III

In the second half of this paper, we offer a reading of the queer temporalities of cancer survivorship through two lesbian interventions: Barbara Hammer’s 2008 experimentafilm, A Horse Is Not A Metaphor, and Peggy Shaw’s 2008 collaborative poetic performance monologue with Clod Ensemble, MUST: the inside story. Each piece explores the inextricability of illness from sexuality through what Edelman calls ‘time’s queer refusal to submit to a temporal logic’. If, as he argues, ‘we are never at one with our queerness; neither its time nor its subject is ours’, then both these pieces present us with the ‘excess of something always unassimilable’ (2007: 188).

The title of Barbara Hammer’s 2008 film A Horse Is Not A Metaphor (hereafter

Horse) presents us with a statement that speaks back to Sontag’s challenge to refuse

the metaphorical that gives force to the stigmatisation of both sexuality and illness.

An experimental film about the lesbian filmmaker’s diagnosis of and treatment for

stage 3 ovarian cancer, Horse combines poetic and documentary images with music

by experimental vocal artist Meredith Monk. Just as Sontag urged us to undercut

the damaging power of metaphorical thinking about illness which blamed particular

personality types or sexual subcultures for the onset of disease, so Horse reconfigures the

vitalities of human and horse in ways that echo Donna Haraway’s notion of ‘companion

species’ – those entanglements which are ‘knotted from human beings, animals and other

organisms, landscapes and technologies’ (back cover, 2008). Not a metaphor in that it

does not represent something other than itself, not a metaphor in that it does not stand

in for the expression of something already known about the human, and not a metaphor

in that it does not follow the logic of substitution, the horse in question here draws us

instead into a sense of the materiality of being alive.

Combining a relatively conventional narrative structure that moves from the first of

several rounds of chemotherapy through to an extended eighteen-month remission

with an experimental visual aesthetic of repetition, slow motion, superimposition and

extreme close-up, the film both offers a story of hope based on sequential direction and

undoes any certainty of predictive futurity. Cancer survivorship may make it hard to

resist the reassurance of narrative structures that flow from past to present to future (as

in the heroism of the clichéd triumph-over-tragedy genre) but the visceral and psychic

disturbances incurred through cancer diagnosis and treatment implode conventional

temporalities, turning reassuring form into only superficial comfort. Horse brings both

modes of time within the same frame: cancer generates the need for narration; treatment

warps the time of the body (or perhaps queers the time of the body). It reveals the

queerness of time and our embodiment of it.

But this is not the extent of the deconstructive engagement with time here. Most

importantly perhaps, Horse delivers a yearning for being present in the present. As

Hammer says: ‘“Survivor” has never seemed to me to be the right word for a person who

lives with cancer. I would choose a word that signifies flourishing, a sense of well being,

exaltation and love of life. The horse is not a metaphor, but a living, breathing creature

of power and pride that I join in this moment-by-moment living’ (barbarahammer.com/

archives/155, accessed 29/5/11). The desire to inhabit the present and to generate a

spectatorship that is also of this present, might be said to define the film’s aesthetic

project. As Horse moves the spectator through the cycles of chemotherapy and out into

the hopeful space of remission, it holds us in the materiality of the present through its

exploration of cinema’s formal temporalities. Shifting between the documentary desire

to record the filmmaker’s experience and her deconstructive reassemblage of shots

exploring the beauty of both horse and human moving through lanscapes, Horse becomes

the occasion not merely to place the spectator in the present but to turn spectatorship into

an encounter with the presence of the present. Through this technology of presence, it is

not that we are made aware that we are in time, but rather that we are of time, as it is of

us.

Being of time, horse and human vitalities become sustenance throughout the emotional

turmoil of the treatment. Drawing on memories of wanting to own horses from

childhood onwards, Hammer describes the horse as the figure of freedom and beauty

(website). Shots of Hammer’s body (walking, swimming, lying in hospital) blend

with superimposed shots of galloping horses, mane and tail blowing in the wind. This

shot, (Figure 2: insert film still from Horse) for example, brings the two faces into

close alignment, offering a co-presence of form and movement. But this is not a vision

of co-presence based on identification with what the human imagines the animal’s

incomplete subjectivity to represent (Lori Brown, citing Lippit, 2007); rather, the film’s

deconstructive strategies put in process a connection between the shared liveliness of

the two based on the halting flow and repetition of the music and images. Hammer’s

films have always flirted with the cliché of turning to Nature to provide visions for

living otherwise (see Richard Dyer, 1990). But here, as elsewhere in her work, if Nature

provides the space for utopian fantasies of escape and recovery, then the deconstructive

formal moves undercut any lingering romantic notions of essence. Instead, we see and

hear fragments and repetitions that disturb temporal continuity and linearity even as they

increase the intensity of vitality.

