TIME AND TABOO: DEATH DRIVE IN OUTER SPACE

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Heptapods and their discontents

Psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theory is often wrongly accused by those who do not care to take it seriously, of being a 'humanism' and therefore not capable of addressing the new conceptual challenges that the post-human, post-apocalyptic, post-Anthropocenic[1] era may present us with. The persistent mischaracterization of psychoanalysis as somehow reducing grand theoretical, political and philosophical concerns into petty psychological questions of personal experience has meant that often the radical conceptual possibilities of psychoanalysis in both theory and praxis are missed. Having said that, the opportunities to put psychoanalysis to work outside its usual scope, even by those sympathetic to the psychoanalytic edifice, are often overlooked in favour of seemingly more well-suited theoretical frameworks[2]. This we see in the case of neuroscientific collaborations with AI companies for example under the auspices of Nick Bostrom's Future of Humanity Institute, Elon Musk's Neuralink, and the Blue Brain project among others. The challenge then is to push psychoanalysis beyond its comfortable realms and outside of the usual concerns with either the clinical subject or cultural critique of media objects and ask rather how may psychoanalysis become a tool with which we ask new theoretical questions that space travel and different modes of thought (including artificial and non-human) and their concomitant challenges presents the human subject with?

Given its shared ability to engage the unconscious and allow us to experience (as dreams so often do) forms of time and space altering logic, often the way to approach these questions is through cinema. More than just concerns with the gaze, desire and ideology as is traditionally

[1] The scientist, environmentalist, and futurist James Lovelock (2019) in a recent publication *Novacene: The Coming Age of Hyperintelligence*. London: Penguin has termed this new era the 'Novacene', the epoch in which AI has decisively overtaken human civilization. He proposes that the age of the Anthropocene (the geological period in which humans acquired planetary scale technology) has already come to an end and we are entering a new age in which technology will come to inherit the 'consciousness' of the cosmos. In his vision, artificially intelligent beings who can think 10,000 times faster than humans will emerge as the inheritors of the earth and caretakers of the intelligent universe.

[2] As I argue at length in *The Psychoanalysis of Artificial Intelligence* (2021) London: Palgrave, the emergence of Artificial Intelligence into the social bond provokes an urgent engagement with the psychoanalytic subject and the concept of enjoyment.

associated with Lacanian film theory, cinema can offer scope to think through psychoanalytic and philosophical questions in a way that empirical research simply cannot. It is important to note however as Todd McGowan (2007) points out in *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* that the Lacanian film theory of the 1970's suffered from a misappropriation and misreading of Lacan's concept of the gaze, which early theorists extracted from Lacan's (2006a) *The Mirror Stage: as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience'*. In fact, Lacan's concept of the gaze does not appear properly until *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (2004)* in which it takes on a wholly different significance as a drive object. Lacan adds the gaze (scopic drive) along with the voice (invocatory drive) to the other drive objects to supplement Freud's original three (oral, anal and genital drives).

Whereas the notion of the gaze in film theory was understood as the subjective mastery over the visual field, the concept of the gaze (as opposed to the look) as Lacan elaborated it, referred to the blind spot in the visual field that incorporated the void of the subject, where the opaque desire of the 'spectator' was revealed. It is not therefore until Joan Copjec writes the controversial *Orthopsychic Subject* (1989) therefore that Lacanian film theory as we should understand it today starts to take shape. The aim therefore going forward should be to radicalize the Lacanian tool box even further, and take psychoanalytic film theory outside of the confines of its traditional concerns with spectatorship and ideology, utilizing it as a way of engaging conceptually with film as a philosophical text and a form of thinking.

