Making bodies and worlds: religious affects in 120 BPM

Stefanie Knauss

Abstract

Inspired by the intense affective experience of watching the film 120 BPM (Beats Per Minute/Battements par minute) (Robin Campillo, 2017) about the HIV/AIDS activist group ACT UP Paris, I turn to affect theory to better understand how the film did what it did, tracing the circulating emotions of joy, anger, love, sadness, frustration, and exhilaration among the protagonists on screen, between the screen and the audience, and among the audience. I argue that the film’s affective economy has a religious quality in the way it creates bodies, worlds, and communities, and more specifically, that these religious sensibilities resonate with Christian affectivities in all their complexity. Thus, my argument about the religious affects of 120 BPM also contributes to the reflection on the affective dimensions of Christianity, and religion more broadly, and on the religious dimensions of affective-embodied aesthetic experiences.

Keywords: 120 BPM; Robin Campillo; affect; embodiment; LGBTQ; AIDS/HIV; film analysis; audience reception; transcendence; religion; sacrament

Affiliation

Villanova University, Pennsylvania, USA.
email: stefanie.knauss@gmail.com
Introduction

‘Writing is an affective practice. [...] it begins with an experience of being affected,’ says Dong Sung Kim (2020:111) early in his reflections on the Sewol ferry disaster in South Korea. My ‘experience of being affected’ that motivated this writing happened in 2017. I attended a screening of 120 BPM (Beats Per Minute/Battements par minute) (Robin Campillo, 2017), the critically acclaimed winner of the Grand Prix at Cannes in 2017, during a film festival together with a crowd of film enthusiasts. As the film about the Paris HIV/AIDS activist group ACT UP (of which Campillo and his co-screenwriter Philippe Mangeot were members in the 1990s; Clarke 2018) unfolded, I was drawn into the film’s powerful representation of the affective structure of the group’s political actions, the intimate emotions of the love story between HIV+ Sean and HIV− Nathan, and the film’s focus on the bodily materiality of illness, love, resilience, and resistance. And I felt, in my intense experience of joy, exhilaration, and sadness in watching the film, sutured into a momentary community with the film’s protagonists and the others in the audience, as we cried at Sean’s death and sat in stunned silence after the film ended. While grounded in my bodily sensations, I was at the same time reaching beyond my embodied situation into the world on screen and the community of the audience. It felt like an experience of transcendence, not because the film was ‘religious’ in any obvious sense, but because of how I experienced it. And looking through reviews of the film, I saw that I was not alone in this experience: reviewers noted the physical and emotional intensity of the film experience, the way they felt drawn into the presence of the film, and described it as ‘revelatory’ (e.g., Hassan 2018; Walters 2018).

In this article, I turn to affect theory to better understand how the film did what it did (and still does, after repeated viewings), tracing the circulating emotions of joy, anger, love, sadness, frustration, and exhilaration among the protagonists on screen, between the screen and the audience, and among the audience. I argue that the film’s affective economy has a religious quality in the way it creates bodies, worlds, and communities, and more specifically, that these religious sensibilities resonate with Christian affectivities in all their complexity, from encouraging emotions such as love of the marginalized and recognizing possibilities of embodied-affective relationship with the divine to creating fear or shame through discourses of sin and punishment, or reinforcing body–soul dualisms. Thus, my argument about the religious affects of 120 BPM also contributes to the reflection on the affective dimensions of Christianity, and religion more broadly, and on the religious dimensions of affective-embodied aesthetic
experiences, adding a new facet to my previous interest in the role of the body as a medium of relationship with the divine (e.g., Knauss 2007, 2008, 2014).

My reflections on the religious dimension or ‘coloring’ of cinematic affects sit perhaps somewhat uncomfortably on the boundary between the study of affect in religions and Christian theology, as I draw on insights into the affective quality of religions, as well as specifically Christian theological concepts such as sacramentality, resurrection, or transcendence, in order to understand how divine presence can be mediated through the material, embodied reality of a film and myself as a viewer in feelings, sensations, and affects. Writing as an ‘insider’ in the Christian community, I nevertheless hope that my reflections resonate beyond this particular context, as I propose a phenomenological-theological analysis of affective experience rather than normative doctrinal judgments.

I will begin by sketching my theoretical framework of affect theory and its reception in film theory and the study of religions. I then turn to a close analysis of 120 BPM, its aesthetic form, and affective structures, focusing both on the film ‘text’ and on its reception, in order to trace the ways in which it impacts viewers in a potentially religious experience, drawing on my own experience and that expressed in published film reviews. I will conclude with a reflection on what the religious affects of 120 BPM mean for our understanding of religion, film experience, and affectivity, including some cautious remarks on the ambivalence of such intensely affective experiences.

**Theoretical framework: affect theory, film theory, and religious studies**

I am attracted to affect theory as a framework for understanding the religious dimension of embodied-affective cinematic experience, because it bridges a number of unhelpful dichotomies between body and mind, sensation and cognition, individual and collective, private and political, religious and secular. I find Sara Ahmed’s feminist, phenomenological, cultural studies approach to emotions most fruitful for my project, connecting it with Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenological film theory and Donovan Schaefer’s approach to affectivity in religion.

