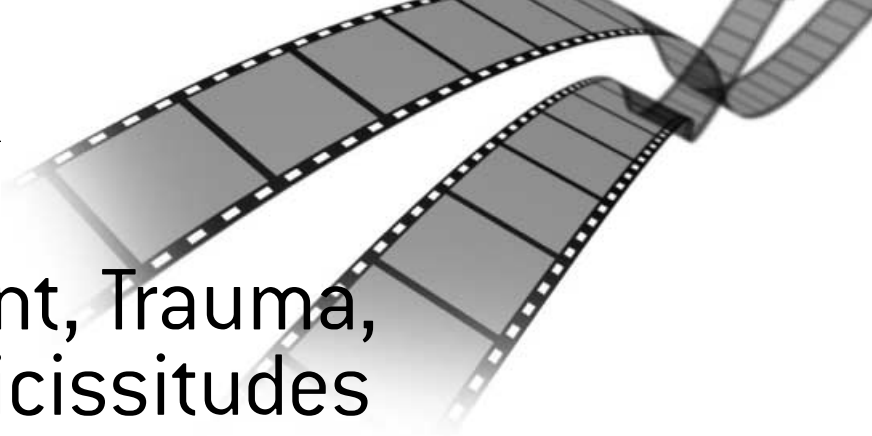


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# Attachment, Trauma, and the Vicissitudes of Love: Circularity in Julio Medem's *Lovers of the Arctic Circle*

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**Abstract:** Circularity, a salient theme in the film *Lovers of the Arctic Circle* (1999), is explored as a symbol that points to a consideration of issues central to psychic life. The movie sets up an expectation—two lives will be brought together to recreate a former blissful union, and complete a circle that defies finality, separation, and loss. It succeeds in creating a dialectic between two tensions, the experience of separateness where each person is a circle unto oneself, and the longing to be encircled with an “other” in a union that promises safety and permanence. The wish for fusion versus merger with the loved one is discussed in the context of traumatic loss and soul blindness. These early experiences interfere with healthy mourning and determine the reliance on magic and regressive compromise that contributes to a tragic outcome.

**Keywords:** attachment, fantasy, fusion, merger, mourning, separateness, soul blindness, trauma

In his landmark paper, “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” (1905), Freud proffers an important insight into the psychology of love. The child’s relation to his mother is “the prototype of every relation of love. The finding of an object is in fact a re-finding of it” (ibid., 222). Developmental thrust propels the child toward individuation, but love is a force that aims “to restore the happiness that has been lost” (ibid., 222). The intensity of the longing, the quality of “subjection” to and idealization of the loved one bespeak of an exclusivity that mirrors the earliest attachment experience. While Freud speaks of re-finding an object to restore happiness, later psychoanalytic writers have expanded this view. “Lovers do not simply and repetitively re-find infantile objects, but seek objects who can undo the wounds and humiliations experienced early in life at the hands of their infantile objects, with the outcome of love depend-

ent on the balance achieved between its repetitive and reparative functions” (Person 1992: 848). Thus, the lover draws a circle that unites past and present.

Circularity is a recurring theme in Julio Medem’s fourth movie, *Lovers of the Arctic Circle* (*Los amantes del círculo polar*, 1999).<sup>1</sup> Medem, who is recognized as one of the pre-eminent exponents of Spanish cinema today, has written and directed a film of ambitious structure that elucidates the conundrum of “reality” as a “psychic construction.” Two main protagonists narrate the story of their intertwined lives, each from his or her unique perspective, hence offering different accounts of the same moment in time that are colored by their wishes and conflicts. The narrative is cyclical: events recur binding the lives of different characters across generations; time is collapsed as the story is constructed from repeating images that start with the ending and eventually arrive back to the start. Hence, this is a film that, in its very structure, obliges a closer look at its depiction of human experience.

The tenacity of the emphasis on circularity that pervades the structure and content of the film has received both praise and criticism. Some critics consider it an exercise in cinematographic virtuosity suggestive of the work of Krzysztof Kieslowski. Others object to an unrelenting, even obsessive quality that feels overbearing. “Our director wants, ever so seriously, for us to see patterns and symbols and interrelationships. Our lovers’ names, Ana and Otto, are palindromes. In case we hadn’t noticed, we are told so on screen at least twice. Palindromes have a circularity, and circles—Arctic Circle, the circle of fate, and so on—are of concern to Mr. Medem” (Talens 1998). DeLaTorre writes “the entire film is a series of circles embedded in circles, bound together by a tight, intricate web of coincidence, and these circles exist not only in physical space (the Arctic Circle), but also in sequences of events. . . . Otto is named after a German pilot his grandfather saved during World War II, and then himself becomes a pilot. His stepmother cheats on his father, Alvaro, with another man named Alvaro, whose father is the German pilot for whom Otto is named. The German pilot rents out space in the Arctic Circle to Ana” (1999).

