allan Stoekl as, “an all-out assault on dignity” so repellent that it defied the incorporative logic of all contemporary systems of thought – the idealism of Christianity, Hegelianism, materialism and even the Surrealist group around André Breton – heterogeneous matter would be the subject of many of the pieces Bataille contributed to the journal *Documents* that he helped found in 1929.²⁸³

In his essay “The Big Toe” Bataille argues that this part of the human foot is simultaneously the most *human* part of the body, in its difference from the big toes of our nearest relatives the apes (the result of our dwelling on the flat ground rather than in the branches of trees), and at the same time one of our most repulsive body parts. The big toe, despite “giving a firm foundation to the erection to which man is so proud,” is also the body part most stubbornly anchored to the filth of the ground.²⁸⁴ While the fingers have come to signify useful action and work, the toes, Bataille argues, reveal “stupor and base idiocy.”²⁸⁵ Thus the toes have the potential to puncture man’s hubris and wound his dignity. This is compounded by the fact that the toes, like many aspects of the material body, have the capacity to disrupt notions of bodily integrity and disturb even the most lofty of civilised pursuits with the brute fact of one’s animality. This is evocatively rendered by Bataille when he imagines a man pausing to appreciate a monument glorifying his nation, “stopped in mid-flight by an atrocious pain in his big toe because, though the most noble of animals, he nevertheless has corns on his feet; in other words, he has feet, and these feet independently lead an ignoble life.”²⁸⁶

In “The Language of Flowers” Bataille turns his attention to the emblematic and cryptographic function of flowers as they relate to human emotions. After discussing the transposition of feelings away from pistil and stamens at the centre of blooms – their

²⁸³ Allan Stoekl, “Introduction,” in Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis, MN.: The University of Minnesota Press, 1985), xi.

²⁸⁴ Bataille, “The Big Toe,” 20.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 22.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 22.

obscenely exposed “hairy sexual organs” – onto the corolla (petals) Bataille turns his attention to the transient nature of their beauty:

But even more than by the filth of its organs, the flower is betrayed by the fragility of its corolla: thus far from answering the demands of human ideas, it is a sign of their failure. In fact, after a very short period of glory the marvellous corolla rots indecently in the sun, thus becoming, for the plant, a garish withering.²⁸⁷

The cyclical nature of the exalted flower’s relationship to abject matter is articulated by Bataille in terms which parallel Wojnarowicz’s juxtaposition, in *Crash* and elsewhere, of the fruits of human civilisation with masses of excrement: “Risen from the stench of the manure pile – even though it seemed for a moment to have escaped it in a flight of angelic and lyrical purity – the flower seems to relapse abruptly into its original squalor.”²⁸⁸ In their relationship to manure flowers could be said to animate that essential aspect of human life that Bataille described in “The Big Toe” as “the rage of seeing oneself as back and forth movement from refuse to the ideal, and from ideal to refuse.”²⁸⁹ The two moments of refuse in question here are birth and death, both of which Bataille saw as conditioned by horror and disgust because both are ruptures of the notion of the individual as a discrete entity as it emerges from, in the case of birth, or is reduced to, in the case of the decomposing corpse, zones of messy and formless continuity.

But, in fact, it is not only in their death and decay that flowers correspond to this duality; it is an essential, if hidden (literally buried), aspect of the organism. Bataille describes this facet of flowers when he writes of “the impossible and fantastic vision of roots swarming under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin [...] loving

²⁸⁷ Bataille, “Language of Flowers,” *Visions of Excess*, (pp. 10-14) 12.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 12.

²⁸⁹ Bataille, “The Big Toe,” 20-21.

rotteness just as leaves love light.”²⁹⁰ The earth, in this instance, masks the abject nature of the flower that is exposed when it decays.

In 1990 Wojnarowicz completed a series of flower paintings, one of which, *He Kept Following Me*, features a large phallic anthurium surrounded by undergrowth [Fig. 2.4]. Also present are silkscreened texts that recount two experiences of cruising; one on the piers from the early 1980s is rapturous and utopian, another from the nadir of the AIDS crisis in 1990 is foreboding and gloomy. Another work in the series, *I Feel a Vague Nausea*, betrays in its title an awareness of the potential association of flowers with repugnant filth and death [Fig. 2.5]. This title is taken from a passage in the essay *In The Shadow of the American Dream*, reproduced in the work, which recounts a car journey on one of Wojnarowicz’s many cross country trips coming to its conclusion: “I’m getting closer to the coast and realize how much I hate arriving at a destination. Transition is always a relief. Destination means death to me.”²⁹¹ Connections between the withering of beautiful flowers and human mortality are also drawn by the photographs lining the bottom of the work which feature a skeleton, a heart x-ray with an arrow superimposed across it and an isolated human brain.

²⁹⁰ Bataille, “The Language of Flowers,” 13.

²⁹¹ Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 62.

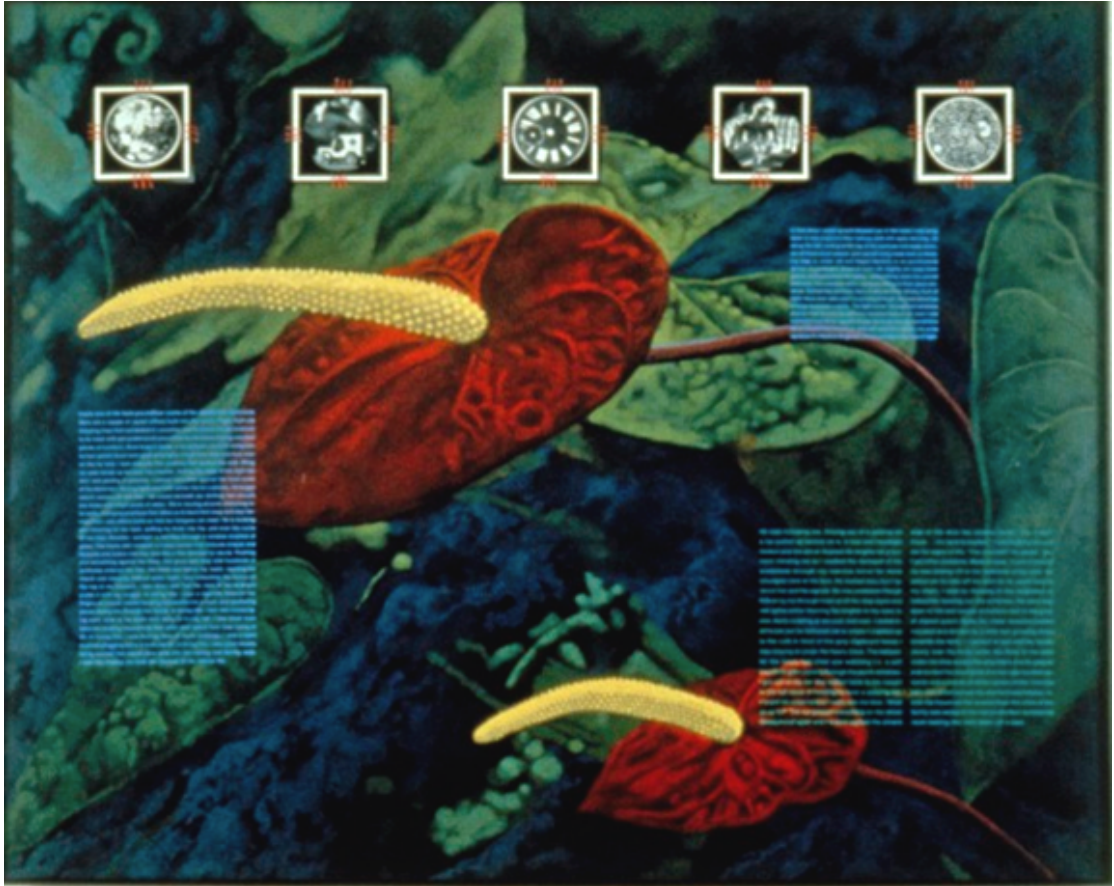


Fig. 2.4: David Wojnarowicz, *He Kept Following Me*, 1990. Black-and-white photographs, acrylic, string and text on board, 48 x 60".



Fig. 2.5: David Wojnarowicz, *I Feel a Vague Nausea*, 1990. Black-and-white photographs, acrylic, string and text on board, 60 x 48".

In her biography of Wojnarowicz, Carr notes his interest in the Decadent movement in French literature that included titles such as Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*.²⁹² Of particular interest to Wojnarowicz was a section of Huysman's *Against Nature* in which the protagonist, Des Esseintes, collects exotic flowers to observe the death and

²⁹² Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 511.

decay in them. He is particularly drawn to plants with scars and tears in them like partially healed wounds. This episode, which comes while the character is mourning his virility as he ages, concludes with Des Esseintes looking at a caladium flower and having, “a sudden vision of the human race tortured by the virus of long past centuries.”²⁹³ The virus in question in Huysman’s novel is syphilis, but Wojnarowicz obviously shared with some of his favourite writers this interest in flowers as symbols of decay and death. The flower paintings share with *Against Nature* the theme of a sexually transmitted disease which compromises virility, seen in the different tone of the two cruising anecdotes. Like Des Esseintes’s thoughts on syphilis, Wojnarowicz’s work – particularly where it focuses on ruin and decay – suggests that HIV/AIDS has potentially apocalyptic implications for humanity.

In his influential study of Bataille, *Against Architecture*, Denis Hollier unpacks in great detail the value of employing Bataille’s antipathy towards the structuring and sublimatory tendency expressed in architecture as a prism for understanding his entire body of work. Sublimation can be defined as the separation of knowledge and the civilising tendency in human life, from sexual pleasure and corporeal experience.²⁹⁴ Bataille’s wholehearted support of *desublimation*, the potentially shattering re-eruption of the sexual, is the principal reason behind the division of surrealism into opposing factions headed by Breton and Bataille.²⁹⁵ A key dimension of Hollier’s argument is the opposition between the atemporal nature of the architectural mausoleum and the formless putrefaction and decay he associates with human and animal flesh, also found in a piece like *Language of Flowers* and exhibited in Wojnarowicz’s (and Des Esseintes’s) interest in plants. With the architectural monument, argues Hollier, “all that disappears is that which was perishable, which remained in time’s power: flesh that rots and its transitory

²⁹³ Joris-Karl Huysman quoted in Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 511.

²⁹⁴ Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1992), 164.

²⁹⁵ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1995), 110 – 111.

colors [...] Architecture retains of man only what death has no hold on.”²⁹⁶ This aversion to the regulated and progressive imperatives of human civilisation that Wojnarowicz expressed with the phrase “pre-invented world” and “clockwork of civilisation,” aversions that I am arguing he shares with Bataille, are most forcefully expressed in his *Elements* series.

The Elements

In addition to his early cow and dinosaur murals the Hudson River Piers had also provided the backdrop for some of the photographs in Wojnarowicz’s *Rimbaud In New York* (1979) series. This engagement with another hero from the Decadent movement was originally published in a small literary journal called *Little Caesar* by the writer Dennis Cooper. In 1985 just as he was beginning to gain recognition as a key figure in the emerging East Village art scene, and had work included in the Whitney Biennial, Wojnarowicz ran into Cooper in New York.²⁹⁷ At this point much of Wojnarowicz’s work was populated by an alternative set of tropes including burning children and sharks covered in deconstructed maps, kissing men and cyclopean robots. Cooper was critical of the turn Wojnarowicz’s more recent work had taken and expressed his concerns; acknowledging this Wojnarowicz admitted that he too was unhappy with his current output. In response to what he felt was the self-indulgent and cosseted nature of much of the East Village scene Wojnarowicz had attempted to imbue his work with an obvious political edge and a confrontational social conscience. This tactic had been unsuccessful and he was now more closely associated with his East Village peers than ever before. After giving this explanation, Cooper recounts, “He said he was going to quit making art, and stormed off.”²⁹⁸ However, rather than give up, he returned, in 1986-87, to the aesthetics of ruin and decay that had animated

²⁹⁶ Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 55.

²⁹⁷ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 275-276.

²⁹⁸ Dennis Cooper quoted in Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 275-276.

his visual art practice since his first experiments on the piers. The political edge and social conscious Wojnarowicz had been seeking was, in fact, present in his works on ruin, decay and decline all along. These acrylic and collage based works could be described as entropic, where entropy signifies the gradual slide into disorder and mess.

Having worked around the combination of ruin and decline in conjunction with the indifference of nature for some time, Wojnarowicz developed the elements series in 1986 as a mural for the Norton Gallery of Art. The show was a success, being extended for eight months, but eventually the murals were destroyed as planned. Wojnarowicz returned to the elements in a series of four paintings *Earth, Wind, Fire* and *Water* completed in 1987.

Against an incongruously serene background of clouds *Wind (for Peter Hujar)* features at its centre a portrait of a screaming baby connected by a thin line flowing through an open window to a paratrooper [Fig. 2.6]. Behind the soldier is a self-portrait of Wojnarowicz who is also dressed in fatigues. Electrical circuitry diagrams skirt the canvas and surround a dinosaur image in the bottom left corner. According to Carr Wojnarowicz modelled these diagrams after what he described as a “nuclear reactor handbook” he found.²⁹⁹ Calling up images of the destructive nuclear wind that would follow an atomic bomb, or meltdown disaster, the circuitry can be paired with the bottom right hand image of a tornado ripping through an urban landscape.³⁰⁰ Both are unrelentingly destructive elemental forces that sweep aside the human created world. Other elements include an image based on Albrecht Dürer’s *Wing of a Blue Roller* (1512), one of Peter Hujar’s favourite artworks, and a vaguely pornographic image of two men next to a classical sculpture.

²⁹⁹ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 368.

³⁰⁰ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 368.

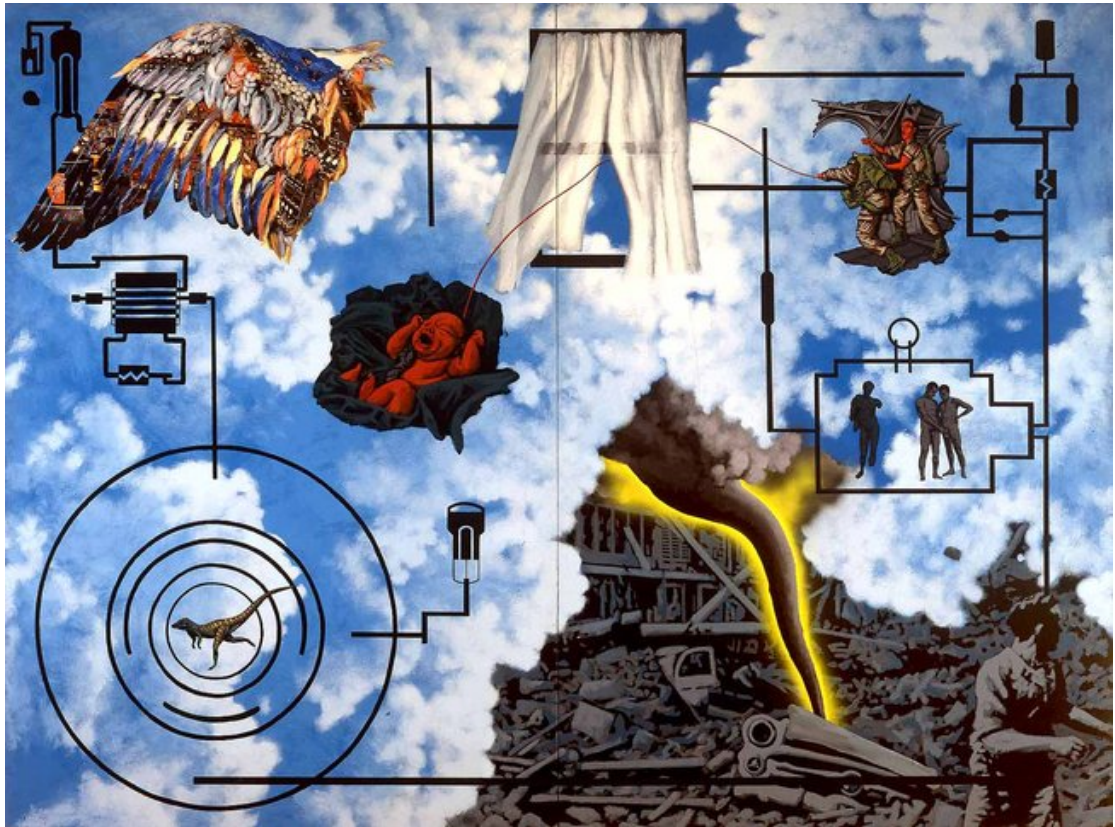


Fig. 2.6: David Wojnarowicz, *Wind (for Peter Hujar)*, 1987. Acrylic and collage on wood, 72 x 96".

Fire is divided roughly into four quadrants, this time wounding and violent forces are signalled by an erupting volcano set against a background of FBI wanted posters [Fig. 2.7]. Additional details in this top left-hand section include a chimpanzee wielding a club, a zombie's hand lighting a match and a neon handgun encircled by a serpent devouring its own tail. This symbol for eternal recurrence and cyclicity suggests the continuity of violence before, during and after human existence as represented by the chimp, human media and technology (the printed posters and neon sign), and the zombie. The geological violence of the volcano seems to dominate, but the quadrant below shows the parched desert ground surrounding the volcano and, in a cave below the surface, the relics of human existence: the head of a snake preserved in a jar and another classical sculpture. This suggests that the very structure of the earth itself is subject to the same destructive

cyclicality, albeit on the longer temporal register of geological time, as the human and animal worlds.



Fig. 2.7: David Wojnarowicz, *Fire*, 1987. Acrylic and collage on masonite, 72 x 96".

Water is a remarkable collage that features more than 20 individual paintings set within a single droplet of water or cell [Fig. 2.8]. These miniatures depict animal life (monkeys, reptiles, amphibians and fish), skulls, seascapes and pornographic images. Another recurring scene within the smaller paintings is of concentric circles, which, it has been suggested, depict the aftermath of pebbles thrown into water.³⁰¹ Several of the scenes inside the droplet/cell show a large ocean-going ship, one of these also contains a foetus sinking beneath the waves, while a much larger version of the same ship dominates the lower left-hand corner of the painting in front of the cell. Wojnarowicz's father, a violent alcoholic whose abusive behaviour prompted him to flee home and begin his perilous life on the streets, had served in the Merchant Navy. "Dad's ship" features in

³⁰¹ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 368.

other works where it functions to link the personal trauma of familial violence and parental neglect with disdain and brutality at a wider socio-political level, for example his 1984 installation at Gracie Mansion Gallery *Untitled (Burning Child)*. In *Water* it forms a pair with the image of a scrawny and bandaged hand dropping a withered flower head through the bars of a prison window set against a snowy exterior in the top right-hand corner. These two images are the most prominent figurations for human civilisation in the composition and suggest isolation and cruelty stemming from a pernicious and overbearing patriarchal presence. Above "Dad's ship" is a large frog with the image of a car crash inset into its body while whole composition is surrounded by the frog's tadpoles or human spermatozoa, an effluence of sperm cells crossing and penetrating its different zones. While the suggestion of pebbles thrown into water is certainly a plausible interpretation of the circular scheme found in several of the miniatures I would suggest, given the other cellular elements in the painting, that an alternative reading of these images would be as biological cells dividing and replicating through cell fission, also known as scissiparity.



Fig. 2.8: David Wojnarowicz, *Water*, 1987. Acrylic, ink, and collage on masonite, 72 x 96".

In his book *Eroticism* Bataille tackles the subject of asexual reproduction. Scissiparity, he argues, reveals a fundamental truth of all reproduction in its counter-intuitive connection with death. As simple organisms grow, he tells us, they eventually reach a state of super-abundance or plethora at which point asexual reproduction begins to take place. The original cell *a* pinches or buds off into two distinct organisms *aa* and *aaa*.³⁰² The excess encountered in the plethora initiates a crisis of sorts in the initial cell as it begins to separate into its two offspring. When scissiparity is complete two discontinuous organisms will exist, but for a moment during the process *aa* and *aaa* are in continuous existence. This development is brought about by the violent excess encountered in plethora, “a turbulent agitation which lays hold of the total being in its continuity,” and is concluded by the violent separation of the two beings as they are

³⁰² Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: Penguin, 2012), 94-95.

wrought into discontinuous existence.³⁰³ Bataille continues his discussion by pointing out the ways in which asexual reproduction illuminates aspects that are less obvious in sexual reproduction, but are nonetheless fundamentally similar.

Both asexual and sexual reproduction originate in a crisis brought about by excess and both lead to the disappearance of the individual. Of scissiparity, Bataille writes, “during the division *a* ceases to be, *a* disappears, *a* dies. It leaves no trace, no corpse, but die it does.”³⁰⁴ In complex organisms death only immediately befalls the sexual being in rare instances, but these are so strikingly significant that orgasm and post-coital exhaustion have been given the common moniker *la petit mort* (little death). In general, he argues, the parents survive the birth of the child but, in actual fact, they have only been granted a temporary reprieve. This stay of execution allows the work of child rearing to be done but the appearance of offspring confirms the eventual disappearance of their parents all the same.³⁰⁵ Furthermore, in creating new offspring who will themselves eventually die, reproductive sexuality could be said to be responsible for making more deaths.³⁰⁶ For Bataille, the similarity between sexual and asexual reproduction in their connection to death is evidence of a force or pressure bearing down upon discontinuous individual beings that would destroy the barriers keeping those individuals apart returning them, in death, to a general continuity.³⁰⁷ The significance of scissiparity is that it brings about a moment or instance in which death and reproduction can be observed taking place at the same time. The rupture of the individual discrete entity in the creation of its offspring results in a moment at which the organism is simultaneously continuous and dying.

³⁰³ Ibid. 96.

³⁰⁴ Ibid. 97.

³⁰⁵ Ibid. 100-101.

³⁰⁶ Adam Phillips, “On a More Impersonal Note,” in Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago, IL & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 114-115.

³⁰⁷ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 101.

The argument advanced by Bataille throughout *Eroticism* is to stress the central position occupied by sexuality and death in our relation as individuals to the social.³⁰⁸ Human civilisation – which in other texts Bataille will write about in terms of homogeneity and reserve in opposition to heterogeneity, limitless expenditure and excess – is constituted by the establishment of boundaries between people and prohibitions placed on behaviours which would threaten those boundaries. These boundaries are of fundamental importance in the establishment of discontinuous individualities that allow the homogenous world of work and reason to thrive. As Bataille puts it in his celebrated single paragraph dictionary entry on the word formless: “*formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form.”³⁰⁹ This is to say, the category formless (another avatar of what is elsewhere called heterogeneity, scatology, excess etc.) not only disrupts the closed circle of meaning-making in its collapse of form, but also that the word itself is the site of an affective event in which its destructive energy brings things down to the level of the big toe, or the roots of a flower wallowing in filth.³¹⁰ It is in this way that the insurgency mounted on understanding by the formless bursts forth in abject matter; in the same paragraph Bataille connects the formless to a spider, an earthworm and spit.³¹¹ The latter example is a member of the same abject family as urine, excrement, spilled blood or shed tears, constituted by being of the body but not in the body. The former two are abhorrent boundary transgressing insects that dwell in this rotten and abject zone.

One of the pleasures of eroticism is the temporary transgression of a taboo in order that it be reinstated more forcefully, acting as a kind of safety valve allowing us to experience the ecstatic pleasure of a continuous existence without boundaries for a brief

³⁰⁸ Colin MacCabe, “Introduction,” in Bataille, *Eroticism*, xi.

³⁰⁹ Bataille, “Formless,” *Visions of Excess*, 31. *Emphasis original.*

³¹⁰ Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 30-31.

³¹¹ Bataille, “Formless,” *Visions of Excess*, 31.

moment.³¹² Indeed, *Eroticism* was a text composed late in Bataille's life and is arguably more conservative in tone than his treatment of the same themes in the 1920s and 1930s. The key difference, I argue, is the decision to assign the erotic definitively to this safety valve role rather than embrace its radically destabilising potential as he had in his pre-war writings. Nonetheless, one strand of continuity in Bataille's deliberately heterogeneous output is undoubtably his attempt to work through a contestation between two opposing forces that can be described as a desire for sovereignty, on the one hand, and a wish for fusion on the other.³¹³ These opposing tendencies can be seen in eroticism with the dual presence of reproduction and death most starkly illuminated in scissiparity.

As Patrick Ffrench has argued, a productive way to understand Bataille's work is as a consistent engagement with different forms of relation understood as "what passes between beings, the movements that traverse individuals and groups."³¹⁴ In addressing this problem, articulated by others as his "obsession" with community and communication,³¹⁵ Bataille would develop a model of the subject defined by its experience of bodily violence and violation. Such threats to bodily coherence could be found in abject bodily effluents, troubling formless matter, or the violations experienced in sacrifice and eroticism. While I discussed sacrifice in detail in chapter one, I would like to stress again here that the body that emerges in Bataille's work is one determined by its exposure and permeability. It is for this reason that Ffrench has discussed Bataille's work in terms of a cut or wound carried out against the reader or spectator.³¹⁶ This overturning of the normative privileging of coherence and legibility is also, for Hollier, central to Bataille's antipathy to architecture, which I have mobilised in relation to Wojnarowicz's interest in

³¹² Stoekl, "Introduction," in Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, x.

³¹³ Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree, *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication* (Albany, NY.: State University of New York Press, 2009), xi.

³¹⁴ Patrick Ffrench, *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* (London: Legenda, 2007), 4.

³¹⁵ See Mitchell and Winfree, *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille*.

³¹⁶ Patrick Ffrench, *The Cut: Reading Bataille's Histoire de l'Oeil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.

ruination and decay above.³¹⁷ Like Ffrench, Hollier has described eroticism as being in continuity with Bataille's earlier work concerning heterogeneous abject matter and sacrifice in that it enacts a wound in a being's coherence and integrity: "the erotic effect can be defined by the loss of what is proper: the simultaneous loss of cleanness in filth and of one's own, proper identity in an expropriating violation."³¹⁸ Clearly, such a conception of the body becomes all the more apposite to our understanding of human relations with the arrival of a viral agent circulating between permeable bodies through erotic contact in the form of HIV/AIDS.

Bataille's hostility to architecture and his exposition of eroticism and embodiment as exposure and violation are part of the same project. Bringing Bataille into concert with post-structuralism, which reveals "a prison in every monument or building,"³¹⁹ Hollier argues, "If prison is the generic form of architecture this is primarily because man's own form is his first prison."³²⁰ In exposing the body as permeable, as a site of cohabitation as much as of autonomy or sovereignty, AIDS was experienced as a violation, but this violation itself exposes the already existing violation that we experience corporeal embodiment, our "first form," as.

For Bataille the formless acts as a wound, a hole in the closed circle of meaning, or the point at which it collapses.³²¹ In this way the formless is an important pre-cursor to Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction the aim of which is the disruption of "the self-identity of a text or concept, the organisation of discourses in the shape of what we assume to be well-formed organic bodies."³²² Significantly, the last manifestation of

³¹⁷ Hollier, *Against Architecture*, ix.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.* 74.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.* x. The implicit reference is to the work of Michel Foucault, in particular Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991).

³²⁰ Hollier, *Against Architecture*, xii.

³²¹ *Ibid.* 31.

³²² Naas, "'One Nation... Indivisible,' 18.

deconstruction – which Derrida argued was not a method of reading but simply *what is*³²³ – was to be developed under the heading of autoimmunity. The strength of this term, once considered by medical science to be an aberration but now thought of as a constituent part of every well-functioning immune system, is that it reveals a self-destructive process of undoing, “inevitably and irreducibly at work more or less everywhere, at the heart of every sovereign identity.”³²⁴ Derrida, as I wrote in the introduction, is explicit on the importance of the HIV pandemic, “this fact of our time that I believe to be absolutely original and indelible,”³²⁵ in providing, “as if it were a painting or a giant movie screen [...] an available, daily, massive *readability*,”³²⁶ to the previously denied incoherence at the heart of discourses of bodily integrity, sovereignty and self-identity.

In Bataille’s erotic novel *Story of the Eye* 1928 the collapse into formlessness of stable meaning, and the self-identity and coherence of objects and bodies, is played out through the play of metaphor and metonymy (contagious association) from roundness to liquidity.³²⁷ The narrative of the story develops through the insertion or ejection of a series of round objects from the vagina of Simone, the main female character, such that the roundness of the objects, their very form, comes to suggest “a threatening transgression of the distinctness and fixity of each object,”³²⁸ a rupture or collapse into formlessness. This collapse takes the form of a liquefaction, which provides a second chain of associations running through the narrative. Where the roundness of objects had signified their (threatened) discreteness, “liquefaction,” Ffrench argues, “transgresses and ruins those limits.”³²⁹

³²³ Ibid. 18.

³²⁴ Ibid. 18.

³²⁵ Derrida, “The Rhetoric of Drugs,” 250.

³²⁶ Ibid. 251. Emphasis original.

³²⁷ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 94.

³²⁸ Ibid. 95.

³²⁹ Ibid. 95. See also Roland Barthes, “The Metaphor of the Eye,” in Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschal (London: Penguin, 2001), 191-126.

In *Water* Wojnarowicz plays with this ability of liquid to suggest contiguity – allowing meaning to flow. The overbearing patriarchal presence of his father’s ship flows into the homoerotic associations of sailors and swimming. Images of fecundity (a foetus, a fish and its eggs) are juxtaposed with those of death: the tadpoles/sperm that transgress the boundaries of the otherwise largely separate elements of the painting take on new meaning when one’s own semen comes to be associated with death and disease.

Wojnarowicz chose not to take an HIV test until the middle of 1988, after the completion of the elements series, but by 1986/1987, when he was working on the *Elements* series, many of his friends and lovers had already tested positive. His mentor and former lover Peter Hujar died in late 1987 and by the time Wojnarowicz tested positive he had fewer than 200 T-cells, meaning he had already crossed the threshold between HIV-infection and “full-blown” AIDS.³³⁰ *Water* brings together his deeply felt enmity and criticisms of western civilisation as a whole and at a fundamental level, which can be seen throughout the series, with immediate political situation of the AIDS crisis and culture wars. Significantly, he often chose to address both structural and immediate political issues through recourse to his own biography.

In his 1985 work *Installation #5* at the Anchorage underneath the Brooklyn Bridge Wojnarowicz exhibited one skeleton that appears to be electrocuting another, a third skeleton eating a baby doll, and a fourth ascending to heaven, all around a family dinner table where Ronald Reagan’s face adorns a cheap bottle of wine. In response the critic Mina Roustayi told Wojnarowicz she thought the piece related to “the global nature of problems like greed, nuclear war, child abuse, and the instinct for self-extinction.”³³¹ He replied that this was a valid interpretation but in reality the piece was inspired by “his childhood and life experience.”³³² It was a tactic he carried over into his response to the

³³⁰ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 391-392.

³³¹ *Ibid.* 287.

³³² *Ibid.* 287.

AIDS crisis and the culture wars, writing in his essay “Postcards from America: X Rays from Hell,” “WHEN I WAS TOLD THAT I’D CONTRACTED THIS VIRUS IT DIDN’T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE THAT I’D CONTRACTED A DISEASED SOCIETY AS WELL.”³³³ The *Postcards* essay is famous for being the source of the controversy in 1988 surrounding the *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* exhibition at Artists Space, New York, where it was included in the catalogue. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) threatened to pull its funding from the show on the basis of the political tone of Wojnarowicz essay; of particular concern was the essays vehement criticisms of Cardinal Joseph O’Connor, the Archbishop of New York. Having been a sexually active teen runaway Wojnarowicz was particularly incensed by the Catholic Church’s refusal to provide safe-sex information and condoms in its shelters, and its lobbying against their availability in public schools.³³⁴ When the NEA’s chairman John Frohnmayer came to inspect the exhibit Wojnarowicz told him:

What is going on here is *not* just an issue that concerns the “art world”; it is not *just* about a bunch of words or images in the “art world” context – it is about the legalized and systemic murder of homosexuals and their legislated silence, it is about the legislated invisibility and silencing of people with AIDS and a denial of the information necessary for those and other people to make informed decisions concerning safety within their sexual activities... I will not personally allow you to step back from your original reasoning for rescinding the grant, which was that my essay and the show had a political rather than artistic tone.³³⁵

In the end the NEA partially reversed its decision and restored the show’s funding but specified that the grant was not to be used to fund the exhibition catalogue. Wojnarowicz considered this a gesture of appeasement towards the far-right and did not attend the show’s opening. He also contacted the dean of Illinois State University’s College of Fine

³³³ Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 114. Caps original.

³³⁴ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 456-458.

³³⁵ David Wojnarowicz quoted in Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 458. Emphasis original.

Arts where his first retrospective, which would be called *Tongues of Flame*, was being planned and asked that the “Postcards...” essay be included in that show’s catalogue.³³⁶

Wojnarowicz’s attitude towards his artistic output could be summarised as one that refused to draw clear lines of demarcation between the artistic and political; personal trauma and institutionalised discrimination, bigotry and neglect; and immediately necessary political changes in the face of the AIDS crisis and a more fundamental critique of the contemporary human centred world. This refusal to accept the separateness of art from politics and social life is regarded within art history as one of the most significant legacies of the historical avant-garde of Bataille’s generation.

