Love's Revival: Film Practice and the Art of Dying

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Abstract:

Dying serves so often within the narratives of Western popular culture, as an exercise in self-improvement both to the individual dying and to those looking on. It enlightens, ennobles and renders exceptional all those affected by it. Though mainstream cinema's "grammar of dying" is mired in similar myths, film has the potential to do dying differently: it can, instead, connect us, ethically, to the vulnerability of others. The aim of this article is to pursue this potential of film. Using the mainstream grammar of dying as a starting point, I will consider how the moving image, and this ethical potential, is harnessed within two hybrid-media pieces about a loved-one's decline and death: George Saxon's art installation, "A Record of Undying" (2014) and photographer Briony Campbell's short film *The Dad Project* (2009). While these works will be located within the traditions and transformations of moving image practice, the primary concern here is with how such emotionally resonant pieces navigate our relation to, and responsibility for, our own and others' harsh realities. In this way, the question of ethics is grounded not in the solipsistic circuits of affective modes – whether as the catharsis or betterment of mainstream myths, or what Jane Stadler privileges as the ethical effects of empathy – but in something more inherently, more inevitably, political.

Keywords: film practice; dying; ethics.

Death cannot be undone. There is no undoing. No undying. It is final. We might be forgiven for forgetting this at least for a while – if we are lucky

enough, that is, to live untouched by war, famine or personal tragedy for any part of our lives – for this forgetting is sponsored so generously by the lavish fantasies of immortality that populate our screens and imaginations. From the death-defying heroes who dodge bullets and bombs to the extraordinary CPR success rates in hospital dramas, our storytellers nourish us with confections of human invulnerability.

When it comes to mainstream tales of bodily decline, to images of illness and injury or memoirs of diagnosis and debilitation, here too the human form and spirit remain extraordinarily intact. From Bette Davis in *Dark Victory* (Edmund Goulding, 1939) – the *ur text* of mainstream dying – to Ali McGraw in *Love Story* (Arthur Hiller, 1970) to Sofia Vassilieva in *My Sister's Keeper* (Nick Cassavetes, 2009), those approaching death on screen – and they are my primary concern here – exude bravery and goodness, beauty and stoicism. After all, as Jackie Stacey (1997) puts it, "there is always room for heroism in tragedy" (p. 2). While such women – and it is predominantly women, and white women at that, who frequent these mainstream tales – cannot be made better from their illnesses, they can be made better people by their illnesses. Indeed, they can even make others better people by their illnesses. Dying, in other words, serves so often within Western popular culture as an exercise in self-improvement both to the individual dying and to those looking on. It enlightens and ennobles and renders exceptional all those affected by it (Aaron, 2014, pp. 103–26).

Real dying is little like this, of course. It is rarely edifying or rewarding, clean or tidy or painless. It is characterised instead by banality and increasing disability, and by our unremarkable sameness both in terms of our physiology and in how we expire. We all die, without exception or exceptionalism. Though who and where we are shape the nature and manner of our dying and our access to a good life, let alone a good death, none of us is immune to the wages of injury, of disease or of time. This is not to say that dying cannot be a profound and meaningful experience, a "distinguished thing" (Henry James as quoted in Wharton, 1934, p. 367) – this is not to say that at all – but that the myths about it, endlessly repeated in the public imagination, stifle its profundity and divert its meaning away from the truths of the body and of relationships, social and personal, for sensational and sentimental and, as I will argue later, solipsistic effect. Such diversions shield us from the tangles of life, love and politics, and block any deeper confrontation with our shared humanity and vulnerability.

It is this deeper confrontation that I want to explore here, and specifically how film enables rather than forecloses it: how it might require the spectator to face head-on and up to death and, thus, connect

us to the vulnerability of others and ourselves. I have written previously of how mainstream film provides a rich language to convey the frailties and profundity of dying – with Hollywood as chief grammarian – but one that serves mostly mythic ends (Aaron, 2014). Film has the potential, however, to do dying differently, to render it, after Elaine Scarry (1985), "shareable" (p. 4), everyday and opposing the "debased forms of power" (p. 14) that commonly underpin the mediation of others' suffering (Aaron, 2014; Sontag, 1977, 2003).

In what follows, I pursue this potential through addressing film's use within other art practices. Detaching film practice from mainstream film culture and conventions reflects the seismic shifts in where, how and why we now watch or use audio-visual narratives – in other words, the utter ubiquity of film, in its widest definition – and their application within a vast array of cultural, commercial and third sector agendas in the digital age. Film became, as Hal Foster put it in 2003, the "default media" (p. 93) of contemporary art, but is, increasingly, the default media of contemporary life. Most importantly, this detachment sharpens the focus upon film praxis, upon how theory and practice are brought to bear on making and sharing work on human vulnerability for more personal and socio-political ends. In turning to the use of film in the art of dying, my concern then lies not with the medium itself or its hybridity, nor with art's and its scholarship's rich recent history of mining the mortal implications of the still and moving image (see Townsend, 2008; Wilson, 2012). Neither am I focused on existing examples of elegiac lens-based works such as by Bill Viola (1992), Annie Leibovitz (2006) or Sophie Calle (2007). Though the pieces I explore below are indebted to this history, and to this work, less common concerns – of how the practitioners navigate the emotional, aesthetic and myth-making affordances of the moving image, and their loved ones and their own, on-screen, pain – preoccupy us here.