Using ‘affect(s)’ and ‘emotions’ interchangeably (as I will do here), Ahmed argues that emotions ‘operate to “make” and “shape” bodies as forms of action, which also involve orientations towards others’ (Ahmed 2015:4). She thinks of emotions in terms of impressions, the pressing of bodies against each other, and the mark they leave, shaping bodies into
objects to be feared or loved (Ahmed 2004:29–30). Importantly, then, the affective charge of a body or object is not inherent to it, but is the result of emotions circulating among and pressing upon bodies (Ahmed 2015:11), and these ‘impressions we have of others, and the impressions left by others are shaped by histories that stick, at the same time as they generate the surfaces and boundaries that allow bodies to appear in the present’ (Ahmed 2004:39). Ahmed’s conceptualization of emotions as impressions allows to understand them as both circulating among bodies, shaping them by pressing against them, and as something felt in a body as it is im-pressed by another, interlacing the pre-individual, individual, and collective within the notion of emotion, without making the individual the origin of feeling. With their socio-historical as well as material dimensions, emotions work on two levels by constituting bodies as objects of certain emotional ‘readings,’ and by aligning individuals into collectives that share this history of reading the impressions shaping a body (Ahmed 2004:27). It is this twofold constitutive potential of emotions – creating bodies and communities – that I find most helpful in understanding the effects of the affective economy of 120 BPM.

However, while Ahmed rightly emphasizes the way in which emotions reinforce normative orders and make them appear natural in the bodies they shape, 120 BPM suggests that the constitutive power of emotions can also be used to undo the normative history of reading the feelings ‘sticking’ to certain bodies. This ambivalence is reflected in Deborah Gould’s study of the emotional work of ACT UP. She argues that ‘attending to affect can illuminate how hegemony is effected, but also why it is never all-encompassing’ (Gould 2009:27). Gould captures this ambivalence in the notion of emotional habitus, a group’s collective emotional dispositions which combine both durability through the repetition of social norms and change as variations are introduced (Gould 2009:36). As the film also shows, ACT UP’s affective work functions as an ‘implicit pedagogy about what to feel and how to express one’s feelings’ (Gould 2009:63), undoing historical readings of bodies as shameful and despairing, and instead reconstituting them as objects of pride, agency, and love. Thus, Ahmed’s understanding of ‘emotions as a form of cultural politics or world making’ (2015:12) can be read as both the emotional affirmation of a world of oppression and othering, and as the possibility of alternative world making through new affective relationships, as is the case in 120 BPM.

In this emotional world making, film (as well as other media) play an important role as ‘little apothecaries for the dispensation of affects’ (Schaefer 2017:80) or ‘machines for generating affect’ (Shaviro 2010:3, original emphasis). Film theorist Tarja Laine (2011:4) notes that attending to affects
in film analysis shifts the focus from what film is or means, to what a film does, and how it does it. This requires careful analysis of the film’s aesthetic forms used to create the ‘mood’ of the film shared by its protagonists, and how viewers participate in this mood in an ‘affecognitive’ way (Hamner 2015:1435–6). With Gould, one might then also speak of the affective pedagogy of film that forms emotional dispositions toward objects of sadness or joy, which may be aligned with hegemonic constructions of such objects or counteract them, and thus either mirror social relationships of othering or create new communities through emotional alignments.

However, while the viewer’s affective engagement with the film may lead to identification with the specific emotions seen on screen and with the more general ‘atmosphere’ of the film, Laine (2011:4) also cautions that ‘the emotion that the film embodies is not necessarily the same emotion that the spectator feels in this process.’ While noting the affective power of media, Andre Cavalcante’s study of LGBTQ audiences points out the possibility of ‘resilient reception,’ as audiences exercise their agency in negotiating media affects by tapping into both collective and individual archives of feelings (Cavalcante 2018). Thus, the kind of mark that the film’s body (Sobchack 1992) leaves on the viewer’s body is neither predictable nor indelible, even if certain ways of affectively reading its impressions are historically and socially suggested, as Ahmed argues, and can be encouraged through particular aesthetic forms.

Thus, cinema has the capacity to ‘touch’ viewers through the multiple affective flows within a film and between film and audience, which leave impressions in the materiality of the viewers’ (and the film’s) bodies, and thus change both in the process. Film theorist Vivian Sobchack describes this experience as transcendent, paradoxically precisely in and through the material immanence of the film viewer’s embodied-affective exchange with the film:

Thus, in its most heightened state as at the movies, our sense of transcendence in immanence not only relocates us ‘beyond’ the presentness of our flesh to dwell in the on-screen world but also refers us reflexively (and without a thought) back to our own fleshly presence – this in a mediating structure that, as it vacillates between our intentional relocation ‘elsewhere’ on the screen and our fleshly presence ‘here’ and ‘now’ in the theater, simultaneously intensifies and diffuses both our senses and our sensual location. There is, then, a paradoxical bodily character to a heightened sense of ex-static transcendence: a sensual (and affective) enhancement in which our body’s ‘here’ and ‘now’ – in something like a feedback loop and without conscious thought – reflexively refracts its own sensuality in a process of mimetic exchange with both the general perceptive and expressive sensuality of cinema as a medium and the specific figurations (both
visual and acoustic) that constitute the ‘elsewhere’ on the screen. (Sobchack 2008:197, original emphasis)

While Sobchack mentions ‘affect’ only in parentheses here, it is obvious that feelings and emotions are essential to the cinematic experience she describes as transcendence-in-immanence. Sobchack’s observations open a possibility to think of watching (or more comprehensively, feeling) a film as a moment of religious experience, challenging theology to consider the sensing, affected, and affecting body as a medium of the transcendent.