Avant-Garde Activism

In his influential book *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1968) Peter Bürger elucidates the importance of Dada and Surrealism in terms of their revolutionary desire to refuse and dismantle the autonomous status of art. Bürger understands art’s autonomy as, “the detachment of art as a special sphere of human activity from the nexus of the praxis of life.”³³⁷ In the eighteenth century, as industrialised production begins, the development of art production is arrested at the stage of artisanal or handicraft production. Bürger argues that this historical development is the precondition for seeing art as something separate from the other elements of life.³³⁸ Simultaneously, another development takes place whereby art ceases to fulfil its role as cult object. Bürger sees this as the function of religious/sacral art, which he notes is also produced as collective craft. When art’s function becomes primarily representational, its reception is still collective, though now it is produced by individual artists. These are developments Bürger sees as taking place in

³³⁶ Ibid. 460.

³³⁷ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, MN.: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 36.

³³⁸ Ibid. 36.

the era of “courtly art.”³³⁹ In the era of bourgeois art, where reception is also individualised in the form of solitary contemplation, the apartness of art from the rest of the practice of life becomes its very function: “The citizen who in everyday life has been reduced to a partial function (means-ends activity) can be discovered in art as ‘human being’. Here, one can unfold the abundance of one’s talents, though with the proviso that this sphere remain strictly separate from the praxis of life.”³⁴⁰ In other words, art’s autonomy helps maintain the capitalist system of economics and labour relations by providing something of a release from it. Bürger also notes that this development is profoundly ideological in the sense that Karl Marx uses that term: the relative separateness of art from the rest of life/capitalism is obscured for what it actually is (a historical development) and becomes essentialised/naturalised as art’s essence.³⁴¹ This in turn helps facilitate the perpetuation of the currently existing social order.

Bürger locates the avant-garde’s most acute radicality in the readymade and its “negation of the category of individual creation.”³⁴² In signing and displaying a mass produced object Marcel Duchamp, it is argued, was exploiting the tension between mass production and autonomous artistic creation. The subsequent acceptance of the readymade as an object worthy of display in a museum, for Bürger, meant that this gesture of provocation had failed. Its repetition by the American neo-avant-garde of the 1960s (chiefly represented in Bürger’s account by Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol) represented an adaptation to the continuation of art’s status as autonomous rather than a critical gesture aimed at its subversion.³⁴³

Benjamin Buchloh has critiqued Bürger on the grounds that his analysis of the relationship between the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde relies, for its most crucial point

³³⁹ Ibid. 47-48.

³⁴⁰ Ibid. 48-49.

³⁴¹ Ibid. 46.

³⁴² Ibid. 51.

³⁴³ Ibid. 52-53.

of distinction, on the belief that the critical gesture of the historical avant-garde was *original* and *genuine* and the work of the neo-avant-garde no more than a debased copy or repetition.³⁴⁴ The concept of originality is fundamentally connected to the idea that the individual subject is the producer of the work of art, an idea that Bürger had himself argued was intimately connected to the notion of the autonomy of art. Buchloh argues that it is in its repetition of avant-garde gestures that the neo-avant-garde realises its critical potential; such repetitions put the idea of the work of art as a complete, autonomous and self-enclosed entity into question.³⁴⁵ In their repetitive structure neo-avant-garde works prohibit the “the perception of an immanent meaning” (emanating from within the self-contained work and identifiable to the individual observer) and confound the traditional modes of aesthetic evaluation that Bürger relies upon, even as he attempts to critique the aesthetics of an autonomous art object as an historically contingent development.³⁴⁶ Instead, Buchloh argues, the meaning and function of neo-avant-garde works is dependent upon what traditional aesthetics would dismiss as outside the frame of aesthetic consideration: “the process of their reception – the audiences dispositions and demands, the cultural legitimation the works are asked to perform, the institutional mediation between demand and legitimation.”³⁴⁷ Put somewhat differently, neo-avant-garde works provoke questions about historically specific audiences, their affective investments, and the mediation of these demands/investments by art as discourse and institution.

Hal Foster draws upon Buchloh’s work and advances an interpretation of the neo-avant-garde as a reconnection with a former or lost mode of practice in order to disconnect from a contemporary mode, “felt to be outmoded, misguided, or otherwise oppressive.”³⁴⁸

³⁴⁴ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of Neo-Avant-Garde,” *October*, Vol. 37 (Summer, 1986), 42.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 48.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 48.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 48.

³⁴⁸ Hal Foster, “What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde,” *October*, Vol. 70 (Autumn, 1994), 7.

In the context of America in the 1960's this strategy took the form of a rejection of the formalist aesthetics privileged in the analysis of abstract expressionism by Clement Greenberg, which was particularly reliant on an investment in the intrinsic autonomy of artworks and their immanent meaning.³⁴⁹ Neo-avant-garde artists were attracted to the historical avant-garde due to the challenge it posed to this formalist model of evaluation.³⁵⁰

Buchloh and Foster's insights are helpful in shifting the focus of art/praxis debates away from solitary contemplation of discrete art objects and towards those areas where art and social life are already understood to encounter one another. However, like Bürger they locate the continuation of avant-garde practices in the institutionally appropriated and commercially successful art of the 1960s.³⁵¹ I would argue that this preference for decoding the criticality of commercially successful and institutionally sanctioned artworks continues in Buchloh and Foster's (and a host of other critics and theorists) analysis of postmodern art in the 1970s and 1980s. As Amelia Jones has asserted, in much of the theoretical writing on postmodernism produced in art history and criticism it "came to be defined again and again in relation to strategies such as appropriation, allegory, pastiche, or more broadly, institutional critique."³⁵² At the same time any discussion of postmodernism within art history/theory in relation to subjectivity, identity, or embodiment was usually foreclosed.³⁵³

Recently, Gavin Grindon has advanced an alternative narrative of the adoption of avant-garde practices in 1960s America away from the institutional and commercial art world. 1960s social movement cultures, particularly those associated with left-anarchist groups, embraced avant-garde tactics in their protest strategies and therefore represent a

³⁴⁹ Ibid. 9.

³⁵⁰ Ibid. 9-10.

³⁵¹ Gavin Grindon, "Poetry Written in Gasoline: Black Mask and Up Against the Wall Motherfucker," *Art History* Vol. 38:1 (February, 2015), 174.

³⁵² Jones, *Body Art*, 29.

³⁵³ Ibid. 29-30.

radical alternative attempt to dismantle the boundaries between art and life.³⁵⁴ The term “social movements,” as it is used here, refers to “large, informal and non-institutional groups of people acting on political and social issues.”³⁵⁵ The associated term “social movement cultures” refers to the belief that such movements are not only important political and social groupings, but sites of cultural and artistic value too.³⁵⁶ Grindon’s argument focuses on the way in which 1960s anarchist groups absorbed avant-garde rhetoric and tactics concerning the autonomy of art and redeployed it, in the form of direct action, against the institutionalisation of the avant-garde by the art world and as an attack on the category of the “artist.”³⁵⁷ He also argues that the particular avant-garde or experimental activist practices adopted by these groups – for example the use of poster art and performance or specific protest techniques like the masked protest – later became much more widely utilised direct action strategies by other social movements to the extent that they became “what protests commonly looked and felt like.”³⁵⁸

Following this trajectory I would certainly include the often ingenious forms of AIDS activist art and protest as part of this lineage of avant-gardist direct action. Particularly note-worthy in this regard are the Political Funerals and Ashes Actions undertaken by ACT UP in 1992 and 1996, in which activists scattered the remains of their loved ones on the White House lawn [Fig. 2.9 & 2.10]. One of the first political funerals to be held was for Wojnarowicz himself and the Ashes Actions were directly inspired by his injunction to “drop my body on the steps of the FDA,” the Food and Drug Administration that was felt to be holding up the development of more effective treatments and generally mismanaging the AIDS crisis [Fig. 2.11 & 2.12].³⁵⁹ The “Postcards from America” essay had also suggested that, instead of perfecting the rituals

³⁵⁴ Grindon, “Poetry Written in Gasoline,” 174.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 205. n. 2.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 205. n. 2.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 173.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 174.

³⁵⁹ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 575-578.

of grief, the friends and lovers of those lost to AIDS take the dead body to Washington in order to “dump their lifeless form on the front steps” of the White House.³⁶⁰ Both actions take Wojnarowicz’s interest in the affective power of the dead and decaying body and utilise it in a performative political gesture in a way that not only blurs the boundaries between art and life but is also aimed at addressing an on going political crisis in the most direct and unapologetic manner.



Fig. 2.9: Ashes Action, Washington D.C., 1996. Photo: actupny.org.

³⁶⁰ Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 122.



Fig. 2.10: Police confront activists carrying the body of Tim Bailey at his political funeral, Washington D.C. 1993. Photo: actupny.org.

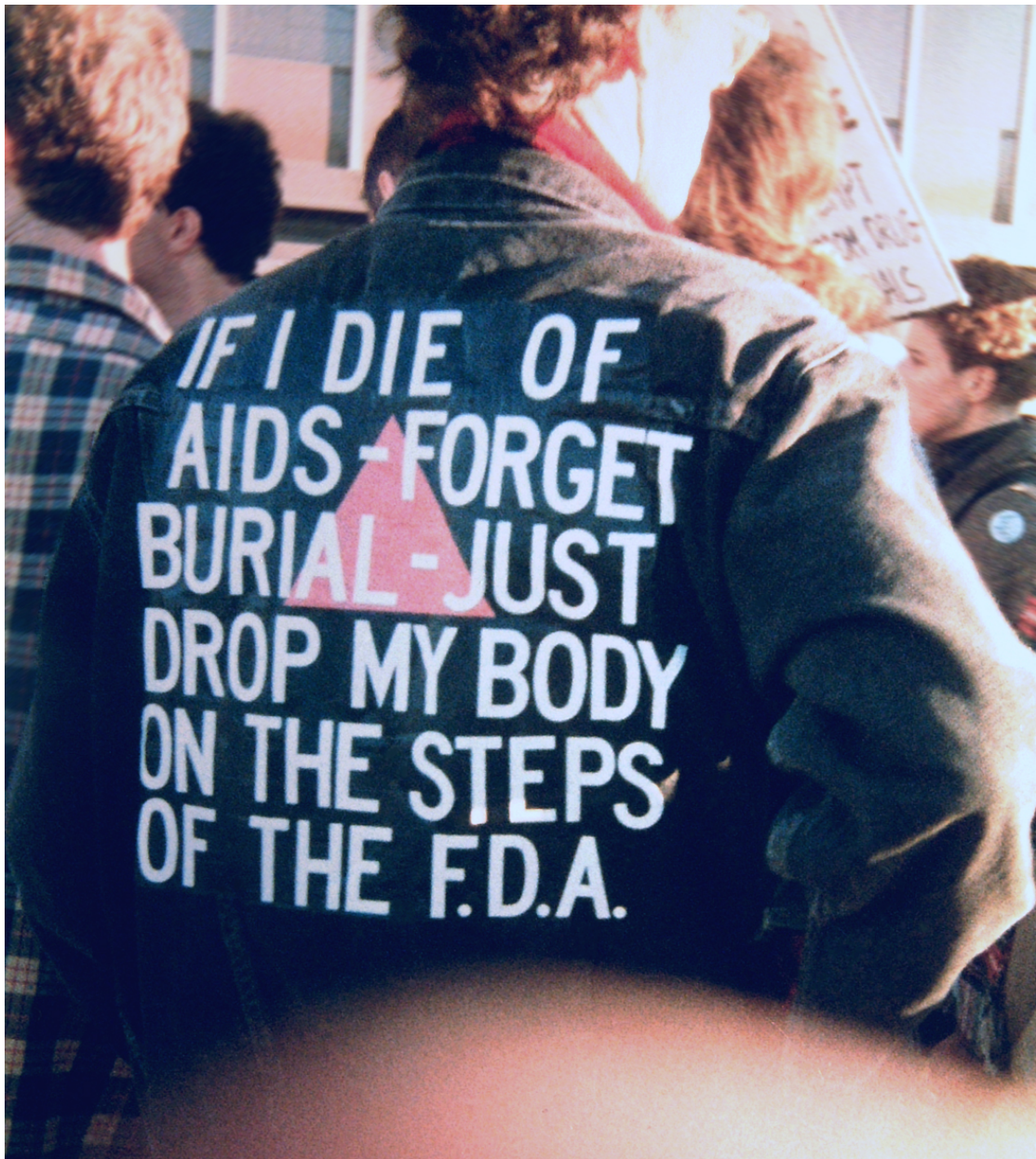


Fig. 2.11: Wojnarowicz at an ACT UP demonstration in 1988. Photo: actupny.org.

Like the groups Grindon identifies – his primary focus is the collective Black Mask/Up Against the Wall Motherfucker – Wojnarowicz often refused to accept any separation of his art from his politics and activism as seen in his response to Frohnmayer and the controversy surrounding the *Witnesses* show quoted above. He is also prolific in his use of techniques inherited from the historical avant-garde like collage and montage as well as the incorporation of mass cultural imagery in his work: many of his earliest pieces utilise and subvert commercial advertisements. In addition, he is also notable for the

surrealist tactic of drawing upon an alternative lineage of outsiders in order to establish his own mythological identity as an artist.³⁶¹ For Wojnarowicz this pantheon includes Genet, Rimbaud and Baudelaire. In his written output Wojnarowicz displayed leanings towards the anarchist/autonomous end of the political spectrum that had embraced the legacy of the avant-garde:

When I was a teenager I had a recurring fantasy that began after my first motorcycle ride. This was shortly after waking up one morning and realizing that the government and god were interchangeable and that most of the people in the landscape of my birth insisted on having one or both determine the form of their lives. I recognized the fact that the landscape was slowly being chewed up and that childhood dreams of autonomy in the form of hermetic exile were quickly becoming less possible.³⁶²

The above quotation displays Wojnarowicz's tendency to use the American landscape as a space within which he could explore his amorphous thoughts on politics. The same approach is also bourn out in the *Elements* series.

³⁶¹ Grindon notes that this is a tactic also employed by Black Mask, Grindon "Poetry Written in Gasoline," 199.

³⁶² Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 40.

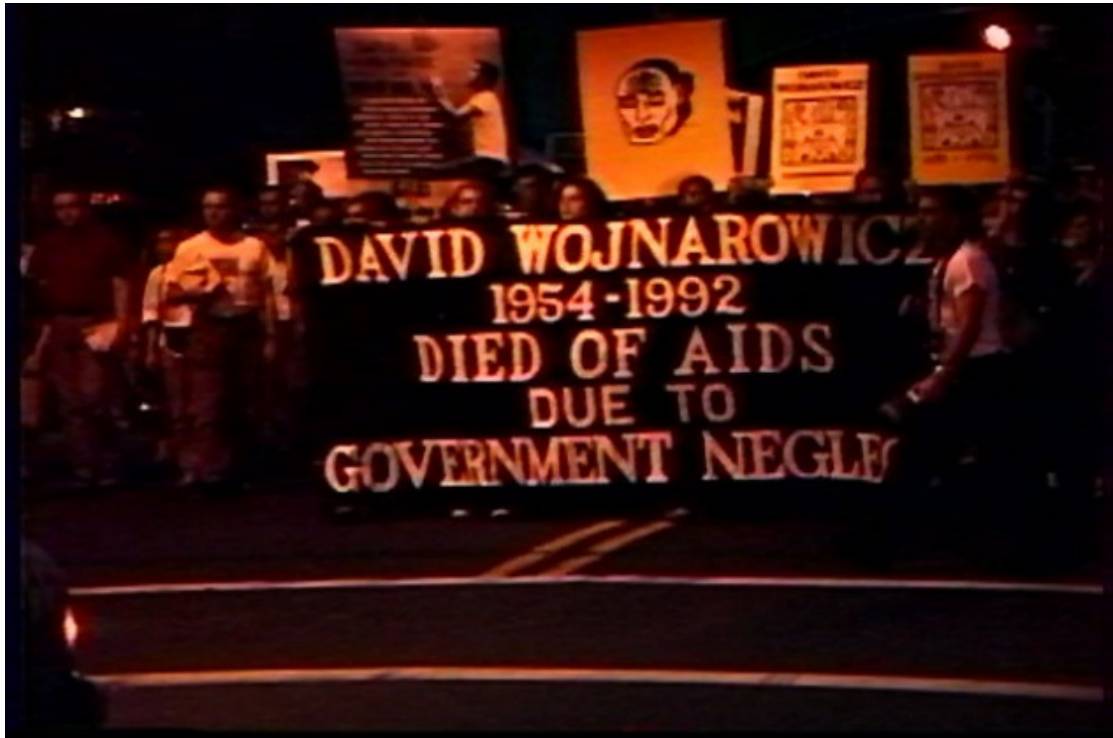


Fig. 2.12: Political funeral for David Wojnarowicz, New York 1992. Photo: actupny.org.

Another quadrantal composition in the *Elements* series, *Earth* is centred on a single pellet of excrement, clearly transposed from the *Dung Beetle* paintings. In the bottom right corner we see a wrecked steam train in front of which hover sprouting seeds [2.13]. Above, a red bridge section and human skeleton ascend to the sky. In the lower right quarter an industrial digger attempts to move what appear to be enormous lumps of coal; fossil fuels, as is well known, are derived from the bodies of long-dead animals and plants as they decompose and are subjected to heat and pressure from the Earth's crust. Above, a cowboy rides a bucking bull while a Native American doll is progressively submerged by earth. In the remaining section ants traverse a plain of scorched ground while a human brain bursts out of a small planet Earth. The composition is divided into four by structures resembling roots that emanate from the central dung pellet. As noted above, for Bataille the roots of flowers and plants were a particularly potent allegory for the buried, abject or rotten aspects of life masked by elevated beauty.³⁶³ These roots together with the

³⁶³ Bataille, "Language of Flowers," *Visions of excess*, pp. 10-14.

scorched earth, marauding insects and disappearing elements of western and indigenous society, appear to link *Earth* more closely to *Fire* and *Wind* as well as to the earlier *Crash* and the dung beetle pictures [Fig. 2.14] than to the tangential concerns of *Water* discussed above. The quasi-environmentalist or *rotten* aesthetic of these paintings should be understood as part and parcel of Wojnarowicz's political intervention in the burgeoning AIDS crisis alongside his more explicit engagements with these issues in his written essays and photo-textual works (e.g. *Untitled [One Day This Kid...]*, 1990 or *Untitled [Hujar Dead]*, 1988-89) due to the anger expressed in this rottenness.



Fig. 2.13: David Wojnarowicz, *Earth*, 1987. Acrylic and collage on masonite, 72 x96”.

Anger is the principal emotion associated with Wojnarowicz's involvement in AIDS activism – his unashamedly vitriolic attacks on complacent or homophobic politicians and institutions acted as a clarion call to many – and is also often one of principal affect associated with the movement as a whole. For example the title of Carr's

recent biography of Wojnarowicz adapted from one of his video works *Fire in the Belly* can be compared with *United in Anger* the recent documentary film chronicling the history of ACT UP by Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard. Anger is also an emotion associated, for Bataille and for a number of nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropologists, with the human corpse and decomposition.



Fig. 2.14: David Wojnarowicz, *Dung Beetles*, 1986. Acrylic, spray paint, and collage on masonite, 48 x 72”.

Decomposition, Anger and Activism

In another section of *Eroticism* Bataille argues that the horror experienced in our confrontation with death is not only the result of our fear of annihilation, but also a product of our anxiety surrounding the decomposition which returns the material body of the deceased back into the general continuity of organic life. The physical revulsion provoked by a corpse is, Bataille argues, the result of the excessive abundance of new life

in the form of insects and microbes present in the decaying human body.³⁶⁴ The disgust and fear we experience in this confrontation also exposes our shame in relation to our own origins in the continuity found in reproduction, to which we are returned by death and decay. Bataille describes the horror of the expropriation of the individual body, the literal dissolving of its boundaries, in the most evocative terms:

That nauseous, rank and heaving matter, frightful to look upon, a ferment of life, seething with worms, grubs and eggs, is at the bottom of the decisive reactions we call nausea, disgust or repugnance [...] death will proclaim my return to seething life. Hence I can anticipate and live in expectation of that multiple putrescence that anticipates its sickening triumph in my person.³⁶⁵

This passage graphically communicates the revulsion experienced upon the realisation that the human body is not impermeable and sealed off from other life forms, but can, in fact, harbour all sorts of invading organisms which transgress its boundaries. The aversion to this aspect of the material human body would, as noted above, take on new contours with the spread of the HIV virus and the festering prejudices that it unleashed. In addition, the affective power of decomposition was an arena explored by some of Wojnarowicz's favourite writers. The initial genesis of the flower series he was to produce in 1990, which I discussed above, can be traced to notes towards a series of photo-textual works called *Fleurs du Mal* after the collection of poems by Baudelaire.³⁶⁶ One of the most notorious poems in *The Flowers of Evil* is titled *Une Charogne* (meaning a carcass or a corpse) and contains a parody of Romantic poetry in which a couple out on an afternoon stroll come across the carcass of a dead cow, a grotesquely sexualised description of which replaces the expected meditation upon a flower:

Her legs were spread out like a lecherous whore,
Sweating out poisonous fumes,

³⁶⁴ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 56.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 56-57.

³⁶⁶ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 475.

Who opened in slick invitational style
 Her stinking and festering womb.

The sun on this rottenness focused its rays
 To cook the cadaver till done,
 And render to Nature a hundredfold gift
 Of all she'd united in one.

The poem's last stanza reinforces the inevitable fall into decay and corruption in language that anticipates Bataille's descriptions of the decomposition of flowers:

—And you, in your turn, will be rotten as this:
 Horrible, filthy, undone,
 O sun of my nature and star of my eyes,
 My passion, my angel in one!³⁶⁷

Wojnarowicz's work from this period, which I have been describing as inspired by an aesthetics of rottenness or decay, is evidently engaged in exposing the universal and inevitable nature of decay and its effect on the forms of human life and civilisation, animal and plant matter, geological and architectural structures in an attempt to level the playing field. That is, as a cry of protest against the prevailing political rhetoric ascribing this corrupted and decaying status only to specific maligned social groups, in favour of a worldview that assigns this ailing and decayed status to the very heart of contemporary American culture. In addition, Wojnarowicz's utilisation of repellent decomposition is

³⁶⁷ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 59-61. It is worth noting that both Wojnarowicz and Ron Athey do not replicate the misogyny evident in Baudelaire's poem or Bataille's work. On Bataille's gender politics see Judith Surkis, "No Fun and Games Until Someone Loses an Eye: Transgression and Masculinity in Bataille and Foucault," *Diacritics*, Vol. 26:2 (Summer, 1996), pp. 18-30.

motivated by an activist impulse in which anger is the most privileged affect. In this way he is employing another aspect of our relation to death and decay as it is interpreted by Bataille: namely, that in their encounter with the decomposing corpse the living perceive a hatred projected towards them by the dead.³⁶⁸

Here, Bataille is drawing upon the work of the sociologist/anthropologist Emile Durkheim, who was himself working through the findings of other anthropologists on the indigenous cultures of Australia and North America, and who also notes the initial terror and repulsion inspired by the corpse.³⁶⁹ For Durkheim the corpse was one of many sacred objects; these could either be pure and benevolent, inspiring harmony and positive feeling, or impure, negative, and productive of distress and disorder. The shared sacred nature of these seemingly diametrically opposed objects is the result of their mutual status as untouchable, out of circulation and set apart from everyday profane life.³⁷⁰ Furthermore, sacred objects are capable of transposition from the impure realm to the pure realm of sacredness; in this way the corpse is transformed into a venerated relic.³⁷¹ For Bataille, this change is symbolised by the emergence of the skeleton, the pure white bones signifying the successful completion of mourning rites and the appeasement of the formally angry dead by the living.³⁷² As I will discuss below we can detect something of this progression taking place in Wojnarowicz's work with the increasing shift to monochromatic photo-textual pieces like *Untitled (When I Put My Hands On Your Body)* of 1990. For the time being I would like to stay with the topic of decomposition which, Durkheim argues, is so troubling because (like all sacred objects, forces or beings) it is a projection or objectification of the emotional state of the group or community.³⁷³

³⁶⁸ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 56.

³⁶⁹ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 305.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 304-306.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.* 305.

³⁷² Bataille, *Eroticism*, 56.

³⁷³ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 307.

According to Durkheim when a human community encounters circumstances that cause it sadness, anguish or irritation there is a compulsion on the part of the members of that community to bear witness to these negative affective states. This usually takes the form of expressive acts: “something like a duty to weep, wail, and inflict wounds on themselves or others.”³⁷⁴ It is through these expressive collective acts and what Durkheim calls “the moral communion they express” that energy and confidence is restored to the group; this mitigates the effect of the unfortunate events and “enables the group to recover itself.”³⁷⁵ In other words, the intense collective affective states brought on by adverse circumstances are essential to the maintenance of the group and its endurance in the face of anguish. In a similar way, he notes, after the mourning process is complete the living no longer perceive the spirit of the dead person as angry or vengeful but as a protective force because the mourning process itself has assuaged their grief and distress.³⁷⁶ Mourning rites, as examples of collective affect, correspond to Durkheim’s conception of the universal function of religion in that they strengthen the relational bonds between individuals and help humankind avoid a state of impulsive individualistic existence.³⁷⁷

This is view of society as essentially harmonious is, of course, problematic in the context of the diversity of the United States in the late twentieth century and the divisive culture wars. Durkheim himself had for a time argued that modern liberal societies had few beliefs that were held sufficiently collectively and strongly to assume a religious or sacred character. However, over time he revised this position and claimed that many social institutions and beliefs in his own time exhibited qualities he had associated with the sacred. Key to the adoption of this new position was his analysis of the Dreyfus Affair, which rocked France at the end of the nineteenth century. The division of French society into pro- and anti- Dreyfusards, based on their support of a falsely convicted and

³⁷⁴ Ibid. 307.

³⁷⁵ Ibid. 307.

³⁷⁶ Ibid. 308.

³⁷⁷ Durkheim argues that “Beliefs express this life in terms of representations; rites organize it and regulate its functioning.” Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 309.

imprisoned Jewish army captain or his opponents, had produced a situation analogous to the effervescent emotional contagion Durkheim had described in his sociology of religion in which, as Mark Cladis puts it, “people took to the streets as flags were waved, creeds professed, ideals renewed.”³⁷⁸ The beliefs affirmed by the affair, with the eventual acquittal of Alfred Dreyfus in 1906, were those of a social liberalism based on the dignity and rights of the individual as the foundation of the community.³⁷⁹

A prominent strand of AIDS activism – brought into being, like the events surrounding the Dreyfus affair, by the collective effervescence perpetuated by a crisis – did adopt a similar liberal rhetoric of individual dignity, rights and action. However, as scholars such as Lee Edelman have persuasively argued, such rhetoric, quite apart from the political intent motivating it, relies on an ideology of the subject as self-identical, autonomous, agential, and responsible in its social engagement as opposed to narcissistic, passive and hedonistic. It therefore replicates the phobic opposition that constructs the gay community as “murderous in its attachment to ‘narcissistic’ gratification.”³⁸⁰ In this way the language of political activism can easily replicate a conventional morality and vision of politics as ascetically divorced from the body and its pleasures.³⁸¹ While the actual content of Durkheim’s sacred modern beliefs (liberal individualism) is certainly problematic in the context of the HIV/AIDS crisis his attention to the affective and bodily dimensions of political engagement are of paramount importance. Furthermore, it is these aspects of Durkheimian thought which were to inspire Bataille.

³⁷⁸ Mark S. Cladis, “Introduction,” in Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, xv.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.* xv.

³⁸⁰ Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994), 107.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.* 115.

Affect

Between 1937 and 1939 Bataille was involved in an intellectual organisation known as The College of Sociology, which was inspired by the Durkheimian tradition and dedicated to the sociology of the sacred. The college, Hollier notes, was interested in responding to the symbolic rather than economic causes of social breakdown and the rise of fascism.³⁸² To this end Bataille sought to understand the aesthetic seductiveness of fascism and its affective underpinnings in line with his theory of heterogeneity, which, as argued above, often asserts the primary importance of waste, decay and an affective response of disgust and repulsion.

For Bataille, political power can be understood in line with Durkheim's theory of the sacred: as an operative mode of the separation of the proper, clean or pure from the improper, dirty or impure.³⁸³ Like Durkheim's theory of the noble and ignoble forms of the sacred, eliciting responses of attraction or repulsion but both sacred in their position out of general circulation and capable of undergoing contagious reversal (such that the ignoble sacred becomes noble, the vengeful spirit a protective one etc.), Bataille's theory of political power implies a valorising or sacralising of the excluded term. In this way the separation of noble (clean) and ignoble (dirty) in relation to politics and social structures very much follows the logic of sacrifice that Bataille had advanced earlier in the 1920s and 1930s. I discussed sacrifice in greater detail in the previous chapter in relation to the work of Ron Athey; here, however, I would recall that Bataille's model of sacrifice is one in which the space between the sacrificer and his victim effectively collapses through identification. The fascist model of power does not allow for this erotic identification or sacralisation of that which it excludes from the realm of the pure and noble and is,

³⁸² Denis Hollier, "On Equivocation (Between Literature and Politics)," trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October*, Vol. 55 (Winter, 1990), 7.

³⁸³ *Ibid.* 13.

therefore, entirely exclusionary and aggressive.³⁸⁴ As Hollier notes, “the fascist appropriation of the social body begins with an ethics and gymnastics of the clean body”³⁸⁵ while in contrast, “Bataille’s erotics is a celebration of the prefix *ex* in words like excess, existence, excrement, etc.”³⁸⁶ Bataille’s vision of an affective politics of counter-fascism, therefore, acknowledges its own desirous implication in that which it rejects and recognises the affective seductiveness of fascist spectacle.³⁸⁷

Regardless of the actual forms that Bataille envisaged this counter-fascist politics taking (it is worth noting that he later came to regret his 1933 essay “The Psychological Structure of Fascism”)³⁸⁸ what is important for our purposes here is his attention to the formation of social structures and political models along affective lines of attraction and repulsion emanating, in the first instance, from the human body. Among the first examples of the heterogeneous (those things which are excluded from homogeneous everyday or instrumentalised life, of which sacred things form a part) Bataille lists in his essay on fascism are “the waste products of the human body and certain analogous matter (trash, vermin, etc.)”³⁸⁹ On the same sliding scale of heterogeneity he includes the inassimilable processes of the unconscious, social forms like mobs or the underclass and the emotional states that animate them such as violence, delirium or excess.³⁹⁰ Also included are certain inert forms that are seen to be analogous with these forces in that they break the laws of social homogeneity. The example he uses in this instance is, “the violent and excessive nature of a decomposing body.”³⁹¹

In their introduction to contemporary affect theory Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, when attempting to give a momentary coherence to this intentionally elusive

³⁸⁴ Ibid. 15.

³⁸⁵ Ibid. 13.

³⁸⁶ Ibid. 13.

³⁸⁷ Ibid. 16, n. 28.

³⁸⁸ Ibid. 4, n. 2.

³⁸⁹ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” pp. 137-160, 142.

³⁹⁰ Ibid. 142.

³⁹¹ Ibid. 142.

concept, settle on a very similar set of concerns to those which occupied Durkheim and Bataille. Seigworth and Gregg define affect as being, “in many ways synonymous with *force or forces of encounter*.”³⁹² Put somewhat differently affect is concerned with the body and its relation to other bodies (human, non-human, animate and inanimate) in the world: “affect is born in *in-between-ness* and resides as accumulative *beside-ness*.”³⁹³ As they enumerate the various forms that affect theory takes Seigworth and Gregg identify a strand that is centrally concerned with critical theories of emotions or feelings, these depart from a view of emotions as pure psychic interior, to embrace emotions as both relational and embodied and to this end often investigate, “atmospheres of sociality, crowd behaviours, contagions of feeling, matters of belonging.”³⁹⁴ In addition to this shared concern with emotional contagion, or the embodied and relational aspects of emotions, Ben Highmore, in his essay in the same volume, employs a Bataillian category to explain how affect theory departs from more traditional models scholarly engagement.

Tracing the history of modern aesthetics to its origins in the work of the eighteenth century philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, Highmore notes that aesthetics was conceived as a philosophical engagement with sensory perception and thus as a corrective to western philosophy’s traditional bias towards the logical and cognitive faculties.³⁹⁵ “Aesthetics,” he writes, “in its initial impetus, is primarily concerned with material experiences, with the way the sensual world greets the sensate body, and with the affective forces that are generated in such meetings.”³⁹⁶ Yet, in the time since, aesthetics has largely become a narrower discourse about fine art. For philosophers like Immanuel Kant, Highmore argues, nature, or the material everyday world, is always the starting point for

³⁹² Melissa Gregg & Gregory J. Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in Melissa Gregg & Gregory J. Seigworth (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC. & London: Duke University Press, 2010), (pp. 1-28) 2.

³⁹³ *Ibid.* 2.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 8.