Within the development of moving image or lens-based art, the tension between the still and moving has dominated discussion, as their contested categorisation affirms (see Leighton, 2008, p. 11). Whether in terms of the temporal complexities of photography and film, then (Bazin, 1967; Barthes, 1981; Sontag, 1977) and more recently (Beckman & Ma, 2008; Campany, 2007; Green & Lowry, 2005; Mulvey, 2006), or the evolution of video art (Meigh-Andrews, 2006; Westgeest, 2016), hybrid moving images (Kim, 2016) or slow cinema (De Luca & Jorge, 2016), the dynamic between the indexical and illusory, the fixed and flexible, propels burgeoning debate on the fecundity, or redundancies, of medium interaction.

Recourse to death is common in these texts, and I will return to this below; recourse to politics or ideology less so. In her discussion of lens-based "palliative" art, Emma Wilson (2012) respects but rejects André

Bazin's and Roland Barthes' loss-locked designations of film and photography's reckoning with time and death. Her ascription favours, instead, something more sensuous and productive of the moving image, that enables, specifically in its application and generation of love and affect, an "opening to vulnerability" as an "occasion for a more trenchant politics and ethics" (p. 20). Love and affect are Wilson's "privileged responses" (p. 156) to loss in palliative works; however, despite the appeal to Giorgio Agamben (1998) and Judith Butler (2009), her claim for a resulting shared vulnerability with the grievable and lovable (p.18) but amorphous other, remains vague (perhaps obediently so, after Mignolo [2009]) and therefore depoliticised. Where the radicality of moving image art about dying is sought here also, so too is the bio- or necro-political precision – the deathly stakes of socio-cultural difference – that gives it weight (Aaron, 2014), even within the Western context and comforts of the works discussed.

That film is also now the default media of contemporary adversity is important to stress, for it is this wider sense, scale, and necropolitics of our exposure to others' suffering that frames my work. With smart phones, user generated content (UGC) and other affordances of digital technologies, the live as well as lived experience of the harshest human realities now circulate, relatively freely, pervasively and globally. I reflect here on the relationship between film and dying from natural causes because I want us to be better able to reflect on the relationship between film and dying from all causes. I want us to be better able to understand the use of film in determining and navigating our relation to, and responsibility for, our own and others' harsh realities; to express, that is, its ethical potential.

With all this in mind, I turn now to my case studies: George Saxon and John Briscoe's "A Record of Undying" (*Record*, 2014) and Briony Campbell's *The Dad Project* (*Dad*, 2009). These complex, hybrid projects operate primarily through film. Though contrasting in their aesthetic strategies and form, creative and cultural agendas, both will be seen to be in dialogue with existing mainstream myths about the experience of dying. At the same time, they each in their own ways expose the lived, embodied and ethical dimensions of this experience. They do so not at the expense of sentiment or style but with a careful tempering of their grip. Crucially, and unlike other practitioners' work, they do so through an emphasis on collaboration, complicity and self-exposure: they appear throughout the pieces.

Record is a gallery-located art installation centred on the moving image and integrating still digital images and live performance. The photographs and films were taken in the period leading up to, and including,

Briscoe's death. The installation was exhibited at VIVID Projects at Minerva Works in Birmingham in 2014 and was funded by Arts Council England and the Henry Moore foundation. *Dad* is a ten-and-a-half-minute film by Campbell, a professional photographer. Produced as her final piece for an MA in Documentary Photography in 2009, it became a *Guardian* "Video Witness" online documentary in 2010. Incorporating still and moving images, it was shot in the period leading up to and including her father's death. The photographs have been exhibited, and published, as stand-alone pieces. They, and the film, have won awards, been featured in photography journals and newspapers, and screened and exhibited in Galleries and festivals in the UK, Europe and North America (Campbell, 2009).

In *Record*, Saxon and Briscoe engage with the various myths surrounding the depiction of death and in so doing, I would suggest, un-stifle its profundity. Briscoe is Saxon's long-term partner and the work began as a collaboration between the two, when Briscoe became terminally ill. All the favoured ingredients of the mainstream myths surrounding dying are there in *Record*, but they are there to be undone. First is the denial of the finality of death: the myth or fantasy of immortality that fuels so many mainstream narratives in which the dead just will not die, return as ghosts, linger in some other liminal form or live on through the promise of children. I will say more on the latter later. This plot or prospect underpins a huge swathe of popular film and television both historically and today, from *Heaven Can Wait* (1941, 1978, 2001) to *Dr Who* (1963-ongoing) or NBC's *The Good Place* (2016−2020).

