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Andrew Asibong

Deadness, replacement and the divinely new: *45 Years* (2015)

For me, it is in the film's first ten minutes, when Geoff (Tom Courtenay) utters the words 'my Katya', just after he's read a letter telling him in German that his dead girlfriend of 1962 has been found, preserved in a frozen glacier on a Swiss mountain, that the horror of *45 Years* begins. This is the moment when Kate (Charlotte Rampling), after forty-five years of marriage to Geoff, finds herself uncannily replaced by the glittering spectre of her husband's suddenly re-vivified, un-mourned, earlier love-object. The film goes on to show us Kate's mind collapsing in on itself, her sense of being a real, knowable, loveable person evaporating at an alarming rate. What if this is no temporary aberration in Geoff's mind? If Katya really *was* Geoff's one true love, then what does that make Kate? Can we really become 'nothing', the film needlingly asks, just because we have been 'replaced' – or fear we have – in the mind of the one we love?

Andrew Haigh's cinema has always been preoccupied by the kind of envy that is provoked when one is terrified of being replaced by a more desirable version of oneself, a version of oneself that is both more powerful and more dead. The little-seen 'mockumentary' *Greek Pete* (2009) trailed pornographic model, actor and escort Peter Pittaros, constantly in danger of having his soul eclipsed by his glamorous, Covent Garden-dwelling, sexual fantasy-based alter ego 'Greek Pete'. The film effortlessly captured the complex phenomenon of 'self-envy' (cf. López-Corvo: 1995), wherein an individual finds themselves in competition with aspects of themselves from which they feel traumatically dissociated. The more mainstream *Weekend* (2011), Haigh's breakthrough film, on the surface told the story of two men falling in love after picking each other up in a Nottingham nightclub on a Friday night; but it is simultaneously a film which documents the envious loneliness of watching others either pairing off or disappearing into their own narcissistic sunset while one feels oneself to be unloveable. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the film's own impossibly romantic miracle of love between Russell (Tom Cullen) and Glen (Chris New) seems often to be experienced by gay male spectators with a strong degree of wistful identification, melancholia and projection.¹ Both *Greek Pete* and *Weekend* leave me strangely affected by their provocative representations of splitting, abandonment and longing. Their characters seem to lack the 'alive' core which reassures the viewer that emotional meaning and psychical stability exist. I find myself almost embarrassingly moved at the end of both these films to 'check in' with

NOTES

¹ The final paragraph from the online review of *Weekend* by blogger Adam (2014) gives some flavour of this: 'Who knows, perhaps after a few years, Glen will return to Russell and they will finally be able to complete each other. We should all be so lucky'.

myself, to find proof that I truly exist, that my thoughts are real and tangible, that (to paraphrase the late pop singer George Michael – a lyricist obsessed with addictive romantic replacement, if ever there was one) I, the voyeuristic spectator, have, in 'real life', been loved.

In *45 Years*, Kate must struggle to convince both herself and her husband that she is more alive, more desirable, more 'real' than the frozen Katya-object which she imagines to be internalized, perfectly preserved, in Geoff's psyche. The situation is oddly reminiscent of the challenge incumbent upon any analyst of the kind of patient André Green (2005) would have described as suffering from a 'dead mother complex' – that form of post-traumatic psychopathology wherein the developing infant internalizes a maternal imago which, for complex intra-psychical and environmental reasons, s/he comes to experience as lifeless, zombified, spectral. This deathly internalization swells up monstrously to choke the infant's unconscious mind and libido, which is consequently riddled with psychical 'holes'. One result of such a complex is a severely damaged capacity to love, and accept love, from the living. As Green puts it, 'the subject's objects remain constantly at the limit of the ego, not wholly within, and not quite without. And with good reason, for the place is occupied, in its centre, by the dead mother' (154). Katya may not be Geoff's 'dead mother', but Geoff is nevertheless depicted as a man whose psychological structure as an adult appears to be organized around an archaic need to serve, preserve and somehow *animate* a lifeless woman upon whom he continues to project a thwarted desire, rather than to engage with the living woman who loves him. How can Kate possibly hope to triumph over this corpse-bride of Geoff's nostalgia? How can she reassert herself as a subject in her own right, rather than as a bland replacement for the deathless, irreplaceable Katya? Moreover, the film insists with unnerving cruelty on Kate's lifelong collusion with her own retroactive annihilation. She speaks of a time 'before *we* existed'; sighs that she doesn't want '*us* to start smoking again'. We get a clear sense of *Geoff's* political values (he is a Tory-baiting socialist); *Geoff's* interests (bird-watching; Kierkegaard; climate change); *Geoff's* various quirks and idiosyncrasies (secret smoking; beating his chest like a geriatric Tarzan) – but Kate's loves and pet hates (other than two shared pets: 'Max' and the late 'Tessa'), are hard to discern. Who *is* this woman, outside the ideologically-sustained, normative identity of 'Geoff and Kate'? In her friendship with the bossy Lena (Geraldine James), a 'fascist', in Geoff's view, Kate is oddly passive and subtly bullied. She snipes at the unctuous organizer of the anniversary party, using 'anti-bourgeois' taunts that appear lamely borrowed from Geoff. Kate is trapped in a veritable nightmare of self-eradicating isolation, a lonely echo-chamber, neatly exemplified when she phones an absent and non-responsive Geoff from Norwich city centre, only to be confronted with the answering message she herself has recorded on his behalf.