The close-up shots of the fingers feeling the texture of Hammer’s own regrowing grey

hair after chemotherapy and of the equine grey mane are the best example of this (Figures

3 and 4: insert film stills). Chemotherapy frequently involves dealing with hair loss. The

problem is not only the baldness that follows but the presence of dead hair before it falls:

its surprising volume, the labour of gathering it up, the chill of its absence, the insects

that can enter ear, nose and eyes without it (Stacey, 1997: 84). In Horse, extreme close-

up shots of the death and regrowth of the grey human hair and eyebrows of Hammer

as chemotherapy patient are followed by those of the grey coat of the horse. It is the

texture of each that lingers as much as any identification or matching, or even yearning

for regrowth. The film moves beyond an aesthetics of identification taking us into the

sensuous spaces of the materiality of all life forms through its insistence on formal

experimentation with the particularity of film as matter. We are left with the pleasurable

sense of the texture of the ‘companion species’.

In exploring the survivorship of cancer, Horse places the spectator within what Laura

Marks has called a haptic visuality, ‘the way vision itself can be tactile, as though one

were touching a film with one’s eyes’ (Marks, 2000: xi); as put succinctly by Marks, this

might be thought of as a ‘visuality that functions like a sense of touch’ which enables

the viewer to ‘experience the cinema as multi-sensory’ (2000: 22, 23). Emphasising

the embodied perception of the spectator, this way of thinking about film allows us

to reconsider how the relationship between self and other might be less one based

on identification and more one of co-presence. Haptic cinema ‘encourages a bodily

relationship between viewer and image’ (2000: 164). Whereas Marks takes as her corpus

what she calls ‘intercultural films’, those which use formal experimentation to explore

their politics of displacement, hybridity, diaspora and the memory of home (even one

never lived in), Horse works through the temporal disturbance of illness by bringing the

force and relationality of the body into a sensuous present. In Horse, the deconstructive

styles of sound and image reveal the deceptions of time’s predictive promises. As the

conventional contours of sequence and flow unravel through the temporal swerves of

diagnosis and treatment, so the cancer patient’s body is immersed more deeply in the

materiality of its own present. The repetitive chemotherapies become the technologies

through which the patient’s body must submit to the present through the promise of

the future. Survivorship is the reward. And yet, healing the body with its poisons, the

treatment also transforms it and demonstrates its unstable and ever-changing cellular

composition, making the present an impossible object that is by definition always already

lost.

Horse brings us into proximity with our embodiment of the uncanny nature of time

through its instantiation of cinema’s particular temporal relations. For Strathausen,

the uncanny is present in the cinema since it is premised on something presumed dead

being ‘brought back to life’ and beginning ‘to haunt the living’ (Strathausen, 2003: 15-

17). As Laura Mulvey suggests, cinema ‘combines, perhaps more perfectly than any

other medium, two human fascinations: one with the boundary between life and death

and the other with the mechanical animation of the inanimate, particularly the human

figure’ (Mulvey, 2006: 11). Photography shares with cinema that sense of preserving

past time, but while the single image of the photograph ‘relates exclusively to its moment

of registration’, the film strip has ‘an aesthetic structure that (almost always) has a

temporal dynamic imposed on it ultimately by editing’ (ibid: 13). It is this particular

combination of the still and the moving image, of the ‘now-ness’ and ‘then-ness’, that

makes the cinema so uniquely compelling as a technology of ‘hidden stillness’. Through

its exploration of the temporal relationalities of still and moving images, and of the

shifting histories of black-and-white and colour sequences, and of the vital infectiousness

of human and non-human materialities, Horse brings to the surface the secret stillness of

cinema’s animating capacity, generating a haptic visuality full of both the pleasure and

pain of troubling ontological insecurities.