‘De jour en jour / From day to day’: Documenting Times of Self-Mourning in Hervé Guibert’s La Pudeur ou l’impudeur (1990)

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Abstract:
Mourning is predominantly understood as an emotional process caused by the loss of a beloved other. This is challenged in this article on Hervé Guibert’s 1990 La Pudeur ou l’impudeur, a documentary in which the author and photographer represents his physical and emotional suffering through the last stages of HIV-AIDS. The article explores this suffering via the idea of ‘self-mourning’, which denotes Guibert’s reflection on his own mortality in the light of terminal illness. In particular, the article focuses on what happens to the notion of time in mourning against the backdrop of Gilles Deleuze and Jean-Luc Nancy.

Keywords: Guibert; Documentary; Mourning

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance …

Ecclesiastes 3
The film *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur* (Hervé Guibert, 1991) is the autoportrait, or video-diary, of the French writer and photographer Hervé Guibert, in which he documents himself undergoing medical treatment and suffering from the increasingly painful symptoms of HIV-AIDS. The hour-long film, which aligns different episodes in the style of a home movie, was only shown on French television posthumously on 30 January 1992 following Guibert’s death from the consequences of an attempted suicide in December 1991. It is mostly remembered for one of the film’s final scenes, in which Guibert stages a mock suicide. In fact, the film could be described as centring recurrently on the theme of suicide – scenes that were particularly important to Guibert were those in which he interviews his two great aunts, aged 92 and 85, and repeatedly asks them whether the severity of his physical pain might justify him to take his own life.

Mostly, however, the film, shot in 1990 and 1991, comprises scenes of Guibert’s everyday life: we see Guibert at his apartment, working, dancing, being examined, in conversation with his doctor, under the shower, on the toilet, on a massage table, or on holiday – supposedly on the island of Elba. Guibert’s film touches on a variety of topics, such as the painful body, the progression of illness, the relation between doctor and patient, the possibilities and restrictions of first person documentary, all of them probing the connection between cinematic form and mortality. In the introduction to her work on the body and mortality in cinema, Emma Wilson refers to Guibert’s film and highlights just that, namely that it ‘opens questions about the ways in which moving image art captures a bodily intimation of mortality’ (Wilson, 2012, p. 18). Her emphasis on moving image art as allowing for sensuous and sensory means of mediating loss informs my approach, which analyses the ways in which *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur* scrutinizes the changed experience of time caused by a terminal illness. To this end, it draws on Gilles Deleuze’s and André Bazin’s explorations of how film mediates between temporal continuity and the ephemerality of the image. I juxtapose these approaches to Havi Carel’s philosophical reading of the ill person’s changed experience of time, and Jean-Luc Nancy’s emphasis on the place the body holds within this experience. Central to my argument that the video-diary offers a privileged form to express these temporal shifts and capture the horizon of the self’s imminent demise is the concept of ‘self-mourning’. ‘Self-mourning’, a term sporadically used since the emergence of literary criticism’s interest in trauma studies and readings of mourning and melancholia, generally designates the loss of the self that occurs during a process of mourning. My use of the
term is situated within this theoretical context but follows James Agar in particular, who in an article on Guibert’s literary work has used ‘self-mourning’ more specifically to refer to illness narratives and their relation to mourning (Agar, 2007). My reading of self-mourning in *La Pudeur et l’impudeur* argues that the first person documentary allows Guibert to come to terms with his mortality following the diagnosis of a terminal illness.

Diagnosis and prognosis are seminal here, as they set an ‘expiration date’ for the process of mourning that the self undertakes, and this recognition of an a priori limited time is what structures the lives of the terminally ill. And yet, that ‘deadline’ always remains vague, thereby abandoning the patient in a horizon of an ever-present eventuality. As Paul Kalanithi writes reflecting on the prognosis of his own terminal condition: ‘Getting too deep into statistics is like trying to quench a thirst with salty water. The angst of facing mortality has no remedy in probability’ (Kalanithi 2014, paragraph 17). *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur* is intimately concerned with this transformed time structure. Guibert’s time is limited and punctuated by periods of intense physical pain that act as constant reminders of his impending death. This opens up a dilemma: on the one hand time appears short, all too short, to the self that mourns its impending death, on the other hand, pain prolongs time, it stretches seconds and minutes into what can seem like endlessness. How does the self mourn the little time that is left? How does pain shape the experience of time, and how can this dual experience of time be transformed into cinematic time? How can the uncertainty of how much time is left be represented without being romanticized or seeming banal? This article attempts to answer some of these questions by first examining the experience of time in illness; it then theoretically contextualizes this within an understanding of cinematic time. Finally, I propose a reading of the process of self-mourning in the scene of Guibert’s staged suicide, which, I claim, allows him to accept whatever little time is left to him—even if acceptance means a continuous experience of pain.

