Beyond ‘la petite mort’ – sex and death in 120 BPM

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ABSTRACT

Recent French films have sparked discussion about how we understand the AIDS crisis and how that historical understanding informs present-day views of HIV/AIDS in France and further afield. An example of this, Robin Campillo’s period piece, 120 Battements par minute (2017), explicitly depicts ‘la petite mort’ and the connection between orgasm and demise through the experiences of Parisian ACT UP members during the height of the AIDS crisis in the early 1990s. The following article argues that the three sex scenes in 120 BPM are pivotal points in the narrative which quite literally raise the dead, connecting the characters to lost lovers, members of their community and their past selves. Through this, I analyse how these scenes interact with the film’s re-enactment scenes of protest actions in the 1990s, through their choreography, dialogue, duration, and the images of sexual acts themselves. To do this, I identify how the film troubles and reconstructs ideas of death in AIDS cinema through the recognition of the HIV+ individual as one who will not be desexualised by the virus, even if they are dying. This article will scrutinise and query the relationship between the sex scene, mortality, and memory in 120 BPM.

RÉSUMÉ

Récemment, le cinéma français a suscité des débats autour de notre compréhension de la crise du SIDA, en particulier comment cette vision historique éclaire notre point de vue actuel sur le VIH et le SIDA en France mais aussi à l’étranger. Un exemple de cette production cinématique est le film d’époque de Robin Campillo, 120 Battements par minute (2017), qui représente ‘la petite mort’ et la connexion entre l’orgasme et la mort, en regardant les expériences des membres parisiens du groupe « ACT UP » au sommet de la crise du SIDA au début des années 1990. L’article qui suit affirme que les trois scènes de sexe dans 120 BPM sont des points clés dans l’histoire qui ressuscitent littéralement les morts, en liant les personnages aux amours perdus, aux membres de leur communauté, et aux anciennes versions d’eux-mêmes. En avançant cette thèse, j’analyse les interactions de ces scènes-ci et leur chorégraphie, dialogue, durée, ainsi que leur représentation des actes, avec les scènes de manifestation qui tentent de recréer certaines manifestations des années 1990. J’analyse la manière dont le film dérange et reconstruit les idées de mort dans le cinéma de la crise du SIDA par la reconnaissance de l’individu séropositif en tant que quelqu’un qui ne sera pas déssexualisé par le virus, malgré le fait qu’il est mourant. Cet article examinera et interrogera les liens entre le scène de sexe, la mortalité, et le souvenir dans 120 BPM.
Introduction

Recent outputs of cinema and television are beginning to spark discussion of how we understand the AIDS crisis now, and what relation it has to current notions and fears around sex and death. In France, an example of this is Robin Campillo’s period narrative, *120 Battements par minute* (2017), which follows the lives of members of ACT UP-Paris, an AIDS advocacy and political group, in the early 1990s. Campillo has detailed in interviews how he was a member of ACT UP-Paris in his youth, and that the narrative of the film tells both his story and that of others he knew and lost during the 1980s and 1990s (Lewis 2018; Shepherd 2018; Walters 2018). He also identified how he was surprised to discover that many of his actors did not know as much as he thought they would about the crisis (Lodge 2017). Campillo ‘hoped the visibility that the group wanted 25 years ago would be achieved today’ through the film’s success, both in France and internationally.

The analysis presented here argues that the film succeeds in remembering and telling the stories of ACT UP-Paris members, and that it achieves this through its depiction of ‘la petite mort’ and the relationship between sex and death which permeates the narrative. To do this, I examine three sex scenes in the film: Nathan and Sean’s first time together; the hand-job Sean receives from Nathan in his hospital bed; and finally, Nathan and Thibault’s tryst on the evening of Sean’s wake. I scrutinise these scenes through Georges Bataille’s theory of eroticism and death and present my own conception of the death bed in *120 BPM*.