Pointing to circularity as a reflection of an underlying “metaphysical system” that privileges chance and coincidence, Ebert commends Medem’s film as a “strange and haunting movie that wants to be a palindrome” (1999). The movie suggests the arc of life, where characters seem impelled to their destiny by fate. Yet, this is but the surface structure, one that belies a deeper psychological truth. Embedded in the focus on circularity are issues central to psychic life and to the nature of relationships. Circularity is a symbol that, like a symptom in the clinical context, points us to the exploration of underlying meaning. Ostensibly, this is a movie about passion and loss, longing and frustration. As children, the characters are helpless in the face of loss. As young adults, they seem hopelessly isolated as they struggle to make contact with one another. Circularity emphasizes the longing for union and safety, the wish

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to feel encircled with someone at the center; it also heightens the sense of helplessness. The circle comes to represent magic and fate, forces at odds with initiative and effectance. Medem's work offers a perspective on central questions about oneness and separateness, and the nature of desire. He draws us into considering what is revealed in his artistic expression that helps to articulate our understanding of these issues.

### **The story**

Told linearly, the movie is the story of two young latency age children, Otto and Ana, who form an intense lasting bond after a fateful encounter. Otto is chasing a ball that has rolled outside the school gate. He meets Ana as she is running away from her mother who has just conveyed to her the news of her father's death. Ana is immediately drawn to Otto, and creates the fantasy that he is her father reincarnate. Otto is fascinated by this strange new creature, a girl who is staring intently at him. Much taken with her, he is drawn to write an evocative question about love on paper planes with which he litters the schoolyard. Finding one at dismissal time, Ana gives it to her recently widowed mother as a love message from a man she picks out at random from the crowd of parents, Otto's father. The paper plane message sent by Otto, who himself will later carry love messages as a pilot for an airplane messenger service, sets up the fortuitous encounter between the two parents that leads to their marriage. The children, thus, are brought into a close familial intimacy that culminates in a passionate, sexual love affair in adolescence. Alas, neither union survives the test of time. Otto's father, who had abandoned his first marriage professing the temporality of love, ends up love sick and broken when Ana's mother leaves him for another. Otto, who, as a child, had vowed eternal love for his mother when his father deserted them but had, in adolescence, left her to actualize a carnal union with Ana, is so overwrought upon his mother's untimely death that he renounces life with Ana in the throes of his bereavement.

The movie traces Otto's and Ana's lives into young adulthood, following their trajectory as they aim to regain the experience of their adolescent relationship. As if unable to re-find their love in the context of their commonplace environment, they seek each other in Lapland, that peaceful, idealized land of their adolescent fantasy. Their reunion in the Arctic Circle, the world of the midnight sun where time seems to stand still in a promise of permanence, lasts but a fleeting moment. Otto, who is the namesake of a German soldier who found love in Spain after parachuting from his plane during World War II, attempts to actualize his childhood fantasy and parachutes out of his messenger plane near the cabin Ana is renting in the Arctic Circle. Ana reads the news of Otto's plane crash and, distraught, walks into the path of an oncoming bus. Otto rushes to Ana's side, arriving at the moment of death. He is

***Medem's work offers a perspective on central questions about oneness and separateness, and the nature of desire.***

reflected in her pupils just as they dilate with her last breath. He is, thus, encircled in her gaze, but their reunion is ephemeral. As if punctuating this point, the background music is a Finnish song about the promise of infinity in the great blue yonder. “Whenever I see the blue sky, I want to climb on its high blue ridge to free myself from my earthly chains . . . The sky can cast a spell over dreams and hide them so that no one can find them. And there are no miracles. Oh, child of the cold earth.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Discussion**

The movie sets up an expectation that two ends will be brought together, two lives will be united to complete a circle that will recreate a former blissful union. Instead, it portrays union as only a wished-for re-union that can never be, a childhood fantasy forged out of an earlier experience that has been lost and cannot be regained. Circularity betrays a longing for continuity and permanence that denies finality, loss, and death. But life is depicted as a trajectory marked by loss; a relentless move toward separation and aloneness where union with another is like unrequited love, a hopeless longing that will not materialize. The film succeeds in creating a dialectic between two tensions that are central aspects of psychic development—the experience of separateness where each person is a circle unto oneself (as suggested by the palindromic names of the main protagonists), and the longing for being encircled with an “other” in a “oneness” that denies separateness.

