

Sex after death: François Ozon's libidinal invasions

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By now it should be well understood, within and beyond the bounds of gender and sexuality studies, that queer praxis has been both a sustained response to a particular history of loss and an important contribution to the ongoing psychosocial project of theorizing mourning. Among other things, 'queering' mourning has meant overruling reticence with the antagonistically explicit; displacing mortuary and memorial decorum with improvised and impatient performances; reconceiving illness, care and forms of farewell to accommodate new experiences of familiarity with, and estrangement from, bodies; freshly embracing the work of anger, ambivalence and melancholy. It has meant risking not only futures but the very consolations of futurity in favour of preposthumous resistance to the logics of reproduction and self-bestowal. And it has meant coming to terms with pleasure at the core of the experience of mourning.

To say that mourning has become a way of life is banal, for it has never been anything else. And the sanguine recommendation that loss be apprehended as 'productive rather than pathological' is too weak a tonic for many.¹ But to assert that mourning entails a phenomenology of pleasure remains as provocative today as it was when Karl Abraham and Sigmund Freud, early in the last century, noted with perplexity and discomfort the libidinal assertiveness of grief. 'My impression', Abraham wrote to Freud in 1922,

is that a fair number of people show an increase in libido [*eine Steigerung der Libido*] some time after a bereavement. It shows itself in heightened sexual need [*gesteigertes sexuelles Bedürfnis*] and

¹ David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss: the Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), p. ix.

2 Karl Abraham to Sigmund Freud, 13 March 1922, in Ernst Falzeder (ed.), *The Complete Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Karl Abraham, 1907–1925*, trans. Caroline Schwarzacher (London: Karnac, 2002), pp. 453–4. *The interpolated German is from Hilda C. Abraham and Ernst L. Freud, Sigmund Freud, Karl Abraham, Briefe 1907–1926* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1980), p. 306.

3 Maria Torok, 'The illness of mourning and the fantasy of the exquisite corpse' (1968), in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 108–10. Italics in original. The interpolated French is from Nicolas Abraham, *L'Écorce et le noyau: Collaboration et autres essais de Maria Torok* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), pp. 232–3.

4 Torok, 'The illness of mourning', p. 121.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

6 *Ibid.* Italics in original.

appears quite often to lead, e.g., to conception shortly after a bereavement. Sometime at your convenience I should like to know what you think about this and whether you can confirm this observation.²

Abraham persisted in his query, fruitlessly, in the face of Freud's repeated epistolary evasions. Maria Torok characterizes Freud's resistance in terms of 'the reluctance we all feel when, in a sacrilegious move, we want to grasp the inmost nature of mourning'. Her own clinical experience, however, confirms the intuition Abraham allowed himself to be discouraged from pursuing. '*The illness of mourning*', she writes,

does not result, as might appear, from the affliction caused by the objectal loss itself, but rather from the feeling of an irreparable crime: the crime of having been overcome with desire [d'avoir été envahi de désir], of having been surprised by an overflow [débordement] of libido at the least appropriate moment, when it would behoove us to be grieved in despair.

These are the clinical facts. A measure of libidinal increase [*accroissement libidinal*] upon the object's death seems to be a widespread, if not universal phenomenon.³

There is no question of paraphilia in the cases Torok reports or in those she infers from her metapsychological analysis – no pathological excitation, for example, over the non-resisting, non-rejecting corpse. On the contrary, the conclusion she draws is that heightened sexual need is among the commonest sequelae of grief, due primarily to the imagoic congealment of unassimilated desire – the condensation of an unconscious fantasy of return to 'a satisfaction that was initially granted and then withdrawn'.⁴ The surge of libido, then, is the ecstasy of the transient lifting of a shared repression, a hallucinatory gratification of a repressed desire, preserved as an 'exquisite' (literally, sought out) moment, or "'exquisite corpse" that together the dead and the survivors had both long before consigned to the grim tomb of repression'.⁵

Anyone who has ever experienced, within a context of libidinal disorder or demise, the sensation of objectless, intransigent waiting – waiting for something that will not come to term – might find a kind of solace in Torok's image of the fixated child's 'unwavering hope that one day the object would once again be *what it was* in the privileged moment'.⁶ One's most acute and useless longing is validated, at least, by reflection. Moreover, such an image might encourage one to seek – in analysis, in aesthetic experience, in love – an improved figure for the dimly apprehended feeling linked to, constitutive of, that unrecoverable moment. What one wants, what one gets if one is lucky, is a better way of looking out, so to speak, for danger. Seeking the desires quelled by repression is akin to socially interdicted erotic pursuits, just as cruising, as a social courtship of risk, may be an end in itself as a form of libidinal expressivity. 'What are you waiting for?' is the unanswerable question

posed to the unconscious ego that nevertheless rhetorically insists that the path to an answer is unobstructed ('C'mon, what are you *waiting* for?'). While waiting to know, or to be taught, the secret of our desire, we risk forfeiting the mobility of pleasure.