³⁹⁵ Ben Highmore, “Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food and Social Aesthetics,” in Melissa Gregg & Gregory J. Seigworth (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC. & London: Duke University Press, 2010), 121.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 121.

the consideration of aesthetic sensual experience but is usually abandoned in favour of the consideration of works of art; these concretise aesthetic experience in a form that allows resolution and judgement.³⁹⁷ This prompts Highmore to argue that, “aesthetic satisfaction (in its dominant mode) is satisfaction in the end form of a process, rather than the messy *informe* of the ongoing-ness of process.”³⁹⁸ Contemporary affect theory, in contrast to this model of aesthetics, turns its attention towards the pleasures and discomforts of the formlessness (*informe*) of unresolved process that affective experience represents. Bataille was acutely aware of philosophy’s preference for discrete objects facilitating stable judgement. In his dictionary article on the word formless he writes, “for academic men to be happy the universe would have to *take shape*. All of philosophy has no other goal.”³⁹⁹ The *informe*, in contrast, operates on the level of affect and on going process.⁴⁰⁰

As I wrote in the introduction, Bataille’s notion of the *informe* has been used by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois to reassess modernist art criticism. However, their use of Bataille omits the importance of the body and sexuality in his work. For example, their use of the term ‘pulse’ to integrate temporality and the material body into their revised conception of modernism conspicuously avoids any depiction of the sexual body.⁴⁰¹ Krauss and Bois also use the term “entropy” which they define as “meaning the constant and irreversible degradation that leads to a continually increasing state of disorder and nondifferentiation within matter,” to cover Bataille’s interest in “rot and waste [...] the decomposition of everything, which finds expression in almost every one of his texts.”⁴⁰² Bois credits Giambattista Piranesi, the eighteenth century Italian artist famous for his romanticised etchings of the ruins of ancient Rome, as “the first entropic artist,” in a lineage which is renewed in the 1960s with the land art of Robert Smithson. Yet Bois’s

³⁹⁷ Ibid. 123.

³⁹⁸ Ibid. 123.

³⁹⁹ Bataille, “Formless,” *Visions of Excess*, 31. My emphasis.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid. 31.

⁴⁰¹ Yve-Alain Bois, “The Use-Value of ‘Formless,’” 32.

⁴⁰² Ibid. 34 & 37.

account fails to mention the socio-political context of such work in either the romantic vision of history or the burgeoning environmental movement in the 1960s.

Elsewhere Krauss draws attention to the social underpinnings and continuously operative nature of the *informe*. In the course of her critique of the thematics of abjection in contemporary art and criticism Krauss calls for a rethinking of abjection apart from the objects of disgust, whilst simultaneously recognising that Bataille does, of course, spend a great deal of time enumerating these objects.⁴⁰³ Instead, Krauss calls for a thinking of *informe* as a process of alteration,

[I]n which there are no essentialized or fixed terms, but only energies within a force field, energies that, for example, operate on the very words that mark the poles of that field in such a way as to make them incapable of holding fast the terms of any opposition.⁴⁰⁴

Here, Krauss is drawing upon the work of Hollier who has also stressed the importance of conceptualising the *informe* as “an explosion of affective potential”⁴⁰⁵ rather than an expression of any particular settled meaning. Krauss critiques abject art and the way in which much of it has been appropriated in art criticism as an inadequate focus on thematics that undermines the (in her view) much more radical and productive aspects of the *informe* as the waste product of the system of meaning making itself.⁴⁰⁶ The strand of thought that Krauss is criticising here is one that aligns the *informe* with Julia Kristeva’s use of the term abjection in *Powers of Horror* where bodily disgust and excremental substances are the representational trace of the painful separation from the mother.⁴⁰⁷ The various manifestations of the abject in contemporary art are cast, she argues, as numerous forms of the wound because, “it is this character of being wounded,

⁴⁰³ Rosalind Krauss, “‘Informe’ without Conclusion,” *October*, Vol. 78 (Autumn, 1996), 98.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 98-99.

⁴⁰⁵ Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 30.

⁴⁰⁶ Krauss, “‘Informe’ without Conclusion,” 98.

⁴⁰⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.

victimized, traumatized, marginalized, that is seen as what is in play within this domain.”⁴⁰⁸

Krauss is perhaps correct to caution against the simplistic linking of social and bodily abjection and a rhetoric of victimisation, and propose instead a more open-ended operational view of the *informe* as a process which disrupts the stability of meaning in the service of, as she puts it, “opening up the very category of the ‘normal’ from within.”⁴⁰⁹ However, her account attempts to wish away the body and its particular importance in generating the affects that Bataille identified as puncturing the closed circle of meaning, or, to paraphrase Highmore, the satisfaction of resolved process and judgement, that the *informe* represents.⁴¹⁰ In addition, Patrick Ffrench has argued that such readings of Bataille’s work – as a meditation on a tension or negation internal to aesthetics, dialectically orientated towards the emergence of a new conception of aesthetics – while productive, do not give enough weight to the sociological (affective) inspiration or political urgency of Bataille’s work in the 1930s.⁴¹¹ It is precisely these aspects of Bataille’s writing; its continuous focus on the body as a site of affective potential, from essays like “The Big Toe” in the 1920s to works like *Eroticism* in the 1950s; its interest in the experience of human connection in erotic, political and religious scenarios; and its application of these insights to the experience of art, as well as political and social engagement; that make it a valuable tool when thinking about the art and politics of the AIDS epidemic.

Deborah Gould has argued that affect is a key term in understanding non-institutional forms of political engagement as evidenced by the very terms we use to

⁴⁰⁸ Krauss, “‘Informe’ without Conclusion,” 92-93.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 103.

⁴¹⁰ In addition, I would note that the two artists Krauss selects as coming closer to this open ended “operational” deployment of the *informe*, Cindy Sherman and Mike Kelly, consistently utilise bodily abjection and its affective power in their negotiations of this terrain. Krauss, “‘Informe’ without conclusion,” especially 101-105.

⁴¹¹ Ffrench, *After Bataille*, 26.

discuss them. “The *movement* in ‘social movements,’” she writes, “gestures towards the realm of affect; bodily intensities; emotions, feelings, and passions; and towards uprising.”⁴¹² Social movements and activist groups, Gould argues, play an important role in channelling and shaping affective states into politically efficacious actions but this necessitates legitimising certain affects while suppressing and even denying others.⁴¹³ In what remains of this chapter I will focus on the aspects of Wojnarowicz’s art that are more difficult to integrate into the AIDS activist project. A deep-seated negativity and pessimism about the future, which can be seen in the *Elements* series and in his earlier work, was compounded by an overwhelming tide of loss and grief as the crisis wore on unabated.

The Political Funerals and Ashes Actions undertaken by AIDS activists, which I discussed above, are also the result of this gradual gnawing away of resilient hope and vitality in the movement in the face of unendurable numbers of deaths and, at that stage, very little medical or political progress. Douglas Crimp draws attention to the importance of camp humour in ACT UP’s tactics in that it helped activists “maintain our exuberant sense of life while every day coping with disease and death.”⁴¹⁴ He also claims that humour has “defended us against the pessimism endemic to other left movements, from which we have otherwise taken so much.”⁴¹⁵ While this is certainly true it is also obvious that exuberant humour is difficult to maintain indefinitely in the face of the death of multiple lovers, friends and fellow activists. While anger, then, may be the affect most commonly associated with protest movements it is important to stress that it exists in connection to other affects like humour, grief and pessimism. These affects, like bodies in collective protest, exist in contiguity with one another.

⁴¹² Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago, IL. & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3. Emphasis original.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.* 28.

⁴¹⁴ Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics*, 20.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.* 20.

Bataille's interest in bodily affect in conjunction with direct political engagement represents an important and neglected strand of the avant-garde legacy. For, at least as far as the academic discipline of art history is concerned, discussion of the repercussions of the revolutionary art of Bataille's generation has too often taken the form of debate around the capacity for institutional critique of artworks already firmly ensconced within the art institution.

As I have argued above, the formless can be considered an important precursor to Derridian deconstruction, which, as I also noted, should be considered as an operative force in the world rather than simply a methodology. Derrida explains the virtue of adopting autoimmunity, a trope from the medical and biological sciences, as the last incarnation of deconstruction by saying that it allows us to consider "all these processes of, so to speak, normal or normative perversion."⁴¹⁶ In addition, autoimmunity allows us to consider nature and life, "before any opposition between life (bios or zōē) and its others (spirit, culture, the symbolic, the spectre, or death)"⁴¹⁷ In other words, it is the supposed naturalness or bodily nature of autoimmunity that makes it such a useful term for discussing the operative nature of deconstruction throughout the world. One of the aims of this chapter has been to extend this insight to Bataille's use of the formless. The strength of this body of work, when considering the art and politics of the AIDS crisis, is its immediate corporeal associations in conjunction with its attendant insights into art, politics, affect, sexuality and community.

⁴¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 109-110.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.* 109.

Affect and AIDS

Crimp has charted the shifting and complicated interplay between emotions and activism throughout the AIDS epidemic and in doing so has become a pioneer of queer theory. Beginning with the ground-breaking special issue of *October on AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* in 1987, Crimp advocated an interventionist and activist art epitomised by the use of graphic posters or video pieces which spread safer sex and drug use information in defiance of political prudishness and inaction, or attempted to counter misinformation circulating in the mainstream media [Fig. 2.15-2.16]. Such artworks emerged directly from AIDS activism and were an integral part of its strategy of non-violent direct action. The very directness of these works, Crimp argued, “demands a total reevaluation of the nature and purpose of cultural practices in conjunction with an understanding of the political goals of AIDS activism.”⁴¹⁸

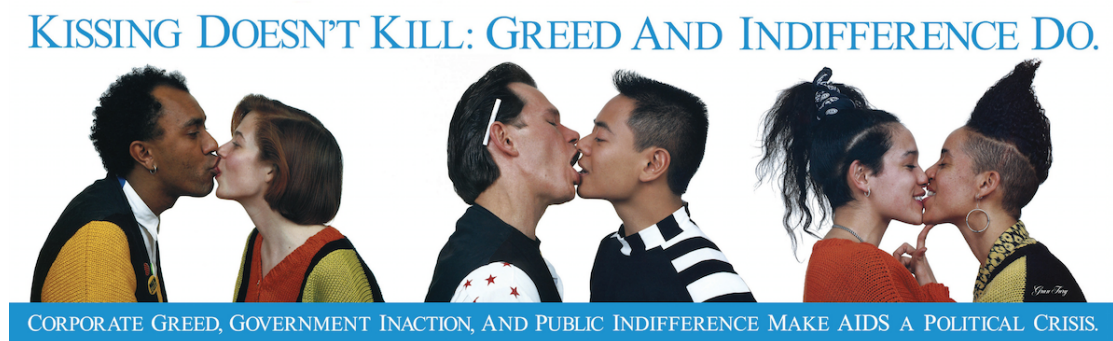


Fig. 2.15: Poster to be displayed on public transport by the collective Gran Fury, a chapter of ACT UP, 1988-89.

⁴¹⁸ Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 39.



Fig. 2.16: Demonstration poster by the collective Gran Fury, a chapter of ACT UP, 1988-89.

In the same essay Crimp is critical of the withdrawn stance of aesthetic idealism that had up until then dominated the art world's very limited response to the AIDS crisis. This mournful and disengaged position was heavily invested in the idea that art was unable to make any practical contribution to dealing with the crisis; that art, in its timelessness, transcended the everyday world of politics and human mortality; and that the most useful thing that art could do to combat suffering was make use of its status as a commodity through fundraising.⁴¹⁹ Here, as is the case elsewhere in his early writings on AIDS, Crimp is critical of the tendency of elegiac artworks focused on personal illness or loss (or, perhaps more accurately, the way in which these tend to be interpreted) to remain "safely within the boundaries of their private tragedies."⁴²⁰ Such artworks, he argues, do nothing to engage with the political mismanagement and prejudice that has exacerbated

⁴¹⁹ Ibid. 31.

⁴²⁰ Ibid. 91.

the crisis.⁴²¹ As I have argued above it is productive to read much of Wojnarowicz's practice, even those pieces which could be viewed as not explicitly engaged with the AIDS crisis such as the *Elements* series, as scathing indictments of American society through their mobilisation of ruin and decay. Furthermore, in addition to his personal activism and powerful memoirs he also produced more explicit visual art interventions in the politics of the AIDS crisis like his contribution to *Silence=Death* a 1989 film by Rosa von Praunheim and other artists and AIDS activists. However, towards the end of the 1980s he did begin to produce the sort of elegiac works that Crimp finds problematic.

It should be noted that Crimp later stated that he had “not intended to be either pre- or proscriptive about the form or genre of artwork about AIDS.”⁴²² His initial polemic had been motivated in part by the desire to counter the repudiation of avowedly political and activist art as insufficiently transcendent to be worthy of the name. In this sense Crimp's work on art and AIDS is an extension of the critique of traditional aesthetics and institutions that he, along with many others, had been elaborating for much of the 1970s. As he puts it: “the contingency of political investment is the necessary condition of all art, one that traditional idealist notions of art [...] work to conceal.”⁴²³ In addition, Crimp recognised that it was possible to misinterpret his polemic as essentialising activism, by interpreting his writing as making it clear which forms of artistic response were political and which were not.⁴²⁴

Furthermore, Crimp acknowledged the difficulty of maintaining – even within AIDS activist organisations – the opposition between a hopeful and interventionist activism and mournful elegiac responses. Such responses became all the more inevitable as the AIDS crisis wore on and activists were overwhelmed by the enormity and persistence of successive waves of deaths. He has also always maintained that the loss

⁴²¹ Ibid. 91.

⁴²² Ibid. 24.

⁴²³ Ibid. 25.

⁴²⁴ Ibid. 26.

encountered by gay men in the AIDS crisis was not only the loss of many friends and loved ones but also the loss of pre-AIDS sexual culture.⁴²⁵ Gay sexual culture, Crimp argues, represents a genuine ethical alternative to conventional moralism in its abandonment of an identifiable ground of pre-constituted rules.⁴²⁶ The strength and resilience of gay culture and AIDS activism, in countering social injustice and prejudice and simultaneously giving care and support to the sick and dying, while also mourning their losses, attests to the vitality of gay life rather than its repudiation.⁴²⁷

Wojnarowicz was also always adamant in attesting to the value and excitement of gay promiscuity; he had initially planned his contribution to the *Silence=Death* film to be a celebration of cruising, another culture he saw as inexorably fading away.⁴²⁸ As I have argued throughout this chapter the aesthetic of entropy in many of Wojnarowicz's large scale acrylic and collage works, such as the *Elements* series can be read as an angry and damning indictment of the homophobic political and social system that allowed the AIDS crisis to grow unchecked. These works sit alongside Wojnarowicz's more explicit interventions in activist politics, for example the attacks on homophobic AIDS discourse in his literary work, and actually surpass them in that they take as their target the structural iniquities and modes of thought which long preceded, but were also hugely instrumental to, the mismanagement and prejudice exposed by AIDS. The writer, activist and curator Sur Rodney (Sur), also the former co-director of Gracie Mansion Gallery which represented Wojnarowicz, has recently drawn attention to the way in which the deep seated and widespread critique of western culture at work in Wojnarowicz's visual artworks was collapsed into a metaphor for AIDS in order to "better serve his hugely marketable writing on the subject," in which there was always more public and critical interest.⁴²⁹ This

⁴²⁵ Ibid. 200.

⁴²⁶ Ibid. 15.

⁴²⁷ Ibid. 16.

⁴²⁸ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 423.

⁴²⁹ Sur Rodney (Sur), "Activism, AIDS, Art, and the Institution," in Katz and Hushka (eds), *Art AIDS America*, 75 & 77.

suggests that anger at the homophobic response to the AIDS crisis, albeit in the mystical and unconventional form of Wojnarowicz's essays, is more palatable and easier to grasp than the more wide-ranging critique at work in his visual artworks.

When I put my hands on your body

One of Wojnarowicz's most plaintive works is also one of his most powerful. *When I Put My Hands On Your Body* (1990) [Fig. 2.17] reproduces a photograph he had taken at the Dickson Mounds (a Native American burial site and museum in Illinois) of human skeletons arranged inside an excavated chamber. Silk-screened over the photograph in bright red/orange lettering is a text by Wojnarowicz ruminating on the connection one feels to a loved one and the loss of that connection in death. The first lines of the text evoke the embodied, tactile or contagious aspects of human connection: "When I put my hands on your body on your flesh I feel the history of that body. Not just the beginning of its forming in that distant lake but all the way beyond its ending." The transience of human life here is not presented in opposition to the supposed transcendence of the artwork along the lines that Crimp objects to in his critique of idealist aesthetics. Instead, the duration of an individual life is placed in concert with the transient nature of all life forms and structures. The "distant lake" calls up the image of a primordial soup from which life emerged and will one day return. In addition, as Carr has noted, the lake mentioned in this work also relates to a recurring dream image in which Wojnarowicz pictured his own demise.⁴³⁰ In this way *When I Put My Hands On Your Body* calls attention to fact that many of the elegiac works produced during the AIDS epidemic were made by artists who were not only mourning loved ones but also anticipating their own death. The death of another forcing us to confront our own mortality is clearly a factor in our experience of any death, in the situation of widespread infection within particular

⁴³⁰ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, especially 376 and 515.

groups through shared practices like sex or IV drug use this dynamic is doubly exacerbated.

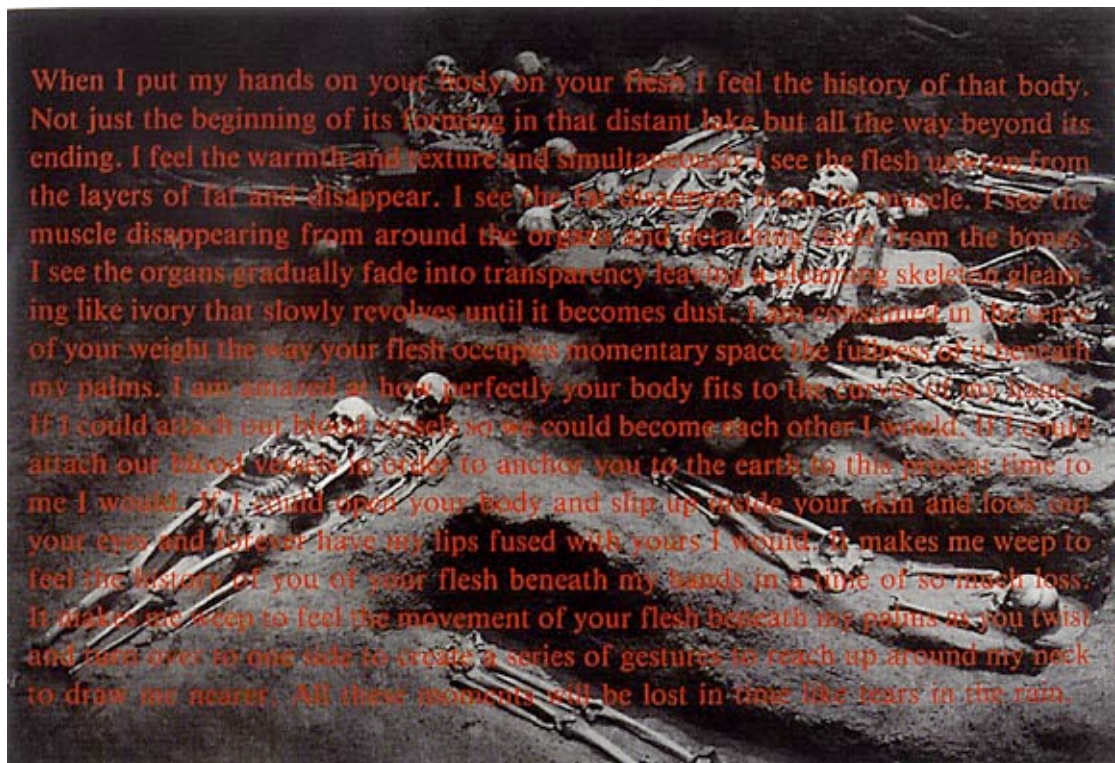


Fig. 2.17: David Wojnarowicz, *When I Put My Hands On Your Body*, 1990. Gelatin-silver print and silk-screened text on board, 26 x 38”.

As Crimp argued when writing about gay male experience, “we are directly and immediately implicated in the particular cause of these deaths, and implicated, as well, through the specific nature of our deepest pleasures in life.”⁴³¹ This kind of connection through behaviour can be extended to those who have the good fortune to not, or not yet, be HIV positive due to the significant risk still attached to these pleasures. For Simon Watney this relationship to risk and contingency made activism essential in itself. Any gay man who was fortunate enough to have remained HIV negative before the spread of safer sex information should, he argues, “meditate most profoundly on the whim of fate that spared him, but not others. Those of us who chance to be seronegative have *an*

⁴³¹ Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 138, n. 17.

absolute and unconditional responsibility for the welfare of seropositive gay men.”⁴³² I would add to this meditation the growing consensus that safer sex practices are often not entirely adhered to, even among those who have the benefit of this information, and the speculation about the possible social and psychic causes of this risk-taking behaviour, as reasons for the continued implication of seronegative people in the funereal images that emerged from the AIDS epidemic.⁴³³

As I have argued above, the thematics of rot, ruin and decay at work in many of Wojnarowicz’s artworks attest to an affective charge of anger directed towards the social and political issues that both preceded and exacerbated the AIDS crisis. This attention to rotteness and its associated affects – disgust, but also anger and fascination – is central to the work of Bataille where it is also integral to his anthropological understanding of the affects at play in political engagement. Affects, particularly those generated by our experience of our own bodies, or our relation to other bodies living and dead, are also of primary importance in Bataille’s critique of the preference in western discourse for settled meaning or resolved process over the messy formlessness of ambivalence, waste or ongoing process. In this regard I would draw attention to the over-layering of text and image in *When I Put My Hands on Your Body* and of pictorial elements in *Earth* in contrast to the legibility and lack of ambivalence prioritised in activist poster art reproduced above. The superimposition of text over image simultaneously makes the photograph hard to view and the text hard to read and, in doing so, doubly impedes the pleasure or satisfaction of the viewer. This frustration of legibility marks a work like *When I Put My Hands On Your Body* as motivated by a distinctly different, though certainly connected, set of concerns to AIDS activist poster art. The mournful and macabre nature of *When I Put My Hands* draws upon the nihilistic streak that had always

⁴³² Simon Watney quoted in Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 138, n. 17. Emphasis original.

⁴³³ See Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, especially chapter 17, “Sex and Sensibility, or Sense and Sexuality,” 281-301. As well as Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago, IL & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008) and Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago IL & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

been evident in Wojnarowicz's work. In the *Elements* series this negativity is connected to the deleterious and possibly irreversible impact of human development on the landscape and environment. This more generalised sense of negativity and impotence has also been recognised as one of the aspects of the work of Baudelaire and his successors that was most troubling to their contemporaries.⁴³⁴ Such deep-seated negativity is difficult to integrate into an activist inspired practice that aims to engender concrete changes in political policy.

Bataille's own reflections on the anger that seems to emanate from the decaying corpse did contain a resolution of sorts. After the flesh has putrefied and wasted away the anger that had been projected by the corpse, as it is experienced by the living, seems to have been abated. The emergence of whitening bones appears to attest to this appeasement in that they "draw the first veil of decency and solemnity over death and make it bearable; it is painful still but free of the virulent activity of corruption."⁴³⁵ This dynamic is also present in Wojnarowicz's work as the anger of the dead, or the responsibility to do something on their behalf to address the political and social injustices that had contributed to their deaths, is mollified becoming the reverence of a piece like *When I Put My Hands On Your Body*. The text superimposed across the photograph of skeletons continues by describing this transformation: "I see the organs gradually fade into transparency leaving a gleaming skeleton gleaming like ivory that slowly resolves until it becomes dust."

In addition, the allusion present in the work's title to touch as a mode of sensory perception corresponds to this sensibility of mourning, appeasement, and eventual disappearance. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued, there is a particular intimacy between the world of affect and tactile experience simultaneously present in words like

⁴³⁴ Jonathan Culler, "Introduction," in Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, xix.

⁴³⁵ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 56.

“touching” and “feeling.”⁴³⁶ Regarding the particular affects produced by the textures on display here, the smoothness of these bones could be interpreted in line with Renu Bora’s argument that “smoothness is both a type of texture and texture’s other.”⁴³⁷ Bora makes the distinction between textures which seem to offer up the history of how they came into being in the unevenness of their finish and those, associated with smoothness or sheen, that appear to refuse this information in the willed erasure of their history.⁴³⁸ Smoothness, in this instance, signifying the coming-to-terms with death, its eventual overcoming, that it is the function of mourning to put into process.

Following this line of reasoning one might conclude, with reasonable justification, that *When I Put My Hands On Your Body* represents an almost irresistible slide on the gradation of affect from a militant activist anger towards a passive sadness; a mourning and memorialisation arising from the seemingly unstoppable tide of loss, compounded by the artist’s own impending death. However, as Sedgwick argues, touch, to an even greater extent than other perceptual systems, disrupts this dualistic understanding of activity and passivity: “to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, [...] and always also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself.”⁴³⁹ This sense of touching upon the past helps to mitigate the tendencies of affect theory towards what I consider a problematic assumption of decontextualized and immediate experience in the present. It was also a factor in Wojnarowicz’s choice of these particular bones as the subject of one of his last artworks. The Native American remains, like the aboriginal motifs in many of his other works, draw attention to the transience of all structures and civilisations, highlighting their essential and inevitable fall into the formlessness of dust. These bones also, of course, draw parallels between the contemporary social and political situation and an historical genocide, exposing the

⁴³⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC. & London: Duke University Press, 2003), 17.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.* 14.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.* 15.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.* 14.

perennial tendency of imperialistic human societies to operate through brutal cycles of incorporation and abjection.

This piece also actively disrupts the viewer's straightforward or uninhibited immersion in the clean and resolved death imagery that the skeleton photograph could (were contextual details about the source of the photograph omitted from the works captioning) potentially provide. The superimposed text works to sustain or provoke the viewer's interest as they attempt to read it, but also frustrates easy engagement with text and image alike by making the written element difficult to read while simultaneously preventing straightforward immersion in the image. In this way the work disrupts or draws attention to the active/passive distinctions at play generally in the contemplation of visual culture.⁴⁴⁰

Furthermore, *When I Put My Hands On Your Body* challenges the distinction between an individual or private experience of death, "safely within the bounds of private tragedy," on one hand and a more socially or politically engaged encounter with death on the other. The use of the pronoun "I" and the evocative descriptions of personal sensory contact suggest that this work be read as an individual meditation on loss. However, the use of a common typeface – as opposed to handwriting for example – together with the lack of information regarding the identity of the body described by the text, and the anonymous skeletons shown in the photograph suggest that this work be viewed as one which opens out onto the political/social through the personal and embodied. In this way *When I Put My Hands On Your Body* operates in the same way as Wojnarowicz's earlier pieces like *Crash* where the political is entered through the historical or *Fire and Earth* where transhistorical elemental forces are used to address political issues. Similarly in *Water* an equivalence is drawn between the individual abuse and trauma Wojnarowicz

⁴⁴⁰ Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 128-131.

suffered in childhood and the widespread social victimisation he saw himself and other people with AIDS as suffering in the present.

Conclusion

As I have shown Wojnarowicz's work makes a virtue of charting the difficult territory between pessimistic negativity and political activism. His use of elemental destructive forces in *Earth, Wind, Water* and *Fire* allowed him express his contempt for the moral and political order in which he lived alongside his belief in the ultimately transient nature of that order. The anger at work in this rotten aesthetic is a key component of the simultaneously affective and political response to the AIDS crisis. As an embodied and direct activist engagement with politics, at the level of both structural critique and immediate necessity, Wojnarowicz's work represents part of an alternative lineage of radical avant-gardism in his refusal to accept art's autonomous status. However, this refusal of aesthetic idealism was matched by a corresponding refusal to toe the line of political expediency. In this regard there is often in Wojnarowicz's work and exemplified by a work like *When I Put My Hands* a coupling of political critique with a fatalistic and macabre tendency.

As Gould argues in her study of ACT UP, the negotiation of ambivalence and contradictory emotional states is often a structuring factor in queer communities and political organisations.⁴⁴¹ Such communities are forced to navigate the contradictions inherent in feelings like the desire for social acceptance that sits alongside loathing of a society that is, even if homophobia were to be overcome, replete with prejudice and injustice. A critique of the false opposition between art and activism must accept that such ambivalence often runs at odd with the express intentions of activism while

⁴⁴¹ Gould, *Moving Politics*, 24.

remaining a form of it. However, such paradoxically motivated activism need not be ineffectual and can leave room for action in the face of such contradictions, this has been noted as one of the unique strengths of AIDS treatment activism. For example, scepticism and mistrust concerning medical discourse and authority was a key factor in altering the scientific response to AIDS and, though these changes came too late for Wojnarowicz and countless others, eventually resulted in more effective combination therapies to tackle HIV.⁴⁴²

In this chapter I have sought to retain a conception of Bataille's *informe* (formless) that treats it as an operative force in the world because this makes apparent the proto-deconstructionist character of Bataille's writing. This is to say that the formless – like deconstruction, considered not as a methodology but simply *what is* – shows the undoing or rupture of supposedly stable and impregnable concepts and entities as always already imbedded within them. At the same time I have argued that the Octoberist appropriation of Bataille makes crucial exclusions that obfuscate the way in which Bataille's work is rooted in the body, sexuality and collective political engagement. In the *October* roundtable on the *informe* and the abject, which I mentioned in my Introduction, Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster draw attention to the reworking of Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection (otherwise much maligned by the participants) by Judith Butler to explain the endurance of homophobia and sexism.⁴⁴³ They also draw attention to the way in which Kristeva draws upon the work of Mary Douglas, who argues that the individual human body is an image of the social body where the transgression of bodily boundaries represents threats to the social fabric, and the relevance of this argument in the age of HIV/AIDS.⁴⁴⁴ Likewise, in Chapter 1 I discussed Butler, Douglas and Bataille in relation

⁴⁴² Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic*, 298.

⁴⁴³ Foster et al., "The Politics of the Signifier II," 5.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 13.

to the performance artist Ron Athey who uses the imagery of sacrifice and the penetration of his own body through various means including wounding and anal penetration to negotiate HIV/AIDS. In the next chapter I will discuss *Time to Leave* a film that, like *Deliverance*, is about confronting mortality. However, here the confrontation with mortality takes place after the widespread adoption of effective HIV treatments. The safety of this temporal distance, I argue, allows the film to return to a time when HIV was more often than not terminal and fatal.

Chapter 3: The Other Time in the First Time: Temporality, terminal illness and photography in François Ozon's *Time to Leave* (2005) and *La petite mort* (1995)

When we are introduced to Romain (Melvil Poupaud), the protagonist of François Ozon's 2005 film *Time to Leave* (*Le temps qui reste*), he is photographing fashion models on a Paris rooftop, barking instructions at subordinates and verbally encouraging himself and his models in their poses. Suddenly, the scene is interrupted by an increase in light intensity, Romain's increasing breathlessness and his collapse. In the following scene his doctor informs him that he does not, as Romain suspects, have AIDS or HIV but instead is suffering from a highly advanced malignant tumour that is unlikely to respond to treatment. After learning of his status as terminally ill Romain leaves his partner and keeps his illness secret from his family, with the exception of his grandmother Laura (Jeanne Moreau) whom he visits in rural France. Throughout the film Romain's confrontation with his own imminent mortality takes the form of repeated interactions with the image of his childhood self, alongside the documenting of his loved ones through photography. This investment in the subject of childhood is also emphasised in the film's narrative trajectory, which culminates in Romain fathering a child with an infertile heterosexual couple before succumbing to his illness.

For this reason the film has provoked queer anxiety surrounding reproductive futurity, being described as "a bourgeois and moralistic vision" by one critic.⁴⁴⁵ In this chapter I argue, contrastingly, that the film employs a series of sustained references and cues that will return some of its viewers to the time in which HIV/AIDS was a terminal and fatal rather than chronic illness. It achieves this through its investigation of the temporal structure of photography. In this regard an earlier short film by Ozon *La petite mort* (1995) is an important precursor. Here, another young gay photographer replaces his

⁴⁴⁵ Quoted Asibong, *François Ozon*, 107.

artistic project of photographing men at the moment of orgasm with the documentation of his father's dying and dead body. In their interweaving of the themes of death, photography, childhood and family the films draw upon the work of Roland Barthes, in particular his meditation on photography *Camera Lucida*, which proposes an embodied affect analogous to the wound as the principle metaphor for understanding the power of photography.⁴⁴⁶ Temporality was also crucial to Barthes's analysis of the medium's specificity, which he described as "an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*."⁴⁴⁷ Following this insight I will argue that *Time to Leave* has a relationship to the AIDS crisis that follows the temporal structure of trauma found in psychoanalysis; a model of experience where something distressing happens too suddenly to be experienced fully, only to be repeatedly re-experienced through the latent onset of traumatic symptoms.

This structure of belatedness or latency is also at work in the functioning of the HIV virus itself. HIV is a member of the lentivirus family of retroviruses, which are characterised by their long incubation periods, also termed clinical latency, referring to the time period between infection and the onset of symptoms. In the case of HIV infection this window period can be as long as ten years, this was a key factor in its subsequent epidemiological development: AIDS emerged as a syndrome already established and spreading rapidly in certain populations before its source, the HIV virus, was isolated. This caused huge and successive waves of death among the affected populations, most prominently gay men and intravenous drug users in the European and North American context, before effective prevention measures and, eventually, effective treatments became available.