Denis Villeneuve's 2016 film *Arrival* tells the story of first contact with an alien race of Kraken like creatures; *Heptapods* who have come to earth to, they tell us, 'offer weapon'. The weapon they offer comes via the medium of language which for the heptapods operates according to a completely different logic than that of spoken and written human language. The heptapods communicate via symbols which they produce physically by spurting out black squid-like ink (called semagrams) on a two-dimensional surface into the air with no linear sequence. Louise Banks (Amy Adams) is the world-renowned linguist recruited by the military to try to decipher this language and work out what it is that the heptapods really want and how they propose to help humans. In the process of learning their language Louis experiences what appear to be flash backs of the tragic death of her teenage daughter. In fact, the language that Louise is learning is not just enabling her to understand the heptapods and *their desires* better but changing her whole experience of time and of desire itself. The heptapods don't think in linear time through cause and effect and past, present and future but rather circular time wherein all events happen simultaneously. Through learning this mode of thought, the heptapods give

Louise and by extension humanity their help or 'weapon' against the ravages of linear thinking. Her visions of her daughter's death then are not flash backs but rather flash forwards of the child she will have with her colleague Ian Donnelley (Jeremy Renner) the Los Alamos physicist.

A feature often neglected by commentators of the film is the spatial and material nature of the heptapods language. In the original book *Story of Your Life* by Ted Chiang Louise discerns that the heptapods speech and writing have no relation to each other (in fact she discerns two languages one spoken and one written (Heptapod A: speech and Heptapod B: writing). Whilst their alphabet is pictorial, it is not symbolic in the way that human languages are, it does not attempt to represent speech. The shapes that they create with the substance that they emit from their bodies exist topologically as relations of space and do not relate to the audible communication that they make with Louise, their language exists as real in space but not in time, a true materialist position[3]. In order to decipher the semagrams one must be able to perceive the structural coexistence of them all at once. Hence, the heptapods live 'out of time'. One wonders then given their apparent lapse in perfection (their allusion to a future time when they will need the help of humans), are the sounds the heptapods make a crack in the circular logic of their thought, the 'cry' which effectively humanizes them and provokes them to engage with our temporal and finite universe? It must be that their perfect existence of plenitude and grace has been punctuated by the nightmare of temporality? In other words, do heptapods dream in depressingly linear mundane fashion, the inverse of the human psyche?

By the end of the film even though she discovers that her future child will die, Louise still decides to enter into a liaison with the child's prospective father, the knowledge of which he cannot forgive her for. According to her husband, in surrendering to the future she had foreseen, she made the wrong decision and rather should have chosen never to have a child and avoid the suffering and loss that would befall them all. However, as Žižek (2020) among others have pointed out, in Arrival's universe, free will consists only in following through on a decision you already know you will make. Rather than attempting to avert the future as if it were the effect of some external will of God, by doing nothing you are effectively creating, affirming, and enacting chronology. What Louise performs in her inability to avoid the

[3] Žižek (2020. P.188) recounts Frederic Brown's short story about time travel 'Experiment' in which, when a solid cube is sent back and forth in time using a physicists time machine, surprisingly when a past action is thwarted by human intervention what disappears is not the cube, but the whole universe surrounding it; the story ends mid- sentence. The reality which supported the brute matter is gone leaving only the cube as the intractable real element of the universe.

catastrophe of her daughter's death is what Lacan in *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (2006b) would call the future anterior:

> What is realized in my history is neither the past definite as what was, since it is no more, nor even the perfect as what has been in what I am, but the future anterior as what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming
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> Lacan 2006b: 247

In a sense what Arrival depicts is the *atemporality* of the death drive. Let us recall that in contrast to Freud (1955), for Lacan (2007) the death drive is not the ineluctable urge of the organic to return to an inorganic state, nor ever the thirst for self-destruction, even if destruction and death of the organic body is a side effect. But rather the death drive is the insistence of a form of undeadness, an immortal life, a will to enjoy despite the catastrophe it may cause. The death drive instead of pursuing an ultimate goal merely circles incessantly around an intractable object.

The torture of time

Whilst Arrival depicts the death drive via the paradoxical experience of freedom and determinism (that strange automatism which all speaking beings suffer at the mercy of their symptom) and the persistent existence of trauma as the only consistent reality shaping subjectivity, a number of recent science fiction films explore the function of death drive and our confrontation with it in an endless and timeless empty universe. As the famous adage goes, for Arthur C Clark, there are two possibilities; either we are alone in the universe or we are not. Both are equally terrifying. Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja's 2019 film *Aniara* arguably proves the second option maybe even more terrifying than the encounter with timeless heptapods.