The turn of religious studies to affect theory has provided a theoretical foundation to the reflection of the material dimension of religious feelings oriented toward the transcendent. Karen Bray and Stephen Moore (2020:1) argue that ‘at once transpersonal and prepersonal, affectivity transcends and subtends the human. As such, it has affinity with divinity, but a divinity that is indissociable from materiality.’ This implies that the relationship between the created world and the divine is already an affective relationship experienced through the medium of the material world, including the embodied experience of cinema.

For Donovan Schaefer, tracing the affective dimension of religion allows us to think about religion in terms of wants and feelings beyond and outside of language, recognizing the affective motivation (and manipulation) of beliefs, as well as the insufficiency of an understanding of religion reduced to a set of linguistic statements of beliefs, which ‘obscures the multitude of subterranean ways that religion flows through our bodies’ (Schaefer 2015:209). Like Ahmed, Schaefer is attentive to the ways in which power relations shape the flows of affects – in which religions are also involved – and how they impress on bodies, noting the ‘multidirectional vectors of influence between embodied emotions and politics’ (Schaefer 2015:10). Thus, attending to affect in religion provides a way to think about religion as a formation of power, both distinct from and connected with other power structures, and about the role of religious affects – such as the shame of sin – in political and social dynamics, something also noted in 120 BPM.

In addition to highlighting the affective dimensions of religion, as Schaefer does, affect theory in religion has also raised attention to the religious dimension of affects, and thus extends the scope of the religious in yet another way. Bray and Moore (2020:7) note that ‘reading for affect in contemporary cultural and political movements, and recognizing within them the religious sensibilities in certain affectual modes […], impels us to rethink where ritual and faith are practiced today.’ Taking my cue from Bray and Moore, I will now turn to 120 BPM to trace the ‘religious sensibilities’ of its affective economy.
120 BPM: sensations and im-pressions

120 BPM depicts – and evokes in its viewers – a range of feelings and emotions, as noted by Ben Walters (2018): the film ‘immerses us in tangled lives of passion and anger on their own terms of tenderness, frustration, charisma, mess, pride, fury, pain, laughter, intimacy and bitterness.’ The film achieves this emotional intensity, which reviewers describe as ‘galvanising’ and ‘invigorating’ (Walters 2018) and experience as ‘immediacy’ (Scott 2017) and ‘presence’ (Liebert 2017, my translation), in several ways: its structure which interlaces four main types of scenes; the use of the filmic means of camera position, editing, and sound; and its recreation of time and body.

Ritualized repetitions: the film’s narrative structure

The film’s narrative unfolds primarily through four main types of scenes – the meetings of ACT UP, their political actions, scenes in a nightclub, and those focusing on Nathan and Sean’s love story – which circle into each other, and sometimes mesh with each other, in a ritualized repetitiveness.

Viewers are introduced to the first type, the meetings of ACT UP Paris in a university lecture hall, in the opening sequence, together with three newcomers, among them Nathan. The meetings, together with the second type of scenes, the group’s actions, represent the political dimension of ACT UP, protesting against the government’s inaction and demanding resources and access to treatment. As actions are planned and the goals of the movement debated, there is a sense of community and closeness among the diverse members, based not just on shared political goals but also on affective relationships of attraction, love, and care, underlined by the occasional hug or flirty exchange of looks between group members.

Ahmed’s insight into the alignment of individuals into collectives through the affective constitution of their bodies comes to mind when one of the older members of ACT UP alerts the newcomers that being a part of the group will mean being represented and perceived as HIV+ in public; the public emotions about the disease will stick to their bodies and shape them into contagious bodies-to-be-feared, no matter their actual infection status. While this impression of their bodies makes them outsiders in French society, at the same time it aligns them with the community of ACT UP, held together by precisely these impressions on their bodies, but now turned into a source of pride and agency. The meetings are one of the places where this affective re-alignment occurs, the emotional pedagogy of ACT UP that Gould notes (2009:63), when feelings of shame or grief are turned into an anger that fuels the group’s activism, supported by the sense
of solidarity and care for each other. Yet, as the film returns to the lecture hall and meetings, this sense of closeness in the ACT UP community is disrupted, as conflicts over goals, strategies, and leadership – already hinted at in the first sequence – become more intense, and the meetings are increasingly marked by feelings of tension and discomfort. The film's shifts in the affective dynamic of the meetings thus reflects the emotional trajectory of ACT UP that Gould traces, with feelings of distrust, betrayal, and disrespect, together with overall exhaustion, contributing to the decline of the movement (2009:366).

