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A Death in the Family:  
Meditations on Mourning in Contemporary Cinema

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A dissertation submitted in *fulfillment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of  
Master of Arts in Film Studies

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2012

**COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

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# Abstract

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This thesis examines cinematic depictions of traumatic loss and mourning, with a particular focus on representation. My study merges a theoretical and analytical investigation. I aim to defend cinema against the wider post-structuralist claim that trauma refutes the possibility of representation and argue, instead, that an increasing array of filmic examples demonstrate cinema's potential to provide valuable insights into the complexities of the subject. I use Freud's discussion of trauma as a belated, repetitious experience as an entry point to illustrate the ways in which cinema, a medium bound to temporality, can develop a relationship between linear and traumatic time. I frame this discussion with perspectives on trauma, narrative and recovery from theorists such as Judith Herman and Dominick LaCapra. In defining trauma as a paradoxical experience, I emphasise the need for cinema to approach the subject with a combination of post-structural self-consciousness regarding problems of representation and Freudian psychoanalysis that offers the possibility of narrativisation and recovery.

My dissertation examines five films, each of which offers a variety of narrative and aesthetic possibilities concerning the cinematic representation of trauma and loss: *21 Grams*, *In the Bedroom*, *Don't Look Now*, *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Trois Couleurs: Bleu*. My analyses of *21 Grams* and *In the Bedroom* highlight the challenges in assimilating trauma into narrative. With *21 Grams*, I explore the ways in which the cinematic tactic of linear disruption can, instead of expressing the fragmentation of traumatic time, affect story and character complexity. While *In the Bedroom* provides interesting representations of mourning, denial and alienation, its sudden turn to a revenge drama illustrates the risk of succumbing to generic conventions.

*Don't Look Now*, an early example of the traumatic loss narrative, reveals a complex interweaving of Gothic, supernatural and traumatic registers. I focalise my analysis through readings of Freud's dream of the burning child, exploring the film as a tale of repressed parental grief and guilt.

My examination of *The Sweet Hereafter* centres on the way its fractured storytelling, more successfully than *21 Grams*, evokes associations between trauma, time and denial. Drawing on Roland Barthes' reflections of the photographic image, I critique the perspective on the film's ending as redemptive, and argue, instead, that it continues the narrative's engagement with presence and absence. The narrative's refusal of blame, and of curative norms, subsumes traumatic loss as part of the inexplicable.

*Trois Couleurs: Bleu* is a curious narrative of recovery: it moves between mourning and its denial, representation and its refusal, consciously using ambiguous metaphors of colour, light and music to express the liminal spaces of traumatic loss. Its repetitive confrontation with an absence and disruption of form articulates the need to narrativise trauma, as well as an awareness of the challenges in doing so.

# Introduction

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[T]raumatic events for contemporary culture turn around the question of how to represent the unrepresentable, or how - in Samuel Beckett's words - to name the unnamable.<sup>1</sup>

At its best, the modern elegy offers not a guide to 'successful mourning' but a spur to rethinking the vexed experience of grief in the modern world. We should turn to it expecting not so much solace as fractured speech, not so much answers as memorable puzzlings.<sup>2</sup>

The past two decades have yielded a noticeable increase in filmic depictions of traumatic loss, or more specifically, people struggling to cope with the sudden, accidental or violent death of a family member. My interest in traumatic loss was sparked not only because of its recent popularity in cinema, but because of the alternative narrative aesthetic it encourages, or rather, as I will argue, the subject necessitates. The complex interplay between cinema, trauma and loss poses interesting challenges for the theory and practice of film analysis, particularly with regard to issues of representation. My investigation in this thesis is two-fold: on the one hand, I aim to explore the widely-held post-structuralist concept of traumatic experience as an aporia, a crisis in representation, narrative, and time. On the other hand, I use a selection of films to examine cinema's self-conscious ability to form new paths of engagement with traumatic grief, often challenging its own medium as an adequate form of expression. My thesis, thus, involves a dialectical exchange between a theoretical and an analytical investigation, in which my

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Postmodernism as mourning work," *Screen* 42, no. 2, Special Debate: Trauma and Screen Studies (2001): 195.

<sup>2</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), x.

analyses of a selection of films offer an opportunity to assess my theoretical arguments, while my examination of theory offers insight into traumatic loss cinema.

Both the quotations that open this introduction ruminate, in different ways, on the paradoxes that surround trauma and grief, and how they can potentially problematise narrative. Thomas Elsaesser, in *Screen's* Special Debate on Trauma and Screen Studies, outlines a question central to my investigation and to trauma theory, of "how to represent the unrepresentable." Focusing on psychoanalytic theory, I will examine Elsaesser's question as a response to the incongruities of trauma, an experience that is perceivably intrusive, repetitious and enduring, while simultaneously unlocatable, unspeakable, and even unknowable. I aim to explore trauma not only as a decisive rupture in one's sense of self, but essentially, in one's experience of time. While Elsaesser's question suggests an impasse, I aim to explore how cinema's self-conscious engagement with narrative temporality can potentially, as Roger Luckhurst suggests, "retrospectively rewrite narrative significance,"<sup>3</sup> and develop a relationship between linear time and traumatic time.

In the second quotation, Jahan Ramazani examines the 'modern elegy' in poetry, a term I would like to extend to contemporary cinema, partly because of my concentration on mourning and its integration into narrative, but mainly because of the corresponding dialectical process Ramazani's study takes: through an analysis of selected poetry, he aims to establish the modern elegy as capable of revealing "some of the twentieth century's most sophisticated thinking about grief, some of its most impassioned articulations of it."<sup>4</sup> Cinema, I will argue, is capable of a similar reflection. Ramazani invokes Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," a text which still informs contemporary grief theory, or at least, the issues that plague it, and uses it to consider elegiac narrative

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 80.

<sup>4</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, ix.

constructions not as a mode of consolation or recovery, but as a space to explore the complexities of grief. Like Ramazani, I do not offer cinema as a pure form of solace or therapeutic ideal, or even as an answer to the paradoxes raised by Elsaesser; rather, I aim to illuminate cinema's potential to provide a space to consider and emphasise the bewildering ambiguities of traumatic loss, and ultimately, to seek new ways of showing and seeing "the unrepresentable."

The two quotations also signify, however, the traditional disconnection between 'trauma' and 'mourning,' as they are rarely examined together, and as I will explore, their unique relationship has been largely overlooked by contemporary film theory, as well as psychodynamic and to an extent, clinical psychiatric approaches.

In *The Trauma Question*, a study to which I am greatly indebted, Roger Luckhurst confronts the challenging task of tracing the genealogy of trauma. The word 'trauma,' derived from the Greek word meaning 'wound,' originally referred to a physical injury, inflicted by an external force. It is only in the late nineteenth century that trauma starts to emerge as it is most popularly understood in contemporary usage, as a term describing psychological wounds.<sup>5</sup> One of the early instances Luckhurst details is the emergence of 'railway spine' in Britain in the late 1860s, a nervous disorder associated with victims or witnesses of railway disasters. Marked by depression, nightmares and memory problems, sufferers of 'railway spine' often had no sign of bodily injury; the reason for the disorder's name was owing to a lack of knowledge concerning the nervous system. One of the most emphasised symptoms was the inability to conduct business effectively, and as a result, victims began claiming compensation.<sup>6</sup> Sufferers of 'railway spine' would most likely be diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) today.

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<sup>5</sup> Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*. Luckhurst notes an 1895 edition of *Popular Science Monthly*, which makes use of the phrase "psychical trauma" to mean a "morbid nervous condition" (2).

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller review of 'railway spine,' see Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 20 – 26.

PTSD, often differentiated from other mental disorders because of its distinct link to a specific event, has had particular ramifications in litigation. The early example of 'railway spine' informs the origins of trauma in relevant and distinctive ways, highlighting the need to elucidate psychical trauma: without a diagnosis, sufferers would not be treated, and without a proper validation of the disorder, the legal system would not provide compensation. Moreover, it demonstrates that trauma's history is not homogeneous, making it difficult, if not impossible, to delineate a clear trajectory. 'Railway spine' also indicates that trauma is a distinctly modern conception; Dominick LaCapra goes further to refer to the popular view of recent history as a largely traumatic era: "There are reasons for the vision of history – or at least modern and, even more, postmodern culture – as traumatic."<sup>7</sup> While I do not have the space to explore trauma's genealogy fully, it is important to note its multidisciplinary, far-reaching nature: from psychiatry to neurobiology to law to military warfare, trauma is informed by many different contexts.<sup>8</sup> The successive wars of the previous century, for example, have spurred investigation into the devastating after-effects of combat trauma and 'shell shock syndrome,' leading to a politicisation of war trauma.<sup>9</sup> Feminism has given rise to studying 'survivor syndrome' as a gendered experience, as well as establishing a relationship between sexual abuse and trauma.<sup>10</sup> The Holocaust has invited many theorists to investigate the role of post-traumatic testimony in collective trauma; most importantly, Holocaust literature has contributed to the crucial understanding that post-traumatic

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<sup>7</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), ix.

<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive overview of trauma's conception see Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000) and Roger Luckhurst, "Part 1: Aetiology," in *The Trauma Question*, 17 - 79 (New York, NY: Routledge).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> See Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora, 1994).

symptoms occur belatedly.<sup>11</sup> In *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys implies that the conception of trauma mirrors this belatedness:

Yet that same body of work on the [Holocaust] camp survivors remained somewhat isolated from the literature on the combat neuroses, and to some extent also from the literature on civilian trauma, until it was assimilated in the post-Vietnam literature on PTSD.<sup>12</sup>

Janet Walker, in her article "Trauma Cinema: false memories and true experience," concurs, emphasising the interdisciplinary chain of effect:

The emerging literature of the 1980s on sexual traumatization benefited from the existing literature on battlefield trauma. And I expect that the public attacks on women's recovered memories, however unpleasant, will result in the discovery that created elements are as much a feature of combat trauma as they are of recovered memory.<sup>13</sup>

Trauma's history thus emerges as a non-linear, repetitious, and delayed system, one that has a strong correlation, as I mention above, to a psychodynamic understanding of trauma. Drawing on Freudian principles, Cathy Caruth defines post-traumatic symptoms by their repetitious reference to the original event: "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. I will elaborate on the belatedness of post-traumatic symptoms in my theory section.

<sup>12</sup> Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Janet Walker, "Trauma Cinema: false memories and true experience" *Screen* 42, no. 2, Special Debate: Trauma and Screen Studies (2001): 214. Walker refers to the 1990s controversial 'Memory Wars,' and the recovery of traumatic memory.

<sup>14</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 9.

Dominick LaCapra warns, however, that trauma's heterogeneous origins often lead to a tendency in trauma theory to generalise suffering, where 'survivor syndrome' is too easily applied, and without distinction, to a multitude of traumatic experiences:

But the indiscriminate generalization of the category of survivor and the overall conflation of history or culture with trauma, as well as the near fixation on enacting or acting out post-traumatic symptoms, have the effect of obscuring crucial historical distinctions...<sup>15</sup>

Luckhurst similarly notes that trauma appears to be "worryingly transmissible" in nature: post-traumatic symptoms are able to navigate boundaries between patients, between patient and doctor, and between victims and their listeners, or those not directly experiencing the traumatic event.<sup>16</sup> Much of this conflation, most specifically in the case of vicarious 'listener' or 'viewer' sympathy, can be related to modern technology's ability to reproduce and broadcast trauma. Walker, quoting Hayden White, reflects on how modern media, such as television, have changed the reception and representation of trauma:

Twentieth-century catastrophes are extraordinary, argues White, because they must be comprehended through a 'revolution in representational practices, and the technologies of representation made possible by the electronics revolution'.<sup>17</sup>

LaCapra argues that this allows for a culture where traumatic events "are not fully owned by anyone and, in various ways, affect everyone."<sup>18</sup> While this is perhaps a reality of

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<sup>15</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, xi.

<sup>16</sup> Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> White quoted in Walker, "Trauma Cinema: false memories and true experience," 214.

<sup>18</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, ix.

modernity, as well as the intrinsic nature of trauma observation and identification, it is important to distinguish between different contexts of traumatic experience.

The field of PTSD, as Leys notes above, is an assimilation of previous, multidisciplinary research, aimed to form “a *unified theory* that applies to the victim of natural disaster, the combat victim, the Holocaust survivor, the victim of sexual abuse, and the Vietnam veteran alike.”<sup>19</sup> As it stands today in the Fourth Edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM)*, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder can arise from

direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate.<sup>20</sup>

The formalisation of PTSD by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1980 is largely considered a triumph in trauma studies. Since its inclusion, however, its description has been revised in many ways, and attracts debate. As noted above, LaCapra finds the current definition of PTSD problematic as it now extends to secondary victims of a traumatic event, a major distinction from its 1980 limitation to primary victims.

The parameters of the disorder are another area in dispute. The problem in using PTSD as a definitive way to define trauma, is that experiencing or witnessing an “extreme traumatic stressor” – an extreme, life-threatening event, or other threats to one’s physical integrity, such as sexual assault – will not necessarily result in the listed post-traumatic symptoms. Similarly, if one experiences the symptoms of PTSD, but as a

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<sup>19</sup> Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, 16, emphasis my own.

<sup>20</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed., Text Revision (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000): 424.

result of getting divorced or being fired, for example, it would fall under what the APA classifies as Adjustment Disorder. Otherwise, and in accordance with the length of time the symptoms persist, other mental disorders are considered, such as Acute Stress Disorder.<sup>21</sup>

My aim is not wholly to invalidate PTSD – later in my argument, I find its synthesis with a psychodynamic understanding of trauma very useful – but rather, to highlight the *DSM's* shifting definitions.<sup>22</sup> The APA does not currently recognise bereavement as a mental disorder, the rationale being that it is normal to experience grief after the loss of a loved one. The differing criteria between normal and abnormal grieving are still, and will most likely continue to be, the subject of controversy and modification. In the current *DSM-IV*, Major Depressive Disorder currently has a 'bereavement exclusion,' unless the symptoms are experienced for longer than two months; the same goes for Adjustment Disorder, for three months.<sup>23</sup> As quoted above, PTSD does recognise sudden or violent bereavement as a potential traumatic stressor: "learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate."<sup>24</sup> As Yuval Neria and Brett Litz state:

violent and unexpected loss results in severe feelings of personal vulnerability and forces the individual to confront the prospect of death, creating intense

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<sup>21</sup> APA, *DSM-4*, 427

<sup>22</sup> The APA documents the proposed changes for a multitude of mental disorders, including PTSD, due for the 2013 release of *DSM's* Fifth Edition: APA, "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder," *DSM-5 Development*, <http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevisions/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=165> (accessed July 25, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> APA, *DSM-4*, 355, 682.

<sup>24</sup> APA, *DSM-4*. Military combat, sexual assault, terrorist attack, torture, severe automobile accidents and natural disasters are just a few of the examples of extreme traumatic stressors provided, and as the entry notes, it is not limited to the listed examples (427).

anxiety, which arguably is the psychological aftereffect common to *all* traumatic stressors.<sup>25</sup>

Holly G. Prigerson, an early researcher of bereavement, agrees that traumatic grief mimics the three cluster symptoms of PTSD: the first set relates to the way “the traumatic event is persistently reexperienced,” through distressing dreams, flashbacks or thoughts; secondly, the “persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma,” which can mean avoiding activities, thoughts and people that remind one of the event; lastly, the “persistent symptoms of increased arousal,” such as outbursts of anger or difficulty falling asleep.<sup>26</sup>

The problem that Prigerson as well as Mardi J. Horowitz, another forerunner in the research of traumatic grief, argue is that none of the current potential diagnoses adequately covers its symptoms: both insist that a new and separate category is needed to encompass the specific disorder of traumatic grief – also commonly referred to as complicated grief, prolonged or chronic grief, pathological grief, or traumatic bereavement.<sup>27</sup> At the core of this issue is that if one does not fit the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, Major Depressive Disorder or Adjustment Disorder, one will not get treatment. Traumatic grief is a unique experience, argue Prigerson et al, because it involves both “the *separation distress* of losing an attachment figure and the *traumatic distress* of adjusting to life without that figure.”<sup>28</sup> Separation distress, Prigerson continues,

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<sup>25</sup> Yuval Neria and Brett T. Litz, “Bereavement by Traumatic Means: The Complex Synergy of Trauma and Grief,” *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 9 (2003): p.75.

<sup>26</sup> Holly G. Prigerson and others, “Consensus Criteria for Traumatic Grief,” *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 174 (1999): 67; APA, *DSM-4*, 428.

<sup>27</sup> Mardi J. Horowitz and others, “Diagnostic Criteria for Complicated Grief Disorder,” *Focus: The Journal of Lifelong Learning in Psychiatry* 1, no. 3 (2003). Horowitz and others state that “major depressive disorder does not adequately cover the symptom picture. Adjustment disorder is too nonspecific to serve as the relevant additional category. The event criteria for PTSD exclude some common loss-induced reactions...” (297).

<sup>28</sup> Prigerson and others quoted in Neria and Litz, “Bereavement by Traumatic Means: The Complex Synergy of Trauma and Grief,” 75, 77, emphasis my own.

“involves intrusive, distressing preoccupation with the deceased person (e.g. yearning, longing, or searching),” and traumatic distress is defined by

efforts to avoid reminders of the deceased, feeling of purposelessness and futility about the future, a sense of numbness or detachment resulting from the loss, feeling shocked, stunned or dazed by the loss, difficulty acknowledging the death, feeling that life was empty and unfulfilling without the deceased, a fragmented sense of trust, security and control, and anger over the death.<sup>29</sup>

Horowitz et al define similar diagnostic criteria, stating that the patient must experience any three of the following seven symptoms:

Intrusive symptoms

1. Unbidden memories or intrusive fantasies related to the lost relationship
2. Strong spells or pangs of severe emotion related to the lost relationship
3. Distressingly strong yearnings or wishes that the deceased were there

Signs of avoidance and failure to adapt

4. Feelings of being far too much alone or personally-empty
5. Excessively staying away from people, places, or activities that remind the subject of the deceased
6. Unusual levels of sleep interference
7. Loss of interest in work, social, caretaking, or recreational<sup>30</sup>

Essentially, both Prigerson and Horowitz outline a persistent longing and preoccupation with the deceased, and a general inability to carry on with life. They differ, however, in their criteria for the duration of symptoms: for Prigerson, symptoms must be present for longer than six months, whereas Horowitz extends it to longer than twelve months. Once again, the boundary between normal and pathological grief is called into question.

In the proposed changes for the *DSM-V*, to be released in 2013, many revisions have been suggested that reflect the recent and growing research in traumatic grief. The

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<sup>29</sup> Prigerson and others, “Bereavement by Traumatic Means: The Complex Synergy of Trauma and Grief,” 68.

<sup>30</sup> Mardi J. Horowitz and others, “Diagnostic Criteria for Complicated Grief Disorder,” 297.

bereavement exclusion in Adjustment Disorders and Major Depressive Disorder has been removed, implying that the loss of a significant attachment figure now qualifies as a precipitating event for either disorder.<sup>31</sup> Currently, despite the fact that Complicated Grief Disorder has been proposed as a new addition from an outside source, the APA still insists that there is insufficient research to warrant it as a separate category.<sup>32</sup> A bereavement-related disorder will appear, however, under Adjustment Disorders as a sub-section "Related to Bereavement," which can be diagnosed at least twelve months after a loss, and follows a similar set of diagnostic symptoms to the ones listed by Prigerson and Horowitz.<sup>33</sup> The validation of Complicated Grief Disorder in clinical psychiatry remains to be seen, and will most certainly be subject to much revision and debate. One may observe, however, that the area of traumatic grief has been underresearched, most particularly in the area of normal versus abnormal grief, as well as the type of bereavement experience: for example, the difference in impact between an expected and a violent death.

Whether one considers the filmic depiction of people struggling to cope with the sudden, accidental or violent death of a family member as a subgenre of trauma cinema or as a genre in its own right, the representation of traumatic loss appears to be an area mostly overlooked by contemporary film theory, or subsumed into larger historical or cultural cinematic depictions, such as the loss of a relative in wartime.

Janet Walker explains trauma cinema as "a group of films, each of which deals with a world-shattering event or events of the past, whether public, personal, or both."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> APA, "Adjustment Disorders" *DSM-5 Development*, <http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevisions/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=367> (accessed on August 10, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> APA, "Conditions Proposed by Outside Sources" *DSM-5 Development*, <http://www.dsm5.org/proposedrevision/Pages/Conditions-Proposed-by-Outside-Sources.aspx> (accessed on August 10, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> APA, "Adjustment Disorders."

<sup>34</sup> Walker, "Trauma Cinema: false memories and true experience," 214.

Walker also correlates the topics covered by trauma cinema to the American Psychiatric Association's list of possible traumatic stressors; she does not, however, mention familial loss. Most film theorists analysing trauma cinema tend to focus primarily on historical or cultural traumas: as Walker writes, "To think in terms of a 'trauma cinema', therefore, is to think of certain Vietnam or World War II themed films."<sup>35</sup> The focus is reflected in one of Walker's studies, *Trauma Cinema: documenting incest and the Holocaust*.<sup>36</sup> In E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang's *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations*, the concentration, too, is on nation-scale traumas, such as post-Apartheid South Africa, the Holocaust, and the bombing of Hiroshima.<sup>37</sup>

Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question*, on the other hand, encompasses a range of trauma films, such as *Hiroshima Mon Amour*,<sup>38</sup> *Blue Velvet*,<sup>39</sup> *21 Grams*,<sup>40</sup> *Memento*<sup>41</sup> and *Elephant*.<sup>42</sup> Arguably, all characters in trauma cinema negotiate what Jeffrey Kauffmann refers to as a loss of the assumptive world, or "assumptions or beliefs that ground, secure, or orient people, that give a sense of reality, meaning, or purpose to life."<sup>43</sup> Surely, in Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible*,<sup>44</sup> the brutal rape and beating of Alex will find her engaged with a loss, or fragmentation, of identity and meaning. There are many useful

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<sup>35</sup> Walker, "Trauma Cinema: false memories and true experience," 215.

<sup>36</sup> Janet Walker, *Trauma and Cinema: documenting incest and the Holocaust* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang, *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Alain Resnais (dir), *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (France: Cocinor, 1959).

<sup>39</sup> David Lynch (dir), *Blue Velvet* (USA: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986).

<sup>40</sup> Alejandro González Iñárritu (dir), *21 Grams* (USA: Focus Features, 2003).

<sup>41</sup> Christopher Nolan (dir), *Memento* (USA: Newmarket Films, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Gus van Sant (dir), *Elephant* (USA: HBO Films, 2003).

<sup>43</sup> Jeffrey Kauffmann, "Introduction," in *Loss of the Assumptive World: A Theory of Traumatic Loss*, ed. Jeffrey Kauffmann, (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2009), 1.

<sup>44</sup> Gaspar Noé (dir), *Irréversible* (France: Mars Distribution, 2002).

comparisons to be made by examining these traumatic narratives in relation to each other, and Luckhurst reveals significant similarities in the way these films engage in atemporal plots, associating the complexities of trauma with narrative time. For the purpose of a focused study, however, and because of what I have observed as an increased popularity in these narratives, my definition of traumatic loss takes the specific form of people struggling to cope with the death of a family member.

I omit studying narratives where the socio-political or historical context dominates the focus of, or instigates, the trauma. The loss of a spouse in films such as *The Constant Gardener*<sup>45</sup> and *The Road*,<sup>46</sup> for example, are largely focalised through, and dictated by, eclipsing circumstances: in the former, an international pharmaceutical conspiracy, and the latter, a post-apocalyptic wasteland. I also exclude from my study narratives where the loss is not of a sudden, accidental or violent nature, not because I presume it to be less traumatic, but because of the perceived rise in film narratives where a family member dies because of unprecedented events: a car accident, a drowning, a shooting. Cathy Caruth, whose reading of Freud I find invaluable, largely defines trauma in relation to unprecedented events, or 'fright,' and the element of surprise: "What causes trauma, then, is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time."<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the American Psychiatric Association refers to the "learning of the unexpected death" as the traumatic event. It is a significant observation that the majority of familial loss narratives I examine centre on a child's death.<sup>48</sup> Walsh and McGoldrick write that the loss of a child is arguably "the most tragic

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<sup>45</sup> Fernando Meirelles (dir), *The Constant Gardener* (USA: Focus Features, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> John Hillcoat (dir), *The Road* (USA: Dimension Films, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 61.

<sup>48</sup> For a closer look at representations of missing, victimised and dead children in cinema see Emma Wilson, *Cinema's Missing Children* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003).

of all off-time losses, reversing generational expectations.”<sup>49</sup> Cinematically, the representation of child death serves as a radical signifier of traumatic loss.

One of the most defining aspects of my investigation is narrative progression. I am not interested in all narratives that contain instances of death and grief, or that are simply motivated by the death of a family member; rather, I seek narratives that focus on bereavement as the film’s primary topos, using the sudden and unexpected absence of a family member as a starting point for the exploration of grief. An important feature regarding narrative progression tends to fall under the different depictions that occur in independent and genre cinema. Emma Wilson’s *Cinema’s Missing Children*, which focuses on cinematic representations of missing, victimised and dead children, makes hesitant yet relevant observations regarding the distinction. She observes that while strict divisions between the two cinemas are potentially obstructive in a thematically approached study, the “freedom of self-expression” associated with independent productions, especially when handling sensitive subject matter such as child victimisation, tends to generate very different results.<sup>50</sup> Wilson argues that while genre cinema continues an engagement with the child-victim, most commonly seen in the horror genre, the works of independent and arthouse directors, such as Todd Solondz and Atom Egoyan, yield a different interaction with the subject:

What their work does, precisely, is refuse to fit existing entertainment formulas in both their manipulation of film form and in their treatment of the missing

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<sup>49</sup> Froma Walsh and Monica McGoldrick, *Living with Loss: Death in the Family* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1991), 18. Also see Shirley A. Murphy and others, “The Aftermath of the Violent Death of a Child: an integration of the assessments of parents’ mental distress and PTSD during the first 5 years of bereavement,” *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 7 (2002). The death of a child is observed as an extreme stressor on parents, particularly when the loss is unexpected, most commonly related to homicide, suicide, or accident (205).

<sup>50</sup> Wilson, *Cinema’s Missing Children*, 3 – 4.

child as subject. In contrast to Hollywood in particular, the avoidance of sentiment in the treatment of this subject is seen as paramount...<sup>51</sup>

Revenge narratives such as *Mystic River*<sup>52</sup> and *Reservation Road*<sup>53</sup> thus tend to fall outside the realm of my study, as they use the loss of a family member as a motivation to explore cultural cinematic myths of violence and retribution.<sup>54</sup> The recent *Shutter Island*<sup>55</sup> tells the story of a man traumatised by the loss of his wife and children. The film's plot, however, disguised as an intricate murder mystery intended to communicate belatedly his multiple personalities, overshadows the possibility for a reflective representation of traumatic grief. More often than not, popular genre narratives tend to rely on conventional tropes of violence and suspense, and lack a distinctive interaction with a traumatised subjectivity. That being said, Iñárritu's *21 Grams*, while categorised as an arthouse film, displays a curative ending similar to the conclusion to the Hollywood feature, *Minority Report*.<sup>56</sup> The ending of Spielberg's film, Wilson argues, uses a substitutive economy that replaces the lost child when the protagonist's wife falls pregnant, raising complex issues of representing traumatic recovery and resolution.<sup>57</sup>

I aim to examine the traumatic loss narrative as an essential and growing part of trauma cinema, and explore the applicability of existing trauma theory. Simultaneously, however, I distinguish it from other trauma narratives because of the intense personal focus on loss, and mourning as a post-traumatic condition. Following Prigerson's combination model of 'traumatic distress' and 'separation distress,' I will apply both

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>52</sup> Clint Eastwood (dir), *Mystic River* (USA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2003).

<sup>53</sup> Terry George (dir), *Reservation Road* (USA: Focus Features, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> In my analysis of *In the Bedroom*, I further contextualise revenge narratives.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Scorsese (dir), *Shutter Island* (USA: Paramount Pictures, 2010).

<sup>56</sup> Steven Spielberg (dir), *Minority Report* (USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2002).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 4.

trauma theory and grief theory to my selection of films. While the study of trauma requires a multi-disciplinary awareness and approach, for the purpose of my focused investigation I concentrate on a specific aspect of trauma and grief theory that is aimed at negotiating issues of narrative and cinematic representation. My theoretical investigation outlines two central perspectives in contemporary trauma theory: the first is dominated by Cathy Caruth and the post-structuralist discourse which aims to define trauma as an anti-narrative, locating it as an unrepresentable concept. The second perspective is focalised through Freudian theories, and calls for a reconstruction and recuperation of trauma through the structures of language and symbolism. I aim to provide a perspective that reflects on the beneficial merging of the two modes, where I will outline the issues bound up with trauma and representation, but also promote the psychoanalytic discourse that allows for a gradual narrativisation of the traumatic experience. Furthermore, I seek to demonstrate the possibilities that cinema offers in representing the complexities and paradoxes of trauma. The first section thus consists of a theoretical investigation, but includes an examination of a myriad of traumatic loss narratives, produced mainly in the past three decades, revealing an emerging set of themes, narrative structures, and iconography which I use in analysing my key films.

The analysis of five films, to each of which I dedicate a chapter, constitutes the second section of my thesis: *21 Grams*, *In the Bedroom*,<sup>58</sup> *Don't Look Now*,<sup>59</sup> *The Sweet Hereafter*<sup>60</sup> and *Trois couleurs: Bleu*.<sup>61</sup> Each film offers variation on the topic, narratively and aesthetically, and opens up to different, yet ultimately interweaving discussions on cinema, trauma and loss.

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<sup>58</sup> Todd Field (dir), *In the Bedroom* (USA: Miramax Films, 2001).

<sup>59</sup> Nicolas Roeg (dir), *Don't Look Now* (UK: British Lion Film Corporation, 1973).

<sup>60</sup> Atom Egoyan (dir), *The Sweet Hereafter* (Canada: Alliance Communications Corporation, 1997).

<sup>61</sup> Krzysztof Kiesłowski (dir), *Trois couleurs: Bleu* (France: MK2 Diffusion, 1993).

I locate *21 Grams* and *In the Bedroom* as problematic narratives that highlight the issues of trauma and representation. Inárritu's film exhibits an unbalanced treatment of plot and story: its fragmented narrative often comes at the expense of character and story complexity, and the narrative resolves itself in an especially curative ending. My chapter on *In the Bedroom* briefly explores the revenge film in relation to traumatic loss. The film's final act, where a husband and wife avenge their son's death, is arguably the result of a problematic literary adaptation, but its generic conventions overshadow the film's detailing of a couple torn apart by grief.

My chapter on *The Sweet Hereafter* examines the narrative's involvement with redemption and blame, and how it invokes patterns of denial and transference. By moving back and forth across four different time frames, and a multitude of family traumas, the film creates a continuing dialogue between mourning and dread, presence and absence, refusing to conform to curative norms.

*Don't Look Now* is a film commonly examined by critics as a contemporary Gothic thriller. My analysis aims to realise it as a traumatic loss narrative, focusing on how the film, through its conscious undermining of conventional narrative logic, creates a dream-like space that not only mirrors the bewildering nature of the supernatural, but of a grieving father's unconscious and repressed desires.

My final chapter on *Trois Couleurs: Bleu* examines the narrative focus on a bereaved mother's intense denial of her loss, and the ways in which the film continually and consciously refuses a direct representation of her grief. By using metaphors and repetitions of music, colour and light, Kieślowski's film seeks an engagement with the traumatised subject that reflects a consciously hesitant mode of recovery.

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## PART ONE

### Contemporary trauma culture: from the incomprehensible to the curative

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Kerwin Lee Klein proposes that contemporary trauma culture can be divided into two approaches: the “avant-garde” and the “therapeutic.”<sup>62</sup> The avant-garde, he explains, concerns itself mainly with a “discourse of the unrepresentable,”<sup>63</sup> and can be located within a post-structuralist perspective that insists on trauma as an aporia, a crisis in representation, narrative and time. At the other end of the spectrum, Klein posits the therapeutic approach, which he associates with Freud’s ‘talking cure’ and a redemptive, consolatory mourning. This chapter explores both perspectives, but like Klein, I do not aim wholly to promote either approach; rather, I advocate the value of considering a symbiotic relationship between the “avant-garde” and the “therapeutic,” and establishing a more accessible, yet ambiguous perspective on the complexities of trauma and grief.

In Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* she defines trauma as a paradoxical experience:

...trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on.<sup>64</sup>

Caruth, along with trauma theorists such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, studied under the deconstructionist Paul De Man, who was heavily influenced by the Derridean

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<sup>62</sup> Kerwin Lee Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” *Representations* 69, Special Issue: Grounds for Remembering (2000): 137.

<sup>63</sup> Berger quoted in Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” 137.

<sup>64</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 4.

theories that arose in the late 1960s and early '70s. Klein's "avant-garde" approach focalises trauma through a post-structuralist model that decentres and destabilises the idea of inherent meaning in language, signs, practices and knowledge.<sup>65</sup> Like language, trauma is perceived as a referential structure, but it only exists in reference to an inaccessible context. Trauma, Caruth argues, can only be defined by its "unassimilated nature," describing the experience as unlocatable and unknowable. She also highlights the traumatic experience as belated and repetitious; its significant relationship to temporality has particular relevance to my exploration of narrative cinema. Caruth's understanding of Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," which she reads largely through Derridean philosophies, is central to her thesis.

The idea of a 'latency period' emerges in Freud's earlier theory on infantile sexuality in the 1890s. Freud writes, "Perhaps the abnormal reaction to sexual impressions which surprises us in hysterical subjects at the age of puberty is quite generally based on sexual experiences of this sort in childhood..."<sup>66</sup> After a sexually traumatic incident, a child's progression, Freud theorised, undergoes an interruption from approximately age six to adolescence: during this latency period, the child represses the traumatic memories, only for them to resurface in adolescence as a form of hysteria. The essence of the earlier traumatic event, Freud implies, is only given meaning with its subsequent reappearance.

It is also during Freud's examination of his traumatised patients that he perceives 'the talking cure' as a highly effective method of recovery, and one which largely defines psychoanalysis today. Josef Breuer, collaborating with Freud on hysteria studies, observed that improvements in his patients occurred when he let them talk freely about

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<sup>65</sup> Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," 137.