*120 BPM* depicts the HIV/AIDS crisis in a way which remembers the trauma felt by those who experienced it, thus responding to recent critiques that discuss cultural amnesia, particularly within the gay community. At the turn of the century, Roger Hallas stated that ‘Our calmer but rather numbed present frequently promotes an amnesia around the not-too distant past and a disavowal of the continuing psychic toll of the epidemic on gay men’ (Hallas 2003, 88). In this, he identified what he felt was missing from contemporary screen narratives compared to those made during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and the decades following (Hallas 2003, 88). This notion of cinema’s collective amnesia about the crisis evokes Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed’s concept of ‘de-generational unremembering’ which refers to ‘calls for gay men to forget the sexual cultures of previous generations of gay men’ (Castiglia and Reed 2012, 39). However, Castiglia and Reed specify that this process did not simply occur as treatment for HIV became more accessible and the prospects of HIV+ people improved, but that it began during the HIV/AIDS crisis, wherein alternative narratives were created which attacked broader queer cultures, whilst simultaneously absolving the state of responsibility. The narrative of *120 BPM* is permeated with scenes of the actions and protests the members of ACT UP-Paris imagine, organise, and take part in. Further on I consider how the protest scenes communicate and reinforce the message of the sex scenes which are intercut throughout. This part of the analysis also considers the presence of archival footage and photos, and their reinforcement of the film’s connection to the past.

Returning to the present, I conclude by identifying the response that the film received upon release and how the narrative correlates with contemporary French perceptions of what it means to be HIV+, or ‘séropo’, as the ACT UP-Paris members refer to their status in the film. In *120 BPM*, death is more than just a consequence of sexual encounters and a positive diagnosis. I show here how the film successfully presents contemporary audiences with images of those who died of AIDS with their erotic agency intact.
Sex, death and deathbeds

In the title of this piece, I refer to ‘la petite mort’ as something which 120 BPM transcends. The phrase is a borrowing from French which translates in English to ‘the little death’ and can be defined as ‘the sensation of orgasm as likened to death’ (Oxford English Dictionary 2005). This is a useful term for the analysis conveyed due to the connection between sex and death present in 120 BPM and other AIDS narratives. It is also a term linked to queer studies and analysis of queer sexual practices, through the philosophy of Georges Bataille. Whilst Bataille’s work is largely occupied with a philosophical critique of PIV (penis in vagina) sex for the purpose of reproduction, this can be applied to sex acts between two men, as Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett show in their comparison between Bataille’s work and that of queer theorists writing in the final years of the twentieth century. They argue that this is apparent through two key concepts of Bataille’s which are mirrored in later queer theory: transgression which becomes queer transgression (Downing and Gillett 2011, 91), and eroticism-as-death which becomes death drive (Downing and Gillett 2011, 97), both of which are relevant to my own concept of the deathbed in AIDS cinema. They go on to identify that, regarding the concept of transgression, ‘as a result of the AIDS crisis, the severed link between sexuality and morality was being restored and reinforced’ (Downing and Gillett 2011, 93). This notion of physical desire and personal principles is at work in the interactions between the bodies of the ACT UP-Paris members in a myriad of ways.

Referring to Bataille’s discussion, Karla Schultz defines ‘la petite mort’ as ‘the violent transgression against individual boundaries. At least temporarily, the self passes from the discontinuous (individuated) state of life into the continuity of death’ (Schultz 1987, 78). The transgression which Bataille refers to is what he identifies as taboos. The first half of his book, L’Érotisme, is engaged with the concept of taboo—social restrictions which he identifies as being relevant to both sex and death—‘Ces interdits ont essentiellement—et certainement—porté sur l’attitude envers les morts. Il est probable qu’ils touchèrent en même temps—ou vers le même temps—l’activité sexuelle’ (Bataille 1957, 36). In the case of 120 BPM, this is evidently not just involved with taboos surrounding death and sex, but with the taboo of sexual relations between individuals of the same sex, namely MSM practices. Indeed, during the crisis, Leo Bersani stated that ‘AIDS has made the oppression of gay men seem like a moral imperative’ (Bersani 1987, 204), implying that morally, gay men were breaking from societal norms, and that they must be punished for doing so. In reference to 120 BPM, Robin Campillo remarked: ‘We decided to become the evil fags and dykes. We didn’t care about giving a good image of homosexuality to the rest of society. So, when I did this film, I tried to reconnect to that type of legitimacy’ (Lodge 2017). Thus, we can see the director’s intent to include the transgressions enacted by his characters without judgement.