The second type of scenes are the direct actions of the group, such as an invasion of the offices of a pharma company, delaying the release of test results, a ‘die-in’, participation in the Pride Parade, and perhaps most impactful, the political funerals of Jérémie, also one of the newcomers, and Sean. These scenes evoke a range of feelings, such as anger and sadness at Jérémie's funeral, which is represented in a subdued way with low sound, dark colors, and slowed-down movement, or highly charged excitement and exhilaration with faster editing, noise, and bright splashes of the pink of ACT UP's logo in other actions. As political statements, ACT UP's interventions aim at shifting society’s affective economy regarding HIV/AIDS by physically claiming back the public space from which HIV+ bodies and those primarily threatened by the pandemic – gays and lesbians, prisoners, prostitutes, junkies, immigrants, as well as others – have been marginalized. As the camera zooms out in an aerial shot of the die-in, showing a mass of bodies lying on the ground, it is no longer possible to ignore the bodies that had been rendered invisible; they are right there in the public square, they are dying, and they demand attention, respect, and action. The press of bodies against others in these interventions, as well as in other scenes, leads to an affective reconfiguration of the HIV+ body as not a body of shame and death but one of pride, dignity, and life.

However, the reactions to these impressions of bodies on other bodies vary. In an intervention at a school, ACT UP interrupts lessons to distribute information and condoms, and while one teacher tries to push them out of his classroom and snatch up the information leaflets, another turns cautiously toward them, gives them space to speak and pass out their material, with students reacting in a variety of ways from embarrassed giggling to cautious interest to outright hostility. This range of reactions is important to note because of the contingency of the impressions of bodies on each other, following hegemonic cultural scripts or subverting them (Ahmed 2004:27–8). It is also important to note that in these direct action scenes, where the emphasis is on the political level, the individual relationships between group members and their constitutive role for the community are
never lost: the camera focuses on individual faces and the feelings – excitement, confusion, caution – they express; we see group members flirt with each other or take care of those who are sick when roughly hustled into the back of a police van.

The sense of exhilaration of the direct actions carries over into the third type of scenes, those set in a nightclub. Focusing on the music and dancing bodies, with flashes of bright light picking out one or the other face or body in the otherwise darkish image, the scenes have no direct narrative function. They are breaks in the story of political protest, medical treatments, and physical deterioration, moments that are pure sound and movement, emphasized through slow-motion shots of the dancing bodies, experiences of a *joie de vivre* in the midst of a deathly pandemic. As a kind of *‘danse macabre’* (Clarke 2018:21), they do not allow viewers to forget about the reality of death behind this celebration of life. In one scene, the dust particles in the nightclub blend into a close-up of a virus, strangely beautiful yet threatening as it is suspended in the frame, and in another, the dancers moving with the music contrast sharply with Sean, who at that point cannot summon the strength to join them. Yet, with the energy pulsing through the beat of the music, light, and movement, the scenes counteract an easy reduction of the HIV+ protagonists to victims, bodies-to-be-dead in a ‘wound fetishism’ (Ahmed 2015:32) that reduces them to their suffering as passive objects of the viewers’ compassion. Instead, the nightclub scenes, within the fabric of the film as a whole, emphasize their subjectivity, agency, feelings of pleasure and strength, even and perhaps especially in the face of death.

The last set of scenes focuses on the development of the relationship between Nathan and Sean, from a first kiss at an action to a hook-up after a night of dancing to a committed relationship of love and care until Sean’s death. These scenes express intimacy and closeness through soft or dark lighting and tight framing, focusing attention closely on the two characters as they have sex with each other, talk about past relationships and their experience of the HIV pandemic, or when Nathan provides medical care for Sean. Tracing both the increasing intensity of their relationship and the deterioration of Sean’s health, these scenes stress ‘that the personal and political passions can’t be easily disentangled,’ something that is, continues reviewer A. O. Scott, ‘not so much argued as felt’ (2017). The sense of angry urgency that ACT UP cultivates is personal for Sean, who is too ill to benefit from any advances in treatment; the fear of death with which those who are infected live is his as he lies in his hospital bed, and his friends’ grief over his death is that shared by millions of others who have lost loved ones.
The film culminates in Sean’s death, which is represented in a way that is extremely touching, without clichés. Having returned from the hospital to die at home, Sean’s physical weakness and emotional exhaustion are obvious and – although this becomes clear only in hindsight – he decides to put an end to it with Nathan’s help, who injects him with an overdose while Sean is asleep. As Nathan’s ragged breathing and sobs dominate the soundtrack, with the visual dimension limited due to the darkness of the image, these physical expressions of his grief create a sense of embodied feeling-with in viewers that bridges the gap between screen and audience. When Sean’s friends gather in the apartment to mourn their friend and support each other, expressions of grief are set against mundane actions such as making coffee, communicating the intensity of their feelings about Sean’s death through the ways in which the protagonists – and we in the audience – attempt to manage them without breaking apart.