It seems to me that what Haigh's film demands of both Kate *and* the spectator is that she – we – move beyond a self-annihilating envy of dead and tantalizing objects to locate something within herself – ourselves – that might be called alive, connected, real. Fairbairn writes brilliantly and movingly of our internal battles with dissociated, post-traumatic, rivalrous 'sub-egos', suggesting that psychical splitting tends to occur along early phantasmatic fault-lines, which organize internalized others as alternately 'exciting' and 'rejecting'. When the living-dead Katya is reawakened in Geoff's mind as his object of desire, emerging as simultaneously unattainable and impossibly lovely, it is significant that his character seems to develop markedly regressed and schizoid tendencies: he starts to suck furiously and privately on cigarettes, retreating to the masturbatory attic of nostalgia where Katya's ghost resides. This suddenly howling, haunted attic functions in the film as the psychical retreat where a suddenly fragmented and secretive Geoff can hide both physically and emotionally, tantalizing the living characters who seek connection with him in this important anniversary week, whilst he himself is unbearably tantalized by the un-dead Katya. He is not altogether unlike Jack Nicholson's character (also named Jack) in Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980),² taken over by glamorous ghosts from the past while his long-suffering wife Wendy (Shelley Duvall) looks helplessly on. Another cinematic precursor is Bernard (Jean-Baptiste Thiérrée) in Resnais's *Muriel ou le temps d'un retour* (1963), obsessively watching slides and old film footage;³ in *Muriel* these evoke the Algerian torture-victim (raped and murdered by him and fellow French soldiers) whom he enigmatically names 'Muriel', his current fiancée Marie-Do (Martine Vatel) unable to intervene or make contact with him from her world of the living.⁴ Like Jack and Bernard, Geoff seems to need to dwell outside time (he does not wear a watch for this stated reason), in a darkness populated only by nostalgic images of the past (interestingly, he loses his erection as soon as Kate tells him to open his eyes).⁵

Patricia Polledri argues that envy is most destructive and self-annihilating in people who, for psychical reasons linked to their early experiences of relationality, lack internal

² *45 Years* seems also to mirror *The Shining* in its construction around inter-titles announcing each successive day of the week as a further stage of spectral breakdown.

³ *45 Years* places so much emphasis on Geoff's slides and their impact on the protagonists' psychical landscape that the sounds of them being changed are grafted onto the opening credits.

⁴ It is hard not also to think of Resnais's more famous film *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), when watching *45 Years*, another cinematic narrative about finding that one is the replacement for a traumatically preserved, 'living-dead' German: 'C'était mon premier amour!'