### Time and Illness

The genesis and release of *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur* itself already inscribes a particular relation to time within the film. Guibert started shooting sequences for the film once he had publicly announced that he would no longer write about his illness. Elaine Scarry has described the inexpressibility of pain and the ways in which pain even destroys language since it is not ‘about’ anything (Scarry, 1985,
Hervé Guibert’s La Pudeur ou l’impudeur pp. 19–20). And one of the reasons why writing about HIV-AIDS seemed no longer an option might have been that any narrative form or linearity was no longer able to adequately represent the final stages of Guibert’s illness, the intensification of his pain and his progressively fragmented sense of self. In his literary work, Guibert increasingly distanced himself from traditional narrative form as his illness progressed. While writing about his condition was apparently no longer an option, the first person documentary allowed Guibert to creatively engage with his illness, and his visual work therefore also bids a formal farewell to the written word. Shots of Guibert’s books, his writing desk, or scenes depicting Guibert both reading and writing intersperse the film, and this imagery provides a visual rhythm of mourning for Guibert’s earlier life—a life in which writing was still possible. The film is therefore a sort of coda to Guibert’s written work, but its posthumous screening furthermore underlines its functioning as a testament to Guibert’s life.

While Guibert’s move from word to image also delineates his progression from life to death, the limitation of his life span does not only shape the making of the film, but is also internal to the film itself. In a first interview with his great-aunt, Guibert states the simple fact of their age difference—he is 35 years old, his aunt is 85. Guibert makes the seemingly banal comment that their age difference is not very big: ‘50 years is actually not that long’ (all translations from La Pudeur ou l’impudeur—except when mentioned otherwise—are my own). Yet this remark captures everything that is at stake in this film, as Guibert thereby effectively asks what constitutes life-time, what is the meaning of human life—and death—in time? Is dying at 85 different from dying at 35? Is he, at 35, more justified to turn to suicide than she?

Time in Guibert’s film has a singular dimension as it is essential to the experience of illness: a life-threatening illness makes its carrier painfully...

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1. Ann Jurecic has pointed out that Scarry’s introductory argument has largely overshadowed her claim later in the book that there is potential for artistic creativity after pain. Criticism, she claims, has appropriated the argument about the language-destroying force of pain to justify its focus on ‘gaps and paradoxes rather than personal stories and empathetic responses’ (Jurecic, 2012, p. 51). It should therefore be noted that Guibert actually returned to writing despite his initial proclamation of abandoning it. Jean-Pierre Boulé comments on Guibert’s switching between writing, photography and video and in particular highlights some of the film’s sequences as they are described in Guibert’s Le Protocole compassionnel (Boulé, 1999, pp. 226–228).

2. See the changes in Guibert’s narrative form from À l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie (1990) to Cytomégalovirus, Journal d’hospitalisation (1992). The latter is more a collection of fragments and impressions than a sustained narrative.
aware that his or her life-time is limited, that the passing of time is no longer an objective fact of human life, but subjectively lived and experienced from the moment of birth. The physical pain Guibert exposes in the film functions as a constant reminder that this pain cannot be sustained forever, and while it is a seemingly banal statement that everyone's life span is limited, living with the diagnosis of a lethal disease has the ability to transform this commonplace: being able to quantify what remains of the time we have left turns the general ‘every mortal must die at some point’ into the painful realisation ‘I must die soon’. Having to die eventually has nothing to do with having to die now, and by turning this eventuality into an actuality, illness makes the norm extraordinary, personal and inevitable.