Aniara, envisages the emptiness of space and the utter hopelessness that humans experience when faced with the deep time of the universe. The Aniara is a ship destined for Mars, promising a new and exciting life for the passengers who expect that after a few months on board entertaining themselves with shopping, partying and eating they will eventually be rewarded with a new planetary existence. However, when the ship malfunctions and goes off course and the passengers realise that they will be aboard for years rather than months, things immediately go into meltdown. The manic, anxiety- stricken passengers all rely on the on-board virtual reality AI 'therapist' MIMA to help them to deal with the prospect of this potentially never-ending journey through space, enabling the passengers to virtually go

wherever they find most soothing. The MIMA fulfils the function of what Lacan (2007) would have no doubt termed a *lathouse* - something not quite being not quite the other, but which can siphon off bodily jouissance and attend to the compulsion to enjoy[4]. Eventually however the overload of transference from the deluge of demanding and distressed passengers causes the AI to self-destruct in sheer despair. The sadness and trauma that MIMA is having to process, whilst presenting the passengers with the perfect solution to their suffering, proves too much even for an Artificial Intelligence. Once this last vestige of support is gone the passengers turn to each other to create new rituals, bonds and sexual attachments. Inevitably with the comforts of consumerism and other distractions gone, a return to ancient practices begins as they attempt to find new meaning in the oblivion of their seemingly endless journey into space. They form a paganistic erotic religious cult, as they try to come to terms with the frustrations of their bodies and the desolation of their hopes. Desire and its discontents in the deep time of the universe takes on a whole other nightmarish dimension. In the horrific climactic moment of the film, the protagonist is distracting herself with drugs and dancing in one of the ships' night clubs with a young man. When she returns to her quarters, she discovers her partner and lover has killed herself and their baby. The guilt of having a child destined for an eternal existence aboard the Aniara with no end point or planetary home in sight proves unbearable for a mother. Desire had been completely extinguished, all that remained was a pointless death drive. In the unbearably sad last scenes of the film, we are treated to the seemingly infinite inhuman view of the universe. In the unfathomable expanse of deep time we see images of the inside of the desolate ship floating in space nearly 6 million years later. The scene from outside shows us however they are finally reaching their new planet in the Lyra Constellation.

The concern with time and its relation to drive in film has according to Todd McGowan even become a new mode of cinematic representation. As McGowan (2011) writes in *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*, the emergence of a new temporal aesthetic in cinema that coincides with the start of the digital age where spectators have become accustomed to experiencing multiple forms of temporally punctuated visual stimuli, marks a change in the audience's relation to time and constitutes a new cinematic mode - that of atemporal cinema. The logic of enjoyment that this category of cinema exhibits, McGowan argues, switches from that of desire to that of drive. This form of film allows the spectator to experience their existence 'out of time'. According to McGowan, atemporal cinema distorts chronological time

[4] For a more in-depth treatment of the concept of the lathouse see Millar, I. (2021) *The Psychoanalysis of Artificial Intelligence*

to reveal the psychoanalytic logic of repetition. A repetition that does not pretend to seek the new but rather circulates around the kernel of an originary trauma or loss.

Whilst McGowan acknowledges that of course film has previously existed that did not follow chronological time in the form of the flashback for example, this in itself does not constitute atemporality. Playing with chronological structure in order to serve the eventual revelation of the object of desire or completion of fantasy, in his view, stays within the realms of traditional narrative form. Similarly, science fiction films which play with concepts of time or time travel as part of the plot likewise usually still adhere to an eschatological logic of desire. In order for a film to be considered truly atemporal in its logic it is not merely a question of content but of form. The form of the film must not attempt a final restitution of fantasy nor the obtainment of a lost object like the union of the romantic couple of the rediscovery of a lost place or friend, rather it needs to present time in such a way as to draw to light the traumatic kernel around which the narrative revolves. Showing us the logic of enjoyment that continually circulates around its object. In other words, atemporal cinema belongs to the death drive.