A moment of comic relief as Sean’s mother and the ACT UP members negotiate the distribution of Sean’s ashes, which he had intended to be used in a political action and of which she would like to keep some, leads into the final sequence. Shots of the intervention, in which ACT UP members throw Sean’s ashes over the buffet at a health insurers’ conference – with the diegetic sounds of the action muted under the dominant sound of the beating house music we know from the nightclub scenes – are interlaced and contrasted with barely lit shots of Nathan and Thibault, the leader of ACT UP, having sex, reassuring each other through touch and closeness in their grief for Sean. As the dance music becomes more prominent, the slow-motion images of the action and the sex scene are now lit in bright flashes in the rhythm of the music as in the nightclub scenes, until the film cuts to the nightclub, flashing on the dancing bodies in a final celebration of life. The music morphs into just the beat of the rhythm, now reminding us of a human heartbeat – an association already implied by the title, *Beats Per Minute*, which references both the heartbeat and the beat of dance music – until it cuts to silence and a black screen for a moment before the closing credits scroll, a final reminder of the power and fragility of life. These last scenes emphasize that ‘[i]t’s a film about fragility – the fragility of the body, the fragility of the collective, the fragility of the beat – and it suggests that only by attending fiercely to the fragile can we find our way to love’ (Walters 2018).

Importantly, the film does not end with death, but with the affirmation of life in Sean’s ‘resurrection’ in the political action (Figure 1). With his ashes spread over the insurers’ food, his body becomes a sacrament of resistance in the fight against ignorance and death, a strange eucharist, food not to be eaten but to remain stuck in the throats of those who become fat and
rich from the capitalist exploitation of other people’s suffering. The sex scene cross-cut with the political action increases this experience of the sacramental quality of the body, with the sexual encounter between the two bodies a sacrament of shared life, communication, and transcendence (Knauss 2014).

While each of these four types of scenes generates a particular set of affects, the way they rhythmically circle into each other (Liebert 2017), returning to the lecture hall, the nightclub, the actions, again and again, has its own affective impact through the ritualized repetition of impressions that deepens their marks and sutures viewers into the affective economy of the film and the community of viewers. In addition, the repetition of scenes, but with variations, changes their affective charge and allows the viewer to trace the emotional trajectory of the growing attachment between Sean and Nathan or the increasing tensions at ACT UP’s meetings, an effect that film theorist Greg Singh also notes in his analysis of the shifting feelings of repetitions with a difference (Singh 2014:63).

**Aesthetic form and affective intensity**

The affective intensity of the film is further developed in its aesthetic forms through which the film’s body presses against those of the viewers. Film theorists drawing on affect theory emphasize the importance of paying close attention to the filmic means – camera position and movement, mise-en-scène, editing, sound, lighting, color, etc. – used to express and create feelings in the film and viewers (e.g., Brinkema 2014:xv; Laine 2011:4). However, it is again important to emphasize that the emotional effect of filmic means is not ‘automatic,’ but contingent on how they are used within
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the context of the film (a close-up can feel intimate or restrictive) and on how I as a viewer enter the film, with which expectations, previous experiences, and affective dispositions (a close-up of two men having sex can feel exciting, boring, or upsetting). In the following, I will focus on three filmic means that are employed especially effectively in *120 BPM* to create affectivity both on screen and in the audience: camera position and framing, editing, and sound.

In both indoor and outdoor settings, the camera usually stays close to the protagonists in close-ups or medium shots, creating a sense of intimacy and shared life, even if at times, the tight framing might also feel claustrophobic or tense. Drawing on Deleuze, Hermann Kappelhoff and Sarah Greifenstein (2014:266–7) note the function of close-ups of faces or objects as ‘affection-images’ which focus on the expressiveness of feelings rather than on narrative development. Especially in scenes between Nathan and Sean, the camera’s closeness to their faces or bodies, sometimes even further reinforced by the use of shallow focus that centers attention on the head or face in the foreground with the background blurred, brings viewers into their relationship as they are able to trace the subtle shifts in emotional intensities between them, thus aligning feelings on and off the screen (Figure 2).

Yet no matter how close the camera comes, the protagonists also remain somewhat enigmatic; the film does not provide a lot of detail about them, the acting is understated, and dialogues are often elliptic. Affective closeness, rendered through the filmic instrument of the close-up, is thus only an approximation of the ultimately transcendent reality of the other, never a means to capture the other and reduce them to an object of my knowledge, but a demand of my recognition of their dignity as subject. This

Figure 2: Sean (left) and Nathan (right) in a moment of intimacy; *120 BPM (Beats Per Minute)* (Robin Campillo, 2017), film still, 1:10:09.
sensation is further emphasized by images that are lit barely enough for viewers to discern what they show, thus not functioning as providers of visual information about the other, but instead as a screen for the viewer’s own sensations and feelings, allowing for the mutual affective flow from the film to the viewer, and from the viewer back to the film.