That refusing such a forfeiture, directly in the aftermath of loss, would draw reactions of incredulity and disapproval is still – even now, despite any and all positive revaluations of the counternormativity of libidinal events – in no way surprising. To be anything but bereft of libidinal sensations seems an offence against the gravity of loss; it runs counter to the intelligibility of strong, sincere attachment. Mourning is not a merely optional socially sanctioned form of inconsolability – an acceptable resistance to comfort that may or may not be indulged in by the bereaved according to internal promptings. On the contrary, mourning is a socially mandated incapacity to be consoled. To suit the social requirements for mourning decorum, this incapacity must be only temporary. Mourning that exceeds its term-limit is disturbing to others because it subverts faith in the ultimate efficacy of consolation. 'Blessed are they that mourn', according to the second beatitude, 'for they shall be comforted' (Matthew 5: 4). The blessing – and its secular counterpart, care – accrues to the eventual willingness to be comforted as well as to the sanctity of the experience of loss. Mourning must come to an end. But to come to an end, it must first run its course. A perceived 'failure' to mourn seems a dangerous refusal to avow or to respect the vulnerability of the libidinal self in the face of life's profound contingency. To refuse dissociation from one's desiring body in the immediate aftermath of loss is offensive, not because it is self-evidently in poor taste but because it courts disappointment so brazenly. Thus, the image of the desirous mourner is most often turned, through disapproval, into a reflection of contempt or erotic dread (in, for example, the figure of the horny widow).

This is probably why that which Torok calls 'the untoward arrival of this kind of libidinal invasion [*envahissement libidinal*]' has received so little serious cultural elaboration.⁷ A famous exception to this rule is Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), in which Marlon Brando's character, Paul, initiates an intense sexual affair with Maria Schneider's Jeanne in the immediate aftermath of his wife's suicide. Another exception to this rule is the far less well-known short film by François Ozon, *La petite mort/Little Death* (1995), that I will treat here as an example of what queer praxis – cinema at a far remove from Bertolucci's melodramatization of a narcissistic will to self-perpetuation⁸ – can make of desire that refuses to be the occasion for its own destruction.

Little Death is the story of Paul, a twenty-something photographer whose father, from whom he is estranged, is dying. The film's opening shot is of a black-and-white photo of Paul, taken on the day of his birth (figure 1). In the voiceover, he explains that a copy was sent right away to his father, who was away on business at the time. His father's reply was: 'This monster can't be my son. He's too ugly. There must be some

7 Ibid., p. 110. The interpolated French is from Abraham, *L'Écorce et le noyau*, p. 233.

8 After Jeanne shoots him, Paul speaks his final words: 'Our children ... our children ... our children will remember'.



Fig. 1.
All images from *La petite mort*
(François Ozon, 1995)

9 *La petite mort, X2000: the Collected Shorts of François Ozon*, DVD, directed by François Ozon (KimStim, 2001). All translations from the original French dialogue are my own.

mistake.’⁹ This piece of family lore – anecdote of an archetypal rejection – stands, in this short film, for the entire history of the father–son relationship, from the narrator’s birth to his father’s last illness. The first action sequence takes place in bed, where Paul demands anxiously of his lover, Martial: ‘Honestly, do you think I’m ugly?’ ‘Hideous’, Martial teases, and then coaxes Paul – whose photographic speciality is capturing men’s faces at the moment of orgasm – into allowing himself to be photographed while masturbating.

The walls of their apartment are plastered with such photographs of the blissed-out, contorted faces of various men, as Paul’s sister Camille discovers when she arrives to take Paul to visit his ailing father. Camille is intrigued: ‘They’re pretending?’ ‘No, of course not’, Martial replies, ‘otherwise there’d be no point.’ ‘Look at that picture there’, he tells her, pointing to one of himself. ‘You see? I have a bit of cum on my cheek’ (figure 2).