<sup>66</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Aetiology of Hysteria," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1962 [1896]), 202.

their thoughts, anxieties and desires.<sup>67</sup> Unlike the post-structuralist perspective that sees trauma as an incomprehensible experience, 'the talking cure' and psychoanalysis encourage language as part of a resolution. As Jacob Arlow explains, one of the main functions of the psychoanalyst is to uncover what the patient has repressed, and the "interpretation of unconscious meaning is made possible through metaphor."<sup>68</sup> Through the act of displacement, the patient aims to narrativise the untransformed trauma, using repetition, symbolism, contrast and metaphor to transmit an encoded message, and ultimately aid in psychoanalytic communication as well as a possible recovery.<sup>69</sup>

Though his theory of infantile sexuality was later abandoned, Freud's two-phase conceptualisation of trauma, the idea that traumatic events are realised and defined by their eventual, haunting return, had considerable impact on his later work and contemporary trauma theory.<sup>70</sup> In 1920, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" saw Freud exploring the dreams of World War I veterans, continuing the method of 'the talking cure.' He writes:

Now in the traumatic neuroses the dream life has this peculiarity: it continually takes the patient back to the situation of his disaster, from which he awakens in renewed terror.<sup>71</sup>

Freud saw dreams as the most reliable source to explain deeper psychic processes, and initially, one that he perceived to support his theory of the pleasure principle.<sup>72</sup> The war

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<sup>67</sup> Joseph D. Lichtenberg, *The Talking Cure: A Descriptive Guide to Psychoanalysis* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Analytic Press, 1994), ix.

<sup>68</sup> Jacob A. Arlow, "Metaphor and the Psychoanalytic Situation," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 48 (1979): 363.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>70</sup> Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952 [1920]), 641.

<sup>72</sup> In my chapter on *Don't Look Now*, I closely analyse Freud's earlier exploration of dreams in "The Interpretation of Dreams" (1900), and in particular, the dream of the burning child.

veterans, however, were not achieving wish-fulfilment through their nightmares, but re-experiencing the traumatic event, and perpetuating their suffering. The 'repetition-compulsion,' Freud explains, defines the patient's inability to posit the trauma in the past: instead, the moment repeatedly intrudes on the present: "He is obliged rather to *repeat* as a current experience what is repressed, instead of, as the physician would prefer to see him do, *recollecting* it as a fragment of the past."<sup>73</sup> In contrast, Freud also observed a numbing of the senses: "But I am not aware that the patients suffering from traumatic neuroses are much occupied in waking life with the recollection of what happened to them. They, perhaps, *strive rather not to think of it.*"<sup>74</sup> Judith Herman, in her study on traumatised women, observes that a duality of traumatic symptoms also presents itself in the victim's close relationships. In an attempt to avoid reminders of the trauma, one may withdraw from social life; simultaneously, one may actively cling to loving attachments as a form of emotional protection.<sup>75</sup>

The perplexing symptoms of trauma saw Freud attempting to develop theories on the complex relationship between trauma and repression. He conceived consciousness as a protective layer against stimuli that could potentially harm the sensitive organism. Traumatic neurosis, he argued, occurred when "external excitations" – a train accident, war combat, physical assault – were strong enough to rupture the protective layer.<sup>76</sup> Freud saw the psychic processes of the unconscious as timeless: "they are not arranged chronologically, time alters nothing in them, nor can the idea of time be applied to them." The barrier of consciousness, Caruth elaborates, shields the organism not simply from unwanted stimuli, but "protects the organism by placing stimulation within *an*

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<sup>73</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 643.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 641, my emphasis. These contrasting symptoms – re-experience and avoidance – are two of the three symptom criteria for PTSD.

<sup>75</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 56.

<sup>76</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 648 – 649.

ordered experience of time.”<sup>77</sup> Consequently, when an exceptional experience breaches the barrier of consciousness, the traumatic event can be conceived as a fragmentation of memory.

Freud further claimed that the main contributing factor to this destructive repetition lay not in the content of the actual event, but in its unexpected nature: he defines the causal element of ‘fright’ as “the name of the condition to which one is reduced if one encounters a danger without being prepared for it; it lays stress on the element of surprise.”<sup>78</sup> Ruth Leys explains:

It is only when the ego is caught unprepared and insufficiently “cathected” to bind additional amounts of inflowing energy that its protective shield is breached and a massive release of unbound or unpleasurable energy occurs.<sup>79</sup>

Caruth, too, emphasises Freud’s focus on the suddenness of trauma:

It is not simply, that is, the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognised by the mind *one moment too late*. The shock of the mind’s relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience.<sup>80</sup>

She proposes that it is essentially because the original event is unavailable to consciousness that one compulsively confronts it, but always in the form of a ‘symptom,’ such as a dream, flashback or thought.<sup>81</sup> For Caruth, trauma can never be conceived in relation to a complete truth. Rather, in association with post-structuralist ideology, she insists that the experience of trauma necessitates a partial understanding: “[T]he most

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<sup>77</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 61, my emphasis.

<sup>78</sup> Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 641.

<sup>79</sup> Leys, *Trauma: a genealogy*, 29.

<sup>80</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 62.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness.”<sup>82</sup> Because one can never access the missed encounter, the experience is deemed incomprehensible, unlocatable and unspeakable while simultaneously intrusive and repetitious, “suggest[ing] a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known.”<sup>83</sup>

Caruth’s perception of trauma as a missed encounter also corresponds to Jacques Lacan’s conception of the Real, which refers to that which resists meaning and representation.<sup>84</sup> In Lacanian terms, the Real cannot be inscribed into the Symbolic as it is exterior to the phenomenological world of symbols and language, nor can it be experienced, and thus also opposes the Imaginary. Lacan uses Aristotle’s term *tuchè* to describe the realm in which the Real is encountered; however, because the Real can never be fully grasped or experienced, and yet presents itself as an insistent lack, it is conceived as an essentially missed encounter.<sup>85</sup> While Lacan’s theories are not directly concerned with trauma, it is here that one can associate it with the Real: as Slavoj Žižek explains, that which repeatedly persists as an absence “is precisely what defines the notion of the traumatic event: a point of failure of symbolization, but at the same time never given its positivity – it can be constructed only backwards, from its structural effects.”<sup>86</sup>

Freud, unable to align the repetition-compulsion with his earlier theory of the pleasure principle, sought a new paradigm that would explain instinctual behaviour. The death drive is based on the premise that certain organic life retains a keen anticipation of

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: a selection*, transl. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock/Routledge, 2006).

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 169.

death: "an instinct would be a tendency innate in living organic matter impelling it towards the reinstatement of an earlier condition."<sup>87</sup> Freud argues that the drive stimulates the desire to return to one's inorganic status, to the previous, quiescent state of being that existed before the surfacing of life. "The goal of all life," Freud writes, "is death."<sup>88</sup> Perplexingly, however, the organism wants to die on its own terms, and resists all the potential traumas which could help it reach its goal in a speedier fashion.<sup>89</sup> The barrier of consciousness, for example, exemplifies the way in which the mind attempts to ward off psychic dangers. The repetition-compulsion, Freud claims, is a form of mastery over what the mind has failed to protect itself from. As Paul Fry explains, one can view this effort as a "mastering in advance through rehearsal, as it were, the inevitability of death, the trauma of death which awaits and which has been heralded by traumatic events in one's life."<sup>90</sup>

"Beyond the Pleasure Principle" was not Freud's first attempt to comprehend the patient's compulsion to repeat. "Mourning and Melancholia," written in 1915 and published two years later, attributes a similar self-destructive repetition to the abnormal state of grieving. Despite Freud's changing ideas regarding loss, "Mourning and Melancholia" is a useful starting point as it delineates some of the problems still plaguing contemporary grief theory. In this early text, Freud makes clear distinctions between normal and abnormal grieving:

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<sup>87</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 651.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 652.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 653.

<sup>90</sup> Paul H. Fry, "Freud and Fiction," *Open Yale Courses*, ENGL 300: Introduction to Theory of Literature Lecture Series, <http://oyc.yale.edu/english/introduction-to-theory-of-literature/content/downloads> (accessed July 7, 2011). The concept of the repetition-compulsion as a form of mastery is also strongly influenced by Freud's observation of his grandson's *fort-da* (gone-here) game. He viewed this repetitive game, where the child threw a wooden spool back and forth in his crib, as a symbolic mastery over his mother's departure and return (Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 641 – 643).

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on. As an effect of the same influences, melancholia instead of a state of grief develops in some people, whom we consequently suspect of a morbid pathological disposition.<sup>91</sup>

Mourning, he claims, works via what Tammy Clewell refers to as a “hyperremembering,”<sup>92</sup> a process whereby “each single one of the memories and hopes which bound the libido to the object is brought up and hyper-catheted, and the detachment of the libido is accomplished.”<sup>93</sup> The mourner obsessively revives memories, but through a testing of reality, realises that the loved object no longer exists outside the psyche, and accepts the loss. Once this course is complete, the ego becomes “free and uninhibited again,” in other words, is able to invest its libido in a new love object.<sup>94</sup>

Freud describes melancholia, on the other hand, as occurring when

the free libido was withdrawn into the ego and not directed to another object. It did not find application there, however, in any one of the several possible ways, but served simply to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object.<sup>95</sup>

The narcissistic identification that the ego forms with the lost other causes the ego to become impoverished: “Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego....”<sup>96</sup> As Freud writes, “In grief the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself

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<sup>91</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. John Rickman (Hertfordshire, Garden City Press Limited, 1937 [1917]), 143.

<sup>92</sup> Tammy Clewell, “Mourning beyond Melancholia: Freud’s Psychoanalysis of Loss,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 52, no. 1 (2004): 44.

<sup>93</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 144.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

[which becomes poor and empty].”<sup>97</sup> Melancholia’s defining features, as described below, differ from normal mourning mainly in the deprecation of self:

...a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.<sup>98</sup>

Freud describes a general inability to carry on with life after loss. More specifically, however, one can observe the symptoms of avoidance and detachment alongside the more intrusive signs of guilt and self-retribution. This is one of the ways in which Freud describes melancholia similarly to trauma, with regard to the dual symptoms of re-experience and avoidance.

Jahan Ramazani takes issue with Freud’s conception of normal mourning, arguing that it leads to a largely idealistic and impenetrable view on loss:

Most clinical psychoanalysis has adopted “normal”, “healthy” or “successful” mourning as a therapeutic ideal, often hypostatizing mourning as a rigid step-by-step program that leads from shock to recovery...<sup>99</sup>

Freud’s normal mourning also implies a substitutive economy in that it calls for the systematic replacement of the lost object. The curative ideal is also contextualised within Klein’s “therapeutic approach,” which claims that Freud’s ideas regarding loss are often used to endorse a sentimental social discourse:

In the past few years, such terms as ‘mourning’ and ‘working through’ have demonstrated a dangerous tendency to attach themselves to New Age

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>99</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, 28.

discourses, and for each monograph attempting a careful, rigorous engagement with psychoanalytic tradition we suffer a host of self-help histories.<sup>100</sup>

In her article “Mourning beyond Melancholia: Freud’s Psychoanalysis of Loss,” Tammy Clewell claims that criticism of Freud often ignores the revisions he made in *The Ego and the Id*, where he drastically altered his perceptions of loss.<sup>101</sup> In his 1916 paper “On transience,” Freud revisits his previous version of normal mourning, and puzzles over why letting go is such an arduous task to complete:

But why it is that this detachment of libido from its objects should be such a painful process is a mystery to us and we have not hitherto been able to frame any hypothesis to account for it. We only see that libido clings to its objects and will not renounce those that are lost even when a substitute lies ready at hand.<sup>102</sup>

In *The Ego and the Id*, published in 1923, Freud reconceptualises the formation of the ego as fundamentally founded in loss. Freud argued that a young child’s awareness of self derives from the process of identifying with a love object, most commonly a parent, and subsequently coping with the loss of or separation from this love object. The process of identification and internalisation, which Freud originally asserted lead to melancholia, was now viewed as a crucial part of contextualising oneself in the psychic world.<sup>103</sup> As he writes, directly addressing his previous establishment of melancholia as a pathological disorder, “we did not appreciate the full significance of the process [of melancholia] and did not know how common and how typical it is.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” 136.

<sup>101</sup> Clewell, “Mourning beyond Melancholia: Freud’s Psychoanalysis of Loss,” 43.

<sup>102</sup> Freud quoted in Clewell, “Mourning beyond Melancholia: Freud’s Psychoanalysis of Loss,” 58.

<sup>103</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952 [1923]), 703 – 708.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 703.

Judith Herman states: "Since mourning is so difficult, resistance to mourning is probably the most common cause of stagnation..."<sup>105</sup> Drawing from Freud's theories in *The Ego and the Id*, Clewell explains that mourning is such a difficult experience precisely because of the identification with the lost other: relinquishing the love object would mean letting go of "an irrecoverable attribute of the self necessary to the mourner's sense of coherent identity."<sup>106</sup> Jeffrey Kauffmann concurs, defining traumatic grief as a "fragmentation of self."<sup>107</sup> Freud thus dissolves the extreme polarisation between "Mourning and Melancholia" and in doing so, suggests mourning as no longer a finite, easily restorative process, but a grief without end. In 1929, nine years after his daughter died from influenza, Freud wrote in a letter to a friend:

Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually, this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish.<sup>108</sup>

Freud emphasises the integral endlessness of mourning, as well as the difficulty in conceptualising what it means to "fill the gap." Herman, too, explores the complexities of recovery: on one hand, she insists that "[r]esolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete."<sup>109</sup> She qualifies her statement, however, and explains that while the traumatic experience will continue to have ramifications throughout one's life,

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<sup>105</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 189.

<sup>106</sup> Clewell, "Mourning beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss," 47.

<sup>107</sup> Kauffmann, "Safety and the Assumptive World."

<sup>108</sup> Freud quoted in Clewell, "Mourning beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss," 61 – 62.

<sup>109</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 211.

“it is often sufficient for the survivor to turn her attention from the tasks of recovery to the tasks of ordinary life.”<sup>110</sup>

Dominick LaCapra borrows Freud’s terms “Mourning and Melancholia” and applies them to his work on the Holocaust, referring to them as “working-through” and “acting-out” respectively.<sup>111</sup> Acting-out, he states, is related to repetition-compulsion, and the inability to disengage from the traumatic experience. In working-through, however, the victim eventually gains a “critical distance on a problem, [and is] able to distinguish between past, present and future.”<sup>112</sup> He aims, however, to dissolve the distinction between Freud’s initial fixed categorisation, and more so, the polarisation of trauma engagement in contemporary culture:

Trauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel. Working through trauma involves the effort to articulate or rearticulate affect and representation in a manner that may never transcend, but may to some visible extent counteract, a re-enactment, or acting out, of that disabling dissociation.<sup>113</sup>

LaCapra claims that in recent grief theory, acting-out is too often emphasised as a totally destructive experience, incapable of alleviating suffering, whereas normal mourning, or working-through, is often imagined as a fully remedial process.<sup>114</sup> As I explain earlier in connection with Klein’s therapeutic approach, the concept of working-through has the potential to yield unattainable therapeutic ideals regarding recovery. The narrow post-

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 211 – 212.

<sup>111</sup> Dominick LaCapra, “An Interview with Professor Dominick LaCapra,” (interviewed by Amos Goldberg, Cornell University, 1998) [http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Micro soft%20Word%20-%203646.pdf](http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Micro%20soft%20Word%20-%203646.pdf), 1.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>113</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 42.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

structuralist focus on dissociation, which tends to dominate critical trauma theory, fares no better, often leading to a silencing of debate regarding issues of representation: trauma is conceived as “a traumatic-sacred-sublime alterity,”<sup>115</sup> bound up in the inaccessibility of the Lacanian Real. LaCapra essentially argues that acting-out and working-through should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but intimately connected parts of a process. In my examination of the relationship between trauma and narrative, I maintain his approach, and an engagement which locates trauma between the incomprehensible and the curative.

## The “apparently paradoxical thing: the trauma narrative”

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In *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst writes that “[t]he relationship between trauma as a devastating disruption and the subsequent attempts to translate or assimilate this disturbance is a fundamental tension between interruption and flow, blockage and movement.”<sup>116</sup> Luckhurst addresses the discourse of aporia, however, and claims that “if trauma is a crisis in representation, then this generates narrative *possibility* just as much as *impossibility*, a compulsive outpouring of attempts to formulate narrative knowledge.”<sup>117</sup> He thus suggests that trauma and narrative can function dialectically: integrating them is not only possible, but works to conceive traumatic representation as well as narrative meaning. In labelling the trauma narrative an “*apparently paradoxical thing*,”<sup>118</sup> Luckhurst implies a complex relationship between traditionally opposed theoretical positions.

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<sup>115</sup> Berger quoted in Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” 137.

<sup>116</sup> Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 79.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, my emphasis.

E. Ann Kaplan states that

Trauma is narration without narrativity - that is, without the ordered sequence we associate with narratives. Images are repeated but without meaning; they do not have a clear beginning, middle and end.<sup>119</sup>

Without a three-act narrative structure, Kaplan states, narrative is void of meaning; causal temporality thus implies a sense of meaning. LaCapra, similarly, remarks that conventional narratives can be considered restorative:

[I]f you take the conventional narrative structure itself – with a beginning, a middle and an end, whereby the end recapitulates the beginning after the trials of the middle, and gives you (at least on the level of insight), some realization of what it was all about – there's a sense in which the conventional narrative is redemptive.<sup>120</sup>

In this sense, one can view narrative as subscribing to a working-through of conflict: the narrative gears towards a cathartic rebirth, where the stabilising conclusion functions to recover the earlier, undisturbed equilibrium. Like LaCapra, Peter Brooks states that it is the end that structurally and thematically informs the entire plot: "The sense of beginning, then, is determined by the sense of an ending."<sup>121</sup> And if we inquire further into the nature of the ending, we no doubt find that it eventually has to do with the human end, with death."<sup>122</sup> In his essay "Freud's Masterplot," Brooks argues that narrative mimics the basic human instinct that Freud schematised of how "life proceeds from

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<sup>119</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, "Melodrama, Cinema and Trauma" *Screen* 42, no. 2, Special Debate: Trauma and Screen Studies (2001): 204.

<sup>120</sup> LaCapra, "An Interview with Professor Dominick LaCapra," 10 – 11.

<sup>121</sup> Peter Brooks' theory of the meaningful end is similar to the concepts discussed in Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). Kermode argues that the narrative end, which he correlates to notions of the biblical Apocalypse, is in harmony with the narrative beginning, and seeks to recover meaning and order.

<sup>122</sup> Peter Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot," *Yale French Studies* 55/56, Literature and Psychoanalysis, The Question of Reading: Otherwise (1977): 283 – 284.

beginning to end.”<sup>123</sup> He writes: “We emerge from reading ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ with a dynamic model which effectively structures ends (death, quiescence, non-narratability) against beginnings (Eros, stimulation into tension, the desire of narrative)....”<sup>124</sup> Narrative desire, he argues, is premised on the very death wish which Freud perceives in all life: to return to the inorganic state of the non-narratable, or that which does not stimulate story into plot. The end of the text signifies the end of the reader’s engagement with the text, but as Earl G. Ingersoll explains, Brooks’ application of psychoanalysis emphasises that “[d]eath, in the sense of an ending that reveals meaning through a metaphorizing of the plot’s ordinariness, is a consummation devoutly to be wished.”<sup>125</sup>

Repetition and metaphor, Brooks argues, are essentially what initiate and unify narration, combining and interconnecting different actions and events which are independently insignificant.<sup>126</sup> The ‘middle’ of the text functions to provide the repetitions, obstacles and elaborations to bind excitations, before pursuing its ultimate goal: the middle thus functions in accordance with the organism’s desire to perish on its own terms, to attain the right end. If the narrative beginning, however, is determined by the ending, then repetition also functions to resist the forward movement of time: “Repetition is a return in the text, a doubling back... We are thus always trying to work back through time to that transcendent home, knowing of course that we cannot.”<sup>127</sup> Brooks’ reading of Freud’s model examines the text’s interdependent aims: the narrative

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>125</sup> Earl G. Ingersoll, *Waiting for the End: Gender and Ending in the Contemporary Novel*, (Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 25.

<sup>126</sup> Brooks, “Freud’s Masterplot,” 287 – 288.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 288, 299.

desire to delay the end, for as long as possible, but eventually to satisfy its desire to return to the place of quiescence.

As Brooks notes, he is not interested in the psychology of the reader, author or fictional characters, but in the energies of the narrative text.<sup>128</sup> The integration of traumatic loss as a story event thus emphasises the importance of the narrative aims of detour and end. The temporality of trauma, Judith Herman observes, is in contrast with narrative desire: “One observer describes the trauma story in its untransformed state as a ‘prenarrative.’ It does not develop or progress in time, and it does not reveal the storyteller’s feelings or interpretation of events.”<sup>129</sup> Herman draws attention to Pierre Janet’s explanation of normal or narrative memory as “the action of telling a story,” and in contrast, traumatic memory as “wordless and static.”<sup>130</sup> The remembering and telling of the traumatic event as a story is considered by Herman an essential transformative step in recovery. The reconstruction of the trauma into a narrative form, she argues, implies the patient’s ability to situate the trauma in the past, and dissociate from the immediacy of the event.

While Herman concurs that immediate contact with trauma leaves one in a fragmented, wordless space, she views language, and communication between patient and therapist, as a crucial form of emancipation. Herman’s concept of recovery, as I note earlier, is of a process that is never fully complete, but where one is able to gain respite from the intrusive re-experiencing of trauma. Post-structuralist discourse, on the other hand, defies any future possibility of narrative assimilation, claiming that trauma is by its very nature an ineffable, unregistrable entity similar to the Lacanian Real, encompassing what Rachel Warhol refers to as “those events that defy narration, foregrounding the

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>129</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 175.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

inadequacy of language or of visual image to achieve full representation, even of fictitious events.”<sup>131</sup>

There is a general consensus, as Roger Luckhurst writes, that “[t]rauma, in effect, issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge.”<sup>132</sup> At the core of the challenge appears to be the integration of traumatic time into narrative time; as Luckhurst writes, “If narrative is at all possible, then critical theory has been particularly absorbed by the temporal paradoxes of trauma’s belated effects.”<sup>133</sup> Echoing E. Ann Kaplan that trauma is essentially “without the ordered sequence we associate with narratives,”<sup>134</sup> Paul Fry argues that “[a]nything is unnarratable if we don’t have a sense of a beginning, a middle, and an end to bring to bear on it. The narratable, in other words, must enter into a structure.”<sup>135</sup> The foundation of this structure, it appears, is its compliance with temporality; trauma is regarded as an anti-narrative essentially because it does not conform to conventional linear time and causality. My exploration of the traumatic loss narrative centres on cinema as a structure that, too, has a significant relationship to temporality, and moreover, the possibilities for the medium self-consciously to experiment with its own form and emphasise the ambiguities of traumatic time.

Luckhurst acknowledges trauma as an extraordinary, complex experience, but simultaneously recognises its narrative possibilities. In turning to popular culture, Luckhurst aims to show that trauma, despite the prevalent discourse of aporia in

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<sup>131</sup> Rachel R. Warhol, “Neonarrative: or, How to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film,” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, 223 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

<sup>132</sup> Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 79.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>134</sup> Kaplan, “Melodrama, Cinema and Trauma,” 204.

<sup>135</sup> Fry, “Freud and Fiction.”

contemporary trauma theory,<sup>136</sup> continually stimulates representation: "In its shock impact trauma is anti-narrative, but it also generates the manic production of retrospective narratives that seek to explicate the trauma."<sup>137</sup> Narrative, he suggests, may also be particularly capable of handling the tensions between blockage and movement, more so than the discourses of science, medicine and psychiatry: "Narrative is spurred to shape this disruptive anomaly into new kinds of forms, each foregrounding, sometimes more, sometimes less, the violent tension between discordance and concordance."<sup>138</sup> Luckhurst attempts to liberate narrative from being tied to conventional time and form, and concentrates on its self-conscious abilities to render a space that registers the complexities of trauma.

Jahan Ramazani also suggests, similarly to Luckhurst, that narrative art forms are particularly apt at expressing the paradoxes of traumatic experience in contrast to more traditional forms of consolation:

For many of us, religious rituals are no longer adequate to the complexities of mourning the dead. Insufficient too are the sentimental consolations of the funeral parlor, the condolence card, and the pop song. Psychology usefully elucidates the structures of bereavement, but it leaves us in want of a mourning discourse more subtle and vivid, less normative and schematic.<sup>139</sup>

In Ramazani's study on elegiac poetry, he argues that the modern experience of grief resists a definitive path of enlightenment and clarification and is instead defined by

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<sup>136</sup> The prevalent discourse of aporia that I observe is in reference to the work of Cathy Caruth, which I focus on specifically, but also to Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, who convey similar associations between trauma, representation and aporia. See, for example, Felman and Laub's often referred to joint study, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>137</sup> Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 85.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, ix.

“moral doubts, metaphysical scepticisms, and emotional tangles.”<sup>140</sup> One should turn to the modern elegy, he writes, “expecting not so much solace as fractured speech, not so much answers as memorable puzzlings.”<sup>141</sup> Ramazani outlines the potential for poetry to emphasise the ambiguities of loss; similarly, I do not aim to locate cinema as a therapeutic ideal, or even as an answer to the paradoxes of traumatic experience, but to consider the ways the medium can self-consciously explore the representation of traumatic experience. In the words of Jean-François Lyotard: “What art can do is bear witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia of art and to its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it.”<sup>142</sup>

In my examination of traumatic loss narratives, I explore the existing ways cinema has forged a relationship between traumatic and narrative time, and its varied approaches to trying to represent the unrepresentable.

## **Paralysis, repetition and circularity: locating trauma and loss in contemporary cinema**

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E. Ann Kaplan writes: “Rather than focusing on traumatic cultural symptoms, independent cinematic techniques show paralysis, repetition, circularity – all aspects of the non-representability of trauma and yet of the search to figure its pain.”<sup>143</sup> Kaplan implies that traumatic representation relies on narrative time, but necessitates a dialectical approach that attempts a self-conscious engagement with cinema’s existing structures, simultaneously accepting the partiality of that representation. In examining a variety of

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., ix – x.

<sup>142</sup> Lyotard quoted in Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 6.

<sup>143</sup> Kaplan, “Melodrama, Cinema and Trauma,” 204.

traumatic loss narratives, where people struggle to cope with the unexpected or violent death of a family member, I aim to demonstrate cinema's ongoing attempts to configure the paradoxes of trauma.

In Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second*, she writes of cinema and the unconscious: "Both have the attributes of the indexical sign, the mark of trauma or the mark of light, and both need to be deciphered retrospectively across delayed time."<sup>144</sup> Much like the unconscious, she claims, cinema has a "storage function" that preserves memories which the conscious state abandons. As an indexical sign, cinema points towards its origins in photography, which Mulvey argues produces a sense of loss.<sup>145</sup> Her study focuses on the relationship between stillness and the moving image, and the way in which the still frame can induce an uncanny, deathly effect. Mulvey's comparison is useful in that it implies cinema's privileged relationship to time,<sup>146</sup> or, in the words of Todd McGowan: "The essence and the appeal of the cinematic art are inextricable from the experience of temporality that it offers spectators. Whatever else films explore, they inherently take temporality as their subject due to the nature of the medium."<sup>147</sup>

One of cinema's key differences from photography is its ability to invoke duration and temporality: by cutting up time, and projecting it at twenty-four frames per second, cinema captures a sense of time and movement. Like Mulvey, McGowan emphasises that this sense of temporality also conveys an absence: "Films do not directly reproduce the unbroken time of everyday experience so much as reassemble time through the editing

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<sup>144</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2006), 9.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., Mulvey is informed by the work of Roland Barthes and Andre Bazin, who feature more strongly in my analysis of *The Sweet Hereafter*.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Todd McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 4.

process and even through the projection of images itself.”<sup>148</sup> The potential for cinematic form to negotiate time is one of the central ways I frame the interplay between film, trauma and loss.

The accentuation of absence in cinematic form attempts a different mode of temporality, one that embraces the repetition of loss.<sup>149</sup> Luckhurst observes that trauma cinema invariably plays with narrative time, either “disrupting linearity, suspending logical causation, running out of temporal sequence, working backwards towards the inaugurating traumatic event, or playing with belated revelations....”<sup>150</sup> Kaplan similarly notes that “[t]he struggle to figure trauma’s effects cinematically leads to means other than linearity: story fragments, hallucinations, flashbacks are the modes trauma cinema characteristically adopts.”<sup>151</sup> As a medium bound to temporality, cinema has the ability to rupture its own linear conventions, and articulate to different degrees the temporal paradoxes that define trauma.

Luckhurst uses the flashback as a starting point to explore the disruption of cinematic linearity.<sup>152</sup> While cinema arguably depends on temporal ruptures such as ellipses, he argues that recent cinema has emphasised traumatic experience with the sudden, intrusive flashback, not indicated by the typical means of voice-over narration or dissolve.<sup>153</sup> *The Door in the Floor*,<sup>154</sup> a film that concentrates on a troubled family some years after the loss of their two sons, cuts intermittently, and without any apparent psychological motivation, to the image and sound of a blinking car indicator. As

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>150</sup> Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 80.

<sup>151</sup> Kaplan, “Melodrama, Cinema and Trauma,” 205.

<sup>152</sup> Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 180 – 181.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>154</sup> Tod Williams (dir), *The Door in the Floor* (USA: Focus Features, 2004).

Luckhurst explains, the flashback can only be understood and explained in retrospect, signalling the belatedness of traumatic experience, and conveying the “frozen moment of the traumatic impact: it flashes back insistently in the present because this image cannot yet or perhaps ever be narrativized as past.”<sup>155</sup> The cutaways in *The Door in the Floor* create a sense of obscurity, and it is only towards the end of the narrative that their significance is explicated: Ted tells Eddie the story of how he and his wife lost their two sons in a car accident, and the narrative integrates the car indicator into a fuller visual sequence. By narrativising the event, Ted turns traumatic memory into narrative memory, illuminating the film’s traumatised subjectivity.

Similarly, in *Ordinary People*,<sup>156</sup> the final flashback sequence functions as a form of catharsis. Redford’s film, which focuses on the disavowal of grief, also ends with a narrativising of the traumatic past. Conrad Jarrett, who loses his brother in a tragic accident, is initially resistant to seeing a psychiatrist, but eventually confronts his survivor guilt: in a session with Dr Berger, he falls into a hallucinatory space where he recalls the boating accident that caused his brother’s death. The flashback thus not only functions to reflect the intrusive symptoms of trauma, but a working-through of a temporal crisis.

Nanni Moretti’s *La Stanza del Figlio*<sup>157</sup> engages with the traumatic flashback in complex ways. Giovanni, a psychiatrist, arranges with his son to go running one morning, but at the last minute, one of his patients calls with an emergency. Giovanni cancels his engagement with his son, Andrea, who goes scuba-diving with his friends and drowns. Later in the film, the bereaved father sits and listens to a track from Michael Nyman’s “Water Dances,” and, with the stereo remote, continually replays the same few seconds of the piece. The film then cuts to an image of Giovanni and his son, Andrea,

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Robert Redford (dir), *Ordinary People* (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1980).

<sup>157</sup> Nanni Moretti (dir), *La Stanza del Figlio* (Italy: Sacher Distribuzione, 2001).

jogging together: whether this is a flashback or a fantasy is unclear, but the proceeding images tend to indicate that it is the latter.<sup>158</sup> Giovanni re-imagines the scene from earlier in the film: this time, however, he tells his patient that he is unavailable. While, as Emma Wilson writes, the moment functions for Giovanni as a “desperate escape from the present,”<sup>159</sup> it suggests melancholy rather than relief. The scene serves as a painful reminder that while one can easily replay music, one cannot reverse time.

While ellipses and absences form part of cinematic time, the traumatic loss narrative accentuates them. Gillian Roberts, in an article that compares and contrasts *Titanic*<sup>160</sup> and *The Sweet Hereafter*, argues that James Cameron’s film avoids emphasising traumatic absence.<sup>161</sup> She writes: “As an extension of the accident, death itself becomes spectacle in *Titanic*; *The Sweet Hereafter*, in contrast, invokes death without representing it.”<sup>162</sup> James Cameron’s blockbuster dramatically depicts mass death, and spends time detailing the sinking of the ship, and the thousands who drown or freeze to death. Amidst all this destruction, the film also romanticises moments of death, such as the ageing couple who opt to lie in their bed and await their watery death together, and the ship’s captain who is depicted as valiantly choosing to go down with his ship. Roberts also notes that the film’s return to the original spectacle of the ship serves as wish-fulfilment that effectively re-unites the dead, recuperating any previous sense of loss.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Emma Wilson, “Moving on: *The Son’s Room*,” in *Cinema’s Missing Children* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003): 147.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> James Cameron (dir), *Titanic* (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1997).

<sup>161</sup> Gillian Roberts, “Spectacle Matters: *Titanic*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, and the Academy and Genie Awards,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 30, no. 3 (2000): 317-338.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 324.

Mandy Merck muses that genre cinema reflects a tendency either to sensationalise or sugarcoat depictions of death:

America, land of the happy ending, famously has an aversion to matters of mortality...When it comes to death and dying, the average American recoils. Hollywood aids and abets, as well as reflects this: death in films or on TV is mostly dealt with in one of two ways – either with spectacular, impersonal violence, or with intense, simple-minded sentimentality.<sup>164</sup>

In contrast, as my analysis elaborates on, *The Sweet Hereafter* depicts its central trauma of the bus accident in an extreme long shot that lasts only a few seconds.

Roberts' comparative study highlights the centrality of the cinematic representation of death to my study. Many traumatic loss narratives have a tendency, as Roberts writes of *The Sweet Hereafter*, to “[rely] greatly on the unseen.”<sup>165</sup> While films such as *Rachel Getting Married*<sup>166</sup> and *Red Road*<sup>167</sup> locate the traumatic accident before the beginning of the plot, even those films that do include the event are likely to disengage actively from an explicit visual representation. In *La Stanza del Figlio*, representation of Andrea's scuba diving accident is omitted from the narrative: the first time the audience learns of his death is as his father finds out. Similarly, in *Après Lui*,<sup>168</sup> Mathieu's fatal car accident is never depicted, and the last one sees of him is as he leaves the house to attend a party. The temporal gaps in these narratives, while placing emphasis on the mourner's reactions, also relate to the discourse of aporia that informs trauma theory. By omitting the moments of the traumatic accident, these films attempt an engagement with the

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<sup>164</sup> Whittle quoted in Mandy Merck, “Undermining the uncanny,” in *Reading Six Feet Under*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, 59 (London and New York: I.B Tauris, 2005). Merck clearly correlates her views to perceived American culture, quoting historian Arnold Toynbee: “death is un-American, an affront to every citizen's inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (59).