This article engages with Bataille because it is interested in analysing how taboo behaviour is presented in 120 BPM and how this is responded to within the narrative, particularly regarding the behaviour towards the dead and dying victims of AIDS. In comparison to other representations of death in films set during the AIDS crisis, 120 BPM utilises the image and meaning of the deathbed in an alternative manner. As I will further elaborate in my analyses of the two sex scenes between a couple of the ACT UP-Paris activists, Nathan and Sean, the dying individual (Sean, an angry and determined HIV+
founding member of the group) is not stripped of his sexuality. He continues to have protected sex with lovers until just before his death, and shares stories of infection and dead former lovers with Nathan, his current partner, during their sexual relations.

But what do I mean by the death bed? Described as ‘the bed that someone dies or is in the state of dying in’ (OED 2014), this understanding of the process of dying makes the notion of the death bed malleable. Any bed can be a death bed because, from birth, we are all in a slow forward motion towards the grave. Bataille’s work complements this notion, stating how as humans, ‘Nous sommes des êtres discontinus, individus mourant isolélement dans une aventure inintelligible’ (Bataille 1957, 19–20). By discontinuous, here Bataille refers to how we can never continue our own existence even if we reproduce and create new life (Bataille 1957). Michele Aaron describes how ‘death is defined as the life-sentence of the disease’ (Aaron 2004, 5) for HIV-positive characters in AIDS films. This reiterates my prior notion as every bed we see in 120 BPM becomes a potential death bed, as the HIV+ characters have the spectre of death constantly following them and driving their actions. The image of the bed, and its contents, appears multiple times throughout the film. What constitutes a bed in 120 BPM and the link between the inactive body and images of the corpse are worth contemplation.

Two forms of traditional bed/deathbed appear in the film: the bed in the home, and the bed in the hospital ward. In both instances, these spaces continue to function as sites of sexual practice, despite their dual use as a place of rest and potential final resting place. The traditional concept of the deathbed scene, as described by Philippe Ariès—‘The dying man is lying in bed surrounded by his friends and relations’ (1976, 34), is never shown, but the set-up for it appears repeatedly throughout the narrative.

Several shots throughout the film are dedicated to the characters making up beds and getting them ready for use. This is primarily to show a change in circumstances and living arrangements—the role of changing bedsheets is taken up by Nathan when he moves in with Sean and the latter has lost his strength to do household tasks. Comparable to this is a shot near the end of the film after Sean has died. Circumstances have changed again, and his mother is folding away the sofa bed she has slept on whilst helping Nathan care for him in their shared apartment. She is aided in this by other members of ACT UP-Paris who have come to grieve and help with laying Sean’s body out. Throughout the film, the image of the deathbed is portrayed as a site for transgression. It is the location for sex with the ill and dying, assisted suicide and subsequent sex with a new, also ill, and possibly dying partner.

**Nathan and Sean: at home**

Ten minutes of the film’s running time is dedicated to its first sex scene, between Nathan and Sean, and we enter it through intercut shots with the previous scene where the ACT UP-Paris members are partying in a club. The two spaces briefly overlap as the disco lights briefly reflect on the lovers’ naked bodies before the bedroom darkens to a deep blue, accent by streetlights outside, and the diegetic sounds of the music in the club fade away. Close-ups of the two men’s body-parts fragment them as they perform fellatio on one another; however, Sean’s HIV+ status is never forgotten, and there is a key focus on safe sex practices. The camera jumps to condoms and lube on Sean’s nightstand and the couple discuss the use of protection, and whether Sean is Nathan’s first ‘séropo’ or positive partner. Whilst the only ‘death’ in this sex scene is ‘la petite mort’, Nathan says
he cannot orgasm when using a condom. As Sean is adamant about their use, there is an ambiguity here as to whether Nathan will be able to ‘die’, orgasm, and be at risk of the same real death as Sean through infection.