Given the prevalence of close-up or medium shots, the occasional aerial shots that position the viewer out of the action above the world of the film are even more striking in creating a sense of superiority, distance, and control, but also expansiveness. Similarly, extreme long shots are used – rarely but with great impact – to create a similar feeling of openness, especially in the only scene set outside Paris, when Sean and Nathan take a (last) trip to the beach in Normandy. The camera stays at a distance as they undress, run toward the water, and jump in the waves, with the contrast between Nathan’s sturdy, muscular body and Sean’s thin, frail body felt even more strongly in the extreme long shot which makes Sean appear tiny. The open space of beach and sea and the wide horizon opened up by the extreme long shot also create a sense of freedom and possibility, and – given the symbolic significance of the open sea as a symbol of infinity in the Western tradition – even of hope, not in recovery, but in a transcendence encompassing and reaching beyond the boundaries of life. My reading of the sensation of this shot as transcendent in an otherwise ‘secular’ film is confirmed by the next sequence, when the film pauses for a moment on a shot of the infinity of the sky from Sean’s perspective through the hospital window.

Editing, with its capacity to create rhythm and suggest emotional associations by the way that shots are placed in context, is an important means to organize the affective structure of a film, and is expertly used in 120 BPM. Two aspects related to editing are particularly impactful: cross-cutting, used to interlace different scenes, and contrastive editing. Cross-cutting, the back and forth between two or more scenes, often connected through the continuity of soundtrack layered across cuts, creates a – sometimes confusing – entanglement of feelings, events, bodies, and destinies that cannot be neatly lined up in a causal narrative. The complexity of this non-linear editing often leaves the viewer at a loss as to how to read the images in front of them, and thus creates distancing disorientation, throwing viewers back on how they ‘feel’ a scene rather than their cognitive processing of it, and at the same time drawing them further into the world of the film as they share its feelings and become enfolded into the film.

The affective impact of the film is further intensified through editing that contrasts the moods of different scenes, cutting jarringly from a quiet, dark, intimate sex scene to a loud, high-voltage, bright and colorful shot
of the Pride Parade (Figure 3), or from the excited overflowing of ideas at a meeting to the boring drone of the literature teacher before ACT UP’s intervention in the school. The contrast between the atmosphere of two scenes heightens their respective affective charge, coloring both my reading of the present scene and, ‘in hindsight,’ the affective impact of the previous scene, as I am abruptly thrown into a different emotional state.

Lastly, the affective impact of sound is emphasized from the first second when the film’s opening titles appear on a black screen with a voice and other unidentifiable sounds audible from the off, and throughout the film, most obviously in the nightclub scenes, when the sound and especially the beat of the music shade the scenes in different affective tonalities of joy, exuberance, vitality or melancholy, emotional distance or sadness. The light flashing on faces and shapes keeps time with the beat of the music, and the alignment of visual and auditory sensations synchronizes the rhythms of the viewer’s body with the bodies of the dancers and the film’s body. Sound is also significant in two other scenes highlighting the fragile vitality of the human body and connecting the bodies on screen with those of the viewers. By singling out Sean’s labored breathing on the soundtrack and layering it across the cross-cutting between his hospital room and shots of the River Seine dyed a bright red by ACT UP, the color contrasting with the greenish-blue of the early dawn, the film emphasizes, through the sound of Sean’s breath, the symbolic significance of the red river as the blood ‘shed’ by politicians, and society at large, with their delayed and insufficient reaction to the pandemic. And, as already mentioned, when Sean dies, the sounds of Nathan’s ragged breathing and sobs intensify the viewers’ emotional alignment with his grief, focusing their sensory reach into the film on the audio dimension. In addition to the effects of sound in these scenes, the layering of sound across cuts noted before increases the sense of feelings
flowing among different moments in time, spaces, and people, both on the screen and in the rhythmic attunement of viewers with the film.

The aspects of film language analyzed here function on two levels: to express the affective structure of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the emotional pedagogy and trajectory of the ACT UP movements, and the ties among characters on the diegetic level; and to attune viewers to these affective flows as they circulate between screen and audience and among the audience in the ‘ex-static’ experience of cinema, feeling the ‘elsewhere’ of the film’s world precisely in the ‘here’ of my body, as described by Sobchack in the passage quoted earlier (2008:197). While not explicitly marked as religious in the film, the sensations and emotions evoked through the film’s aesthetic form can (also) be read as ‘religious sensibilities,’ as they encourage feeling-with toward the other person without condescending pity or compassion, represent the body as a fragile yet powerful medium of relationship and agency, express hope in the face of death, create a community of love and care for the marginalized other, and evoke a sense of transcendence and infinity.

This reading of the film’s affective-embodied experience as religious is further encouraged, I think, by how its affective flows disrupt linear time and reshape bodies – on the screen and in the audience.