The classic example of an event that leads to the development of traumatic neuroses is a sudden and shocking accident, which, as I noted, appears to have taken place

⁴⁴⁶ See Carol Mavor, *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida, La Jetée, Sans soleil, and Hiroshima mon amour* (Durham, NC. & London: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁴⁴⁷ Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 44.

too suddenly to be fully comprehended. It is re-experienced, after a period of latency, through the repetition of the initial trauma. Sigmund Freud argued that the unexpectedness of the traumatic event was a key factor in the development of traumatic neurosis through his distinction between the psychological function of “fear,” “fright” and “anxiety” that he argues should not be used as synonymous terms.⁴⁴⁸ “Fear,” Freud states, requires a specific object in which to be afraid of while “anxiety” anticipates the encounter with the fearful object or event and, in so doing, reduces the sense of shock should such an encounter take place. In this way anxiety actually helps to protect against the development of traumatic neuroses.⁴⁴⁹ Experiences which give rise to traumatic repetition are characterised by “fright” which Freud describes as the condition of running into danger when one does not expect it: “it emphasises the factor of surprise.”⁴⁵⁰ Traumatic neuroses are therefore characterised by temporal belatedness, the delayed and repeated grappling with an event that occurred too suddenly to be fully appreciated. In addition to being characterised by belatedness, trauma, in Freud’s account, despite being derived from the ancient Greek word for wound, does not usually occur where the frightful experience has caused an actual bodily injury.⁴⁵¹ Like Barthes’s *punctum* and his work on the photograph, which I will discuss below, trauma is an attempt to account for the simultaneous experience of immediacy, a welling up of feeling or embodied sensation in the present, and temporal anteriority. Both employ the metaphor of the bodily wound to give an account of the experience of pain that has no directly somatic component, but is nonetheless felt with that stinging immediacy.

This delayed confrontation with what we might term the inescapable presentness of the past is, I will argue, the way in which *Time to Leave* engages with the AIDS

⁴⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” in James Strachey and Anna Freud (eds.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XVIII (1920-1922)* (London: Vintage, 2001), 12.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 12-13 and 31-32.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 12.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.* 33.

epidemic. It is also reflected in the way in Romain grapples with the personal past of his own childhood throughout the film, where the figure of himself as a child increasingly occupies the diegetic present. The film's repeated engagement with the subject of childhood, rather than the incessant replication of bourgeois norms, draws attention to ways in which childhood, and the intersection of childhood with sexuality in particular, can itself be thought of as traumatic.

The film's enquiry into childhood, from the perspective of looming death in adulthood emphasises the singular uniqueness of each individual in life and death, also a crucial issue in debates about photography and HIV/AIDS and gestured towards by the film's examination of that medium. With this in mind Romain's decision to father a child, rather than a normative or conservative gesture, should be read as corresponding to the faculty of human existence that Hannah Arendt, under the heading of *natality*, described as the "ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin."⁴⁵² The child, as it appears as a subject in *Time to Leave*, demonstrates that each iteration of personhood introduces alterity and the potential for transformation. The category "child" is, as we learn from Kathryn Bond Stockton, one constituted, like trauma, through a series of delays and deferrals: legal and cultural mandates that exclude from the child's ambit that which is deemed too "adult."⁴⁵³ As Bond Stockton demonstrates, and of particular relevance to the meeting of ends that I find in the dying Romain's relationship with his childhood self, the protogay child can only be recognized retrospectively, despite the queerness that seems inherent to childhood, and after a death of sorts: "by the time the tombstone is raised ('I was a gay child'), the 'child' by linguistic definition has expired."⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 246.

⁴⁵³ Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 6.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 7.

Family, Children and HIV/AIDS in the French Context

As the film begins the opening credits roll over the scene of a boy with curly dark hair on a beach, Melvil Poupaud's name appears alongside the boy's image, establishing the connection between the film's protagonist and star and the unnamed child [Fig. 3.1]. The connection is reinforced after Romain receives his prognosis when he visits his parent's apartment to tell them he is going to die. After practicing his speech in the elevator, we see Romain snorting a line of cocaine in the bathroom, as he gazes at his own face in the mirror the image he looks at transforms into the face of his childhood self [Fig. 3.2]. Romain's mother then knocks on the bathroom door. After he lets her in she comments on how he never used to lock the bathroom door and asks him to be kind to, and show an interest in, his sister who is having marital difficulties. In the subsequent scene Romain plays with his nephew who, his sister argues, looks like him. Although, according to his mother, Romain has always liked children he dismisses her when she asks if he has ever thought of having any of his own with the comment, "too bad your son is a fag, no offspring from me." His sister then comments that in a few years she is sure adoption will be possible for anyone, regardless of their sexuality. Together, these scenes work to establish a degree of estrangement between Romain and his family that has developed over the course of his adulthood, by emphasising the difference between the current Romain and how he used to behave. This estrangement, or inability to talk honestly and straightforwardly about meaningful issues, is given no specific reason or causal event. Instead, it points to the nature of families being, as psychoanalyst Adam Philips describes it, the first place you learn about love, fulfilment, dependence and frustration.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵⁵ Adam Philips, *One Way and Another: New and Selected Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2013), 354.



Fig. 3.1: François Ozon, *Time to Leave* (2005), opening credits.



Fig. 3.2: François Ozon, *Time to Leave* (2005), Romain gazes into the mirror.

The scene also gestures towards the way in which gay and lesbian civil rights issues are intimately intertwined with debates about adoption and childrearing in France. In the French context an arguably greater toleration of sexual difference in private life is put under pressure by these issues, which straddle the “heterosexist public/private

divide.”⁴⁵⁶ In addition, the French model of Republican universalism has generated a historic suspicion of “particularism” and places great importance on “the symbolic link between parent and child (*filiation*).”⁴⁵⁷ For this reason when France introduced (after two years of intense legal and political debate) the PaCS (Pacte Civil de Solidarité), a form of civil-union, in 1999, it was open to both heterosexual and gay/lesbian couples and prohibited access to “*homoparentalité*” (gay parenting) through either adoption or artificial insemination.⁴⁵⁸ It has also been argued that this Republican scepticism regarding “particularism” and “community” was responsible for France’s delayed and inadequate response to the AIDS crisis.⁴⁵⁹

In order to demonstrate the challenge posed to republican universalism by HIV/AIDS, David Caron draws upon a line from Hervé Guibert’s *To The Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (*A l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie*), arguably the most influential work of French AIDS literature, spoken by the character Muzil (a thinly veiled stand in for Guibert’s friend Michel Foucault): “A cancer that would hit only homosexuals, no, that’s too good to be true, I could just die laughing!”⁴⁶⁰ For, while it is true that anyone *can* get HIV/AIDS, epidemiology demonstrates that specific people and groups are at much greater risk of infection, prompting Caron to argue that:

[B]y refusing to conceive communities otherwise than in essentialised terms in order to deny their existence within the Republic, France could not understand AIDS, an epidemic inseparable from, although not limited to, the existence of marginalised communities.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁶ Diane Richardson cited in Denis M. Provencher, *Queer French: Globalization, Language, and Sexual Citizenship in France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 14.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 14.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 18. The PaCS legislation also prohibited a foreign national from acquiring French citizenship through civil union. Same sex adoption and marriage were made legal by the Hollande government in 2013.

⁴⁵⁹ David Caron, *AIDS in French Culture: Social Ills, Literary Cures* (Madison, WI. & London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 152-155.

⁴⁶⁰ Hervé Guibert, *To The Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, trans. Linda Coverdale (London: Quartet Books, 1991), 13.

⁴⁶¹ Caron, *AIDS in French Culture*, 154.

I flag up these issues here in order to draw attention to the way in which *Time to Leave* engages with questions of individual versus collective or universal experience and the particular resonance this has in the French context. For, while the film could be praised for making Romain's sexuality somewhat incidental and thereby be held up as an example of a person, whose sexuality is acknowledged as not heterosexual, confronting a universal experience like death, this respect for both the absolutely individual and personal and the universal is, in fact, reflective of the ideology of republican universalism which has often proved inimical to the material interests of France's non-hetero, non-white, immigrant and overseas citizens.⁴⁶² This tension between the universal and the singular, identitarian or historically mediated aspects of being is, as we shall see, a recurrent theme in critical responses to photographs of people with HIV/AIDS.

When Romain is discussing his condition with his doctor, and is told he has cancer rather than AIDS, their conversation is entirely occupied by questions of risk, chance and the law of averages. The doctor speaks of the high risk of the cancer spreading to an even greater extent than it already has. Romain wants to know whether his slight chance of survival means fifty per cent or five per cent. When he is told the chances are less than five per cent and demands to know how long he has left the doctor advises that similar cases can expect around three more months of life, but is unable to offer any conclusive figures saying "But it could be one month or one year." When Romain says that he does not want to undergo any treatments like radiotherapy or chemotherapy because they are unlikely to work, but will cause horrible side effects, the doctor attempts to divert their discussion away from questions of contingency and likelihood, towards the consideration

⁴⁶² To demonstrate this point Caron provides the example of the actions of ACT UP-Paris president Christophe Martet on the *Sidaction* (a televised fundraising drive for HIV/AIDS) on 6 June 1996. Martet drew attention to the continued absence of same-sex partnerships, the government's repatriation of HIV positive immigrants to countries where they would not receive adequate medical care and the neglect of the severe HIV epidemic in France's overseas territories. Martet and his lover were the only participants in the *Sidaction* who publicly proclaimed their identity as gay men and, as Caron writes, "In accordance with ACT UP's goal, it was as gay men that they went on to address the concern of other communities as well." Martet's outburst was seen by the press as disruptive, unhelpful and "jeopardizing the new and fragile sympathy enjoyed by gays and lesbians in times of hardship." Caron, *AIDS in French Culture*, 158-159.

of Romain as a singular and unique person, by saying that he should not compare himself with other cases as each cancer and each treatment is different and is experienced differently. However, as their conversation concludes he is only able to offer hope by appealing to the idea that an individual can somehow master abstract notions like luck and likelihood through the sheer force of their wilful agency even when, as the saying goes, the cards are stacked against them: “Even if your chances are small they are not nil, you should grab every single chance.” Coming, as it does, just after Romain’s assumption that his collapse was caused by AIDS has been shown to be false, I contend that this discussion is actually a way in which the topic of AIDS is subtly maintained by the film through the way it which it binds together trauma (the encounter with or proximity to death), probability, and the spectre of HIV/AIDS as initially raised by Romain.

Trauma

The AIDS epidemic has thrown up issues of chance and risk in terms of health, illness and survival in an unprecedented way. The AIDS crisis appearing at a particular time and place and first taking hold in specific populations (gay men, IV drug users and certain ethnic minorities e.g. Haitian Americans) rather than others and thereafter being indelibly associated with these groups can also be seen as something of an accident of history.

Forcefully advocating this fact has often been used as a tactic to combat and counter those who would explain HIV/AIDS as a judgement from a higher power, or an occurrence that was in some way inevitable, based on aversion to the behaviours (real or imaginary) of gay men and drug users in particular.⁴⁶³ The issue of probability or likelihood has also been integral to the development of trauma as a concept, which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as an attempt to explain the experience of sudden and shocking “accident” events caused by modern technology. As I wrote above, trauma describes

⁴⁶³ Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 45, 61 and 81

experiences or encounters with death that have taken place too suddenly to be fully comprehended only for them to be re-experienced, after a period of latency, through the repetition of the initial trauma. Trauma's latency, in combination with the fact the traumatic neuroses are caused not by the traumatic event itself, but by the survivor's subjective experience of them, and the development of accident compensation and insurance, profoundly shaped the medical profession's relationship to trauma, transforming doctors into surveyors "who must establish whether an accident was 'adequate cause'" for the resulting psychic injuries.⁴⁶⁴

As Wolfgang Schäffner explains, the expansion of probabilistic calculus into different spheres of life in the nineteenth century, one of the most significant drivers of which was insurance discourse, led to a reconceptualization of events that transcended the dichotomy of fictitious and real, transforming events "into different degrees of probability."⁴⁶⁵ Schäffner argues that as insurance was established on a statistical basis, probability came to constitute the reality of the insured: events like crime and accidents, that had previously seemed to occur arbitrarily, were now seen to occur regularly and inescapably, "because the accident was inevitably anticipated by every insured person as a possible event."⁴⁶⁶ Furthermore, the effects of the damage caused by the accident, when it did eventually occur, were dispersed temporally "over the whole period of insurance and the whole community of the insured."⁴⁶⁷ Members of an insurance association constituted a community who collectively both paid the costs of and enjoyed the protections of insurance, questions of fate or personal guilt were replaced by the probabilistic dispersal of risk across time and space through the insurance model, which was to become the

⁴⁶⁴ Wolfgang Schäffner, "Event, Series, Trauma: The Probabilistic Revolution of the Mind in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," in Mark S. Micale and Paul Lerner (eds.), *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 81.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 88.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 88.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 88.

paradigm of social policy in Europe.⁴⁶⁸ This model has detrimental effects that contain the radical implications of its framework of community based support and protection: “The local and individual occurrence of an accident changed into a risk threatening everybody and became a permanent event throughout society. Risk invades the realm of the mind and can now be experienced without any external release. It lurks always and everywhere.”⁴⁶⁹ In the context of the HIV epidemic the existence of communities constituted by and responsive to their at-risk status has been possibly the most significant factor in responding to the virus in terms of creative responses, activism, and also the development of treatments and prevention strategies. Hesitation in acknowledging this aspect of the epidemic can have dire consequences as evidenced by France’s inadequate and belated response to the AIDS crisis chronicled by Caron and summarised above. However, as Schöffner’s work makes us aware, the constitution of a community through risk disperses the trauma that is the AIDS crisis throughout the community, as it comes to affect and threaten those who do not personally have the virus, and (in a temporal model reflective of the structure of trauma itself) maintains that trauma as a permanent event across time. The pervasiveness of HIV/AIDS and its persisting connection to gay male sexuality and identity is sustained by *Time to Leave* long after the conversation with the doctor: when Romain initially refuses to help Jany (Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi) conceive a child, she asks him if it is because he has AIDS. This assumption, and the implied equation of a young but dying gay man with HIV/AIDS, is also an aspect of the way in which the film probes the tensions between the identitarian, communally inflected and historically mediated aspects of personhood with the singular and unique facets of Romain’s being, illness and mortality.

Much of the discussion of visual artworks that engage with the AIDS epidemic has been concerned with the opposition between images which function as “auguries of

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid. 88. The focus of Schöffner’s study is the German law of accident insurance of 1884.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid. 89.

universal experience⁴⁷⁰ in their depiction of death – advanced as the universalising experience *par excellence* by liberal humanism – and those which treat the person with AIDS (PWA) that the image depicts as singular, individual beings rather than the subject of platitudinous metaphors. In particular, this opposition has often been the focus of critiques of photographic representations of PWAs.⁴⁷¹ The conversation between Romain and his doctor reveals how the tension of contingency, risk, uncertainty and between singularity and the universal, are actually deeply ingrained in medical discourse and our discussions of illness far beyond HIV/AIDS. This scene also problematizes the tension between the singular and universal in our discussions of serious illness and mortality in that it is when the physician attempts to address Romain as a singular and unique being that he falls back upon humanistic clichés, abandoning the candour he had maintained when addressing his patient in terms of de-individualised statistics and probability. Ozon has stated, in the DVD interview, that, for him, it was important that the film was about death, about the experience of facing death as a young man, rather than about disease and that he did not want to include extensive scenes involving hospital care or medication. If much of the resistance to artworks that explored HIV/AIDS as a personal tragedy which culminated in the universal experience of death were motivated by the need to address AIDS as *also* an acute political and public health crisis affecting specific marginalised communities, *Time to Leave* can, from one vantage point, be viewed as a testament (around ten years after the introduction of effective treatments which made HIV a chronic manageable condition) to the fact that it was once also, like certain cancers, an illness that forced many to confront their own imminent mortality. Significantly, this aspect of HIV/AIDS was deliberately downplayed by many of the most politically engaged artworks emerging from AIDS activism in order to counter the mawkish focus on death and decline that dominated mainstream responses and in deference to the activist demand

⁴⁷⁰ Pearl, "Gazing at AIDS," 79.

⁴⁷¹ See also Douglas Crimp, "Portraits of People with AIDS," in Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 83-108.

that PWAs be depicted as “surviving and thriving” with the illness. The fact that this was so often not the case suggests that the distance afforded by time and the shift in the HIV epidemic to (in the developed world at least) a stage of less acute crisis and reduced mortality actually facilitates the kind of response to HIV/AIDS that I am arguing *Time to Leave* can be read as exemplifying. That is, a response which is unflinching in its focus on mortality yet unsentimental and respectful of the singular and irreplaceable nature of each individual in their own death.

In contrast, at the height of the AIDS crisis some of the most trenchant critiques of AIDS discourse, and in particular the way in which the virus was represented in visual art, criticised both artworks that approached illness and death through personal tragedy as insufficiently militant and those that whitewashed the historical and political factors that exacerbated the epidemic in their appeals to an elegiac universalism.⁴⁷² Funereal humanistic responses to death were also seen as distasteful in that they did not adequately address PWAs as singular beings with unique histories. Art, in particular photography, representing PWAs and academic/critical debates about such work, came to illuminate one of the fundamental problematics of our existence as a plurality of distinct individuals: our desire to act collectively while also having our singular nature recognised. Arendt summarises this problem in a way which draws attention to birth (natality) and death as the twin events which bookend the possibility of meaningful political action: “we are the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live.”⁴⁷³ For Arendt plurality, and action within it, is the enabling and constitutive condition of all political life. The conception of politics in terms of “action” and plurality is significant for Arendt because she argues that the western philosophical tradition has made the serious mistake of conceiving politics as a project of *making* something. An activity she calls “work” rather than “action.” To conceive of politics as a

⁴⁷² Ibid. 91.

⁴⁷³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8.

project of work would be to conceive of human beings as raw material to be fashioned without any say in the process, a misconception she sees Karl Marx as having inherited from the western philosophical tradition and accounting for the development of his ideas along totalitarian lines. Likewise, Arendt sees all utopian thought, “a model of politics as *making* a work of art,” as denying the human capacity for action and therefore as the sterile project of a philosopher-king.⁴⁷⁴ Birth, the introduction of new people into the world, each capable of action and disruption for better or worse, reveals the sterility and impossibility of such utopian projects.

In the context of the AIDS crisis, there was considerable desire to put cultural production in the service of an activist politics, which required challenging the myth that art should only address the transcendent, that which is above or outside of the material everyday world.⁴⁷⁵ Instead, AIDS activist and like-minded artists focused on the fact that steps that could be taken to mitigate the crisis were not being taken and the reasons for this inertia. As Mary Patten puts it, “Many of us wanted not only the ‘bread’ of treatment and access to care but the ‘roses’ of social transformation, too.”⁴⁷⁶ This is all very much in line with Arendt’s thoughts on meaningful political action, against deferral of action in deference to a transcendent space beyond the material world. Indeed, Arendt’s conception of natality emphasises the hitherto unknown chains of events and social movements that will be brought into being by the existence of new and unique individuals. However, the need for effective political action can at times sit uneasily alongside the need to acknowledge the passing of that opportunity in death.

One well-known flashpoint for these issues was the 1988 MoMA exhibition of photographs by Nicholas Nixon that contained a series of portraits of PWAs. These

⁴⁷⁴ Margaret Canovan, “Introduction,” in Arendt, *The Human Condition*, xviii.

⁴⁷⁵ Deborah Bright, “Introduction: Pictures, Perverts, and Politics,” in Deborah Bright (ed.), *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), 2.

⁴⁷⁶ Mary Patten, “The Thrill is Gone: an ACT UP post-mortem (confessions of a former AIDS activist),” in Bright (ed.), *The Passionate Camera*, 391.

portraits were praised for their stark honesty, the supposed intimacy between photographer and subject, and the way in which they were said to facilitate identification between the dying PWA and the viewer, who is always assumed to be seronegative [Fig. 3.3].⁴⁷⁷ As Douglas Crimp points out, Nixon's photographs in fact hardly departed at all from what had quickly become the established conventions for representing PWAs in the media: "they are ravaged, disfigured, and debilitated by the syndrome; they are generally alone, desperate, but resigned to their 'inevitable' deaths."⁴⁷⁸ As a result the exhibition was subject to a protest by the pressure group ACT UP that involved holding up photographs of PWAs that departed from these conventions, such as a smiling middle-aged man and an activist addressing the news media. The protesters distributed leaflets that communicated their belief that issues of the representation of PWAs, "affects not only how viewers will perceive PWAs outside the museum, but, ultimately, crucial issues of AIDS funding, legislation, and education."⁴⁷⁹ The flyer went on to point out the exhibition's portrayal of PWAs as "people to be pitied or feared, as people alone and lonely," the absence of women or people of colour (who made up the majority of AIDS cases in New York City), its neglect of recent medical advances and the political actions of PWAs and other AIDS activists that have made them possible, and the political and social dimensions of the crisis.⁴⁸⁰ It ended with the demand, "STOP LOOKING AT US; START LISTENING TO US."⁴⁸¹ Crimp notes that, in contrast to this demand, one prominent approach to the questions of representation and HIV/AIDS had been, since very early in the epidemic, the need to combat "bureaucratic abstraction" by giving AIDS a human face.⁴⁸² The implication here is that these artworks are designed to speak to people who do not feel themselves at all involved in the crisis, who do not know a PWA and are not themselves at

⁴⁷⁷ Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 84.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 86.

⁴⁷⁹ Reproduced in Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 87.

⁴⁸⁰ Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 87.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.* 87.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.* 88.

risk. This approach, in Crimp's account, tends to produce statements of identification underpinned by mutual anxiety about death and bodily suffering. As such they function as, "a defence mechanism, which denies the difference, that obvious sense of otherness, shown in the photographs by insisting that what we really see is ourselves."⁴⁸³ The simultaneous recognition of distance and otherness alongside its tacit denial prompts culturally legitimated responses to death and illness like pity, grief and dread.⁴⁸⁴ *Time to Leave*, by keeping the subject of AIDS in play in various ways, allows audience members who do perceive themselves to be at risk or affected by the virus to approach the character Romain alongside those who are not members of risk communities but can imagine the prospect of premature death through other means. This operation is sustained in the way the film probes the topics of domestic photography and childhood.



Fig. 3.3: Nicholas Nixon, *Tom Moran*, 1988. Gelatin silver print, 19.6 x 24.5 cm.

⁴⁸³ Ibid. 88.

⁴⁸⁴ Pearl, "Gazing at AIDS," 76.

Domestic photography and childhood

In the next scene of *Time to Leave* the family are having dinner when Romain's sister comments, "Do you realise we have a photographer in the family and he's never shot a picture of my kids?" His mother then speaks of her desire to have a portrait with her husband by Romain in the style of one of his magazine shoots. Romain responds that he does not want to take any pictures of his sister's children because, "they are your things, they belong to you, I would see your face in them. Just thinking about it I feel like puking." He continues to provoke her by adding, "It's not surprising your man left you. I understand him. You give him no space, it feels like you made the kids on your own." Whereupon she bursts into tears and attacks him across the dining room table, which, in a childlike manner, he appears to find hilarious as his parents separate them into adjoining rooms. This scene highlights the extent to which Romain believes his sister is trying to make her children replicas of herself and his resistance to domestic photography. In addition, this scenario, structured around the deferred revelation of a secret (Romain's terminal illness) and the erratic and disruptive behaviour Romain indulges in on finding himself unable to make that disclosure, replicates the cinematic representation of coming-out and subtends two of my other concerns in this chapter: the traumatic temporality at work in the revelation of sexuality in childhood, and the way in which this development tends to be conceptualised through metaphors of death and birth; as I noted above with reference to the work of Bond-Stockton.

Ozon's 1995 short film *La petite morte* also explores the way in which we narrativise our childhood and family relationships, and consequently often our general attitude to those institutions, retrospectively from the vantage point of adulthood and foregrounds the role of domestic photography in this process. At the end of this film, which I shall discuss in more detail below, after the death of his father the main character Paul (François Delaive) goes to meet his sister Camille (Camille Japy) who criticizes him

for not attending their father's funeral. Though Paul wants no inheritance and believes his father had always disliked him, Camille gives him a box of their father's favorite photographs saying that he wanted Paul to have them. At the train station on his way home Paul looks through the photographs, most of which were taken on his father's travels, and finds one in an envelope marked "Paul" of his father cradling the infant Paul in his arms. The implication is that Paul's sense that his father has no affection for him has been misplaced all along and that their relationship, while complex, is not one of straightforward rejection by the father. In the same conversation Camille had poked fun at Paul's assumptions by saying "why bother spending a day with your bourgeois family, after all they hate the gays." Here, the domestic photograph does not simply compel memory, in this instance the photograph forces Paul into the realization that his memories had been partial fabrications all along.

Simon Watney argues in his essay "Ordinary Boys" that it is precisely our familiarity with the conventions of domestic photography that makes it "densely ideological."⁴⁸⁵ Its function, he suggests, is to lend a semblance of "retrospective coherence to family life" by belatedly reforming its unpredictable development into a stable narrative trajectory.⁴⁸⁶ In doing so an archive of family photographs bestows a sense of purpose on domesticity and sexual reproduction. Watney's essay explores the relationship he has, as a gay man, to his own childhood image in photographs. He locates, in that image of himself as a child, a subject who will not conform to the desire, attributed to his parents, that he replicate the heterosexual narrative exemplified by their own relationship and in this refusal becomes what they most dread: a queer.⁴⁸⁷ In the smiling face of his childhood self Watney finds a double tragedy: the masquerade, solitude and

⁴⁸⁵ Simon Watney, "Ordinary Boys," in Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (eds.), *Family Snaps: The Meaning of Domestic Photography* (London: Virago Press, 1991), 27. Reprinted in Simon Watney, *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), 27-34.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 29.

⁴⁸⁷ Watney contextualises his account by stating that he "grew up in the shadow of the various gay scandals of the fifties" that he came to know through the British tabloid newspapers his parents read. Queer was the common derogatory epithet at this time. *Ibid.* 28.

concealment he attributes to “the gay child who loves and wishes to be loved,” and so “spares his parents’ feelings at the expense of his own” and “our more or less desperate desire to be happy: a dumb clumsy inchoate awareness that somehow life could be better than it is.”⁴⁸⁸ Contrasting the image of that ill at ease child and the awkward image of himself in his early twenties, which nonetheless exhibits his growing sense of pride and defiance, he reflects on how few representations were available to him that might have given him a greater sense of self-esteem. The difference between the image of that young man and photographs of himself now is the result of thousands of people like himself who “worked to construct our culture, however uneven and contradictory it may be.”⁴⁸⁹ One of the achievements of his generation of queers is to have produced new forms of domesticity, “perhaps a little more honest and flexible than those we fled – or that threw us out.”⁴⁹⁰ What Watney calls his Extended Family Album, photographs of his friends, fellow activists and lovers, is both a record of his life after he failed to conform to his parents’ desires and began to pursue his own, and “an archive, one fragment of the much greater enterprise that is modern gay history.”⁴⁹¹

Watney’s intensely moving essay foregrounds the way in which when looking at domestic photographs we are indulging in the desire to commune with past versions of our selves: “Perhaps we spend our entire lives coming back to stare at pictures of the people we once were, mouthing the same reassuring messages that we could never hear when we most needed them?”⁴⁹² He also articulates the way in which the documents of a life are also part of wider collective history. But, largely as a result of his own generation’s achievements in carving out new forms of domesticity, and the wider intellectual and political legacy of the 1970s that I discussed in my introduction, some of his contentions no longer ring true, for example the assertion that “All too few parents ever have the

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid. 30.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid. 32.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid. 33.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid. 34.

⁴⁹² Ibid. 30.

opportunity or encouragement to imagine parenting in terms that differ significantly from the ways in which they themselves were parented.”⁴⁹³ Or that having a queer child would be what parents most dread. In *Time to Leave*, for example, Romain’s sexuality is not directly remarked upon by his parents but his career, relationships and plans for the future are. This suggests that their hopes and expectations for him, though still present, are able to accommodate his non-normative sexuality.

Romain’s hostility to domestic photographs at this stage in the film stems from his belief that his sister, in wanting to make her children replicas of herself, exhibits what Lee Edelman describes as the “all-pervasive, self-congratulatory, and strategically misrecognized” narcissism that animates pronatalism.⁴⁹⁴ In addition, he projects an image of himself as defiantly outside the ambit of sexual reproduction in his goading of his mother: “too bad your son is a fag, no offspring from me.” However, Romain’s actual relations with his family are immediately shown to be more ambiguous and complicated than this picture of transgressive resistance to the familial.

As his father drives him home he asks Romain how things are going with his boyfriend Sacha. After Romain admits that things are not going particularly well and that their passion is dying and they will most likely split up, he gets his father to pull over so that he can buy some cocaine. His father, somewhat alarmed, asks “I thought you stopped taking that shit?” To which Romain replies that it is just an occasional thing that helps him get an erection. As they say goodnight to one another Romain’s father asks him not to do anything foolish, as his mother cannot take it. He gets his father to admit that he too is vulnerable and that his habit of talking about his wife’s fragility and reactions is the product of never having learned to talk about his own feelings. Romain then asks why his parents never separated despite his father’s infidelities, to which his father replies simply that they still love each other. The intimacy of these scenes, shot with both men in close

⁴⁹³ Ibid. 30.

⁴⁹⁴ Edelman, *No Future*, 13.

proximity in the car is further emphasised by their repeated physical embraces upon saying goodnight, and the intimate nature of their conversation: drug use, sex, relationships, infidelity [Fig. 3.4]. Yet at the same time an unavowed and unbridgeable distance is established between these two men. The candour with which they talk is undercut by their avoidance of the most difficult topics: the father's inability or refusal to offer any in-depth analysis of his infidelity or the fact that his marriage has endured, and Romain's inability to broach the topic of his impending death.



Fig. 3.4: François Ozon, *Time to Leave* (2005), Romain and his father.

In the interview that accompanies the film on DVD Ozon points out that the actor playing Romain's father, Daniel Duval, is well known in France for playing violent thugs and villains on television and in film. Wanting to give him the chance to play an intellectual and sensitive father Ozon asked him to soften his facial features by growing a beard. This decision to present a recognisably tough and threatening actor in a new light is part of Ozon's strategy of undercutting the assumptions of both the audience and protagonists regarding family dynamics in some of his film. The most important precursor in this regard is, as I mentioned above, *La petite morte*, which also explores the intricacies of family dynamics through photography. In *Camera Lucida*, a text which for many viewers both *La petite morte* and *Time to Leave* will bring to mind, Roland Barthes (while also discussing family photographs) writes of his opposition to "that scientific way

of treating the family as if it were uniquely a fabric of constraints and rites: either we code it as a group of immediate allegiances or else we make it into a knot of conflicts and repression. As if our experts cannot conceive that there are families ‘whose members love one another.’”⁴⁹⁵ In *La petite morte* another young gay photographer confronts mortality, this time the more commonplace mortality of an elderly parent, a turning point in life in which, Barthes argues, death takes on a new and tangible reality: “that moment when you discover that death is real, and no longer merely dreadful.”⁴⁹⁶ Here Paul is forced, as I argued above, to reassess his views about his family.

La petite mort

The film opens with a photograph of a baby while Paul recounts, in voiceover, that when he was born his mother sent a photograph of her new baby to his father who was away on business. “That monster can’t be my son, he’s too ugly, there must be a mistake,” his father apparently responded. Still doubtful of his own attractiveness as an adult he agrees to let his boyfriend Martial (Martial Jacques) assume his own role as photographer and take his picture while masturbating. Paul has an ongoing project of photographing men’s faces at the moment of orgasm, *la petite morte* (little death) being a common French idiom for the experience of orgasm. Paul’s sister Camille, who has taken over the family business during their father’s illness, arrives at his apartment to drive him to the hospital. On the journey Camille attempts to make conversation but is rebuffed by Paul who has no desire to share any part of his life with his sister. When he arrives at the hospital Paul comes across another patient lying emaciated in a starkly lit hospital corridor [Fig. 3.5]. This image of a man dying alone in bleak medical setting, and Paul’s horror and dread in

⁴⁹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), 74.

⁴⁹⁶ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA. & London: University of California Press, 1989), 286.

confronting it, recalls the stark and arguably exploitative (though often praised as “humane”) images of AIDS patients ravaged by disease depicted in journalism and art photography that I outlined above.



Fig. 3.5: François Ozon, *La petite mort* (1995), Paul in hospital.

We learn that Paul has not seen his father in six years and when he enters the room his father (Michel Beaujard) does not recognize him, greeting him with the formal “bonjour monsieur.” As Paul flees Camille tries to convince him that age and illness have addled their father’s brain, but Paul insists that he is used to not being recognized by their father, referring to the initial lack of recognition the older man experienced while looking at his portrait as a baby. Later, he sneaks back into his father’s hospital room and takes multiple photographs of his naked dying body [Fig. 3.6]. After being interrupted by a horrified Camille, Paul argues that taking these photographs is equivalent to photographing a baby. When developing the pictures of his father Paul cuts out the eyes and places the portrait over his own face [Fig. 3.7]. Earlier in the film Paul had replaced the photograph of himself as an infant that began the film with one of his face during orgasm as the centerpiece of an erotic montage of bodies in physical contact. These gestures are early indicators of Ozon’s interest in considering birth, infancy or childhood in tandem with death and decline, which he would pursue in more depth in *Time to Leave*. The gesture of meticulously recording the just dead or dying body was one that came to renewed prominence during the AIDS crisis, for example David Wojnarowicz took multiple photographs of the dead body of his close friend and former lover Peter Hujar which formed the basis of the artwork *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* (1988-89) [Fig 3.8]. Wojnarowicz’s response to Hujar’s death also attested to the sense of bodily connectedness and penetration which certain artworks can achieve, he stated “his death is now as if it’s printed on celluloid on the backs of my eyes.”⁴⁹⁷ This sense that some artworks can be penetrating, which is to say that they both make one aware of one’s embodiedness and disrupt the body’s coherence, is suggested by the title *Le petite morte* and Paul’s placing of the image of his father’s face over his own. It is also the central contention of Barthes’s short book on photography *Camera Lucida*.