Claire Denis' 2018 deep space psychological horror film *High Life* invokes atemporality as both content and as form in an exemplary fashion. Reminiscent of Tarkovsky's (1972) *Solaris* in its focus on the psychological aspects to space travel over and above the fascination with technological innovation, High Life plays on the conceptual and perceptual disturbances in the experience of time that occur when humans are taken outside of the earth. In terms of content the manifest subject matter of the film is the journey into outer space with the temporal and phenomenological distortions which this brings. The concept of the black hole furthermore in its very definition is the distortion and obliteration of time and space as we know it. But simultaneously the form of the film is atemporal in the way in which it presents to us both the order of events and the manner in which the characters position themselves in relation to desire, drive and fantasy. This combination of content and form in relation to temporality lends the film a particularly powerful mode of engagement with the spectator's relationship to the scopic object.

The opening sequence of High Life depicts a futuristic version of 'single dad' parenting in outer space. Inside a spaceship a small baby coos in front of a TV screen. A scene from an old black and white Western depicts a Native American dancing around a plume of smoke, while outside the ship dad speaks to her playfully via an intercom from the black expanse of space. Despite the strangeness of the scenario, the normality of the father-daughter bond is

underscored by Monte (Robert Pattinson) seemingly completing his mundane daily routine while trying to entertain his baby daughter. Fumbling around to fix a window on the outside of the ship, baby screams too loud in his earpiece and he drops his wrench. Strangely though, instead of floating off weightlessly, the heavy metal object plummets into the endless depths beneath him. Things are not all they appear to be. Even so far from the earth, the pull of human gravity seems to be exerting itself.

Monte and Willow we discover are alone on a floating object which looks more like a shipping container than a spaceship, a rusty old rectangular box trudging through the galaxy. Monte, multitasking various jobs around the desolate rooms of the ship, warns the child not to 'drink your own piss or eat your own shit…that would be a taboo, well at least it is for me but not for you' he says 'not for you'. 'Ta-boo, ta-boo', he repeats in baby talk. Clearly Monte is aware that for Willow, the symbolic laws that bound him on Earth are maybe not so self-evident out here in space. As will soon become clear this film is concerned with one of the most psychoanalytic of all distinctions, the difference between the law and the symbolic, and at what point they cross over into a new dimension of ethics.

Monte and his erstwhile crew mates we learn were all death row inmates who having committed terrible crimes on earth have been selected for an experiment to go into a black hole to potentially retrieve its boundless energy and bring it back to earth, the so-called 'Penrose Process'. Before they get there however everybody else who was on the ship is now dead. Their bodies having been disposed of by Monte and left to float out into the universe, leaving him completely alone with his infant daughter, the different reasons for their demise we will learn in due course. The child is apparently the product of a reproductive experiment, orchestrated by Dr Dibs (Juliette Binoche) who 'totally devoted to reproduction' is hell bent on forcing the crewmates to supply their bodily fluids and offer their wombs in order for the next generation to persevere on the journey towards the black hole. All reluctantly acquiesce to Dibs' demands except Monte who refuses to demean himself by forced masturbation. She teases him however that she'll 'get him one day'.

On board, actual sexual activity between the crew mates is forbidden, their sexual urges being taken care of by the mysterious 'fuckbox'; an apparently fully personalizable, turbo powered version of Woody Allen's orgasmatron in *Sleeper*. The only person we get to see inside of the fuckbox however is Dibs. Writhing around on a metal phallus connected to what looks like a large furry headless beast, whose giant paws occasionally reach around to caress her. Dibs

emerges flushed and exhausted, to the disdainful yet flirtatious taunts of the celibate Monte. Out of the side of the fuckbox a trickle of white discharge streams onto the floor. Who knows whether this is organic or synthetic? Surprise surprise, despite this box of delights, the ship's occupants have sexual desires which cannot be met by any sort of satiating machine no matter how sophisticated.