Fig. 2.

It has been six years since Paul has seen his father, whose homophobic alienation from his son is strongly implied, and their initial reencounter at the hospital goes badly. But Paul returns on his own, with his camera, to uncover and capture surreptitiously his father's naked, sleeping body on film (figure 3). The immodesty of Paul's exposure of his father's nakedness is compounded by the implied publicity of the camera. To whom will he show these photos? Where might they be displayed? He takes his shots quickly and from many angles before his sister returns to discover what she perceives to be a shocking lack of filial deference. In effect, Camille takes the place of Ham's brothers in Ozon's refiguration of one of the most famous and sexually ambiguous scenes of oedipal transgression: the exposure of Noah's nakedness in Genesis 9: 20–25. The same questions of incest and homosexual cathexis hover unanswered around both scenes. Does the son desire the father's naked body? Has the son ventured some sort of sexual conquest in aggressively drawing attention to the father's weakness? Is the son's immodest look symbolic of rape or castration?

Camille is bewildered and outraged by her brother's actions. After quickly restoring her father's bedclothes, she tussles with Paul in an effort to get him and his camera out of their father's hospital room and to force him to account for his actions. But Paul is contemptuous of her reaction. Before walking away, he says, 'Do you ask a baby for permission to take its picture?' By which he seems to be asking if he, as a baby, was able to give permission for the photo that prompted his father's disavowal of him and that still reminds him of their irreparably wounded attachment. Now that I am a man, he seems to imply, can I perhaps introduce my dying father to something like the specific sense of risk that characterizes my experience of my sexuality? Paul, like so many gay men of his age, is coming to know that his own particular history of childhood attachment and loss is more fully on display – to himself and to others – by virtue of the adult sexuality he refuses to renounce.



Fig. 3.

In the immediate aftermath of their father's death, it is precisely this refusal of Paul's that will seem to Camille – and undoubtedly to many of the film's viewers – to be an obscene affront to the father's memory. When the call comes from his sister, telling him his father has died, Paul reaches for Martial. As Martial comforts him, Paul becomes urgently aroused. He experiences the news of his father's death almost immediately as a libidinal invasion, which, as Ozon shows us in a scene of post-coital tenderness, restores what had been the rapidly crumbling intimacy of Paul's relationship with Martial. Our view of their lovemaking, however, is displaced by a series of close up shots of black-and-white photos of the mingling but motionless naked limbs and torsos of unidentifiable men. Are these photos of Paul and Martial – Ozon's mannered, abstracted depiction of what might otherwise have seemed too lurid or improbable: hot sex driven by grief? Or are they the photos of other men, the other men whose faces cover the walls – fetish-like photos that adorn, protect or magically enhance the realm of Paul and Martial's erotic life? Either way, the images suggest the importance to the filmmaker of a fixed formal quality complementing the social transgressiveness of their desire's filmic enactment.

But perhaps this quality not so much complements the transgressiveness as opposes it. One thinks of Roland Barthes's preference for photography 'in opposition to the Cinema' – a preference, that is, for photography as an opportunity to dismiss 'sociological commentary', whether on the family or on its counter-bourgeois manifestation in the intimate sphere of a couple of gay Parisians. 'What did I care', Barthes asks himself in *Camera Lucida* (1980), evidently with Pierre Bourdieu's 1965 study *Photography: a Middle-brow Art* in mind, 'about the Photograph as family rite ... nothing but the trace of a social protocol of integration, intended to reassert the Family, etc.'¹⁰ In 1988, Ozon's first film, the seven-minute *Photo de famille*, registered his own protest against treating photography as a mass social practice for integrating and protecting the family. Employing his own relatives as actors, Ozon shows us what seems to be a very happy family of four having dinner together and afterwards dispersing to various parts of the house. The son then proceeds to poison his mother, stab his sister and smother his father, and to reassemble and arrange their corpses on the living-room sofa for a family snapshot, in which he includes himself with the help of the time-delay feature on his instamatic.

The photographer-as-wayward-son figure returns in Ozon's later work – not only in *Little Death* but also in one of his most recent features, *Le temps qui reste/Time to Leave* (2005), which is the second film, according to Ozon, in an uncompleted trilogy of features about mourning.¹¹ Romain, thirty-one, is a fashion photographer who learns after collapsing at a shoot that he is dying of cancer, dying quickly. In the aftermath of his diagnosis Romain goes through a variety of reversals of feeling, several of which have importantly to do with his attitude towards children: his sister's children, himself as a child and ultimately his own

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1981), pp. 3, 7. Italics in original.