⁴⁹⁷ David Wojnarowicz quoted in Pearl, “Gazing at AIDS,” 78.

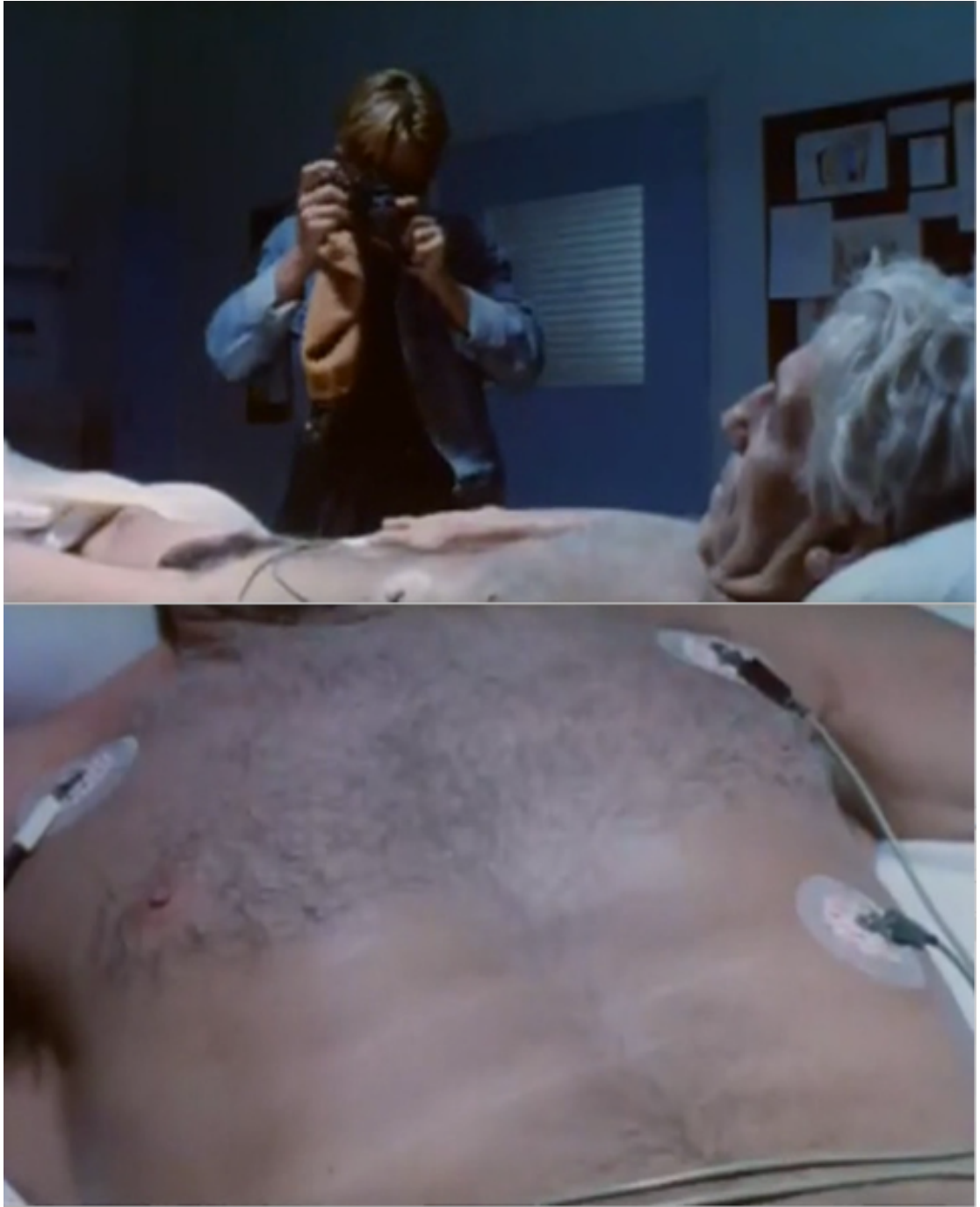


Fig. 3.6: François Ozon, *La petite mort* (1995), Paul photographs his father.



Fig. 3.7: François Ozon, *Le petite mort* (1995), Paul in the dark room.



Fig. 3.8: David Wojnarowicz, source material for *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*, 1988.

Camera Lucida

In “Rhetoric of the Image,” an important precursor to his more sustained meditation on photography, Barthes argues that photography represents a radical break in the history of communication systems due to its establishment of a “new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority.”⁴⁹⁸ The myth of the photograph’s naturalness or transparency, its mechanical recording of what really existed in front of the camera lens, far outstrips our impression of the human intervention in the image’s construction – which might be discussed in terms of framing or style – when we contemplate the photographic image in comparison to any other medium. Furthermore, the immediacy of access to the thing the photograph depicts does not take place straightforwardly on the basis of its *being-there* in front of the viewer, but on the basis of its *having-been-there*, in front of the camera lens once upon a time in the past: “an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*.”⁴⁹⁹ This coexistence of spatial immediacy with a sense of looking at something now gone or past is described by Geoffrey Batchen as “the basis of every photograph’s sense of witness.”⁵⁰⁰ Barthes’s thoughts on the photograph, like the concept of trauma, are an attempt to account for the simultaneous experience of immediacy and temporal anteriority.

In *Camera Lucida* Barthes attempts to define two separate orders of meaning generated by the photographic image. The first is concerned with the information conveyed by the image as it is experienced, through cultural and historical mediation, by the viewer. He terms this order of meaning *studium*, denoting taste or application, “a kind of general enthusiastic commitment.”⁵⁰¹ The second type of reaction Barthes has when encountering certain photographs is more complicated, harder to define, and could be said

⁴⁹⁸ Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” 44.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 44.

⁵⁰⁰ Geoffrey Batchen, “Palinode,” in Geoffrey Batchen (ed.), *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections of Roland Barthes’s Camera Lucida* (Cambridge, MA. & London: The MIT Press, 2011), 8.

⁵⁰¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.

to have more to do with what the photograph *does* as opposed to what it shows or depicts. Barthes terms this response *punctum*, because it breaks or punctuates the field of the *studium*, it takes the form of an involuntary bodily response: “This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness) it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.”⁵⁰² The attention to emotion, personal experience and embodiment signals that the *punctum* is a particular type of affective response. Barthes goes on to reiterate the way in which this response is experienced as a bodily injury: “this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument.”⁵⁰³ Continuing to offer corporeally palpable similes, as if in acknowledgement that the experience of *punctum* is both profound and varied, Barthes adds the notion of chance to the sensation of physical violation: “sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”⁵⁰⁴ As I argued above chance, in the form of probability and accident, is of central importance in both trauma theory and the HIV epidemic: extending the traumatic event and its consequences temporally and across the bodies of the community it helps constitute through shared risk.

In *Time to Leave* after Romain’s father drops him off at his apartment we are introduced to his boyfriend Sasha (Christian Sengewald). As Romain is taking off his coat Sasha is playing a video game at which he comments, “Still playing that crap? You’re not twelve anymore.” Sasha ignores this jibe and asks where Romain has been, when he replies that he has been at his parent’s and it was the same as usual, a gunshot and a foreboding musical chord rings out from Sasha’s video game as he turns around to look at Romain for the first time. Immediately afterwards we see the couple take some cocaine and have a somewhat violent sexual encounter where Romain’s penetration of Sasha is

⁵⁰² Ibid. 26.

⁵⁰³ Ibid. 26.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid. 27.

emphasized by the framing of his erection. After they have sex the pair discuss how their love has faded over time, with Romain becoming increasingly cruel and insulting telling Sasha to leave and that he is fed up supporting him financially. After a physical confrontation Sasha storms off to sleep on the couch before leaving in the morning. Romain whispers “pardon, pardon (sorry, sorry)” to himself, suggesting that he has provoked Sasha into leaving in order to protect him from the pain of his impending physical deterioration and death. In the following scene, which takes place later that same night, Romain comes down from the mezzanine bedroom area and, in a repetition of the actions of Paul from *La petit morte* and Wojnarowicz but with the proximity to death reversed from subject to photographer, the dying Romain meticulously photographs isolated parts of Sasha’s sleeping body. As he does this a very literal representation of Barthes’s *punctum* is shown through the appearance of a trail of blood running from Sasha’s temple [Fig. 3.9]. The attention to wounding and bodily penetration, already established by the violent video game and sex scene, is particularly stark and emphatic here as it is, with the exception of Romain’s flashbacks and interactions with his childhood self, the only point where the film departs from the conventions of cinematic realism.



Fig. 3.9: François Ozon, *Time to Leave* (2005), Romain photographs Sasha.

Though Barthes argues that the punctum has an immediate bodily nature akin to penetration or wounding, he also argues that it can sometimes only be grasped after it has been worked through in the mind.⁵⁰⁵ Barthes has this insight towards the end of the first part of *Camera Lucida* when reconsidering a photograph of an African American family by the photographer James Van der Zee. When contemplating the same photograph earlier in the text Barthes had considered the *punctum* to reside in or be produced by the strapped shoes of one of the women in the photograph.⁵⁰⁶ Reconsidering the photograph in its absence, however, he comes to the realization that it was in fact the necklace worn by the same woman in the picture that generated, for Barthes, its affective power. The necklace, he tells us, is the same as one that had been worn by one of his elderly unmarried female relatives: “I had always been saddened whenever I thought of her dreary life.”⁵⁰⁷ Victor Burgin argues that in this displacement from the ankle strap to the circle round the throat and from the woman in the photograph to Barthes’s elderly relative we arrive the sources of the *punctum* “in the themes of death and sexuality, played out within a family scenario [...] the very substance of psychoanalysis.”⁵⁰⁸ The text, which throughout the whole book is composed of short numbered entries and written with a diaristic immediacy, continues to revise the notion of the *punctum* in line with this latest important insight: “I had just realized that however immediate and incisive it was, the *punctum* could accommodate a certain latency.”⁵⁰⁹

In watching *Time to Leave* we are positioned in a similarly intimate relationship to Romain, who is present in almost every scene of the film, often alone, vulnerable (towards the end of the film we witness his painful physical deterioration), and in close proximity to the camera. Yet we are given little access to Romain’s inner life during this intimacy: no character motivation is offered to explain his secrecy about his illness, his difficult

⁵⁰⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 53.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 43.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 53.

⁵⁰⁸ Victor Burgin, “Re-Reading *Camera Lucida*,” in Batchen (ed.), *Photography Degree Zero*, 42.

⁵⁰⁹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 53.

relationship with his family, his treatment of his boyfriend or his decision to father a child. In this way the film demonstrates a respect for the singular and somewhat ineffable nature of its protagonist. It also mirrors Barthes's assertion that the *punctum* is something we experience individually, the difficulty of communicating it to another viewer of the same photograph is exposed by his extensive use of bodily metaphors throughout the text and his decision not to reproduce the photograph that, for him, has the most potent lacerating effect.

In the second half of *Camera Lucida* Barthes focuses more intently on the temporal nature of the *punctum* as part of his experience of grief following the death of his mother. In his search for a photograph that communicated the unique "truth" of his mother, rather than simply represented her, he finds himself moving back through time from photographs of her shortly before her death to one of her as a child.⁵¹⁰ When he finds such a photograph – taken in 1898 when his mother was five years old in a Winter Garden – Barthes writes that he cannot reproduce it for the reader, for it would only operate on the level of *studium* and would not possess for them any of the force of the *punctum* that has stung and touched him: "in it, for you, no wound."⁵¹¹ A key aspect of the *punctum* is, therefore, its unique relevance to the person who experiences its wounding power, making the viewer aware of their singular individuality through this experience of bodily penetration. In this respect Barthes's book on photography is deeply informed by his longstanding interest in Marcel Proust, an important precursor to *Camera Lucida* is the essay "*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure...*", first delivered as a lecture at the Collège de France in 1978, just after the death of his mother, which takes the first line on Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* as its title. Walter Benjamin also drew attention to Proust's ability to communicate the seemingly ineffable experience of singular personhood through his writing: "When Proust in a well-known passage described the

⁵¹⁰ Ibid. 71.

⁵¹¹ Ibid. 73.

hour that was most his own, he did it in such a way that everyone can find in it his own existence.”⁵¹² This insight would be taken up by Barthes as a partial model for his *punctum*.

In Search of Lost Time is also an important influence on *Time to Leave* in that both place great importance in the relationship between a young protagonist and his wise grandmother. In addition, though the film is titled *Time to Leave* in English a closer translation of its French title (*Le temps qui reste*) would give the somewhat more Proustian *The Remaining Time*. Ozon’s film also incorporates the latency that, as I have argued, is of central importance to both Barthes’s work on photography and trauma, and is a leading concern of Proust’s novel. Emma Wilson writes of her disappointment upon first viewing the film, initially finding it “dark, glassy and linear.”⁵¹³ Poupaud, she found, “despite his mournful beauty,” absorbed the film’s energy with his omnipresence.⁵¹⁴ However, in a reflection of my own experience of repeatedly re-watching the film on DVD she found “that the film gains immeasurably from intimate viewing, from close-knit familiarity.”⁵¹⁵

The compulsion to repeat is, as is well known, one of the one of the primary symptoms of traumatic neurosis. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Sigmund Freud writes of repetition as a problem stemming from the confusion of temporal immediacy and anteriority: “He is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past.”⁵¹⁶ Freud also observes the repetition compulsion in the actions of individuals

⁵¹² Walter Benjamin, “The Image of Proust,” Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Fontana, 1973), 205.

⁵¹³ Emma Wilson, “Time to Leave (*Le temps qui reste*),” *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 60:2 (Winter, 2006), 24.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.* 24.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.* 24.

⁵¹⁶ Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 18. Emphasis original.

who do not display any other neurotic symptoms.⁵¹⁷ At a key point in his essay he also suggests a shift in focus away from “the dark and dismal subject of traumatic neurosis” towards an analysis of children’s play which he presents as the mind, “in one of its earliest *normal* activities.”⁵¹⁸ Freud then goes on to describe the famous fort/da (gone/there) game in which a child re-enacts its separation from its mother using a wooden reel attached to a string.⁵¹⁹ The repeated re-enactment of this unpleasant situation is, Freud argues, an example of the child revisiting the painful scenario as master of the situation, rather than passive participant, and in doing so attenuating the trauma of his mother’s absence.⁵²⁰ Freud interprets such behaviour as similar to tragic art in that it amounts to a transformation of what is unpleasurable into something enjoyable.⁵²¹ The neurotic patient is distinguished by the inability to re-channel the traumatic experience in this way and the compulsion to repeat in an uncontrolled and unpleasurable way.⁵²² At the same time as he acknowledges this difference Freud also hypothesises the existence of the death drive, a universal and instinctual “urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things.”⁵²³ Speculating that all organic life forms seek to restore the inanimate state from which they were roused long ago by external environmental forces he states that “*the aim of all life is death.*”⁵²⁴ Freud argues, however, that the organism seeks death only from internal causes and for this reason fights against and is fearful of external forces that might cause death.⁵²⁵ Such proximity to (or encounters with) forces that could cause death, when not anticipated by anxiety and therefore experienced as unexpected and frightful, as I explained above, can result in traumatic neurosis.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid. 21.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid. 14.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid. 14-15.

⁵²⁰ Ibid. 16-17.

⁵²¹ Ibid. 17.

⁵²² Ibid. 38.

⁵²³ Ibid. 38.

⁵²⁴ Ibid. 38. Emphasis original.

⁵²⁵ Ibid. 39.

Cathy Caruth has drawn from Freud's work the lesson that trauma is characterised not simply by an encounter with death but by "the ongoing experience of having survived it."⁵²⁶ Having failed to grasp the brush with death at the time, it is only after the temporal delay that the trauma victim can try to make sense of both the event and his or her survival from it. In some ways this conception of trauma would seem to exclude the AIDS crisis, which wasn't conditioned by any delay in the appearance of either artistic or activist responses to it, but in fact saw an enormous outpouring of artistic investigations into the subject across all media and an a sense of urgency on the part of activists who demanded that something must be done right then and there to mitigate not just the epidemic but the many injustices and inequalities which were exacerbating it too. However, I'm arguing that trauma theory can help us to understand how an example like *Time to Leave* can be seen as returning to the AIDS crisis at a time in which, in the developed world at least, its most acute phase seemed to have passed. The film was released in 2005, around ten years after what's been called the "pharmaceutical threshold" where effective anti-retroviral combination therapies became available.⁵²⁷ The extensive and advanced state of public healthcare in Western Europe has meant that this change, where HIV becomes a chronic and manageable illness rather than a terminal one and rates of new infections are also kept low, has been more pronounced here than anywhere else. But if *survival* is as much a cause of trauma as the encounter with death itself, then it could be the success of this approach, the fact that after so much death and loss the crisis seems to have passed after all, that accounts for the belated and traumatic relationship that a film like *Time to Leave* has with the AIDS crisis. As Caruth writes:

If *fright* is the term by which Freud defines the traumatic effect of not having been prepared in time, then the trauma of the nightmare does not simply consist in the experience *within* the dream, but in *the experience of waking from it*. It is the experience of *waking into consciousness* that, peculiarly, is identified with the

⁵²⁶ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD. & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 7.

⁵²⁷ Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, 2.

reliving of the trauma. And as such it is not only the dream that surprises consciousness but, indeed, the very *waking itself* that constitutes the surprise: the fact not only of the dream but of having passed beyond it. [...] What one returns to in the flashback is not the incomprehensibility of one's near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one's own survival.⁵²⁸

Building upon Freud, Caruth's work establishes trauma as a crisis of survival and the individual or collective relationship to the past. Drawing parallels between Freud's speculation that all organisms are in a quest to return to an inorganic state and in this way are compelled in a struggle to die with the high suicide rates documented among those who have survived the traumatic events of the twentieth century, Caruth sees the death drive as a recognition of the destructive impulses in the human psyche and "the formation of history as the endless repetition of previous violence."⁵²⁹ What the lengthy quotation above also draws our attention to is the shared terminology found in descriptions of the experience of trauma and one of the most well established cinematic techniques for representing the past: the flashback. Romain's negotiation of his own past is conveyed by both flashbacks and his viewing of still photographs.

Photographs as narrative device – Flashbacks

As I have outlined above, Barthes sees photography as a revolutionary medium due to its characteristic of "spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority"⁵³⁰ In *Camera Lucida* he adds that certain photographs have a penetrating, wounding power which engages the viewer in their singularity and embodiedness. This quality of the photograph is also one which instils the photographic subject with animation and life beyond its frame. This is a quality more usually associated with the moving image of cinema rather than the still

⁵²⁸ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 64. Emphasis original.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.* 63.

⁵³⁰ Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 44.

photograph where everything is thought to be fixed down, motionless and dead.⁵³¹ In addition, as Simon Watney has also argued, domestic photography in particular often facilitates the imaginative experience of communicating with younger versions of ourselves and re-narrativising our past. Domestic photographs can confer an imaginary coherence upon the events of a life or in the case of the final scene of *La petite morte*, when the photo of Paul as a baby in his father's arms prompts a reconsideration of his feelings regarding his father, can disrupt the previously existing narrative.

In *Time to Leave* Romain looks through a family photo album during his visit to his grandmother around half way through the film. The photographs here work to emphasise the narrative development of Romain's family across the generations from his grandmother to himself. However, as we have just learned, this family story does not conform to a mythical model of normative stability, coherence or reproduction either. Immediately before Romain looks through the photo album Laura recounts the story of the immediate aftermath of his grandfather's death. In order to escape her suicidal despair Laura abandoned her son, who reminded her too much of her lost husband, and took many lovers. Romain's father has never forgiven her for her actions but she is confident that she did the right thing. Laura equates her own actions at this time, which were seen as selfish and promiscuous, with Romain's decision not to tell any of his other family members about his impending death, which she had previously criticised. Furthermore, as I noted above, earlier in the film Romain's father had spoken of his own infidelities and the difficult emotional history of his marriage. As we look with Romain at the photographs of his grandmother as a young woman; his father as a child, his mother with himself as an infant, an image of the boy who has been established as the child Romain, and photos of himself as an adolescent and an adult; we do so in the knowledge that this sequence of still images does not (only) confer the happy and successful succession of the generations, but

⁵³¹ Bathes, *Camera Lucida*, 57-59.

is also an archive of upset, abandonment and survival. In this group of scenes Romain explains that he made the decision to tell Laura alone about the nature of his condition due to their shared proximity to death. Romain and Laura (framed together in such a way as to resemble Michelangelo's *Pietà*), with his singularity marked out by his bright red jumper against the beige and black tonalities of Laura's home [Fig. 3.10], share with each other the questionable paths through emotional turmoil that each has taken.



Fig. 3.10: François Ozon, *Time To Leave* (2005), Romain and Laura.

Romain and Laura agree that they have deeper similarities than their shared proximity to finitude and I see their unorthodox responses to death and bereavement as reflective of another conception of natality. As Timothy Clark has argued natality need not only refer to birth but can convey the force of having acted unexpectedly: “refusing to passively fulfil a role, obey conventional expectations or to behave as ‘normal’ or ‘expected’ for the type of the person society may cast us as.”⁵³² This aspect of natality is hugely important for political thought, keeping open the possibility that one can act outside their social positioning or acculturation. The horizons of *Time to Leave*, however, are limited by the approaching mortality of Romain and Laura and the limited action they can take in that remaining time.

⁵³² Timothy Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity: The Counter-Culturalist Turn in Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot and the later Gadamer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 30.

The central emphasis on the relationship between a wise grandmother and young protagonist is also another way in which *Time to Leave* genuflects to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*.⁵³³ Significantly, it is also an additional way in which the film betrays its debt to Guibert's *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, a book that has a reasonable claim to be the definitive French AIDS text, and with which a significant number of French viewers will be familiar. References to it are likely to lead many who watch the film to think of the epidemic at its most severe point (the book was released in 1990 and Guibert died in 1991). Guibert documented and wrote a great deal about his close relationship with his octogenarian great-aunts Suzanne and Louise, a relationship that is transposed onto Romain and his grandmother in the film [Fig. 3.11].⁵³⁴ *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* is also a novel which investigates the uncertain temporality of HIV, the progress of opportunistic infections and experimental drugs, and the way in which the gradual but inevitable encroachment of death can produce its own existential insights: "It was a disease that gave death time to live and its victims time to die, time to discover time, and in the end to discover life."⁵³⁵ Near the end of the film when Romain, this time marked out in a pink sweater against the cool turquoise blue of his apartment, reconciles with Sasha he takes his former lover's hand and places it over his heart in a gesture that resembles *L'ami* one of Guibert's most well-known and widely reproduced photographs [Fig. 3.12]. An even closer reproduction of this photograph appears in *La petite morte* as the last of the still pictures which occupy the screen as Paul and Martial make love after receiving news of the death of Paul's father [Fig. 3.13]. At a point in *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* Guibert's friend and lover Jules shaves off his curly hair. In addition to making him look more like a recognisable or stereotypical PWA this action

⁵³³ For a reading which considers *Time to Leave* in conjunction with these examples of European high culture see Emma Wilson, "Pathos as Queer Sociality in Contemporary European Visual Culture: François Ozon's *Time to Leave*," in Mireille Rosello and Sundeep Dasgupta (eds.), *What's Queer about Europe?: Productive Encounters and Re-enchanting Paradigms* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 148-170.

⁵³⁴ Asibong, *François Ozon*, 105.

⁵³⁵ Guibert, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, 164. See also Lawrence R. Schehr, *Alcibiades At The Door: Gay Discourses in French Literature* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 155-198.

removes the last remnants of cherubic charm from Guibert's face.⁵³⁶ This is a gesture Romain repeats towards the end of the film when he's becoming increasingly ill and approaching death [Fig. 3.14].



Fig 3.11: Hervé Guibert, *Autoportrait avec Suzanne et Louise*, 1979. Gelatin silver print, 14.6 x 22.9 cm.

⁵³⁶ Guibert, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, 80-81.



Fig. 3.12: Hervé Guibert, *L'ami*, 1979. Gelatin silver print, 14.3 x 21.9 cm.



Fig. 3.13: François Ozon, *Le petite mort* (1995), Paul's photograph.



Fig. 3.14: François Ozon, *Time to Leave* (2005), Romain shaves his head.

In addition to the use of still photographs *Time to Leave* also extensively employs the flashback, a much more common cinematic technique for narrativising the past. In mainstream narrative cinema flashbacks usually function as a method of conveying information about the diegetic past to the spectator (and often to other characters) in order to advance the plot or provide motivation for the actions of characters in the present.⁵³⁷ Such flashbacks are usually announced by an established set of conventions. These

⁵³⁷ Joshua Hirsh, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia, PA.: Temple University Press, 2004), 93.

include aspects of dialogue and plot like the remembering character being asked by another character to recall the past; transitional markers like fades, dissolves and musical cues; or, as is often the case with interior flashbacks which are not recounted to other characters, techniques like a close up of the remembering character followed by a shift in their gaze which is then held on a blank spot or significant object.⁵³⁸ Such conventions, it has been argued, were introduced as part of a commercial imperative to prevent excessive experimentation by filmmakers with cinema's ability to disrupt spatio-temporal reality by letting the spectator experience, rather than simply hear recounted, the remembering character's immersion in their own past.⁵³⁹ The filmic conventions surrounding classical flashbacks ensured that, in the minds of spectators, the remembered events were securely confined to the past. However, as Joshua Hirsch has demonstrated, an alternative form of flashback can be identified that is characterised by the absence of transitional markers, primarily these flashbacks signal the involuntary and unpleasant onset of the memory for the remembering character.⁵⁴⁰ As Maureen Turim notes, even cinematic flashbacks that correspond to convention and firmly signal the content of the flashback scene as the personal, subjective, memory of a character imply a psychoanalytic dimension to personality.⁵⁴¹ They do this through their use of the past as the determining factor in that character's nature and motivations in the film's present. Further to this Hirsch designates the involuntary, painful and spontaneous flashbacks that he identifies as posttraumatic on the basis of their often painful content and, more importantly, "the formal disturbance of the time jump."⁵⁴² Trauma's temporality is one of disturbing belatedness and its relationship to the past is one of a more upsetting and unexpected intrusion than the wilful recollection that is the subject of conventional flashbacks.

⁵³⁸ Ibid. 93-94.

⁵³⁹ Ibid. 92.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid. 95

⁵⁴¹ Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), 12.

⁵⁴² Hirsch, *Afterimage*, 98.

Time to Leave employs many flashbacks to Romain's childhood which are naturalised according to convention as his personal memories. It also features several more idiosyncratic flashbacks where Romain's memories of himself as a child are not confined to the past, but where the two Romains come to occupy the same present and even, in the final scene where Romain goes to a crowded beach to sunbathe and die, interact with one another [Fig. 3.15]. As I explained above the film's sustained engagement with the theme of childhood, coupled with the fact that Romain fathers a child with an infertile heterosexual couple have led to accusations that the film is normative and moralistic. Against this argument I have argued that the birth of each child, rather than simply representing the ceaseless replication of bourgeois norms, actually introduces at least the potential for alterity and transformation. Strengthening this argument is the fact that the child version of Romain is particularised as a queer child. This is apparent in a scene in which Romain goes to a church and encounters his childhood self and a friend, about two thirds of the way through the film.



Fig. 3.15: François Ozon, *Time to Leave* (2005), Romain at the beach.

After a series of scenes showing Romain's increasingly acute physical decline he visits a church and observes two boys, one of whom is the child that has been established as his former self, play a prank by urinating in the font before giggling as they watch an elderly parishioner make the gesture of the cross on her body with the contaminated holy

water. As they laugh, the friend, who bears some physical resemblance to the adult Sasha, kisses the young Romain on the cheek and exits the frame. The young Romain looks perturbed as his adult counterpart looks on in tears [Fig. 3.16]. The film is foregrounding this as the first instance in the development of Romain's non-normative sexuality.



Fig. 3.16: François Ozon, *Time to Leave* (2005), Romain, young Romain and a friend in church.

The psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche has retranslated the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (commonly translated into English as “deferred action”) as “afterwardness.” This reformulation is a key part of his advancement of a theory of human sexuality based on a model of “general seduction” taking place in infancy; this model proposes that sexuality itself is something “exogenous, traumatic and intrusive.”⁵⁴³ For Laplanche seduction and trauma are not egregious or exceptional but ordinary. He makes this argument by examining an anecdote of Freud’s concerning a young man who encounters the woman who was formally employed as his wet-nurse. Upon experiencing sexual excitation the young man comments, “I’m sorry [...] that I didn’t make better use of my opportunity.”⁵⁴⁴ For Freud this story illustrates the dual directionality at work in the formation of human sexuality in that sexuality is deferred into adulthood and past experiences are retrospectively sexualised. Laplanche reminds us that the adult finds the spectacle of the infant at the breast sexually exciting, not only because of retrospective fantasising, but also because he “has retained and preserved the traces of his own infantile sexuality” in the form of oral eroticism.⁵⁴⁵ Crucially, for Laplanche, Freud’s account of this tale takes into consideration only the infant and adult incarnations of the young man, he neglects “the nurse and her own sexuality, which is no doubt vaguely sensed by the baby.”⁵⁴⁶ This assertion – that the infant has some sense of the adult’s unconscious sexuality in their interactions – is a key part of Laplanche’s reformulation of seduction theory in terms of the transmission of enigmatic messages from adult to infant. While touching a child’s genitals might seem obviously sexual, Laplanche reminds us of the potential erotogenic nature of the entire body: “On the basis of this fundamental postulate, how should we see the gesture of touching the child’s big toe?”⁵⁴⁷ In the entirety of its

⁵⁴³ John Fletcher, “Introduction: Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Other,” in Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 6.

⁵⁴⁴ Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, 263-264.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 264.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 265.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 169.

interactions with adults the infant (*in-fans*: speechless) is in a helpless, passive and open relationship with an adult subject who has their own unconscious, which retains traces of their own polymorphous infantile sexuality: “an adult proffers to a child verbal, non-verbal and even behavioural signifiers which are pregnant with unconscious sexual significations.”⁵⁴⁸

The concept of the enigmatic signifier is informed by the distinction between a signifier *of* and a signifier *to* where the former designates a specific meaning or signified and the latter a message towards a specific subject, addressed to and interpolating them. Though they may not be able to attribute a specific meaning to the signifier, they are aware that they are its intended recipient. It is the latter form of signifier that persists into adulthood in Laplanche’s enigmatic model based on the possibility that, “the signifier may be designified or lose what it signifies, without thereby losing its power to signify to.”⁵⁴⁹ This message is enigmatic not simply because the infant is unable to determine its meaning but, because it derives from the unconscious wishes of the other, it remains opaque to the adult as well: “Internal alien-ness maintained, held in place by external alien-ness; external alien-ness, in turn, held in place by the enigmatic relation of the other to his own internal alien.”⁵⁵⁰ Showing that the unconscious/sexuality of the subject is derived in part from an other, through the proffering and translation of enigmatic messages (derived from innocuous interactions essential to the infant’s survival) themselves conditioned by the unconscious of that other, amounts to a radical decentering of the human subject from itself, with trauma rearticulated as a foundational and “ordinary” process.

In *Time to Leave* the kiss proffered to the young Romain by his friend acts along the lines of Laplanche’s time bomb analogy of the afterwardness of trauma: “the first

⁵⁴⁸ Fletcher, “Introduction,” 11.

⁵⁴⁹ Fletcher, “Introduction,” 12.

⁵⁵⁰ Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, 80.

memory is like a time-bomb which is triggered off by something outside of it.”⁵⁵¹ I would add to this theory of the ordinariness of trauma the implications that come with the sexuality released by that external influence being at odds with cultural standards of normativity. Bond Stockton has drawn attention to “the general and cultural tendency to officially treat *all* children as straight, while continuing to deem them asexual.”⁵⁵² The traumatic component of the emergence of sexuality is amplified when that sexual subjectivity is, to quote Lauren Berlant, “organized more manifestly by risk than is the case for other more highly valued normative ones whose risks have tended to be romanticized and heroized.”⁵⁵³ Berlant, drawing on the work of David Halperin, is thinking of the disruptive force of sex in general arguing that when someone comments to their lover after having sex, “‘you make me feel safe’ we understand that she means that there’s been an emotional compensation to neutralize how unsafe and close to the abject sex makes her feel.”⁵⁵⁴ For the non-normative subject sex and sexuality can entail the risks of social abjection and HIV infection too. However, *Time to Leave* acknowledges these risks at the same time as it de-dramatises them: immediately following this scene we see young Romain and his friend happily together at mass, seemingly having made some sort of peace with the destabilizing force of their sexuality.

Conclusion

I previously mentioned the scorn Romain directs towards his sister’s approach to parenting, aligning his attitude with what queer theorist Lee Edelman has described as the

⁵⁵¹ Ibid. 261.

