

*Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics*  
Number 66, July 2014  
ISSN: 2047-0622  
URL: [www.freeassociations.org.uk](http://www.freeassociations.org.uk)



## THE SHADOW OF THE OBJECT:

### LOSS, PLACE AND RESOLUTION IN *35 RHUMS* (Denis, France/Germany, 2008)

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**Abstract:** Object relations theory provides us with a thoroughly apposite theoretical tool with which to analyse the relationship between mourning, its resolution and the sense of place in Claire Denis's *35 rhums*. (Denis, France/Germany, 2008) The rigidity and sense of sterile safety, in addition to the awkward architecture of Lionel and Joséphine's apartment contribute to the representation of states of mind that deny the reality of loss and consequently impede the process of mourning. The flat of their upstairs neighbour, Noé, whilst superficially very different from theirs in that it is somewhat untidy and chaotic, reveals, on closer examination, that it equally serves to offer a picture of a psyche resolute in its determination to avoid thinking about the implications of loss. The directorial decision not to show the viewer the home environment of the remaining protagonist in the film, Gabrielle, lends the figure a sense of lack and wistful longing. The journey that Joséphine, Lionel and Noé make to confront and come to terms with their personal losses is instigated by an abortive trip to a concert. The outing necessitates a dramatic change of setting from the cold, anonymous apartment block to a warm, intimate bar. The dramatic external change of environment reflects a commensurate psychic shift in the protagonists who allow themselves the opportunity to act on their desire. This gesture of liberation facilitates an even more dramatic change of environment to another country, reflecting the depth of the psychological shifts heretofore. The trip to Germany heralds a less inhibited relationship to the past that allows the father daughter couple access to their memories of a lost loved one. The past can now be represented rather than denied. The final stage of this process of resolution revolves around a visit to a grave demonstrating the protagonists' wish to allow the deceased her rightful place as a living memory.

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*From the moment of birth when we lose the comfort of intrauterine life, to our last breath, losses of all kinds, and our efforts to gradually come to terms with them through mourning, constitute important points of reference in our existence. (Sabbadini 2007: 2).*

In this article I will explore, using an object relations theoretical framework, the relationship between the emotional experience of mourning and its cinematic representation. Freud describes in the paper *Mourning and Melancholia* the way in which ‘the shadow of the object falls upon the ego’ (Freud, 1917 [1915]: 249). It is my aim in this article to show how the lost object that is the focus of Freud’s original paper casts its shadow not only over the ego but also the environment. In order to do this I will demonstrate how Claire Denis in *35 rhums* exploits the complex interaction between the elements that contribute to the aesthetics of a film – performance, soundtrack, screenplay and location – to create a text that movingly illustrates the psychological shift from depression to the acceptance of loss. The film tells the story of Lionel, a middle-aged widower and lone parent due to the premature death of his wife Mechtilde when Joséphine, his daughter, was a baby. He makes a living by driving a train that operates on the suburban RER rail network. He shares an apartment on the outskirts of Paris with his daughter, Joséphine, a twenty something anthropology student. They have developed a close, loving relationship, reminiscent of a companionable, married couple. The nature of their closeness is conveyed through glances and behaviour – dialogue takes second place in this film. There are two other people of significance to them in their block, Gabrielle, a taxi driver and Noé, a recently bereaved young man. These four have developed a casual, family-like relationship. A close friend’s suicide, a spontaneous sexual encounter and a growing attraction between Noé and Joséphine lead Lionel to question the comfortable, predictable yet ultimately paralysed nature of his way of life and do something about it.

The actors and principal members of the creative team responsible for *35 rhums* have well-established relationships with Denis. She met her cinematographer Agnès Godard in the 1970s whilst studying at the Institute des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques. She has collaborated with her co-writer Jean-Pôl Fargeau on a number of her films including *Beau travail* (1999) and *L'intrus* (2004). Stuart Staples, the composer of the original music for the film, has similarly been involved in a number of her projects. The sense of ease and intimacy discernable in their work together implies a shared history. This feeling of effortlessness that long term collaboration allows is very evident from the beginning of *35 rhums*. The complex interweaving of each of the elements these practitioners represent is exemplified through the credit sequence. In order to illustrate this point I shall begin with a close examination of this introduction to the

film. Whilst it does not tell the story it effectively establishes the principal themes and conveys the ambiance of the film for the viewer.