The philosopher Havi Carel describes this temporal change experienced in illness in the following terms:

Death is no longer an abstract, remote notion. The soft focus lens is replaced by a sharp magnifying glass through which terminal stages of illness can be viewed in nauseating detail. The future curls in on itself and at once becomes both exposed and radically curtailed. It has a clear endpoint. (Carel, 2008, p. 123).

In a memorable sequence at the beginning of the film, Guibert spells out in similar terms what happened to his experience of time during illness:

AIDS has allowed me to time-travel: the body of a weak, acrimonious, old man has taken possession of my 35-year-old body, I am 85 years old like my great aunt. Every day I lose the capacity to perform a gesture I was still able to perform the day before. I am fighting against the clock.

What is key in the scene and what structures the film throughout is Guibert’s ‘fight against the clock’. He first uses the expression in the quotation cited above, then halfway through the film. Finally, at the very end of the film, we hear an alarm clock going off, pointing towards the fact that this fight against time has now come to an end, and that it is time, and not Guibert, who has won. Guibert’s decaying body triggers this time travel, but while the body is incessantly travelling forward, towards death, the subject inhabiting the body tries to stop time from passing in order to fight against the time bomb inside. Mirroring Guibert’s comparison of his age with that of his great aunt, Havi Carel speaks of beginning ‘to experience herself as older than her years […] as her movements slow down, [and] the time difference between herself and others becomes evident’ (Carel, 2008, p. 84).
Carel makes much of the changed perspective on one’s life that the apprehension of mortality gives the ill and she – perhaps idealistically – believes that ‘ill people can develop an ability to live in the present’, as ‘illness restricts the ability to imagine future scenarios’ (Carel, 2008, p. 85). In *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur* this is both true and not true, much like the conjunction that connects the two nouns, which is why it is particularly unfortunate that this has been replaced with an inclusive ‘and’ in the English translation of the title of the film as *Modesty and Shame* (Guibert himself changed from ‘et’ to ‘ou’ in his revision of the script). The images of Guibert’s trip to Elba suggest an eternal summer and a paradisiacal present – Guibert’s description of nature and the apparent motionlessness of time, immerse the viewer in an experience of time that makes it difficult to imagine a life outside – and after – the island. The images of Elba evoke stasis, and yet images of Guibert’s emaciated body walking through the lush Mediterranean setting signpost that these hot summer days are only cover-up. They hide, as Susan Sontag analyses in her seminal study *AIDS and its Metaphors*, that ‘AIDS is progressive, a disease of time’ (Sontag, 1991, p. 107).

In her analysis of HIV-AIDS, Sontag writes about the notion of ‘latency’ and the ‘constructing of temporal sequences of stages’ which defines the disease (Sontag, 1991, p. 108):

Thinking in terms of ‘stages’ is essential to discourse about AIDS. […] What is called AIDS is generally understood as the last of three stages – the first of which is infection with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and early evidence of inroads on the immune system – with a long latency period between infection and the onset of the ‘telltale’ symptoms. (Sontag, 1991, p. 107)

In that sense Carel’s ‘ability to live in the present’ might be nothing but latency in Guibert’s film – or perhaps a parallel experience of time – that is simultaneously and continuously undermined by scenarios that make it impossible not to think about the future and its next ‘stages’. When Guibert first evokes the image of the ‘fight against time’, the viewer witnesses a montage taking us back to Guibert’s childhood and the images here are in stark contrast to the decaying figure Guibert is now. While the flashbacks take the viewer to Guibert’s past, they naturally suggest the succession and acceleration of time as the image of the small child playing with the water pipe is brutally juxtaposed with the phantom-like body of the emaciated adult. What further accentuates the break between then and now is the death of Guibert’s grand-aunt Suzanne towards the end of the film. Again, it intimates that the passing of time cannot be ignored and
that, inevitably, the fight against time is always lost. And finally, without doubt most forcefully, there is Guibert's staging of his own suicide, which naturally takes on a future dimension for the viewer who knows that an attempted suicide was what caused Guibert's actual death.