⁵⁵² Kathryn Bond Stockton, “Eve’s Queer Child,” in Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (eds.), *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), 185.

⁵⁵³ Lauren Berlant, “Neither monstrous nor pastoral, but scary and sweet: Some thoughts on sex and emotional performance in Intimacies and What Do Gay Men Want,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, Vol. 19:2 (2009), 266.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid. 269.

narcissistic and self-congratulatory character of pronatalism.⁵⁵⁵ The broader target of Edelman's critique is the deeply ingrained cultural tendency to invoke the figure of the child as "the emblem of futurity's unquestioned value."⁵⁵⁶ By this he means the way in which the future, heralded by the image/idea of the child, seems to promise the achievement of meaning and stable identity through time in the manner of linear narrative.⁵⁵⁷ Instead, Edelman argues that the image of the child deployed in the name of futurity in fact defers enjoyment, the meaningless and self-shattering *jouissance* that exposes the inability of our investment in the future to fulfil our desire or confer stability on our identity.⁵⁵⁸ In opposition to futurity's child he celebrates the disruption of identity and dedication to *jouissance* he associates with the queer.⁵⁵⁹ Edelman's target is the idea of the child as the unquestionable anchor of futurity, which defers meaningful change in the present and is often invoked to curtail the freedoms and liberties of that imperfect present's adults.⁵⁶⁰ This image/idea of the child, he admits, does not correspond to any actually existing or historical child. Furthermore, he hints at the possibility that the child could also be an equally appropriate emblem for the destabilising force of queerness that his account pits it against: "the cult of the Child permits no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls, since queerness, for contemporary culture at large [...] is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end."⁵⁶¹ In this quotation we see, in common with the work of Bond-Stockton, the recognition that children are capable of being very queer indeed alongside the acknowledgement that queerness, through its association with sexuality, can often only be comfortably realised or acknowledged after the child has ceased to be. In specifying Romain's childhood as a queer one *Time to Leave* draws attention to the capacity of birth and childhood to introduce at least the potential for

⁵⁵⁵ Edelman, *No Future*, 13.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 4.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 4.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 13.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 5 & 17.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 21

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.* 19.

queerness, alterity and change into the world in line with the concept of natality. By the time of Romain's death at the end of the film we are projecting this potential forward in time on to his unborn child.

Furthermore, this theme of birth and the passing of generations draws attention to the fact that the belated experience of trauma if it is, as Caruth argues, a crisis of survival, is something that exceeds a single individual or generation. *Time to Leave's* allegory of the AIDS crisis; alluded to through terminal illness, risk discourse, the medium of photography and the figure of Guibert; returns to a time in which HIV/AIDS was a terminal and fatal illness from the vantage point of the present day and the context of western European affluence, healthcare, and social liberalism regarding sexuality, where it is a chronic and manageable condition. Though the development of effective HIV treatments is, of course, a good thing the transformation of HIV into a chronic condition can itself be viewed as a partial failure for those hoping for a vaccine or cure. As Elizabeth Fee and Daniel Fox argue in the introduction to their book *AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease*, in the early 1980s it was widely agreed that the analogies with past epidemics that were most suited to explaining AIDS were those that concerned "sudden, time-limited outbreaks of infection [...] Many people were unwilling to believe that a disease that had emerged [...] so suddenly, and appeared to be invariably fatal, was either deeply rooted in the past or likely to become part of the human condition for the foreseeable future."⁵⁶² Fee and Fox also note that for those with the infection, or close to people who have it, or in the main risk groups, the psychological effect of HIV infection becoming a chronic condition could be devastating in its own way for this meant "admitting that the threat of disease is not transient, not a matter of a bad season or a terrible year" that HIV is, in fact, more like cancer than cholera or the Black Death.⁵⁶³

⁵⁶² Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox (eds.), *AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA. & London, University of California Press, 1992), 3.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.* 4.

Chapter 4: Embodying the uncanny: Sexual difference in the films of Pedro

Almodóvar

In a scene near the beginning of Pedro Almodóvar's *Talk to Her* (*Hable con ella*, 2002) Marco (Darío Grandinetti), the lover of a female bullfighter recently placed in a coma, wanders the halls of a hospital clinic specialising in the care of patients in a Persistent Vegetative State. Finding a door ajar Marco surreptitiously gazes at the naked body of an unconscious young woman being attended by two nurses. The shot, from Marco's point of view, framed by the partially open door, aligns us with his voyeurism [Fig. 4.1]. The young woman suddenly opens her eyes and Marco, in a state of stupefaction that is itself wide-eyed, hastily exits the scene unnoticed. Benigno (Javier Cámara) one of the nurses then asks his colleague, Rosa (Mariola Fuentes), to close the door and notices the patient's open eyes. "That gives me the creeps," Rosa comments. "And when she yawns?" Asks Benigno, "I shit myself," she replies. The confusion and repulsion of nurses Rosa and Marco are a testament to the uncomfortably uncanny nature of a human body exhibiting the wakeful unconsciousness that characterises a vegetative state.



Fig. 4.1: Pedro Almodóvar, *Talk to Her* (2002), Marco gazes at Alicia.

When Sigmund Freud wrote his essay *The Uncanny* in 1919, medical technology was not sufficiently advanced to support patients like Alicia (Leonor Watling), the young woman in this scene. Had such technology existed, we can reasonably suggest, Freud would have mentioned the troubling space occupied by Alicia between life and lifelessness as one of his examples of states that provoke the uncanny. The uncanny, understood as the experience of the familiar made strange can also be understood as a condition the renders us strangers to ourselves. The concept therefore has profound implications for questions of identity, particularly sexual difference, one theme of Freud's original essay. By the time Freud wrote his essay the uncanny had already become an unstable notion or nodal point at which several different discourses met and this chapter will continue to use the concept in this expansive way. In making the familiar strange, and troubling the distinction between the natural and unnatural the uncanny is a phenomenon closely related to deconstruction which, along with psychoanalysis and the work of Georges Bataille, as I have argued in the previous chapters, is the most appropriate methodology we have at our disposal for understanding the questions thrown up and the transformations wrought by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. To this end I will turn to Jean-Luc Nancy's essay "The Intruder," a meditation on the disruption brought about by life-saving medical intervention, a heart transplant and course of immunosuppressant drugs, in any simple conceptualisation of the boundaries and definition of his own body and identity. Like deconstructive accounts of HIV and other illnesses, psychoanalytically inspired feminist film theory asks questions about how we identify as bodies/selves in relation to cinematic representation and how cinema reflects or challenges normative ideology.

In this chapter I will look at the films of Pedro Almodóvar, particularly *Talk to Her* and *The Skin I Live In* (*La piel que habito*, 2011) to argue that they can be read as meditations on the HIV/AIDS epidemic in that they present medicalised bodies subject to

various extreme forms of penetration which question the notion of the natural and authentic body/self. Furthermore, *The Skin I Live In* presents gender identity itself as an imposition and painful wound and as such can be read as a film that is about coming to terms with profound loss. To this end I shall employ Butler's concept of gender melancholia to argue that the film allows its audience to experience gender as loss and thereby recognise losses ordinarily barred from recognition in heteronormative culture. While in the previous chapter I argued that *Time to Leave* was a retrospective view of a time when HIV usually meant unavoidable death, here I make a backwards glance to a time when AIDS deaths were disavowed and devalued by widespread homophobia. However, *The Skin I Live In*, I argue, dramatises and avows the normally melancholically foreclosed losses that structure sexual difference and for this reason can be read as a film about recognising and living with the memory and experience of such profound loss.

Uncanny

In attempting to distinguish the particularity of the uncanny from that which is frightening or repulsive in any other way, Freud argues that the uncanny, while terrifying, paradoxically always leads back to something once known and very familiar to us.⁵⁶⁴ In cataloguing "those things, persons, impressions, events and situations which are able to arouse in us a feeling of the uncanny in a very forcible and definite form," Freud cites entities or beings that appear to blur the boundaries between animate and inanimate, for example waxworks and automatons, as starting-points for his investigation.⁵⁶⁵

However, Freud argues that in "The Sand-Man," the story by E. T. A. Hoffman which had inspired his predecessors to form their conclusions on the production of

⁵⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. XVII (1917-1919)*, Trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage & The Hogarth Press, 2001), 220.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 226.

uncanny affects, the automaton Olympia is not the only, or primary, element in the story which creates the “quite unparalleled atmosphere of uncanniness,” the tale evokes.⁵⁶⁶ Instead, he suggests, the primary source of the uncanny in Hoffman’s story is “the idea of being robbed of one’s eyes.”⁵⁶⁷ The fear of losing one’s eyes, he continues, is felt especially strongly in children and is maintained by many adults.⁵⁶⁸ Furthermore, Freud argues, the particular terror associated with losing one’s eyes can be attributed to fear of castration, for which fear of blindness acts as a substitute. The Sand-Man in the story is actually a stand-in for “the dreaded father at whose hands castration is expected.”⁵⁶⁹ Like the childhood fear of castration, the uncanny effect of objects which blur the distinction between animate and inanimate – Olympia in the story but also dolls, waxworks etc. – can be attributed to the return of repressed childhood fantasy. In this case the fantasy is a form of animistic belief among children where they believe that their toy dolls are, or can be, equivalent to living beings.⁵⁷⁰

In *Talk to Her* it transpires that Benigno’s relationship with Alicia predates her medical condition. He lives across the road from her ballet school and has developed an obsession with her through gazing voyeuristically from his window [Fig. 4.2]. After returning Alicia’s lost wallet to her in the street and walking her home he discovers that Alicia’s father is a psychiatrist. When she fails to turn up to class one day he uses this information to gain contact with her by booking an appointment with her father. During this consultation he reveals that he has lived a very isolated life with his deceased mother, caring for her every need, only leaving her side to attend his nursing course. In addition to nursing Benigno has taken correspondence courses in hairdressing and make-up in order to take better care of his mother, he also washes her body and manicures her nails. All this is despite the fact that his mother is not mentally or physically ill “just a bit lazy.” “My

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid. 227.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid. 230.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid. 231.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid. 231-232.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid. 233.

mother was beautiful,” Benigno tells the doctor, “and I didn’t want her to let herself go.” Far from being an overbearing imprisoner, Benigno’s mother seems to have been an entirely passive plaything: a living doll.



Fig. 4.2: Pedro Almodóvar, *Talk to Her* (2002), Benigno gazes out of his window.

Following the psychiatrist’s questioning Benigno reveals that he has never had sex with a man or woman. His sexuality is a subject that the doctor would like to discuss in a subsequent appointment. After stealing a memento, a hair-clip, from Alicia’s room Benigno encounters her as she is leaving the shower. To allay her shock he tells her that he just wanted to see her but is “harmless.”

In the same flashback Benigno explains to Marco that when Alicia was involved in the road accident that placed her in her current condition her father requested the best nursing care. When Benigno was put forward by the hospital her father had a moment of

hesitation but eventually hired him as one of two exclusive carers for Alicia. Later in the film it is revealed that Benigno is allowed such intimate and unsupervised access to Alicia because her father and most of the other medical staff believe him to be gay and therefore “harmless.”

In contrast to his hermetic existence with his mother, Benigno has his life enriched and his horizons broadened during his time caring for Alicia. In order to have something to talk to her about he adopts her interests: he attends ballet and silent film performances and recounts his experiences to the semi-comatose Alicia. Marco is sceptical about the ability of Alicia and his own girlfriend Lydia (Rosario Flores) to understand anything that is said to them and the effectiveness of talking as a therapy. Benigno’s belief that Alicia and Lydia appreciate conversation is absolute. In response to Marco’s rationalism he draws upon a series of clichés: the female mind is “a mystery, even more so in this state.” He also speaks from the perspective of a devoted, if somewhat patronising, husband: “You have to pay attention to women, to talk to them. Be thoughtful occasionally. Caress them. Remember that they exist, that they’re alive and that they matter to us.” Later, when it emerges that Lydia had, in fact, rekindled her relationship with a fellow bullfighter a month before her accident and was intending to end her relationship with Marco, Benigno reacts as if the break-up were the result of a recent argument first asking “have you split up?” then claiming that he “could see it coming.”

The repeated emphasis on talking as a therapy, signposted in the film’s title, together with Alicia’s father’s profession as a psychiatrist and his assessment of Benigno on the basis of his sexuality and relationship to his mother, indicates that the film is concerned with a psychoanalytic model of subjectivity. Benigno’s faith in his talking cure, and his lack of distinction between fully animate humans and those in a state of permanent unconsciousness reaches pathological heights when he confesses to Marco that he wants to marry Alicia. Again, Benigno justifies his desire by falling back upon a semi-

comedic cliché: “we get along better than most married couples.” By this point in the film it is becoming clear that Benigno has, in fact, raped and impregnated Alicia.

After being imprisoned Benigno is labelled a psychopath by prison doctors. In another of his examples Freud noted that “an uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality.”⁵⁷¹ This element of the uncanny, he argues, is at play in the uncanny experience of magical practices, and can be traced back to the common childhood belief in “the omnipotence of thoughts,” which is also commonly observed in neurotic patients.⁵⁷² Benigno is unable to differentiate between reality and his own imaginative fantasy of life with Alicia to the extent that he takes an overdose of pills in order to put himself into a persistent vegetative state and thus “join” her. He is unaware that, while her child did not survive birth, Alicia was roused from her state by the experience.

The various cases cited by Freud as examples of the uncanny all share the common element of being thoughts, feelings, objects or experiences which were once familiar and that have been rendered strange in their reoccurrence. Freud gestures towards this early on in his paper when he emphasises that the German word for homely, *heimlich*, “develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*.”⁵⁷³ *Unheimlich*, “unhomely,” is translated into English as uncanny. Freud returns to this ambivalence towards the end of his essay when he writes of the uncanny feeling experienced in male patients when confronting the female genitals. He sees this as the supreme example of the return to something once very familiar: “This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning.”⁵⁷⁴ *Talk to Her* includes one of the most startling examples of the temptation and danger involved in this

⁵⁷¹ Ibid. 244.

⁵⁷² Ibid. 244.

⁵⁷³ Ibid. 226.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid. 245.

notion of intra-uterine existence, which Freud recognised as a pleasurable fantasy transformed into a terrifying one.⁵⁷⁵

Midway through the film Benigno recounts to Alicia a recent trip to see a silent film called *The Shrinking Lover*. The film, reproduced for us on screen, tells the story of Alfredo, who begins to shrink dramatically after sampling some of his lover Ampario's weight loss elixir. When Ampario is unable to discover the antidote Alfredo leaves to stop her suffering. Years later Ampario tracks Alfredo down at his mother's house and rescues him, by this time he is only a few inches tall. After Ampario has fallen asleep Alfredo climbs over her body caressing her [Fig. 4.3]. He begins to stimulate her vagina, after discovering the mutual pleasure this gives them, he enters her entirely, never to leave [Fig. 4.4]. The price paid for the pleasure of this intra-uterine existence, which harks back to pre-Oedipal oneness with one's mother, is the end of subjectivity itself. Alfredo, Benigno tells us, "stays inside her for ever."

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid. 244.

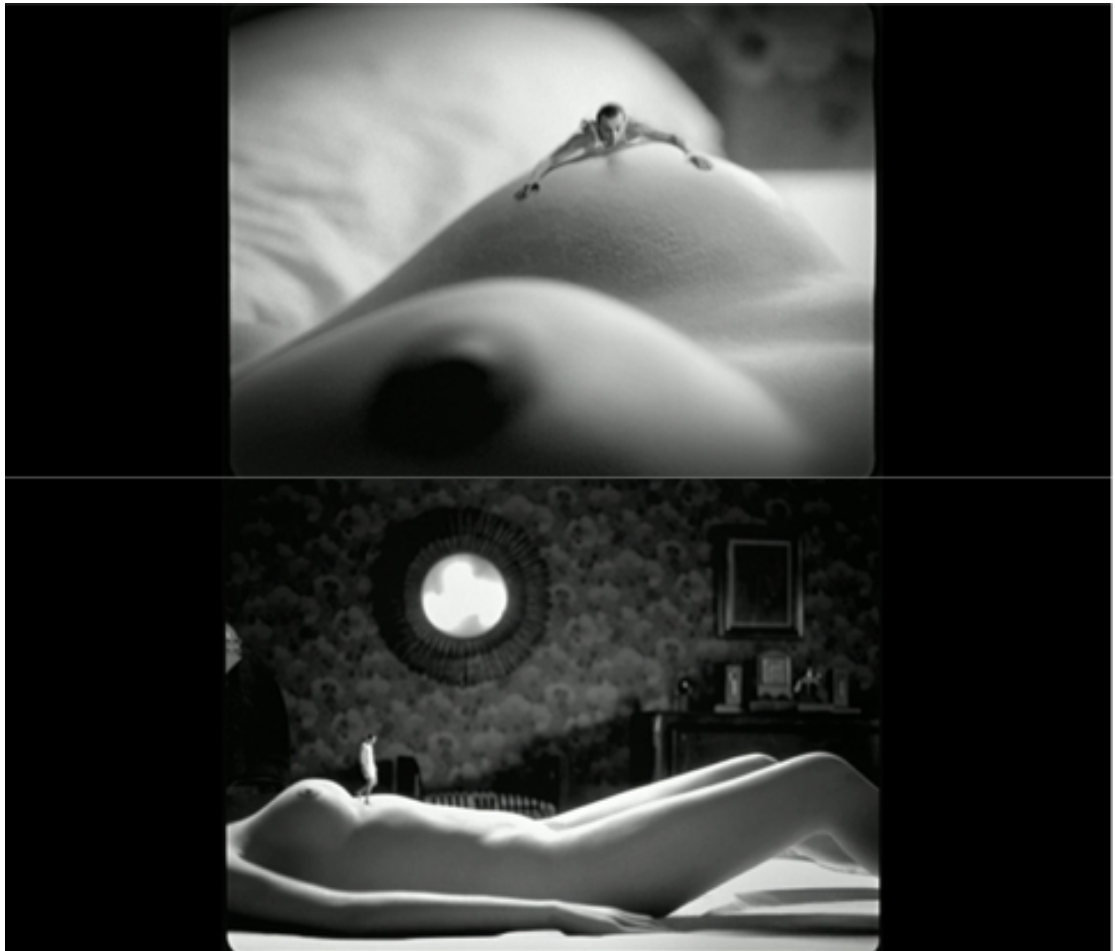


Fig. 4.3: Pedro Almodóvar, *Talk to Her* (2002), “The Shrinking Lover.”

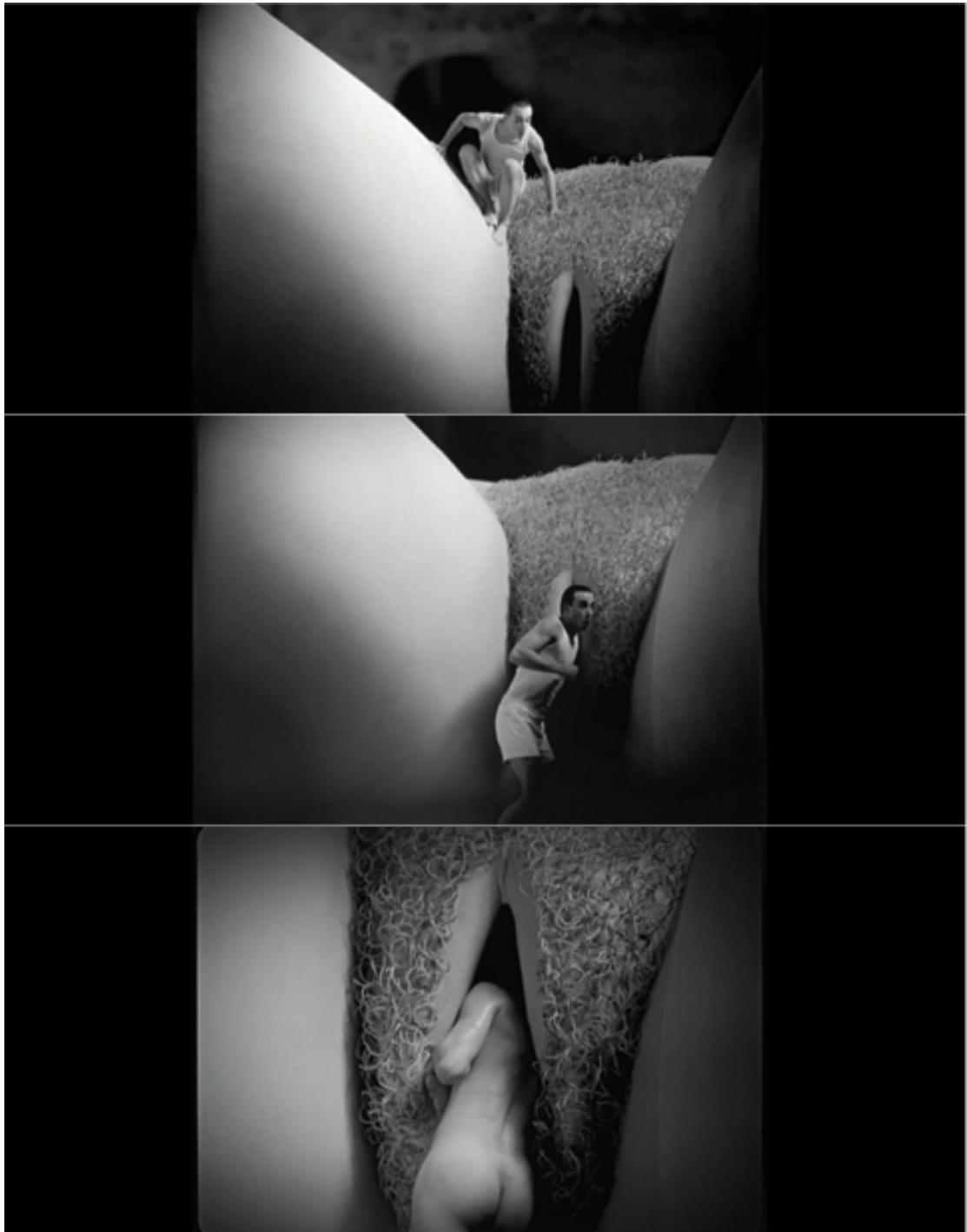


Fig. 4.4: Pedro Almodóvar, *Talk to Her* (2002), “The Shrinking Lover.”

In chapter one, through the work of Ron Athey, I examined the queer potential of martyrdom as a state of existence between life and death and compared this to HIV, which makes the infected (and those close to them) keenly aware of their mortality whether or not they are actually ill. Like martyrdom, mystical literature like the writings of St John of the Cross, can be read as disrupting binary conceptions of gender and sexual identities

while also challenging the simplistic division between life and death. For mystics and martyrs these feelings and experiences are obviously anchored by a belief in the afterlife. As psychoanalysis emerges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the uncanny transgression of life and death, animate and inanimate, is played out in literature through the figures of the automaton and vampire. This latter figure draws upon the uncanny terror of being buried alive, a scenario Freud identified with the desire for intra-uterine oneness with the mother, which, in its return, is rendered terrifying as it would entail subjective dissolution and death.⁵⁷⁶ Alfredo, like Benigno, seems to choose this life of non-productive stasis and subjective dissolution quite willingly. In both cases practicalities, in other words reality, stands in the way of their sexual object choice. Alfredo is only a few inches tall and maintaining a relationship with his fully-grown lover would, in all likelihood, be difficult in the real world. Benigno must know on some level, despite his protests to the contrary, that he cannot have any kind of socially sanctioned relationship with a woman in a coma.

It has been suggested that when viewed retrospectively the scene where Benigno recounts the plot of the silent film marks, not the first time that Benigno decides to have sex with Alicia – this may have been happening for some time – but rather his decision to throw caution to the wind. As Despina Kakoudaki has argued we could read Alfredo's shedding of clothes before entering his lover as “standing in for perhaps removing a condom, his decision to remain inside the body of his beloved standing for a decision not to withdraw before ejaculation.”⁵⁷⁷ Benigno must know that these decisions will lead to his detection, in the film they eventually lead to his death through suicide, which he claims he chooses to commit in order to fully “be with” Alicia. The film has already suggested that Alicia is a substitute for Benigno's dead mother, his interest in her stems from around

⁵⁷⁶ Case, “Tracking the Vampire,” 394. And Freud, “The Uncanny,” 244.

⁵⁷⁷ Despina Kakoudaki, “Intimate Strangers: Melodrama and Coincidence in *Talk to Her*,” In Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (eds.), *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema* (Minneapolis, MN. & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 213.

the time of his mother's death, his attentive and obsessive care of Alicia corresponds to that of his mother. In choosing to have sex with her he seals his fate, in the end death, which acting on this prohibited desire entails. HIV, like all viral particles, is unable to reproduce outside of another host organism, its inability to fulfil one of the defining characteristics of organic life without the aid of another life form, means that the virus itself troubles the distinction between living and dead. In addition, as I argued in chapter one, HIV infection can be compared to pregnancy in the sense that it is the (sexual) transmission of another organism into the body that, after a period of incubation, causes profound life changes.⁵⁷⁸ By combining the themes of uncanniness, forbidden desire, the eschewal of contraception and its attendant risks (which after some delay lead to Benigno's death) this section of the film implicitly refers to HIV/AIDS. It is worth noting that Anglophone New Queer Cinema, understood as one of the earliest film movements to attempt to reflect the experience of HIV/AIDS, is much of the time not overtly about AIDS at all. But in its depiction of fragmented subjectivities and its discontinuous visual forms and narratives is an attempt to approach the topic "obliquely, at an angle, from perspectives that suggest just how disruptive the virus has been."⁵⁷⁹

In the previous chapters I have argued that the notion of autoimmunity advanced by deconstruction is crucial in understanding the effects of HIV/AIDS, particularly the way in which it has transformed our understanding of identity and the body. A key aspect of this analysis has been that HIV exposes the hidden or sedimented elements of incoherence in supposedly integral organic bodies as well as taken-for-granted concepts and entities. This means that while films like those in the New Queer Cinema genre and the Almodóvar films that are the subject of this chapter are indirect responses to HIV/AIDS, as can be discerned by their engagement with AIDS-concomitant themes like

⁵⁷⁸ Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*.

⁵⁷⁹ Monica Pearl, "AIDS and New Queer Cinema," in Michele Aaron (ed.), *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 23-24.

unprotected sex and the medicalised body in *Talk to Her*, they are also usually overtly about something else. But this other, more explicit subject matter can be read as part of their engagement with HIV/AIDS too. Almodóvar's more recent film *The Skin I Live In* is primarily a stunning critique of sexual difference but, as I shall argue in what follows, this critique can also be read as one that is given a renewed sense of urgency and form by the AIDS crisis even though in other ways it pre-exists the epidemic. It is for this reason that the uncanny is such a useful concept

The Skin I Live In

At the beginning of *The Skin I Live In* we are introduced to Vera (Elena Anaya), who lives imprisoned in the house of Robert (Antonio Banderas). Robert is using Vera as a human guinea pig for the development of a synthetic skin – named Gal after his late wife – that is resistant to heat and insect bites. He has developed this skin using transgenesis, transferring genetic information from a pig into a human cell, a practice forbidden by the medical establishment. As I argued in previous chapters, one of the most novel and disruptive aspects of HIV was that it was the first retrovirus known to affect humans. The virus injects its RNA into cells of the human immune system that are then converted into viral DNA. After this has happened the immune system cell remains effectively co-opted by the virus until that cell dies. Furthermore, the increased production of immune system cells to fight infection provides more opportunities for viral replication. In this way the body's attempt to save itself is what can end up killing it, through the inability of the immune system to differentiate between self and not-self. The use of transgenesis, the incorporation of foreign DNA into a human's genetic make-up, in the development of Robert's synthetic skin suggests early on, like Benigno's impregnation of Alicia in *Talk to Her*, that HIV is an implied presence in this film too.

Although her skin is finished Robert is unwilling to release Vera from captivity. She tries to seduce him, his maid Marilia (Marisa Paredes) notes her resemblance to his late wife, and warns that if he does not kill her she will kill herself. While Robert is away one day, Marilia's son Zeca arrives. A fugitive, Zeca wants Robert to perform plastic surgery on his face to help him evade the police. Zeca misrecognises Vera as Robert's wife and gains entry to her room. She tries to escape but fails, and it emerges that Zeca had been having an affair with Gal and fled the scene of a horrific car accident the pair were involved in. Zeca then rapes Vera, whom he still believes to be Gal; Robert, we learn, also used to lock up his wife. Although clearly coerced, Vera hopes that sex with Zeca will aid her escape. During this time Robert returns and kills Zeca, the episode seems to cement his love of Vera.

While cleaning up the evidence Marilia explains to Vera that Robert, though he does not know it, is Zeca's brother and she is the mother of them both. In flashback we learn that after the car accident that Zeca ran away from, Robert was able to use his medical brilliance to save Gal from the brink of death. Though hideously disfigured, Gal's health improves until one day she hears her daughter Norma singing a song in the garden. Stirred by emotion Gal summons the strength to walk to the window. In the glass she catches sight of her "inhuman" reflection for the first time and throws herself to her death. Vera seems better disposed to Robert now, that night they sleep in the same bed though they do not have sex because Zeca has "really messed up" her genitalia.

The action cuts to six years earlier, Norma, now an adolescent, is beginning to recover from the trauma of seeing her mother's death. At a society wedding for one of Robert's patients he finds her in shock in the garden, and presumes that she has been raped. We are introduced to another character, Vicente (Jan Cornet), a young man who works in his mother's dress shop. He attends the wedding and goes into the garden with Norma. Both are heavily under the influence of drugs: Vicente's recreational and Norma's

medically prescribed. As they are making out Norma hears the song that she sang when her mother killed herself and starts to scream and attack Vicente. He slaps her unconscious and flees after re-arranging her dress to protect her modesty. Norma is committed to a psychiatric institution and in revenge Robert abducts Vicente. After Norma's suicide Robert and his surgical team perform a "vaginoplasty" on Vicente, reforming his sex organs into those of a woman. We realise that Vera is, in fact, Vicente.

Strangers to Ourselves

In her consideration of the category "foreigner" in Western thought Kristeva draws upon the notion of the uncanny as a phenomenon that makes us strangers to ourselves. Freud's text, she argues, moves from a consideration of aesthetic effects to "an investigation into *anguish* generally speaking and, in a fashion that is even more universal, into the *dynamics of the unconscious*."⁵⁸⁰ In the discovery of the unconscious and the theorising of a model of subjectivity as indelibly split, threatened by the repressed infantile desires of which the uncanny is a symptom, Kristeva sees psychoanalysis as moving uncanny strangeness from an external phenomenon into the psyche and, when located there, depathologising that alienation and integrating "within the assumed unity of human beings an *otherness* [...] foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided."⁵⁸¹

While Kristeva largely confines her thoughts to the political category of the foreign and what might be gained from applying the insights of psychoanalysis – the subject as divided, alienated – to political debates surrounding immigration and ethnic/national identity, Jean-Luc Nancy has explored the experience of foreignness as it is encountered in one's own body. In his essay "The Intruder" Nancy gives an account of

⁵⁸⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 182. Emphasis original.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.* 181. Emphasis original.

his experience of a heart transplant, a technological intervention into his body essential to maintain his life. Nancy begins by explaining how such an event forces one to think of the continued existence of one's body/self as a chance encounter between personal need and technological development, implicitly critiquing the notion of an original and authentic human body/subject that would be untouched by historical contingency: "Earlier I would be dead, later I would survive by other means. But 'I' always finds itself tightly squeezed in a wedge of technical possibilities."⁵⁸² This denaturalisation of selfhood through technology has been made possible, he argues, through the process of scientific progress motivated, at its core, by our most basic fears and anxieties: "modern humanity has transformed the longing for survival and immortality into an element in a general program of 'mastering and possessing nature.' It has thereby programmed the growing strangeness of 'nature.'"⁵⁸³ In *The Skin I Live In*, when reminded that the use of transgenesis is entirely forbidden in humans, Robert responds by arguing that because humans interfere with everything around them, it is senseless to prohibit the use of the same technologies on the human body itself.

This troubling of the natural/unnatural binary was also at play in many of Freud's examples of the uncanny, such as phenomena and incidences which appear to confirm repressed belief in animism, magic or the omnipotence of thought. But the concept of nature is itself subject to shifts that alter our representations of the unnatural. In the nineteenth century model of nature as natural, productive and good, same-sex desire, it has been argued, was deemed unnatural, monstrous and vampiric. However, in the 1950s, the testing of nuclear weapons in remote areas gave rise to an alternative representation of the "natural" world as a realm that could produce the monstrous and unnatural.⁵⁸⁴ Judith Butler's analysis of the citational and performative character of sex, as I have argued

⁵⁸² Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Intruder," in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 162.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.* 165.

⁵⁸⁴ Case, "Tracking the Vampire," 395.

above, provides a way of thinking about the category “sex” in a way that avoided falling back upon a notion of the natural or innate. Butler’s work makes the usual distinction between biological sex (conceived of as natural and real) and culturally constructed gender untenable. By laying bare the performative and citational nature of both she undermines the conception of natural or authentic biological sex. For Vicente/Vera the imposition of sex is experienced as violent trauma, a technological assault in line with Nancy’s model of the intruder who “introduces himself forcefully, by surprise or by ruse, not in any case, by right or by being admitted beforehand.”⁵⁸⁵ Here, it is sexual and gendered identity that is the intruder with whom Vera must learn to live.