The credit sequence can be read as a visual metaphor that epitomizes the theme of the loss of a loved one. Against a point of view shot from the inside of an RER driver's cabin travelling through a bleak cityscape, accompanied by the repetitive, haunting music of *Tindersticks*, the names of the principal actors appear in a shadowy, grey form, like ghosts, evoking the sense of a constant presence whose existence is influential and powerful but hard to grasp. As the train travels along the tracks, the appearance of actors' names metamorphose, in turn, from grey to white, rendering each one clear, defined and legible before returning to its former shadowy state. These credits are reminiscent of those inner objects ever present in the mind that make a more defined appearance when aroused through the agency of a memory - rather in the way that a smell, sound or place can vividly remind one of a lost loved one. Crucially, Lionel and Joséphine, as we will see, have disposed of any reminders of Mechtilde in their lives in order to preserve their emotional equilibrium. They obliterate the fact that she has died and gone forever. It takes a significant psychological shift for them to allow Mechtilde her right to be a living memory in their lives.

The mode of transportation, central to the credit sequence, is also important. The movement of a train along the rails is predictable; there is no possibility for spontaneity. Whilst other choices exist - we see other tracks leading elsewhere - unseen forces dictate the route, limiting the driver's autonomy in the same way that unacknowledged unconscious forces dictate the rhythm of Joséphine and Lionel's life together. Mechtilde's death has led them to sacrifice the risks of development for the safety of stagnation. This unexpected tragedy has confronted them with the dangers of the unexpected, hence their avoidance of the unpredictable. The railway track conveys the idea of a rigid, brittle safety, free from surprises. Whilst this contributes to a sense of security that is reflected in the couple's domestic life, it leaves little room for spontaneity, change or development.

Writing, image and sound coalesce to represent minds inhabited by the spectral presence of a lost loved one who exerts an unacknowledged power over those left behind; her powerful, yet unacknowledged presence means that Mechtilde casts a long shadow over the lives of Lionel and Josephine. True to her stated intention, Denis remarks in an interview: 'Why deprive cinema of what belongs to film? I think it's selfish.' (Romney, 2008) Denis demonstrates in the credit

sequence her skill in mobilizing all the possibilities cinema has at its disposal to convey the experience of living with incommensurable loss.

Throughout the remainder of the film Denis plays with the themes represented in the introductory sequence. They are made manifest in subtle ways that can only be articulated through a close analysis of the text. A particularly telling cinematic device Denis exploits to the full is her use of place to reflect the psychological state of the protagonists. It is worth quoting in full her remarks in the interview included in the DVD version of the film as they illustrate the extreme care she takes in choosing an appropriate environment that will accurately reflect the psychic states of the protagonists:

The structure of the apartment is very weird – it's like a long corridor, and each room is connected to the corridor, but neither room are (sic) connected to the next room. And when I first saw this apartment I thought, "Oh this is a mistake of the architect, it's because there's a curve in the middle of the building, and he didn't know how to manage with that corner, you know?" And then I realised that it makes perfect sense: When he became a widower, he probably slept in the room next to his baby girl. And as she grew up he took a distance. They will never meet in the middle of the night going to the toilet naked or whatever, you know? They were protected by the length of the corridor, you know? (ibid.)

Led by Denis, I shall continue this exploration with a consideration of Lionel and Joséphine's relationship with the space they inhabit, showing how Denis creates an environment that reflects the internal world of the protagonists. Clearly, she attaches great importance to finding the right location as much as the right actor thereby illustrating that, as Daly observes, 'configurations of domestic space are not accidental. Families socially create spaces that are meaningful for them, and, in turn, these spaces constrain, mediate and reflect family identities and relationships.' (Daly, 2003: 708). I would also include relationships with the dead in this creation of an individualised space.