Whist the manifest story of High Life is a space trip towards a black hole for a group of criminals, the latent theme of the film is that of sexuation and law. The film illustrates how even outside of the earth's orbit there remains an impossibility of reconciling sexuality with either nature (reproduction) or culture (social convention). The sexual frustrations that permeate the actions of the ship's crew are seen against the backdrop of the black hole which they are headed towards. It acts both as an impossible object of desire promising an ultimate form of total enjoyment for those that traverse it and also as drive object around which their enjoyment endlessly circulates. It is the combination of the atemporality in form as well as content that make the final (impossible) romantic union so paradoxical. High Life, in highlighting the question of genesis of a new population outside the earth attempts to demonstrate the impossible real kernel of the sexual non-rapport. In the final sequence of the film the two protagonists both reach their final object of desire allowing them their continued life together, but at the same time meet with the inherent impossibility of obtaining it. The black hole is at once figurative and literal.

The brooding and menacingly priapic Ettore (Ewan Mitchell) after being turned down by all the women on the ship decides one night to rape one of them, Boyse (Mia Goth). He is stopped halfway through and beaten to a pulp by Monte and then, as if to allude to the inverted Oedipal tragedy than is about to unfold, stabbed in the eye by Boyse's cabin mate Minx (Claire Tran). After this scene of horror, instead of increased measures to protect her 'inmates' Dibs herself gets the idea too and decides to creep into Monte's bed one night to finally 'get what she wants' from him. Whilst Ettore's rape is violent, un-feeling and non-verbal, Dibs' violation of Monte is gentle, discursive and permeated with the longing and pain of unrequited love. As she straddles him in his sleep, Dibs whispers her desires in his ear, asking why he won't take her in his arms and aching for his reciprocation. This jouissance of speech and of the signifier we will recall is for Lacan an archetypal instantiation of feminine enjoyment, an enjoyment that whilst it involves the body goes beyond and in fact transcends the satisfaction of the organ. In Seminar *XX: Encore: On Feminine Sexuality the Limits of Love and Knowledge* Lacan (1998) makes the distinction between phallic and the Other or feminine enjoyment which

corresponds to a different positioning in relation to castration, one which is to be found in the act of speech itself yet paradoxically, is unsayable, and therefore cannot be *known.* Lacan refers to these two modes of jouissance as phallic and Other. He states:

> Analytic experience attests precisely to the fact that everything revolves around phallic jouissance, in that woman is defined by a position that I have indicated as "not whole" (pas tout) with respect to phallic jouissance. I will go a little further. Phallic jouissance is the obstacle owing to which man does not come (*n'arrive pas*), I would say, to enjoy a woman's body, precisely because what he enjoys is the jouissance of the organ.
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> Lacan 1998: 7

And that:

> As concerns jouissance, that is but an elementary level. The last time, I put forward the notion that jouissance is not a sign of love. That is what I shall have to argue for, and it will lead us to the level of phallic jouissance. But what I, strictly speaking call "jouissance of the Other", insofar as it is merely symbolised here, is something else altogether-namely, the not-whole that I will have to articulate.
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> Lacan 1998: 24

Dibs' jouissance even though it is obtained through the sexual act of rape arguably pertains an Other jouissance that is not phallic. Due to the sheer mechanics of the male body therefore, despite his lack of consent, Dibs gets her 'real prize' and manages to retrieve his sperm from inside her to take back to the lab. It is after the juxtaposition of these two scenes where we get another inkling about the major significance of sexual taboo in this film.

Taboo and the Real Gaze

We are shown consecutively two rapes, one violent and one nonviolent. A female rape which ends horrifically and a male rape which ends which the extraction of semen. On the face of it, it is clear we should be disgusted and disturbed by both. But Denis knows this is not a simple story. In fact, might it be that despite the extreme and brutal nature of the female rape, for (some) viewers the rape of a man is still somehow more 'subversive'? So accustomed as we are to visions of male sexual aggression it becomes an unspoken part of 'natural law'. The taboo here lies in what forms of sexual exploitation and aggression are psychically acceptable and

which are not. The rape of a man strikes at the very heart of the logic of the sexual relation, and our horror at it exposes the gaze as *real* in the visual field.