After his vaginoplasty Vicente is shown alone in his room, which at this stage is sparsely furnished lacking the artworks and objects through which he makes it his own. He begins tentatively to examine his new genitalia in a mirror before being interrupted by Robert [Fig. 4.5]. The operation, Robert tells him, was a success, but there is still a risk that the tender tissues could stick together. To prevent this Vicente must keep his new orifice open, and gradually manage to make it deeper: “Think that your life depends on that orifice. That you breath through it,” Robert tells him. To help him in this task Robert produces a series of dilators of increasing length and girth with which Vicente must penetrate himself. At this revelation the camera changes from a shot-reverse-shot that emphasises the didactic nature of Robert’s instructions, to one from behind the dilators, which run across Vicente’s face like the iron bars of a prison cell [Fig. 4.6]. This shot had been prefigured at the beginning of the film as we were introduced to Vera’s position as Robert’s captive by shots that show her face behind the bars of her windows. Vicente is, at this stage, both literal prisoner in his room and slave to the regimen of maintaining the integrity of his new sex which, ironically, relies on prising himself open.

⁵⁸⁵ Nancy, “The Intruder,” 161.



Fig. 4.5: Pedro Almodóvar, *The Skin I Live In* (2011), Vicente examines himself.



Fig. 4.6: Pedro Almodóvar, *The Skin I Live In* (2011), Vicente and his dilators.

HIV, as I argued above, profoundly disrupted stable conceptions of what could be designated as self and not-self. These are issues that also arise in organ transplant, where immunosuppressant drugs are prescribed to prevent the patient rejecting the donated organ, which has the side effect of making one vulnerable to opportunistic infections. As Nancy writes,

The possibility of rejection resides in a double strangeness: the strangeness on the one hand, of this grafted heart, which the organism identifies and attacks as being a stranger, and, on the other hand, the strangeness of the state in which medication renders the grafter in order to protect him. It lowers the grafter's immunity, so that he can tolerate the stranger. It thereby makes him a stranger to himself, to this immunitary identity, which is akin to his physiological signature.⁵⁸⁶

Furthermore, for Nancy, the procedure highlights a certain inherent foreignness, a viral counterpart to Kristeva's take on the unconscious, longstanding latent infections such as shingles virus, or cytomegalovirus: "strangers that have been dormant within me from the very start and are suddenly raised against me by the necessary immune depression."⁵⁸⁷ Nancy's essay is focused on the sense of strangeness introduced, or unearthed, in one's

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid. 167.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid. 167.

own body by medical intervention, which for Vicente relates directly to his sex and gender identity and is experienced on the same visceral wounding level. While shingles and cytomegalovirus also often effect people whose immunosuppression is the result of HIV infection the key point to draw from Nancy's account of his illness is the revelation of a foreign or non-self-identical presence, which always existed, but was given a new grand and threatening exposure by his illness and its treatment.

The Almodóvar film that engages most explicitly with HIV is *All About My Mother* (*Todo sobre mi madre*, 1999), though even here the virus is simply one element of the drama, which includes drug addiction and transgender identity among other themes. The protagonist of that film, Manuela (Cecilia Roth), is a nurse who oversees organ transplants. This means that after her son is involved in a car accident on his seventeenth birthday she is intimately acquainted with the carefully scripted lines spoken by his doctors and is able to anticipate that her son has died. Though HIV will also come into play as Manuela attempts to locate her son's transvestite prostitute and drug addict father, it is also at work in the undermining of the notion of a natural or authentic body represented through organ donation. In a breach of protocol Manuela uses her position as a nurse to track down the reinvigorated recipient of her dead son's heart. Most of all, however, the film can be read as being a response to HIV in that it is about the aftermath of the tragic and senseless death of a beautiful young man.

I have argued above that deconstruction, the de-sedimentation or unearthing of previously concealed meaning in a text, concept or entity is crucial to understanding the way in which HIV has transformed our culture. In its disruption of the simple divisions between self/other, body/intruder, as well as the traumatic cultural legacy of mass death and suffering, HIV made the previous vision of bodily integrity and sovereignty untenable. Nancy recognises his state as an amplification of pre-existing alienation between self, self-image and body: "between me and me, there had always been some space-time: but now

there is an incision's opening, and the irreconcilability of a compromised immune system."⁵⁸⁸ Derrida had metaphorised the presence of HIV/AIDS by saying that it had "as if it were a painting or a giant movie screen," provided "an available daily massive *readability*," to a previously concealed incoherence.⁵⁸⁹ Nancy's experience of immunosuppressant drug treatments likewise escalates and gives a new, sharper contour to pre-existing lack of unity within his own body; a clarity he uses the metaphor of the wound ("an incision's opening") to convey. This sense of the uncovering or de-sedimenting of concealed meaning is common to both deconstruction and the uncanny, Freud described the latter as "the name for everything that ought to have remained hidden but has come to light."⁵⁹⁰ As Nicholas Royle has argued, the uncanny, in its revelation of strangeness in familiarity, is both a precursor to and a manifestation of deconstruction: "with a persistence or consistency that can itself seem uncanny, it shows how difference operates at the heart of identity, how the strange and even unthinkable is a necessary condition of what is conventional, familiar and taken-for-granted."⁵⁹¹

The uncanny is associated with the gender anxiety that *The Skin I Live In* exploits so masterfully. Jane Marie Todd has argued that Freud's essay unwittingly downplays both the gendered and visual aspect of the uncanny in a movement that enacts, at the same time as it attempts to explain, the process of veiling and unveiling at the heart of the uncanny itself.⁵⁹² In downplaying the theme of Olympia, and the uncertainty over whether she is a real woman or automaton, and instead playing up the importance of the fear of losing one's eyes – which Freud recognises as a substitution for castration – he veils the importance of gender in that he interprets Nathaniel's castration anxiety as related only to

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid. 168.

⁵⁸⁹ Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs," 250. Emphasis original.

⁵⁹⁰ Freud, "The Uncanny," 224.

⁵⁹¹ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 24.

⁵⁹² Jane Marie Todd, "The Veiled Woman in Freud's 'Das Unheimliche,'" *Signs*, Vol. 11:3 (Spring, 1986), 519-528.

paternal punishment from the castrating father.⁵⁹³ In other texts Freud made clear that the sight of the female genitals convinces the male child of the reality of castration.⁵⁹⁴ Todd notes that castration only becomes fearful in its repetition or return, “This, of course, is also the structure of the *unheimliche*: the reappearance of something that has been ‘disavowed.’”⁵⁹⁵ I would also note that it is the same structure found in trauma, the subject of my previous chapter, and that the idea of delay and return governs much of Freud’s work. Freud also argued that at an early stage children of both sexes believe that all living things have a penis unless they have been punished by castration.⁵⁹⁶ In this way the issue of being robbed of one’s penis (for which eyes can be a stand in) is connected to the question of whether or not one is fully or really human: the revelation that Olympia is an automaton happens alongside her eyes been torn out. Todd argues that Hoffman’s story uses Olympia to satirise the treatment of women in patriarchal society: “Olympia is a caricature of the ideal woman: silent, powerless, docile.”⁵⁹⁷ It is only when she loses her eyes that polite society realises to its shock how this ideal has been achieved.

Vera refers to herself as Robert’s “toy” immediately before her first suicide attempt. After Robert has given Vicente the name Vera we see her tearing up three floral dresses that she has been given to wear. At the same time she returns the makeup she has been given, rejecting the femininity imposed on her. Later in the film Vera appears to willingly adopt the position of a dutiful and compliant wife and lover to Robert in exchange for limited freedom within the house, though this is shown to be a ruse that facilitates her escape. As Robert’s toy Vera could be read as a token of his castration anxiety, as an attempt to work through his impotence in having been unable to prevent the deaths of his wife and daughter. While Vera eventually adapts her forced docility and powerlessness to her own ends.

⁵⁹³ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 225.

⁵⁹⁴ Todd, “The Veiled Woman in Freud’s ‘Das Unheimliche,’” 524.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 523.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 525.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 525.

Elsewhere in his essay on the uncanny Freud comments on the conviction that the gaze can be used to give life to inanimate dolls: “I have occasionally heard a woman patient declare that even at the age of eight she had still been convinced that her dolls would be certain to come to life if she were to look at them in a particular, extremely concentrated way.”⁵⁹⁸ He also describes his own experience of the uncanny in the repeated, undesired return to the red light district of an Italian town where he “felt the inescapable gaze of these painted women (human dolls?) and felt helpless.”⁵⁹⁹ In addition, he comments on the persistence of the superstition of the “evil eye” as a result of the projection of envy on to those who lack “something that is at once valuable and fragile” by those that have such a thing.⁶⁰⁰ In this way the gaze of someone who is lacking is endowed with the power to itself produce such lack. To this Todd adds that,

He did not say, could not say, that it is a woman’s gaze, the castrating look. If a woman’s gaze is threatening, it is because man feels threatened by the fear of castration confirmed by his view of the female genitals. That is, he misunderstands: he looks at a woman and sees a mutilated double. He can understand the female genitals only in terms of his own fear. He cannot understand sexual difference beyond identifying the other as “not man.”⁶⁰¹

Furthermore, women are not only uncanny because they remind men of the reality of castration but also because they take him back to a repressed childhood wish: “the boy’s wish to be like his mother, to be loved by his father.”⁶⁰² This repressed homosexual attachment, as Freud explains elsewhere, can take the form of intra-uterine fantasy: “there is a wish to be inside the mother’s womb in order to replace her during intercourse – in order to take her place in regard to the father.”⁶⁰³ But in the essay on the uncanny the

⁵⁹⁸ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 233.

⁵⁹⁹ Todd, “The Veiled Woman in Freud’s ‘Das Unheimliche,’” 526.

⁶⁰⁰ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 240.

⁶⁰¹ Todd, “The Veiled Woman in Freud’s ‘Das Unheimliche,’” 527.

⁶⁰² *Ibid.* 527.

⁶⁰³ Sigmund Freud, “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” quoted in Todd, “The Veiled Woman in Freud’s ‘Das Unheimliche,’” 527.

same once pleasurable fantasy of subjective dissolution in intra-uterine existence is rendered strange and terrifying where it reoccurs as the thought of being buried alive. Sarah Kofman has argued that works of art that provoke pleasure and those that cause uncanniness can be separated on the basis that the repressed content of the pleasure more disguised in the former than the latter. In the case of artworks that provoke the feeling of uncanniness “there is a greater degree of recognition of the repressed [...] hence the dreamer’s anxiety, proceeding from the superego’s inability to accept such an explicit realization of desire.”⁶⁰⁴ The desire to return to a lost bodily unity with the mother is first comforting then terrifying, in its returning, as it would entail death. For Freud it is also bound up with equally impossible to countenance homosexual desire thus even the fear of death is associated with woman, with fear of castration and with repressed homosexual desire.

Though Vicente’s castration is certainly heavily implied by *The Skin I Live In*, the film places greater emphasis on his new vagina, through his examination of it in the mirror and Robert’s suggestion that his life depends on that orifice. Later in the film, when one of Robert’s surgical team confronts him with a picture of Vicente in a newspaper article on missing persons he remarks that it was surprising the young man wanted a sex change, without any cosmetic changes or hormone treatments. Robert initially tells the other surgeon that Vicente “only wanted a cunt,” and that he is now a sought after porn actor in Los Angeles. The presence of Vicente’s new orifice and its penetration is flagged up repeatedly: in the scene with the vaginal dilators and sex scenes with Robert and Zeca, as well as the related issue of Vera’s impenetrable synthetic skin. The penetration of Vicente/Vera’s body is prefigured by a shot during Vicente’s initial captivity, where he is chained up in a dark cellar, in which Robert uses a hose to soak him; the jet of water spurts from Robert’s hose onto Vicente’s backside suggesting the repressed homosexual

⁶⁰⁴ Sarah Kofman, *Freud and Fiction*, trans. Sarah Wykes (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 123.

potential of the scene [Fig. 4.7]. It is immediately after this that Vicente begins to crave Robert's companionship: in the next scene he apologises for having annoyed Robert begging him to stay and keep him company. This suggests that to some extent Vicente cannot help but be complicit in his own oppression. In *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (*¡Átame!*) (1990) Almodóvar had equated the need for human connection, specifically in the form of heteronormative coupling, quite explicitly with Stockholm Syndrome where hostages come to sympathise, identify and form emotional attachments to their captors. Almodóvar's interrogation of sexual difference and heteronormativity marks the convergence of his own preoccupations with those of psychoanalytically informed feminist film theory.



Fig. 4.7: Pedro Almodóvar, *The Skin I Live In* (2011), Robert hoses Vicente down.

Film Theory

The first half of *Talk to Her* seems to reinforce Laura Mulvey's famous psychoanalytically inspired argument on the position of women in film as *to-be-looked-at*.⁶⁰⁵ The camera

⁶⁰⁵ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press, 1988), 19.

aligns the gaze of the audience with that of Marco and ensures that we are guilty of looking at Alicia's naked body. In *The Skin I Live In* this effect is achieved through the use of multiple CCTV cameras and television screens which display Vera's image for monitoring. At one point, as Robert gazes upon her, through an enormous flat-screen TV installed in his own bedroom, Vera is framed as a copy of Diego Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* (c. 1647–51) [Fig. 4.8]. In fact, as if to make this connection more obvious, the palatial villa-cum-clinic that Vera is imprisoned in is primarily decorated with modern abstract art, with the prominent exception of several portraits of Venus.



Fig. 4.8: Pedro Almodóvar, *The Skin I Live In* (2011), Robert gazes at Vera on CCTV.

Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," inaugurated a wave psychoanalytically inspired feminist film theory that sought to build upon her insight that "the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form."⁶⁰⁶ Mulvey means by this the way in which film, in particular narrative cinema, both reproduces and reveals the patriarchal social order of sexual difference. From a feminist-psychoanalytic perspective patriarchy is given its meaning, paradoxically, by the image of woman: "it is her lack that produces the phallus as symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the

⁶⁰⁶Ibid. 14.

phallus signifies.”⁶⁰⁷ This is to say that in the Freudian account of female sexuality the woman, through her real lack of a penis, symbolises the castration threat, and through her envy of the penis endows it with symbolic meaning, as the phallus, in the form of the wished-for child. Crucially, and problematically, Freud does not recognise any experience of the vagina on the part of the girl and orientates sexuality around the penis for both girls and boys. As I outlined above, in Todd’s analysis of “The Uncanny” essay Freud performs (at the same time as he attempts to explain) man’s inability to look at the image of a woman and see her on her own terms, as anything other than a mutilated/castrated double. In both patriarchy and psychoanalysis possession or lack of the anatomical penis is thus endowed with symbolic importance and becomes “a major yardstick for the categorisation of human beings.”⁶⁰⁸ Crucially though, in psychoanalysis the symbolic power of the phallus, while the marker of male privilege, is not coextensive with the anatomical penis, which must remain veiled if phallic power is to endure. Thus, as the phallus is irreducible to the normative biological notion of sex, psychoanalysis marks the beginning of the opening up of the category of biological sex to critique. In their entry on the phallus in *The Language of Psychoanalysis* Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis note that the assumption by the subject of his or her own sex cannot be thought of as a logical consequence of biological fact but as “the problematic outcome of an intra- and inter- subjective process.”⁶⁰⁹

Mulvey argues that narrative cinema activates voyeuristic and fetishistic mechanisms to facilitate visual pleasure and to bypass the threat of castration implied by the female body.⁶¹⁰ Voyeuristic scopophilia refers to the erotic pleasure that can be derived by taking others as visual objects and “subjecting them to a controlling and

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid. 14.

⁶⁰⁸ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac, 1988), 313. See also their entries on “Phallus” 312-314, “Penis Envy” 302-304 and “Castration Complex” 56-60.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid. 313.

⁶¹⁰ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 25-26.

curious gaze.”⁶¹¹ This active form of voyeurism is found in its most extreme form in the phenomenon of the Peeping Tom, who derives all his pleasure from looking at others while ideally remaining unseen himself. Voyeurism also exists in a passive or narcissistic and auto-erotic form where the pleasure of the look is transferred to others allowing one the gratification of exhibitionism. The cinematic apparatus, Mulvey argues, utilises both these forms of voyeurism in that the narrative film unfolds before the viewers as if they were not there, while they are also isolated from one another in the darkness of the auditorium, promoting “the illusion of voyeuristic separation.”⁶¹² The audience are also able to repress their exhibitionism and project that desire onto the performer on screen.⁶¹³ This narcissistic aspect of scopophilia is also developed by Mulvey in relation to the way in which audience members are encouraged to identify with characters on the screen. In Jacques Lacan’s account of the mirror stage the infant’s recognition of its own image in the mirror is crucial to both the constitution of its own ego and, through the misrecognition of that mirror image as a more coherent and able version of their own limited bodily capacity, establishes that sense of self as tainted with a sense of lack or inadequacy when compared to an ideal.⁶¹⁴ Mulvey draws upon this insight to argue that the cinema “has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing it,” returning the audience member to the first instance of subjective development in image recognition, while simultaneously encouraging identification with a more perfect ego ideal in the form of the movie star.⁶¹⁵

⁶¹¹ Ibid. 17.

⁶¹² Ibid. 17.

⁶¹³ Ibid. 17.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid. 18. In Lacan’s words: “the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation – and for the subject caught in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an ‘orthopedic’ form of its totality – and to the finally donned armour of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure.” Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York & London: Norton, 2006), 78.

⁶¹⁵ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 18.

Mulvey notes that the voyeuristic pleasure in looking is conducive to the development of the narrative in film as audience members watch the story unfold. However, she also argues that the female figure, in her lack of a penis, “always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified,” reminding the viewer of the trauma of castration.⁶¹⁶ To combat this threat of un-pleasure cinema often employs a strategy of fetishistic disavowal “by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous.”⁶¹⁷ The tendency towards treating the female body as an object of erotic contemplation in and of itself tends to “freeze the flow of action” and interrupt the diegesis.⁶¹⁸ To exploit the erotic potential of the female image without disrupting narrative realism cinema has naturalised devices like the showgirl character. She allows the look of the audience to be aligned with that of the male characters on screen as they watch a female character perform.⁶¹⁹ It is this alignment of the look of the audience with the (usually male) protagonist and other characters on the screen that is key to the ability of narrative cinema to naturalise patriarchal social relations. Mulvey states that cinema is structured through three different looks: the camera filming the pro-filmic event, the audience watching the finished film, and the looks of the characters at one another within the diegesis.⁶²⁰ Narrative cinema disavows the first two and subordinates them to the third with the aim of eliminating the “intrusive camera presence” and preventing “a distancing awareness in the audience.”⁶²¹ Put somewhat differently Mulvey is arguing that the cinematic apparatus is orientated around denying its status as recorded fiction. This inhibits any sense of criticality regarding the social and gender relations on display, rendering the cinematic

⁶¹⁶ Ibid. 22.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid. 22.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid. 19.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid. 20.

⁶²⁰ Ibid. 26.

⁶²¹ Ibid. 26.

audience passive spectators and making cinema one of the most powerful conduits of ideology.

It is worth noting at this point that Almodóvar's films have consistently drawn attention to the artifice of narrative cinema by being structured around the making of a film as in *Bad Education* (*La mala educación*, 2004) or *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* 1987's *Law of Desire* (*La ley del deseo*) opens with a young man undressing on a bed to the instructions of an unseen older male voice. The voiceover directs the younger man not to look at him, telling him to pretend he is alone, it then orders him to interact sexually with his own image in a mirror. Returning to the bed he is ordered to caress his buttocks and ask the disembodied voice to fuck him. When the young man hesitates it is revealed that the voice comes from one of two film technicians who persuade him to utter the words while they recite a script. After the young actor has climaxed one of the filmmakers tells him that he "did well" and that he can leave after showering, at the same time tossing a wad of banknotes on the bedside table. This has the effect of maintaining the aura of sex work that the scenario had initially suggested. As the young man counts his money the voiceover orders someone to "freeze the image" and we see a film camera stop. To the sound of audience applause the word "*fin*" then appears on a cinema screen superimposed over the image of the money on the bedside table, revealing that the scene we have just watched, about the making of a film, is the final scene of a film within the diegesis of *Law of Desire*. That latter film title appears on the screen over the image of the director of the first film being told of its success in the cinema foyer. Another young man who had been watching the film within the film, also played by Banderas, moves through the foyer to the bathroom where he recites the words "fuck me" as he begins to masturbate in a re-enactment of what he has just seen on screen. In the first scene of the film Almodóvar draws our attention to the three looks of cinema as outlined by Mulvey and connects them explicitly with sexuality and the social relations connected to it; the rest of the film will

follow the homicidal infatuation of the young Banderas with the film maker. While the opening section of *Law of Desire* exposes the three looks of cinema it also makes apparent the heteronormativity at work in much of Mulvey's article by explicitly foregrounding the (economically disenfranchised) male body as the object of the voyeuristic gaze and the source of erotic pleasure for audience members and characters of either sex.⁶²²

Alicia's position as a comatose patient in hospital in *Talk to Her* and Vera's situation as Robert's captive help to naturalise the visual and erotic pleasure that our unconstrained ocular possession of them facilitates. In this way both films correspond to Mulvey's analysis of the films of Alfred Hitchcock in that they utilise an exploration of the dynamics of looking, particularly as it relates to sexuality, as the content or subject matter of the films themselves. This is particularly true of the similarities between *The Skin I Live In* and Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), which revolves around a retired policeman, Scottie (James Stewart), "exemplary of the symbolic order and the law," according to Mulvey, and his infatuation with Madeleine (Kim Novak), the wife of a friend.⁶²³ Believing Madeleine to have killed herself by jumping from a church bell tower, in parallel with Gal's suicide in *The Skin I Live In*, Scottie sets about imposing his recreation of Madeleine on Judy (also played by Kim Novak), in the same way that Vera comes to replace Gal as the unwilling object of Robert's obsession. As a prominent and wealthy surgeon to the upper classes Robert, like Scottie, exemplifies patriarchal authority and both men subject women to their sadistic will and voyeuristic gaze in line with Mulvey's analysis.⁶²⁴ However, as Kakoudaki has argued in relation to *Talk to Her* "Almodóvar goes to some length to show Alicia as a separate person, in the process developing a subtle

⁶²² For an extensive critique of Mulvey's article and the determinism of much psychoanalytically inspired feminist film theory see Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994) 19-48.

⁶²³ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 23. Benigno's initial voyeurism from his balcony, which I described above, also resembles the protagonist of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) also starring James Stewart and discussed in Mulvey's article.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.* 24.

discourse on the perils of projection and narcissism, but also on the ethics of looking.”⁶²⁵ The medical setting of the film, references to famous nudes in paintings and Benigno’s apparent professionalism and devotion “allow us to sustain this presentation of looking as if it were disconnected from structures of shame and propriety, as well as from structures of cinematic objectification.”⁶²⁶ Alicia is unaware of being looked at, which “renders both camera and viewers inevitably voyeuristic, perhaps even unapologetically so.”⁶²⁷ But, in flashback, when Benigno surprises Alicia as she is coming out of the shower she immediately covers herself up. As Kakoudaki puts it: “Almodóvar alerts us that perhaps the film’s representation of nudity and the constant handling of Alicia may have a problematic or troublesome side.”⁶²⁸ She also points out that at the end of the film, after Alicia has been miraculously revived, she does not adopt the girlish pigtails and braids that Benigno had imposed upon her in the hospital, instead choosing a close angular cut that frames her face: “When the real woman can she intervenes in the construction of her image.”⁶²⁹ Furthermore, I would add that the realisation that Alicia has been raped adds a retrospective sense of guilt to our former pleasure in possessing her so fully in line with the male protagonist’s position, a similar dynamic plays out in *The Skin I Live In* regarding our ocular possession of Vera while she is Robert’s captive. Later in the film she adopts the position of a somewhat stereotypical upper class housewife, with correspondingly feminine clothing choices, in order to win Robert’s trust. Her subversion of these expectations is accompanied by a shift towards a slightly more androgynous (though still exceptionally beautiful) model of female attractiveness.

As I outlined above, Mulvey argued that the voyeuristic scopophilia enabled by the cinematic apparatus, through its presentation of the female body as *to-be-looked-at*, is always tempered by the threat of castration that the female body also always

⁶²⁵ Despina Kakoudaki, “Intimate Strangers,” 229.

⁶²⁶ Ibid. 229–230.

⁶²⁷ Ibid. 230.

⁶²⁸ Ibid. 230.

⁶²⁹ Ibid. 230.

symbolises.⁶³⁰ To combat this potential disruption of pleasure cinema deploys strategies of fetishistic scopophilia alongside voyeurism. For Freud the fetish was a means of denying castration and maintaining the belief that the mother possessed a penis, as to recognise that she had been castrated would raise the spectre of the possibility of his own castration.⁶³¹ Adopting a substitute object for the missing female penis allows the fetishist to simultaneously retain and give up the idea of female penis following the rationale “I know very well, but all the same...”⁶³² Furthermore, this model of disavowal heightens the fear of castration for the fetishist as “the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute.”⁶³³ Consequently the fetishist has a deep aversion to the real female genitals as they “remain a *stigmata indelebile* of the repression that has taken place.”⁶³⁴ In Mulvey’s account of narrative cinema the whole of the female body can pose the threat of castration. Fetishistic mechanisms of disavowal to combat this threat include the stylisation and fragmentation of the female body through the use of camera techniques like the close up so that her body “is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator’s look.”⁶³⁵ As also noted above, such techniques have a tendency to disturb narrative coherence and “burst through the world of illusion as an intrusive, static, one-dimensional fetish.”⁶³⁶

While Mulvey identifies devices like the showgirl which allow a compromise to be reached between fetishistic pleasure and narrative realism, she also points out another way in which castration anxiety can be worked through in her analysis of Hitchcock’s films: “Power is backed by a certainty of legal right and the established guilt of the woman

⁶³⁰ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 22.

⁶³¹ Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. 21 (1927-1931)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 152-153.

⁶³² Octave Mannoni quoted in Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), 76.

⁶³³ Freud, “Fetishism,” 154.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.* 154.

⁶³⁵ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 23.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.* 26.

(evoking castration, psychoanalytically speaking).⁶³⁷ Mulvey is referring, among other examples, to Kim Novak's character Judy/Madeleine in *Vertigo*. Judy, object of the male protagonist's voyeuristic gaze and sadistic will, is guilty of impersonating the real Madeleine as part of a murder plot but inadvertently falls in love with Scottie. Scottie then proceeds to force her to dress and pose as the dead Madeleine not realising that the Madeleine he had been in love with was actually Judy all along. This narrative structure allows sadism and voyeurism to be "concealed under a shallow mask of ideological correctness – the man is on the right side of the law, the woman on the wrong."⁶³⁸ *The Skin I Live In*, for all that it pays homage to the cinematic structures and sources of visual pleasure that characterise Hitchcock's thrillers, clearly differs in this respect. Robert is candidly presented as being in violation of medical ethics at the film's outset, when he presents his research on synthetic skin, long before we are made aware of the gravity or extent of his crimes against Vera/Vicente. However, Robert's defence of his experiment – that it is hypocritical for humans to prohibit genetic intervention in their own bodies when they interfere with everything around them – seems reasonable, suggesting that the law is as much a compromised binarism as gender and sexuality in Almodóvar's films.

The psychoanalytically inspired feminist film criticism that came in the wake of Mulvey's article has broadened to include the possibility of cross gendered identifications on the part of film spectators and in this way it explores "the gaps and contradictions within patriarchal signification."⁶³⁹ However, as Jackie Stacey has argued, psychoanalytic models, for all their value, have a tendency to collapse gender and sexuality into "a totalistic binarism of masculinity and femininity," which continually associates active desire (by a member of either sex) with masculinity while exhibitionism and being the

⁶³⁷ Ibid. 24

⁶³⁸ Ibid. 24.

⁶³⁹ Stacey, *Star Gazing*, 25. Mulvey played an important part in this revision herself see "Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)" in Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 31-40.

object of the voyeuristic gaze are associated with a passive femininity. While it can therefore accommodate identification with what it designates as the masculine or feminine position by either men or women such a psychoanalytic model “leaves uncontested the assumption of heterosexuality in the processes of cinematic spectatorship.”⁶⁴⁰ To state the case somewhat differently such models consistently reassert the binary positions of man/woman, masculine/feminine, even while they acknowledge the potential of individual men and women to make identifications across that binary division, by falling back upon the binary active/passive, which is always understood as implying masculine/feminine and (implicitly) man/woman.

Butler has argued that the mirror stage can be read as an attempt to chart the centring of a decentred body in infancy and Lacan’s later essay on “The Function of the Phallus” can be read as an attempt to account for the “‘accession’ of bodies into sexed positions in the symbolic.”⁶⁴¹ In the latter case the body before the mirror is replaced by the figure of the body before the law, but both should be conceived “less as a developmental explanation than as a necessary heuristic fiction.”⁶⁴² That is, as a story we tell ourselves in order to make sense of our world.⁶⁴³ The longstanding presence of transgendered characters in Almodóvar’s films, as well as his attention to the ritualised and performative aspects of gender recognition are a testament to his awareness of the fluidity of these binaries. Rather than repress the performative or theatrical reality of gender his transgender characters usually embrace it. In *All About My Mother* Agrado (Antonia San Juan), a transgender former prostitute friend of Manuela takes to the theatre stage to perform a biographical monologue when her friends are unable to perform the

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid. 27.

⁶⁴¹ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 80.

⁶⁴² Ibid. 80.

⁶⁴³ Kofman’s analysis of Freud’s essay alongside Hoffmann’s original story demonstrates that Freud attempts to efface the aspects of the story that question limits and binaries in favour of transgressions and ambiguities. For example she draws attention to Clara’s interpretation of Nathaniel’s memory of his father “putting an end to the split between the good and bad father and restoring his unbearable ambiguity.” Kofman, *Freud and Fiction*, 146, see also 134-136.

play that the audience has come to see. She begins by saying that her services as a prostitute had always been prized due to their very authentic nature, and follows this by a list of the multiple surgical procedures she has undergone to achieve this “authentic” look. As the audience laugh along with her she says “You’re more authentic the more you resemble what you’ve dreamed you are.”

Mulvey’s analysis led her to champion cinematic techniques that involved an alienation effect aimed at creating “a distancing awareness in the audience” in the hope that they would question patriarchal norms and sexual difference.⁶⁴⁴ Almodóvar, however, actually employs pleasure and cinematic genre – melodramatic empathy in *All About My Mother*, suspenseful thriller in *The Skin I Live In* – to undercut our preconceptions about gender politics rather than enforce them.

While Agrado’s performance is inspiring and heart-warming, Vera/Vicente’s experience in *The Skin I Live In* bears closer resemblance to Butler’s concept of gender melancholia, conceived as a corrective to “the voluntarism of gender performativity that has emerged in in reception of *Gender Trouble*.”⁶⁴⁵ Gender melancholia also succeeds in integrating an understanding of gender as performative with psychoanalysis and in doing so attends to the unconscious grief that conditions our experience of sexual difference.

Becoming Woman

After Vicente has been following the instructions regarding his new vagina Robert examines him and is pleased to report that the largest of the vaginal dilators fits easily inside him. Vicente asks if this means he can go home, to which Robert replies that they have only just begun. The screen then dissolves from Vicente’s face to one we recognise

⁶⁴⁴ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 26.

⁶⁴⁵ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 161.

as Vera's, covered in a protective plastic mould. Robert can no longer continue addressing Vicente by his own name, he tells him, and will now refer to him as Vera. The rest of Vera's anatomy has also been feminised, Robert is particularly proud of the naturalistic ("not pneumatic") quality of the breasts. At this point Vera/Vicente tries to escape and, when prevented, attempts suicide by cutting her throat. But this route too is blocked, Robert's medical brilliance and on-site operating theatre obstructing even this most desperate undertaking.

The following montage shows Vera fashioning her own, new, identity. She rejects make-up, except those items she can use as writing and drawing implements, and tears up the women's clothes she has been given, preferring her utilitarian body stocking instead. She is inspired by a yoga instructor on the television who advocates the practice as a route to internal strength and freedom, achieved through disciplined training of the body [Fig. 4.9]. Also on her television, she is inspired by the art of Louise Bourgeois, the clear inspiration for the artworks Vera was constructing at the beginning of the film.



Fig. 4.9: Pedro Almodóvar, *The Skin I Live In* (2011), Vera takes up yoga.

For Kristeva the condition of being a stranger to one's self, although a source of internal conflict and incoherence, it is also the wellspring of human creativity and enjoyment: "Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with an exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking."⁶⁴⁶ While she remains a victim of a dreadful crime, Vera's defiance during this montage show her coming to terms with her new identity and, to the best of her ability given the violence of its inauguration and her continued imprisonment, making it her own. Due to her creativity and her passions she is able to sustain herself and eventually achieve her freedom.