Denis manipulates space so that it reflects the internal world of her protagonists, creating 'territories of the self' (ibid., 708). Lionel and Joséphine share their flat with the ghost of Mechtilde. They have dealt with her death by creating an environment within which there are no

mementos, no photographs or other artefacts. Through relating to each other as husband and wife, they obliterate the hole left by Mechtilde. They have denied themselves the opportunity to mourn and thereby create a living memory of the deceased. She exists as an embalmed corpse in their lives rather than a vital memory.

Freud explains this psychological phenomenon in his exploration of the repression of memory in *Remembering, repeating and working through* (Freud, 1914). He mentions the patient who observes at one point in his analysis, ‘As a matter of fact I’ve always known about it; only I’ve never thought about it.’ (ibid., 392) Whilst quite aware that she is dead, they do not appear to have thought about the effect of her death or created memories in the wake of the tragedy. They bring to mind Freud’s patients, compelled to repeat: ‘the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action: he repeats it without of course knowing that he is repeating it’ (ibid., 150). Joséphine and Lionel live in the presence of the unthought known, behaving as a married couple without reflecting on why this might be.

The actual space and the objects that do (or do not) furnish it are emblematic of the psychological states of the protagonists. The apartment is characterised by rigidity, straight lines and a lack of connection between rooms. Denis has made it clear that, embedded in the apartment, are intentional meanings. In one she makes a concrete link between loss and the use of space when she says: ‘when he became a widower, he probably slept in the room next to his baby girl’. (Romney, 2008) By emphasising this point she intimates that the closeness of their relationship brings with it the danger of an inappropriate intimacy as Josephine grows up.

We can also read into her choice of this flat a psychological meaning that is linked to the problematic design of an apartment that inhibits easy movement from one room to another: Denis draws attention to this idiosyncrasy: ‘The structure of the apartment is very weird – it’s like a long corridor, and each room is connected to the corridor, and each room is connected to the corridor, but no room are (sic) connected to the next room’ (ibid.). This arrangement reflects the psychological state of the occupants who, in order to maintain their psychic equilibrium, avoid making connections between one event and another. In this way they deny themselves the possibility of the insight that could lead to resolution. For Lionel and Josephine this would involve making a link between Mechtilde’s death and their present existence. The capacity to make links implies the ability to make connections and think, to put two and two together. This

is a dynamic process that involves intellect and emotion. Lionel and Joséphine, for example, do not speak of Mechtilde to each other. Such a conversation would have the potential to instigate a chain of feelings and associations that, whilst painful, could lead to insight and development. They appear to have opted for stasis and a mental state characterised by rigidity. In the same way that the structure of the flat does not permit a fluid movement from one space to another, Joséphine and Lionel's state of mind inhibits making a connection between one mental conception and another. They have not made that vital link between their constrained way of life and Mechtilde's death.

This rigidity is reflected in the hermetically sealed nature of their home which underlines the enmeshed, exclusive intimacy of Lionel and Joséphine's relationship, a relationship that excludes other people. Both Noé and Gabrielle linger in the hallway outside the couple's front door not quite daring to ask whether they can join them, presumably through fear of rejection. Such characters never gain true access to this privileged space and disrupt the rhythm of their existence. In this way, unthought and unacknowledged, the opportunity for spontaneity that the presence of another person could offer is denied. Whilst this protects them from the possibility of an accidental and dreaded jogging of the memory, there is a heavy price to pay; they lose 'the capacity to adopt any new object of love' (Freud 1917[1915]: 244) because that would entail 'replacing' (ibid., 244) him or her. This would also mean acknowledging the empty space left by the loss of the loved one.