<sup>165</sup> Roberts, “Spectacle Matters: *Titanic*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, and the Academy and Genie Awards,” 325.

<sup>166</sup> Jonathan Demme (dir), *Rachel Getting Married* (USA: Sony Pictures Classic, 2008).

<sup>167</sup> Andrea Arnold (dir), *Red Road* (UK: Verve Pictures, 2006).

<sup>168</sup> Gaël Morel (dir), *Après Lui* (France: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2007).

incomprehensibility of trauma, not by refusing a narrative altogether, but through an active dissociation and absence. McGowan writes:

By leaving the central traumatic events as a blank space within the narrative, a film can affirm its singularity through emphasizing its incongruity with what comes before and after. Thinking in terms of temporality leads us to expect that causes will lead to certain effects, but the traumatic event interrupts the regime of temporality and causality.<sup>169</sup>

Though *The Sweet Hereafter*, as well as Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Bleu*, includes the scene of the accident, they distance the audience through an extreme long shot that refuses a direct visual representation, and conveys the shock impact of the accident through an absence of representation. Trauma is often configured as an accentuated narrative ellipsis.

While experimentation with narrative time is not new, many theorists note a more radical, atemporal aesthetic emerging in the mid-1990s.<sup>170</sup> Speculation as to the cause of this temporal distortion generally locates two main influences: firstly, postmodern discourse and its encouragement to reconceptualise modern time; secondly, the interactivity and non-linear experience of digital media such as the internet and video games.<sup>171</sup> Luckhurst claims, however, that in addition to these possibilities, the temporal disarticulation that one continues to see in contemporary cinema is partially owing to the attempts to represent traumatic experience, and, borrowing Thomas Elsaesser's words, is

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<sup>169</sup> McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*, 141.

<sup>170</sup> See, for example, Charles Ramírez Berg, "A Taxonomy of Alternative Plots in Recent Films: Classifying the "Tarantino Effect,"" *Film Criticism* XXX, no. 3 (2006): 7; Allan Cameron, "Contingency, Order and the Modular Narrative: *21 Grams* and *Irreversible*," *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (2006): 65; McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*, xii.

<sup>171</sup> Berg, "A Taxonomy of Alternative Plots in Recent Films: Classifying the "Tarantino Effect,"" 6; Cameron, "Contingency, Order and the Modular Narrative: *21 Grams* and *Irreversible*," 65 – 66.

related to issues “of memory and trauma, of anticipation and the *après-coup*, of dependence and interdependence.”<sup>172</sup>

While McGowan labels them atemporal, Allan Cameron defines narratives that “foreground the relationship between the temporality of the story and the order of its telling” as database or modular narratives.<sup>173</sup> Cameron claims that cinema of this kind goes “beyond the classical deployment of flashback,” and is often assembled in more radically achronological ways.<sup>174</sup> Charles Ramírez Berg, using David Bordwell’s distinction between ‘story’ and ‘plot’ – the story is “the series of events that are narrated,” and the plot is “how the filmmaker relates the story events” – focuses on plots that differ significantly from Classical Hollywood narration.<sup>175</sup> He attempts to classify films that fall under the outsized umbrella term “alternative plots,” into smaller sub-categories such as “The Multiple Personality Plot,” “The Repeated Action Plot,” or “The Hub and Spoke Plot.”<sup>176</sup> “The Backwards Plot,” for example, which includes films such as *Memento* and *Irréversible*, reorders time with the backwards moving of the plot.<sup>177</sup> In “The Jumbled Plot,” the sequence of events is scrambled: the plot formation in films such as *21 Grams*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Pulp Fiction*<sup>178</sup> and *Reservoir Dogs*<sup>179</sup> is not motivated by character memory, however, but by the filmmaker’s artistic decisions.<sup>180</sup> “The Hub

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<sup>172</sup> Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 178; Elsaesser quoted in Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 204 – 205.

<sup>173</sup> Cameron, “Contingency, Order and the Modular Narrative: *21 Grams* and *Irreversible*,” 65.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> Berg, “A Taxonomy of Alternative Plots in Recent Films: Classifying the “Tarantino Effect,”” 9 – 10. Berg’s definitions of story and plot are informed by the Russian formalist definitions of *fabula* (story) and *suzhet* (plot) that are used in theories of narratology.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 – 61.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>178</sup> Quentin Tarantino (dir), *Pulp Fiction* (USA: Miramax Films, 1994).

<sup>179</sup> Quentin Tarantino (dir), *Reservoir Dogs* (USA: Miramax Films, 1992).

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

and Spoke Plot,” in films such as *Amores Perros*,<sup>181</sup> *Lantana*<sup>182</sup> and *11:14*,<sup>183</sup> has multiple characters’ storylines intersecting at one time and place.<sup>184</sup> The ‘spokes’ consist of the fallout from the usually catastrophic ‘hub,’ most commonly a traffic accident.

Berg observes that “The Hub and Spoke Plot” tends to “emphasise chance, coincidence, and the freakish nature of fate,” and often thematically engages with a subversion of the American discourse of individualism that implies that one has the power to control one’s own destiny.<sup>185</sup> While the large ensemble cast of Robert Altman’s *Short Cuts*<sup>186</sup> does not permit the narrative to have one central ‘hub,’ two characters’ lives intersect when Doreen accidentally hits the young Casey with her car. He walks away from the accident, apparently unharmed, and Doreen is relieved. Her daughter later tells her: “You’re very lucky, you know that?” Doreen replies, “If I’d been going faster, it would’ve killed him. Imagine... How could you get over that? You couldn’t.” Casey dies in the hospital later that day, but Doreen remains unaware, believing that good fortune was on her side. *La Stanza del Figlio* also emphasises the randomness of the traumatic accident: by providing the audience with a belatedly realised possibility that Andrea’s death could have been avoided, it underlines its arbitrariness. The film further emphasises the unexpectedness of the accident with a montage showing each of the family members in potential danger on the day of the accident: Giovanni comes close to a swerving truck on the way to meet his patient; Paola witnesses a mugging at a fair; Irene and her friends precariously drive around on Vespas, and finally, Andrea and his friends get into a boat.

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<sup>181</sup> Alejandro González Iñárritu (dir), *Amores Perros* (Argentina: Eurocine, 2001).

<sup>182</sup> Ray Lawrence (dir), *Lantana* (Australia: Palace Films, 2001).

<sup>183</sup> Greg Marcks (dir), *11:14* (USA: New Line Cinema, 2003).

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.* Berg notes that many films will fall into more than one category. *21 Grams*, for example, subscribes to both “The Hub and Spoke Plot” and “The Jumbled Plot” (39).

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 40 – 41.

<sup>186</sup> Robert Altman (dir), *Short Cuts* (USA: Fine Line Features, 1993).

The narrative engages with the inexplicable, implying that there is no rhyme or reason for Andrea's death, and simultaneously, that one cannot turn back time.

Allan Cameron writes that the theme of contingency, the sense of an arbitrary unpredictability as opposed to premeditated actions, permeates narratives that centre on chance events.<sup>187</sup> *Short Cuts* and *La Stanza del Figlio* focalise the contingent through the diegesis, and by emphasising the apparent randomness of the story events. *Short Cuts*, while adhering to the forward movement of time, cuts back and forth between multiple protagonists' stories, creating a continual fragmentation and delay between narratives, and thus also underlines the contingent through plot. The random movement from story to story is similar to *21 Grams* in the sense that it is not determined by character motivation, but by the filmmaker's artistic direction. Cameron writes that because of the central car accident in *21 Grams*, as well as the film's seemingly random shuffling between past, present and future, "contingency asserts itself both as diegetic force and as structural principle."<sup>188</sup>

The concentration on chance events is central to my investigation: the traumatic loss narrative which I outline is premised on a loss that is sudden, accidental or violent. The unexpected nature of trauma, which Freud locates as the cause of suffering, is often emphasised not only through the diegetic events, but by the order of their telling. In *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Mary Ann Doane explains that while the flashback appears to disarticulate filmic time, challenging its irreversibility, the unit of time covered within the flashback is still a forward moving segment.<sup>189</sup> Even if narrative radically plays with time, it still aims to recuperate that which it has deemed contingent; of *Memento*, which tells its

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<sup>187</sup> Cameron, "Contingency, Order and the Modular Narrative: *21 Grams* and *Irreversible*," 66.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002): 139.

story through the backwards moving of its plot, Doane writes: "For the most part, the fragmentation and reordering of time in this film is supported by the basic irreversibility of movement."<sup>190</sup> She emphasises one of her central points, that "[c]inema comprises simultaneously the rationalization of time and an homage to contingency."<sup>191</sup> Cameron similarly writes that "Narrative itself is not simply the triumph of order over contingency. Rather, it consists of a negotiation between the contingent and the predetermined."<sup>192</sup> The traumatic loss narrative, as will become clear, needs to balance this negotiation with caution.

One of the central concerns of traumatic loss, as I have outlined, is the possibility of recovery. LaCapra writes that the traumatised victim "may never transcend, but may to some visible extent counteract, a re-enactment, or acting out, of that disabling dissociation."<sup>193</sup> Similarly, Judith Herman writes:

Nowhere is it written that the recovery process must follow a linear, uninterrupted sequence. But traumatic events ultimately refuse to be put away. At some point the memory of the trauma is bound to return, demanding attention.<sup>194</sup>

Recovery as an indefinite, complex process raises questions of narrative assimilation and the recuperation of traumatic disjuncture into a rationalised order.

Narratives such as *Il y a longtemps que je t'aime*<sup>195</sup> and *Rabbit Hole*,<sup>196</sup> both recent films that focus on traumatic loss, do not conform to the popular atemporal aesthetic in

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 252, n.49.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>192</sup> Cameron, "Contingency, Order and the Modular Narrative: 21 Grams and Irreversible," 68 – 69.

<sup>193</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 42.

<sup>194</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 174.

<sup>195</sup> Philippe Claudel (dir), *Il y a longtemps que je t'aime* (France: UGC Distribution, 2008).

trauma cinema and, rather, invest in linear narratives that gear toward a recovery that is both gradual and hesitant. The final revelatory scene of Claudel's film that occurs between the two sisters is driven by dialogue. It functions, however, similarly to the conception of the cathartic flashback in that Juliette finally explains to Léa the circumstances surrounding her son's death; she narrativises the hidden past. While the ending is mostly curative in the sense that it strengthens the relationship between the sisters, and answers the questions raised concerning Juliette's son's murder, it comes approximately fifteen years after her loss. The preceding narrative depicts her struggles to integrate herself into society after a lengthy prison sentence, and is concerned with alienation and isolation. Her recovery is thus not associated with one specific event, but occurs after a complex and gradual interaction with her new environment.

In the final sequence of *Rabbit Hole*, the film plays out Becca and Howie's imagined montage of inviting their friends over: they envision the awkward moments, the difficulties of having to play with their children, and of someone inevitably bringing up the topic of Danny, their dead son. The final image of the couple sitting alone in the garden, after their guests have left, evokes an ambiguous blend of serenity and melancholy. Similarly, *La Stanza del Figlio* ends with Giovanni, Irene and Paola wandering across the beach, each lost in their own thoughts, offering what Evan Williams refers to as "a liberating calm, a strange awakening joy."<sup>197</sup> These films attempt a sense of closure that is hesitant, and not altogether restorative.

The narrative representation of recovery and resolution also has much to do with how the film configures the complexities of trauma. In *Rabbit Hole*, Becca's mother, who experienced the loss of her son eleven years earlier, meditates on the complexities of recovery:

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<sup>196</sup> John Cameron Mitchell (dir), *Rabbit Hole* (USA: Lionsgate, 2010).

<sup>197</sup> Evan Williams, "Tenderness in Grief," *The Australian*, March 23, 2002.

At some point it becomes bearable. It turns into something you can crawl out from under, and you carry around – like a brick in your pocket. And you forget it every once in a while, but then you reach in for whatever reason and there it is: “Oh right. *That*.” Which can be awful. But not all the time. Sometimes its kinda... Not that you *like* it exactly, but it's what you have instead of your son, so you don't wanna let go of it either. So you carry it around. And it doesn't go away, which is... fine... actually.

The 'brick' that Becca's mother, Nat, refers to indicates a figure often used by trauma cinema: metaphor. In the context of psychoanalysis, Jacob Arlow, whom I reference earlier in relation to 'the talking cure,' explains that the act of displacement is an essential part of the patient's narrativising of trauma:

Because of the element of displacement of meaning, metaphor readily lends itself as a means of warding off anxiety...For certain patients this was essential, because direct interpretation of the conflict could lead to catastrophic panic.<sup>198</sup>

The cinematic appropriation of such a method lends itself to the representation of trauma in that it conveys the experience, yet also signifies the difficulty of a direct depiction. The title, *Rabbit Hole*, functions similarly, metaphorising the bewildering, unfamiliar space in which Becca finds herself. In *La Stanza del Figlio*, Giovanni's visit to the fairground seeks to express the shock impact of trauma through the bereaved father's experience of the terrifying rides. *The Door in the Floor*, similarly to *Rabbit Hole*, also uses the metaphor of an underground space: at the end of the film, Ted actually opens the latch to a door in the floor, and climbs inside. Trauma, these films suggest, can be expressed through a displacement that is designed to create a sense of ambiguity and affect.

Nat's comments regarding loss, however, also refer to a rejection of curative norms. When Becca eventually reaches the complex state of recovery that her mother

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<sup>198</sup> Arlow, 371.

refers to, it is after her continual denial of therapeutic structures. When Becca's mother asks her where she is finding comfort, Becca replies: "Comfort? I'm not." Earlier on in the narrative, Becca and Howie attend a group therapy meeting for bereaved parents. Sam and Ana take their turn to express their grief:

Sam: We just have to remind each other that it was just part of God's plan. And we can't know why. Only God can know why.

Ana: God had to take her. He needed another angel.

At this point, Becca interrupts, exasperated: "Why didn't he just make one? Another angel. I mean, he's God after all. *Why didn't he just make another angel?*" Becca refuses what Jahan Ramazani refers to as a "sugarcoat[ing] of mourning in dubious comfort."<sup>199</sup> A similar sentiment is echoed in *Moonlight Mile*<sup>200</sup> when Jojo throws the self-help books that she and her husband, Ben, have been given by concerned friends after the couple's daughter is murdered. Ben protests, saying, "Those are gifts, from our friends, they're supposed to be helpful." Jojo picks up a book, reading the title: "*Grieving for Grownups?* Please. I'll show you helpful," as she tosses it into the fire.

In recent years, there are in fact few traumatic loss narratives that promote conventional forms of consolation. Even those films that end on a note of tentative hope, or rebirth, tend to reject religion, therapy, and self-help as viable sources of relief. In *Lantana*, Valerie works as a psychiatrist, but is unable to communicate effectively with her husband regarding their troubled relationship, or the loss of their daughter. In *La Stanza del Figlio*, Giovanni's work as a psychoanalyst is more closely correlated to the concept of trauma recovery. Earlier in the narrative, one of his patients professes that he has more faith in Valium than in therapy: "I'd like to meet the genius who invented that. He knows how to help people!" Giovanni's patients are often depicted as stuck in

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<sup>199</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, ix.

<sup>200</sup> Brad Silberling (dir), *Moonlight Mile* (USA: Touchstone Home Video, 2002).

destructive fixations and cycles, and doubtful of the benefits of psychoanalysis. After the death of his son, he, too, appears to lose faith in the expected remedial power of his profession. He admits to himself, "I can't do this work anymore." *Ordinary People*, a film made more than twenty years before *La Stanza del Figlio*, depicts an upper-middle class family that never openly speaks about their grief. Set in 1980s suburban America, that narrative is made socially relevant by addressing and dispelling the stigma attached to therapy, and the damaging effects of repressing one's emotions under a façade of coping. Redford's film thus locates therapy, and the confrontation of loss, as a source of comfort.

While the cinematic form has found ways to engage with the shock impact of trauma through temporal fissure, it also, as the above films highlight, requires a variety of techniques in order to engage with the nuances of trauma and loss. As Janet Walker writes,

Like traumatic memories that feature vivid bodily and visual sensation over "verbal narrative and context," these films are characterized by non-linearity, fragmentation, nonsynchronous sound, repetition, rapid editing and strange angles. And they approach the past through an unusual admixture of emotional affect, metonymic symbolism and cinematic flashbacks.<sup>201</sup>

*Rabbit Hole*, however, notably locates both the rejection of consolation and Becca's healing through dialogue, and a linear narrative. Striking an interesting balance between a post-structuralist discourse and Freud's talking cure, it affirms the possibilities of cinematic representation. More so, it suggests that the ambiguities, the indefinable in-between of traumatic experience is not located through a distinct set of techniques, nor, necessarily, a radical disruption of cinematic conventions. In selecting my key films for

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<sup>201</sup> Walker, "Trauma Cinema: false memories and true experience," 214.

analysis, I have sought narratives that exhibit diverse struggles in negotiating cinematic technique and traumatic loss.

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## PART TWO

### The return to innocence: problems of temporal fragmentation and character complexity in *21 Grams*

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As theorists have argued, the disruption of linearity is a common device in trauma cinema, used to express the tension between trauma and narrative time. Similar to his debut feature, *Amores Perros*, Alejandro González Iñárritu's *21 Grams* inextricably connects the lives of three characters through the event of a fatal car accident. Jack Jordan, a born-again Christian, kills Cristina Peck's husband, Michael, and their two daughters in a hit-and-run accident. Paul Rivers, who suffers from severe cardiac disease and desperately awaits a transplant, is given Michael Peck's heart. The chronological story of *21 Grams*, however, is drastically different from its plot: conceived by Guillermo Arriaga, most of the screenplay was apparently written in the highly fragmented, atemporal order in which it appears.<sup>202</sup> While the film is a feat of surgical construction and editing, it raises questions regarding the effect on story and character. Michael Newman argues that *21 Grams* proves that character complexity is independent of plot complexity, and more so, that the narrative form functions to disguise the unsophisticated, melodramatic story.<sup>203</sup> The film thus offers the opportunity to explore the obstacles faced in representing trauma, in particular, the balance between content, form and technique.

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<sup>202</sup> Erica Abeel, "21 Grams (Film)," *Film Journal International* 106, no. 10 (2003), [http://www.filmjournal.com/filmjournal/eseach/article\\_display.jsp?vnu\\_content\\_id=1000695585](http://www.filmjournal.com/filmjournal/eseach/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1000695585).

<sup>203</sup> Newman, Michael, "Character and Complexity in American Independent Cinema: *21 Grams* and *Passion Fish*," *Film Criticism* XXX, no. 3 (2006). Newman writes: "The sophistication of the storytelling functions as a screen behind which the rather unsophisticated story material is hidden for the first part of the film, so that the audience is intrigued and drawn in before it knows what the story is really like" (100).

The film's ending is easily its most problematic feature: Cristina discovers she is pregnant, Jack returns home to his family, and Paul, in his moment of death, questions the validity of life. The conclusion is structured as a montage of curative images that promote the power of sacrifice and redemption. The substitute space of innocence provided for Cristina's lost family invokes Freud's conception of successful mourning, and the psychoanalytic discourse that puts faith in therapeutic norms. The film's explicit recovery of order demonstrates another issue central to my investigation: the challenge posed by trying to assimilate narrative resolution to traumatic recovery.

## A narrative of return

While the film's ending informs the entire narrative, the first act of Iñárritu's film, when viewed in isolation, can be argued to engage with trauma and loss in innovative ways. *21 Grams'* most powerful integration of temporal disruption is through the narrative's continual return to the moments just before the accident. Cristina's replaying of Michael's last voice message as well as her return to the site of the accident embrace the logic of Freud's death drive and the repetition of the experience of loss. The absence of any visual representation of the car crash lends itself to Cristina's experience of trauma as an unlocatable experience. Todd McGowan, for example, writes:

Though the spectator's knowledge in *21 Grams* does move forward, the movement of the narrative is fundamentally one of return. It is as if the film's central traumatic event – the accident in which Jack kills Cristina's entire family...exerts a gravitational force that pulls the narrative back and never allows it to move beyond the essential trauma.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*, 138.

I would argue, however, that *21 Grams* does recuperate its trauma: the narrative can certainly be defined as one of return, but a return to a space of innocence. While the film does offer a temporal restructuring of the story, suggesting complex ways of conceptualising trauma, these innovations are not sustained through the denouement.

Unlike traditional linear narratives, the opening of *21 Grams* is geared towards creating a sense of perplexity and disorder. Newman writes that in the film's introductory sequence, the spectator's enjoyment is derived from "the pleasure of working out explanations for how people and events are connected."<sup>205</sup> While it is difficult to delineate where the opening sequence ends, it is arguably a scene approximately thirteen minutes into the film, when the three protagonists are seen together for the first time:

1. A post-coital Cristina and Paul in a bed together. Cristina lies sleeping while Paul stares down at her, smoking a cigarette.
2. Michael and his and Cristina's two daughters, Laura and Katie, are about to leave a diner.
3. In a group therapy session, Cristina discusses her family's support in overcoming addiction.
4. Jack counsels a teenage delinquent in a church recreational facility. He shows him a truck he won in a raffle, with the word "Faith" emblazoned across it. "Jesus gave me that truck," Jack says.
5. A flock of birds fly across the sky at dusk.
6. Paul lies in a hospital bed, hooked up to a host of tubes and machines. In voiceover, he says, "So, this is death's waiting room."
7. Cristina snorts cocaine in a bathroom.
8. Mary, Paul's wife, meets with a fertility specialist in the hopes of becoming pregnant with her dying husband's child.
9. Paul sits beside an empty swimming pool with a gun in his hand.

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 93.

10. Jack enters a prison cell.
11. Cristina and her sister swim laps in the gym swimming pool. Cristina misses a call, and tells her sister she has to leave: "Michael and the girls are waiting for me." Her sister calls to her, and Cristina turns around and laughs at something she does, which is not shown.
12. Paul, breathing with the help of an oxygen tank, is caught smoking by his wife, Mary, in their home. She angrily destroys the remainder of his hidden stash of cigarettes and scolds him: "If they find out you're smoking, they'll take you off the transplant list!"
13. Cristina, Paul and Jack are in a shabby motel room. Paul, unconscious and bleeding, lies in Cristina's arms as she cries out to Jack, "Call an ambulance!" Jack eventually begins to help Cristina move Paul out of the room.

Iñárritu and Arriaga create anticipation and intrigue through radical temporal ellipses that force the spectator to question the interplay between the chronological sequence of events and the characters' relationships: Is Cristina snorting cocaine part of her perilous past, or a post-therapy relapse? Is Jack's theological fanaticism a result of his imprisonment? The final scene raises the most interest, as it implies a dramatic culmination of the narrative's themes: life and death, crime, addiction, and deceit, all of which are intensified by the continual temporal leaps.

According to Charles Berg's classifications, *21 Grams* subscribes to both "The Jumbled Plot" and "The Hub and Spoke Plot."<sup>206</sup> The film's narrative reflects how the central 'hub,' the car accident, can cause irreparable and far-reaching suffering to the people involved. The film's denial of a clear temporal framing device engages with this suffering from the perspective of trauma as a non-linear experience, illustrating Elsaesser's point that the traumatic event "intimately links several temporalities...so much so that the very distinction between psychic time and chronological time seems

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<sup>206</sup> Berg, "A Taxonomy of Alternative Plots in Recent Films: Classifying the "Tarantino Effect,"" 39 – 41.

suspended.”<sup>207</sup> Paul lies in his hospital bed and says in voiceover, “I don’t know when anything began anymore. Or when it’s going to end,” which mirrors the spectator’s experience: by creating a sense of confusion through the film’s introductory sequence, *Iñárritu* places the spectator in a similar temporal bewilderment that trauma induces.

As noted above, one of the key ways the narrative evokes McGowan’s conception of a narrative of return is through the replaying of Michael’s voice message, which he leaves for Cristina shortly before he is killed. Cristina listens to the voice message for the first time when she gets home from a swimming session at the gym:

Hi, honey. I’m on my way home. If you need me to pick up anything along the way --  
[Daughter] Look, Daddy, a pigeon!  
Girls, no, don’t touch. Laura, stop it. Gimme a call on my cell. I’ll see you in a bit. Bye.

The content of the message is particularly ordinary, if not mundane, implying the unexpected, sudden nature of the impending trauma. Later in the film, Michael, Laura and Katie are depicted walking along a residential pavement, shortly before they cross the fatal stretch of road. Michael leaves the voice message for Cristina as they pass a gardener, Lucio, who is blowing leaves in front of a house. The scene ends as Michael closes his cellular phone. The scene replays from Lucio’s perspective later in the film. After leaving the voice message, Michael turns to Lucio and reminds him to tend to his garden over the weekend. He agrees, and waves to the youngest daughter as Michael and the girls walk away. The film cuts to an establishing shot of Lucio as he continues to work, the leaf-blower humming loudly. The camera remains stationary, and after a few seconds, a truck flashes past along the road. An ominous screech is heard, causing Lucio to turn around and run offscreen to investigate, throwing the leaf-blower to the ground.

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<sup>207</sup> Elsaesser, “Postmodernism as mourning work,” 197.

The camera does not follow him, but continues to remain stationary, watching as leaves are blown aimlessly across the street. The scene ends as another screech of tyres is heard, indicating Jack's flight from the accident site.

The noticeably static, lingering camera, as well as the repetition of the moments leading up to the crash, point to a deliberate denial. The conscious absence of the car crash engages with the paradoxes of trauma and the discourse of the unrepresentable: in refusing a representation of its central trauma, the narrative of *21 Grams* presents the accident as unassimilated. The sound of the screeching tyres is the only interaction the spectator does have with the crash, and illustrates, much like Cathy Caruth claims, that trauma necessitates a partial understanding.

The film's engagement with its central traumatic event directly corresponds to the ways Cristina mourns her loss, which is also illustrated not only by the film's fragmented structure, but by a repetitive return. Cristina is depicted visiting the diner her family ate at, questioning Lucio, and wandering the street where the accident occurred. As she sits on a corner of the pavement, Michael's voice message begins playing, continuing into the next scene where Cristina, lying on her bed and crying in anguish, listens to it repeatedly on her phone. Similar to the war veterans' traumatic nightmares that Freud observed, Cristina's compulsive action "awakens [her] in renewed terror."<sup>208</sup> In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud attributes the desire symptomatically to re-enact the trauma as indicative of the death drive, an instinct which impels the subject to return to its earlier, inorganic state.<sup>209</sup> Cristina's drug and alcohol addiction also illustrates the logic of the drive: it does not console or relieve her, but rather, appears to worsen her state of grief, indicating a drive towards death, and what McGowan refers to as an atemporal force. He writes, "For the subject [of the death drive], the future promises not unknown

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<sup>208</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 641.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 651.

possibilities for fulfilling desire, but new occasions for the repetition of the fundamental loss that defines the subject.”<sup>210</sup>

Cristina’s reaction to loss initially refuses the structure of Freud’s normal mourning. After the funeral, her father says to her, “When your mother died, I thought I wasn’t going to make it. I felt the world was falling on me and that I was never going to get up. But, sweetie, life goes on.” She replies:

“You know what I thought when Mom died? I couldn’t understand how you could talk to people again. How you could laugh... again. I couldn’t understand how you could play with us. And no-- no, that’s a lie. Life does not just go on.”

Cristina negates the concept of her husband and daughters as replaceable entities. Her affair with Paul leaves her in the same desperate state she was in before. “I can’t just go on with my life,” she cries at him, “I am paralysed here....” When Paul’s body rejects Michael’s heart, the logic of substitution inherent in being able to recover one’s loss is further denied. As McGowan writes, “The loss of Michael and their daughters leaves Cristina inconsolable, an attitude that testifies to the singularity of the lost object.”<sup>211</sup>

## Coincidence, chaos and car accidents

Cristina’s inconsolable response to loss is motivated by the underlining of the central traumatic event as accidental. Before Jack gets into his truck, his ex-boss says to him, “Damn it, Jack, it’s your birthday and you didn’t even have one drink with me.” When Jack returns home to his wife, Marianne, shaken from the crash, he tells her that he “took a turn... a little too quickly. I didn’t see them coming.” While he cannot be faulted

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<sup>210</sup> McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*, xi.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

for speeding or drinking, he does, however, flee the scene of the accident, and as Cristina later notes, Katie might have survived had she received medical attention sooner. The actual accident, however, is presented as a particularly chance event, and focuses the theme of contingency. For the earlier part of the film, contingency adds to the film's continuing engagement with trauma as an anti-narrative, and the characters' struggle to comprehend loss.

Of films that disrupt causal linearity, Ma del Mar Azcona Montoliú writes: "Rather than portraying people in full control of their destinies who manage, through effort, determination and will, to overcome the obstacles ahead, these movies present human beings at the mercy of external circumstances."<sup>212</sup> Actress Naomi Watts, in the documentary *21 Grams: In Fragments*, says of her character Cristina, and Jack, "We're both told that if we play by the rules, it will be okay," an adage that turns out to be cruelly false.<sup>213</sup> Early in the temporal duration of the film, Jack and Cristina are depicted in relative spaces of self-possession: Cristina, in her group therapy meeting, appears to have been sober for years, and Jack, despite his anger issues, coaches young, troubled youth. Despite their different relationships to the car accident, Jack and Cristina are similar in significant ways: the ex-con and the ex-party girl are both defined in relation to their families, as well as their respective attempts to escape their past. "The problem is, some members have started complaining about your tattoos," Jack's boss informs him. Jack frustratedly responds, "I don't drink. I don't steal. I'm clean," emphasising the difficulties faced in leaving his criminal life behind. A chance event ultimately renders both their efforts futile: in a desperate attempt to numb her pain, Cristina turns back to drugs and alcohol, and Jack is cast again in the role of a criminal, and worse, a killer.

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<sup>212</sup> Ma del Mar Azcona Montoliú, "A Time to Love and a Time to Die: Desire and Narrative Structure in *21 Grams*" *Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies* 31, no. 2 (2009): 114 – 115.

<sup>213</sup> *21 Grams: In Fragments*, The Making of *21 Grams* Documentary (2003), DVD Special Feature.

Prior to the accident, Jack places his faith in a fanatical theology that aims to provide an ultimate sense of power and meaning in the world. In the introductory sequence, he refers to winning the truck not as luck, but as a gift from Jesus. When the same truck kills Cristina's family, he sees it as a betrayal: "I did *everything* He asked me to do. I changed. I gave Him my life, and He betrayed me. He put that fucking truck in my hand so I could carry out his will. Made me kill that man and those girls." Reverend John visits Jack in prison and reflects the twisted logic of their shared fanatical theology: on one hand, he emphasises to Jack the accidental nature of the tragedy, but then yells at him, "Stop this shit, or you're going straight to hell!" His implied determinism is echoed in the next scene when Ana, a drug dealer, gives Cristina a form of rohypnol: "You take two of these, you go straight to heaven." Like Cristina, Jack struggles to narrativise his trauma. Trauma is largely regarded as an anti-narrative because it does not conform to conventional time and causality. Jack desperately attempts but fails to contextualise the accident within a meaningful structure of cause and effect, lodging him in a perpetual state of traumatic distress. Even after turning himself in and serving a prison sentence, he cannot find redemption. Neither can Cristina find any blissful relief from drugs. The narrative continually asserts its central traumatic event as a site of contingency and ongoing devastation, and as Hahn writes, the film's "suffering souls are denied aid and comfort from those sources (personal, social, or institutional) we normally turn to in hours of need" denying the characters any personal, social or institutional forms of relief.<sup>214</sup>

On a transplant waiting list, Paul's life, too, is determined by chance and circumstance. He has no control over his deteriorating physical health, and must await the death of a suitable donor. As a mathematician, Paul appeals to chaos theory on a lunch date with Cristina, when he says, "There is a number hidden in every act of life, in

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<sup>214</sup> Robert Hahn, "[untitled]." *Film Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2005): 53.

every aspect of the universe. Fractals, matter – that there’s a number, screaming to tell us something.” Chaos theory can be described as the analysis of mathematical models, usually a set of simple equations, which yield greatly different outcomes.<sup>215</sup> These varying results are due to what is referred to as “the butterfly effect,” or the sensitivity of small, unpredictable changes in the initial stages of the equation.<sup>216</sup> What results is a form of chaotic determinism: while the effects are necessitated by the causes, the causes are occasionally irregular, which may yield different outcomes. Paul goes on to recite a portion of a poem from Venezuelan writer Eugenio Montejo: “The earth turned to bring us closer. It turned on itself and within us, until it finally brought us together in this dream.” Paul thus understands his union with Cristina as based on determinism; however, as Cameron notes, their meeting is also orchestrated by Paul’s hiring of a private investigator.<sup>217</sup> The narrative continually undermines a sense of certainty or assurance. Paul’s perceived luck, similar to Jack’s initial feelings regarding his truck, changes when his body rejects the transplant. His and Cristina’s encounter no longer evokes the dreaminess of Montejo’s poem, but the inevitability of death. His doctor advises him to admit himself to hospital, which will increase his chance of survival. Even Paul, who celebrates the contingent aspects of life, desperately asks him, “If I stay, will I be saved?” The structure of his question, mimicking a clear cause-and-effect chain, expresses a desire for a definitive sense of meaning and order.<sup>218</sup>

Allan Cameron argues that contingency in *21 Grams* cannot be seen only in its diegesis, but in its structure: “modular narratives mimic contingency itself by leaping

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<sup>215</sup> Stephen H. Kellert, *In the Wake of Chaos: Unpredictable Order in Dynamical Systems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>217</sup> Cameron, “Contingency, Order and the Modular Narrative: *21 Grams* and *Irreversible*,” 73.