In *Record*, this myth is evocatively and explicitly conjured in the installation's title (and purpose) itself. But it operates ongoingly in its various loopings and longings. Saxon toys with time and fantasy throughout the work. Most prominently, this occurs in the first looped film fragment, confronted upon entering the exhibition space, of George gathering and scattering, scattering and gathering, Briscoe's ashes (*fig. 1*).

George's action, and this last letting go, keep un-happening and happening. The ashes, like time here, move backwards and forwards in a seemingly ceaseless but also implausible cycle. Steven Eastwood (2016) has discussed the use of looping in both Viola's and Calle's video installations about the deaths of their mothers, and recognises the practice as inherently "anti-narrative [... and] immortalizing" (p. 39). Saxon, however, sets the piece up in opposition to the linearity and comforts of narrative but his (and Viola's and Calle's) loopings also resonate within the "paralysis, repetition, circularity" of trauma (Kaplan, 2001, p. 204). This suggests a stagnation, a stasis; yet, as I will argue below, *Record* feels more productive than that. Viola (1995) speaks of his

Figure 1. Gathering and scattering the ashes. "A Record of Undying" (2014) by kind permission of George Saxon.

own work in similar terms: "recording something, I feel, is not so much capturing an existing thing as it is creating a new one" (p. 33).

It is also worth noting how the celestial trajectory and graphic alignment of the ashes with the clouds echo the fantasy of the "good death" promulgated by Hollywood, something that Saxon will return to at the other end of the exhibition. They echo but undercut this myth: the ashes rise and fall, or rather fall and rise, and the gesture to heaven is decidedly dampened by the overcast day.

Just as the ashes are at first gathered and then released, the timeline of the photographs that comprise the main artery of the exhibition are similarly in reverse. As one moved along the corridor-like main room, one went back in time. Saxon continues to mess with chronology to revive Briscoe as it were in an endless, hopeless, *fort da*. This wishful thinking will prove more than knowingness or grief, and is mired in the burden of responsibility that comes not just with survival – with Saxon's undying – but with making such works of mourning. Saxon toys with time, but nothing can halt the contrasting presence and activity of the artists within the frame and, as two become one, beyond it.

The mainstream terminal illness film has proven rife with the painless-ness and stoicism of the almost grateful dead. From *Dark Victory* to *Bucket List* (Rob Reiner, 2007), the imminently expiring are shown to be capable of extraordinary physical exertion alongside a final obligatory serenity. Like Viola, Leibovitz and Calle, Saxon provides a very different image of the individual close to death. *Record* provides instead the mundane,

immobilised and embodied experience of dying through the inclusion of various graphic digital images, stills and film of Briscoe's withering frame, bulbous tumour, banal discomfort and even corpse.

Briscoe's groans, never words, accompany the installation to allow us to read the physical experience through his body. In a filmed sequence, although one that teases the gap between photography and the moving image, a sustained close-up of his still head eventually starts to move in seeming slow motion. Saxon manipulates time again here to explore and exploit the tension between the animate and the inanimate of film. This tension – the deathly grounds or stakes of film – will be returned to below but, as Tanya Leighton (2008) summarises, such a technique in contemporary art practice allows for "a heightened awareness of time's passing" (p. 39). In its intangibility, it recalls both the abstraction of early video art "which explores [...] relationships between perception and emotion" (Meigh-Andrews, 2006, pp. 197–198), and the theoretical evocations of the still, moving or digital image by Bazin, Barthes, Susan Sontag or Laura Mulvey. But Saxon is committed, instead, to the indisputable actuality of "time's relentless melt" (Sontag, 1977, p. 15) read through the dying body itself. In harnessing this much-used and oft-cited tension, he endows such moments with "pause for thought" that promote, as Karen Beckman and Jane Ma (2008) continue in a rare moment of politicised critique within lens-based art studies, a "critical dismantling of the structures that support [...] mindless living" (p. 8).

Rather than the exceptionalism accorded dying figures in mass culture – the remarkable selflessness of, say, Judy in *Dark Victory* and protagonists since; the brilliance of dead-before-their-time celebrities from Marilyn Monroe to Heath Ledger – *Record* depicts, instead, "raw life": a post-capacity, even post-identity, Briscoe, thoroughly removed from the cult of the self. Raw life, I should add, is not to be confused with "bare life" – a further state of exception. "Bare life" is Agamben's (1998) distinction of the "living dead", the abject inhuman figures created by the deathly workings of sovereign power (such as the concentration camp). But Briscoe's is not a "life that does not deserve to be lived" (Agamben, 1998, p. 137) or grieved, as Butler (2009) would add to the discussion. He has "not been reduced to this state by others, [is] not afflicted from elsewhere" (Aaron, 2014, p. 170). And yet, and as I will illustrate below, *Record* is not free of the exercise of political power upon the value of human life.