Such prohibitions make for a sterile space; memorabilia that could facilitate emotional linking have been eradicated. The lack of mess, the care with which they carry out the simple, mundane acts of living indicates a brittle fragility. There is a sense of precariousness - if things are not kept in their proper place, the whole structure might collapse. Denis elaborates this point in an interview as follows: 'They have built this sort of balance in their lives, their small rituals...' (Hughes, 2009). The idea of maintaining balance is a psychological necessity for the pair and their home reflects this need. Emotions are associated with mess; they disturb and disrupt mental processes yet also contain the potential for change and growth. Denis illustrates how the ordered environment that the father/daughter couple have organised for themselves preserves their mental stability and shows how place can serve and reflect the demands of the inner world.

Having illustrated the ways in which she employs place to reflect the psychic realities of Lionel and Joséphine, I will now turn my attention towards one of the other important occupants of the block, Noé. Whilst appearing to be equally fearful of the emotions associated with loss, his environment reflects a different psychological construction designed to keep such feelings at bay. In contrast to Lionel and Joséphine, however, the arrangement of his living space suggests that he is not so rigidly defended as his neighbours.

Noé is mourning his parents' passing. He lives a nomadic existence: his work necessitates regular trips overseas. He has kept his parents' flat exactly as it was when they were alive, so, rather than it being his own, owned space, it is inhabited by the spectral presence of his dead parents – a tomb to the deceased, reminiscent of a pharaoh's burial chamber. Thus, in contrast to Lionel and Joséphine his flat is full of souvenirs related to his parents. Paradoxically, however, this can be seen as serving the same purpose as the lack of memorabilia in his downstairs neighbours' apartment. After all, if one does not clear out what belonged to the departed and participate in that grim, grey ritual of disposing of the objects that create the narrative of a life, the opportunity to internalize the presence of the loved one is lost, as one still has the external reminders to rely on. However, Denis signals a crucial psychological difference between Noé and Lionel and Joséphine through the architecture. His flat is open plan. There is a connection by means of a spiral staircase that occupies a central space within the apartment. In contrast to the cleanliness and rigidity of Lionel's domestic space, it is somewhat chaotic and unkempt. This setting implies that there is, at the very least, the possibility for spontaneity.

However, our introduction to Noé does not take place in his apartment but in the communal space of the hall. He is returning home from a trip abroad. On his way to his flat at the top of the building, Noé pauses outside Lionel's apartment. He hears music and sees the light around the edge of the door. As spectators we know, and he does not, that Lionel and Joséphine have just shared a meal in an atmosphere of great tenderness and intimacy. He loiters outside the door, longing to enter but not quite daring. He will not intrude. In addition to underlining the exclusive nature of Lionel and Joséphine's relationship, it is at this point that Denis introduces this communal space of the hallway as a locus of sadness, wistfulness and longing to which the protagonists' retreat when in the grip of these emotions.

Having decided not to disturb Lionel and Joséphine, he makes his way to his own flat. The hall light goes off and he trips over a bike left inconsiderately in the way by another tenant.

The bike has a symbolic meaning with a psychological resonance in accessing the feelings associated with loss that the communal yet anonymous setting of the hallway facilitates, hurt is inevitable.

On entering his flat he greets a rather moth-eaten cat affectionately and then kicks it out of the way as if fearful of maintaining and deepening the emotional link. Like the cat, the furniture is comfortable but tatty and somewhat at odds with what one might expect from a young man. The contrast between this space and the one downstairs is striking; instead of the straight lines, lack of connection and tidiness, we have a sense of restrained chaos in which everything is connected with everything else. Yet Noé has done nothing to put his personal stamp on the flat of his dead parents, keeping their furniture and cat. It is a mausoleum.

Through his space, Denis demonstrates an alternative way of living with loss. Like Lionel and Joséphine, Noé does not reminisce. He speaks of his parents in a very matter of fact way. When Joséphine asks him whether he finds the flat suffocating, he responds, rather enigmatically, by saying that it is all that is left of his parents as if memories are nothing and concrete rather than internal objects are the only significant ones. He speaks as if his loss carries no emotional impact.