<sup>218</sup> The use of the word “saved” also invokes a religious context, and hints at both Paul and Jack’s impending engagement with sacrifice.

between narrative segments in apparently arbitrary or unpredictable ways,” which reflect the irregular patterns one sees in chaotic systems.<sup>219</sup> Cameron does argue, however, that many of the juxtaposed scenes exhibit “an associational logic” in that they relate to similar themes and often act metaphorically.<sup>220</sup> In one scene, Jack tries to convince his boss that he is “clean,” referring to his rejection of a criminal life; in the following scene, Cristina washes her dead children’s clothing. Cameron writes:

The emotions of guilt and grief are connected in this way by the motif of cleansing. This points forward to the connection that will be established between the two characters...and to the cleansing process that will see Jack overcome his guilt and Cristina come to terms with her grief.<sup>221</sup>

The film often uses repetitive imagery – most commonly water, alcohol, mirrors, swimming pools and cars – to connect its temporally disjointed scenes. Mary asks Paul to help her collect the glasses lying around after a dinner party, followed by a scene that begins with Cristina making herself a drink. While the images may reflect a traumatic repetition reminiscent of Freud’s conception of the repetition-compulsion, their content cannot be associated with the central narrative trauma, making the connections appear random and uninspired. At other times, however, seen in McGowan’s above example, the graphic matches feel particularly contrived and point toward an eventual redemption from guilt and grief. Indeed, Newman also contends that the film’s structural and thematic engagement with contingency often reflects an excess of irony.<sup>222</sup> The scene in which Jack tells Marianne that he “took a corner...a little too quickly” is followed by a scene of Jack driving Cristina and a bloodied and unconscious Paul to the hospital where

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<sup>219</sup> Cameron, “Contingency, Order and the Modular Narrative: *21 Grams* and *Irreversible*,” 74.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Newman, “Character and Complexity in American Independent Cinema: *21 Grams* and *Passion Fish*,” 100.

Cristina shouts, "Can't you go any faster?" In another part of the film, a scene of a healthy, post-surgery Paul, with black stitches running down his chest is contrasted with the previous scene of Cristina being informed of her family's death. The juxtaposition of scenes reflects the narrative's attempt to forge moral and emotional connections between the characters, but simultaneously, to deem these connections random. The few scenes in the film that do appear in chronological order concern the heart transplant:

1. A shaken Cristina is asked by a nurse to consider organ donation: "Are you willing for your husband to donate his heart?" A beeping sound, similar to a heart monitor, continues into the next scene.
2. Mary and Paul wake up to the sound of their beeper. Mary calls the hospital and is informed that a heart has become available for Paul.
3. Paul is prepped for surgery by a team of doctors. Mary wishes him luck, and then returns to the hospital's waiting room, where she glances at Cristina, who leaves the hospital with her sister and father, along with a bag of her dead family's belongings.

Iñárritu sensationalises their crossing of paths, highlighting its coincidental nature, but playing on the irony involved in Mary's obliviousness as she catches a glimpse of her husband's soon-to-be lover. The apparent contingency of the plot structure thus oscillates between a sense of affected arbitrariness and an overly conscious technique. As Newman argues, any perplexity that its disrupted chronology evokes is penetrated by the spectator after the first act.<sup>223</sup>

The coincidental appearance of the plot and story, such as in the sequence described above, is emphasised by the stylistic system, which engages with an aesthetic of realism reminiscent of *cinéma vérité*. Most of the film was shot using a handheld camera, making use of mobile framing as well as long takes. The cinematography's

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

apparently imprecise, loose framing and open form emphasises the thematic and structural engagement with chance: in many scenes, the camera movements seem unplanned. One of the most defining aspects of the cinematographic style is the bleach bypass process, which involves omitting a stage in the development of colour film.<sup>224</sup> The simultaneous darkening and desaturation of the image that results from such a process draws attention away from the spectacular image, often associated with bright, vibrant colours, and instead invokes a gloomy, yet dramatic atmosphere. Director of photography, Rodrigo Prieto, reveals a largely expressionistic attitude towards the style:

When things start to get more difficult for our characters, we'd go to a grainier stock. When things feel a little cleaner or better, the stock isn't as grainy. The framing and camera work reflect that, too - when things are in balance for the characters, we use more traditional framing.<sup>225</sup>

*21 Grams'* style, as well as its structure, emerges as a facade of unpredictability. They both recall techniques that, on the surface, disrupt the trends of generic formulations, but actually invest in excessive irony and connotation.

## Melodrama and “the problem of the end”

At first glance, the film's style as well as structure appear to emphasise chance and coincidence, but once probed, and as the plot progresses, not only do they emerge as overly premeditated, but are revealed as a disguise, concealing the even less complex story that lies beneath its surface. Problems of character complexity emerge when one tries to define Cristina, Jack or Paul's sense of individuality, and to distinguish between

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<sup>224</sup> “21 Grams: Production Notes,” [http://madeinatlantis.com/movies\\_central/2003/21grams\\_production\\_details.htm](http://madeinatlantis.com/movies_central/2003/21grams_production_details.htm).

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

the implications of their experiences. In *21 Grams*, Iñárritu's protagonists often appear as one integrated being, converging through their closely associated experiences of the narrative themes of chance, circumstance, guilt, grief, and later, sacrifice and redemption. It is arguable that the characters are conceived only as a projection of these themes, as they appear to lack any nuanced individuality otherwise. The fragmented structure of the plot presents characters that tend to change from shot to shot: in one moment, Cristina tells her sister that she does not want to press charges against Jack, and in the next, she proclaims her desire for revenge. The spectator is unable to witness a meaningful progression from one encounter to the next, thus diminishing one's understanding of character motivation. Roger Ebert writes: "By fracturing his chronology, Iñárritu isolates key moments in the lives of his characters, so that they have to stand alone. There is a point at which this stops being a strategy and starts being a stunt."<sup>226</sup> The continual linear disruption thus obscures the development of character and story. Newman argues that in *21 Grams*, "the complexity gained through temporal reordering... come[s] at the cost of complex characterization."<sup>227</sup> As I have argued, however, and as Ebert implies, even the apparent plot complexity is easily deciphered, becoming a tricky aspect of the storytelling.

As with most narratives, but especially in the case of *21 Grams*, it becomes difficult to separate content and form. The issues of character complexity thus also need to be related to the criticism levelled against the overwrought story. Erica Abeel writes: "That Cris and Paul should meet through the unlikely bond that connects them, and that Paul should then fall for her – well, at times it smacks of a telenovela."<sup>228</sup> Similarly to

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<sup>226</sup> Roger Ebert, "21 Grams," *Rogerebert.com*, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20031125/REVIEWS/41005002>.

<sup>227</sup> Newman, "Character and Complexity in American Independent Cinema: *21 Grams* and *Passion Fish*," 91.

<sup>228</sup> Abeel, "21 Grams (Film)."

Newman, Jonathan Romney further argues that *21 Grams*' fragmented plot aids in concealing the story's contrived events:

One man's death is the saving of another, who then falls in love with the first man's wife; that woman, giving blood to save her dying lover, discovers she is pregnant. If it weren't for the structure, we could almost be watching a Latin American soap, perhaps entitled *But Life Goes On...*<sup>229</sup>

The association of *21 Grams* with telenovelas and Latin American soap operas has been made largely with reference to melodrama, when the term is used pejoratively, in reference to the story's sensationalised violence, emotional extremes, and questions of moral legibility. Linda Williams defines the melodramatic mode, which she views as fundamental to popular American cinema, as follows:

If emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and actions, then the operative mode is melodrama.<sup>230</sup>

Williams considers the significance of a moral register in relation to Peter Brooks' seminal study, *The Melodramatic Imagination*.<sup>231</sup> Brooks' examination of melodramatic excess centres on what he refers to as 'the moral occult,' a rhetorical scheme which carries the burden of expressing the struggle between moral forces in an increasingly secular world.<sup>232</sup> The melodramatic mode, he argues, recuperates morally reprehensible

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<sup>229</sup> Jonathan Romney, "Enigma Variations: *21 Grams*," *Sight and Sound* 14, no. 3 (2004), [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:iipa:&crft\\_dat=xri:iipa:article:citation:iipa00244710](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:iipa:&crft_dat=xri:iipa:article:citation:iipa00244710)

<sup>230</sup> Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in *Refiguring American Film Genres*, ed. Nick Browne, 42 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>231</sup> Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 51; Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, melodrama, and the mode of excess* (New York: Yale University Press, 1976), 5.

<sup>232</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, melodrama, and the mode of excess*, 15.

forces into a post-sacred order by means of interiority, subtext and symbolism: as Williams writes, "The quest for a hidden moral legibility is crucial to all melodrama."<sup>233</sup>

Williams' definition emphasises that one of melodrama's central features is that it "begins, and wants to end, in a space of innocence."<sup>234</sup> She also describes melodrama as involving a negotiation between "pathos and action – a give and take of 'too late' and 'in the nick of time.'"<sup>235</sup> Melodrama, much like trauma, has a significant relationship to temporality. Pathos, Williams explains, comes from the spectator's awareness of loss, and more specifically one's "connection to the lost time of innocence."<sup>236</sup> Hope centres on the possibility that it is not too late, even at the last minute, for a form of action to regain the past. E. Ann Kaplan argues that trauma cinema faces particular issues with the melodramatic ending:

In melodrama, the spectator is introduced to trauma through a film's themes and techniques, but the film ends with a comforting closure or 'cure'. Such mainstream works posit trauma (against its reality) as a discrete past event, locatable, representable and curable.<sup>237</sup>

Kaplan's comments reiterate the tension between narrative closure and traumatic recovery, and the way these tensions complicate issues of representation. *21 Grams* cannot be understood, however, as a problematic narrative because of its attempt to integrate melodrama and trauma; it is not that these two structures are diametrically opposed, but that the filmmaker needs to approach their amalgamation with caution. It is difficult to imagine how the narrative would have played out if *21 Grams* had been made in chronological order essentially because it would change the entire conception of the

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<sup>233</sup> Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 51.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>237</sup> Kaplan, "Melodrama, Cinema and Trauma," 204.

film. *21 Grams*' story is not inherently overwrought; rather, it is the way the fractured plot isolates and thus emphasises its most extreme moments that pushes it into the classification of a weak melodrama.

Robert Hahn writes that all films are plagued by "the-problem-of-the-end," arguably because of how the conclusion informs the preceding narrative events.<sup>238</sup> In offering its ending at the beginning of its narrative, *21 Grams* testifies to its emphasis on the climaxes of storytelling. The scene in the motel room, which is first introduced at the end of the film's opening sequence, plays out in its entirety toward the end of the narrative, signalling the film's climax. The twist is that it is not Jack who wounds Paul, which the narrative previously hints at, but Paul who shoots himself. Furthermore, Cristina discovers that she is pregnant with Paul's child. The film closes with a montage sequence of Paul's death in the hospital, as well as moments from before and after the car accident:

1. Birds fly across a sky at dusk.
2. Cristina holds a bloodied, dying Paul in her lap. His voiceover begins, continuing into the following shots: "How many lives do we live? How many times do we die?"
3. Paul lies in a hospital bed, attached to a respirator. His voiceover continues: "They say we all lose 21 grams at the exact moment of our death. Everyone."
4. Michael and his daughters leave the diner. "And how much fits into 21 grams?"
5. Jack waves goodbye to his boss as he gets into his truck. "How much is lost?"
6. Cristina's sister calls out to her at the swimming pool. Cristina turns around, laughing at her sister who jokingly gives her the finger. "When do we lose 21 grams?"

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<sup>238</sup> Hahn, "[untitled]," 54.

7. At the hospital, Cristina stares out of the window. Jack comes to stand next to her. She slowly looks up at him. "How much goes with them?"
8. Jack returns home to his family. "How much is gained?"
9. Cristina opens the door to her daughters' room, and steps inside. She sits on the bed, her pregnant stomach evident. "How much is gained?"
10. Paul lies in his hospital bed. The heart monitor flatlines. "21 grams. The weight of a stack of 5 nickels. The weight of a hummingbird. A chocolate bar. How much does 21 grams weigh?"
11. Snow falls over an empty swimming pool.

The moments depicted before the tragedy – Michael and his daughters in the diner, Cristina and her sister at the swimming pool, and Jack happily waving to his boss – are contrasted with optimistic flashes of what is to come. As Hahn writes, in order for the film "to fulfil its vision (of the power of sacrifice and the possibility of renewal), it adds a coda of hope, consisting of quick epiphanic images of the future."<sup>239</sup>

Jack and Cristina are both depicted throughout the narrative in relation to their families, and the ending integrates this similarity in significant ways; as Cameron writes, "the reconstitution of Jack's nuclear family (husband, wife, and two children) provides a sense of balance and recompense for the loss of Cristina's family."<sup>240</sup> The sense of hesitant reconciliation between Jack and Cristina in the hospital is reinforced when she finds the strength to enter her deceased children's room. Furthermore, her unexpected pregnancy, apparently viable despite her drug use, symbolically balances the loss of the child that could have been saved had Jack not fled the accident, invoking a general sense of forgiveness.

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Cameron, "Contingency, Order and the Modular Narrative: *21 Grams* and *Irreversible*," 76.

Paul's voiceover emotionally appeals to the spectator to find value in the meaning of life. While his words do not directly explain the significance of the accident in a grander scheme, the repetition of the line "How much is gained?" implores the spectator to domesticate the trauma as a realm of hopeful possibility. As Kimberley Chun writes,

Iñárritu positions both Jack and Paul as Christ figures – Paul shoots himself in the chest, and Jack mutilates himself with almost palpable zeal, sacrificing themselves, respectively, for another human being and for some kind of spiritual understanding.<sup>241</sup>

Like Hahn, Chun views the film's overall message, informed by the narrative ending, as the promotion of the redeeming power of sacrifice. While the previous events appear to deny the tenets of Jack's theology, the ending engages with them through an affected spirituality, providing for the storyworld a reliable moral scheme. This not to say that Jack might never return to his family, or Cristina find closure, but that the film presents these elements as an instantaneous cure that results from a contrived sense of salvation.

Newman writes that "*21 Grams* ends by answering all of the questions it raises. It ends by decomplexifying its narration, by explaining all."<sup>242</sup> The characters do not find solace in accepting the incomprehensibility of loss, but are comforted by the notion that chance and coincidence will ultimately be transformed into redemption and hope. While the film never visually represents the car crash, it narrativises trauma in that it locates the accident within a structure of cause and effect. The narrative appears to take on the same role as the religion that it so vehemently seeks to reject throughout its diegesis, bringing the accident, and traumatic loss, back within the framework of justification and

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<sup>241</sup> Kimberley Chun, "Film Reviews: *21 Grams*," *Cineaste* 29, no. 2 (2004): 23.

<sup>242</sup> Newman, "Character and Complexity in American Independent Cinema: *21 Grams* and *Passion Fish*," 104.

enlightenment. The singularity of the lost object, the conception of Cristina's loss as irreplaceable, is ultimately diminished.

21. *Grams'* narrative thus highlights that while cinema has found ways to engage with the shock impact of traumatic distress, mainly through a disruption of causal linearity, it needs to tread carefully when it comes to balancing content, form and technique, as well as find ways to represent narrative resolution and traumatic recovery. As I have argued, it is not so much the narrative presence of recovery that is problematic, or even that the film displays melodramatic characteristics; rather, Iñárritu's assimilation of story and plot isolates sensational moments in the story, where the spectator lacks an understanding of character progression and motivation. As the proceeding analyses make clear, narratives of trauma and loss require an interaction with ambiguity, and not simply the extremes of life and death.

## **“No sound, but so loud”: questions of anger and revenge in Todd Field’s *In the Bedroom***

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Released in 2001, Todd Field’s directorial debut details the struggle a couple go through when their only child is murdered, and the ways in which they deal with their loss. Traumatized by Frank’s death and frustrated with the ineffective justice system, Matt and Ruth Fowler turn on themselves and on each other, and finally, their son’s killer. While the film received much critical acclaim, the ending of *In the Bedroom* has been generally acknowledged to be, as one critic puts it, the film’s “fatal flaw.”<sup>243</sup> Noting the film’s abrupt transformation into a revenge drama, Paul Christman claims that the narrative does not prepare one to believe that the protagonists would resort to murder.<sup>244</sup> Henry Taylor argues that the film, like many Hollywood blockbusters, simply reasserts the American myth of regeneration through violence.<sup>245</sup> Despite the film’s initial human focus on a bereaved couple, Taylor claims that *In the Bedroom* is ultimately dominated by “the pull of genre, wish-fulfilment, and mythology.”<sup>246</sup> Through the lens of traumatic loss, I aim to differentiate *In the Bedroom* from the conventional revenge drama, but to argue that the film’s narratively inconsistent ending comes from a problematic literary adaptation of Andre Dubus’ “Killings.”

The critique of the film’s revenge narrative, while largely well-founded, has often obscured analysis of what is arguably the narrative’s more stimulating action: the emotional violence caused by a couple’s inability to mourn the loss of their son. *In the*

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<sup>243</sup> Lynden Barber, “Outtakes,” *The Australian*, March 22, 2002.

<sup>244</sup> Phil Christman, “Quick takes,” *Christian Century* 119, no. 4, (2002): 48.

<sup>245</sup> Henry M. Taylor, “Trauma and violence; Different sensibilities: Nanni Moretti’s *The Son’s Room* and Todd Field’s *In the Bedroom*,” *CineAction*. 36, no. 9 (2006): 44.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

*Bedroom* shares a similarity with many traumatic loss narratives: the couple torn apart by grief, seen in films such as *Ordinary People*, *The Door in the Floor*, and *Rabbit Hole*. In these films, it is the couple's different ways of dealing with loss that cause marital fissures. In Field's narrative, the bereaved parents are trapped in a cycle of destructive repetition, Ruth chain-smoking and watching daytime television, while Matt actively avoids her, and absorbs himself in work. Described by *The New York Times* as "profoundly quiet,"<sup>247</sup> *In the Bedroom* provides the opportunity to explore representations of the denial of their loss, and how it turns a relationship into one of stony silences and repressed anger. Stylistically, the theme of disavowal seems to seep into the film's subdued colour palette and often motionless camera, evoking Pierre-Janet's description of traumatic memory as "wordless and static."<sup>248</sup>

Unlike the alternative plots that are popular to trauma cinema, *In the Bedroom* is steadfastly linear, and makes no drastic attempt to re-order time; however, the film uses intermittent temporal gaps, most stylistically evident after Frank's death: the short, often silent scenes are continually punctuated with a fade to black, giving the impression of fading in and out of consciousness. For the Fowlers, time appears to offer no comfort or cure, and mourning is configured as an endlessly destructive process. Charlotte O'Sullivan writes that the film's narrative progression, which is one of the most significant divergences from Dubus' short story, focuses on "the bizarre pace of the everyday. As in life, no one sets the scene; we have to fill in the gaps ourselves."<sup>249</sup> I will explore how *In the Bedroom*, through the concentration on a couple unable to communicate or mourn the loss of their palpably absent son, engages with the shock

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<sup>247</sup> Stephen Holden, "Film Review: When Grief Becomes A Member of the Family," *The New York Times*, November 23, 2001.

<sup>248</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 175.

<sup>249</sup> Charlotte O'Sullivan, "Reviews: *In the Bedroom*," *Sight and Sound* 12, no. 1 (2002): 44.

impact of a traumatic temporality manifested, here, in the oxymoronic “bizarre pace of the everyday.”<sup>250</sup>

## ‘Eye for an eye’ and the American Gothic

Set in a small town in Maine, *In the Bedroom* details the lives of middle-aged couple Matt and Ruth Fowler, whose son Frank, an aspiring architect, is home from college on his summer break. He spends the days working as a lobster fisherman, and is romantically involved with Natalie, an older woman with two sons and a jealous ex-husband, Richard Strout. One day, after a few antagonistic incidents with the couple, Richard shoots Frank dead. Matt and Ruth struggle to deal with the loss of their only child, a grief that is worsened by the justice system’s inability to prosecute his killer. Matt and Ruth decide to take the law into their own hands. With the help of his friend, Willis Trottier, Matt murders Richard. Of the ending, Lynden Barber writes:

When, at the climax, Wilkinson’s husband murders his son’s presumed killer, audiences are meant to feel that justice (albeit a terrible justice) has been done. The central American myth of the pioneer not only places the individual in a privileged position in society, it suggests individuals can solve their problems using violence. Hollywood repeatedly depends on this myth.<sup>251</sup>

While Barber believes that *In the Bedroom* is far from “a crass blockbuster,”<sup>252</sup> his view is similar to Henry Taylor’s assertion that the film fails to go beyond American, and, specifically, Hollywood, myths of violence and revenge. Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration through violence: the mythology of the American Frontier 1600 – 1860*, traces the establishment of

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Barber, “Outtakes.”

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

a collective cultural identity and national myths, such as those of the pioneer and frontier justice, back to the early British settlements in America. Slotkin writes:

We have, I think, continued to associate democracy and progress with perpetual social mobility....and with the continual expansions of our power....The seeds of many American tragedies are in the captive-and-hunter myth, the myth of regeneration through violence.<sup>253</sup>

Both Barber and Taylor argue that it is a “rugged individualism” that informs the basis of the narrative’s ending, and Matt’s desire to avenge his son’s death.

In a narrative, the loss of a family member is often the catalyst for the revenge plot, seen in films such as *Mystic River*, *Reservation Road*, and *The Brave One*.<sup>254</sup> While these films do explore elements of the family’s grief, the narrative is mainly focused through a desire for retribution. *The Brave One* sees Erica Bain and her fiancé violently attacked one night while walking their dog: Erica survives, badly beaten and traumatised, and her fiancé dies. She appears to suffer from traumatic grief, unable to sleep, work and even walk the streets of the city without experiencing intrusive reminiscences of the attack. While she differs from Matt and Ruth in that she has physically experienced a trauma herself, *The Brave One* spends little time detailing her emotional recovery process, and instead turns to more action-orientated premises. Erica purchases a gun, supposedly for protection, but ends up going on a vigilante killing spree. The narrative justifies her actions by deeming the justice system ineffectual, and by her killing only those threatening imminent violence. Finally, after Erica has hunted and killed her fiancé’s murderers, a friend of hers, Detective Mercer, aids in covering up her crimes, further endorsing the logic of

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<sup>253</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through violence: the mythology of the American Frontier 1600 – 1860* (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1996), 557, 558. Slotkin writes: “Believing in the myth of regeneration through the violence of the hunt, the American hunters eventually destroyed the natural conditions that had made possible their economic and social freedom, their democracy of social mobility. Yet the mythology and value system it supported *remained even after the objective conditions that had justified it had vanished*” (557 - 558, my emphasis).

<sup>254</sup> Neil Jordan (dir), *The Brave One* (USA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2007).

revenge. Ultimately, the narrative celebrates Erica's actions and supports the myth of regeneration through violence, largely conforming to the conventional revenge plot.

The narratives of *Mystic River* and *Reservation Road*, while still focalised through recrimination, treat the myth in varying ways. *Mystic River's* centrepiece is a crosscutting sequence between Jimmy Markum killing Dave Boyle, the man whom he incorrectly pegs for murdering his daughter, and the real killers, a couple of kids involved in a prank gone wrong, confessing their crime. The final moments of the film are left open-ended: Sean Devine, a local detective, threateningly mimes that he will shoot Jimmy, who returns Sean's gesture with an indiscernible shrug. Arguably, Jimmy either aims to suggest that his capture is inevitable, or, he is challenging the detective with mocking carelessness. While the imminent consequences are left unspecified, the implication is that taking the law into one's own hands is perilous.

*Reservation Road* attempts to consider revenge from the perspective of both victim and perpetrator. Ethan and Grace Learner's son, Josh, is killed in a hit-and-run accident. The driver, Dwight Arno, struggles with his mounting guilt and fear, while Ethan, like his cinematic counterparts, grows frustrated with the justice system and hires a lawyer, who coincidentally turns out to be Dwight. The narrative descends into a predictable game of cat-and-mouse, and is neatly resolved: Ethan, seeing Dwight's remorse, spares him the revenge he had planned, and Dwight turns himself in to the authorities. While the narrative differs from *The Brave One* in that it does not promote the American myth of revenge, its treatment is tired and moralising. In regard to the traumatic loss narrative, it offers no insights or reflections: the experience of mourning is used, similarly to *The Brave One* and *Mystic River*, to create an action-orientated suspense plot.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Andrea Arnold's *Red Road* is a more interesting counterpoint to the conventional Hollywood revenge drama in that it does not reveal the protagonist's scheme until late in the narrative. Jackie Morrison, a CCTV operator living in Scotland, leads an isolated and lonely life, which the narrative takes time detailing. She becomes obsessed with watching and following a man, Clyde Harrison, in the CCTV footage and in real life. Through an intricate plan, she deceives him into getting charged with rape and assault; later, he is

*In the Bedroom* offers a debatable alternative to the above revenge narratives, and their use of generic conventions. The film's final act sees Matt and Willis kidnap Richard and mislead him into thinking he is going on an involuntary "holiday:" in effect, the two men make it appear as though he is skipping bail and running from the law. When they arrive at Willis' cabin, Matt kills Richard as he gets out of the car: first, he shoots him in the shoulder, and then, when Richard attempts to crawl away from him as he is injured on the ground, Matt shoots him in the back. Surprised, Willis asks Matt why he had not stuck to their plan, which was to kill Richard the next day. "I couldn't wait," Matt replies, a phrase which Taylor argues conveys that it is emotion, and not reason, that informs the logic of Matt's revenge.<sup>256</sup> The entire sequence, Taylor further claims, is geared to disapprove of Matt's actions: "The kidnapper's cruelty of totally deceiving Richard makes us share some sympathies with the victimizer-turned victim."<sup>257</sup> Matt and Willis travel home in silence, and the grey, ominous shots of an early morning Camden imply that the Fowlers' grief is far from over. When Matt arrives home, Ruth is waiting, puffing on a cigarette as she sits in bed and asks, "Did you do it?" The final sequence of the film sees Matt tossing in bed, clearly traumatised, while Ruth tries to force food on him. Matt removes a plaster from his finger: the small cut he had sustained from a fishing line is nicely healed. Ruth's voice echoes in the almost tangibly empty house, layered over disquieting images of an empty doorway, a staircase, and a mirror in front of a billowing curtain: "Matt? Do you want coffee?" The camera cuts to a long exterior shot of the house, and then to extreme long shots of the town of Camden.

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exposed as the man who ran over and killed Jackie's husband and daughter, and was recently released from jail. While much of the plot is based on suspense and mystery, the myth of revenge is handled delicately, and serves to reveal a grieving woman's emotional alienation. The confrontation scene between Jackie and Clyde offers no moral certainties or answers, and the film ends on a note of ambiguity as Jackie visits her deceased husband's family.

<sup>256</sup> Taylor, "Trauma and violence; Different sensibilities: Nanni Moretti's *The Son's Room* and Todd Field's *In the Bedroom*," 43.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

Rand Richards Cooper views the film's ending as a perpetuation of the narrative's concentration on the destructive potential of traumatic loss: "Vengeance may hold a primitive necessity, but it offers neither redemption nor relief...by the end of this sombre meditation on grief and family, there's nothing left but the numbed sensation of loss."<sup>258</sup> Judith Herman argues that the revenge fantasy often appears as a "magical resolution" to the difficulty of mourning; however,

[t]hough the traumatized person imagines that revenge will bring relief, repetitive revenge fantasies actually increase her torment....People who actually commit acts of revenge... do not succeed in getting rid of their post-traumatic symptoms; rather, they seem to suffer the most severe and intractable disturbances.<sup>259</sup>

And while retribution is a psychodynamically justifiable reaction to trauma, Taylor claims that the film's final images create "an uncomfortable ambiguity, as the panoramic view of the New England community suggests that this logic of revenge is part of a broader cultural imaginary."<sup>260</sup> While the message is clearly that revenge is far from sweet, Taylor claims that the film's exploration of recrimination is primarily through a cultural, and not psychodynamic, model of mourning.

*In the Bedroom* appears intent on rendering a specifically New England locale: with its reference to American holidays – the Fourth of July, Labour Day – as well as lobster fishing, rural villages and Puritan values, Stephen Holden claims that the small town in Maine is as important as any character in the film.<sup>261</sup> As a region once referred to as the "fortress of Puritanism," New England's theatre was correspondingly associated with

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<sup>258</sup> Rand Richards Cooper, "Who's afraid of Sissy Spacek?" *Commonweal* 129, no. 1 (2002): 20.

<sup>259</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 189.

<sup>260</sup> Taylor, "Trauma and violence; Different sensibilities: Nanni Moretti's *The Son's Room* and Todd Field's *In the Bedroom*," 44.

<sup>261</sup> Holden, "Film Review: When Grief Becomes A Member of the Family."

conservative, moralistic melodramas until the late nineteenth century.<sup>262</sup> Eugene O'Neill revitalised these stage melodramas by exploring the darker side of New England, often using the motif of warped familial relationships in productions such as *Desire Under the Elms*<sup>263</sup> and *Mourning Becomes Electra*.<sup>264</sup> Bruce Murphy, in a study on the region's history of theatre and film, argues that *In the Bedroom* engages with the "O'Neill strain in New England drama," using the family as motivation to explore tensions created by repressed desires.<sup>265</sup> Karan Sheldon, too, argues that family secrets are a recurrent theme in the cinematic depiction of New England, as are haunted surroundings, the contrasting of city and country values, and stories set at sea.<sup>266</sup> Sheldon's categories yield a variety of examples, ranging from *Our Town*,<sup>267</sup> *Dolores Claiborne*<sup>268</sup> and *The Ice Storm*<sup>269</sup> to *The Witches of Eastwick*<sup>270</sup> and *The Crucible*.<sup>271</sup>

According to Sheldon's description, *In the Bedroom* can easily be read as an example of New England contemporary film. Early in the first act, the film alludes to its title, an allegory which serves to forecast the impending tragedy, as well as thematically concentrate the narrative on destructive familial relationships: on a lobster catching trip, Matt warns Natalie's son that when two or more lobsters are caught in the innermost head of the lobster trap, known as the 'bedroom,' one of them usually gets injured. He

<sup>262</sup> Bruce F. Murphy, "Film and Theatre," in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Regional Cultures: New England*, ed. Michael Sletcher, 172 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004).

<sup>263</sup> Eugene O'Neill (playwright), *Desire Under the Elms* (NY, USA: Greenwich Village Theatre, 1924).

<sup>264</sup> Eugene O'Neill (playwright), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (NY, USA: Guild Theatre, 1931); *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>266</sup> Karan Sheldon, "New England in Feature Films," *Northeast Historic Film*, <http://www.oldfilm.org/content/new-england-feature-films>.

<sup>267</sup> Sam Wood (dir), *Our Town* (USA: United Artists, 1940).

<sup>268</sup> Taylor Hackford (dir), *Dolores Claiborne* (USA: Columbia Pictures, 1995).

<sup>269</sup> Ang Lee (dir), *The Ice Storm* (USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1997).

<sup>270</sup> George Miller (dir), *The Witches of Eastwick* (USA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 1987).

<sup>271</sup> Nicolas Hytner (dir), *The Crucible* (USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1996).

of memory: his feelings regarding the young couple's romance, his son growing up, Richard assaulting Frank, Mary Ann's promiscuous reputation (Natalie in the film), and his wife Ruth's fears and strong objections to the romance.

The short story is ordered chronologically from the point when Matt kidnaps Richard, and continues in present time until the end when he returns home to Ruth. The change in temporal order provides a clear indication of the story's thematic focus: sitting in his car as he waits for Richard to emerge from the bar, a father reflects on the events leading up to his act of revenge. Dubus' story continually correlates Matt's loss and his retribution:

Looking at the back of Strout's head, he thought of Frank's grave; he had not been back to it; but he would go before winter, and its second burial of snow.<sup>281</sup>

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Strout turned around; Matt looked at his lips, his wide jaw, and thought of Frank's doomed and fearful eyes looking up from the couch.<sup>282</sup>

In "Killings," content and form prove to be inseparable: one cannot remove the narrative integration of revenge without eliminating the entire story.

The distinction between the film and the short story's treatment of plot is pivotal in generating their different narratives, but also, in understanding *In the Bedroom's* ending. Arguably, having generated a largely different narrative focus, screenwriters Rob Festinger and Todd Field would have fared better by eliminating the film's revenge plot: without it, *In the Bedroom* bears almost no resemblance to Dubus' story. Unlike "Killings," the film's linear narrative does not allude to revenge until the final act, leading to narrative inconsistencies and the sense of imposed genres and mythologies.

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 210

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 212.

*In the Bedroom*, as is clear even from the title, has different ambitions to its literary predecessor. Aside from concentrating less meditatively on bereavement, "Killings" depicts Matt and Ruth in a shared grief: "And at night in bed she would hold Matt and cry, or sometimes she was silent and Matt would touch her tightened arm, her clenched fist."<sup>283</sup> The month that the short story leaves out is supposedly when Matt and Ruth mourn their loss: Festinger and Field not only expand on this period, but create a far more disturbing relationship between husband and wife. The film's depiction of an unspeakable, endless grief not only engages with issues of trauma and representation, but creates an inner violence which is far more suspenseful than Matt's revenge.

### **A denial of mourning and memory**

The first act of *In the Bedroom* ends when Matt goes to inform Ruth of Frank's murder. He paces the passage outside the hall where she conducts a choir. The scene fades to black, and then cuts to the funeral. Many traumatic loss narratives, such as *La Stanza del Figlio*, *Après Lui* and *21 Grams*, omit a visual representation of the death scene; however, Field's film depicts a graphic shot of Frank's mutilated face after he is shot. The difference between Field's film and those mentioned above is that Frank's death is not an accident, but the result of intentional violence. The brief, yet shocking image of his bloodied face and lifeless eyes serves as an engagement with a pathological aggression. The film proceeds to Matt answering Natalie's frantic phone call, to a long shot of Matt pacing in the passage and then to the funeral, marking the beginning of the film's second act. The narrative actively disengages from a depiction of Matt and Ruth's discovery of their son's death, conveying the incomprehensibility of their loss; however, through

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 206.

showing the spectator the brief, yet brutal image of death, the narrative involves the spectator in its concentration on violence and revenge.

The film engages with many visual and temporal ellipses, the first pronounced example occurring early in the narrative: Field omits depiction of Frank and Richard's first physical fight. Natalie and Frank talk happily in her garden one night, but their conversation is cut short by Richard's arrival, marked only by the ominous, bright headlights of his car. The next one sees of Frank is Matt tending to his cut and bruised face. Through the ellipsis, the narrative creates suspense and subtly warns of a disaster. As Taylor writes, the suppressed gap is "not coincidental, but will prove to be systematic, regarding emotions kept under tabs and finally serving a rationale of vindication."<sup>284</sup>

The cinematography of the film, stylistically engaging with an aesthetic of realism reminiscent of *cinéma vérité*, also corresponds to the theme of repressed emotions. Cinematographer Antonio Calvache perfects a subdued colour scale throughout the film, not just in the dominance of bright, naturally-lit outdoor shots, but even in the capturing of the bland, earthy tones of the characters' clothing.<sup>285</sup> The notably static camera appears to stand waiting, in doorways or behind window panes, for the characters to pass before it. The long takes and sparse editing suggest a lack of premeditation, as many of the scenes in the first act meander along without any clear dramatic path, and are cut before any action or resolve. This stylistic engagement with an apparent blankness not only creates the sense of trouble lurking beneath the surface, but cinematically expresses the couple's interior state of self-denial.