Cinematic Time

The tension between waiting for time to pass and attempting to stop time from passing is what structures La Pudeur ou l'impudeur. References to time thereby function as a constant refrain acknowledging to the viewer Guibert's limited life-time, and that even if stretched out on his armchair listening to music or reading a book, time only seemingly stands still, but actually races to the end. The connection between time and finitude is crucial to moving image media, which might explain why Guibert turned away from writing and to cinema towards the end of his life. In particular, this link is seminal to the claims Gilles Deleuze makes about Bergson's philosophy and, in turn, about cinema, in Cinema 2: The Time-Image. Deleuze starts out by summarizing Bergson, who according to him, proposes that:

The only subjectivity is time, non-chronological time, grasped in its foundation, and it is we who are internal to time, not the other way round. That we are in time looks like a commonplace, yet it is the highest paradox. Time is not the interior in us, but just the opposite, the interiority in which we are, in which we move, live and change. […] Subjectivity is never ours, it is time, that is, the soul or the spirit, the virtual. (Deleuze, 1989, pp. 82–83)

Guibert's acknowledgement of his illness leads to this experience of 'non-chronological time', as images of his childhood are juxtaposed and no longer correspond to the experience of his present body. The 'subject' is 'subjected' to time and thereby loses access to agency, but Guibert, the subject of his own film, is also its patient. 'Patient' is etymologically connected to 'patience' and the quality of enduring suffering. The patient is required to acknowledge that time is out of his or her control, that time – which has suddenly become quantifiable – is structuring the patient's subjectivity. Patient-hood in La Pudeur ou l'impudeur is also depicted as turning the human being into a mere object – and this is, of course, where links to Michel Foucault can be made, not only because Foucault was a friend of Guibert's and an important protagonist in his book, À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie. The patient, Foucault writes in The Birth of the Clinic is subjected to the 'medical gaze' and thereby the 'patient is trapped in a relation to the self that is of the order of guilt (faute), and in a nonrelation to others that is of the order of shame (honte)'.

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Hervé Guibert’s La Pudeur ou l’impudeur

(Foucault, 1972, p. 516, translation in Huffer, 2010, p. 159). Guibert’s position as both objectified subject and patient in the film therefore further strengthens the perception of time as being entirely outside of his reach.

Deleuze’s musing on Bergson comes into its own – and contributes to a discussion of cinematic time in particular – once Deleuze introduces the notion of the ‘crystal-image’. According to Deleuze,

What constitutes the crystal-image is the most fundamental operation of time: since the past is constituted not after the present that it was but at the same time, time has to split itself in two at each moment as present and past, which differ from each other in nature, or, what amounts to the same thing, it has to split the present in two heterogeneous directions, one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past. Time has to split at the same time as it sets itself out or unrolls itself: it splits in two dissymmetrical jets, one of which makes all the present pass on, while the other preserves all the past. Time consists of this split, and it is this, it is time, that we see in the crystal. The crystal-image was not time, but we see time in the crystal. (Deleuze, 1989, p. 79, italics in the original)

The crystal image merges the past tense of the recorded event with the present tense of its viewing, presenting us with the difference between time as duration and the metaphor of time, which expresses that duration. Guibert’s interviews with his aunts open up such crystal-images in the film, as they split time into two by, on the one hand, referring to a past that is always present for these old ladies, and on the other hand representing a life-time that Guibert knows he does not have. The life expectancy of Guibert and his aunts is approximately similar; their lives evolve in a seeming ‘day-to-day’ that is clearly directed towards the one day that will be the last. The present which the film documents thereby invariably splits time, and in this split, as Deleuze argues, we see time itself. But what does ‘seeing time’ mean?

In his discussion of exemplary crystal-images, Deleuze points to that of the departing ship in E la nave va (Frederico Fellini, 1983) as epitomizing a crystalline state. This image might help to explain what seeing time in the crystal-image means, as Deleuze explains what it is about the ship that turns it into such a peculiar image:

The ship can also be the ship of the dead, the nave of a simple chapel as place of an exchange. The virtual survival of the dead can be actualized, but is this not at the price of our existence, which becomes virtual in turn? Is it the dead who belong to us, or we who belong to the dead? And do we love them against the living, or for and with life? (Deleuze, 1989, p. 72)
The crystal-image and its juxtaposition of metaphor and duration is exemplified in the ship that carries those that have gone before and points to the future in which the living will equally be part of the dead. And this leads to the experience of the present as virtual. Cinema captures this. Carel also takes up the image of the crystal, when she beautifully writes that the experience of illness is ‘liquid time solidified into a crystal drop of Now’ (Carel, 2008, p. 124). Coincidentally, Guibert himself integrates an image of a departing ship by which he brings the Elba sequence to an end. While Elba seemingly represents an eternal present, Guibert’s departure had already been inscribed in what turns out to be mere latency. Cinematic time gives body to the seemingly clichéd ‘living in the present’ triggered by illness, and yet it does so by preserving the essential split in time that is contained in this Now.