In discussing this state of raw life in relation to *Dying at Grace* (Allan King, 2003) – when the dying individual has moved, whether through drugs or decline, to this particular physical and legal condition often preceding death – I distinguished its presence as not simply the confrontation of the greatest taboo and most sensitive terrain, but as the

ultimate marker of ethical connection (Aaron, 2014, pp. 174−146). What I meant by this, was that it represents the breakdown of the Metzian contract of film – the inherent but unspoken agreement between the one who knows he or she is being looked at (but pretends otherwise) and the one who looks (and takes what is seen as real whilst knowing otherwise) – the foundational and fantastical state of distance and disavowal that underlies the film and spectatorial experience (Metz, 1977/1982, p. 94). Raw life, instead, cuts against this complicity and dynamic, revealing instead the quintessential connection of the self to the other. A connection without return, it represents the non-solipsistic ethical encounter. It is "without return" in that it provides no reward, no benefits of fantasy, catharsis, entertainment or suspension of disbelief. It is without return too in that it does not take us back to the needs or priorities of the self. It offers neither salve nor reassurance. It neither enacts nor revives consent. It is fundamentally decentring. Of course, we are dealing with film in the gallery space, here, which tends not to be about the "suspension of mobility and predominance of visual function" (Baudry, 1970/1976, p. 539), the conditions that underpin psycho-analytic understandings of film, and the Metzian contract (see, also Mondloch, 2010, for spectatorship theory's importance for analysing screen-based installation art). Yet *Record*, crucially, still summons the attentiveness or immersion of the spectator in a darkened space, pro-ffering a language of regressive fantasies: its decentrism is not bound to its location.

This privileging of a decentred state as ethical operates in opposition to prevailing notions. It is distinct from the "humane gaze" that Vivian Sobchack (1984/2004) prioritises as the ultimate "ethical space" of the film documenting dying, which "engag[es] itself directly with the direct gaze of its dying human subject, who looks back" (p. 253). Sobchack's humane gaze, I argue, returns the psychodynamics and ethical profundity of looking to the terms of the spectator, to the self. The spectator, for Sobchack, is rescued from prurient or "cold voyeurism" by the dying individual's perpetual symbolic consent, through their "openness", "collaboration" and "intimate acceptance of the film-maker" (1984/2004, p. 254) which is contained in that look back. The state of raw life found in *Record* and *Dying at Grace* forces a less familiar but more profound ethical space of looking without return, without this anxious confir-mation of consent. Rather than privileging a dynamic, or psychodynamic (Piotrowska, 2014), ethics is the responsibility of the individual alone.

This decentred ethics also opposes Jane Stadler's (2017) emphasis upon the "affective and cognitive modes of empathy" (pp. 412−413) inspiring ethical understanding, which locate the latter – and its value – in

the anonymous universal body of mainstream US television's spectator. Stadler's privileging of the ethics of empathy entertains its "negative potential" (p. 420) but outside of any body- (bio/necro/geo-) politics or the narcissism, solipsism or neo-imperialism associated with it in post-colonial critique (Rowe, 2007; Chouliaraki 2006; Gunew, 2009; Aaron, 2014).

A further myth that *Record* refutes is the emphasis upon futurity that usually underscores the representation of dying. Before their finales and their protagonists' death, popular fictions about terminal illness tend, as another diversionary tactic, to redistribute the love of the romantic couple to new relationships, specifically to new or renewed familial relationships. These take the place of that which has gone, as a denial of bereavement, as a prophylactic against finitude and loss. From *Dark Victory* to *Beaches* (Garry Marshall, 1983) to *Miss You Already* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2015), terminal illness is generative, offsetting the loss of one love by setting up the gains of another.

Record ends differently. There is no balm of children and, in this way, there is "no future" (Edelman, 2004). Homosexuality, however, has certainly not precluded a recuperative nod to the next generation in mainstream representations of dying. *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993), the prime example, provided a gay, childless man dying, but still managed to close on children: the home movies of the protagonist as a child, and close-ups of his sister's progeny. *Record* might be thought of, instead, as queer in this regard, as resisting reproductive futurity, as Lee Edelman (2004) calls it. Much more importantly, it can be thought of as queer in resisting the normative closure, indeed normativity, of mourning and evidencing instead the productivity of melancholia.