The early tie with the mother is an experience of oneness, in that the mother’s emotional attunement with the infant is integrally linked to its physical and emotional development. The tiny infant knows no boundary of separation between itself and its mother. The mother and the infant together form the powerful dyad that relieves tension and promotes blissful satisfaction. The child depends on its mother not only to meet its needs; it relies on her feedback and communication to make sense of its world and its internal reactions. The pull to maintain the safety of the union with the mother is counterbalanced by an equally powerful force toward separateness, and the development of one’s independent autonomous self. The earliest omnipotent sense of mother being as one with the self gradually gives way to a view of the mother as someone who has her own goals and wishes, who can be frustrating as she is giving. The child is confronted with the first potential trauma in its young life, the threat of loss of the blissful union with mother.

Blass and Blatt (1996) point out that development proceeds along two fundamental lines—that of attachment and that of separateness. “The attachment line involves the quality of the individual’s relationships—the capacity to form and maintain stable relationships and to integrate them into a sense of self in relation to an other. Development in the separateness line involves the individual as a self-contained and independent unit” (*ibid.*, 720). This focus

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on two primary aims of development is consistent with Freud's position that "the development of the individual seems . . . to be a product of the interaction between two urges, the urge towards happiness, which we usually call 'egoistic,' and the urge towards union with others." (ibid., 721; Freud 1930).

Blass and Blatt describe two broad categories of undifferentiation in the primary relationship between child and mother. One refers to the wish to include the need-satisfying maternal part-object within the self. "This is an experience of *fusion* whereby the lack of differentiation of self and object involves the omnipotent experience of the other as part of oneself" (1996: 723). The other category refers to an experience that maintains a certain awareness of two partners that are joined together into one. This is the experience of *merger*. "When the state of undifferentiation is primarily formed or maintained in the service of attachment, the experience is of merger" (ibid., 723). These authors assert that "at the foundation of human existence lies an experience of unity with others and . . . this unity, comprised of both the attachment experience of merger and the separateness experience of fusion, provides the very early basis for the dialectical process of development that human being undergo throughout the course of life" (ibid., 740). The fantasy of fusion, of complete and total identification with the loved one, can be differentiated from the fantasy of timelessness, of having a love object forever, which is compatible with merger.

Love is an expression of this dialectical process, while it also encompasses an integration of the vicissitudes of all aspects of human development. Arlow points to the "complicated interrelationship of identification, defense, object relations, and instinctual gratification" that plays a role in determining the nature of love and of a specific object choice (1980: 125). He cautions that, while the development of the capacity to love takes place in the context of the experience with the first object, there is no simple correlation with future choice of object and patterns of loving. How the individual comes to choose someone to love and how this love is expressed "is a complex process involving the integration of the individual's total experience. It is usually organized in terms of a few leading, unconscious fantasies which dominate an individual's perception of the world and create the mental set by which she or he perceives and interprets her/his experience" (ibid., 131). Hence, in addition to the nature of the early experience with the mother, conflict and compromise pertaining to libidinal wishes, aggression and object relations from every subsequent developmental phase contribute to the development of the capacity to love. "[A]t all times we are dealing with a psychological experience, the mental presentation of an object, a persistently 'internal' experience. . . . Fundamentally, it is the effect of unconscious fantasy wishes, connected with specific mental representation of objects, that colors, distorts, and affects the ultimate quality of interpersonal relations" (ibid., 114).

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Arlow states that “love relations integrate complex needs of individuals who come together in keeping with conditions operative at various phases of their lives” (1980: 128). Medem’s movie offers an opportunity to explore this statement in detail. *Lovers of the Arctic Circle* portrays the vicissitudes of a love relationship as it follows the story of two protagonists who have been subjected to the trauma of loss, and of soul blindness, the parents’ inability to perceive the personal needs and emotions of the child (Wurmser 2004, 2007). The ambiguous title, which is in keeping with the film’s intent to emphasize that psychic perspective is highly individualized, shaped through the prism of wishes, fantasy and defense, suggests a question about the nature of the protagonists’ longing for each other—are these two individuals seeking permanence through merger with each other in the seclusion of the Arctic Circle, or are they characters who, unable to achieve a mature sense of individuation, cling to a fantasy of the Arctic Circle as a promise of security in fusion with the other (Figure 1)? Close examination of Otto and Ana, their personal history and psychic compromise, elucidates the interplay between early attachment and trauma as it impacts the capacity to form relationships.