There are two instances of the ‘little death’ in this scene, and each one is followed by a lull in sexual activity where the couple reminisce about previous sexual partners and their fates. The first is experienced by Sean, fellated to release by Nathan, and here lies the first example of the film transcending ‘la petite mort’. The couple do not simply momentarily move into the ‘continuity of death’ (Schultz 1987, 78) through their experience together but use their connection as a portal to reach to their pasts and connect with those already dead.

Archival footage and photographs are used on multiple occasions throughout 120 BPM to evoke the characters’ memories and those of viewers who experienced the HIV/AIDS crisis themselves. During both post-orgasm interludes, photos are used to connect this present moment together with their memories. In the first pause, Nathan asks Sean about the Polaroid photos stuck to his wall. Identifying the woman who appears in multiple photos as his mother, Sean laughs when Nathan jokingly queries ‘Et ça te dérange pas qu’elle te regarde pendant que te baises?’. Sean’s subsequent recollection of his dead lovers then brings to the fore another sexual taboo: he was infected with HIV by his Maths teacher whilst still his student.

Later in the scene, photographs reappear to illustrate Nathan’s experience of the AIDS crisis before he joined ACT UP-Paris, which Robin Campillo has said was based on his own experience (Lewis 2018). As Nathan describes seeing a gay couple in a magazine for the first time, images from the article appear on the screen. The photographs show the ‘before and after’ effect of HIV on Ken Ramsauer, a real American businessman who died of AIDS in May 1983, and Campillo, speaking through Nathan, expresses his younger self’s anxieties. At this point, Sean responds to the story, laughing at Nathan but reassuring him. Using a personal memory as part of a fictional character’s backstory allows the filmmaker to adjust the outcome of it, and to have what may not have been given in reality—a response from a living partner. Georges Bataille describes death as a signifier for violence, but this does not necessarily mean we desire to avoid images of death entirely—‘la violence et la mort qui la signifie, ont un sens double: d’un côté l’horreur nous éloigne, lié à l’attachement qu’inspire la vie; de l’autre un élément solennel, en même temps terrifiant, nous fascine, qui introduit un trouble souverain’ (Bataille 1957, 52).

In this first sex scene, we directly interact with the dead and gain further understanding of the characters through their previous traumas. Whereas Sean’s story of Hervé Ducaire, his teacher, is told through dialogue, Nathan’s ex-lover, a nameless 20-year-old, is re-animated in the bedroom. The shot of Nathan and Sean on the bed cuts to the figure of a shirtless young man, ghost-like, and surrounded by smoke, who promptly disappears and the couple begin talking again. This scene is, in its basic construction, the least taboo of the three sex scenes, in that the sexual acts are performed between two lovers in the private space of the bedroom and on a bed. Sean’s bed, however, is rendered a figurative deathbed through the bodies of their dead lovers who share the filmic space and the bedsheets with them through the slippages of temporality and memory.
**Nathan and Sean: the hospital**

Set in Sean’s hospital room, after he is admitted for treatment for cryptosporidiosis, the mise-en-scene of the second sex scene is in direct contrast to the first. The lighting is high-key, bright and clinical, whereas the previous scene was filled with shadows and obscured faces and body parts, framed through fractured close-ups. The second scene hides nothing. After a terse conversation with Thibault, Sean is visited by Nathan, where he tells his partner ‘Tu me manques’ and acknowledges that he misses sexual contact with him. Even though ‘heteronormative pedagogical and medical discourses negate an erotic response’ (Holcombe 2017, 126), the scene goes on to depict a sensuous if desperate act between the lovers.