¹¹ 'The idea was to do a trilogy on mourning, beginning with *Under the Sand*, an austere melodrama about coping with the death of another. *Time to Leave* is about coping with one's own death. And the third part, which I'll do someday perhaps, will be about the death of a child.' François Ozon, 'Interview on the film *Time to Leave*', *François-Ozon.com*. URL: <http://www.francois-ozon.com/francais/entretiens/le-temps-qui-reste.html> [accessed 6 July 2007]. My translation.

12 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 9. The interpolated French is from Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 23.

13 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 26–7

14 *Ibid.*, p. 21. The interpolated French is from Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 42.

15 André Bazin compares photographic realism to 'the molding of death masks', in *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), p. 12. Similarly, Susan Sontag writes of the photograph as 'something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask', in *On Photography* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1977), p. 154. Elaborating on photography's 'special status with regard to the real', Rosalind Krauss writes that 'photography is an imprint or transfer off the real; it is a photochemically processed trace causally connected to the thing in the world to which it refers in a manner parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints or the rings of water that cold glasses leave on tables. The photograph is thus generically distinct from painting or sculpture or drawing. On the family tree of images it is closer to palm prints, death masks, the Shroud of Turin, or the tracks of gulls on beaches. For technically and semiologically speaking, drawings and paintings are icons, while photographs are indexes'. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 110.

offspring, the child he conceives with an infertile straight couple but does not live to see (though he does have time to make the unborn child the sole beneficiary of his will). *Time to Leave* makes the photographer himself – the single, gay photographer, immobilized and silhouetted in the film's final shot of his sunset death – the trace of 'a social protocol of integration, intended to reassert the Family'. In other words, *Time to Leave* returns us to the melodramatization of the narcissistic will to self-perpetuation for which the family may be the universal alibi.

Little Death does something else, something closer to Barthes's meditation on photography in *Camera Lucida*. Rejecting the sociological vantage point of Bourdieu and others, Barthes aspires to a critical–expressive discourse that would be adequate to confront, above all, 'that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead [*retour du mort*]'.¹² For Barthes the photograph has a special relation to *jouissance*, the bliss that is close to wounding and death, and he is most interested in the element of the photograph (he calls this element the *punctum*) that 'rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me ... that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'.¹³ Barthes's *punctum* shares something of its explosive, unpredictable nature with the 'untoward arrival', the *envahissement libidinal*, that Torok links to object-loss, the return of death. In both cases, what Torok would call the conscious ego has the impression of being the site, but not the source, of an unsettling phenomenon. Whether the invasion comes from within or without, the experience of its untoward arrival is the same.

Like *Camera Lucida*, *Little Death* encourages the exploration of photography 'as a wound [*blessure*]'.¹⁴ In *Little Death*, the photographic wounds gape overdeterminedly. First there is the photo with which the film opens; looking at it, Paul experiences anew the psychic wound his father has inflicted. Paul's photos of various men in the throes of orgasm interrupt the temporality of pleasure. They also provoke a discomfort in Camille that is metonymic of their father's homophobia. The photos Paul takes of his father's vulnerable body figuratively dismember him, and Camille is keenly distressed at what she considers to be a violation of their father's dignity. Paul pastes one of the photos Martial took of him coming over the offensive baby picture that has been in view on one of the walls (figures 4a and 4b). In their bedroom are displayed dozens of images of Saint Sebastian. Later, Paul cuts the eyes out of a photo of his father's face in order to fashion a mask for himself, which he holds up to his face while gazing at his (father's) reflection in a mirror (figure 5).

This eerie scene, filmed – virtually ensanguined – in the blood-red monochrome of the darkroom's safelight, evokes the common association of photograph and death mask: an imprint of the real aligned with mortality.¹⁵ Paul, in his darkroom, is playing with a semblance of his father's actual death, not only by rendering him motionless in a photographic print, but also by cutting the eyes out of that print, revealing the emptiness, the lifelessness behind them.