Otto is the child poet, the dreamer who tells, at the beginning of the movie, of his search to bring his life full circle. “I can’t close anything. I am on my own,” he states. To complete his circle and experience a sense of wholeness, he needs to place someone at the center. “As a child,” he says, “I felt surrounded by the whole world, I felt protected.” It was a time when the world seemed to revolve around him. He muses that, had the ball stayed within the schoolyard or had he managed to catch it, nothing would have changed. This is a wish to regress to an earlier time, when he felt safe at the center of his universe—the family unity. But, instead, he says, “one afternoon, in the cold, something happened,” something that forced psychological change. He had to integrate two discoveries that would change his perspective forever—the libidinal feelings sparked by that enigmatic, mesmerizing being, “the girl,” and the loss of his heretofore idyllic state, as his father confronts him with a new, harsh reality.

*Figure 1. Otto and Ana, the lovers of the Arctic Circle—do they seek permanence in merger, or security through fusion with the other?*



Otto's childhood is marred by instability. Losing the safety of his egocentric perspective, a process that every child has to negotiate in the course of development, coincides for him with the experience of loss of love and of abandonment. His father assails him with an implacable message: things change, everything dies, love ends. In his message to Otto, he gives testimony to his limited capacity to love—he is blind to the impact of his actions on his son. The young child tends to experience his parents as perfect, omnipotent, and omniscient. Otto has a deep attachment to his gentle, loving mother. She has provided him the security that allowed for the development of healthy egocentrism. The experience of learning so abruptly that his father is no longer in love with her, shocks Otto into a new perspective of his world. He rejects his father angrily, in a defensive reaction against feeling crushed and unloved. He turns mentally to an image of his mother who offers a comforting message—things will turn out all right. Deeply affected by a new sense of vulnerability and the lack of a supportive male image, Otto copes with his parents' divorce by defensively identifying with the lost, idealized good father. In order to console himself and his bereaved mother, he promises her "I will love you forever." But, even at his young age, Otto needs to diffuse the Oedipal burden of the responsibility of his love for his mother in the context of his father's absence (Herzog 2001). In a reaction that bespeaks compromise, he becomes infatuated with Ana and, in adolescence, moves from his mother's to his father's home. He thus relinquishes the role of Oedipal victor, establishing a protective distance from his mother, as he gains greater access to his father.

Ana too has been marked by loss (the sudden death of her father) and, perhaps even more pervasively, by her relationship with her self-absorbed mother. Bereft of support because of the mother's emotional unavailability ("She can't stop crying," Ana states, revealing mother's blindness toward her), she turns to denial and fantasy in order to preserve her loving feelings for her father. She develops a quasi-delusional feeling that her father has *not* abandoned her; Otto is his reincarnation, sent by him as a sign of his enduring love. At this moment of grief, Ana has expanded her sense of self to take in the image of her father, and through this maneuver has developed an omnipotent fantasy of control and connection with the paternal object.

We can infer that Ana's attachment to her mother is at the very least ambivalent. She is a pseudomature child, a defensive posture characteristic of children who cannot penetrate the mother's self-centered withdrawal. She is vigilant, like a child who has needed to be self-protective, and recognizes that her mother is depleted and not capable of nurturing. Ana seems terrified to acknowledge her father's death, as if aware that she would have to cope on her own with the unimaginable impact of this loss. She tries to set a limit on her mother's depressive reaction and, realizing that she is not a comfort to her, provides her with a male replacement figure in Otto's father. She adheres

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to the fantasy that her father lives on in Otto, a compromise that defends not only against the loss of her father but also against the recognition of being unloved and unprotected by her mother. While fantasy ameliorates grief, it is a maladaptive response that interferes with healthy mourning.