But does this reading of Deleuze’s crystal-image not come close to the Barthesian punctum? In the punctum we have the emphasis on the subjective, and what triggers the ‘wounding’ is precisely the temporal split and its relation to a chronology of death. And while the crystal-image is certainly related to this chronology, it is also inherently other. In order to understand how it differs, it becomes telling to turn to André Bazin and his juxtaposition and comparison of photography and cinema:

[Hence] the charm of family albums. Those grey or sepia shadows, phantомlike and almost undecipherable, are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny; not, however, by the prestige of art but by the power of an impassive mechanical process: for photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption.

Viewed in this perspective, the cinema is objectivity in time. The film is no longer content to preserve the object, ensnared as it were in an instant, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber. The film delivers baroque art from its convulsive catalepsy. Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were. (Bazin, 1967, pp. 14–15)

Cinema and photography are connected in their relation to time, but cinema preserves time in motion: the Deleuzian ship – like Guibert’s ship – is not ‘preserved intact’, it is not frozen into the frame, it moves, it moves out of the haven of the past and into the uncertain sea of the future. And within this movement there is the temporary standstill, the split within the present. In the last sequence of the film, when Guibert’s alarm clock rings and his time is up, the fight against time is lost, Guibert reflects on the temporality of the moving image. He claims that, unlike in
photography or writing, one needs to have already lived – or have rehearsed – a certain situation in order to film it: ‘With video, one gets close to another moment, to the new moment with, as if in superimposition, in a purely mental fade-in fade-out, the memory of the first moment. Then the present instant has the past’s richness too.’ (translation in Boulé, 1999, p. 228). The experience of illness is structured around the day-to-day, but translating this day-to-day into the moving image extends the timeline of this present and while it inscribes it into a temporality of mortality, it also captures this mortality as virtual.

**Mourning One’s Own Death**

In his study on mourning cinema, Richard Armstrong describes the Deleuzian crystal’s ability ‘to highlight images like the differing refractions of light available as the crystal is turned’, and he suggests that crucial to the understanding of the crystal is the constant interplay between ‘actual and virtual’ (Armstrong, 2012, p. 90). This interplay is also seminal to an understanding of the process of mourning, in which the person grieving for the loss of another constantly needs to update his or her memories – which still contain the virtually living beloved other – with the actual reality that this person no longer exists. Sigmund Freud has famously described this work of normal, non-pathological mourning as a ‘reality-testing’, which is carried out ‘bit by bit’ until the person becomes ‘free and uninhibited again’ (Freud, 2001, pp. 244–245). In her work on mourning, the grief therapist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, influenced by Freud, has devoted much of her attention to this piecemeal process of transitioning from the virtual to the actual. Within this transitioning she has singled out five stages of mourning: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 2005). Kübler-Ross is careful to point out that these stages differ individually, with some stages enduring longer than others, some being skipped over or never attained. However, she maintains that following the loss of a beloved other, the survivor generally confronts some of the emotional states described in these stages in his or her transition to reality.cá

Unlike normal mourning, mourning for one’s own self following the diagnosis of a terminal illness travels in the opposite direction: it will not end with release, but with the death of the self – that point, where mourning

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3. Even if the emotions Kübler-Ross singles out are – in different and varying quantities – central to the process of self-mourning that Guibert undergoes in *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur*, I adopt the notion of ‘stages’ with caution. Its hinting towards a teleological approach to mourning suggests that mourning can be ‘overcome’, which is a view that a postmodern discourse of mourning – with its emphasis on its ethical implications – discourages.
for another person usually starts. And yet, the self mourning his or her own mortality also goes through a comparable process of making the transition and shares many of the emotions Kübler-Ross describes.