Monica B. Pearl (2012), distinguishing between Gay AIDS narratives, which are characterised by mourning, and Queer AIDS narratives, which are characterised by melancholia, states that:

> Mourning has a "happily ever after" to aspire to; melancholia rejects happiness as a plausible or desirable goal [... It] does not acknowledge or accept the possibility of finishing the work. It is open ended, it is tethered to loss and those lost. (pp. 156–157)

There is considerable resonance between this configuration of queer loss and Saxon's work (see also Woubshet, 2015). If *Record*, in its loopings and longings, open-endedness and tethering, is melancholic, then such melancholia is productive and not pathological (Eng & Kasanjian, 2003). Indeed, discerning melancholia's productivity – and mourning's nor-mativity or oppressiveness – chimes with the shift in understandings of

Figure 2. From the screening of *Blissfully Gunned Down* (1980). "Record of Undying" by kind permission of George Saxon.

grief over the last twenty years: from the Freudian mourning versus melancholia paradigm, to the "continuing bonds" model (Klass, Nickman & Silverman, 1996). This model challenges mourning's emphasis upon loss as something to be surmounted or completed by leaving it behind for new attachments, favouring instead the sense that grieving individuals carry on in their attachments to their deceased loved ones, they remain tethered even as they continue their lives.[1]

Record ends with Saxon's deeply complicated relationship to Briscoe's death enacted through the couple's take on the Hollywood dream. The installation involved, at least on occasion, the live twin screen looped fifteen-minute performance of *Blissfully Gunned Down* (1980–2013), based upon a short sequence that Saxon and Briscoe had made in 1980 which "originated from a photograph by American photographer Ralph Morse (*Time Life* magazine, circa unknown)" (Saxon, 2014). The rest of the time, the film was screened on a loop in the final space at the end of the exhibition.

A humorous take on the iconic death of Hollywood's cowboys, Briscoe, dressed as a cowboy (*fig. 2*), takes a bullet to the chest and falls, dramatically, into the high grass only to do it again and again. *Blissfully Gunned Down* works to exploit and disrupt the fantasy of immortality, and in its loopings, the very narrative of dying. It is a highly self-conscious

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1. The recurring designation of photography as mournful and film as melancholic (Mulvey, 2006; Wilson 2012) is worth noting but, like the Freudian paradigm revised here, proves insufficient.

intervention into those fictional confections that teach us staged deaths. At the same time, of course, in tune with the rest of the exhibit's playing with the finality of death, its repeated screenings and dual screen refuse the weight of a single or linear screen time. Instead, Saxon's complicity in his partner's death is underscored. As Saxon (2014) himself puts it, "I play the killer in this filmic game". He is responsible for the shooting: through filming but also, during the performance, through scratching the loops of celluloid and in so doing adding "bangs" to the soundtrack. In addition, in entering into the live installation, he marks his own survival. Instead of being generative, of prophylactically and normatively promising a future, Saxon's culpability in life's endings is repetitively staged. Always at stake in Briscoe's un/dying is Saxon's un/dying: a shared perilous subjectivity. The use of 16mm film here continues Saxon's multi-media project and post-media hybridity, cutting through the distinctions of "high and low art". The trashiness of the faux death coincides with the sacredness of celluloid, the "precious remnant of a cinema in ruins" (Balsom, 2009, pp. 411–427). Saxon overlaps the myth of the dead technology with that of the dead lover; at stake in the un/dying of Briscoe is that of Saxon and of cinema too.

Saxon, not Hollywood, I would suggest brings us the romantic ideal of undying love: love un-cauterised, love without prophylactic distraction, redistribution or absolution. Doused in loss and welded to grief, this moving record of Briscoe's decline and departure becomes a testimony, inevitably, to the unfinished business of love within loss. But it also provides a testimony to the unfinished business of love, full stop. Love not life endures, and film surfaces as the key medium of its revival.

Though love is undying here, it is neither uncomplicated nor pretty. There is beauty aplenty in Saxon's painterly, classical, [digital] stills of his partner's immobility and in the whimsical, even balletic, reworkings of his footage: in one sequence, his raising and moving of a very weak Briscoe is slowed down until it appears like the two are dancing. The words "waltz with me darling" accompany the images on the screen. But there is hard labour too in dying and caring for the dying, and the evident physical and emotional toil, and toll, is not compromised but accentuated by Saxon's artistry. The power of the installation lies, then, in this fusing, this queer fusing, of truth, art and vulnerability to unpick the taboos and confections surrounding the before, during and after of death.

Briony Campbell's *The Dad Project* (2009) is similarly a testament to love and loss, and also collaborative in origin. Its first words are a voiceover from Dad (David) saying, "So when is the right time for your children to know what life's really about?" and we will soon see him talking direct to camera about why he took part in his daughter's project.