After her violation of him, Dibs takes the seed of Monte to inseminate Boyse in her sleep, through which baby Willow will be born. Despite Monte and Boyse's obvious erotic connection they never consummate it and their interactions are steeped in violence. The sadness and brutality of their missed encounter is brought to a horrific conclusion when Boyse, in postnatal despair hijacks one of the small ships to travel into the black hole, ending in a gruesomely visceral way as all human bodies supposedly would. It is Monte and Willow's relationship though that foregrounds the ambiguous mood of the whole film. In contrast to the way in which Willow is conceived, theirs is a relationship of gentle closeness and intense codependency. During Monte's nurturing of baby Willow, the camera is trained on Monte's naked body relentlessly alerting us to the tactile and physical nature of their relationship. The natural softness of a father with his baby is strangely cut to produce the uncomfortable image for the viewer as if Monte were a lover. As we know Monte is abstinent despite all of Dibs' best efforts and even the lure of the 'fuck box'. So, Denis really wants Monte's body to be an object of our scopic drive.

Denis' frequent reference to bodily fluids serves on the one hand to draw the continuity between them and their inherent organic meaninglessness and also to their radically different signifying functions. Blood is a constant reminder of both the looming violence that may erupt at any moment and the biological processes that promise to bring new life into the emptiness of space. Similarly, in quick succession we see shots of Monte's post rape semen trickling down Dibs' leg, followed by a close up of a baby Willow with milky white dribble trickling down her face, lastly (although not chronologically) we see Boyse's lactating breasts seeping with milk down her stomach. The use of these images next to each other implants the simultaneous naturalness and abjectness of these bodily functions. Furthermore, it highlights the socially constructed meanings that these bodily discharges convey which reach beyond their reproductive or biological function.

It is through atemporality that the film manages to convey the theme of taboo via the use of the gaze. The audience is constantly confronted with the uncomfortable awareness of the prohibitions which operate between which bodies may be seen to interact in what ways, and how we are supposed to look at certain bodies and decode their meaning. Denis seems to be unveiling visually the very structure which underpins the social bond beyond the written laws.

She achieves this by exposing the gaze at various points throughout the film. Dropping clues in the direction of taboo and leaving it to us to stich them inevitably together. Perhaps the reason why the film unsettles so many is the fact that Denis does not tell us in advance why we should be disturbed as in the standard psychological horror film. The boundaries which the film crosses exist in the field of the gaze not in the dialogue or narrative, meaning that when we experience the deepest taboo we must have been searching for them already, and the nature of taboo is such that even the thought of them are prohibited.

Lacan (1998) Drawing on Freud's (1913) formulations in *Totem and Taboo* articulates what became his most fundamental contribution to the psychoanalytic theory of sexual difference. It is his logical formalization (the graphs of sexuation) of Freud's myth of the all-enjoying Totemic Father which becomes the conceptual framework on which the notion of phallic and feminine jouissance is based. His death instantiates the incest taboo, since the son's guilt prevent them from themselves partaking of the obscene enjoyment of the absent but super-egoic presence of the father. On the left (masculine) side of the graph, the logic is that of the exception from the whole. The concept of the "The Man" is structured via the exception of one man from the group, which thereby founds the universality of their identity. The masculine position corresponds therefore to the *all* of exception and inclusion. To be on the masculine side one is characterized by belonging to a closed group which is constituted by an exception. For the masculine sex all except one are castrated. The feminine *non-all* in contrast is an open set which doesn't require a boundary to define itself. There is not one that is not castrated. What characterizes a strictly masculine enjoyment is a limitation to only the phallic mode. Which ultimately, one could argue, is a form of radical subjective choice.

The logic of femininity is thus not something mystical or ineffable but rather as a formal category which entails an infinite proliferation of possibilities. The strange thing about the two modes of sexuation, however is that on the masculine side the category of man is generated as a totality, whereas on the feminine side the category of woman logically simply cannot 'exist'. Since the conditions of her totality are impossible. The staging of taboo that we see in High Life, in a sense attempts to subvert this logic. Despite the attempts at physical violation by (at least) one man on the ship, the totemic figure in this context is arguably the (symbolic) mother, Dr Dibs who is the only person who has any power over the genesis of her crew.