This way of coping with death is further emphasised when we see how he deals with the passing of his cat – a living relic from his parents. He discovers the corpse by the side of a chair; he gets a plastic bin bag, unceremoniously dumps the animal in it and, as an afterthought, adds a squeaky plastic toy. He then puts it in the bin. It would seem that this is an end to the matter for him, even though Joséphine expresses some surprise at this utilitarian way of saying farewell. His behaviour implies that the dead can simply be disposed of peremptorily, with no consequences. Denis questions his belief visually by showing us the cat's paw peeping out of the bin bag. It illustrates the psychic reality that, whilst Noé might believe he can dispose of the dead in this way, a part will always be left demanding our attention. Noé, rather like Joséphine and Lionel, demonstrates that he does not allow any space for reminiscence or memory. He does not talk to Joséphine about any kind of association he might have regarding his past and the cat; without this kind of reminiscence there can be no remembering and without remembering there can be no memory.

In order to articulate the way in which the ossified nature of his flat reflects Noé's state of mind I will return to Freud who describes the inner process of coming to terms with loss thus:



‘Each single one of the memories...in which the libido is bound to the object is bought up and hypercathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it’ (Freud, 1917: 245). The static nature of the flat in which nothing has changed since the death of his parents maintains an illusion that time has stood still. If nothing is altered, the inexorability of time and the consequent losses are denied. For example, if Noé had bought a new item of furniture to replace an existing piece, it would be hard to avoid confronting the reality that, if his parents were still alive, he would have been unlikely to do this. The detachment that Freud describes is inhibited in this museum like space. As we can see from the cat incident, this process frightens Noé due to the inevitable pain entailed, but, as Freud points out... ‘when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again’ (ibid., 245). Yet, although his flat is furnished exclusively with the artefacts related to the life of his parents, there is a sense of potential here that is not present in Lionel's flat. Connections can be made and spontaneity experienced.

An incident with Lionel supports this view. As the film progresses Lionel's sense of constriction and claustrophobia, due to the closeness of his relationship with his daughter, becomes more evident. Noé has left a window open and, in his absence, Lionel goes up to close it. On entering the flat he looks around appreciatively, greets the cat and, after closing the window, sits expansively on the sofa, legs apart and enjoys a fart. Such a spontaneous gesture redolent of a primitive part of us that is hard to control would be unthinkable in the hygienic space he shares with Joséphine.

The final character I will look at is Gabrielle, a taxi driver who harbours an unrequited love for Lionel. She provided practical support for him as a lone parent when Joséphine was an infant. She is the most challenging to consider as we never see the interior of her home and we do not witness her coming to any kind of resolution. She is defending against the loss of a fantasy rather than a person – the fantasy that some day she and Lionel will make a couple. Denis demonstrates that this loss is the hardest to resolve, as there is no concrete reality, no body, and no space once occupied by a real person to instigate the work of mourning. A hopeless hope is maintained through her belief that it *might* be realised. This hope protects her from confronting a reality that is obvious to all, yet prevents her from moving on.

Gabrielle operates in the more public, shared spaces of the block – the hallway, the car park and the balcony of her flat. The hallway is a tantalizing space for her that both promises and

denies connection. It is a meeting place, yet the firmly closed front doors emphasize her status as outsider. A particularly poignant moment between her and Joséphine illustrates the function of the hallway as a place of longing. They are both returning from work and Gabrielle invites Joséphine back to her flat to share a meal. Joséphine refuses saying that she has work to do. Gabrielle is hurt and rejected; she then does something exceptional in the context of this film so far - she reminisces and recalls that 'it was easier' when Joséphine was younger. She remembers how she would tuck her up in her bed after supper. Gabrielle can articulate what she has lost and mourn the past, but the unreciprocated nature of her feelings for Lionel and her refusal to acknowledge the futility of her hope means that she stays stuck in the sadness created by these realities.

She is the exception in a film within which the other characters do not appear to remember and where a sense of a history created together is not represented. The fact that we never see the interior of her flat lends Gabrielle a sense of lack. There is an empty space in her life. Her capacity to care is made manifest throughout the film; characteristically she deals with the obstruction of the bike in the hallway. She offers to help Joséphine with her hair on her wedding day. An offer that Lionel rejects, demonstrating that no one is going to replace Mechtilde's position as mother.