Recreating time and body

Time and body are, of course, interconnected: human bodies change over time, our breathing and heartbeat mark time, and in the context of a film about the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the fact that human life is finite is part of what drives the narrative and creates a sense of urgency that intensifies its experience. However, the experience of time in 120 BPM is far from straightforward. This begins with the fact that its temporal setting is left undefined (presumably sometime in 1992), and so is its story time. How much time passes between the meetings? Weeks? Months? How long do Nathan and Sean have before Sean dies? Instead of anchoring its action in a precise historical moment of time, creating a clear sequence of past, present, and future, the film represents history as ‘the pulling of the affective past into the present tense’ (Hassan 2018). And instead of measuring time in weeks or months, the film measures it in T-cell counts, the schedule of medications and infusions, the growing attachment between Nathan and Sean, and the increasing frailty of Sean’s body. The film’s time is nearly biblical in its emphasis on the subjective significance of moments in time, the intensity of its experience in dance or action, and in the knowledge of the limits of one’s own time. This subjective experience of time as limited...
shades all other experiences in a way that is not accessible to those who do not have this measure of their remaining time. The permanent awareness of the finiteness of life – at one point, Sean yells at the pharma representatives, ‘We don’t have time!’ – fuels the group’s activism, stressed by the faster pace of the editing in the action scenes.

Yet the film places the limited time of one’s life, its finite character, into a different horizon of time, the ‘collective time’ of the community in the group’s political actions, time pulsing between people and events, a time that transcends time in the shots of the sea and sky. Sean’s funeral is one such moment, when the limitation of time is broken as his body is resurrected in the form of protest and becomes the sacrament of solidarity and life, and the time of his life continues across the boundary of death, opening up into the community of his friends and their future.

This timeless time of the film has a religious quality of time beyond measure and full of endless possibility, which is particularly felt in Jérémie’s political funeral (Knauss, forthcoming). The sequence interlaces shots of Jérémie in hospital dying of AIDS, with shots of different ACT UP actions and the procession with Jérémie’s coffin through the streets of Paris. These visuals are combined with a soundtrack that gathers Jérémie’s voice-over recounting a *promenade des cadavres* during the French 1848 revolution and his last will for a similar political funeral, together with diegetic sound from the hospital and Jérémie’s funeral parade, and an extra-diegetic, slow, melancholy piano tune that continues throughout. At first confusing, this complex layering of images and sounds weaves together several moments in time to culminate in Jérémie’s funeral, the moment when his time is apparently over. And yet the sequence also conveys a sense of openness through the dissolution of sequential time, the entanglement of Jérémie’s time with the times of others, rendering past, present, and future irrelevant. Without sequential time, there is no finitude, but just a now that is open to an eternity beyond time. The film’s complex treatment of time thus places the limited time of the individual, subjectively experienced, within an open time of possibility that can be felt as a transcendent horizon that does not deny but embraces human finitude in its timelessness.

This affective grounding of the experience of timeless transcendence in the concrete immanence of embodied existence is emphasized by the film’s treatment of the body. In a way, the film is all about bodies, as is ACT UP: getting drugs into bodies, preventing bodies from being infected, caring for dying bodies, putting HIV+ bodies in the public square, the cathedral, scientific conferences, pharma headquarters. The material presence of bodies is emphasized throughout the film, sometimes prominently in the action scenes, sometimes as if an aside, subtly noting the permanent presence of
the disease and its impact: Jérémie is shown palpating his lymph nodes during a meeting; the film includes several explicit, yet not sensationalist, sex scenes; repeatedly, the camera lingers on Sean’s deteriorating body, the lesions on his back and feet, his ribs showing under his skin; when Sean is dead, his body is dressed, giving a brief glimpse of the diapers he was wearing, and his eyelids are taped down; breathing and heartbeat are singled out by the soundtrack; the material needs of bodies and lack of access to resources or treatment are noted.

However, the film stresses that in their concrete materiality, bodies are never objects but subjects of experience and relationship, counteracting the mind–body dualism that has shaped much of Western culture, including its medical and theological discourses. This is made especially clear in one scene, when activists protest against the protocol of a medical trial that foresees the frequent testing of spinal fluid: what might make sense from a medical standpoint, which sees the body as an object of research, is impossible when attending to the sensing body and the subjective experience of pain during the procedure. The emphasis on the body–mind/soul unity of the subject is further underlined in the sex scenes, in which the partners relate to each other in a personal way through their touch and feelings. And at the same time as the film’s bodies are remade from objects into subjects of agency and relationship, so too are the viewers’ bodies, as the film’s structure and aesthetics draw them into the affective-embodied world of the film, with their bodies and feelings the medium or sacrament of this experience of transcendence, of crossing over into another world.

The film’s treatment of bodies further highlights how affective economies function as they shape bodies and align them into collectives, as theorized by Ahmed. The film notes the role of media, sciences, and religion in reinforcing the affective reading of the impressions left by gay and HIV+ bodies as ‘bad’: Nathan remembers that the first story he read about homosexuality in a magazine was about AIDS, with the film showing a distressing photo from the magazine of a man dying from AIDS; in one of the meetings, an activist reads from a volume on the psychology of homosexuals supposedly marked by ‘emotional inauthenticity’ and ‘lack of trust’; and archival clips of an ACT UP protest in the cathedral of Notre-Dame reference the impact of Christianity’s condemnation of homosexuality on the creation of gay bodies as sinful. As bodies-to-be-feared, they are shunned (a man stands up in the metro when two men from the group kiss) and aligned with other abject bodies into the collective of the ‘other,’ objects of fear and disgust.