The unpleasant and brutal version of the sexual non-rapport that we see evident in the contrasting male and female rape scenes alludes to the fundamental question of feminine and

phallic jouissance which permeates the whole film beyond the separation of the male and female characters. Dr Dibs occupies a figure of enjoyment that is both all-powerful and phallic and simultaneously pertaining to an Other jouissance, the ecstatic enjoyment of what Lacan would have aligned with the mystics in *Seminar XX*. Dibs as the controller of procreation and the 'totemic mother of the horde' plays with the position of femininity and genesis provoking a time old psychoanalytic question. In *Seminar IV*, Lacan, intrigued upon learning that a woman used a stock of frozen sperm from her deceased husband in order to inseminate herself, asks; *What is a father?* Concluding that it is precisely the dead father, which is the symbolic father, or in Lacanian terms the Name-of-the-Father, a notion nonetheless already present in Freud (as totemic father of the horde). Much later in *Seminar XVII* in direct reference to *Totem and Taboo*, Lacan (2007) states: 'equivalence is therefore drawn, in Freudian terms, between the dead father and jouissance. It is he who keeps it in reserve, if I can put it like that' (p. 123). He continues:

> Here the myth transcends itself through stating in the name of the real- for this is what Freud insists upon, that it actually happened, that it is the real – that the dead father is what guards *jouissance*, is where the prohibition of *jouissance* started, where it stemmed from.
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> Lacan 2007: 123

Curiously then, it is Dibs in the role of jouisseur as it were, who confounds as to who should normally be orchestrating the insemination of multiple women. She is both the loving protective mother and the ravaging father. As a figure of woman, her enjoyment is not limited to one form. Whereas the phallic enjoyment of the male characters, 'the jouissance of the idiot' as Lacan (1998) would call it, centers always around the satiation or obtainment of a partial object. Even the captain Chandra (Lars Eidinger) Ask Dibs on his death bed to 'Suck my Dick, please' the only male on board who refuses the jouissance of the organ is Monte but even he succumbs to it in his sleep. The allusion to Dibs enjoyment as being of some other order is made evident to us various times. Just before the rape of Boyse, we see Dibs standing in front of the air conditioning fan in an ecstatic state, whilst Ettore watches her and touches himself. The captain then embraces her, attempting to capture the rapturous moment she is experiencing. This shot is interspersed with images of the enormous and engulfing black hole. The point of obscurity at which no light or knowledge can escape, much like the masculine fantasy of the woman's obscure Other enjoyment that remains structurally inaccessible to them yet eternally fascinating.

The real problem of Genesis

The film ultimately leads us up to the resolution of a taboo, a new inscription of laws, a confrontation with the impasse of sexuality and the enigma of origins. It is through its atemporal structure however that the audience experiences the incestual taboo at the heart of the film. The way that Denis cuts together the different moments of Monte and Willow's life together with on the one hand his erotically charged and violent exchanges with Boyse and Dr Dibs' longed for physical contact with Monte serve to produce a feeling of ambiguity that engulfs all of their scenes together.

The ships lush Garden of Eden inner sanctum, reminiscent of Douglas Trumbell's *Silent Running*, where Monte spends time with his only real friend Tchmey (Andre Benjamin) sets the stage for the encounter with taboo and genesis that the film is leading us toward. Ultimately Monte and Willow will be the last two living soles, and sooner or later they will have to reproduce. It is for this reason that Monte is constantly preoccupied with the question of instantiating rituals and creating laws around hygiene. As he cradles baby Willow, in the opening sequences he remarks 'if my old man could see me now, breaking the laws of nature you little son of a bitch'. Monte seems to be uncomfortable with the idea of himself as a nurturer. The ambiguity of Monte's relationship to Willow is present throughout the film. The first time we are introduced to the older Willow we are unaware who she is. Denis cuts to a close-up shot of Monte's hands locked into and caressing the hair of someone sleeping on his chest, is it Boyse or Dibs? The camera moves out and we see it is a teenage girl in bed with him. He stirs from his sleeps and pushes her off him, telling her 'too heavy now'. Monte's sees there is blood on the sheets where she was lying and Willow looks down and touches the blood streaming down her leg. Is this her first period, and if so why is she unsurprised by its arrival? The ambiguity leaves the audience uncomfortable about what her bloodied underwear means but nothing is said or shown about it. Rather, Willow remarks that she found all of the crew mates records and that they are all 'bums and losers…you killed your friend over a dog'.