Fig. 4a



Fig. 4b

However, he then transforms the photograph into a different kind of mask by holding it up to his face, scrutinizing his own reappearance in the mirror through his father's enucleated sockets. With Paul's eyes



Fig. 5.

now his, the father, too, makes a kind of reappearance as the menace of incorporation, as the imago into which Paul's unassimilated desire has congealed, along with the hope of its future assimilation. In the darkroom, Paul rehearses the objectal dependency that threatens to overwhelm him in his mourning.

While Paul is in the darkroom, his father is dying. Indeed, his father may already be dead. In the next scene (it could be mere hours or many days later), Martial is vacuuming while Paul lies on the carpet, shirtless, wearing sunglasses. It is not clear why he is wearing sunglasses indoors – there is the implication of a sunlamp or opened terrace door, perhaps. In any case, Ozon succeeds in creating the fanciful impression that Paul's eyes have been weakened or even destroyed in the previous scene – that in the oedipal violence of the darkroom scene, Paul has somehow blinded himself. There seems also to be a kind of playfulness here, on Ozon's part, regarding the glare of cinema. If not for the vacuum cleaner nudging his shoulder, Paul – shot from above against the rich blue carpet, golden hair slicked back and ashtray to hand – looks as if he could be a movie star on the beach at Cannes, seeking both sunlight and limelight, while also affecting the symbolic veil of celebrity – dark glasses. In other words, Ozon may want us to see Paul at this moment as being interrupted – first by Martial's vacuuming and then by the phone call from his sister – in a daydream of desirability, of narcissistic fantasy, of being picture-perfect.

As the film's opening sequence makes clear, Paul experiences the story of his father's early rejection as a prohibition against homosexual attachment. His father's refusal of attachment ('he's too ugly to be mine') is repeated as the question ('am I ugly?') Paul poses to his homosexual object choice. Paul's symbolic castration of his father (cutting out his eyes) entails a double disfiguration: he mimes an attack on the paternal authority internalized as superego, and at the same time he defaces himself in order to become a figure for the impossible closure ('I am my father') of the endless series of substitutions that sustains his ego-constituting struggle over an original homosexual attachment to his father.

In the film's final scenes, Camille hands Paul the sum of his paternal legacy, a box of his father's favourite photographs. 'I know you don't want anything from him. But he was counting on me to give this to you.' Flipping through them later, on his own, Paul discovers an envelope with his name written on it. It contains what is presumably a photograph of Paul as a baby, being held closely and kissed by his father (figure 6). What Paul does not know is that the envelope and the photo were placed in the box by Camille shortly before she handed it to him. The photo she has planted among the rest is both a blessing and a *blessure*, a conferral of well being that is also a tearing of the fabric of truth that Paul has spent his life weaving. The appearance of this photo brings the film to an end. It seems to leave Paul with nothing more to say.

Ozon's ending is nonetheless eloquent. The asymmetrical meaning of the photos that open and close the film – in the former Paul is ugly and



Fig. 6.

abandoned, in the latter Paul is beautiful and embraced – is all the more poignant and formally sophisticated for the lie, or lies, upon which it is based. Camille's subterfuge is motivated by her plan for Paul's freedom (freedom from their father, from oppressive ceremonies such as the funeral Paul has chosen not to attend, from the homophobia of bourgeois family life) – a freedom she nevertheless begrudges him and envies deeply. She even intuits the libidinal invasion precipitated by their father's death. Why bother coming to your own father's funeral, she sarcastically demands. 'You'd rather stay in bed with Martial ... he's a good fuck, huh?'

Camille cannot grant herself the freedom to imagine how fucking Martial and reacting to his father's death might be anything other than incommensurable. As yet, even Paul has no language for their commensurability. Indeed, *Little Death* contains no diegetic expression of their commensurability, but rather frames a view of such a discourse just coming into being. It drives into visibility the untoward arrival of the 'exquisite corpse' that he and his father 'had both long before consigned to the grim tomb of repression'. It challenges the conventional sense of what it means to be comforted in one's mourning, and of what the parameters of that mourning and that comfort might be. The image Camille has in her head of Paul and Martial at home, fucking during her father's funeral, discomfits Camille precisely because she has been brought to the edge of her own wishful identification with Paul: the child who, unlike her, is neither the father's business partner, nor the attentive presence at his sickbed, nor aggrieved by sexual loneliness; the child who, unlike Camille, is lucky enough to have an actual lover to reach for when the exquisite corpse makes itself felt as an opportunity to experience the unconscious life of pleasure less obliquely.