The first person documentary enables Guibert to engage in a process of mourning by providing him with the means to represent—but simultaneously undo—the ‘stages’ of grief he is depicting. Like the period of latency in his physical decay, his process of mourning is interspersed with moments of denial or a stasis of psychological pain. Within the study of documentary film, questions of genre, in particular relating to the first person documentary but also concerning sub-genres such as self-portraiture or the video diary, continue to preoccupy critics, because, as Alisa Lebow claims, ‘in the very awkward simultaneity of being subject in and subject of, it actually unsettles the dualism of the objective/subjective divide, rendering it inoperative’ (Lebow, 2012, p. 5). This, however, is precisely what predisposes the first person documentary as the adequate medium to represent the process of self-mourning due to the experience of a terminal illness.

Representing the self on screen allows Guibert to step in and out of his malfunctioning body—his actual, real, decaying body is made virtual, and this interplay unsettles, or perhaps even merges, the self-other divide caused by his ailing body. Within the auto-documentary genre, the self is always both subject and object of representation, but through the presence of an ever more dominant body, another form of alterity emerges. This otherness is caused by the body of the self, which, through the experience of illness takes on a life of its own. In the work of many theorists of mourning, such as Freud or Kübler-Ross, the body is not assigned a prominent role in their thinking about grief, which is why I propose to turn to contemporary philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in order to capture the concept of enhanced embodiment experienced in illness. Existence for Nancy, as Ian James writes, ‘cannot be thought outside of human finitude’ (James, 2006, p. 131). Nancy emphasises that the self is always reminded of its finitude by an ungovernable and constantly intervening body. This emphasis on embodiment might be caused by Nancy’s own experience of illness so impressively depicted in his intimate text about his heart transplant, L’Intrus. Even if Nancy does not propose a theory of mourning, the place he assigns to the body is relevant to my reading of self-mourning in Guibert’s film, as the body, according to Nancy, lays the foundation for a separation and difference between self and other that is at the heart of mourning the self. Nancy writes:

Bodies are first and always other—just as others are first and always bodies. […] An other is a body because only a body is an other. It has this
nose, that skin color, this texture, that size, this fold, tightness. It weighs this weight. It smells that way. Why is this body thus, and not otherwise? Because it is other – and alterity consists in being-thus, in being the thus and thus and thus of this body, exposed all the way into its extremities. The inexhaustible corpus of a body’s features. (Nancy, 2008, pp. 29–31)

The body is at the source of the relationship between self and other, because it is our body that separates us from others and makes us at each moment aware of our difference. While embodiment also creates difference within a healthy body, the ailing body is a constant reminder not only of the body’s presence, but of the self’s inherent otherness. The body limits and excludes, and thereby becomes a marker of separation and loss, or as Nancy beautifully puts it, ‘The body is self in departure insofar as it parts – displaces itself right here from the here. […] The body is this departure of self to self’ (Nancy, 2008, p. 33). The body is the very possibility of departure, at every moment, everywhere. And the experience of physical illness makes this departure an imminent one. It is this acknowledgement of the body as incorporating this possible absence that explains Guibert’s pre-emptive mourning. While death may trigger the process of mourning, the mourner – via the acknowledgement of the self as body, and thereby as other – always anticipates the consequences of this finitude, because ‘in the span of its lifetime, the body is also a dead body, the body of a dead person, this dead person I am when alive. Dead or alive, neither dead nor alive, I am the opening, the tomb or the mouth, the one inside the other’ (Nancy, 2008, p. 15). This is why mourning – both for the self or the other – always starts with the human body, as the human body, even if healthy, is always already inhabited by its inevitable collapse. The body is the self’s tomb, and while healthiness ignores this precarious situation of the self, illness brusquely reminds the self of it.

Emotional aspects of Kübler-Ross’s five stages of grief can be found in many of the film’s episodes, but it is perhaps the staging of his own suicide which is most important to an understanding of Guibert’s self-mourning, and its impact on the experience of time. The scene is set on the island of Elba, where Guibert positions himself at a small desk and pours himself two glasses of water, into one of which he adds the lethal translucent drops of digitaline. His eyes closed, he then mixes up the glasses and proceeds to drink one of them. The stakes are high, but after a moment of gripping suspension, the tension is relieved with a shot of Guibert in his bedroom. At first it is unclear whether he is dead or asleep, but then his heavy breathing sets in and the voice-over comments: ‘This experience left me dead tired, it transformed me’. Chambers rightly comments on the transformative effect of the suicide experiment, and she notes that
‘Guibert’s mood, from now to the end of the video, is considerably lightened’ (Ross, 1997, p. 80). The staged suicide presents a turning point in Guibert’s mourning – while a fight against the idea of his own death, a fight against time, precedes the experiment, what follows is acceptance and even glimpses of hope that he might reach a posthumous survival in his art.