Yet the film’s representation of ACT UP’s actions works precisely against this affective economy by remaking the feared body into one to be loved,
the victimized body into one of agency, the vulnerable body into one fighting so that other bodies will not experience the same vulnerability. In ACT UP’s claim of public space and display of otherwise hidden bodily processes of sex, disease, and death, the bodies made to curl up in shame through hegemonic affective readings, those from which others recoil in fear, now unfurl among the public of the streets and squares, throw the disgust felt about them back into the faces of the others, and im-press – dancing and dying – other bodies with their anger, sadness, and joy (Figure 4). Thus, both those attending the actions represented in the film and the film’s audience are aligned into new communities through their affective reading of the bodies’ impressions on themselves as no longer disgust or fear but love, joy, or grief. However, as already mentioned, the film emphasizes that this change in the affective reading of HIV/AIDS is contingent. Repeatedly, the impossibility of emotional contagion is noted (the pharma reps cannot ‘know’ what it feels like to be HIV +), and the press of bodies against others does not shift affective alignments automatically. But neither is the flow of affects impossible or ineffectual, as viewers feel the grief experienced by Sean’s friends ‘spill over’ from the screen, shading their own affective states, and feel themselves drawn into the emotional world of the film (Hassan 2018; Scott 2017; Walters 2018).

Through subtle touches and intense impressions, therefore, the film’s affectivity creates possibilities for transformation, as time is disrupted in the experience of a feeling now full of possibilities, and bodies are remade from objects of fear into subjects of agency and relationship, mediating the experience of an elsewhere and otherwise in the here and now of concrete embodied existence.
Religious affects in 120 BPM: concluding reflections

The rich affective economy of 120 BPM as it unfolds in its narrative structure, aesthetic form, and particularly its treatment of time and body on the screen and in the circulation of emotions between screen and audience, can be read and experienced as religious in the threefold making of bodies, communities, and worlds: bodies made into subjects of agency and relationship, gathered into communities of resistance and love, in a world in which death does not have the last word but life pulses through protest, sex, and dance. These religious sensibilities take on a specific Christian tonality in the experience of the body-subject as sacramental medium of transcendence, in the affective reshaping of bodies-to-be-feared into bodies-to-love, the community created and characterized by its alignment with the marginalized, the political and ethical commitments to the making of a world of justice and fullness of life for all, and the breaking open of time into eternity: ashes become a eucharist of protest and hope, sex defies death, dancing is life abundant. In the affective-embodied experience of the film, viewers do not simply observe these religious sensibilities unfold among the protagonist on screen, but become entangled in them themselves in the back-and-forth of affective exchanges between film and audience, moments of transcendence which reshape their own bodies, communities, and worlds.

This understanding of the religious affectivity of cinematic experience also allows the viewer to glance back at religion, and to recognize more clearly the affective-aesthetic dimensions of religions: the pedagogy of feeling enacted through its rituals and practices; the embodied quality of the sacramental experience of divine presence; the reading of emotional impressions left by others as sinful or redemptive; and, quite fundamentally, religion as an affective-embodied transcendence into the world, toward other beings, and reaching into the beyond.

However, in spite of these constructive contributions of religious cinematic affectivity, I also want to raise some concerns in conclusion. As noted before, affects are contingent, both in terms of how they are felt and their effects. They can be manipulated, and they may align communities of love just as much as communities of hate, as Ahmed’s discussion of the affective economy of white supremacists shows (2004). Together with Marie-Luise Angerer, Brigitte Bargetz (2014:209) further points out the potential depoliticizing effect of political affects. With regard to 120 BPM, I also want to emphasize their ambivalent power to both mobilize and immobilize, to create a discomfort that embodies action or to wrap us in a cocoon of well-being and comfort. While reviewers note the activating impact of the film’s
affects as ‘a call to arms’ (Hassan 2018) and ‘a wake-up call, a cinematic alarm against complacency’ (Kenny 2017), the film’s experience might very well also lead to an escape into feelings of nostalgia and admiration for the past achievements of the group’s political activism. This sentiment seems to echo in Jana Weiss’ review of the film, when she notes her feelings of anger at the unnecessary deaths of so many in the past, together with her sense of hope, given how much has been achieved: ‘Those who contract Aids in Europe today do not have to die anymore’ (Weiss 2017, my translation). Perhaps without this being the author’s intention, I read this as an expression of the ambivalent power of affects. The contentment and satisfaction felt about the achievement that, in Europe (or North America), HIV+ persons with sufficient means and access to healthcare can survive quite well thanks to advanced medical treatment dulls our anger and frustration at the injustice that, in other parts of the world and among poor and vulnerable communities in Europe and North America, contracting HIV still means poverty, marginalization, and death. The study of affects, including those in religion and cinema, needs to be attentive to these ambivalences, in order to fully capture the multiple and contradictory ways in which emotions impress and circulate among us.

About the author

Stefanie Knauss is a professor of theology at Villanova University (USA). In her research, she engages with film and other media, gender studies and queer theory, and questions of embodiment and sexualities. Recently published work includes Religion and Film: Representation, Experience, Meaning (Brill, 2020). She is a member of the board of directors of Concilium: International Journal for Theology and co-chief editor of the Journal for Religion, Film and Media.

References