At this point in the narrative, Sean is aware that he is dying, and thus this scene depicts sex and Sean’s orgasm or ‘little death’ as a momentary resurrection on his deathbed. Two wide shots are used during this scene, the first when Sean is still alone with Thibault. In this, Sean is led completely flat on his hospital bed, arms by his side and head tipped slightly back, his eyes closed. Sean already looks dead, posed like a corpse, with only the sheet over his head missing. To achieve this image, Sean’s actor, Nahuel Pérez Biscayart, gradually lost 15lbs across the filming period to create a visible contrast in his character between the beginning and end of the film (Ebiri 2017). The next shot cuts to a close-up of Sean’s Kaposi’s sarcoma lesions on his hip, reminding us that his body cannot hide its destruction and consequential decomposition. An earlier close-up shot of Sean’s feet during a medical scan presents the marks on their base as akin to mould, blossoming unseen. When Nathan begins to manually stimulate Sean later in the scene, a similar framing of the couple is used to that with Thibault.

A second wide shot of the hospital room shows how as Sean gets closer to climax, his limbs lift from the mattress, his knees and torso tipping and spiking. Comparatively, the two shots when placed side by side look like the difference between the flat line on a heart monitor and signs of life. As Nathan brings Sean to orgasm, his moans are interrupted by coughs and wheezing, and he cries out as if in great pain. Effectively ‘homoeroticizing an imperfect or injured body is perhaps as queer as one can get’ (Holcombe 2017, 129), but this scene also presents how the bond between the two men will not be hindered or desexualised by the virus. Bataille, referring to ‘la petite mort’, states that ‘Tant il est vrai qu’entre la mort, et la « petite mort », ou le chavirement, qui envirent, la distance est insensible’ (Bataille 1957, 265); however, in this scene, Sean is seen to feel more alive from the experience.

In multiple instances of films set during the AIDS crisis, the moment of death is censored, often cutting to another moment of action in the narrative just before the moment of death, creating a direct contrast between the literal motions of the living and the dying. As spectators, we learn of the character’s death at the same time as another character in the narrative, two examples of this being in Philadelphia (Demme 1993) and Longtime Companion (René 1989). In both sequences, the shot cuts from what we will learn is the death bed to a friend or colleague picking up the telephone to the news. With this, as spectators we are framed at a distance from the corpse and oriented to identify with the survivors left behind. In contrast, Sean is brought home to live out his last days, and whilst he dies in his sleep, it is because Nathan euthanises him. A focus is put on the guttural snore-like breathing of Sean, wherein the noise is the only sound heard in some
shots. The loss of that sound becomes devastating as the space is plunged into silence at the moment of his death. It is at this moment that the strain of the epidemic on the survivors is presented, with Nathan wandering numbly around the shared apartment in an extended scene as Sean’s mother and the members of ACT UP-Paris hold an impromptu wake.

In an analysis of Philadelphia, Michele Aaron argues that the humanisation of the queer subject comes at the expense of their experience of dying and the spectator’s image of queer death. She states how this is represented through protagonist Andy Beckett’s ‘depiction of suffering … (which) contrast[s] sharply with the extraordinary capacity, vitality even, of his straight counterpart’s demise’ (Aaron 2014, 132) Whilst she also considers how there is an ‘identity-determined relationship of suffering and frailty’ (Aaron 2014) for gay characters based on a notion of punishment, I would argue that this is not applicable in the context of 120 BPM.

The suffering that Sean is shown to experience acknowledges both the pain he feels on his body, but also the day-to-day frustrations it causes both him and, later, Nathan. Also, at no other point in the film is the spectator positioned to pass judgement on the actions of the characters, no matter how debateable their behaviour is. Indeed, through the camera movement and framing, the spectator is positioned as one of the team, sharing in the experiences had. Sean is described as a character who ‘embodies the paradox of ACT UP: that those closest to death could be so ferociously full of life’ (Jung 2017). Even as his body weakens, Sean continues to take part in actions and, from their final exchange, it is implied that Sean has enlisted Nathan to euthanise him, taking control over both his own life and death.