In the DVD interview included in the English edition of the film, Romney (Romney, 2008) suggests that Gabrielle is the true heroine of the film because she never gives up. Yet her tenacity and hope also make her the most tragic figure -ironically the only person who has the capacity to remember is the person who ends up with no one. Her hope that, one day, she and Lionel will be able to make a family together is destined never to be realised. This would appear to be clear to everyone apart from her. Her presence contributes to the creation of the petrification of this apartment block that is imbued with the sense of an environment within which loss can never be resolved. A tomb within which the past remains static, never making that transition to living memory that occurs once the rawness of early grief has dissipated. The environment is inhabited by ghosts that cannot be exorcised. This haunted place has to be abandoned in order to be liberated from the grip of these unacknowledged and therefore powerful spectres.

In order to conclude this section on the representation of the processes involved in unresolved loss and before moving on to a consideration of the depiction of the final resolution, I

would add a final thought about the way Denis invites her audience to participate in the inner world of her protagonists. The spectator is not privy to the history of the relationships depicted in the film. It is not clear, for example, how long Noé has known his downstairs neighbours, although Gabrielle refers to the four of them as a ‘family’, so they must have a shared history. One has no sense of a former relationship between Lionel and Noé’s deceased parents, thus it is not only the protagonists who censor memory. Denis, as the director, participates in this obliteration of the past, forcing the spectator to share in the frustration and the impossibility of making sense of things that the censoring of memory carries in its wake. Through depriving the spectator of the knowledge of what has gone before, Denis offers the experience of the absence of memory and the consequent obliteration of history.

The quartet have to vacate this mausoleum in order for the loss to be remembered, confronted and resolved. Ironically, the person who instigates this process by organising an outing to a concert is Gabrielle - the one person who will not escape from the thrall of loss. I shall now go on to explore the meaning of this outing and the resulting trip to Germany in order to deepen the understanding of Denis’ deployment of space to reveal personal psychology.

The scene takes place after Gabrielle's taxi has broken down, meaning that the ‘family’ trip to the concert has to be abandoned. The quartet finds a bar to shelter from the pouring rain whilst the car is being towed away. In Denis’ own words it is, ‘small and warm’ (Lee, 2009); it recalls the lighting and atmosphere of the first kitchen scene, emblematic of intimacy. It is a ‘nest of change’ (ibid.). Its size and light are in contrast to the monolithic structure of the starkly lit apartment block and the anonymity of the cityscape preparing us for the fact that this is ‘the moment when everything happen’ (ibid.). Whilst it is raining outside the interior of the bar is illuminated in a way that warm colours predominate, a welcomingly alien space: ‘a small oasis in the rain’ (ibid.).

There is little dialogue in the scene; the action is propelled by the music and the looks that are exchanged between the actors. It is the milieu in which everyone will act on his or her desire and things will never be the same again. The change happens when the diegetic music changes from a Spanish Caribbean ballad to The Commodores’ *Night Shift* (The Commodores, 1985). People dance and swap partners. Initially, Joséphine dances with her father. Although we do not know it at this point, it is a dance of farewell. When the music changes to *Night Shift*, Noé takes Lionel’s place - the first ‘shift’ of many in this scene. He kisses her, she moves away, he

turns from her and then she pulls him back - this dance of ambivalent connection reflects the complicated, conflicted feelings his approach to her evokes. It means that she loses her father.

The choice of music is highly significant in this context and contributes to the construction of this transformational space. As Denis notes, it heralds the final psychological shift. But the lyrics, written as a homage to the memory of Marvin Gaye and Jackie Wilson, are also a demonstration of a psychological truth that Lionel, Joséphine and Noé deny, namely that death ends a life but it does not necessarily end a relationship. It shows how a memory can be a living mental entity:

Gonna be some sweet sounds  
Coming down on the nightshift  
I bet you're singing proud  
Oh I bet you'll pull a crowd.  
(The Commodores, 1985)

The scene culminates with Lionel acting on his desire and spending the night with the exotic owner of the bar. The other three return to Noé's flat, somewhat depressed. The melancholic atmosphere of the three of them sharing a coffee in his flat after the momentous events of the night further underlines the building's function as a place of loss, contrasting with the warm intimacy of the bar the night before.