But if it were just about luck, we would not be left with the problem of sexual determinism with which *Little Death*, as a film by a gay

- 16 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 13.
- 17 The research on even this presumably more palatable naturalization of desire in cases of parental bereavement is astonishingly meagre. What little data has been published is based largely on the self-reported experience of heterosexual married couples, and the focus tends to be on sexual behaviour, not on the experience of sexual desire. See, for example, Mary E. Swigar et al., 'Grieving and unplanned pregnancy', *Psychiatry*, no. 39 (1976), pp. 72–80; Sherry E. Johnson, 'Sexual intimacy and replacement children after the death of a child', *Omega: the Journal of Death and Dying*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1984), pp. 109–18; Annelies K. Hagemeister and Paul C. Rosenblatt, 'Grief and the sexual relationship of couples who have experienced a child's death', *Death Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1997), pp. 231–52.
- 18 The antique understanding is discussed by Foucault in *The Use of Pleasure: Volume II of The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, NY: Vintage, 1990), pp. 125–39. On the relation between erotic pleasure and fatally extravagant waste, see George Batailles, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 1986), pp. 170–71.
- 19 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 138.
- 20 *Photo de famille* (1988); *Les doigts dans le ventre* (1988); *Mes parents un jour d'été* (1990); *Une goutte de sang* (1991); *Le trou madame* (1991); *Peau contre peau* (1991); *Deux plus un* (1991); *Thomas reconstitué* (1992); *Victor* (1993); *Une rose entre nous* (1994); *Action vérité* (1994); *La petite mort* (1995); *Une robe d'été* (1996); *L'homme idéal* (1996); *X 2000* (1998); *Scènes de lit* (1998); *Un lever de rideau* (2006).
- 21 *Jospin s'éclaire* (1995); *Regarde la mer* (1997); *Sitcom* (1998); *Les amants criminels* (1999); *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brillantes* (2000); *Sous le sable* (2000); *8 femmes* (2002); *Swimming Pool* (2003); *5x2* (2004); *Le temps qui reste* (2005); *Angel* (2006).

director about a gay character, seems to confront us. The freedom of de-repression seems to belong to Paul not only in his estrangement from heterosexual culture – an estrangement characterized by the inutility to him of what Lee Edelman calls 'the specifically heterosexual alibi of reproductive necessity'¹⁶ – but also, concretely, in the realm of gay coupledom. Indeed Paul and Martial are the only sexual couple depicted in the film. Camille, in contrast, makes much of her sexual loneliness, and their father no longer seems to have a wife to care for him. The first mention of Paul's mother, in the opening voiceover, is also the last reference to her in the film. Her total disappearance (is she dead, divorced, or just conspicuously unobtrusive?) cannot help but suggest, along with the apparent childlessness of both Paul and Camille, a rupture in the logic of reproduction that gives sex its only socially acceptable relation to grief. Sexual desire in recently bereaved parents, for example, is often credited to the 'natural' impulses to replace the lost child and to restore the parents' sense of having a secure relation to their posthumous futures through sexual reproduction.¹⁷ Transcendence, rather than *jouissance*, legitimates sexual pleasure in the procreative bereaved.

Of course, this goes beyond heterosexuality. Since the 1980s, the so-called gay baby boom has been attributed in part to a conscious repopulation project in response to the AIDS-related decimation of gay communities, even as donor insemination technologies have contributed to the de-eroticization of reproduction. More recently, the increasing sociopolitical conservatism of the gay West has enabled the championing of the marital-family model as an appropriate response to the lethality of homophobia. But Paul and Martial, as a gay couple, pursue their bodies' pleasures in a way that is distinctly contraceptive. That 'bit of cum on my cheek' that Martial points out to Camille is precisely the semiotic index that links nonprocreative sex to excessive, wasteful and potentially fatal self-expenditure. Orgasm is called 'the little death' because it has been understood since antiquity, in various terms, to prefigure and even to bring about the death of the individual.¹⁸ Ozon's titular use of the phrase refers most obviously to Paul's photographic speciality. But the film is also about a momentous death – the death of Paul's father – and the ideality of a grief that could find its way back through disinhibition, even if only temporarily and unavowably, to the unassimilable desire that *makes* Paul's father his father. Who but a gay man, *Little Death* seems to ask, would let himself be driven so incautiously to the ground of his subjection, to the point of loss of a homosexual attachment that anyone could mourn, as Judith Butler has argued, 'only with great difficulty'¹⁹