He speaks of what it means for him to "share [his] feelings" and "be a good dad as long as [he] can". Dying is tied up immediately with questions of responsibility as a parent, of duty and love. And the film, he declares, is an opportunity for him to learn more about his daughter. It is enabling of their relationship, of his better use of time. The project's, and the piece's, objectives are clearly stated from the start. This would seem a very different application of film to dying and grieving than we have just encountered with Saxon and Briscoe.

Campbell repeats the declarative mode. After dad's initial voice-over, she adds her own: "This is a story of an ending without an ending. It's a relationship I'm still exploring. This is my attempt to say goodbye to my dad with the help of my camera". Filmmaking is cathartic and enabling of the enduring connection – the continuing bond – between daughter and dad. The "productivity" of loss, here, is practical and positive and not just for those directly involved but the large and grateful audience that the film received (B. Campbell, 2016). The claim for open-endedness, for the finality, and not, of death, position *Dad*, like *Record*, against mainstream representations. Yet, as I will show, this is a piece that leans quite heavily on convention, unsurprisingly so, perhaps, given Campbell's very different stage of career and life experience, even as it brings us into a certain proximity with the experience of dying.

There is little physical pain shown in *Dad* – though there is obvious physical decline, conveyed principally through David's loss of weight and hair and strength over the course of the film. Other signs of bodily frailty are there but are indexical: the breathing gear, the hospital bed, the gestures, the words spoken by mum Jane (*fig. 3*). They are not David's physical pain itself. We are shown his body marked by illness and deteriorating, but not centre-screen. And while we hear of his relationship to dying, and see him struggle to walk, no pain is spoken of here. He describes it, however, in his own blog, as "all consuming" (D. Campbell, 2008).

Following the last piece of footage of David in the film, in an ambulance, the scene fades to white as the dissonant sound of two strings, plucked very slightly apart, begins. A still image of his hand being held on a bed sheet is followed by that of a close-up of his neck in profile, and then of Campbell with the accompanying final voice-over from Dad: "It seems to me it does take courage to let go". Further chords are added to the non-diegetic sound, and the almost machine-like, heartbeat-like, beeps created proliferate and accelerate into music. This speeding up is synchronised with the cuts between a succession of further photographs of Campbell's distraught face and, then, of what appears to be, the view of woods from a moving train.

Figure 3. *The Dad Project* (2009). By kind permission of Briony Campbell.

Neither pain nor dying is disavowed in *Dad*, but they are displaced. The pain that is captured is emotional and it is, predominantly, Campbell's: from still images of her distress, to these sped-up stills of her crying made monumental, made montage, made film not simply through juxtaposition and fast-paced editing but sound too. This adept juggling of speed and stillness, of the human and the mechanical, stands in, here, for a confrontation with death: technique takes us away from the reality of dying for the one dying, for David; from death itself. The cuts or fades to white that have punctuated the film reach their climax as the last still in this sequence bleaches into a white sky. As well as contrasting so sharply to the darker palette, screen space and installation location of *Record*, the use of light in *Dad*, and especially its role within David's expiration, echoes the trope of the promise of heaven found elsewhere on-screen from *Dark Victory* to *My Life* (Bruce Joel Rubin, 1993) (Aaron, 2014).

In the final moments of *Dad*, filmed soon after David has died, a blurred image sharpens into a hand, his hand. We see it being stroked and hear Jane speak of his release from suffering and express her sorrow that he could not stay alive for "you both". Campbell and her brother, Jesse, are bedside as well. We hear sniffling, crying and the obvious distress in all their voices: their bodily-ness, their vulnerability, is palpable now. Though off-screen, it is untrammelled by technique. "He was one in a million. One in two million", someone whispers. And of course he was to them. This is said over a shot of a billowing curtain: the same shot that opened the film. The cycle of living and dying, the ceaseless movement of the natural world – gestured to throughout – is returned to.

This affirmative action is sealed with the piece's closing word, sighed out in response to the declaration of dad's exceptionalism, "Yep".

This is clichéd stuff but it is also true to Campbell's experience and that of so many others. It is also, of course, sensitive to David's privacy, to the "humiliation" he was feeling, which Jane comments on. While the film shields us, still, from the truths of the body and an intimacy with David's experience, its saying of the unsaid, its shareability, must be reckoned with as well. Within this reckoning lie many of the pressing issues of our time: for the death literacy community or activists, who want to get the public talking openly about death, and social justice-oriented filmmakers, who want to build large audiences for their films. Within it, too, lie more timeless concerns, related to these, about the socio-political import and defiance of art – its navigating of what is acceptable, say, and so urgent as to require representation at any cost – and thus the ethical potential of film.