The relentless thrust of development presents new risks for these vulnerable children. Change came, as Otto states, “a golpes.” The meaning of this expression, translated in the subtitles as “change came overnight,” is more aptly conveyed by “change struck.” In fact, the message that the children are “struck by,” rather than helped through, the vicissitudes of development is depicted literally in the movie twice. First, Otto hits his head on the dashboard when his father, who becomes distracted while accosting his son about the temporality of love, has to apply the brakes suddenly to avoid a collision. Later in the movie, Otto and Ana are suddenly thrown forward against the front seat when Ana’s self-centered mother causes a collision with a bus. The mother is depicted as a woman who is discharging her frustration by railing against the children, blind to the reality before her. These scenes convey vividly the child’s vulnerability and helplessness to negotiate the course of development when buffeted by parental insensitivity. Parental insensitivity takes the form of unpredictable shifts from overstimulation to frustration and renders the personal needs and emotions of the child invisible (what Wurmser [2004, 2007] refers to as “soul blindness”). In the face of this trauma, the child feels utter helplessness. It turns for respite to action and magical thinking, hoping to create meaning out of its confusing internal experience. The movie gives poignant expression to the plight of two children who are invisible to the parents. It portrays the perils of a history of parental insensitivity in adolescence, when there is a resurgence of the drives and an absence of adequate models for identification.

Adolescence is a phase that offers a second chance to rework earlier conflicts. The process of separating, epitomized already by the tender age of two in “the terrible twos,” when the child is caught in an unbridgeable ambivalence between wanting and not wanting the mother, resurfaces in this phase. The child is confronted with the complementary tasks of establishing a sense of self as a center for action and thought that is independent of the parents, and of viewing itself in the context of other selves, different and separate, yet in concert with the internalized parental figures (Bach 1980). There is a process of object-removal as the parent is relinquished in the process of consolidating a sense of identity (Blos 1979). It is a period of increased vulnerability and a wish for merger with another, because objective self-awareness leads to feelings of aloneness and a lowered self-esteem. Much like the loss of the perfect union with the mother in the toddler years ushers in the danger of physical and psychic helplessness, psychic loss of the parents in adolescence (as when they are repudiated, or when they have abandoned the child) can lead to an emotional vacuum that threatens the adolescent’s sense of integrity.

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To counteract the regressive pull, the adolescent develops a fascination with a parent-substitute with whom he or she identifies temporarily, or establishes a tight bond with a peer or peer group. Anna Freud (1958) points out that overstimulation can have a traumatic impact, leading to a failure of the defensive system and the disruption of the normal process of object removal. The adolescent may withdraw from the parent suddenly, and this heightens the longing for a replacement object. Libidinal wishes toward the parents may be transferred, more or less in unchanged form, to parent substitutes. Oedipal wishes are acted out with a consequent increase in superego conflicts. Ana and Otto are ill-equipped to handle the losses and challenges of this period. Succumbing to their burgeoning sexuality, they become engulfed in a clandestine relationship that represents a foreclosure of the work of adolescence and interferes with ego-growth and the consolidation of the sense of identity.

Otto falls into Ana's beckoning arms because, dangerously in love with his mother, he must flee from the maternal embrace. He seems to renounce his mother, but is actually displacing his incestuous wishes to a less dangerous object. Oedipal conflict and superego injunction surface with great power when his mother dies suddenly. As if suddenly caught in a time warp, Otto regresses to the helplessness of childhood the moment he enters their home, and surmises that his mother is dead upon smelling a rank odor. Desperately, he denies the dreadful thought by saying "Mama, you're not here are you? You have gone marketing, isn't that right?" Then he pleads—"Mama, it's me, Otto. I'm back," but reveals his wish to escape—"I'll call you later; when you come back." When he comes upon his dead mother, Otto experiences his childhood love and his longing for her with full power. The movie cuts to an intimate moment at the beach, when Otto had snapped a picture of his mother. "You are so beautiful," he tells her. "I don't understand why Dad stopped loving you." Briefly, their interaction threatens to become a lovers' quarrel, as Otto reproaches her for loving the father still, thus revealing his rivalry. She consoles him by saying, echoing his wishes, "Now I love only you. The love for a son is for life."

Otto, defending against Oedipal guilt, feels that he is to blame for having abandoned his mother. He believes himself responsible for her death. The rage at his father, who crushed his world by leaving him, is turned against himself and he succumbs to utter despair. Otto's reaction is a characteristic response to trauma. He manifests all the symptoms of melancholia: he withdraws into a state of dejection, renounces all interaction with the external world, and abrogates his capacity to love (Freud 1917). He turns away from reality to better cling to the mental representation of his mother. Unresolved ambivalent feelings toward his mother, resulting from her increased dependency on him at a time when he needed help to separate from her, and her failure to be sufficiently omnipotent to make things all right as she had promised, compound Otto's overwhelming sense of guilt.