It is remarkable, given Ozon's prolific output and success in making films that revel in impropriety and trouble notions of stable sexual identities, that no major critics and theorists of the New Queer Cinema discuss any of the seventeen shorts²⁰ and eleven features²¹ he has directed

22 There is scarcely a trace of Ozon's work to be found in any of the following: Bad Object-Choices (ed.), *How Do I Look: Queer Film and Video* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1991); 'New queer cinema', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 2, no. 5 (1992), pp. 30–39; Martha Gever, Pratibha Parmar and John Greyson (eds), *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993); Paul Burston, *What Are You Looking At? Queer Sex, Style and Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1995); Ellis Hanson (ed.), *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Thomas Waugh, *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies in Lesbian and Gay Film*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003); Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (eds), *Queer Cinema: the Film Reader* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004); Michele Aaron (ed.), *New Queer Cinema: a Critical Reader* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004). Michelle Chilcoat helps break this silence with her essay, 'Queering the family in François Ozon's *Sitcom*', in Robin Griffiths (ed.), *Queer Cinema in Europe* (Bristol: Intellect, 2007).

since 1988.²² In virtually all of these films, Ozon formally, as well as thematically, displaces, mocks or otherwise defamiliarizes the conventions of erotic narrative. His renditions of the erotics of mourning can be particularly startling, in part because they carry the implicit proposition that mourning *is* an erotic narrative, that sexual desire does not simply evaporate in the face of loss. For example, at the end of *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes/Water Drops on Burning Rocks* (2000) – based on an unproduced play by Fassbinder – the suicide of young Franz briefly interrupts the troilist escapades of his lover Léopold, his girlfriend Anna and Léopold's transsexual ex-lover Véra. After discovering the poisoned Franz and helplessly watching him die, Vera suggests that they call the police. But Léopold insists there will be plenty of time for that after they have finished having sex. The comic horror of their return to the bedroom cannot be dismissed as merely absurd; the scene is cruel, soulless and manic, largely in reaction to the claustrophobic domestic life that Franz has been suffering at Léopold's sadistic hands. It is easily imagined as Franz's libidinally subtended fantasy of his own death. Suicide is the short-circuiting of derepression. It is the melancholic's violent negation of a dawning realization that he will never be able to experience the pleasure of being mourned.

In the more exquisite and complex film, *Sous le sable/Under the Sand* (2000), mourning takes hold of Marie Drillon – whose husband Jean has vanished during their beach holiday – as an exceptionally durable hallucinatory wishful psychosis. Jean continues to exist for her in the rounds of daily life. She hallucinates having breakfast with him. She makes excuses for his absence to their friends. Everyone around her knows that Jean is almost certainly dead – and that, in any case, Marie has not seen him since his disappearance from the beach. They watch her, giving her the extra time she seems to need to test reality, while also very gently encouraging her to recognize and mourn Jean's absence and get on with her life.

What makes *Under the Sand* far more than a simple study of denial is the stunning intricacy with which Marie's imaginary projections of her husband coincide with both her erotic fantasy life and her actual affair with Vincent, whom she meets at a dinner party shortly after Jean's disappearance. Marie wrestles with her attraction to Vincent and even discusses her flirtation with the hallucinatory Jean, as if to secure his approval of a new or as yet unquelled desire. (Prior to Jean's disappearance, the film establishes the couple's affectionate but melancholy intimacy.) She models for Jean the dress she will wear on her next date with Vincent. After returning home from this date, Marie lies on her bed and imagines being undressed and caressed by the hands of both men. Ozon shows us the two pairs of hands removing her shoes, argyling their way up her legs and playing with her breasts. As she begins to masturbate, the hands disappear. In a later scene, as Marie and Vincent are fucking in her bed, she sees Jean step into the bedroom's open

doorway, and they smile at each other while she and Vincent continue having sex.

Having rejected her friend's suggestion that she see a psychiatrist, it seems that Marie has found a different way to deconstruct the imago she continues to project as an image of her dead husband. She seems to find herself inside – which, diegetically, means conscious of and visible to us – the unconscious reorganization of her object relations. It is as if we are able to watch the 'broadening and enriching' of Marie's ego as 'unconscious, nameless, or repressed libido' is introduced into it through the process of what Torok, after Ferenczi, calls introjection. In other words, Ozon portrays simultaneously the hallucinatory fulfilment of incorporation and 'the desire of introjection it masks'.