In the last section of the film, as we move back into the diegetic present, Vera is acting as Robert's dutiful housewife and lover, much to the chagrin of Marilia. Vera convinces Robert to allow her all the freedoms she lacked when locked in her room, on the condition that she never leave him. She now wears dresses and high-heels, and goes on a shopping trip with a reluctant Marilia. Vera appears to be settling into a life of comfortable upper-middle class opulence. When Robert is confronted by a colleague, who suspects that he kidnapped and experimented on Vicente, Vera comes to his aid saying "I was always a woman," making it unnecessary for Robert to use the gun he brandishes at his former operating partner. Vera catches sight of Vicente's image in a newspaper brought by the other doctor as evidence of Robert's wrongdoing, and seems shaken by the experience but embraces Robert. That evening, as they are in bed, Robert attempts to have penetrative sex with Vera once more. Vera says that this is still painful for her but adds that she has purchased lubricant that day while out shopping, which she goes to fetch. Having earlier noted the location of Robert's gun she puts it in her handbag along with the lubricant, gazing at and placing a kiss on the image of Vicente in the process. Vera

⁶⁴⁶ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 13.

returns to the bedroom and kills both Robert and Marilia then flees back to her mother's dress shop in the city.

The end of the film, then, sees Vera defiantly coming to terms with the performance of her new identity while attempting to forge links with aspects of her old life. Significantly, when she arrives at her mother's boutique it is not to her mother that she initially makes her identity known, but to the lesbian shop assistant Christina (Bárbara Lennie). Earlier in the film, during the extended flashback sequence, in the scene where Vicente announces his intention to attend the wedding at which he will meet Norma, Christina and Vicente are working in the dress shop together. Vicente attempts to flirt with Christina, offering her a floral print dress free of charge, and saying they should go out dancing together. Christina rebuffs him saying she is meeting her girlfriend [Fig. 4.10]. Vicente suggests she put the dress on anyway, he thinks she will look great in it, to which she responds, "If you like it so much why don't you wear it yourself." "You're so mistaken," replies Vicente, "Because I don't like men?" asks Christina, "Because you don't like me," he responds. This suggests that Vicente feels that he is in some way different from other men. When he returns to the shop as Vera at the end of the film he is wearing an exact copy of this dress, picked up on the shopping trip with Marilia, which he uses to authenticate his bizarre tale of forced gender reassignment [Fig. 4.11].



Fig. 4.10: Pedro Almodóvar, *The Skin I Live In* (2011), Vicente and Christina.

The Skin I Live In invites us to think about profound loss, in this case Vicente's loss of the gender and sexual identities to which he had become accustomed, in a way that reconfigures such loss as potentially productive. It does so by giving voice to losses usually experienced in melancholic fashion (disavowed, unable to be recognised, therefore unable to be properly mourned) in our experience of sexual difference.



Fig. 4.11: Pedro Almodóvar, *The Skin I Live In* (2011), Vera and Christina.

Melodrama and Melancholia

Rather than defining melodrama through any generic conventions Linda Williams defines it as “a broad mode [...] [that] emerges from primal sentiments of love and loss.”⁶⁴⁷ A key aspect of melodrama, she argues, is its generation of “novel objects of sympathy.”⁶⁴⁸ Her paradigmatic example is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* where the exploitation of a black man “inaugurated a new mode of feeling, unprecedented among white Americans, for the suffering of slaves.”⁶⁴⁹ In his films Almodóvar’s unconventional objects of sympathy include “sodomasochists, drag queens, male whores, pregnant nuns, a daughter hopelessly in love with her mother, an ambiguously sexed male nurse hopelessly in love with a comatose patient, and much, much more.”⁶⁵⁰ The celebration of virtue that is characteristic of melodrama functions as an important recognition of virtue in a world in which it is compromised.⁶⁵¹

The melodrama, Williams argues, usually climaxes in one of two distinctly gendered ways: “it can either consist of a paroxysm of (often feminized) pathos in which suffering becomes the very coin of virtue, or it can consist of a pathos that can be channelled into the typically masculine action of flight, rescue, chase, or fight.”⁶⁵² In the latter case it is through heroic action rather than suffering that virtue is purchased. “Melodrama,” Williams continues, “usually involves a give-and-take between the pathos of the recognition that it is too late to save virtue and the rescue or escape that takes place ‘in the nick of time.’”⁶⁵³

⁶⁴⁷ Linda Williams, “Melancholy Melodrama: Almodóvarian Grief and Lost Homosexual Attachments,” in Epps and Kakoudaki (eds.), *All About Almodóvar*, 167.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 167.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 167.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 167.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.* 167.

⁶⁵² *Ibid.* 167.

⁶⁵³ *Ibid.* 167.

Mourning is defined by Freud as the regular reaction to the loss of a loved person, “or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”⁶⁵⁴ Mourning is a painful process and will involve diminished interest in the outside world, an unwillingness to adopt a new object of love, and a general feeling of dejection. Though painful, mourning is a necessary process and is eventually passed through so that “the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.”⁶⁵⁵ Allowing one, in other words, to become attached to a new object of love.

Melancholia is like mourning with the exception that it is not a phase through which one passes, it appears perpetual, thus pathological. Melancholia can also be displayed when there has been no obvious object loss to cause it. A melancholic, unlike someone in mourning, will also experience “an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale.”⁶⁵⁶ As Williams puts it: “Where mourners find the world poor and empty, melancholics seem to find *themselves* poor and empty.”⁶⁵⁷ In melancholia grief is not resolved and can be experienced as an incorporation of object-loss as ego-loss that takes on a “self-tormenting” character.⁶⁵⁸

Incorporation is the action of retaining an unnameable loss, one that cannot be articulated, within the subject. Normally, in psychoanalytic thinking, loss is processed by introjection. Introjection requires the acknowledgment and understanding of what has been lost, “it further requires that the loss be, not filled or replaced, but displaced by the means to acquire what is literally wanted with a figurative substitute.”⁶⁵⁹ It is by this logic of substitution that introjection allows us to acquire language: cries for nourishment are replaced by words in the mouth – language – the ability to articulate what is desired.

⁶⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIV (1914–1916), Trans James Strachey (London: Vintage & Hogarth Press, 2001), 243.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 245.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 246

⁶⁵⁷ Williams, “Melancholy Melodrama,” 168. Emphasis original.

⁶⁵⁸ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 251.

⁶⁵⁹ Pearl, AIDS Literature and Gay Identity, 87.

When loss cannot be replaced with words it is incorporated “inside” the subject in a way that dovetails with the melancholic subject’s experience of loss as ego-impoverishment.⁶⁶⁰

Returning to the subject of melancholia in *The Ego and the Id*, Freud clarifies the point that in setting up the lost object inside the ego, the melancholic replaces an object-cathexis (object-attachment) with an identification.⁶⁶¹ He then goes on to say that at the time of his initial essay he had not appreciated how often this process took place or how significant it was in the development of the ego, making “an essential contribution towards building up what is called its ‘character’”⁶⁶² The relinquishing of a sexual object, he argues, often results in an alteration of the ego where the lost or prohibited object-cathexis is substituted by what might be called a character trait.⁶⁶³ The frequency of this kind of substitution, for Freud, “makes it possible to suppose that the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexis and that it contains the history of those object-choices.”⁶⁶⁴

In *Talk to Her*, Williams notes, Marco cries in almost every important scene. She interprets his profound sadness, which appears to be independent of Lydia’s condition, in terms of Butler’s concept of gender melancholia: “the process by which the heterosexual ego assumes normative gender by giving up its forbidden homosexual attachments.”⁶⁶⁵

Butler argues that when adopting a normative heterosexual identity one incorporates the prohibited homosexual attachments one must renounce in order to achieve recognition as a normatively gendered subject. As she puts it: “the girl becomes a girl through being

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid. 87-88.

⁶⁶¹ Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. IXX (1923), trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage & Hogarth Press, 2001), 28.

⁶⁶² Ibid. 28.

⁶⁶³ Ibid. 29. See also “Character and Anal Eroticism,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. IX (1908b), trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage & Hogarth Press, 2001), 167-176 to which Strachey refers the reader in a footnote. Here Freud argues that the character traits of “cleanliness, orderliness and trustworthiness” are often prominent in those who took longer to overcome faecal incontinence in childhood, which Freud interprets as evidence of “a sexual constitution in which the erotogenicity of the anal zone is exceptionally strong.” Their prominent character traits indicate the heightened levels of repression to which this anal eroticism has been subjected.

⁶⁶⁴ Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” 29.

⁶⁶⁵ Williams, “Melancholy Melodrama,” 170-171.

subject to a prohibition which bars the mother as an object of desire and installs that barred object as part of the ego, indeed, as a melancholic identification.”⁶⁶⁶

In *Talk to Her* Marco and Benigno develop an unlikely friendship that for Marco proves stronger than his attachment to Lydia. After he finds out that she had taken back her former lover and planned to end their relationship Marco goes abroad to research another travel book. When he finds out that Lydia has died he contacts the clinic looking for Benigno to find out why he had not been informed, instead he learns of Benigno’s crime and imprisonment and rushes back for him. As Williams puts it “The homosexual possibilities of this relation will only be spoken at the point at which they become impossible to realise. [...] this is a film about the grief of lost homosexual attachments whose expression comes melodramatically ‘too late’”⁶⁶⁷

When Marco first visits Benigno in prison they meet in opposing glass booths. Benigno is distraught over the fate of Alicia and her child but eventually calms down telling Marco that he thinks of him often, “especially at night.” The explanation for this is that Benigno has been reading the travel books written by Marco and this makes him feel that he is travelling with and is close to Marco. In particular, Benigno identifies with a portrait of a Cuban woman in one of the books who, like Benigno had nothing and therefore had to “invent everything.”

On their second meeting Benigno expresses frustration at not being able to hug Marco. To do so would require a “vis-à-vis” a pass reserved for close relatives. The prison officers have asked Benigno if Marco is his boyfriend, but he has not dared to say yes for fear of offending Marco. Marco informs him that he would not mind at all and

⁶⁶⁶ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 136.

⁶⁶⁷ Williams, “Melancholy Melodrama,” 183.

puts his hand up to the glass “as a token of the embrace that he cannot give.”⁶⁶⁸ Benigno, with tears in his eyes, kisses his hand and places it on the glass opposite Marco’s.

The third meeting between the pair is provoked by Benigno’s voicemail message to Marco announcing his intention to “escape” to be with Alicia. Marco is then involved in a race against time, a familiar melodramatic trope, to tell Benigno the truth about Alicia before it is “too late.” Predictably, he does not make it and learns of Benigno’s failed attempt to put himself in a coma that has resulted in his death. In a letter Benigno implores Marco to visit him “wherever they take me,” and in contrast to Marco’s attitude to the comatose Lydia “talk to me, tell me everything. Don’t be so secretive.” The next scene deploys what Williams describes as “the ultimate melodramatic cliché of the graveside conversation with the dead,”⁶⁶⁹ where Marco acknowledges that he should have told the truth about Alicia: that Benigno “woke her up.” Marco is in tears once more, though this time they have a focused object: Benigno and the “too late” recognition of what both men meant to each other. Williams argues that these tears are “not caused by the sheer pathos of death and loss as by the cessation of tension at the moment that desire must be given up.” In other words Marco is now able to move beyond his formally prohibited melancholic homosexual attachment. Significantly, the film closes by suggesting that Marco and Alicia will form a couple after meeting at a performance by modernist dance pioneer Pina Bausch, Alicia having noticed Marco’s tears as Benigno had, at an earlier Bausch performance, at the very beginning of the film.

In *The Skin I Live In* Vicente is, in some ways, a typically virile young heterosexual man. His persistent flirting with Christina, despite the fact that he knows her to be gay, has to be checked by his mother. In his fateful encounter with Norma, while he does not actually rape her as Robert assumes, he is overtly aggressive and insensitive. He also takes a devil may care attitude to his own health: he rides a motorcycle and has to be

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid. 187.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid. 188.

cautioned by Christina about his excessive use of recreational drugs. Yet, in other ways Vicente is presented by the film in ways that undermine this conspicuous masculinity. He is responsible for the window displays in his mother's shop, creating beautiful mannequins from straw.⁶⁷⁰ He is interested in women's fashion, recommending clothes to Christina; he appears devoted to his authoritative mother in the absence of his father; physically he is slight and boyish, making his metamorphosis into the beautiful Vera plausible. As I noted above, when he is rebuffed in his advances towards Christina he suggests that he is not like other men. In many, if perhaps more subtle, ways Vicente could be seen as the counterpart to Benigno: a character heavily coded as gay but who pursues his heterosexual object choice with rapacious zeal.

When transformed into Vera, Vicente initially appears horrified. However, over the six years of his captivity he gradually comes to terms with this new identity. Vera becomes devoted to the self-preservative health philosophy of yoga in contrast to Vicente's lifestyle. Vera also carves out a niche for herself on the spectrum of gender presentation: she wears her hair in a short angular bob, eschews makeup but embraces a floral dress. Significantly, after she kills Robert and Marilia and sets off for her mother's shop she pairs this dress with a red leather biker jacket. When she returns to the dress shop as a confident, defiant, beautiful and slightly androgynous young woman it is to Christina, the gay woman to whom she has always been attracted, that she tells her story. By ending the film with this reunited pair, in the same way in which *Talk To Her* ends with the pairing of Marco and Alicia, Almodóvar presents us with a romantic coupling which has gone through a circuitous and torturous route in order to be fully realised.⁶⁷¹

The Skin I Live In also deploys the twin conventions that, for Williams, characterise the melodramatic climax. The feminised pathos in which suffering is

⁶⁷⁰ These uncanny models visually resemble Gal's appearance after her accident, the inhuman sight of which had caused her to kill herself.

⁶⁷¹ Here I would like to express my gratitude to Maria Loh for first suggesting that *The Skin I Live In* might be read as a "dilated" romance in this way.

emphasised is amply in evidence: not only does Vera have to suffer the trauma of a sex change and captivity, she has also lost her virtue in the sense that she has had to seduce and have intercourse with two men in order to facilitate her escape. The film also displays the “typically masculine action of fight, rescue, chase or flight,”⁶⁷² in Vera’s heroic escape. Here, however, the same body performs the two conventions. In this way the film complicates the gendered dynamics of melodrama while retaining the emotional power of the genre.⁶⁷³

In her analysis of *The Ego and the Id*, Butler draws attention to the reversal, in comparison to “Mourning and Melancholia,” of what it means to resolve grief.⁶⁷⁴ In “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud argued that grief was resolved through the abandonment of the object attachment, de-cathexis, in order to form new attachments. In *The Ego and the Id* he alters what it means to relinquish an object so that instead of abandoning the object entirely, we find according to Butler that “There is, rather, the incorporation of the attachment *as* identification, where identification becomes a magical, a psychic form of preserving the object.”⁶⁷⁵

Earlier I wrote of how Butler sees the very category gender as being achieved, “at least in part through the repudiation of homosexual attachments.”⁶⁷⁶ The prohibited desired object is not entirely relinquished but is instead incorporated as a loss that cannot be avowed, therefore cannot be mourned, and for this reason cannot be worked through or moved on from. By arguing that a stable concept of gender, and even biological sex, is achieved through the unavowable loss of homosexual object attachments, incorporated

⁶⁷² Williams, “Melancholy Melodrama,” 167.

⁶⁷³ Williams argues: “It would be a mistake, however, to say that Almodóvar’s unique queering of melodrama ‘subverts’ it, for to subvert it would be to undo the very important feelings of the form.” “Melancholy Melodrama,” 168.

⁶⁷⁴ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 134.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 134.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 136.

into the ego as melancholic identification, Butler is demonstrating the intimate connection between stable gender and the regulation of sexuality:

The identification contains within it both the prohibition and the desire, and so embodies the unrieved loss of homosexual cathexis. If one is a girl to the extent that one does not want a girl, then wanting a girl will bring being a girl into question; within this matrix, homosexual desire thus panics gender⁶⁷⁷

In this way melancholia, the unavowable, thus unsurpassable, longing for a prohibited or lost object, suffuses both gender and sexual identity. Building upon the melancholic and uncanny aspects of sexuality and the medicalised body dramatized by *Talk to Her*, *The Skin I Live In* exposes the way in which these phenomena are present in the acquisition of sex/gender and sexuality itself. By focusing on a protagonist who has his sex and gender identity, in which he has achieved some semblance of coherence, forcibly taken away from him, the film is able to show Vera/Vicente achieving a space of livability within her new gender. In this sense the film makes explicit the performative aspects of gender and, uniquely, presents the lost object of melancholic identification, the body/self Vicente, as not disavowed because it had once been lived. Furthermore, the later iteration of the body/self Vicente, as Vera, is not presented as a complete break with the past but the forced coming to light of formally unavowable homo- and transsexual melancholic identifications. While Vera/Vicente's situation is extraordinary, the scenario arguably implausible, *The Skin I Live In* nonetheless makes accessible to its audience the way in which our emergence as sexed beings in the world is structured by the prohibition and unrieved loss of both our identification with the other sex and our homosexual attachment to the sex that we come to inhabit in social life.

As I have argued above, Vicente's performance of masculinity is ambivalent.

When he and Norma are both high on drugs, flirting together at the wedding, he comments

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid. 136.

“You’re different, I’m different too.” To which she responds, “Are you in treatment?” “Do you think I should be?” he replies, conveying the connection between this ambivalent masculinity/heterosexuality and broader psychic coherence.

For Butler the melancholic acquisition of coherent heterosexuality produces “a domain of homosexuality understood as unlivable passion and ungrievable loss.”⁶⁷⁸ However it is clear from her account that the same process produces a similarly melancholic (unavowable) identification with transsexuality too, given dependence of the acquisition of sex/gender, at least in part, on both the repudiation of homosexual attachment to that gender as the object of desire and repudiation of the opposite sex/gender as a site of identification. While William’s analysis of *Talk to Her* focuses on the unspoken homosexual attachment between two men *The Skin I Live In*, taken as a culmination of themes that have concerned Almodóvar throughout his career, comes closer in spirit to what is particularly original about Butler’s work on gender and sexuality in that it shows how both sexual difference and heteronormativity mutually sustain and compel each other through structures of prohibition, disavowal and foreclosure. Crucially, this is also where the capacity for subversion and transformation can be located. As a discursive structure gender is dependent upon its capacity for reiteration, as reiterable it becomes “open to variation and plasticity.”⁶⁷⁹

Over the course of the film’s narrative Vicente is forced to re-emerge as Vera, but this transformation can be read as both a returning and an imposition. The film is still permeated with a melancholic longing for Vicente, the turning point at which we realise that Vera is the person Vicente has become is one of the most surprising and affecting ever committed to film. But instead of simply positioning Vera’s former male gender as an original of which she has been robbed the film reveals ambivalence in the identities of both Vera and Vicente; the repressed and prohibited homosexual and transsexual aspects

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid. 135.

⁶⁷⁹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 89.

of each self. But while the film may allow us to understand the identity Vera as a disavowed aspect of the identity Vicente, the returning of this previously foreclosed identification differs and transforms in its returning. By ending the film on the tentative possibility of a lesbian relationship between Vera and Christina the film suggests that, as Butler puts it, “Perhaps it is only by risking the *incoherence* of identity that connection is possible.”⁶⁸⁰

While it may be difficult for many of us to imagine feeling estranged from our bodies, our sex and gender identities, to the extent that we would undertake to have them “changed” by medical intervention, it is less difficult as film viewers to place ourselves in Vera/Vicente’s position. Here, Almodóvar’s skilful manipulation of the naturalised conventions of thriller and melodrama dramatically denaturalises the conventional and stable conception of sex and gender. While the uncanny is conventionally understood as the familiar made strange, Almodóvar’s films, with the novel objects of sympathy and outlandishly circuitous yet utterly compelling narratives epitomised in *Talk to Her* and *The Skin I Live In*, render the strange familiar and plausible. An understanding of the uncanny as a reversible phenomenon brings it even more closely into line with an understanding of deconstruction as not simply a method of reading but something always already operative in the world, revealing difference and incoherence at the heart of identity, as well as the covert dependence of the seemingly normal and taken for granted on its marginalised component, which is often forced to masquerade as its binary other.⁶⁸¹

While Mulvey advocated a strategy of distanciation, which destroys pleasure and satisfaction but allows the cinema audience to engage critically with the film text and its ideological content, the Almodóvar films that I have looked at in this chapter employ an uncanny commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar within the conventions of narrative

⁶⁸⁰ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 149. .

⁶⁸¹ The reversibility of the uncanny is emphasised by Royle’s account which also foregrounds the close relationship of the uncanny to deconstruction. Royle, *The Uncanny*, 1. On deconstruction as an operative force in the world see my Introduction.

cinema.⁶⁸² By doing so *The Skin I Live In*, in particular, is able to present sexual difference as an imposition and wound with which we are nonetheless compelled to live.

Conclusion

HIV/AIDS can be detected as an implicit presence in these films through the themes of transgenesis and medical intervention, pregnancy and incubation and anxieties around penetration and castration for men. It also makes itself felt through the way in which the idea of a natural or authentic body is undermined and the exposure to incoherence that this entails. Most of all, however, it is as a meditation on sexual difference, which Butler describes as “the primary *guarantor* of loss in our psychic lives” that the *Skin I Live In* can be read as engaging with HIV/AIDS and so much else besides.⁶⁸³ One of the most important aspects of gender melancholia as a concept, she argues, is how it sheds light on a culture “which can mourn the loss of homosexual attachments only with great difficulty.”⁶⁸⁴ The disavowal of the loss of homosexual and transsexual identifications, their melancholic incorporation, in the service of stabilising heterosexual identity and gender normativity places immense barriers in the way of recognising homo- and trans-losses as authentic or real. This is so because the veneer of authenticity and reality bestowed on stable identity is achieved only through disavowing those structuring losses; the proactive prohibition on recognising and mourning the loss. Our sense of authenticity and coherence regarding our own identity is not something we are likely to give up willingly, given the immense cultural value attached to it. This situation is made all the more acute given the death toll of the HIV/AIDS crisis, described by Manuela in *All About My Mother* as “an awful inheritance,” and the need to find a public language in which to

⁶⁸² The two are not diametrically opposed approaches. Royle draws attention to the uncanny foundations of the alienation effect in both Bertolt Brecht and the Russian formalists and the transformational and revolutionary aims of both. Royle, *The Uncanny*, 4-5.

⁶⁸³ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 164-165. Emphasis original.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 138.

avow and mourn these losses.⁶⁸⁵ Indeed, AIDS activism was in part dedicated to such a project as well as to combating what Butler described in *Bodies That Matter* as “the killing inattention of public policymakers on the issue of AIDS,” itself a symptom of the difficulty of recognising and mourning the value of homosexual lives and deaths within heteronormativity.⁶⁸⁶ In this light Butler’s work on gender melancholia is the crucial link between her articulation of gender as performative and citational, but also policed by prohibition and foreclosure, in *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter* and *The Psychic Life of Power* and her later work on how lives and deaths are differentially valued in various contexts in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*. The unifying insight is that all our later experiences of loss have their genesis in the losses that institute and structure sexual difference and endow it with value, a process and valuation subsequently repeated and ritualised throughout culture. In *The Skin I Live In* the normally disavowed loss that constitutes the acquisition of a stable gender identity and firm heterosexuality is dramatized and given a language in which it can be recognised and mourned. The film’s ending, the implied coupling of Vera and Christina, also suggests, that Vera’s experience of loss, while painful, difficult and upsetting is, in fact to be thought of as an opening to new and transformative possibilities.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid. 138.

⁶⁸⁶ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 233.

Conclusion: Akedah

In Albert Winn's photograph *Akedah* (1995) [Fig. 5.1], the HIV-positive photographer shows his arm wrapped in a tefillin. This is a small black leather box containing scrolls of verse from the Torah attached to a leather strap, which allows the box and text to be held close to the body during prayer by male observant Jews. Also apparent when looking at the photograph is the gauze and plaster covering a wound, the result of a recent blood extraction on the same arm. Winn explains that during the time the photograph was taken he was a participant in clinical trials for HIV medication that required daily blood tests. As the trial went on, rather than getting used to this daily ordeal, Winn found it increasingly unpleasant. The ritualistic act of having a rubber tube wrapped around his arm each day reminded him of the use of the tefillin in weekday morning prayers in the Jewish community in which he grew up.⁶⁸⁷ Furthermore, Winn was able to come to terms with the ordeal by equating it with the biblical story of the binding of Issac by his father Abraham (*Akedah*): "I realized I was making a sacrifice for science, but it was also saving my life."⁶⁸⁸ Winn's photograph, from the series *My Life Until Now*, uses embodied ritual to call attention to a complex multifaceted identity that involves Jewishness, gayness, maleness, HIV-positivity, everyday life in exceptional circumstances and a yearning for bodily integrity, still so highly valued in western culture, while simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of attaining that integrity. In this way *Akedah* crystallises many of the themes this thesis has examined.

⁶⁸⁷ Quoted in Nick Street, "Albert Winn's photography captures the intertwining influences of Judaism and illness," http://www.jewishjournal.com/arts/article/albert_winn's_photography_captures_the_intertwining_influences_of_judaism_an accessed 26/09/16. Unpaginated.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid. Unpaginated.

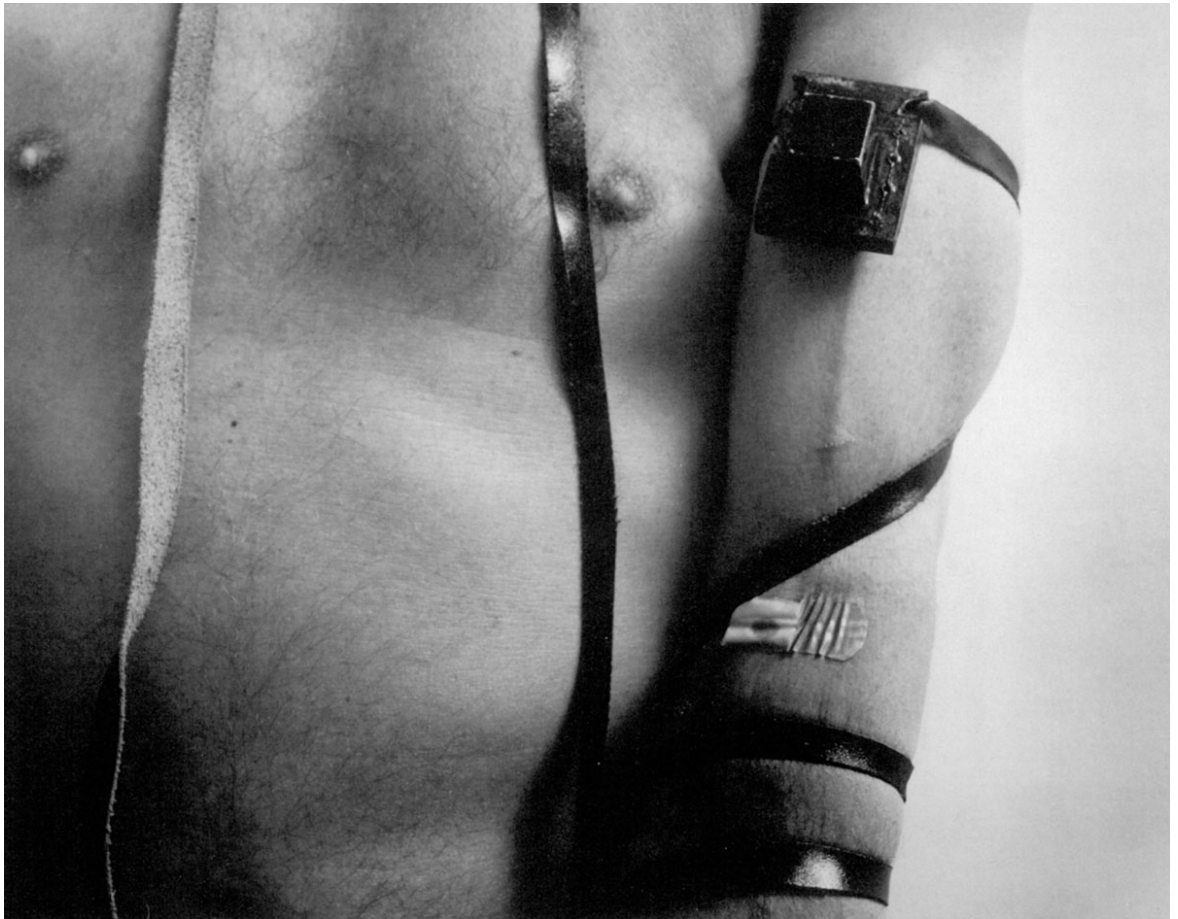


Fig. 5.1: Albert Winn, *Akedah*, 1995. Gelatin silver print, 20 x 24".

Georges Bataille's work has proven influential to the practice of performance artist Ron Athey, where it is combined with ecstatic religious experience and penetration in the form of both bodily wounding and sexual penetration. Athey's *Torture Trilogy* embraces male penetrability, bodily rupture and the multivalent properties of blood in the age of HIV. Following the arguments of Bersani, Butler, Kristeva and Douglas, these qualities form the basis of homophobia and many other prejudices due to the cultural association of penetrability, bodily openness and blood with femininity. In this way penetrability and the bodily wound join queer or anti-homophobic discourses with their routes in feminist thought. This is connected to a central contention of this thesis, made in the Introduction with reference to Derrida, that many of the most troubling and disruptive aspects of HIV/AIDS were elements of human life and embodiment that long predated the epidemic but were given a new terrifying and threatening immediacy and reality by it.

I argued that *Deliverance*, the last instalment of Athey's *Torture Trilogy*, is a meditation on death in line with Bataille's writing on sacrifice. While sacrifice is usually conceived in Euro-American culture as orientated towards some cause or goal, Bataille locates its primal importance to the human psyche in the performed exposure to bodily materiality and death. While Athey's work employs religious imagery that is based on the belief that there is a life beyond to our embodied existence here on Earth *Deliverance*, in fact, uses sacrifice to point to the absence of meaning in death, and its unrecoverable finality. At the same time the performance acknowledges the perhaps unavoidable need to search for meaning in the face of successive waves of tragic and premature deaths. Embodied openness to finitude can also mean openness to the future, to what comes and to the unexpected in the absence of any divine order or meaning to death. For Athey this has, happily but perhaps unexpectedly, meant openness to life and to living on. Considered in this way bodily openness and exposure prompts questions about how PWAs who have lived through the crisis negotiate their survival and their grief.

Subsequently I demonstrated the strategic exclusions that characterised the incorporation of the work of Bataille into the discourse of art history at the very moment when his proto-deconstructionist fusion of the body, sex, the abject, death and ritual could have provided a language in which to discuss these issues as the AIDS crisis made them so painfully present. David Wojnarowicz approached these themes through his literary antecedents (shared with Bataille) and his interest in entropy, decline and ruin. This allowed a more wide-ranging critique of contemporary society than some examples of AIDS activism, which had specific policy and health care goals, but in its combination of immediate and specific aims with broader criticisms of US culture, Wojnarowicz's combined literary and visual practice stands in a synecdochical relationship with the AIDS activist movement.

While Wojnarowicz found himself at the epicentre of the AIDS crisis from the early 1980s to early 1990s, Athey's work spans the permutations of the HIV/AIDS epidemic since the late 1980s. In chapter three I read François Ozon's *Time to Leave* as a veiled meditation on the time when HIV/AIDS was usually a terminal and fatal condition. It does so from the vantage point of the present day and a socialised health care system where it is a chronic and manageable disease allegorising AIDS through a story of cancer. I argued that this film exists in a temporal relationship with the AIDS crisis that resembles trauma, in that it is a belated response to a crisis of survival, something that it also foregrounds through its investigation of the temporality of photography. Both the psychoanalytic account of trauma and Roland Barthes's account of photography draw upon the metaphor of the wound to communicate their simultaneously poignant and disruptive nature. The distance afforded by time and the relative safety offered by medical developments make it less painful to dredge up the past and re-confront the period when HIV invariably meant severe illness and death, this to some extent must account for the renewed interest in the most acute phase of the AIDS crisis and its associated activism in the present day to which I drew attention in the introduction.

I also argued – taking inspiration from Hannah Arendt's concept of *natality* – that the film's engagement with the topic of childhood be read as drawing attention to the way in which birth introduces queerness, change and difference into the world as much as sameness and the repetition of norms. Lee Edelman's influential account in *No Future* proposes the queer subject as the instantiation of the death drive or negative and in this way emerges, like much queer theory, from HIV/AIDS. Indeed, throughout this thesis I have drawn attention to the way in which HIV/AIDS can be thought in relation to deconstruction, the last iteration of which was called autoimmunity, understood as the undoing or self-destructive potential at the heart of every identity or concept, which is neither good nor bad but simply how things are. However, a queer natality sees the

disruptive and non-normative potential in the child and allows us to imagine a future as at least potentially better than the past. Queer natality, and in particular the way in which *Time to Leave* considers birth and childhood alongside illness and death, raises questions about how debates around gay marriage and parenthood are related to the historical memory, current state and future development of HIV/AIDS.

In the final chapter I argued that Almodóvar's films particularly *The Skin I Live In* channelled HIV/AIDS through the themes of bodily penetration and foreignness. The film also draws attention to the way in which anxiety surrounding penetration and sexual passivity for men is related to anxiety around the loss of stable or proper gender. Almodóvar's films use the conventions of narrative cinema to profoundly disrupt our assumptions about gender and in so doing make apparent the way in which our subsequent experiences of loss are related to the culturally mandated losses that institute sexual difference. However, the ending of *The Skin I Live In* suggests that, in the present cultural moment with its explosion of interest in trans and cross-gendered subjectivities, we may be moving towards a time where the losses usually disavowed in heteronormativity, like the lives lost in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, are beginning to be recognised, mourned, and lived with.

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