Like *Record*, Campbell's film shares with us the dying subject's decline and death but, though David will play a far more active and lucid role in the film than Briscoe did, the principal conduit for the experience of dying in *Dad* is that of the one(s) left behind. Saxon's work is also fundamentally an expression of grief, as I suggested above, but his evocative, "writerly" (Barthes, 1990, p. 4) editing of the material dwells on Briscoe's experience and embodiment, opening it up for the viewer's active, even empowered, co-production of meaning. Through sustained close-ups or temporal manipulation, Saxon prioritises Briscoe's physicality even on his deathbed. Campbell precludes such things from her film, enacting instead a careful management of the exposure of human vulnerability. Her practice keeps a very tight rein on what is moving about the image: what is emotional and emotive, but also how footage, sound and photographs combine to become film.

Campbell's aesthetic differs greatly from Saxon's and his painterly compositions of still photography and film. His shot of the three men around the death bed (*fig. 4*) performs, I think, a queer nod to classical composition and grand narrative, but also to the political community of group grief which, according to Townsend (2008), has been forged through this kind of work, and especially in relation to AIDS (see also Butler, 2003).

The sense of balance and perspective in the frame, the frontal looks of the two men and Saxon's downcast eyes, recall family portraiture from the Renaissance to the Dutch Masters. At the same time, with the all-male content, the photograph upends the persistent reiteration, and legitimisation, of the family and, with it, heterosexuality. Saxon's shot contrasts sharply with Campbell's sole ensemble image in *Dad*. The photograph

Figure 4. Around the death bed in a "Record of Undying." By kind permission of the George Saxon.
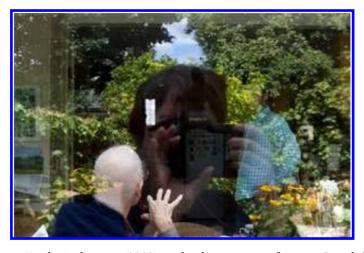

Figure 5. The Dad Project (2009). By kind permission of Briony Campbell.

she takes, seemingly surreptitiously through a garden window, captures her father and brother in conversation (*fig. 5*).

She, and her camera in particular, are coming between them. She is on the outside, yet central: self-centred yet removed. In some ways, this is the classic younger child/daughter/female position but also its familiar disruption. What stand out here are the blue sky, her father, her brother's shirt, the flowers and foliage in what is one of many poetic and pastoral

moments in the film. This is, of course, an Oedipal configuration triangulating – literally and symbolically – the father, son and heavens: a quintessentially traditional model of family.

Accompanying the photograph is music – the melodic but unobtrusive strings that provide a light soundtrack to most of the film – and Campbell's voice-over. "Being a good daughter to my dying dad was tricky", she says. "I struggled to find the right balance between dedication to his needs and distraction from my grief. Introducing a camera into this equation seemed unwise at first but eventually I think it became a solution". In what is a repeated technique in *Dad*, the photograph is not static here but animated: we zoom slowly into the image and in so doing, Campbell, and increasingly her camera, come to dominate the frame. The movement complements her words, and vice versa, enacting the film's role in supporting both her daughterly duty and her grieving. But the camera, and the technique, also allows her to enter this triangulation, to break the existing triad, and take her place in a future guaranteed by the death of the father. Her survival is part of an age-old order of things, a rite of passage, though one enhanced by technology and self-reflexivity and reviving video's feminist promise (Meigh-Andrews, 2006). Despite the metatextual richness, her survival is far removed from the perilous subjectivity framing Saxon's work. Obviously, *Dad* is about the loss of a parent not a partner, but how does film practice connect us to or deflect us from human frailty, and lean upon or rescript convention to do so? As I stated above, this encounter with human frailty is tightly managed in Campbell's work.

Still images become moving in *Dad* through contrived or laboured means. What I mean by this is that there is a very explicit or deliberate translation of the still to the moving image in the film: firstly, through the voice-over accompanying the photograph which renders it durational, secondly through this use of animation. Animating the photographs of her and her family, of the distant and near past – as Campbell does throughout *Dad* – necessarily dismantles the finitude of the fixed historical moment. It breathes life into amber, brings back the dead, as it were, in refusing photography's embalming essence, in Bazinian (1967) or Barthesian (1981) terms, or its frozenness, after Sontag (1977). Yet, it is within this amber that the power of photographs – their ability to move us, to connect with us – is thought to lie. Barthes (1981) distinguishes the *punctum* of photography as that which "pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (p. 27). The punctum is a wound and it is through wound/ing that "a specific photograph reaches me; it animates me, and I animate it" (Barthes, 1981, p. 20). *Dad* supplants the provocation or power of the photograph by, instead, prescribing its affects. At the same

time, Campbell's form of animation is the most common technique of the app-toting generation, eminently familiar and everyday. Whatever uncanniness (Usselmann, 2017) resides in the animate-inanimate inter-mingling, it has been blunted for short-form-friendly social media. In all cases, this is highly palatable stuff. This is not Saxon's knowing – or queer or postmodern – nod to grand narratives. This is the grand narrative; the self-legitimising chronicle of the nuclear unit.