**Nathan and Thibault**

Bataille’s taboos come to the fore once more in consideration of the third sex scene of the film, and those which lead up to it. Sean’s body is not long cold, and Nathan plans to have sex with Thibault the same evening, in Sean’s deathbed. Neither see anything wrong with this, and Thibault laughs and smiles, asking Nathan ‘Et on baiserait et tout?’ This is the first instance in the film where the transgressions surrounding sex and death are directly confronted. Nathan looks to the camera, and the shot cuts to a reverse shot, framing the two doorways in front of the newly formed couple. In one, life prevails in the action, movement, and light of the living room where Sean’s mourners are talking to each other. The latter is the darkened bedroom where Sean’s corpse lays uncovered. A slow zoom towards the right side of the frame shows Nathan’s attention being drawn to the body of his dead lover.

Returning to Bataille, this is reminiscent of his description of the corpse as the ‘l’objet angoissant’ (Bataille 1957, 50) of those who survive the deceased. Indeed, one of Sean’s mourners, a young haemophiliac named Marco, arrives at Nathan and Sean’s apartment with his mother, Helene, and immediately states ‘C’est juste que je ne veux pas voir le corps’. This connects to what Bataille describes as a fear of the dead because the corpse reminds us of what we are fated to become—‘le cadavre est l’image de son destin’ (Bataille 1957, 50).
Historical context is particularly key to this scene, for whilst someone who has died at home cannot be buried or cremated before 24 hours have passed in France (Association Française d’Information Funéraire 1992), stigma around the handling of HIV+ corpses continued into the twenty-first century, as is demonstrated by the fact that HIV+ bodies could not be embalmed before 2017 (AFP 2017). This does not stop an ongoing feeling of discomfort as the survivors handle Sean’s body, changing his clothes. Nathan states that this is the one thing he is unable to do—he can aid Sean in taking his life but cannot take part in making him look less dead. Following from this scene are intercut shots of Sean’s political funeral and the final sex scene between Nathan and Thibault.

In comparison to the previous two sex scenes, the couple do not talk at all and neither Nathan nor Thibault is seen to experience ‘la petite mort’, their coupling interrupted by the grief of the real death as Nathan breaks down in tears. His jerky body movement and framing in the shot parallels a previous one of Sean when he is in the moment of orgasm, thus the choreography of Sean’s ‘little death’ mirrors and subsequently blurs the lines between sex and death as experienced by those left alive.

Parties and protests

Whilst the last three sections have focused on the personal relationships between the activists, the film spends far more time at the multiple actions enacted by the group. This next section considers the intersection between the scenes of protest (some of which are re-enactments of real ACT UP-Paris actions) and the film’s transcendence of ‘la petite mort’. This is achieved in two ways: first, through the multiple clubbing scenes, and secondly through the political funerals for newcomer, Jerémié, and at the end of the film, for the veteran activist Sean.

Regarding the clubbing scenes, all but the third scene follow on from a scene of protest: the first comes after a ‘zap’ at the pharmaceutical company, Melton Pharma’s labs, the second after a Pride event, and the last is intercut with Sean’s political funeral at the end of the film. In each scene, a great emphasis is made on the bodies and vitality of the members of ACT UP-Paris, particularly those who have identified themselves as being HIV+. The club scenes become a litmus test for Sean’s gradual deterioration of health for in those he appears in before his death, his movement on the dancefloor progressively slows down, until he does not dance at all and stands with Nathan at the bar.