The funeral scene comprises a succession of quick images: Ruth's teary eyes, Matt's hand covering hers, the priest speaking, the crowd of mourners, and then Natalie,

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<sup>284</sup> Taylor, "Trauma and violence; Different sensibilities: Nanni Moretti's *The Son's Room* and Todd Field's *In the Bedroom*," 42.

<sup>285</sup> Richard A. Blake, "Coping," *America* 186, no. 7 (2002). He writes that Calvache's depiction of Camden "glows like a postcard in fog-filtered summer light" (24).

hovering some tens of metres away from the event. The next few shots of friends at the Fowler's house, Ruth sleeping, and Matt exploring Frank's untouched room, are all punctuated with a fade to black. Starkly different from the straight cuts of the first act, the fade to black conveys a sense of deep melancholy as Matt and Ruth attempt to deny their memory and pain. Significantly, the stylistic choice also implies a continual resistance of form, corresponding to questions of trauma and representation. By refusing the spectator a direct visual depiction of the couple's grief, the film consciously conveys the inexpressibility of traumatic experience.

While traditionally implying the passing of time, Richard Blake observes that *In the Bedroom's* use of the fade to black functions to reverse the cliché that time heals: "For Ruth and Matt the passage of time does not heal, despite the cliché; time merely allows the wounds to fester."<sup>286</sup> Shrouded in blankets day after day, Ruth sits on the couch, chain smoking and watching daytime television. Matt finds her sitting in front of the television one night; the next day, when he arrives home from work, she appears not to have moved. The claustrophobic interiors of the Fowler's home, most evidently depicted with the motif of mirrors, create the impression of being trapped by grief. On a drive back home from Willis and Katie's cabin, the camera focuses solely on Ruth lying asleep in the backseat, whilst offscreen, everyone discusses a young man's recent suicide.

The depiction of Ruth's grief bears resemblance to Freud's perception of the "repetition-compulsion" in trauma victims, and her conscious avoidance of confronting her loss. Mourning, Judith Herman writes, is such a difficult process that a "*resistance to mourning* is probably the most common cause of stagnation."<sup>287</sup> Ruth absorbs herself in repetitive mindless activities, effectively numbing her senses, but also appearing to prolong her state of traumatic distress. The denial of her loss forms the antithesis of

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid. Presumably, the cliché that Blake refers to is "Time heals all wounds" (24).

<sup>287</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 189.

what Tammy Clewell refers to as the mourner's "hyperremembering"<sup>288</sup> of their loved one: Ruth never appears to interact with her son's memory. The lack of any photographs of Frank throughout the narrative also gives the impression that she refuses to memorialise her son.<sup>289</sup>

The linear narrative of *In the Bedroom* affords only one, quick flashback of Frank: approximately five-years old, he climbs a tree in the Fowler's garden. Significantly, the reminiscence is from Matt's perspective; he appears to engage with his son's memory more than Ruth. One of the film's most poignant renderings of loss is of Matt in his son's untouched room shortly after the funeral: he touches a pillow, still with the indentation of Frank's head; he finds a blue shard of glass, with a memory attached, and starts to cry. Like Ruth, however, Matt also struggles with sleeplessness, and repeatedly tends to the garden, even taking down the swing-set (meant for Natalie's sons) in the middle of the night. Neither finds comfort from their friends. Matt actively avoids discussing his loss with Willis, and it is Ruth who ironically ends up comforting Katie when she thoughtlessly rambles on about her grandchildren. There are few traumatic loss narratives that promote traditional forms of consolation, but *In the Bedroom* resolutely denies its characters any form of relief. When Ruth is confronted by the local priest, his words fall on deaf ears: if anything, his story of a mother losing one of her four children merely reiterates to Ruth her aloneness.

While Matt and Ruth's coping methods are not distinctly polarised like the couples of other traumatic loss narratives, their suffering is never part of a shared experience.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Clewell, "Mourning beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss," 44.

<sup>289</sup> In *The Door in the Floor*, Marion's over-memorialisation contrasts Ruth's denial, as she obsessively adorns the walls of her house with photographs of her deceased sons; however, this extreme proves no less destructive.

<sup>290</sup> In films such as *Rabbit Hole*, *Ordinary People*, *The Door in the Floor* and *Lantana*, couples' different ways of dealing with loss invoke the interplay between Freud's mourning and melancholia, and the different reactions to grief. In most of the narratives, the couples go their separate ways, unable to reconcile their ways of grieving. In *Rabbit Hole*, Becca gives her dead son's clothes to charity, removes his paintings from

The Fowlers visit their lawyer, shouting and arguing with him as they express their astonishment at the crumbling criminal case against Richard. Field then pointedly cuts to the couple's silent drive home together. While Matt seems more engaged in "working-through" than "acting-out" his trauma, he actively avoids his wife, unable to communicate with her, and their relationship becomes largely defined by silences. The words they do utter to each other never concern Frank, or their sense of loss, and function rather as insincere pleasantries. In this sense, the film contextualises traumatic grief as part of a post-structuralist approach that views trauma as an aporia. The film's fades to black, long takes, immobile camera, as well as the continual "dead air" on the soundtrack, imply a paralysing experience. Both intrusive and inexpressible, *In the Bedroom's* manifestations of grief are reminiscent of Pierre Janet's description of traumatic memory as "wordless and static."<sup>291</sup>

Ruth explains her grief to the local priest, "It comes in waves, and then nothing. No sound, but so loud." While the Fowler's mourning is defined by silence, it is also defined by an inner violence. Rand Richards Cooper writes that the real insight of *In the Bedroom* is

to reveal how the routine complexities of family life are criminalized by grief: how the usual ways in which we construe and position one another for our own emotional needs...are remorselessly pushed to the surface and made the explicit material of charge and countercharge.<sup>292</sup>

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the refrigerator, and even gives his dog away. Then she attempts to sell their house. Howie, who finds solace in group therapy and in watching video footage of their son, says to her, "It's like you're trying to get rid of any evidence he was ever here." In *The Door in the Floor*, Marion obsessively tries to keep a sense of her sons alive while her husband, Ted, appears to find comfort in his writing, and other women. Marion is so scarred by her loss that she eventually leaves Ted and her new child, Ruth, whom she admits was meant to function as a replacement for her sons. Though in different and less malicious ways than Beth from *Ordinary People*, Marion has also buried her capacity to love. Beth and Calvin from *Ordinary People* also eventually part ways: Beth wants to deny the existence of her dead son, while Calvin wants to foster a sense of openness and healing. In *Lantana*, psychologist Valerie writes a book about her murdered daughter, whilst husband John, who is far more private, resents her for publicising their loss.

<sup>291</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 175.

<sup>292</sup> Cooper, "Who's afraid of Sissy Spacek?" 20.

The relationship conflicts in the first act, which may have been inconsequential if Frank were still alive, are turned into harsh accusations in the film's climactic scene. Ruth has an especially difficult day: Natalie unexpectedly visits her at school, and then she runs into Richard at the supermarket. When Ruth arrives home, the angry insinuations and repressed silences of the past few months erupt as she and Matt blame each other for Frank's death. Their accusations are, as Cooper states, "terrible distortions."<sup>293</sup> Neither parent, no matter Matt's desire for Natalie or Ruth's overprotective nature, is responsible for what happened. Eventually they both apologise, and the camera frames them in an intimate two-shot as they discuss their pent-up feelings. At this point in the film, the narrative appears to have moved from the incomprehensible to the curative: Matt and Ruth's apparent catharsis favours not only a working-through of trauma, but locates itself in the psychoanalytic ideal of the 'talking cure,' which views talking freely about one's thoughts and anxieties as an essential part of traumatic recovery.<sup>294</sup>

As Herman writes, traumatic memory is "a series of still snapshots or a silent movie; the role of therapy is to provide the music and the words."<sup>295</sup> The film's final act, however, insists that talking cannot console or relieve the couple's grief. *In the Bedroom's* use of music also denies the psychoanalytic ideal of therapeutic art. Taylor writes that the violent incidents in the narrative are continually associated with gaps that suppress; however, they are closely connected to the timing of the school choir scenes. The initial assault on Frank, as well as his murder, both appear to occur when Ruth is with the choir: she arrives home from practice to find her son beaten, and later, Matt informs her

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Lichtenberg, *The Talking Cure: A Descriptive Guide to Psychoanalysis*, ix. Josef Breuer, a physician who worked in collaboration with Freud on hysteria studies, observed that improvements in his patients occurred when he let them talk freely about their thoughts, anxieties and desires.

<sup>295</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 175.

of Frank's death after she concludes a rehearsal. At the Labour Day concert, the choir's singing forewarns of another looming threat: Matt's revenge. The scene occurs after Matt and Willis implicitly plan Richard's murder. In Willis' basement, the two men discuss the poor justice system, and the possibility of Richard getting away with Frank's murder. "It'd break my heart, Matt. It would," Willis says, "But, you ever just think about moving away?" Matt responds, "Yeah, we have. It wouldn't matter." The film cuts to the Labour Day concert, and the Balkan folk music sounds as Natalie once described it: "haunting."

While the continual ellipses function to create suspense, and on one level aspire to the conventions of a revenge drama, they also highlight the film's engagement with a traumatic temporality. Drawing on Freudian principles, Caruth explains that trauma is caused primarily by its unexpected nature: "The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience."<sup>296</sup> *In the Bedroom* stresses the element of surprise in its treatment of many of its traumatic moments by essentially excluding them from visual representation. Caruth continues to explain that because the mind has missed the original event, the experienced repetition of the trauma is inevitable.<sup>297</sup> The narrative's suppression of its traumatic moments – Frank's first fight with Richard, Matt and Ruth's discovery of their son's death, Matt's revenge plotting – imply a sense of denial and detachment, but as Herman writes, "traumatic events ultimately refuse to be put away. At some point the memory of the trauma is bound to return, demanding attention."<sup>298</sup> Matt and Ruth's confrontation, occurring after a long period of repression, is initially configured as the

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<sup>296</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 62.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>298</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 174.

belated return of the traumatic event. The film's revenge denouement, however, serves to perpetuate trauma, denying any possibility for relief or recovery.

In focusing on a disavowal of mourning, the film's traumatic consciousness is not unique. The narratives of *Ordinary People*, *Trois Couleurs: Bleu*, *Après Lui* and *Il y a longtemps que je t'aime*, all focus heavily on a denial of loss. *In the Bedroom*'s narrative and stylistic treatment of its themes, however, is rare to trauma cinema in that it mostly resists "non-linearity, fragmentation, nonsynchronous sound, repetition, rapid editing and strange angles,"<sup>299</sup> and many of the conventions by which Janet Walker characterises films of this genre. The film's depiction of an incomprehensible trauma is marked by a quiet stillness: the subdued colour scale, static camera movements and long takes give the impression that life continues as per normal. The surface image of the Fowler's grief, however, is in continual tension with the emotional violence that lies beneath. Marked essentially by the couple's wordless and detached interactions, and an almost complete lack of engagement with the memory of their lost son, the narrative shows how easily the denial of grief can be turned into anger and aggression.

While revenge is aptly handled in Dubus' short story, the filmic appropriation is problematic. Revenge as narrative closure seems offered as a contribution to the popular cinematic myth of vigilantism. Succumbing to generic formula, it acts as a disruptive force, clouding the nuances of grief and bereavement with which *In the Bedroom* previously engages, ultimately trivialising a traumatised subjectivity.

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<sup>299</sup> Walker, "Trauma Cinema: false memories and true experience," 214.

## “Nothing is what it seems”: repressed trauma and uncanny repetition in *Don't Look Now*

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Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* is recognised as a Gothic thriller, a black comedy, and an example of an excellent literary adaptation.<sup>300</sup> The film, based on Daphne du Maurier's short story, follows John and Laura Baxter, a recently bereaved couple who travel to Venice, where they encounter a clairvoyant who claims to have 'seen' their lost daughter. Despite the premise, the narrative does not appear to focus on the psychological elements of the Baxter's trauma, but on the bizarre, supernaturally-charged events. Rarely is the film examined by critics as a traumatic loss narrative, which testifies to the protagonist's denial, and in the way the narrative keeps his traumatic state so well hidden. As John Izod writes:

[U]tterly unconscious of what he is doing, a bereaved father searches among the living for traces of his dead daughter. It is a curious search, to be sure. For not only cannot John Baxter admit to himself that he is engaged upon it, but through most of the film there is little outward evidence of pursuit.<sup>301</sup>

Through an examination of the film's uncanny, repetitious imagery, I will explore Izod's claims, focusing on how the film creates a narrative of unconscious desire. By repeatedly invoking shapes, colours and gestures reminiscent of Christine's death, the film not only connects its seemingly disparate shots, but invokes a traumatic temporality that sees John continually confronted with his loss. James Palmer and Michael Riley note, however, that Roeg's film "repeatedly 'makes strange' its own codes of association, undermining

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<sup>300</sup> Mark Sanderson, *Don't Look Now* (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 10.

<sup>301</sup> John Izod, *The Films of Nicolas Roeg: Myth and Mind* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 67.

one's confidence in interpretation."<sup>302</sup> The film's continual and conscious disruption of temporal and spatial narrative logic creates a sense of dislocation that reflects not only the bewildering elements of the supernatural, but the way in which traumatic loss suspends one from the familiar, assumptive world.

The film's ending, Palmer and Riley write, keeps with the conventions of a contemporary Gothic thriller in that the "solution to the mystery explodes into another, deeper mystery."<sup>303</sup> *Don't Look Now* concludes after a red-cloaked dwarf, responsible for a spree of murders in the area, kills John Baxter. The film appears to merge death and narrative closure, yet raises questions regarding the correlation between the physical and supernatural worlds, associating trauma with the inexplicable. I offer a reading of the film's ending where the narrative retroactively takes shape, realising the film as a story of the nuances of parental loss: John's desire to protect the mysteriously hooded figure, whom he mistakenly believes to be a child, expresses his uncharted grief and his longing for a reunion with his daughter.

## Exploring the Gothic: split selves, claustrophobic streets and dreadful desires

Daphne du Maurier is known for her development of the modern Gothic text, and more specifically, the Gothic romance, typified by her novel *Rebecca*.<sup>304</sup> Richard Kelly argues that du Maurier's works, often perceived as generic thrillers or mysteries, delve into more profound themes:

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<sup>302</sup> James Palmer and Michael Riley, "Seeing, Believing, and "Knowing" in Narrative Film: *Don't Look Now* Revisited," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (1995): 18.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>304</sup> Richard Kelly, "Daphne du Maurier: An Obituary," (originally appeared in *The Independent*, April 21, 1989), <http://www.dumaurier.org/obituary.html>; Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca* (Oxford, UK: Macmillan Education, 1977 [1938]).

“The Birds” (1963) and “Don’t Look Now” (1973) established the twentieth-century sense of dislocation. The accepted order of things suddenly, and for no apparent reason, is upset. The great chain of being breaks and people find themselves battling for their lives against creatures they always assumed inferior to themselves: birds and children.<sup>305</sup>

Kelly highlights “Don’t Look Now” as a story that creates a sense of the inexplicably strange. The film adaptation emphasises the tragedy of sudden and random accidents even more by changing the cause of Christine’s death from meningitis to drowning, and later in the story, Johnnie, the Baxter’s older son who remains in an English boarding school when his parents travel to Italy, no longer suffers from appendicitis, but is hurt in a fire practice. Beverle Houston and Marsha Kinder write that the film’s depiction of “accidents make[s] the universe more dangerous and suggest[s] a pattern of events that is inexorable, but only partially perceptible.”<sup>306</sup> The significance of dangerous chance events – also seen in the film when John falls from the church scaffolding – creates an engagement with a seemingly unknowable order of cause and effect.

Aside from the film’s fuller emphasis on accidents, the narrative remains largely faithful to the short story. When John and Laura meet the elderly twins, one of whom claims to be a psychic and to have seen Christine in a vision, John, ever the realist, believes them to be frauds, but Laura is elated: “I’m happy, so happy that I can’t put the feeling into words.”<sup>307</sup> All her sadness from the last few weeks, she says to John, has now “lifted.”<sup>308</sup> They come across the twins again, and the sisters warn the couple to leave

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> Marsha Kinder and Beverle Houston, “Seeing is Believing: *The Exorcist* and *Don’t Look Now*,” in *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 55.

<sup>307</sup> Daphne du Maurier, *Don’t Look Now and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1973), 12.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

Venice, and, significantly, that John also possesses 'second sight.' John is angered, but then later that evening the couple receives word that Johnnie has been taken ill. Laura leaves on the next flight, and John plans to follow her the next day. Believing Laura to be on her way back to England, John is surprised to see her on the vaporetto with the sisters. He contacts the police, worried that Laura has been kidnapped. It turns out, however, that his wife is fine, in England with a recovering Johnnie. The sisters later explain John's sighting as psychic transference: possibly, because Laura was thinking of the sisters at that exact moment, John envisioned them all together.<sup>309</sup> As John leaves them, Heather, the psychic of the sisters, starts to convulse: "the child... I can see the child..." she says. John, confused, begins to walk back to his hotel, and spots a pixie-hooded figure, whom he believes to be a little girl. Having seen her the night before, seemingly running away from someone, John believes her to be in danger from the town's serial killer. He follows her into a house, offering his help:

The child struggled to her feet and stood before him, the pixie-hood falling from her head on to the floor. He stared at her, incredulity turning to horror, to fear. It was not a child at all but a thick-set woman dwarf...<sup>310</sup>

It is this "creature" that is responsible for the recent spree of murders in Venice. She kills John, and he realises as he dies that his vision of Laura and the two sisters is a vision from the future, of his own funeral.

The story is told in the third-person, all action and characters focalised through John. The narrative opens at a restaurant, the couple playing a comical game and conjuring up "ridiculous fantasies"<sup>311</sup> about the people at nearby tables. It soon becomes apparent, however, that this game is John's desperate attempt to keep his wife happy:

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 8.

“...then everything will fall into place, life will become as it was before, the wound will heal, she will forget.”<sup>312</sup> Later, he remembers consulting a doctor about his wife’s grief: “‘She’ll get over it,’ the doctor said. ‘They all get over it, in time.’”<sup>313</sup> The story emphasises that John sees Laura’s loss as completely separate from his own experience, which is one of the many indications of repressed grief. His profound sense of denial pierces the surface of the story most powerfully at its end. Gina Wisker explains that John’s desire to see the ‘little girl’ safe is “drawn out of John’s sense of loss, inability to protect, sense of the endangered existence of his young daughter...a protective paternalism which is his undoing.”<sup>314</sup> As Leslie Dick writes about the film:

While his death is scary, a scene of unusual and extreme violence, it’s also very moving, partly because he approaches the apparent child with such tenderness. It may not be his own lost girl, but it is a little girl in red, and he has to reach her.<sup>315</sup>

One of the final lines of du Maurier’s story reads “...he stumbled and fell, the sticky mess covering *his protecting hands*.”<sup>316</sup> These hands, the author makes clear, belong to a grieving father whose desire it is to save his child from harm.

John’s guilt regarding his daughter’s death is underlined when Laura says, in both the short story and film, that he was the one who let her play out by the pond and that Christine was contacting them now to “forgive.” Freud’s dream of the burning child, explored in “The Interpretation of Dreams,” has particular relevance to John’s

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>314</sup> Gina Wisker, “Don’t Look Now! The compulsions and revelations of Daphne du Maurier’s horror writing,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 8, no. 1 (1999): 28.

<sup>315</sup> Leslie Dick, “Desperation and Desire,” *Sight and Sound* 7, no. 1 (1997), [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:iipa:&srft\\_dat=xri:iipa:article:citation:iipa00352907](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:iipa:&srft_dat=xri:iipa:article:citation:iipa00352907).

<sup>316</sup> du Maurier, *Don’t Look Now and Other Stories*, 55, my emphasis.

traumatised state, not just because of the similarity of child loss, but because of the way the dream has given rise to an exploration of the links between the unconscious, wish-fulfilment, and guilt. The dream, as recounted by Freud, is as follows:

A father had been watching day and night beside the sick-bed of his child. After the child died, he retired to rest in an adjoining room, but left the door ajar so that he could look from his room into the next, where the child's body lay surrounded by tall candles. An old man, who had been installed as a watcher, sat beside the body, murmuring prayers. After sleeping for a few hours the father dreamed that *the child was standing by his bed, clasping his arm and crying reproachfully: "Father, don't you see that I am burning?"* The father woke up and noticed a bright light coming from the adjoining room. Rushing in, he found that the old man had fallen asleep, and the sheets and one arm of the beloved body were burnt by a falling candle.<sup>317</sup>

Freud's logic is that the sleeper incorporates an aspect originating from his external reality, the bright light, into a dream. Eventually, however, the irritation becomes too powerful, and awakens the father. In his early work, Freud interpreted dreams as a corroboration of the pleasure principle, and thus a form of wish fulfilment: the bereaved father, longing to see his child alive again, prolongs the dream for a few moments longer.<sup>318</sup> Cathy Caruth states, in regard to Freud's interpretation:

The dream thus tells the story of a father's grief as the very relation of the psyche to reality: the dream, as a delay, reveals the ineradicable gap between the reality of a death and the desire that cannot overcome it except in the fiction of a dream.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952 [1900]), 340.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>319</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 95.

Slavoj Žižek's understanding of the dream is in direct contrast with Freud's initial reading. Drawing from Lacan's interpretation of the dream as an encounter with the Real, Žižek argues that the dream's manifestation of the boy reproachfully gripping his father's arm and crying, "Father, don't you see that I am burning?" is far more dreadful than his reality, his waking world, which essentially reverses Freud's theory of the dream as a form of pleasure. He writes that the father thus "escapes into so-called reality to be able to continue to sleep, to maintain his blindness, to elude awakening to the real of his desire."<sup>320</sup> The sleeper is awakened because he avoids confronting his inherent trauma, which according to Žižek, testifies to a tortured guilt.<sup>321</sup>

Approximately twenty years after "The Interpretation of Dreams," Freud developed his concept of the death drive, which changed his conception of dreams: he now contextualised dreams as part of the 'repetition-compulsion,' where the sleeper re-experiences a version of the original traumatic event.<sup>322</sup> Freud also observes that traumatic re-experience is not a conscious process: "But I am not aware that the patients suffering from traumatic neuroses are much occupied in waking life with the recollection of what happened to them. They, perhaps, *strive rather not to think of it.*"<sup>323</sup> The father's dream is thus not an escape, as Freud originally conceived, but a traumatic re-encounter with his loss. In conjunction with a Gothic register, *Don't Look Now* develops an engagement with the repetitions of traumatic experience, and significantly, expresses John Baxter's inability to escape his unrealised desires.

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<sup>320</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 45.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.; For a fuller interpretation of Freud's dream of the burning child see Emma Wilson, "Introduction," in *Cinema's Missing Children* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003): 4 – 8.

<sup>322</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 641.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., my emphasis.

Baxter's repressed feelings are transferred onto the monstrous Other, a Gothic trope that is used to "interrogate the uncanny nature of identity itself,"<sup>324</sup> or in this case, the protagonist's traumatised subjectivity. Freud's essay on "The Uncanny" explores the concept of the strangely familiar, of how the uncanny can simultaneously disturb and attract.<sup>325</sup> By focusing on "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar,"<sup>326</sup> Freud's theories gloss the Gothic engagement with the doubled, grotesque body and define Baxter's fascination with the murderous dwarf, which he believes to be a child.<sup>327</sup>

Moreover, as Wisker explains, Gothic writing concentrates

on fear and dreadful desire, on split selves, the rejected Other, and dangerous boundaries, divisions and spaces: castles, dungeons, corridors, vaults, claustrophobic streets, grand houses, and the domestic family home....<sup>328</sup>

The short story and film's representation of Venice invokes a Gothic space. As Horner and Zlosnik write, classic Gothic tales often use Italian cities as a site for "the exotic, the sinister and the transgressive."<sup>329</sup> Surrounded by water and most of the city in ruin, Venice may be used to suggest despair. As John states in the short story, "Venice is

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<sup>324</sup> Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 186.

<sup>325</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>, 1 – 2.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> Wisker, "Don't Look Now! The compulsions and revelations of Daphne du Maurier's horror writing," 21.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., 22

<sup>329</sup> Horner and Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination*, 174; Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995 [1912]) and Henry James' *The Wings of the Dove* (London: Penguin, 2008 [1902]), both of which have been adapted for cinema, use Venice as an interaction between death and unfulfilled desires. While Ian McEwan's novel *The Comfort of Strangers* (London: Vintage, 1997 [1981]) is set in an unnamed European city, Paul Schrader's film adaptation locates the city as Venice. Similarly to Roeg's film, *The Comfort of Strangers* (USA: Madacy Entertainment Group, 1990) sees a British couple, Colin and Mary, vacationing in the Italian city. The couple begin a peculiar relationship with one of the locals, Robert, and his wife, Caroline, who eventually kill Colin in what appears to be a sadistic sexual act.

sinking. The whole city is dying.”<sup>330</sup> With regard to the sinister, the film sees its protagonists being continually watched by the local people, which Mark Sanderson explains is a Gothic convention: “...the eyes of a portrait (actually belonging, say, to the misbegotten manservant standing behind it) follow you about the room; the head of a statue turns after you.”<sup>331</sup> John is continually stared at by the church workmen, by mysterious figures behind windows, and by a policeman who shadows him; Laura, too, is eerily watched by the bathroom attendant while they are out for lunch.<sup>332</sup> Most significant are the psychic’s eyes, which the film continually shows in an extreme close-up: Heather’s vision is depicted as exceptional because it transcends the physical world. Even the more minor characters in the film seem to be possessed by the forces of the supernatural: the bishop awakens as John is killed, and the police officer sees the sisters walking past his window soon after he sees their sketches.<sup>333</sup> The city is marked by an inexplicable, mysterious force that remains unknown to the protagonists, and suggests an impending danger.

*Don’t Look Now* also sees John and Laura confused by the layout of their physical surroundings. Venice acts as a claustrophobic site of entrapment, where the couple repeatedly gets lost in the city, its confusing labyrinth of alleyways and bridges creating the impression of a maze.<sup>334</sup> Described by John as a “bright façade,”<sup>335</sup> the city functions

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<sup>330</sup> du Maurier, *Don’t Look Now and Other Stories*, 26.

<sup>331</sup> Sanderson, *Don’t Look Now*, 29.

<sup>332</sup> *The Comfort of Strangers* includes an intensely uncomfortably restaurant scene, where the guests eerily peer at the couple for no apparent reason.

<sup>333</sup> Kinder and Houston, “Seeing is Believing: *The Exorcist* and *Don’t Look Now*,” 56 - 57.

<sup>334</sup> Michael Winterbottom’s *Genova* (UK: Metrodome Distribution, 2008) sees a bereaved American family move to Italy. The youngest daughter, Mary, is continually haunted by images of her dead mother, and spends most of the narrative in a dazed search for her. When the young girl thinks she sees her mother across the street, she nearly causes a fatal car accident. The ghostly image of the deceased ultimately appears to lure Mary into danger, much like John Baxter’s evocation of his lost child. Mary and her older sister, Kelly, continually get lost in the narrow streets of the city, which function as a metaphor for the girls’ gradually explored grief, and their fragmented experience of loss.

as a metaphor for the perplexed mappings of his unconscious mind. Of the repetitive episodes of getting lost, John Izod writes:

...the contents of his [John's] unconscious constellated with the scarlet-clad image of his daughter, irrupt unto his conscious mind. Memory and prescience coincide as he glimpses the other red figure that is eventually to kill him.<sup>336</sup>

The continual exploration of the Venetian streets, Izod argues, implies an interaction between the conscious and unconscious mind. Horner and Zlosnik observe, "As the place of escape from death and self-interrogation, Venice becomes the location of John's confrontation with both."<sup>337</sup> Izod further notes that the film's locale of a city surrounded by water, a motif to which I return later in the chapter, is also a metaphor for the repressed: "Its nature as a medium alien to, but not absolutely impenetrable by humankind makes it a ready surrogate for the unconscious. Those who wish can dip beneath the surface for short periods."<sup>338</sup>

John's work as a restoration artist and architect also becomes significant to the representation of Venice. It is a departure from the short story, where the couple travels to Italy for a vacation, and not because John is commissioned to repair an ancient church. Like the rest of the city, the church also functions as a metaphor for John's engagement with his unconscious mind and, as Michael Dempsey writes, "a multi-faceted emblem of his own soul. Its gutted interior and scarred walls symbolize a dead orthodoxy whose former consolations and mysteries linger in memory, like his daughter."<sup>339</sup> Sanderson concurs, stating that John's work, like his innermost desires, "attempts to

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<sup>335</sup> du Maurier, *Don't Look Now and Other Stories*, 25.

<sup>336</sup> Izod, *The Films of Nicolas Roeg: Myth and Mind*, 21.

<sup>337</sup> Horner and Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination*, 176.

<sup>338</sup> Izod, *The Films of Nicolas Roeg: Myth and Mind*, 74.

<sup>339</sup> Michael Dempsey, "Reviews: *Don't Look Now*," *Film Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1974): 42.

undo the ravages of the past.”<sup>340</sup> John, however, later acknowledges to Laura that he believes the church’s history is not entirely authentic: “I’m restoring a fake.” He unwittingly suggests that, like the decrepit building, he will never be able to recover, or regain his former self. More so, the narrative connections between his inner torment and his contrastingly normal appearance, suggesting his state of denial. The city ultimately functions as a dream-like state of traumatic re-experience for John, as a space where he is forced to explore his repressed desires and the uncanny return of the dead.

### “Beyond the Fragile Geometry of Space”

The film’s introductory sequence details Christine’s death. Its eeriness, difficult to pinpoint when watched for the first time, goes beyond the disturbing event of unexpectedly losing a child. The sequence uses an editing technique that cuts between John and Laura inside their English home and Johnnie and Christine playing outside in a field. The continual rupture of space surpasses the cross-cutting convention of generating suspense, and ultimately serves as a prototype for the film’s engagement with traumatic repetition as well as supernatural sight.

The sequence begins with Johnnie riding his bicycle as Christine, dressed in a bright red mackintosh, plays with a toy action figure and a red and white ball: she appears to be involved in a solitary game of throw and catch. Inside the home, Laura and John sit by the fire after lunch. Laura puzzles over a question Christine asked her: “If the world is round, why is a frozen pond flat?” John examines slides on a projector: pictured is an interior of a church, with a red-hooded figure sitting in one of the pews. As the camera zooms in to focus on the figure, eerie music sounds, and the shot cuts to a reflection of the red-clad Christine in the pond water, as she runs across the bank. John’s sighting of

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<sup>340</sup> Sanderson, *Don’t Look Now*, 47.

the figure seems to put into motion a series of strangely interconnected images and gestures:

1. Johnnie rides his bicycle.
2. Christine steps in a puddle of water.
3. Johnnie rides over a piece of glass, breaking it, and falling from his bicycle.
4. John looks up from the slide he was examining. Laura finds the answer to Christine's question, and John mutters, "Nothing is what it seems." Laura looks around for her cigarettes, flickering her hands in front of her mouth as an encouraging motion for her husband to help her find them.
5. Christine holds her hands in front of her mouth in a similar motion, apparently smiling at something she has seen.
6. Laura continues to look for her cigarettes amidst the couch pillows.
7. The image of a cigarette poised on an ashtray, the smoke billowing upwards.
8. John smiles, amused.
9. Johnnie examines his bicycle wheels as Christine plays across the pond.
10. John finds Laura's cigarettes on the table, and shakes the box to see whether it is empty.
11. Christine walks toward the pond edge, and throws the ball up into the air.
12. John throws the cigarette box to Laura. He curses as a clanging sound is heard, as though he has knocked something over.
13. Christine's ball splashes into the pond.
14. The glass John has knocked over spills water across the projector and the slides. He begins to wipe up the liquid.
15. The ball spirals and floats on the pond surface.
16. Johnnie hunches over his bicycle wheel.
17. John hunches over his slide, inspecting the damage. The red colour from the hooded figure in the pews slowly seeps across the image. John looks up, the expression on his face one of surprise and horror.

18. Johnnie runs across the field.
19. John walks out the room. "What's the matter?" Laura asks, to which he responds, "Nothing."
20. He hurriedly walks from room to room, reaching the back door to the garden.
21. Christine, in slow motion, is submerged in the pond water.

The continual use of graphic matches to connect the parents and children creates both a unification and disruption of the family space: Laura and Christine's similar motion of placing their hand in front of their mouth; Johnnie and his father's hunching; Christine throwing her ball as John throws Laura her pack of cigarettes; the ball falls into the pond as John spills his glass of water. Mark Sanderson explains that the opening sequence also "enables Roeg to set up the correspondence between the little girl and the dwarf straightaway....and to ensure that the colour red is immediately associated with danger and death."<sup>341</sup> The most vivid graphic match is certainly Christine in her red mac juxtaposed with the mysterious hooded figure sitting in the church pew. When water spills onto the slide, the figure appears to bleed, almost as though it, too, has been injured. As Sanderson states above, the association initiates the narrative's ongoing engagement with the colour red, but at the same time, marks the association as ambiguous.

The eeriness of the opening sequence emerges from the spectator's inability to make connections between the images that would explain the accident. Throughout the narrative, the spectator makes links between the young Christine and the mysteriously hooded figure, depicted in the slide and later, as John's killer; however, their connection is never inscribed into a chain of cause-and-effect in the physical world. Their association suggests a supernatural world order, which is also conveyed in the introductory sequence

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<sup>341</sup> Sanderson, *Don't Look Now*, 10.

through John's second sight. The cross-cutting sequence does not serve solely as a form of building suspense, but as testimony to John's vision: when John looks up from his slide after Johnnie falls off his bicycle (shots 3 – 4), his expression is startled, suggesting that he has 'seen' his son's accident. From the moment where the colour red seeps across the slide (shots 17 through 21), John's psychic awareness is emphasised. As Heather Love writes, Christine's "dead body is a double of the stain that spreads on the slide indoors,"<sup>342</sup> but more significant is that John appears to 'see' her dead body by looking at the stain. The repetitive graphic matches thus function as an expression of John's second sight, and his mind's ability to make connections that transcend the physical. The editing is dictated by point-of-view shots and character subjectivity, and not, as it initially appears, a conventionally objective cross-cutting technique.