While the introjection of desires puts an end to objectal dependency, incorporation of the object creates or reinforces imaginal ties and hence dependency. Installed in place of the lost object, the incorporated object continues to recall the fact that something else was lost: the desires quelled by repression.²³

Charlotte Rampling's inspired portrayal of Marie allows Ozon to capture and prolong the illness of mourning ('the feeling of an irreparable crime') that Torok locates within a larger category she terms 'neurosis of transition'.²⁴ *Under the Sand* is Ozon's and Rampling's attempt to find a visual language for incorporation that would also reveal it figurally to be 'the disguised language of as yet unborn and unintrojected desires'.²⁵ In the morgue scene, late in the film, we watch Marie looking at what we cannot see: Jean's sea-logged, grossly distended and putrescent corpse. Marie's insistence on viewing the corpse, very much against the advice of the pathologist, helps make her gaze itself an apt figure for a disturbing avowal of violent rage at Jean's abandonment of her. In this figural sense, her look is what makes Jean's corpse so awful to behold, the cause of Jean's macerated flesh, blackened skin, unrecognizable features – so horrible a spectacle that Ozon does not permit the audience to see it. That is, he anticipates our revulsion at the rage we must nevertheless acknowledge that Marie has every reason to feel at her abandonment (the question of suicide is never resolved). Clearly, the repression of this rage has been a necessary and sustaining condition for Marie's hallucinatory wishful psychosis. Its figural expression in the morgue scene is not in itself a sign that Marie has accepted the reality of Jean's death (in the next scene she refuses to acknowledge that the watch found with the corpse belonged to her husband). But the conflict has at least momentarily become visible. The remainder of the film reveals with brilliant clarity and pathos that this conflict is, for Marie, potentially insurmountable, and thus one with which she might have to continue to live.

Like *Little Death*, *Under the Sand* ends with what the viewer knows to be a deception. The man towards whom Marie runs as he stands in the distance looking at the sea is not actually Jean—no more than the photo of Paul and his father was actually cherished and bequeathed to him by

²³ Torok, 'The illness of mourning', p. 110.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 113–15.

his father. Yet, neither film's ending feels like a betrayal of its central character. Indeed, they are triumphs of delicacy and tact. Our last sight of Marie shows her running away from us, shrinking into the distance of the long shot in a way that asks us to view her pursuit of the illusory Jean without scepticism or contempt. In Paul's case, we see not a retreating figure but a face in closeup, as he looks up from the surprising documentary evidence of his father's early embrace. The actor, François Delaive, looks not directly at the viewer but into the unseen distance behind us, with a look we have seen before: the inscrutable look of orgasm that Paul has devoted his photographic career to capturing. There is no dramatic contortion, no gasp or cry, just the subtle rippling of a pulse from below. His head tips back slightly as it hits him. His mouth opens just a bit too quickly, as if he had momentarily forgotten how to breathe, then he lets the breath go as if saying goodbye to an ancient thought. The physiognomic play of surprise, relief, happiness, and a vague regret just coming into being that Delaive reproduces so finely and simply in those few closing seconds is the actor's perfect response to the director's demand for the character, that he not be seen as acquiescing in a deception (tricked by the planted snapshot) but rather submitting to a transformation, the consequences of which are not for us to know.

Thus, it is not at all clear how Paul will mourn his father or what that mourning will mean for other erotic dimensions of his life. The film ends with a view not of Paul's face but of blurred train carriages hurtling along the tracks that (we now realize) lie between the actor Delaive and the telephoto lens of Ozon's camera. In the final five seconds before the credits roll, the screen is filled with the shuttling from left to right of rectangular blue panels (train windows out of focus) that, segmented and scrolling by, bear a fanciful resemblance to film frames. *Little Death* ends reflexively by reminding us in a particularly forcible way of the effects that framing and cutting can have on the perceived continuity of erotic life. In real life, the death of a loved one is like a shock cut, and our learned response to the shock is the overcompensating purposiveness of mourning – not grief alone, but the conventions of mourning insisted upon by the ego as a kind of parapraxis of desire. Mourning misspeaks our desire, Ozon observes, not the other way around, and this makes mourning all the more unbearable insofar as we experience, as intrapsychic conflict, its alienated relation to the libidinal excitations of loss.

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