In the protest scenes the members repeatedly utilise a form of protest tactic called a ‘die-in’, where the protestors enter a space and en-masse lie down on the floor, pretending to be dead. The manoeuvre has a dual use, as a dramatic signifier of the number of ignored dead from the AIDS crisis, and it also hinders law enforcement from removing the protestors from the space. Returning to my concept of the deathbed in AIDS cinema, Bataille’s taboo surrounding the treatment of the deceased body is disrupted here. The ‘die-in’ does not allow the witnesses of it to separate themselves from the violence which the corpse signifies, as the site of protest becomes the figurative deathbed. This can be seen in a shot from a die-in which occurs just before Sean dies. A top shot of the site of the protest looks like a mass grave where the bodies are yet to be buried. The shot lingers for a moment and the image is accentuated with white crosses held on the chests of the lying protestors.
A running question throughout the film, which connects the implicit taboos of sex and death in the bedroom to explicit taboos during the act of protest, is what is too much, and going too far? The members of ACT UP-Paris are continuously arguing and debating about what forms of protest are appropriate and acceptability politics are a contentious issue between the activists. By this, I refer to the separation between the activists who wish to retain a relatively respectable image to the public and stick to the plans produced during the meetings, and those, including Sean, for whom this is less important. For example, there is a squeamishness around putting sexually explicit images on the posters produced by ACT UP-Paris, and two non-members confront the group over the fact they find their publications too scary. Two camps subsequently form in the group, though they are ultimately united by the death of Sean at the end of the film.

Whilst Bataille is referring to taboos around sex and death, in the context of the ACT UP-Paris protests seen in the film, sex and death cannot be disconnected from these non-sexual acts, and thus his concepts still align. The protests depicted in 120 BPM are fictionalised versions of protests where those present were speaking out against a taboo subject: discussing the sexuality and deaths of those with HIV/AIDS.

The film is relatively devoid of the markers of time passing; however, one event that does mark the passing of each year within the narrative is the annual Pride march, which follows on from the first sex scene between Nathan and Sean. An abrupt shift both aurally and visually, the shot cuts to Sean in a campy ACT UP-Paris cheerleader outfit, chanting and dancing amid other activists. As a confetti canon explodes, a visual representation of sexual climax, the action slows down, the soundtrack swells and the diegetic sound mutes. With the tempo of the image decelerated, the moment is extended, allowing for the images of the characters to exist and live, laughing and dancing, for longer than the original footage would allow. Laura Mulvey describes how ‘as stillness intrudes into movement, the image freezes into the “stop of death”’ (Mulvey 2006, 32). Here the ‘stop of death’, the end of the image, is avoided for the time being, and the temporality of this scene is able to ‘defy death’ (Aaron 2004, 5) for the characters, if only for a moment. Rather than ‘la petite mort’, this moment of heightened emotion and connection between the characters because of their sexuality and their solidarity does not form a continuation of death, but a momentary pause.

This final section considers what happens after death in 120 BPM, and how this relates to ‘la petite mort’. The health of a secondary character, history student Jerémié, progressively worsens, shown through fainting fits, nose bleeds, and finally hospitalisation. The nosebleed and admittance to hospital are intercut with archive footage of ACT UP-Paris taking part in various demonstrations. After Jerémié has died, his voice is heard stating ‘Promène mon corps dans les rues de la ville avec des sifflets et des cornes de brume’, requesting a political funeral. The group respect his wishes and in the next scene his photograph is depicted on signs in place of his body, which has been cremated. The personal becomes political as Jerémié’s demise is mirrored with images of real members of ACT UP-Paris who lived, and died, with AIDS, several of whom received similar political funerals. This funeral scene bears a striking resemblance to that of ACT UP-Paris president Cleews Vellay, who died in October 1994 (Darne 1994). In a photograph taken by Tom
Craig, mourners are shown carrying black flags with a pink triangle and wearing T-shirts bearing the famous slogan ‘Silence = Mort’, which is mirrored in the mise en scène of the scene in 120 BPM.

Though his death is censored like previous examples of AIDS cinema, such as Longtime Companion and Philadelphia, with the action cutting away from his hospital bed (and implied death bed), Jerémié can still be understood as transcending ‘la petite mort’.

Both he and Sean do so through their control over how they are memorialised as members of ACT UP-Paris. The procession for Jerémié, and the later scene of Sean’s ‘funeral’, brings us back to Bataille’s taboo of death, with both men requesting the desecration of their bodies to gain public attention for their cause. In the first shot of the film, the new members of ACT UP-Paris, including Jerémié, are warned that being a part of the group, they will be assumed to be both gay and HIV+ by the public. Indeed, ‘the politics of ACT UP Paris intertwine gay identity and sexuality with the direct action politics that they engage’ (Nakayama 2012, 106).