As John runs outside, his son calling out for him, the film cuts back and forth between Laura sitting obliviously on the couch, and John plunging beneath the murky water. Laura picks up the ruined slide and looks at it, but then throws it aside. As John plunges under the water, the film cuts back to the image of the slide: the red stain spreads even more, and the shot dissolves to a series of slow-motion jump cuts of John lifting Christine's body from the water. Michael Dempsey writes that the use of "slow motion lengthens John's frantic rescue attempt and his animal howls almost unbearably, capturing the way that shocking, unexpected anguish seems to stop the flow of time."<sup>343</sup> The sequence invokes a traumatic temporality, not just in the way that time appears to freeze, but in the way it becomes repetitive and fragmented. Dempsey also compares the representation of time to a later scene in the film, when John falls from the church scaffolding. While he examines a piece of mosaic, suspended by an apparatus far above the ground, a plank of wood falls from near the ceiling. It is several seconds, however,

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<sup>342</sup> Heather Love, "Living (and Dying) in the Other," *Grey Room* 24 (2006): 20.

<sup>343</sup> Dempsey, "Reviews: *Don't Look Now*," 40.

before it hits John: time, once more, seems to stand still. Roeg confirms that the scene was edited so that the plank appears to take longer than expected to strike John, and prolongs time.<sup>344</sup> John's comical and long-winded rescue, however, functions similarly to Johnnie's bicycle breaking, or John spilling water: it is only a precursor to the real tragedy.

The drowning scene continues as John pulls Christine's lifeless body onto the bank, his attempts to resuscitate her futile. Johnnie watches as his father stumbles and slips with the lifeless, red body in his arms. Laura then casually walks outside, and screams in horror when she catches sight of everything, her hand flying to her mouth in a similar motion to earlier in the sequence. Only lasting a second, the sound of her scream morphs into the sound of a power drill: the film abruptly cuts to Venice, where a workman is drilling into a wall. John stands above him, speaking Italian. The sudden sense of dislocation, from one time and space to another, suggests the shock impact of traumatic distress. The film omits the immediate after-effects of the family's loss, such as Christine's funeral and the journey to Italy. The ellipsis functions not just to express the ineffable effects of loss, but also indicates a form of disavowal; as Dempsey writes, "Months later, in Italy, they are outwardly reconciled but inwardly drained."<sup>345</sup>

In the drowning scene, Laura throws a slide down next to a book entitled "Beyond the Fragile Geometry of Space," which provides a metaphor for many instances in the film. By creating a sense of simultaneous dislocation and unification of the family space, the introductory sequence represents how easily and inexplicably a sense of order can be disrupted. Christine's red-clad figure, which mirrors the outline of the red stain, also "vaguely resembles the shape of a foetus," Leslie Dick writes, "as if life and death were

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<sup>344</sup> Tom Milne and Penelope Houston, "Don't Look Now: an interview with Nicolas Roeg," *Sight and Sound* 43, no. 1 (1973/4): 5.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

encompassed within this form.”<sup>346</sup> In many ways, *Don't Look Now* is about the dangerous, ambiguous boundaries between life and death, and as Love writes, the ways “loss can disrupt distinctions between the normal and the pathological through its material effects, its tendency to mark those it touches.”<sup>347</sup> The complex layout of the city not only serves to cause confusion and despair, but also functions as a reminder of the fragility of space and time. More than this, the film attempts to disrupt the spectator’s reliance on a cinematic space and time, challenging conventional narrative logic with one that has a traumatic and supernatural engagement.

### A repetitive seeing

The film’s next encounter with ‘second sight’ after the drowning sequence occurs shortly after John and Laura first meet the sisters, Heather and Wendy. John sits at the table and thinks back to leaving England: rain pours down, and Laura appears distraught as the car pulls away from their home. Instead of the conventional cut back to John’s face, the film cuts to Heather’s smiling face, implying that she, too, has ‘seen’ John’s memory. In the bathroom, the mirrors create double reflections of Laura and Wendy. Heather smiles, her image tripled in reflection. When Wendy explains to Laura that her sister is blind, the camera cuts to a close-up of Heather’s face while Laura, offscreen, says “I see.” Later, at the hospital after her fainting spell, Laura is frustrated that John does not seem to trust Heather’s vision of Christine, but he eventually assures her, “I do believe you. Seeing is believing.” John appears to place his faith in the logic of the physical world, but simultaneously undermines his previous statement in the introductory sequence: “Nothing is what it seems.” It is possible that the ‘seeing’ that John refers to when he

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<sup>346</sup> Dick, “Desperation and Desire.”

<sup>347</sup> Love, “Living (and Dying) in the Other,” 21.

assures Laura in the hospital corresponds to the recent image of Heather's eyes, and her second sight. The film thus consciously complicates what it means by 'seeing,' making distinctions between the physical and psychical world, but significantly, deeming the physical world an unreliable and partial representation.

The film's most apparent engagement with psychic vision, however, occurs when John sees Laura and the sisters on a vaporetto, when he believes Laura to be on her way to England. Significantly, however, the inherent subjectivity of the sequence is not realised until later in the narrative, as it is only the film's denouement that reveals John is witnessing an event from the future: his own funeral. The apparently seamless stitching of disparate time frames reflects the ambiguity of the relationship between worlds, and as Dempsey argues, an editing style that embraces disorientation: while Eisensteinian montage dictates that A (thesis) plus B (antithesis) equals C (synthesis), with Roeg, "A plus B does not necessarily equal C; it may equal D or Q or nothing, and plus may be minus."<sup>348</sup> Richard Armstrong similarly argues that the sequence's temporally disrupted shots are "prompting us to think of time not as linear but as a sort of palimpsest in which moments of subjectivity and objectivity are lain one on top of the other."<sup>349</sup> The narrative's structural and thematic engagement with the supernatural also implicates the spectator and the cinematic experience of seeing; as Palmer and Riley argue: "*Don't Look Now* suggests that the physical world can mislead and, by extension, that the encoding of ways of seeing and interpreting a world presented in narrative film can also be called into question."<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Dempsey, "Reviews: *Don't Look Now*," 41.

<sup>349</sup> Richard Armstrong, "Gilles Deleuze," *Metro Magazine* 160, March 1, 2009, 98.

<sup>350</sup> Palmer and Riley, "Seeing, Believing, and "Knowing" in Narrative Film: *Don't Look Now* Revisited," 15 – 16.

The narrative's temporal fragmentation, and its relationship to sight, has particular implications for the film's title. The short story's opening line is as follows: "'Don't look now,' John said to his wife, 'but there are a couple of old girls two tables away who are trying to hypnotise me.'"<sup>351</sup> Sanderson believes that the title is about being watched, or staring: "avert your eyes because you may be caught staring or you might see something you would rather not."<sup>352</sup> The title also calls to mind the unreliability of the surface image, but simultaneously, the way the passing of time and the transcendence of the 'now' can potentially generate a different meaning. Wisker writes that the story is defined by continual "deferrals, questionings, denials, misinterpretations, keeping it tightly knit, and us as readers constantly uneasy, misdirected, unsure, certain there is something missed out and misread."<sup>353</sup> Significantly, however, while the film's conclusion does highlight John's traumatised as well as psychic state, it still leaves the spectator in a general position of confusion. Like the film's editing, the title of the film is also intentionally ambiguous, its subject and object never defined.

The narrative transference of traumatic loss onto a Gothic register can be seen in the film's repetitive use of similar shapes, objects, colours and gestures, which also have implications with regard to the structural and thematic engagement with sight. John is not aware of the emphasis on repetition and return; rather, it is the organisation of the visual elements, the narration, which signals to the spectator a traumatised subjectivity, and significantly, repression and denial. Through repetition, symbolism, contrast and metaphor, Roeg tries to find a cinematic expression of interiority, signalling an unrealised trauma that cannot be directly represented. The narrative's motifs include mirrors, reflections, water, the breaking of glass, gargoyles and gestures such as the motion of

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<sup>351</sup> du Maurier, *Don't Look Now and Other Stories*, 7.

<sup>352</sup> Sanderson, *Don't Look Now*, 30.

<sup>353</sup> Wisker, "Don't Look Now! The compulsions and revelations of Daphne du Maurier's horror writing," 26.

Christine throwing her ball, mimicked by the hotel manager waving his razor blade around, and more significantly, the dwarf thrusting her knife. The most vital colour in the film is red: the colour of Christine's mac, as well as the dwarf's cloak, it seeps into the *mise-en-scène*. The suspicious man John encounters in the hotel hallway is wearing a bright red dressing gown; Christine throws a red and white ball; a red candle glows in the bishop's bedroom; John wears a red scarf, and finally, blood pours from his neck. The motif of water, not only an expression of a Gothic Venice, recurs continually in the narrative: Christine's drowning; John witnessing a body of a drowned woman being pulled from the canal; John fetching a toy doll from its bank. In a significant shot, the image of the watery Venice canal is superimposed over an image of John, his red scarf placed strategically, emblematic of the shape his daughter took when she was in the pond.

The interaction with a traumatic repetition often produces uncanny effects. When Laura is in the hospital, she waves happily and jokingly pulls faces at the children, who are separated by a glass pane. One of the children plays with a toy ball identical to Christine's, except that the red and white colours have been inverted. The ball's presence creates a bittersweet effect, transposed from a traumatic to a seemingly cheerful moment, but it also induces an eerie familiarity for the spectator. Once again, one is confronted with the idea that the Baxters' world is dictated by an unknowable force.

The hospital scene, however, also signifies that Laura's engagement with loss is significantly different to her husband's. The barrier of glass suggests a separation between her and Christine's worlds, but she also exhibits a connection with children that John expressly does not enjoy. The only encounter he has with a 'child' after his daughter's death is a fatal one. Nevertheless, John and Laura, albeit in vitally different ways, undergo narrative journeys which necessitate an exploration of their grief. As Sanderson writes, "In a way, the bereft are victims of a serial killer: they have to learn

over and over again that their loved one is, in John's words, 'dead, dead, dead, dead, dead, dead'.<sup>354</sup> Even the sex scene between the couple references death: crosscutting between the couple passionately making love in bed and getting ready for a night out mirrors the same editing technique used to depict Christine's drowning.<sup>355</sup> As Leslie Dick notes, the film's sex scene is so compelling because it is "difficult sex, sex about loss and impossible desire, and it carries an amazingly heavy emotional burden, the fact of their dead child."<sup>356</sup> The two separate events – of the couple's lovemaking and preparing for a night out – occur consecutively but are presented concurrently, mimicking the introductory sequence's unifying yet disruptive effects, and implying a continuing engagement with traumatic time.

Cathy Caruth describes the traumatic experience as a paradox, where "the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it."<sup>357</sup> John's attempted rescue of Christine offers this "most direct seeing," and simultaneously, his inability to contextualise the trauma, in psychological or supernatural worlds. Caruth writes further: "The repetitions of the traumatic event – unavailable to consciousness, but intruding repeatedly on sight – thus suggests a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known....."<sup>358</sup> For Caruth, trauma exists as an anti-narrative, and cannot be located in an explicable, locatable structure. *Don't Look Now* focalises trauma through a post-structuralist model that

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<sup>354</sup> Sanderson, *Don't Look Now*, 58.

<sup>355</sup> Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (USA: IFC Films, 2009) opens with a comparable cross-cutting sequence that sees the meeting of sex and death: husband and wife have explicit sex while their young daughter climbs out of her cot, and in an act of childish fantasy, jumps out of their second-story window to her death.

<sup>356</sup> Dick, "Desperation and Desire."

<sup>357</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 91

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

destabilises meaning.<sup>359</sup> As Palmer and Riley similarly argue, Roeg's narrative "repeatedly 'makes strange' its own codes of association, undermining one's confidence in interpretation."<sup>360</sup> The spectator is able to make the visual connections between the repetitive imagery, but one is never able to narrativise them into a causal sequence of events.

The film's conclusion testifies to its lack of explanatory closure. As blood pours from John's neck after the dwarf cuts his throat, his life, or at least his narrative life, appears to flash before his eyes in a succession of quick images: Johnnie running in the field, John unveiling the gargoyle statue, Laura's scream, John cradling Christine, her ball in the water, Johnnie in bed, John's accident in the church, Heather's eyes, water, and the stained slide. Finally, John sees the funeral for the second time, and there is an impression, despite the enormous loss, of order and calm: the triangular shape that the women stand in and Laura's serene expression imply a greater understanding of the events. By repeating all the motifs from the narrative, but more importantly, by including moments where John was not present, the film's conclusion suggests that John has finally 'seen' the connection between the physical and psychical world. Roeg, however, denies the spectator a similar comprehension, invoking trauma as an unassimilable structure, and as Wisker writes, expresses how "[t]he undefinable, the nightmarish, the inexplicable and the oddly threatening are in excess of any comfortable explanations and closure."<sup>361</sup>

Palmer and Riley argue that *Don't Look Now* is "decidedly modernist, for it exploits the resources of its form to undermine the conviction that an artwork's meaning(s) is

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<sup>359</sup> See Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," 137.

<sup>360</sup> Palmer and Riley, "Seeing, Believing, and "Knowing" in Narrative Film: *Don't Look Now* Revisited," 18.

<sup>361</sup> Wisker, "*Don't Look Now!* The compulsions and revelations of Daphne du Maurier's horror writing," 29.

entirely knowable.”<sup>362</sup> By concentrating on the theme of sight, and yet continually challenging what the spectator sees, the film experiments with representation and form. The narrative suggests that there are some experiences in life, such as the traumatic and the supernatural, which necessitate a partial understanding. *Don't Look Now* is indeed a narrative about a father unknowingly searching for his dead daughter; while John only confronts his loss directly before his death, the narrative encourages an exploration of the complexities of grief, and seeks to find new ways of representing repressed desires.

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<sup>362</sup> Palmer and Riley, “Seeing, Believing, and “Knowing” in Narrative Film: *Don't Look Now* Revisited,” 18.

## **“Something terrible has happened that’s taken our children away”: an inexplicable loss in *The Sweet Hereafter***

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Atom Egoyan’s *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997) provides opportunities to examine the cinematic depiction of a traumatic temporality that reiterates the conception of trauma as a fragmentation of memory. Based on the Russell Banks novel, the film centres on the story of a school bus accident. Egoyan closely adapts Banks’ story, which is based on a real-life tragedy, but changes the way it is told. The film’s plot experiments with narrative time, continually shifting between four different time frames that focus on the characters from the novel: Mitchell Stephens, a lawyer; Billy Ansel, a father who loses two children in the accident; Nicole Burnell, a teenage survivor of the accident; and Dolores Driscoll, the driver of the school bus.<sup>363</sup> Of particular interest is Nicole’s narrative transformation, and the way in which the bus accident psychodynamically informs her understanding of her other trauma, incest, revealing interesting representations of the belatedness of traumatic experience.

Margerete Landwehr observes the clear narrative division of perspectives, arguing that the events in the first half of the plot are from the perspective of Mitchell Stephen’s “legal narrative,” but that in the final half of the film, Nicole’s “poetic narrative” dominates.<sup>364</sup> The shifting perspectives on the accident centre mainly on questions of accountability and blame, and by concluding with Nicole’s point of view, Landwehr argues, the narrative appears to promote “the redeeming value of art as a source of

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<sup>363</sup> Russell Banks, *The Sweet Hereafter* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991). The novel is divided up into chapters, each of which is told from a different character’s point of view. Nicole’s name is spelt “Nichole.” I will refer to her as “Nicole” in reference to both the novel and Egoyan’s film.

<sup>364</sup> Margerete Johanna Landwehr, “Egoyan’s Film Adaptation of Banks’s *The Sweet Hereafter*: “The Pied Piper” as Trauma Narrative and *Mise-en-abyme*,” *Literature/ Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2008): 215 - 216.

comfort and wisdom in the midst of suffering.”<sup>365</sup> My examination of the narrative offers an alternative reading that aims to contextualise the ending within the film’s engagement with the inexplicable, and the way in which it consciously resists clarifying a cause for the accident. Much of my argument is bound up with an examination of the film’s poetic lyricism, and in particular, its addition of Robert Browning’s “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” (1842), which helps to create both curative and dreadful spaces.

My exploration of the narrative conclusion deploys a wider examination of the film’s frequent use of still images: most notably, the image of baby Zoe, Mitchell Stephens’ sleeping family, and the final image of Nicole. The uncanny, ghostly nature of these images recalls Roland Barthes’ reflections on photography, which I use to inform an appreciation of the nuances of the representation of trauma, loss and time.<sup>366</sup>

## A fragmentation of time

*The Sweet Hereafter’s* narrative shifts between three different time frames: the day leading up to and including the accident, a few weeks after the accident, and the present day. The film’s opening is indicative of its apparently jumbled form, moving between Mitchell Stephens, Nicole and her father, Sam Burnell, and Dolores Driscoll, all inhabiting different periods of time:

1. A couple and a baby lie sleeping in a bed.
2. Mitchell Stephens drives through a car wash. His drug addict daughter, Zoe, calls him from a phone booth and they have a strained conversation: “The problem is I don’t know who I’m talking to right now,” Stephens says, referring to her drug use.

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, transl. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Press, 2000 [1981]), 60.

3. Nicole Burnell rehearses for an upcoming concert at a fairground. Sam Burnell gazes at his daughter. "You're gonna blow everyone away," he says to her.
4. The car wash malfunctions and Stephens must leave his vehicle. He finds his way to the back of the garage, where he comes across a badly wrecked yellow school bus. Mychael Danna's haunting musical score, comprising mainly the Iranian ney flute, plays for the first time.
5. Back at the fairground, Dolores Driscoll hosts a school outing, helping the children from a yellow school bus.
6. Stephens finds his way to a local motel, owned by Risa and Wendell Walker, grieving parents whom he hopes to retain as clients. "I realise this is an awful time, but it's important that we talk," he says. Stephens talks to the Walkers about the people in town. Stephens gets another call from Zoe and excuses himself from the room. On the wall, the calendar is dated 1995.
7. An airplane television states the date as November 29, 1997. Stephens finds himself seated next to one of Zoe's old school friends, Alison, on a flight. She asks after Zoe, but he ignores her question.

The film's introductory sequence, while evoking a fair amount of confusion regarding cause and effect, also hints at an impending tragedy: the contrasting images of the school bus begin a narrative engagement with mourning and dread. The opening image of a sleeping family, which I discuss in detail further on, is left narratively inexplicable until much later in the temporal duration of the film, and forms part of an exploration of trauma, memory and time.

*The Sweet Hereafter* adheres to both "The Hub and Spoke Plot" and "The Jumbled Plot" that Charles Berg outlines.<sup>367</sup> It uses the central event of the bus accident as the 'hub' that connects the different narrative threads; simultaneously, however, its fragmented temporality implies a synchronicity of chronological time, where past,

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<sup>367</sup> Berg, "A Taxonomy of Alternative Plots in Recent Films: Classifying the "Tarantino Effect,"" 39 - 41.

present and future are viewed on the same plane. Landwehr writes that the confusion created by the fragmented story order deliberately parallels a state of traumatic distress, reflecting the bewildering complexities of loss.<sup>368</sup> By foregrounding its distinction between story and plot, the narrative highlights trauma as an experience primarily conceived according to a rupture in the mind's awareness of time.<sup>369</sup> Landwehr further argues that

...this fluidity of time mirrors the timelessness of the unconscious and the intermingling of past and present that trauma victims re-experience in flashbacks, dreams or overwhelming moments of grief, triggered by sounds, images, smells, or locations that they associate with traumatic events.<sup>370</sup>

Berg argues that in the "The Jumbled Plot" the ordering of events is not motivated by character psychology, but by the director's own preferences. The narrative of *The Sweet Hereafter*, however, does create connections between different times and memories that reflect a traumatised subjectivity. As Egoyan explains, "[t]he visual construction of my films is greatly determined by the characters' strategies of repression and recognition."<sup>371</sup>

The most prominent example of the way in which the film is structured by a traumatic subjectivity is through the narrative association of its "two primary scenes of catastrophe."<sup>372</sup> The first event is the incest scene between Nicole and her father, set in a candle-lit barn. Egoyan explains that the visually romantic depiction of abuse, which appears strangely consensual, was a way to convey how Nicole might have

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<sup>368</sup> Landwehr, "Egoyan's Film Adaptation of Banks's *The Sweet Hereafter*: "The Pied Piper" as Trauma Narrative and *Mise-en-abyme*," 220.

<sup>369</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 61.

<sup>370</sup> Landwehr, "Egoyan's Film Adaptation of Banks's *The Sweet Hereafter*: "The Pied Piper" as Trauma Narrative and *Mise-en-abyme*," 220.

<sup>371</sup> Atom Egoyan, "Recovery," *Sight and Sound* 7, no. 10 (1997), [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&xres\\_dat=xri:iipa:&rft\\_dat=xri:iipa:article:citation:iipa00352273](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&xres_dat=xri:iipa:&rft_dat=xri:iipa:article:citation:iipa00352273).

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

psychologically reconciled herself the act: "I believe that any child who is sexually abused must create some fantasy, however distorted, that will ease the pain of this violent and transgressive act."<sup>373</sup> The camera pans away from the barn, and cuts to a snowy landscape, revealing the yellow school bus travelling along the mountain paths. Dolores' voiceover indicates that the images the spectator sees are of the day of the accident, as she gives her testimony to Stephens. Primarily, the juxtaposition of the two scenes highlights them as sites of trauma, but also hints at a further correlation: Nicole's experience of the bus accident will have a particular, belated effect on her earlier traumatic memory of her father.

The film's plot, as Landwehr suggests, is also primarily ordered through sound. Early in the film, Wanda and Hartley Otto are shown walking their son, Bear, to the bus stop. As Dolores drives away, the Ottos are framed by the snowy landscape. A voiceover of Dolores discussing the Ottos continues into the next scene: the Ottos leave the frame, and the camera stays fixed on a long shot of the doomed school bus, cutting to a medium close-up of Dolores, in a neck brace and visibly injured, giving her testimony to Stephens.

In the latter scene, set in Dolores' home, the wall behind where she sits is adorned with photographs of the school children. Stephens questions her about the Ottos and Dolores says regarding Bear: "He's one of those children who bring out the best in people." She quickly realises the error of her tense and sombrely says, "He would have made a wonderful man." The moment verbally underlines the narrative's fluid sense of time, but also highlights the relationship it cements between mourning and dread. By repeatedly juxtaposing moments before and after the accident, *The Sweet Hereafter* invokes a continual reminder of death.

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid. The disturbing nature of the incest scene is also strongly aided by the recital of "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," which I explore in detail later.

## Competing narratives

Aside from a temporal fragmentation, the film's narrative is also ordered by Mitchell Stephens' and Nicole Burnell's opposing perspectives, relating to their varying responses to the accident. Austin Sarat argues that Stephens' character is defined by a fusion of law and fatherhood.<sup>374</sup> *The Sweet Hereafter* fragments fatherhood, showing its many possible sides: Sam Burnell depicts the "monstrous possibilities of fatherhood," while Billy Ansel serves as the classically good father.<sup>375</sup> Mitchell Stephens, however, is interestingly aligned with both characters. The film connects Ansel and Stephens through their experience of loss: after Stephens tells Ally of baby Zoe's near-death experience, the film cuts to flashbacks of Zoe and her mother playing in a field. As Stephens says to Ally, "It was a wonderful time in our lives. I still felt we had a future together, the three of us." The camera pans upwards from the field to the cloudy sky, which changes to the image of snow, and Ansel at the scene of the bus accident. His dead children are covered by a blanket. He walks away, and remembers happier times, of Jessica and Mason playing outside. Both the fathers' flashbacks are melancholy and suggest a continuing engagement with mourning. While the nature of Ansel and Stephens' loss is very different, the film aligns the characters as traumatised fathers struggling to deal with the absence of their loved ones. As Sarat writes, it becomes clear that "the lawyer is just another father in mourning, vulnerable to the very loss to which his professional work is now responding."<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Austin Sarat, "Imagining the Law of the Father: Loss, Dread and Mourning in *The Sweet Hereafter*," *Law and Society Review* 34, no. 1 (2000): 32.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

On a more primary narrative level, however, Ansel and Stephens are placed on opposite sides of the spectrum regarding their reactions to loss. Sarat argues that Stephens embodies “law’s response to loss,”<sup>377</sup> or in other words, the idea that loss can be commodified. When he visits the Ottos, Wanda cannot comprehend why someone would retain a lawyer after they had lost a child as she can imagine no valid compensation. Stephens is experienced in verbal manipulation, beginning all his conversations – with the Walkers, the Ottos, and Billy Ansel – with the same words: “I realise that it’s an awful time, but it’s important that we talk.” He is finally able to retain the Ottos, but Ansel remains adamantly unconvinced of the benefit of a lawsuit. In an aggressive confrontation in front of the wrecked bus, Stephens says to him, “I can help you,” to which he replies, “Not unless you can raise the dead.”

Stephens’ narrative, or the promotion of the legal system as a response to tragedy, correlates to Freud’s model of normal mourning in that it implies the possibility of a different substitutive economy. As Freud wrote, successful mourning requires the “withdrawal of the libido from [one] object and transference of it to a new one.”<sup>378</sup> *The Sweet Hereafter* firmly negates the conception of mourning as a step-by-step process, a perspective it upholds through its treatment of content and form. Firstly, the narrative continually creates tension between Stephens’ career and his personal life: he promotes a schematised approach to loss, yet is continually defined by the unresolved grief over the loss of his own child, not to a spider bite, as it turns out, but to drug addiction. The film’s “Jumbled Plot,” which I refer to earlier, also suggests mourning as a non-linear, bewildering path.

It is the character of a paralysed teenager, however, that proves to be Stephens’ greatest adversary, narratively and symbolically. She not only destroys his case, but as

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid. 23.

<sup>378</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” 150.

Landwehr argues, her “poetic narrative [triumphs] over the legal one.”<sup>379</sup> Nicole’s transformation, however, also illuminates the film’s treatment of traumatic experience and more specifically, the concept of Freud’s latency period. Nicole can be aligned with the “poetic narrative” in two distinct ways: primarily, through the recital of Robert Browning’s poem “The Pied Piper of Hamelin,” and secondly, through her singing. Significantly, this engagement with Nicole’s voice involves both the diegetic and non-diegetic aspects of the film. The film introduces her singing onstage, but soon, the voice of the actress (Sarah Polley) is also heard on the soundtrack to the film, performing songs such as “Courage” (originally by The Tragically Hip, whose version is also heard on the soundtrack) and “The Sweet Hereafter,” among others. Katherine Weese argues that the disembodiment of Nicole’s voice means that she transcends her storyworld character:

In fact, director Atom Egoyan not only portrays Nicole as a storyteller within the film’s diegesis, but he also blurs the bounds between Nicole as character and Nicole as heterodiegetic narrator and thus allows her desire, her subjectivity, to speak through the film itself rather than simply being narrated by it.<sup>380</sup>

In Banks’ novel, Nicole is a beauty queen and not a singer. Egoyan’s adaptation generates an ongoing engagement with the character’s voice, and alludes to her greater narrative power.

The film’s addition of Robert Browning’s poem, which Russell Banks admits he wish he had thought to include, serves as a “microcosm of the town’s tragedy.”<sup>381</sup> “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” tells the tale of a piper who helps rid a town of its overwhelming

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<sup>379</sup> Landwehr, “Egoyan’s Film Adaptation of Banks’s *The Sweet Hereafter*. “The Pied Piper” as Trauma Narrative and *Mise-en-abyme*,” 220.

<sup>380</sup> Katherine Weese, “Family Stories: Gender and Discourse in Atom Egoyan’s *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Narrative* 10, no. 1 (2002): 70.

<sup>381</sup> Landwehr, “Egoyan’s Film Adaptation of Banks’s *The Sweet Hereafter*. “The Pied Piper” as Trauma Narrative and *Mise-en-abyme*,” 215.

rat problem. When he is refused payment, he lures the town's children away using the same pipe he used to lure the rats away, and Hamelin's children are never seen again. While the historical origins of the fairytale are unclear – a Children's Crusade, a plague, emigration, and a psychopathic paedophile are some speculations – its use in the film is clearly metaphoric. Significantly, the integration of the poem also serves to represent the transformation of Nicole's traumatic experience.

Nicole first recites the poem to the Ansel twins as a bedtime story. While the story of missing children is eerie, it becomes more obviously traumatic the next time it is heard. Later that night, Nicole is led by her father to the candle-lit barn where what seems to be an ambiguous ritual of sexual abuse takes place. As she hesitantly follows him, Nicole recites a portion of the poem in voiceover, specifically at the point where the children are being lured away by the Piper: "All the little boys and girls/With rosy cheeks and flaxen curls" are lured into a "wondrous portal opened wide." Initially, one assumes that Nicole is one of the children, but as the poem continues, one views the young teenager as the "lame" child who is left behind, a description which becomes especially fitting when she is left paralysed by the bus accident.

In Banks' novel, Nicole explicates the double loss that she faces: "he [her father] had robbed me of my soul or something, whatever it was that Jennie still had and I didn't. And then the accident robbed me of my body."<sup>382</sup> Her body is even less under her control when Mitchell Stephens convinces Nicole's parents to join the personal injury lawsuit. No longer able to use her for his own perversions, Sam Burnell finds another way he can profit from his daughter's body: financially. When Stephens warns Nicole how difficult it will be to testify in court, Sam reveals his greed by quickly and eagerly asking when the "damages" will be awarded, without a seeming care for the emotional cost to his daughter. In the novel, Nicole is very much aware of the changing politics of

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<sup>382</sup> Banks, *The Sweet Hereafter*, 180.

her body: "To me, my legs were worth everything then and nothing now. But to Mom and Daddy, nothing then and a couple of million dollars now."<sup>383</sup> Sarat argues that Stephens and Sam Burnell become each other's "spiritual ally" because they both commodify Nicole's body.<sup>384</sup> More so, the two men promote a continuing engagement with loss and mourning as a process of financial compensation.

The film never openly plots out Nicole's plan to impede the lawsuit: instead, it subtly displays the shifting power relations through, as Weese argues, the politics of the male gaze.<sup>385</sup> Weese refers to Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," where Mulvey argues that classical Hollywood cinema generates a strong sense of identification with male characters; women are positioned in passive roles, creating visual pleasure via scopophilia.<sup>386</sup> While Weese's reading of *The Sweet Hereafter* is largely in terms of gender, it is examined through Nicole's growing authority in the narrative, which I relate to her traumatic experience. In the film's opening, Sam is seen staring longingly at his daughter as she sings onstage. One might suspect that Sam is perhaps her boyfriend, until she calls him "Daddy" shortly after. When the incest occurs, one realises the dreadful power implied in his stare. Later in the narrative, after Nicole eavesdrops on Billy Ansel pleading with her parents to drop the suit, her father goes to talk to her. Lying in bed, Nicole responds to her father's accusation that she has become "hard to talk to," by saying, "We didn't used to have to talk a lot, did we, Daddy?" Her father asks what she means, and she says:

I mean, I'm a wheelchair girl now. And it's hard to pretend that I'm a beautiful rockstar. Remember, Daddy? That beautiful stage that you were going to build for me? You were going to light it with nothing but candles.

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<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>384</sup> Sarat, "Imagining the Law of the Father: Loss, Dread and Mourning in *The Sweet Hereafter*," 20.

<sup>385</sup> Weese, "Family Stories: Gender and Discourse in Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*," 70.

<sup>386</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6 – 18.

By repeatedly using the word “Daddy,” she references their past relationship; however, by alluding to the candle-lit barn, Nicole threatens Sam by implying her changed feelings towards him and her perspective on his abuse. Now, the camera focuses on Nicole’s controlled stare, which renders her father speechless. He does not know how to respond to his daughter, and looks away, awkwardly reminding her of the upcoming deposition the next morning. When The Tragically Hip’s song “Courage” plays on the soundtrack, continuing into the next scene, the lyrics indicate Nicole’s changing attitude and the detrimental effect it will have on her father: “Courage... It couldn’t have come at a worse time....”

Nicole’s transformation starts far earlier, however, when she arrives home from the hospital. She determinedly informs Sam that she will need a lock on her door and she tells her younger sister, Jennie, that she can sleep in her bed every night. Nicole firmly indicates a desire for protection. The film’s two traumatic events are further aligned in that Nicole’s retaliation against her father begins after the bus accident. Her narrative is informed by the nature of trauma as a belated experience, and has its roots in Freud’s conceptualisation of a latency period. The romantic depiction of the incest scene suggests, as I mention earlier, Nicole’s traumatised, confused state. She appears to repress her awareness or memory of the abuse, only for it to resurface after the second traumatic experience, the bus accident. The essence of the earlier traumatic experience, Freud argues, is only given meaning with its subsequent reappearance.<sup>387</sup> While Nicole does not get sexually molested again, she experiences another trauma that violates her

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<sup>387</sup> Freud, “The Aetiology of Hysteria” 202. Freud developed the idea of a ‘latency period’ in his early theories on infantile sexuality.

body. As Judith Herman explains, while recovery is not a linear process, the traumatic event will eventually need to be dealt with.<sup>388</sup>

Stephens' character is also defined by trauma's belatedness. When Zoe calls her father to tell him that she is HIV positive, the film cuts to the extreme close-up of baby Zoe's face, an image first seen when Stephens recounts the near-tragic story of the insect bite. The sudden, intrusive flashback not only reiterates Stephens' current lack of control, but further characterises him as a traumatised father. Unlike Nicole, however, Stephens is never able to escape his past.

At the deposition, Nicole lies about the speed the bus was travelling at, and crushes any chance of the lawsuit proceeding. She defeats both Stephens and her father's financial claim over her body, and effectively strikes back at her father for his greater crime against her. After she gives her statement, Nicole's voiceover recites a portion from Browning's poem: "It's dull in our town since my playmates left/ I can't forget that I'm bereft/ Of all the pleasant sights they see/ Which the Piper also promised me." Significantly, she then deviates from the lines of the poem when she says: "And why I lied, he only knew/ But from my lie, this did come true:/ Those lips from which he drew his tune/ Were frozen as a winter's moon." The film once again engages with the politics of the gaze, as Nicole knowingly stares at her father. As she utters the last two lines, the camera moves to an extreme close-up of Sam Burnell's motionless lips. The image echoes an earlier shot of Stephens as he takes a phonecall from Zoe, where the camera also focuses on his "frozen," speechless mouth. The law, as well as fatherhood, is rendered impotent.<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 174.

<sup>389</sup> Sarat, "Imagining the Law of the Father: Loss, Dread and Mourning in *The Sweet Hereafter*," 20.