This reference to another old instance of taboo serves to underscore the ambiguous status of Monte's actions in relation to the law. When Monte was a child his friend killed his dog which provoked him to kill her. The trope of killing a dog is often used in films to highlight a universal taboo, the killing of an inherently innocent creature. By definition, dogs cannot 'sin' and can therefore never be guilty or deserving of violence against them. But dogs have a particular significance in distinction to other animals given their status as quasi-humans. The

fact that dogs form part of human family life makes them a sacred object beyond all other animals. Monte's murder of his friend therefore touches on the unspoken law that finds the killing of his friend redeemable because she broke the symbolic pact not to harm dogs.

Monte's childhood trauma will find its resolution when they mysteriously encounter an identical ship full of dead dogs save a few left abandoned roaming about the desolated rooms. The use of this hallucinatory identical ship suggests echoes of Tarkovsky, and the staging of a confrontation with trauma. 'It's the same ship, there might be other people on board they might be able to help us' Monte says. 'So, we don't need help' replies Willow. Willow watching on the monitor as Monte searches around among the dog corpses, pleads with her dad to please bring her the puppy back. He refuses, telling her he cannot bring the dirt back from the other ship into their own. She complains that its cruel to leave it there, that it will die. 'What do you know about cruelty, you don't know anything about it' he says. Next, we cut to Monte showering in the garden, as if cleansed from this encounter with his originary trauma, a subjective destitution perhaps? The Edenic character of the scene is permeated with a strange and eerie sensuality as Willow watches her father showering and calls out to him; 'You were right dad I have everything I need here'. A sort of inversion of biblical genesis, the temptation of outside knowledge is refused. After this Monte finds Willow praying and asks 'Do you know what god to pray to?' 'I saw it in some of the random images from earth, I just wanted to know what they feel' she replies.

The pairs (unholy) romantic union is finally made glaringly evident in the imagery of marital coupling in the last few scenes. Watching the black hole approaching which appears as a huge 'crocodile eye' staring back at them a metaphorical real gaze perhaps? Willow encourages Monte that this is the time for them to enter: 'I can feel it, I believe in this one'. On the verge of their final flight into the black hole Willows pleads with her father; 'You never answer my questions, do I look like my mother, my eyes, hair, nose, mouth, am I weird looking? 'You're special, different, like no one else and I love that' he says. As they climb into their white spacesuits for the journey into the unknown Monte lifts Willow's space helmet like a wedding veil and she gazes up at him. In the very last scene Monte and Willow stand hovering in the black of space, smiling at each other at the event horizon. 'Shall we?' he asks, as if questioning the morality of their next step. Yes, she affirms beaming up at him like a new bride. 'Shall' of course being the Kantian form of the ethical injunction. Monte is asking after the ethics which may underpin this other world they are about to enter. What is on the other side of the event horizon?

Despite the deftness of Denis' treatment of the question of taboo and genesis, a conservative reading of the film could run the risk of focusing too heavily on Denis' treatment of incest and therefore miss the wider significance of the way in which the film pushes us to question the very foundations of our social bond in the context of space travel and the ways in which concepts of space and deep time confront us with the unsolvable problem of desire and the undead horror of the death drive. Monte and Willow in a sense constitute the beginning of a new 'space colony' and as we know colonies are always created out of 'unnatural' or violent sexual couplings. What High Life dramatizes therefore in its uncomfortable allusion to taboo and incest in outer space is the fact that reality itself is always already riven by sexual impossibility.

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