Returning to Schultz, both men transcend the ‘continuity of death’ (1987, 78), memorialised precisely because of their desires and the virus which instigated their demise, as members of ACT UP-Paris. They are both resurrected throughout the remainder of the film in different forms. Jerémié’s image is paraded through the streets with banners and mournful cries of ‘Sida, on meurt, l’indifférence demeure’ from Sean, and the climax of the film occurs as Sean’s plans for his funeral are enacted, wherein his ashes are pelted over the refreshments at a pharmaceutical conference. Sean’s ‘funeral’ is intercut with a final club scene, the flashing disco lights merging with the conference hall and ashes exploding in the air. The film closes with the audio of a heartbeat going at 120 beats per minute, the shot rapidly cutting between different surviving members of ACT UP-Paris. Though the shot cuts to black, the activists never stop moving and this filmic space, focused on queer community and desire, seems to transcend the ‘stop of death’ (Mulvey 2006, 32). The spectator has left, but the story of ACT UP-Paris and the HIV/AIDS crisis survives.

**Conclusion**

In his research of the depiction of HIV/AIDS in contemporary cinema, Joshua Pocius identifies how a common ‘push to be remembered . . . informed many screen mediations of HIV/AIDS’ (Pocius 2017, 12). The fear of being forgotten and lost to time led to ‘a sense of urgency in producing cultural artefacts of memory’ (ibid.), which links to a contemporary desire to interact with the history of previous generations and, more specifically, to be a part of a future history; in this case, a queer one (Dinshaw et al. 2007, 179).

Robin Campillo has connected the past with the present in 120 BPM through the relationship between sex and death. ‘Safe’ sex practices are strictly adhered to by the characters who are seen to have sex in 120 BPM, though ‘barebacking’ or sex without a condom was a contentious issue at the time (Castro 2015, 160) and could be considered a taboo of itself. Stigma around an HIV+ status is still felt by those living in France to this day (Marsicano et al. 2014, 1), but new narratives, including 120 BPM, provide representation which challenges expectations of what an HIV+ person can do and be.
Another recent French film with HIV+ protagonists, Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau or Théo et Hugo (Ducastel and Martinau 2016), epitomises a narrative shift which stretches into the real world, from collective action and the fear of imminent death to personal issues around consent, disclosure and living with the stigma of being HIV+. The eighth season of SKAM France (Andem, 2018), a French-language teen drama, has also been praised for its portrayal of an HIV+ teenager navigating relationships, particularly as the HIV+ character is a young heterosexual woman—‘Identifier un personnage féminin, adolescent et séropositif dans une production made in France, c’est tout de même quelque chose d’inédit, voire révolutionnaire’ (Ques 2021). The end credit scene of Un couteau dans le cœur or Knife + Heart (Gonzalez 2018) depicts the busy set of a gay porn film falling dark and silent, signifying the loss of life from the gay community during the HIV/AIDS crisis. The director, Anne, and her friend Archibald share a wistful smile despite all that has happened. Across the Channel, however, It’s a Sin (Davies 2021), a limited series set in London during the 1980s and 1990s, returns to a ‘depiction of suffering’ (Aaron 2014, 132), with several of its HIV+ characters dying desexualised and alone. This shows that whilst not every new cultural production which engages with HIV/AIDS narratives is prepared to take 120 BPM’s humanising and guilt-free approach, more are treading the same path towards destigmatising and sex-positive depictions of HIV+ life and death.

To conclude, as an image of the queer past, 120 BPM is a film which constructs the bodies of gay men dying of AIDS as ones with far more control than they have been attributed in previous examples of HIV/AIDS cinema. Bataille’s notion of ‘la petite mort’ is repeatedly disrupted through engagement in and around the deathbed. Whilst these characters know that they may have limited time, they continue to dance and joke and love, and even orgasm.

Note

1. https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-paris-france-anti-aids-activists-of-act-up-paris-marching-in-funeral-27461784.html.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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