Nicole finds a way, as Weese argues, "to write herself out of both narratives,"<sup>390</sup> ending her father's and Stephens' claim over her body. Again, Nicole's re-envisioning of her reality functions on diegetic and non-diegetic levels: her storyworld character lies about the accident, while Nicole as heterodiegetic narrator adds her own words to "The Pied Piper of Hamelin." The existing lines from the poem she does utter are significant not only because they recall the portion heard in the incest scene, but because their meaning has changed: Nicole is still the crippled child, but now she is fortunate, able to escape from the Piper, who is personified by both her father and Stephens. According to Herman, the remembering and telling of the traumatic event as story is an essential transformative step in recovery.<sup>391</sup> The reconstruction of the trauma into a narrative form, while ambitious work, implies the patient's ability to situate the trauma in the past, and dissociate herself from the immediacy of the event.<sup>392</sup> At the beginning of the deposition, and previously in the film, Nicole states that she cannot recall the bus crash. When she does provide a clear, though reconstructed account of the accident, she is asked, "You remember this?" to which she replies, "Yes, I do now. Now that I'm telling it." Nicole, we might argue, refers not the accident, but to her earlier traumatic event: when she first experiences her father's abuse, it is through a romanticised lens which is shared with the spectator. Similarly, the film's opening image of Stephens' sleeping family is also dictated by a belated narrativisation, though this time, it is the spectator's understanding of the image which is transformed: when it first erupts into cinematic space and time, one does not know how to interpret its relevance. It is only later that the image is recuperated into a narrative of cause and effect; however, it remains a troubling image owing to the spectator's knowledge of Zoe's current problems.

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<sup>390</sup> Weese, "Family Stories: Gender and Discourse in Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*, 69.

<sup>391</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 174 – 175.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*

Nicole's fabrication thus effectively triumphs over the "legal narrative" in that it denies mourning as a compensatory, finite process, and instead locates traumatic grief between the incomprehensible and the curative. While the young teenager appears to overcome her traumas, I will explore how the film continues an engagement with loss that denies rationalisation or closure.

## **An inexplicable trauma**

The film's denouement consists of a montage which, like the rest of the narrative, shifts between different time frames: Stephens lands at his destination and says goodbye to Ally. As he gets into a taxi, he catches a glimpse of Dolores Driscoll. She is still a bus driver, no longer for children, but touring adults. Billy Ansel watches the school bus being removed from the garage; he turns around, placing a cap on his head as he walks away. Nicole continues her voiceover, but deviates completely from the rhyming couplets of Browning's poem:

As you see her, two years later, I wonder if you realise something. I wonder if you understand that all of us -- Dolores, me, the children who survived, the children who didn't -- that we're all citizens of a different town now. A place with its own special rules, and its own special laws. A town of people living in the sweet hereafter.

Her face aglow with an expression of wonder, Nicole stares up at the darkening sky over the fairground, and her voiceover returns to the original lines of "The Pied Piper of Hamelin": "Where waters gushed and fruit-trees grew/ And flowers put forth a fairer hue/ And everything was strange and new/ And everything was strange and new." Nicole remembers the night before the accident: she closes the book she was reading to the Ansel twins, and tucks the sleeping children into bed. The film's final image is an extreme long shot of Nicole standing in Billy Ansel's bedroom, with her back to the

camera. She stares out the window as a large blinding light coming from outside engulfs the room. Whether it is the headlights of Billy Ansel's car as he arrives home, or her father coming to fetch her, is unclear. Nicole's voiceover suggests that the trauma of the accident has irrevocably changed the community: the sweet hereafter is not, as one might imagine, a reference to the afterlife, but the evocation of a post-traumatic state.

The final few shots of the film continue a complex engagement with recovery. Tony Rayns writes that the ending of the film functions similarly to the film's opening image of the sleeping family, in that it involves "an image of domestic bliss which we know will very soon be shattered."<sup>393</sup> The final moments of the film, which begin with a shot of Nicole holding a book over her soon-to-be crippled legs, seem intent on leaving the viewer with a melancholic reminder of the impending trauma. The return of the original lines of "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," while linked to the traumas of the narrative, also allude to a sense of rebirth as they make reference to a certain growth and lushness. This rebirth, however, is located within the sweet hereafter, the strange and new place that Nicole situates the town. The film's ending thus testifies to loss as an exceptional, bewildering experience.

Steven Dillon contextualises the film's use of Browning's poem as part of a narrative engagement with the inexplicability of the accident. "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" serves to mirror significant storylines, such as the town's missing children, as well as Nicole's relationship with both her father and Stephens. Dillon argues, however, that the poem serves as a "relentless[ly] unsatisfactory aesthetic explanation" for the cause of the bus crash and why the children in Egoyan's story are missing.<sup>394</sup> In the poem, there is a reason why the Piper takes the children, which is emphasised when

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<sup>393</sup> Tony Rayns, "The Sweet Hereafter," *Sight and Sound* 7, no. 10 (1997): 61.

<sup>394</sup> Steven Dillon, "Lycism and Accident in *The Sweet Hereafter*," *Literature Film Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2003): 228.

Mason questions Nicole regarding it: the town breaks their promise to the Piper, refusing to pay him after he eradicates their rat problem. The punishment, however, is shocking and incommensurate with the offense, and creates a sense of the unknown. The film never clarifies the cause for its tragedy, and the only detail it offers is that Dolores loses control of the vehicle as it drives over a patch of ice. While Stephens makes vague reference to “someone” cutting corners regarding the bus construction and maintenance, the implication is that the actual cause of the crash is possibly a combination of factors involving the weather, but more so, that the tragedy was truly an unavoidable accident.

The true story on which *The Sweet Hereafter* is based raises relevant questions regarding tragedy and blame. One morning in 1989 in a small Texas town, a Coca Cola delivery truck, its brakes failing, ran a stop street and struck a school bus. The bus, full of children on their way to school, went flying into a water-filled gravel pit next to the road, killing twenty-one children in total.<sup>395</sup> Hoards of lawyers descended on the rural community, filed lawsuits on behalf of grieving families and tried to steal each other's clients. Members of the town accused each other of trying to profit financially from the tragedy; even the Mayor came under fire for “insensitivity” when handling donations for the affected families.<sup>396</sup> Lawyers were investigated for bribing poverty-stricken and uneducated families with money and cars, and even turned to suing other lawyers. The questions of blame were endless: the truck driver, finally acquitted of all charges of negligent homicide, claimed he was the victim of poor maintenance, and filed a personal injury suit against Coca Cola. Others blamed the unguarded gravel pit and poorly

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<sup>395</sup> Lisa Belkin, “19 Texas Students Die When Bus Plunges Into Water,” *The New York Times*, Special to *The New York Times*, September 22, 1989. (Two more students died later that day in hospital).

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*

designed school bus.<sup>397</sup> As *The New York Times* reported, “There is a comforting mythology about tragedy, in which grief brings strength to survivors and builds bonds among neighbors,” but sadly the opposite was true for the small town of Alton, torn apart not just by grief, but greed.<sup>398</sup> The film, too, implies what Tony McAdams refers to as the “contemporary decline of family and community.”<sup>399</sup> Billy Ansel, in an effort to end the lawsuit, pleads with Sam Burnell: “That’s what we used to do, remember? Help each other. This was a community.” But while the narrative suggests that the town may be responsible for its deterioration after the tragedy, it leaves the cause for the accident impenetrable.

While it forms the central narrative event, tying the different time frames together, the actual depiction of the accident is relatively short, lasting just over thirty seconds. The scene begins from inside the school bus, showing the children and Dolores chattering and laughing. At the back of the bus, Jessica and Mason wave to their father, Billy Ansel, who follows them in his truck. The moment of the bus first skidding off the road is seen from Ansel’s perspective: the happy expression on his face suddenly falters, and the film cuts to an image of the swerving bus, and then a quick shot of Dolores struggling to control the wheel. The camera remains stationary, depicting the bus from an extreme long shot that lasts only a few seconds: the bus skids onto the ice and then crashes through it, into the freezing river below. Billy runs down the ravine, and the distant sound of screaming is heard. There are no images of the children drowning or even being pulled from the wreckage. A low angle, medium close-up shot shows Billy’s grief-

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<sup>397</sup> “Driver Acquitted of Homicide in School Bus Crash in Texas,” *The New York Times*, May 7, 1993.

<sup>398</sup> Lisa Belkin, “Where 21 Youths Dies, Lawyers Wage a War,” *The New York Times*, Special to *The New York Times*, January 18, 1990.

<sup>399</sup> Tony McAdams, “Blame and *The Sweet Hereafter*,” *Legal Studies Forum* 24, no. 3, 4 (2000). McAdams writes: “The contemporary decline of family and community have caused new tensions and rendered old societal glues unworkable. In a sense, traditional roles (parent, neighbor, friend) and their accompanying responsibilities have atrophied in our mobile, individualistic, compulsive society, and we have failed to find a replacement except the law; to which we turn in desperation” (609).

ridden face as he identifies his children, but the film reveals only a glimpse of a blanket that is pulled over their bodies.

*The New York Times* reported on the Texan accident from the perspective of a bystander:

Ms. Martinez said she ran to the scene and by the time she arrived, approximately five minutes after the accident, "about 50" people stood at the edge of the pit.

There were children clinging to the one visible corner of the bus, she said, and others were floating in the water. At least one shrieking mother was taken away by ambulance after seeing the bodies of her two teen-age daughters recovered from the water.

Ms. Martinez said she had to lock her arms around another hysterical mother whose daughter was floating in the pit. The woman was trying to jump into the pit as rescuers were pulling the girl onto land and beginning cardiopulmonary resuscitation.<sup>400</sup>

The description of the catastrophe could easily be translated into a centre-piece disaster scene. *The Sweet Hereafter*, however, depicts none of the possible horror that Ansel witnesses. The accident scene, Gillian Roberts argues, "rel[ies] a great deal on the unseen."<sup>401</sup> The conscious lack of detail engages with the discourse of the unrepresentable, and also self-consciously defines traumatic loss as inexplicable. The snowy landscape, David Hutchison argues, serves to subsume the accident into the unknowable forces of nature: "In the scenes set before the accident, the natural beauty reminds us of what is soon to be lost; in the scene of the accident and those following it, that same beauty persists to haunt us."<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> Belkin, "19 Texas Students Die When Bus Plunges Into Water."

<sup>401</sup> Roberts, "Spectacle Matters: *Titanic*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, and the Academy and Genie Awards," 325.

<sup>402</sup> David Hutchison, "Atom Egoyan: *The Sweet Hereafter*," *Where are the voices coming from?: Canadian culture and the legacies of history*, ed. Coral Ann Howells, 144 (Amsterdam/New York, NY: Rodopi, 2004).

The visual details surrounding the bus accident, Dillon suggests, are left deliberately indistinct, and work in conjunction with the conception of the poem as an “anti-myth for why the children are away, for ‘why’ the children have been killed in the bus crash.”<sup>403</sup> Landwehr’s perspective that the film offers the poem as a source of redemption and comfort centres on how “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” is used to represent Nicole’s transformation. The actual narrative of the poem, however, is far from idyllic or comforting: Hamelin’s children are never returned to the town, and their well-being is left a mystery. By re-introducing the original lines of the poem, the film’s ending engages with the inexplicability of the accident, and the concept of loss as an irreversible temporal structure. *The Sweet Hereafter* does not promote the psychoanalytic ideal of therapeutic art; rather, it aims to leave the spectator with a sense of loss.

### **Absence and death in the photographic image**

Steven Dillon writes, “the film does not idealize its own seductions, its own poetry; rather, it comments intentionally on its own seductions and ghostly beauties....”<sup>404</sup> It is these “ghostly beauties” that inform my reading of the film through its still images, which I also contextualise as part of the focus on the inexplicable, mysterious, and at times, beautiful forces that haunt the narrative. The film’s final image of Nicole standing against a large, blinding light evokes a particular stillness that recalls previous images in the narrative: *The Sweet Hereafter* opens with an aerial shot of a mother, father, and sleeping toddler. While the image is left unexplained at the beginning of the narrative, the seemingly peaceful depiction of family togetherness is actually part of a story that involves a near tragic incident involving Stephens’ then young daughter, Zoe, being

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<sup>403</sup> Dillon, “Lyricism and Accident in *The Sweet Hereafter*,” 228.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 229.

bitten by a deadly spider. Stephens and his wife must race to the hospital, but be prepared to perform an amateur tracheotomy should Zoe stop breathing. While he explains the story to Ally, the film focuses on haunting close-ups of Stephens holding a knife next to baby Zoe's face: the camera is static and the child barely moves. At the testimony scene, there are similarly still images: the camera lingers on shots of Nicole, a vision of composed control, as she quietly watches her father's motionless lips.

The images correspond to a photographic stillness that confronts the spectator with loss, explored most notably by Roland Barthes in his reflections on the photograph as a site of death. He writes:

For Death must be somewhere in society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps it is in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life. Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death.<sup>405</sup>

Barthes' philosophical study of photography, *Camera Lucida*, is inspired by loss. When he comes across a photograph of his recently deceased mother as a child, he writes: "In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: She is going to die: I shudder... over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe."<sup>406</sup> For Barthes, the photographic image can be broken up into two elements: the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* refers to the general communicated message behind the image, the shared social, cultural or linguistic knowledge that the average spectator decodes. The *punctum*, which is far more fascinating to Barthes, is the contingent, accidental feature or detail in the image

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<sup>405</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 92.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

which arouses one's interest. When Barthes gazes at the photograph of his mother, the involuntary "shudder" he writes of corresponds to the *punctum*, which he argues allows certain photographs to forge an encounter with the Lacanian Real: it both overwhelms the spectator with a profound sense of the subject's presence, but invokes a confrontation with absence and death.<sup>407</sup>

André Bazin's seminal essay, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," addresses the indexicality of the photographic image, which can also be understood in relation to the Real: within the photographic signifier, he argues, is evidence of the missing referent.<sup>408</sup> Through a mummification analogy, Bazin iterates his theory that the photographic image can transcend death, essentially embalming time.<sup>409</sup> As Laura Mulvey notes, Bazin and Barthes' theories are similar in their association of photography with death: for Bazin, however, the photographic image acts "as a defence against the passage of time,"<sup>410</sup> whereas for Barthes, the overwhelming *punctum* emphasises an inevitable "return of the dead."<sup>411</sup>

Drawing from Barthes and Bazin's theories, Mulvey observes that cinema's unique blend of the still and moving image has the potential to evoke uncanny effects: "Immobility mutates into movement that merges with the register of narrative time only to fragment again with a return to stillness and the register of the index."<sup>412</sup> *The Sweet Hereafter* achieves a similar effect through its accentuated still images, which cause a

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid., 25 – 60; Barthes refers to Lacan and the *tuchè* as a way to comprehend the capacity of the photographic image (4).

<sup>408</sup> André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *What is Cinema?* Vol. I, ed. and transl. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1974 [1967]), 1 – 14.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

<sup>411</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, 60. Mulvey suggests that Bazin's approach to photography can be related to his Catholicism, and the conception of a life after death.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 196.

fragmentation in the spectator's experience of time. The image of baby Zoe is haunted by time: even as Stephens tells the story, one is aware that Zoe survives; the *punctum*, however, is the awareness of the irony of her survival, as the story places emphasis on her current struggle against drug addiction and her life-threatening HIV status. The final image of Nicole similarly works to remind the spectator of the inescapable tragedy that awaits the young teen. Through a mixture of the animate and inanimate, the film's still images draw attention to the fragility of life and the continual nearness of death.

*The Sweet Hereafter* reveals itself as a narrative that oscillates between the return of the traumatic event, and the possibilities of recovery. One of the final images of Nicole, staring up at the night sky over the fairground, indicates her growing sense of understanding and calm. Roger Rosenblatt writes that

...the force of things unrationalized is the source not only of the terror but of the beauty in our lives. Instead of being humbled by the inexplicable, we can be saved by accepting it. By accepting the inexplicable we are thrown toward one another.<sup>413</sup>

*The Sweet Hereafter* implies that one may find comfort through accepting trauma as an aporia, as an indefinable in-between. At the heart of the narrative, Gillian Roberts claims, lies a fascination with the quiet immobility of content and form; she writes that "it is Nicole's stillness as she testifies and Zoe's stillness at three years which form the centre of the film...."<sup>414</sup> The continual juxtaposition of the moments before and after the accident imply that the film's focus is not on the extremes of life or death, trauma or recovery; rather, the narrative's ghostly blend of presence and absence indicates an engagement with the ambiguous spaces between which the traumatised victim moves.

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<sup>413</sup> Roger Rosenblatt, "An Inescapable Need to Blame," *The New York Times*, September 15, 1991.

<sup>414</sup> Roberts, "Spectacle Matters: *Titanic*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, and the Academy and Genie Awards," 328.

## Between representation and its refusal: the denial of mourning in *Trois Couleurs: Bleu*

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As has become clear, one of the questions central to my investigation, and to trauma theory, is how to represent the unrepresentable. Cinema has the potential, as a medium that creates interstices between image, sound and the imagination, to share the fragmented experience of trauma while simultaneously articulating the impossibility of explicit depiction. Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Bleu* (1993), which forms part of the *Trois Couleurs* trilogy, is a film that Emma Wilson succinctly claims is "caught in contradiction between representation and its refusal."<sup>415</sup> Detailing the life of a Parisian woman, Julie, after she loses her husband and daughter in a car accident, the narrative uses the denial of mourning as its motivation to explore the ambiguous spaces of traumatic loss. The bereaved mother's extreme attempts to eradicate any memories of her loved ones is structured as a metadiegesis that negotiates the aesthetics of vision and absence: colour, light and music are used to express Julie's disturbed psyche as well as her traumatised subjectivity; however, the sudden and repetitive blackouts of the screen and the conscious lack of depiction of Julie's memories or flashbacks, testify to a denial of representation.<sup>416</sup>

The ending of *Bleu* also provides opportunities to explore further the possibilities of cinema to forge a relationship between traumatic recovery and narrative resolution. Tammy Clewell argues that the conclusion of Kieślowski's film, in which Julie completes the Unification of Europe concerto and falls in love with another man, can be read too

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<sup>415</sup> Emma Wilson, "Three Colours: Blue. Kieślowski, colour and the postmodern subject," *Screen* 39, no. 4 (1998): 351.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid. Wilson writes that "[t]he film will remain split between intense subjectivity and the denial of vision" (351).

easily as subscribing to the discourse of psychoanalysis which hypostatizes mourning and its therapeutic ideals.<sup>417</sup> Through a close analysis of the final montage sequence I will explore the ways in which the conjunction of sound and image, as with previous moments in the film, evoke a space of both absence and recovery. The final, lingering shot of Julie's face, simultaneously bathed in and disrupted by a blue light, corresponds to the narrative's ongoing preoccupation with the liminality of traumatic loss.

### Julie as survivor

Unlike the other key films in this study, the protagonist of *Bleu* is physically involved in the traumatic event, surviving the car accident that kills her husband, Patrice, and their young daughter, Anna. The first image one sees after the scene of the accident is initially confusing: a close-up of a feather on a piece of fabric; the sound of breathing, and the blurred image of a man walking towards the foreground. He places a hand comfortingly on the fabric and asks, "Can you talk?" The shot cuts to an extreme close-up of an eye, reflected in it the image of the doctor in a white lab coat, who informs Julie of her family's death: "During the -- Were you conscious?" he asks her. When he tells her that Patrice is dead, the film cuts to a medium close-up of Julie in a hospital bed, her face bruised, cut and expressing surprise. "You must have been unconscious," the doctor surmises. "Anna?" Julie asks. "Yes," he replies, "your daughter, too." Julie whimpers, shutting her eyes and burying her head in the pillow, and the scene fades to black.

A sense of absence presents itself early in the narrative: the doctor's verbal ellipsis of the accident, to which he seems unable to refer directly, is echoed by the lack of a definitive visual depiction of the car crash itself. The film's opening shot, which takes the spectator a few moments to contextualise, is positioned from behind a car tyre. A horn

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<sup>417</sup> Tammy Clewell, "The Shades of Modern Mourning in *Three Colours* trilogy," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2000): 205.

sounds, and the shot moves with the vehicle as it travels under bridges along the highway. A child's hand holds a metallic shiny wrapper from a car window: it flaps back and forth in the wind, and is then let go. As the car moves through a dark tunnel, Anna stares out of the back window, seemingly directly into the camera lens. The film's only direct visual engagement with Anna is unclear, her image blurred by the window pane as well as the streaking colours and lights which glide over her. Anna's point of view as she watches the surrounding cars is similarly depicted, described by Joseph Kickasola as an image of "[b]eautiful, mysterious distortions."<sup>418</sup> When the car stops so that the young girl can have a toilet break, the camera focuses on a leaking pipe from below the car's engine.<sup>419</sup>

The scene of the accident is depicted from the point of view of an adolescent, Antoine, who reappears later in the film when he tries to return Julie's necklace. He sits in a field next to the road, playing with a stick and ball. After watching a lone car drive through the fog, he turns back to his game, smiling as he manages to balance the ball successfully. He turns as he hears the screeching of tyres and the impact of the collision, but the camera lingers on his astonished profile before showing the spectator a long shot of the car, smashed up against a tree. Smoke billows from its engine, and a colourful ball falls from one of the open car doors. A dog runs past the vehicle in distress. The sequence cuts to a medium close-up of Antoine's feet as he picks up his skateboard and begins running, and then cuts to an extreme long shot of the accident site. The camera remains static as Antoine continues to run toward the car. The rhythmic tapping of his

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<sup>418</sup> Joseph G. Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski: the liminal image* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 265.

<sup>419</sup> Emma Wilson, "Kieślowski's Lost Daughter: *Three Colours: Blue*," in *Cinema's Missing Children* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003). Wilson observes that the leaking pipe acts both as a metaphor for the child's pee as well as a forewarning of the crash (17).

shoes against the road and distant whistling of the destroyed engine are the only sounds that can be heard. As he reaches the vehicle, the image fades to black.

Through the concentration on the innocent child and the apparently unsafe vehicle, the relatively brief opening sequence of the family on the road signals an impending disaster. Kickasola explains that much of the suspense is derived from the sound design: while no soundtrack music plays, all the ambient sounds from each of the clips – the leaking pipe, the stick and ball game, Antoine’s running – beat a consistent rhythm.<sup>420</sup> It is the accentuated absence of sound between the beats, however, that creates the eerie sense of isolation that reverberates throughout the narrative. The lack of any explicit information surrounding the crash functions similarly, conveying an unsettling, ghostly absence through an emphasised distance between spectator and visual image.

The narrative ellipsis of the moments surrounding the accident also relates to Julie’s unconscious state to which the doctor makes reference. Illustrating the post-structuralist discourse that proposes trauma as an unlocatable experience, the film’s depiction of the collision conveys Julie’s missed encounter, and her consequent struggle to confront her loss.<sup>421</sup> Kiesłowski’s *Trois Couleurs* trilogy, consisting of the films *Rouge*,<sup>422</sup> *Blanc*<sup>423</sup> and *Bleu*, refer to the colours of the French flag and different ways of interpreting the elements of the national motto made popular by the French Revolution: “liberty, equality, fraternity.” *Bleu*, associated with liberty, explores Julie’s attempt to gain freedom from her intense grief. Her coping method is to sever all connections with her past, and potentially future, life: she sells her family home and all her possessions, destroys the

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<sup>420</sup> Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kiesłowski: the liminal image*, 265.

<sup>421</sup> See Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 62.

<sup>422</sup> Krzysztof Kiesłowski, *Trois Couleurs: Rouge* (France: MK2 Diffusion, 1994).

<sup>423</sup> Krzysztof Kiesłowski, *Trois Couleurs: Blanc* (France: MK2 Diffusion, 1994).

Unification concerto, goes back to her maiden name, and moves into a building which she specifically requests should be free of children. As she says to her mother, "I don't want any belongings, any memories. No friends, no love. Those are all traps."

Julie's tryst with Olivier soon after she returns home from the hospital can also be read as part of her attempt to attain freedom through anonymity. As she leaves Olivier lying in bed, Julie tries to reduce herself to the bare physicalities of a human being, eliminating any sense of personal identity: "But you see, I'm like any other woman," she says to him, "I sweat, I cough. I have cavities. You won't miss me." John Izod and Joanna Dovalis view Julie's seduction of Olivier "as not only a deliberate act of infidelity to her husband's memory but also as moved by her unconscious desire to cure herself."<sup>424</sup> The logic of the analysis corresponds with Freud's view of normal mourning as the withdrawal of libido from one object and the investment in another.<sup>425</sup> The mourning subject, Freud explained, goes through a painful process whereby the testing of reality shows that the loved object no longer exists.<sup>426</sup> *Bleu* depicts Julie's rejection of her husband's memory, however, as a desperate attempt to avoid her pain. As I will further explore, the spectator is never directly privy to Julie's memories or flashbacks, and thus her interaction with Olivier is seen as an urgent (and impossible) hastening of the healing process.

When Julie returns home from the hospital, her body appears physically recovered, but her psychic state conveys an indirectly proportional relationship to the passing of time. She bids Olivier goodbye on the morning after they sleep together, leaving him lying on one of the sole possessions she keeps from her past life. As she walks away from the family estate, she runs her knuckles along the hard brick walls. She winces in obvious

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<sup>424</sup> John Izod and Joanna Dovalis, "Grieving, Therapy, Cinema and Kieslowski's *Trois Couleurs: Bleu*," *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal* 25, no. 3 (2006): 60.

<sup>425</sup> Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 144.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*

pain, but continues her self-inflicted injury. Later, her grazed and bloodied hands are revealed. Julie's involvement in the accident allows for the narrative to highlight the disparity between her physical and psychic recovery processes. The creation of bodily wounds expresses her survivor guilt, but also reflects an attempt to liberate some of her overwhelming emotional anguish.

Julie's avoidance of her pain, and her simultaneous masochistic tendencies, testify to the dual symptoms of re-experience and avoidance which the trauma victim undergoes. Her coping methods, however, are doomed from the beginning, and the narrative continually highlights the need for Julie to engage with her loss. When she returns home after the hospital, she finds Marie, the family's housekeeper, in a distressed state. Julie asks her why she is crying, to which Marie responds, "Because you are not." The brief verbal exchange functions as a declaration of Julie's denial.

### **Colour, music and the escape into "nothing"**

The audiovisual aesthetics of the film become an essential mode of displacement and metaphor for her ineffable suffering. After Julie is informed of her family's death, the film abruptly cuts from her distraught face, her eyes tightly shut, to the image of shattering glass. Julie's inward retreat is externalised through an image for her fractured spirit. It is soon revealed, however, that Julie has, really, shattered the window in order to distract a nurse, and attempt to take an overdose of pills in the hospital's pharmacy.<sup>427</sup> She spits the pills out, however, unable to go through with the suicide. Julie apologises for the broken window, but is told not to worry: "We'll replace it." The nurse's words highlight the fact that Julie's loss is not governed by a similar substitutive economy: her husband and daughter are irreplaceable, a concept which the narrative upholds

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<sup>427</sup> Paul Coates, "The Sense of an Ending: Reflections on Kiesłowski's Trilogy" *Film Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1996/7): 20.

throughout. Kieślowski thus ironises his own metaphor, and simultaneously articulates Julie's state of distress.

As Izod and Dovalis note, the moment of shattering glass "opens a series of spatial metaphors where glass, blank walls, whiteness and the emptiness of the clinic allow us to enter the newly emptied out spaces of Julie's mind."<sup>428</sup> The film's use of metaphor, however, does not have solely signifying purposes: the displacement of Julie's pain within the film testifies to her denial and avoidance, as well as the impossibility of a direct representation of the traumatic experience. Kieślowski expressed in interviews his fascination with the inner life, and the difficulty of capturing it cinematically:

The inner life of a human being...is the hardest thing to film. Even though I know that it can't be filmed however hard I try, the simple fact is that I'm taking this direction to get as close to this as my skill allows...The goal is to capture what lies within us, but there's no way of filming it. You can only get nearer to it.<sup>429</sup>

The spectator is thus never allowed to enter Julie's mind fully, however emptied out it is, and only ever afforded a partial view. A negotiation between vision and absence are introduced early in the narrative: the extreme close-up of Julie's eye after she awakens from the accident alerts the spectator to her subjectivity; however, the film continually implies her traumatic state by rendering obscured or indistinct images.<sup>430</sup> The first depiction of Olivier is from Julie's perspective, but he is a blurred form. Toward the end of the film, in the scenes dedicated to the finishing of the concerto, a long shot of Julie and Olivier blurs to the point of complete abstraction. The film's images are also often

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<sup>428</sup> Izod and Dovalis, "Grieving, Therapy, Cinema and Kieślowski's *Trois Couleurs: Bleu*," 57.

<sup>429</sup> Kieślowski quoted in Izod and Dovalis, "Grieving, Therapy, Cinema and Kieślowski's *Trois Couleurs: Bleu*," 52.

<sup>430</sup> Wilson, "Three Colours: Blue. Kieślowski, colour and the postmodern subject," 350 - 351. Wilson notes that one of the film's central ironies is that it definitively shares its protagonist's point-of-view, but also shows the impossibility of a shared vision.

obstructed through the framing of shots: the spectator's vision of what Julie sees is often blocked by the back of her head or body.<sup>431</sup> After she returns home from the hospital, the camera tracks her from behind as she wanders the passages. Her black-clad body sits in a doorway, staring into the room which is hidden from the spectator's view.

The partiality or denial of vision is also expressed in complex ways through the focus on Julie's face. The scene when she visits her mother, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, is particularly evocative. One of the shots is framed so that her mother's head blocks the bottom half of Julie's face as she talks. "Before, I was happy," Julie says, "I loved them. They loved me, too." The film cuts to the image on the muted television screen of a bungee jumper in free fall. Julie asks her mother if she is listening to her, to which she responds, "Yes, Marie-France," believing that Julie is her own sister. The image cuts back to Julie's obstructed face: "Now I have only one thing left to do," Julie says, "Nothing." Her mother moves position, and Julie's entire face is revealed. It too, however, reveals nothing, a small, indecisive smile playing on her lips. As Wilson writes, "Binoche's face, its impassivity, its opalescent surface, is an object of fascination. Yet it remains largely inexpressive, a screen between the viewer and Julie's feelings."<sup>432</sup> Through the continual focus on Julie's face, Kieslowski emphasises the actress' beauty. Juliette Binoche's flawless, almost translucent skin appears to glow even in her characters's most painful moments, and the contrast reiterates the disparity between physical and psychical wounds, but also raises questions of recovery and vision, alerting the spectator to the enigma of Julie's mind. (These questions remain throughout the narrative, and become particularly relevant to the film's final image of Julie's face). The scene between mother and daughter is also central to the film because of its allusions to trauma, memory and denial. Julie has continually to remind her mother of who she is:

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 352.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

"I'm not your sister, Mom. I'm your daughter." Her mother's large, expressionless eyes mirror the eerie silence of the bungee jumpers on the television screen, and signal an evacuation of memory. The casting of actress Emmanuelle Riva as Julie's mother recalls her role in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, celebrated for its complex exploration of trauma and memory. Roger Luckhurst argues that Resnais and Duras' innovative ways of depicting the traumatic flashbacks of a woman, played by Riva, haunted by her memories of World War II mark it as an essential forerunner in trauma cinema.<sup>433</sup> In Kiesłowski's film, however, it is not intrusive flashbacks that plague Riva's character, but her *lack* of memory. Her daughter tries to keep her focused long enough so that she can answer questions about Julie's childhood fear of mice. Ironically, while Julie shows a desperate reliance on her mother's recollections, she applies a different logic to her own past, which she insistently keeps at arm's length. Like the bungee jumpers who will eventually return to firm ground, however, Julie will not remain in a state of free fall forever.

As noted, Julie closing her eyes indicates an inward retreat. She repeats the action throughout the narrative, even in mid-conversation with others. The motif is most commonly associated with music, blue reflections that dance upon Julie's face, and the blanking of the screen. The first time the spectator encounters this sonic and visual cluster is when Julie sits outside the hospital, apparently asleep. A blue light engulfs the image, and she is jolted awake by the sound of Zbigniew Preisner's *Dead March*, one of the main musical themes in the narrative, and which was first heard at Patrice and Anna's funeral. The camera pulls back and then moves forward, focusing on Julie's face, the blue light making her appear almost frozen. The music and light disappear for a moment, and then a woman's voice is heard: "Hello?" The music sounds again and then the screen fades to black, and fades back to the image of Julie after a couple of seconds. A reporter, who accuses Julie of being the real composer of her husband's music, has come to

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<sup>433</sup> Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 181.

interrogate her. The motif of darkness, colour and music appears to express the traumatised mother's desire to be left alone, and to escape into her own inner world; however, further analysis suggests that the projection of Julie's interiority has a far more complex relationship to the stylistic system of the film.

An almost identical combination of music and darkness occurs when Antoine meets Julie to give her back the necklace which she lost in the crash. He asks her if she has any questions about the accident, to which she responds, firmly and quickly, "No." Preisner's *Dead March* plays, and the screen fades to black, lingering longer on the dark screen than in the previous example. Wilson argues that Julie awakening in the hospital, engulfed by colour and music, is a "scene of involuntary memory: Julie is prey to aural and visual disturbances which disrupt the blank denial of her mind and shock her into sensation."<sup>434</sup> It seems equally likely, however, that Julie's conscious dive into a dark blankness is an escape from the unbidden memories which threaten to move into her consciousness. In the scene with Antoine, Julie attempts to escape from the memories which he offers to divulge, and her rejection of the crucifix necklace, a symbol of faith, validates her desired state of denial. It appears, however, that she does not flee her memories entirely: Antoine tells Julie that as he reached their car after the accident, Patrice uttered a sentence which he failed to understand: "Now try coughing." Julie puts her head in her hands and sniffs loudly, and it appears as though she is crying. Surprisingly, Julie is revealed to be laughing, and she recounts for Antoine the joke which her husband told her and Anna right before the collision. What Antoine heard Patrice say, she explains, was the joke's punchline. Kiesłowski contrasts what the spectator expects will be a traumatic moment for Julie, being reminded of her husband's last words and the moments leading up to the crash, with a joke. In Todd Field's *In the Bedroom*, a similar, though more consciously ironic moment occurs when Ruth finds a sweepstakes

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<sup>434</sup> Ibid., 354.

letter addressed to her dead son that proclaims, "Frank Fowler: You May Have Already Won \$10,000,000!" Instead of expressing grief or dismay, Ruth laughs. By undercutting the narrative's sombre tone with humour, both films attempt to convey the nuances and the unpredictability of mourning, and the way in which death can be perceived as a cruel joke.