In a similar vein, Campbell's film could be considered heavily invested in the "happily ever after," or normativity, of mourning (Pearl, 2012, p. 156.) It augurs a return to normalcy, to a time not about imminent death, that comes inevitably afterwards. The emphasis upon the family and familiar relationships starts, ends and fills the film, but this is, of course, a film about a "dying dad," and one that works, quite self-consciously, with a sense of legacy. But the ethos of futurity and the nuclear family are more pervasive than this. Early in *Dad*, a film is being made for the prospective grandchildren. David sits encased in cuddly toys. He has trouble getting his words right and a successful take is not achieved or, at least, not included, but there is no sense of failure here. Rather, the film underscores the family's tight and loving relationships.

From the "Grandpa Campbell" invocation of a child-oriented future to the shots of nature punctuating a linear narrative, harsh reality is counter-balanced if not undercut by the rites of passage, the promise of what is to come as well as a steadfastness of beauty. This film within a film provides a comic interlude and sets the tone of sweet spirited-ness that continues throughout. These addresses to camera could be thought of as securing the film's "humane gaze" and our ethical engagement, after Sobchack (1984). They sanction our look; connote consent. In sustaining, and privileging, the psychic and ethical dynamic between the filmmaker and subject, and spectator and film, we are caught, again, in a solipsistic system which seeks to reassure, salve and centre the self. It does not reach or animate me, in other words. Campbell's film moves and bolsters us but on its own, pre-scripted, "readerly" terms (Barthes, 1990). It tells its truth of loss and relationships but excises and sanitises to do so. It tames grief.

Like Saxon, Campbell, the visual artist, plies her tools. The grieving artist's grief and/as artistry is foregrounded. For Campbell, this is recuperative, where for Saxon it is productive. Their hybrid filmmaking practices challenge media specificity in diachronic and synchronic terms (Kim, 2016), in the use of celluloid and photography on one hand, and digital and other media on the other. But, far more pertinent here, as I hope to have shown, is how they use the resulting interplay of stillness and movement, of past and present, to activate their reflections on death and dying and, even, to render the spectator more active. Viola's work has

been discussed in similar terms, via the "lines of intensity" that emerge from his hybrid style and give rise to "a confusing drama of affects" (Røssaak, 2009, p. 343). Such moments are used to modulate, and ultimately control, emotion in *Dad*, but are harnessed in *Record*. I think Saxon aims for this confusing drama, where Campbell works to avoid it.

At the same time, and so importantly, *Dad* in particular speaks to the potential of film to function as vehicle of love, palliation and mourning. According to Wilson (2012), "lens-based art" is "a means of maintaining a sensory, amorous relation to the dead […] a form of pain management" (p. 3). The value of this, and of Campbell's film, is indisputable. But it is not radical. It is indisputable because of the urgent need to shatter the silence around death, to open up conversations about grief and pain in order to soothe those affected by them, and to challenge the invisibility, objectification and disregard of those who are dying. It is also indisputable because of our need to better understand film's role in performing such services at a time of proliferating use (and need). Campbell's film has proven powerful to so many for all these reasons and it invites, not least via the platforms through which it has been disseminated, a mass audience of sorts and a shareability inherent to the digital age that surpasses the scope of Scarry's imaginings. In doing so, it accentuates the "efficacy problem" (Chou, Gagnon & Pruitt, 2015, p. 619) of *Record*: how this queer art piece has a much more limited reach and hence effect in comparison. Reach is not everything of course. And shareability is partial. But what these two pieces reveal is the duality of the discussion of the representation of death (indeed of any weighty topic): the breaking of silence offset by the need for more structural change. In the relative dearth of non-mainstream work on death and dying, both are necessary.

The surge in screen-based representations of death and dying over the last two decades, as a result of aging populations, financial and human crises and technological transformations, responds to the potential for film to connect us to the suffering of others and causes us to rethink our relationship to that suffering and our implication in it (see Aaron, 2014; 2019). *Record* and *Dad* depend upon the moving image by which I mean the image that invites us – if not demands us – to feel things in response to its provocations. Being moved here is not a gesture of distant care or compassion, of right thinking or moral hygiene, but a powerful and invariably political encounter with the experience of another. Rather than siphoning off the truths of the body and of human relationships in the service of sensationalism, sentimentality or the status quo, we need work that engages these truths without compromise. *Dad* is the necessary narrative from the frontline of experience that can help heal and connect individuals and create community, but *Record*, though doing something

similar, challenges some of the privileges – the conventions and solipsism – underpinning *Dad's* success. In our near pervasive exposure to the suffering of others, afforded by digital technologies but created by the scourge of local and geopolitical inequity, this challenge is essential for a full, and ethical, confrontation with human vulnerability.

Acknowledgements

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