Within Kübler-Ross’s stages, the suicide experiment comes probably closest to her understanding of ‘bargaining’. ‘Bargaining’, as Kübler-Ross writes, ‘is really an attempt to postpone […], it includes an implicit promise that the patient will not ask for more if this one postponement is granted’ (Kübler-Ross, 2005, p. 72). Much of Kübler-Ross’s understanding of bargaining has to do with morality, as she describes a set of patients offering good behaviour in turn for an extension of their life, which explains why she concludes that much of the bargaining stage happens between the patient and God. While this is not the case in Guibert’s experiment, where God has been replaced by hazard, Guibert states that filming the experiment has changed his rapport to suicide, which suggests an equally cathartic development.4

Unlike mourning the death of an other, mourning the death of the self is always mourning a future, imagined death. Staging a mock suicide gives Guibert the closest approximation to his own death and in the momentary uncertainty whether he is drinking the digitaline instead of water, Guibert comes as close to his death as he possibly can. Within this moment of suspension, the subject of and the subject in La Pudeur ou l’impudeur is Guibert’s body, which has completely taken over the self. If the suicide experiment is a moment of bargaining for a postponement of death, then the transformative effects of the experiment are not substantially caused by the fact that Guibert’s death has been postponed. On the contrary, once it becomes clear that Guibert has not poisoned himself, it no longer matters how much or little time Guibert has left, as the experiment has enabled Guibert to temporarily give in to the body’s dominance. After the suicide experiment, Guibert reads out a fitting passage from Moreau: Mort d’un Soldat, in which Klabund describes Moreau’s own transformation in the following terms: ‘He now looked death in the face without blinking’ (my translation). While Guibert’s writing prior to La Pudeur ou l’impudeur functioned as a remedy for suicide, the auto-documentary reforms this relationship to survival by paradoxically making it possible to think

4. Chambers rightly notes that the imprecise ‘ça’ in ‘Je crois que filmer ça a changé mon rapport au suicide’ (‘I think that filming that, changed my relationship to suicide’) can be understood as relating to either suicide or HIV-AIDS (Chambers 1997, 80).
Nancy’s ‘absence’ of the body precisely by staging its overarching presence and domination. Guibert emerges from this experiment no longer as subject, but as subjected to his failing body, and it is this acknowledgement of defeat which makes acceptance possible.

In À l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie, Guibert writes about the ways in which living with the diagnosis and prognosis of HIV-AIDS intertwines the experience of time so closely with living and dying that the two become inseparable: ‘It is an illness that grants one time to die, that gives death time to live: time to discover time and finally to discover life’ (Hervé Guibert, 1991, Friend, p. 164) / ‘c’était une maladie qui donnait le temps de mourir, et qui donnait à la mort le temps de vivre, le temps de découvrir le temps et de découvrir enfin la vie’ (Guibert, 1990, p. 181). The urgency to give physical presence to this interface between life and death paved the way towards cinema, as cinematic time is rooted in the undoing of this precise duality. Deleuze writes that the crystal image is the:

point of indiscernibility, of the two distinct images, the actual and the virtual, while what we see in the crystal is time itself, a bit of time in the pure state, the very distinction between the two images which keeps on reconstituting itself. (Deleuze, 1989, p. 79)

Guibert’s staged suicide may be understood as such a Deleuzian crystal: it merges the distinction between Guibert dead and Guibert alive. The two become indiscernible, for a moment they become the same. And even if Guibert’s actual death is postponed, his virtual death has made his actual death possible. Like mourning another, mourning the self involves a burial, a burial of a living corpse. While mourning another might make it possible for the survivor to face life, it is the journey of self-mourning that La Pudeur ou l’impudeur traces which allows Guibert to face the time of death.

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