⁵ Tom Courtenay shot to fame, of course, playing an incorrigible fantasist (*Billy Liar*, Schlesinger, 1963), whilst Charlotte Rampling's re-booted career has often seen *her* cast in the role of ghoulish and (literally) masturbatory fantasy-addict (see *Under the Sand* (Ozon, 2001); *Swimming Pool* (Ozon, 2003); *Heading South* (Cantet, 2005)).

images of themselves in relationship with an other. 'Sally was left without a picture, or a symbol of herself, in relation to a life-sustaining object,' she notes in an extended discussion (69) of her psychotherapeutic work with one particular patient. Polledri goes on:

I added that as she had no picture in her mind of herself in an interaction with a maternal figure, she was attached to her experience of being in a black hole, confused and frightened, fearing the hooded messenger of death [...] When I [as her therapist] was not available, all she could discern within herself was the 'lost' part and the feeling was about death and violence [...] At this stage, she went into the bathroom, vomited and retched. She went into the waiting room and remained there, sitting on the floor, with her head in her hands, sobbing, like a frightened child. (74–75)

What I find most useful about Polledri's clinical discussion of post-traumatic envy is the challenge it leaves us with: a challenge to find ways of dynamizing and replacing internalized deadness, or 'encapsulated containerlessness', as Polledri puts it, with something alive and real. Such a replacement is not effected merely by swapping one person for another. There is, in any case, no original person to swap, merely a ghastly internalized phantasy of one (or rather the absence of one). Polledri's account of this particularly transformative session with her patient evokes a miraculous finding of words – in the form of an especially vivid interpretation – which seem, no matter how painfully, to disrupt the frozen representations and non-representations of Sally's un-mirrored, envious psyche. She literally retches out of self-recognition.

One way we might experience the viscerally unforgettable final scene of *45 Years* – Kate's visible emotional disintegration on the dance floor with Geoff at their forty-fifth wedding anniversary party as they move together to The Platters' 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' – is as a cinematic enactment of a mutative psychoanalytic interpretation. The film has been building to this climactic *snap* throughout its deadly mounting of horror, and it is only when the musical break finally comes – after the pictures of the hitherto pictureless marriage the 'fascist' friend Lena so helpfully provides as an anniversary gift, after the desperately awkward words Geoff has just spoken in tribute to his wife, and, significantly, after Kate, like Polledri's patient, has had to flee to the bathroom – that I think we can genuinely feel the frozen, gnawing deadness melting, giving way, like a glacier under the influence of climate change, to a living, flowing pain. Jed Sekoff describes the process beautifully, even though he is writing long before the film was made, because he too is describing the psychical process of disinterring an internal ghost:

If we keep in mind that it is not death *per se* that we are contending with, but stasis – the freezing of movement across psychological pathways – then we are not left to peddle the necromancer’s art [...] The therapeutic task is to raise the possibility of constituting absence, in place of an adherence to deadness. Yet, this absence must constitute an opening out, up, or into a potential presence. In Green’s language, the something of absence must take the space of the no-thing that the dead mother ‘unpresents’. (122–123)

As Kate shivers, trembles and, spectacularly, ‘loses it’ on the dancefloor, pulling further and further away from the obliviously performative Geoff, the viewer at last is granted a sense that something is moving. It is not pleasant, and as we watch Rampling’s face filling Kate’s with a sort of intolerable, physical panic, it seems as if we are witnessing the emotional equivalent of falling backwards off a mountain. But the spell has been broken; the haunting is over. Kate and Geoff may not be granted the sort of disinterred rediscovery of each another that is afforded Ingrid Bergman and George Sanders at the end of that earlier cinematic exploration of English marital deep-freeze, Rossellini’s Pompeii-set *Journey to Italy* (1953); but something no less real and alive has begun to flow.⁶ The song changes. ‘Smoke’ is replaced by The Moody Blues – ‘Go Now!’ – and the film suddenly ends. Music has featured as one more aspect of Kate and Geoff’s life that is nostalgically frozen throughout *45 Years*’ retro soundtrack, as we are treated to everything from Dusty Springfield’s ‘I Only Want to be with You’ to Lulu’s ‘To Sir, With Love’ in the background of the film’s various scenes. And when, earlier in the film, we hear Kate on the phone to the anniversary DJ, suggesting simply ‘The Moody Blues’ to him, almost as a hurried afterthought before she hangs up, it strikes the viewer as strange that she does not specify which particular Moodies track she intends him to play. When ‘Go Now!’ finally comes, it falls like a thunderbolt; another oldie, to be sure, but somehow, uncannily imbued with the divinely new.⁷

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⁶ For a fascinating discussion of this film’s aesthetics of the couple in terms of aliveness and deadness, see Mulvey (2006).

⁷ I am grateful to Naomi Segal for her privately communicated thoughts on the film’s God-like deployment of ‘Go Now!’

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