When Julie gets locked out of her apartment for the night, she also lets out a small, ironic laugh, this time more clearly linked to her sense of dismay at the situation. She sits on the staircase and a similar, but more subtle intrusion of colour, music and light occurs. A blue light flickers on and around her face in rectangular shards as she closes her eyes. Preisner's *Memento* plays, the other main musical theme in the narrative.<sup>435</sup> As with the hospital scene, and as with the many instances in the film where Julie's face is bathed in a blue light, the source causing the reflection is unknown. The use of colour as a reflective, blue light, as well as the music that is heard, appears dictated by Julie's traumatised subjectivity, and arguably, does not form part of an audiovisual structure which other characters would be able to experience. Wilson writes:

We can never know whether Julie herself supposedly experiences these traumatic intrusions as blue light and music, or whether the film finds sensory analogues, the very raw materials of audiovisual representation, to connote her traumatized perceptions. Yet it is significant that the viewer shares this shattering of silence with Julie.<sup>436</sup>

The use of colour, light and music in the narrative thus suggests a metadiegesis, reminiscent in many ways of Nicole Burnell's relationship to the soundtrack in *The Sweet Hereafter*. By invoking a set of visual and sonic structures which blur the lines between the

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<sup>435</sup> Irena Paulus and Graham McMaster, "Music in Krzysztof Kieslowski's Film "Three Colours: Blue". A Rhapsody in Shades of Blue: The Reflections of a Musician," *International Review of Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 30, no. 1 (1999): 74.

<sup>436</sup> Wilson, "Three Colours: Blue. Kieslowski, colour and the postmodern subject," 354.

diegetic and non-diegetic spaces of the narrative, *Bleu* attempts to express a growing interaction between Julie's conscious and unconscious mind.

Aside from the reflections of blue light, the diegetic examples of blue colour present in the *mise-en-scène* are extensive. In the opening sequence, Anna throws a metallic blue wrapper from the car window. The same wrapper is seen later in the film, when Julie finds a blue lollipop in the contents of her handbag, covered in the identical foil. She devours the sweet in what initially appears to be a desperate attempt to destroy the reminder of her daughter; however, this reading begs the question as to why she does not simply throw it away. One imagines that, like many mothers do, Julie used to keep sweets in her bag as treats for her daughter. Unavoidably confronted with her loss, Julie does not deny her pain: rather, she attempts to get closer to her daughter's memory, consuming the small, concrete symbol of their union. Simultaneously, the desperation that she displays while eating the sweet also suggests a sense of anger at the unwanted confrontation. When Julie returns to her family home after the hospital, she asks the gardener, "You cleared out the blue room?" He assures her that he has, but she finds a blue crystal mobile still hanging from the ceiling, a fact which she finds both frustrating and oddly comforting, as she ends up bringing the mobile to her new apartment. Upon first seeing the mobile, she breaks off a handful of crystals, and sits in the doorway of a room. Playing with them in her hands, blue reflections dance on her face. The moment forms one of the earliest associations between colour, light and grief, and is echoed in the later staircase scene. The significance of the blue room is never explicated, though it is most likely Anna's room. Later in the film, the narrative associates the crystal mobile with childhood memories when Lucille recalls having one when she was younger. The colour blue can thus be seen as a signifier of Julie's lost daughter: Anna does not return in the narrative as an explicit visual memory, but as an abstract form, in the sweet, the crystal mobile, light, and as I will explore, in the intense blue of the swimming pool.

Similarly to the colour red in *Don't Look Now*, blue appears to seep into the *mise-en-scène* of Kiesłowski's film, and even finds its way onto seemingly more random props such as doors, folders and clothing. Kiesłowski's use of blue colour and light can be viewed as both an intrusive force on Julie's muted mind and as a way of expressing her state of repression. It is essentially a cinematic method of displacing and externalising her grief, but also testifies to the simultaneous symptoms of re-experience and avoidance that trauma victims suffer.

Julie's relationship to the colour blue, however, is not as haunting as Baxter's interaction with the red-clad dwarf, and that narrative seeks a more ambiguous engagement between melancholy and self-awareness. Wilson explains that blue is a liminal colour, noting the fact that the eye becomes more sensitive to blue light as it grows darker.<sup>437</sup> In considering the implications of the colour, Izod and Dovalis observe its inescapable associations in Western culture with "grief, with cold and, by extension, with the nearness of death..."<sup>438</sup> Significantly, however, they also consider that colour associations are polysemic, and invoke a multiplicity of connections, further linking the colour blue to "clear, azure skies and water; by extension therefore with healing, inspiration, and hence the spirit."<sup>439</sup> Izod and Dovalis' observation supports the concept of the use of blue in Kiesłowski's film as an ambiguous structure: it has the potential to invoke both death and healing, and thus refuses a fixed representation of Julie's trauma.

The film's integration of music functions similarly to colour in that it continually creates meaning throughout the narrative, but also raises questions of subjectivity, trauma and denial. From a purely diegetic standpoint, the composition of music provides one of the film's main storylines: Patrice, a celebrated composer, dies with an unfinished score

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<sup>437</sup> Wilson, "Kiesłowski's Lost Daughter: *Three Colours: Blue*," 21.

<sup>438</sup> Izod and Dovalis, "Grieving, Therapy, Cinema and Kiesłowski's *Trois Couleurs: Bleu*," 62.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

intended for the celebration of the Unification of Europe. Julie destroys the score in an effort to rid herself of her past life; however, the archivist secretly makes a second copy, giving it to Olivier. When Julie finds out, she is compelled to contribute to the concerto's completion. Though the film never unequivocally discloses that Julie is the sole composer of Patrice's work, it implies that the reporter's claim is correct by linking Julie's experience of her world, and of her trauma, to music. From early on in the narrative, her subjectivity is expressed with two musical themes: *Memento* is a far softer, less intrusive tune than *Dead March*, but it is still defined by Julie's melancholic isolation. The first time one hears the theme is when Julie returns home from the hospital. She looks over sheets of musical scores, and after picking up a piece of paper from the piano, the tune begins to play. It stops as Julie folds the piece of paper, which Paulus and McMaster argue signals that the music sounds from Julie's mind, and not the non-diegetic soundtrack of the film.<sup>440</sup>

*Dead March* is also similarly associated with Julie's subjectivity when she collects the piece of music from the archivist. The tune begins playing as the archivist points out a particularly pleasing section on the score. The music continues playing as Julie walks into the street. She throws the sheets into a garbage truck, watching the paper being destroyed. The music begins to distort and a few seconds later, comes to an abrupt end. Despite Julie's destruction of the score, it returns to haunt her, not simply in the form of the second copy, but in the way the music is associated with her periodic blackouts and intrusion of unbidden memories. *Dead March* thus functions as a return of the dead, but as I discuss in the next part of this chapter, ultimately endured by Julie.

The swimming pool scenes also become an opportunity for the merging of colour, light and music. Paulus and McMaster observe that in the second pool scene, shortly

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<sup>440</sup> Paulus and McMaster, "Music in Krzysztof Kieslowski's Film "Three Colours: Blue". A Rhapsody in Shades of Blue: The Reflections of a Musician," 70.

after Julie meets Antoine, the two musical themes are juxtaposed in order to convey Julie's inner struggle. After swimming, she lifts herself out of the pool, and *Dead March* begins playing. Julie stops, paralysed by an anguished memory, and then lets herself slowly sink back into the water. After a few seconds, however, the tune is interrupted by *Memento*, which in turn, is then drowned out by *Dead March*. Paulus and McMaster write:

It would seem that their powers are identical, but as the scene begins and ends with the *Dead March* (an element of the sudden welling up of pain and memory)...it becomes clear that the return to the world of reality will be for her neither simple nor easy.<sup>441</sup>

It is also significant, however, that both *Dead March* and *Memento* will eventually form part of the essential musical structures of *Concerto for the Unification of Europe*. While the themes are musically different, their integration in the scene, however resistant, indicates a growing dialogue between Julie's conscious and unconscious mind.<sup>442</sup>

When Julie sinks back into the swimming pool, she resigns to floating, mimicking a corpse. Emma Wilson argues that the pool scenes are central to the narrative, providing prime spaces to explore the semiotic.<sup>443</sup> Julie's continual submersion in blue pools of water dramatises a heightened interaction with the unconscious, and invokes both chromatic and psychological associations. Filmed through a blue filter, the swimming pool scenes are made intensely bright to the extent that colour becomes an abstraction, transcending any concrete aspect of the *mise-en-scène*. Julie's foetal-like position as she floats recalls amniotic imagery, and as Wilson claims, provides a "means of

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<sup>441</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid. Paulus and McMaster explain that *Dead March* is governed by the wind instruments and by contrast, *Memento* by the string instruments (74).

<sup>443</sup> Wilson, "Kieślowski's Lost Daughter: *Three Colours: Blue*," 24 – 25. Wilson refers to Julia Kristeva's conception of the semiotic. As Kelly Oliver explains, Kristeva describes the semiotic, one of the essential constituents of signification, as "the bodily drive as it is discharged in signification...associated with the rhythms, tones, and movement of signifying practices." The symbolic, the other element that signification requires, is associated with language and makes reference possible (Kelly Oliver, "Kristeva and Feminism," <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/kristeva.html>).

commemorating mother-child symbiosis.”<sup>444</sup> The scenes are also infused by the liminality of the colour blue, and suggest both drowning and rebirth, death and healing.

As in *Don't Look Now*, water has the potential to become a surrogate for the unconscious mind. If one tracks the progression of the four swimming pool scenes, one can discern an expressly non-linear pattern of development that oscillates between regression and recovery. The first two scenes are distinguishable as they are set at night, emphasising Julie's isolation as she swims in the empty pool. The third pool scene is closely linked to Julie's incident with the mice that take residence in her spare room. Deathly frightened of the rodents, she borrows a neighbour's cat in order to kill them. She flees to her place of refuge, but this time in the middle of the day. Pulling herself out of the water, she is interrupted by Lucille, a prostitute and stripper who lives in her building and with whom Julie gradually forms a bond. Relenting from her strict avoidance of human connections, Julie confides in her about the dead mice, and her fear of returning to the apartment. Lucille offers to take care of the situation. As she leaves Julie, taking the keys to her apartment, a group of young girls run past her, screaming as they jump into the swimming pool. Julie is mortified, yet she does not flee from the pool; instead, she sinks halfway back into it, shutting her eyes against its wall in an expression of frustration. The moment reiterates that Julie is being forced to interact with her pain: she is saved from having to witness the unquestionably confrontational scene of death – of a mother and her babies – waiting for her back at the apartment; however, she must see and hear a group of children that serve as an evident reminder of her loss.

The final swimming pool scene occurs after Julie's interaction with her husband's mistress, Sandrine. In the unlikely setting of the strip club where Lucille works, Julie catches a televised interview between Olivier and the reporter seen earlier in the narrative. The implied eroticism of Lucille is complex, if not contradictory: at the club,

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid., 25.

she offhandedly feels up her co-worker while she sorrowfully recounts for Julie the sighting of her father in the audience. Lucille also, however, proclaims to love the sexual aspect of her work. Interestingly, it is in this context of the Parisian underground, where desire, desensitisation and confrontation meet, that Julie is awakened to her and Patrice's life, and its own sexual promiscuity emerges. Photographs of Patrice flash across the screen, some of which are with Julie; others, with a woman whom Julie does not recognise. While these images do not directly emerge from Julie's vault of recollections, the photographs nevertheless jolt Julie into a state of probing enquiry into the memory of her husband.

After meeting with Sandrine, who she discovers is pregnant with Patrice's child, Julie visits the pool at night. She dives into the water, and then disappears from sight. The camera pans, apparently searching for her, but is unsuccessful. Suddenly, Julie emerges from the water, coughing and spluttering in what appears to be a resisted suicide attempt. If one considers water as a site for unconscious exploration, however, Julie does not appear to have made such an injurious move. Conceived in a more symbolic register, her lengthy submersion signifies her deep interaction with the recesses of her mind.<sup>445</sup> In the next scene, she visits her mother, and finds her watching television again. The image on the screen of a tight-rope walker is significant as it expresses Julie's development: she is no longer the free-falling bungee jumper diving into empty space, but teetering

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<sup>445</sup> In *Il y a longtemps que je t'aime* (2008, d/Claudel), the swimming pool also functions similarly to represent an engagement between the conscious and the unconscious. It is primarily in the swimming pool that estranged sisters Juliette and Léa are seen to reconnect gradually, free from the social realities of their respective lives: they can, in a sense, gradually return to their relationship prior to Juliette's prison sentence. As they paddle around the circular pool, it is also where Juliette finally verbalises her feelings: Léa gossips about their fellow swimmers, and friends, when Juliette unexpectedly says to her: "You'd forgotten about me all those years." The pool comes to represent not only Juliette's resurgence of communication with her sister, but with her own self, and her repressed fears and desires. In *21 Grams*, Cristina swims with her sister; after she loses her husband and children, she swims alone, telling Paul that "it's the only thing that makes me feel normal." Like *Bleu*, the narratives of *Il y a longtemps que je t'aime* and *21 Grams* gear towards a sense of rebirth as the characters quietly submerge themselves.

precariously as she tries to maintain her balance. In turning away from her mother, who is plagued by memory loss, she conveys a rejection of her own memory avoidance.

While Julie is associated throughout the narrative with a blankness, with an impassive, cavernous space, her attempt at denial is always undermined: she always opens her eyes, or comes up for air. While Julie repeatedly immerses herself in darkness, in a supposed “nothing,” it is possible, though unknown to her, that through her actions she forges her own fragmented path of engagement with a precarious healing.

## An endless mourning

As Tammy Clewell argues, it is not difficult to view the end of *Bleu* as redemptive.<sup>446</sup> On a surface level, Julie’s process appears to subscribe to Freud’s normal mourning in that her lost objects are eventually replaced: she is able to withdraw her libido from Patrice, and invest it in Olivier. Sandrine’s pregnancy, a symbol of new life, can be seen as a substitution for Anna. The completion of the concerto can also be read accordingly: as Jahan Ramazani argues, artistic elegies are often constructed as a form of consolation, providing for the mourner a lyrical form of relief.<sup>447</sup> I offer an analysis, however, that unsettles the conception of Julie’s recovery and works to maintain the narrative sense of absence and ambiguity.

The film’s final montage sequence consists of a series of shots, each of which captures a person whom Julie has encountered since her trauma. It begins shortly after a phone conversation where Julie informs Olivier that she has completed the concerto. He insists she claims the music as her own; or, he says, he will complete an awkward, second-rate version. With her back to the camera, dressed in blue, Julie asks Olivier if he still loves her, which he confirms. She looks at the score one last time, and runs her

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<sup>446</sup> Clewell, “The Shades of Modern Mourning in *Three Colours* trilogy,” 205.

<sup>447</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, ix.

finger over a line of music: the concerto begins playing, and continues until the last image of the film. Julie rolls up the sheets of music, and as she leaves the room, the camera captures her from behind the blue crystal chandelier. The montage occurs as follows:

1. A close-up of Julie and Olivier making love. Julie's face is pressed up against glass.
2. Antoine, bathed in a blue light, awakens and switches off his alarm clock. He wears Julie's necklace.
3. Julie's mother closes her eyes. In the background, a nurse can be seen running into the room.
4. A close-up of Lucille as she watches a sex show at work.
5. Sandrine has a sonogram, watching in wonder at the ultrasound image of her foetus.
6. An extreme close-up of Olivier's eye. Reflected in the pupil is a naked Julie, her back to Olivier.
7. A close-up of Julie's face, a single tear on her cheek. A faded blue light, which appears to come from outside, begins to form a moving pattern on the image. A tear slides down her other cheek. She moves her hands away from her mouth, an indiscernible expression on her face.

Long intervals of black screen form the transitions between the shots. The extended period for which they remain suggest that they not only function as invisible wipes, but should be treated as an engagement with darkness; a reiteration of absence. The tightly framed image of Julie and Olivier making love makes it appear as though they are simultaneously under water and in a grave: the glass box which they appear to inhabit is framed by an indefinable type of root or coral. Though, as Izod and Dovalis observe, Julie's sexual passion is not lacking, the image is imbued with an uncanny sense of otherworldliness.<sup>448</sup> The following shots of Antoine, Julie's mother and Lucille, are also

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<sup>448</sup> Izod and Dovalis, "Grieving, Therapy, Cinema and Kiesłowski's *Trois Couleurs: Bleu*," 69.

structured with a similar stylistic abstraction that clouds their meaning. The characters are all depicted as essentially alone, but the sense of shared isolation is not despairing. Sandrine, who arguably provides the most typically vital image of the series, is not intended to provide the spectator with a sense of comfort. In comparison to the ending of *21 Grams*, where it is the bereaved mother who falls pregnant and re-enters her daughters' room, *Bleu* highlights Julie's separation from these consolations; instead, it is her husband's mistress who falls pregnant with Patrice's child and moves into Julie's family home. Her crucifix necklace, a symbol of faith and connection to her past, now belongs to another.

The final two images of the film are essential in that they recall earlier instances in the narrative, yet inscribe them with new meaning. The first, an extreme close-up of Olivier's eye, echoes the image of Julie's eye when she first awakens after the accident; however, the fact that Julie is now the image reflected addresses the negotiation between vision and absence, suggesting the possibility that her traumatised subjectivity has been eased by her interaction with Olivier. Julie's reflected figure, however, does not provide a sense of relief: her naked, turned away body invokes a sense of absence and alienation, and also engages with the earlier images in the film where the spectator is denied access to Julie's vision.

The final image of the film, a close-up of Julie, recalls the way the camera continually and ostensibly focuses on her face throughout the narrative, but never allows the spectator an explicit representation of her inner thoughts. On one hand, her tears indicate, as Clewell writes, that "Julie does not neutralize but renews the pain of loss."<sup>49</sup> As Franco Moretti writes in his essay, "Kindergarten," which analyses the phenomenon of tears, "We cry when something is lost and cannot be regained. Time is the ultimate

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<sup>49</sup> Clewell, "The Shades of Modern Mourning in *Three Colours* trilogy," 205.

object of loss; we cry at the irreversibility of time.”<sup>450</sup> Julie’s loss, as the nurse in the hospital unwittingly suggests, cannot be recovered. The image insistently returns to the blue light, which visually disrupts Julie’s face, and highlights the second tear that falls down her face. Her tears can also be read, according to Slavoj Žižek, as a mixture of anguish and release, as Julie finally appears to engage with her grief. Žižek contends that

this shot does not stage the re-entrance of the heroine from isolation into contact with others, but, rather, that painful act of gaining the proper distance towards (social) reality after the shock which exposed her naked to reality’s impact.<sup>451</sup>

He further observes that one does not cry only in moments of sadness, but in relief: “Happiness also has its tears.”<sup>452</sup> Interestingly, though Žižek does not connect it to the earlier scene of Julie laughing at the reminder of Patrice’s joke, he adds, “Despair also has its laughter.”<sup>453</sup> Read this way, the film can be seen to engage with the complexities of emotion.

The final image insistently returns to the blue light, which visually disrupts Julie’s face, and highlights the second tear that falls down her face. The part of the concerto that plays is derived from *Memento*, recalling the narrative association between colour, light and music; while Julie’s sense of triumph is derived from the building crescendo throughout the montage, and by the increased assurance that Julie has composed the music one hears, the final image returns to the subtler notes of *Memento* reminding the spectator of Julie’s isolation. The image can be seen as a representative for much of the

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<sup>450</sup> Moretti quoted in Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres*, ed. Nick Browne, 169 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>451</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears. Krzysztof Kieslowski: Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 177.

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*

narrative, oscillating between death and rebirth, mourning and denial, representation and its refusal. Clewell writes of the film's ending:

In an amazing conjunction of sound and images...*Blue* illustrates a work of endless mourning that voices all the ambivalence of modern grief, while it also reconnects both self and other, and past and present in the interminable wake of loss.

Like the teetering tight-rope walker, Julie does not project a vision of absolute mastery and relief, but the ambiguities of grief.

Dominick LaCapra argues that in recent trauma theory, Freud's definition of a melancholic response to loss has a tendency to be seen as a wholly destructive force, impossible of providing cure.<sup>454</sup> Kiesłowski's film experiments with the complexities of recovery, moving between depictions of Julie's denial as a hopeless coping method and as a quietened space to confront and gradually explore her hidden memories. But if the film is seen to conjure a sense of positivity and healing, it is as a result of its rejection of therapeutic ideals. The end of the narrative sees changes implemented in Julie's world that would typically promise relief. The final montage sequence consciously plays with typically consoling symbols of religion and birth, but reiterates Julie's irreplaceable loss. As Clewell argues, however, the images and sounds also reconnect her to the memory of the lost other. Her recovery will never be complete but, at the same time, what is arguably a small, pained smile on her face immediately before the film ends hints at a sense of clarity and self-awareness.

Kiesłowski's film expresses the nuances of trauma and mourning: its denial and emptiness, its moments of unpredictable humour, and most fascinatingly, the way in which the victim may disavow the possibility of new life and love. The film's real power, however, is in the way it articulates these complexities by association of affect and

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<sup>454</sup> LaCapra, "An Interview with Professor Dominick LaCapra," 3.

representation. Using the aesthetic of music, colour and light to plot Julie's inner world, *Bleu* captures the ineffable through a series of absences, ambiguities and liminal spaces which ultimately illuminates the cinematic medium's potential to find new ways of representing traumatic loss.

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## Conclusion: Beyond the Unrepresentable

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Thomas Elsaesser proposes that trauma theory is more about recovered referentiality than recovered memory.<sup>455</sup> Drawing on its defining concept of belatedness, he emphasises trauma less as a single catastrophic event than the way it stimulates a revision of its meaning in the eventual present. He writes, crucially, that “[s]uch referentiality, however, can only be recovered through interpretation.”<sup>456</sup> Elsaesser, thus, highlights that the essence of trauma can only be revealed through a repeated and self-conscious reconstruction. He does not imply that trauma is beyond signification, or belonging to the excesses of the Real, but instead, that its comprehension relies on an insistent interpretation that is bound by a simultaneous presence and absence.

Susannah Radstone observes that the value of Elsaesser’s concept is that it provides a space for the aporetic nature of trauma to be explored, rather than presenting definitive answers.<sup>457</sup> So, too, my own entry point into the debate starts with the problem of how to represent trauma, and the paradoxes that characterise answering this question. The dialectical nature of my analytical and theoretical investigation has necessitated that I analyse the ways in which cinema articulates trauma, and, thus, I have had to confront the apparent impasse of explicating how to represent a subject that is deemed unrepresentable. The nature of trauma, however, testifies to this very paradox, and it is for this reason that Elsaesser claims that trauma theory puzzlingly “acts both as a launch-

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<sup>455</sup> Elsaesser, “Postmodernism as mourning work,” 201.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

<sup>457</sup> Susannah Radstone, “Trauma and Screen Studies: Opening the Debate,” *Screen* 42, no. 2, Special Debate: Trauma and Screen Studies (2001): 190.

pad and a landing stage.”<sup>458</sup> Cinema, I have aimed to demonstrate, has the capacity to act as the interpretive force that recovers referentiality, and more so, opens up the complexities of traumatic loss and grief.

My theoretical discussion progresses from a description of the polarisation in contemporary trauma theory to a merging of post-structuralism and psychoanalysis. The crucial difference between these two perspectives mainly emerges from their interpretation of traumatic time: for Freud, while trauma disrupts linear temporality, it can always be recuperated through ‘the talking cure.’ Cathy Caruth, though using Freud’s work as a theoretical springboard, locates trauma as an incomprehensible entity that can never be narrativised, or assimilated into the structure of time. Elsaesser proposes, however, that in considering trauma as a referential mode of recovery, it refers to “a temporality that acknowledges (deconstruction’s) deferral and (the psychoanalyst’s) double time of *Nachträglichkeit*.”<sup>459</sup> My key films reflect Elsaesser’s perspective, conveying the need for a complex tension between post-structuralism and psychoanalysis, denial and recovery, repetition and narrativisation.

My analyses have explored major elements concerning traumatic grief and mourning that illuminate the ambiguous representational capabilities of cinema in the films *21 Grams*, *In the Bedroom*, *Don’t Look Now*, *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Trois Couleurs: Bleu*. I have focused on questions of genre integration, alternative plot structures and the capabilities of the cinematic medium to evoke a self-conscious awareness of representation.

My chapter on *21 Grams* explored the trend of temporal fragmentation in trauma cinema, and its obstacles in achieving character complexity. While the problems in the narrative could be located irrespective of their relevance to trauma theory, the isolated

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<sup>458</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>459</sup> Elsaesser, “Postmodernism as mourning work,” 201.

moments of sensational violence and character transformation affected the conceptualisation of Cristina's loss. Initially structured as an unlocatable, missed encounter, her trauma is easily recuperated into a curative realm of redemption. The film suggests that the puzzle element of the unconventional storytelling structure may appear as a "stunt,"<sup>460</sup> rather than a layered evocation of traumatic bewilderment.

Neither *21 Grams* nor *In the Bedroom* is able effectively to handle revenge as a reaction to traumatic loss. In Iñárritu's film, the problems are owing to poor character development; in Field's film, the concerns regard generic conventions. *In the Bedroom* provided the opportunity to examine the tension between dual narrative interests: until the end of the film's second act, it conveys traumatic grief in complex and interesting ways, using the murder of Matt and Ruth's son as motivation to explore the relationship between repressed anger and façades of normality. I discuss the integration of a suburban gothic genre, and its beneficial use in associating domestic horror and (emotional) violence with traumatic states of loss. It is the continuation of this gothic register into a more overt interaction with cinematic myths of revenge that does not work: aside from the sense of narrative discontinuity, which I argue is also a result of a problematic literary adaptation, the film's conclusion eclipses its more evocative representations of a couple torn apart by grief.

*Don't Look Now* involves a more successful assimilation of genre and traumatic loss. Usually defined as a contemporary Gothic thriller, I explored the narrative as a story of repressed mourning, a thread which is only properly realised at the film's end. The narrative's use of unconventional editing, as well as repetitive colour, shapes and symbols reflects an uncanny awareness, a layer of subtext that corresponds to both the supernatural and traumatic elements of the story. The film's resolution, while resolving some elements of the story, offers no comforting explanations of a reliable world order,

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<sup>460</sup> Ebert, "21 Grams."

self-consciously suggesting the impossibility of a complete understanding of trauma, loss, and the unpredictable forces that control one's life.

My discussion on *The Sweet Hereafter* speaks to the concerns raised in my chapter on *21 Grams* as Egoyan's film offers a narrative that finds a balance between plot fragmentation and complexity of story. Through a story that centres on the desire for redemption and blame, the narrative continually and consciously refuses to provide the en-masse tragedy with a cause. Egoyan also plays with conventions of cinematic representation, depicting the central accident from an extreme long shot that rejects the sensationalising of trauma, but more so, conveys a graphic interaction with trauma that is paradoxically expressive of trauma's incomprehensibility. At the core of my discussion is that the narrative does not order itself through story events, though there are many, but through a ghostly stillness of cinematic image that evokes a vital aspect of Elsaesser's concept of referentiality: in association with the narrative's conclusion, which attempts to articulate the strangeness of a post-traumatic state, the film lingers on moments that oscillate between recovery and loss, and presence and absence. The linear disruption does not resolve in the recovery of memory but, instead, insists on reminding the spectator of a state it cannot completely define.

I close with an analysis of *Trois Couleurs: Bleu* because, alongside *Don't Look Now* and *The Sweet Hereafter*, it offers some of the most valuable insights into traumatic grief and loss. It also, however, stands apart from the other films in that it is decidedly void of action, perhaps comparable to the second act of *In the Bedroom* that centres on the couple's wordless, static interaction as they wander through their empty house. In Kieslowski's film, there is no court case, psychic sisters, heart transplants or plots of revenge. It is through an intense focus on Julie's inner life, projected as colour, light and music that the spectator interacts with the narrative. My discussion is shaped around Emma Wilson's observation that the film is "caught in contradiction between

representation and its refusal,"<sup>461</sup> a phrase which could easily be applied to the central question of trauma theory. The narrative obscures Julie's vision, through fades to black, framing, and even the continual focus on her impassive face, articulating the way the bereaved victim attempts to reject an interaction with memory and pain, and simultaneously, the difficulty in capturing such an exceptional experience. *Bleu's* treatment of traumatic recovery and narrative resolution speaks of the cinematic capacity to provide a liminal space to explore the ambiguities of loss, and the same conscious ambiguities that are required in its reconstruction.

I also, however, end my analyses with *Bleu* because the film emphasises the similarities between the selection of films. In the chapter, I make comparisons to all of the previously discussed key films, be it the use of colour and symbolism in *Don't Look Now*, the ironies of trauma in *In the Bedroom*, or the evocation of ambiguity in *The Sweet Hereafter*. *21 Grams*, especially, appears inspired by Kiesłowski's narrative, from the image of Cristina's corpse-like body floating in the swimming pool, to the depiction of the accident scene from the point-of-view of a bystander, and finally, the montage sequence at the film's end. While this can, on one level, be seen as a form of homage, it also testifies to the prevalence and enmeshment of traumatic loss as subject matter in contemporary cinema. In my introduction, I note that the past two decades have yielded a noticeable increase in filmic depictions of people struggling to cope with the sudden, accidental or violent death of a family member. Later in my theoretical discussion, I emphasise a host of similarities between these narratives, which range from temporal disruption to a rejection of curative norms. *Don't Look Now* acts as a precursor to this cinema, an earlier manifestation that exhibits a desire to reconstruct trauma in ways that become more relevant with the acknowledgement of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the rise of trauma theory. In interesting ways the observation of cinema's self-

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<sup>461</sup> Wilson, "Three Colours: *Blue*. Kiesłowski, colour and the postmodern subject," 351.

referentiality also mirrors Elsaesser's concept of trauma as a recovered revision of the past, and further recognises cinema's potential to experiment within its own structures.

The comparison between *21 Grams* and *Bleu* extends to the thesis' central concerns of trauma and representation. As I suggest prior to my analyses, but which the key films in this study also demonstrate, there is no prototype for trauma cinema to depict loss and grief; instead, films such as *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Bleu* and *Don't Look Now* approach trauma with the intention of ambiguity. What these narratives do confirm, however, is that trauma is certainly not unrepresentable. Through the awareness of post-structural concerns and the challenges that are pertinent to the representation of trauma, cinema can create subtle yet vivid narrativisations of mourning. In isolation, trauma theory may serve as both launching-pad and landing stage, but it is by means of signification and interpretation that it can find ways to move beyond the limits of the unrepresentable.

# Filmography

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## Primary Films

*21 Grams*. Directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu. USA: Focus Features, 2003.

*Don't Look Now*. Directed by Nicolas Roeg. UK: British Lion Film Corporation, 1973.

*In the Bedroom*. Directed by Todd Field. USA: Miramax Films, 2001.

*The Sweet Hereafter*. Directed by Atom Egoyan. Canada: Alliance Communications Corporation, 1997.

*Trois Couleurs: Bleu*. Directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski. France: MK2 Diffusion, 1993.

## Secondary Films

*11:14*. Directed by Greg Marcks. USA: New Line Cinema, 2003.

*Après Lui*. Directed by Gaël Morel. France, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2007.

*Amores Perros*. Directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu. Argentina: Eurocine, 2001.

*Antichrist*. Directed by Lars von Trier. USA: IFC Films, 2009.

*Blue Velvet*. Directed by David Lynch. USA: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986.

*Dolores Claiborne*. Directed by Taylor Hackford. USA: Columbia Pictures, 1995.

*Elephant*. Directed by Gus van Sant. USA: HBO Films, 2003.

*Genova*. Directed by Michael Winterbottom. UK: Metrodome Distribution, 2008.

*Hiroshima Mon Amour*. Directed by Alain Resnais. France: Cocinor, 1959.

*Il y a longtemps que je t'aime.* Directed by Philippe Claudel. France: UGC Distribution, 2008.

*Irréversible.* Directed by Gaspar Noé. France: Mars Distribution, 2002.

*Lantana.* Directed by Ray Lawrence. Australia: Palace Films, 2001.

*La Stanza del Figlio.* Directed by Nanni Moretti. Italy: Sacher Distribuzione, 2001.

*Memento.* Directed by Christopher Nolan. USA: Newmarket Films, 2000.

*Minority Report.* Directed by Steven Spielberg. USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2002.

*Moonlight Mile.* Directed by Brad Silberling. USA: Touchstone Home Video, 2002.

*Mystic River.* Directed by Clint Eastwood. USA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2003.

*Ordinary People.* Directed by Robert Redford. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1980.

*Pulp Fiction.* Directed by Quentin Tarantino. USA: Miramax Films, 1994.

*Rabbit Hole.* Directed by John Cameron Mitchell. USA: Lionsgate, 2010.

*Rachel Getting Married.* Directed by Jonathan Demme. USA: Sony Pictures Classic, 2008.

*Red Road.* Directed by Andrea Arnold. UK: Verve Pictures, 2006.

*Reservation Road.* Directed by Terry George. USA: Focus Features, 2007.

*Reservoir Dogs.* Directed by Quentin Tarantino. USA: Miramax Films, 1992.

*Short Cuts.* Directed by Robert Altman. USA: Fine Line Features, 1993.

*Shutter Island.* Directed by Martin Scorsese. USA: Paramount Pictures, 2010.

*The Brave One.* Neil Jordan. USA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2007.

*The Constant Gardener.* Directed by Fernando Meirelles. USA: Focus Features, 2005.

*The Comfort of Strangers.* Directed by Paul Schrader. USA: Madacy Entertainment Group, 1990.

*The Crucible*. Directed by Nicolas Hytner. USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1996.

*The Door in the Floor*. Directed by Tod Williams. USA: Focus Features, 2004.

*The Ice Storm*. Directed by Ang Lee. USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1997.

*The Road*. Directed by John Hillcoat. USA: Dimension Films, 2009.

*The Witches of Eastwick*. Directed by George Miller. USA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 1987.

*Titanic*. Directed by James Cameron. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1997.

*Trois Couleurs: Blanc*. Directed by Krzysztof Kiesłowski. France: MK2 Diffusion, 1994.

*Trois Couleurs: Rouge*. Directed by Krzysztof Kiesłowski. France: MK2 Diffusion, 1995.

## Theatre

*Desire Under the Elms*. Written by Eugene O'Neill. NY, USA: Greenwich Village Theatre, 1924.

*Mourning Becomes Electra*. Written by Eugene O'Neill. NY, USA: Guild Theatre, 1931.

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