The final resolution of the death of Mechtilde takes place on a trip out of the country to Germany. In an interview Denis signals the psychological importance of the changes marked by this trip. The pair are travelling to 'a Germany that is so different from France' (Lee, 2009) in Lionel's VW camper van. This Germany provides a striking contrast to the France we have become accustomed to both visually and in terms of the psychological constraints they allowed France to put them under.

The fact that Lionel and Josephine have finally liberated themselves from the thrall of their bereavement is made clear through a shot taken from the window of the camper van on the motorway on the way to Germany to visit Mechtilde's sister. The predetermined route of the railway track has been replaced by the open road. A shot of a freight lorry leaving the motorway reminds us that the safer predictability of the RER has been replaced by a form of transport that

allows a measure of spontaneity. The seemingly never ending, undifferentiated apartment blocks of the Parisian suburbs have been replaced by a German town on a more human scale, a town with a past - some of the buildings are obviously old and have a history. Lionel's sister-in-law lives in a cobble-stoned street, representing the past is now possible and consequently memory can be resuscitated.

The interior of the sister's house does not share the same clinical starkness of Lionel's flat, nor the museum-like atmosphere of Noé's. The light can shine in through the many windows, interior and exterior. The artefacts of memory abound, as in Noé's flat, yet, unlike him, the sister is not afraid to reminisce. She provides a model for her niece and brother-in-law in how to do it. She is not scared but appears to enjoy sharing memories of their lives together before her sister died. Her suggestion of a glass of wine rather than coffee adds to the sense of celebration.

When she remarks that Lionel is 'as ever' rather quiet he replies that he is happy to see that Joséphine can manage in German. This is more than a simple acknowledgement of his daughter's talents. It is a realisation that, even though dead, the German-speaking Mechtilde lives on in Joséphine's mind as a benevolent inner object.

When, by means of a point of view shot, we experience Lionel's gaze alighting on a photograph of his wife with Joséphine as a baby, it is clear he can confront his past loss. We have seen this photograph before. Joséphine found it hidden at the back of a drawer. On her discovery of it, Denis ensured the image of mother and child would stay in the spectator's mind by holding the picture centre frame in a motionless long take. In this way, the spectator is included experientially through her participation in the process of creating a helpful, poignant memory. In other words, we have a memory of the picture, as does Lionel. This is a visual representation of the journey he has taken to come to terms with the death and lose the fear he harboured regarding his emotional life. Formerly, memories had to be consigned to a place out of sight, not disposed of, but put in a place where they could not be seen. They can now be experienced in the light of day as a normal, unscary part of life. In this way they lose their power - hiding them invests them with a significance that confronting them does not have. Denis underlines the idea that the past and the ghost of Mechtilde have lost their authority by showing us Lionel and Joséphine tending her grave after the visit to the sister. In doing so they are

acknowledging the fact of the death, exorcising her ghost and making it possible to remember her consciously.

This episode is followed by a sequence shot on a beach where father and daughter are spending the night in the camper van. The static urban landscape is swapped for the unpredictability of the North Sea. The domestic space is on the move. In the same way that the rigidity of their mental life has loosened and the anxiety-laden need for sameness and familiarity dissipated, we are shown that they can take their home with them. It signifies a valuing of and commitment to the reality of the world of inner objects. The space they call home is not simply the physical space; home is also an internal space that travels with them wherever they go. Internal life is as much a reality for them now as their lives as they are lived in the external, concrete world. The final scene of the film is suggestive rather than conclusive. It shows a pair of black female hands arranging two rice cookers and finally, in a gesture of conclusion, placing the lid neatly on one of them. They are the elegant hands of the owner of the bar and represent the final shift for Lionel – he has been able to find someone else to love.

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## **Filmography**

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