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Otto experiences a sudden and traumatic lowering of self-regard, and proceeds to inflict punishment on himself. Although he is able to express his rage toward his father directly, and tells him “I would have preferred that it was you dead,” he quickly reverts to blaming himself—“the fault is mine.” Through a circular window, he watches his mother’s cremation, an act of final separation that takes away his capacity for pleasure and joy (Figure 2). Bereft, he takes a suicidal jump off a cliff on a sled. In a semi delirious state, he experiences a restorative fantasy where a superhuman Nordic father, powerful enough to defy gravity and ski up hill, rescues him and hands him to his maternal wife, depicted by Ana. The meaning of his fantasy of the Arctic Circle is revealed in this dream state. It is akin to fantasies about the North Pole, a place associated in the child’s mind with an earthly, saintly parent who will keep the child in mind, and lavish gifts upon it. The Arctic Circle offers a heavenly promise, a state of being where Oedipal conflict is abrogated, and the innocence of childhood is preserved. This dream lends expression to Otto’s wish to reinstate his place at the center of his nuclear family, to be once again accepted (and forgiven) by his father while still satisfying his incestuous longing.

Otto flees his father’s home to escape from Ana, and from himself. Their relationship has been a thinly disguised enactment of wishes that he can no longer permit himself to satisfy. While his mother was alive, Ana served as a displacement object for deep, forbidden wishes; after her death, merger with Ana is experienced as a replacement, the final destruction of his mother that he cannot tolerate. Angry with Ana as the seductress who stole him away from his childhood with mother, he leaves her and his father’s home after stealing a considerable sum of money from his father—an expression of Otto’s anger at having been short changed by his father, but also an unconscious confession of his feeling that he is a robber, who has usurped his father’s place.

Otto’s relationship with Ana is a compromise formation that addresses complex wishes—his dangerous love for his mother, and his unconscious need to maintain the proximity to his father. Ana beckons Otto because she feels a hunger, a void she does not understand. Aware of his capacity to love, she wants him to spark this feeling in herself. She says to herself, “I want to be in love too.” She turns to Otto with a desperate intensity, challenging him to excite her by taking a great risk that would prove that she is the object of his

*Figure 2. Otto’s  
subject despair at the  
loss of his mother.*



passion. Ana is jealous and envious of her mother, and feels unconsciously victorious over her as she succeeds in separating Otto from his mother. She longs for sexual contact because it may provide an opportunity to achieve a union that might satisfy her attachment needs, a union she has perhaps only fleetingly experienced with her mother. She has felt abandoned by her mother and replaced by Otto's father; now she has her own lover, one who has chosen her over his mother. Ana's sexual interest in and rivalry toward her own mother is openly revealed when, as she exhorts Otto to join her in watching the parents' love making, she admonishes him to look only at her mother while giving herself permission to look only at his father. Later on in the film, she acknowledges that she never enjoyed sex as much as she had enjoyed it in secret, in her own home—that is, as a clandestine act that satisfied multiple forbidden and unconscious wishes.

Ana has grown up with a profound sense of unlovableness forged in the relationship with a self-centered mother who was unable to recognize Ana's needs. She has lost her father tragically, and has turned to denial, fantasy, and restitution to maintain a loving image of him that gives her respite from aggression and despair. Response to loss is impacted by the quality of the attachment experience a bereaved person has had with primary figures. Bowlby (1980) asserts that defensive exclusion, by which he means repression, denial and disavowal, is a pathological reaction characteristic of children who are insecure in their attachment. He underscores that familial after care is a critical factor that determines the course of mourning when a child is bereaved. The child needs support to negotiate the work of mourning. In order to prevent pathological fixation, the child needs help to recognize the reality of the loss, and to tolerate the attendant anger and longing for the lost object, so that it may gradually integrate conflicted feelings. If the child is not able to talk about the loss in the context of fears and fantasies, it may become locked in a persistent yearning for the lost object that leads to a compulsive search for replacement. When the child has had no support to deal with the bereavement, it introjects and identifies with the lost object in a move that aims to maintain a connection to the object. This ameliorates the sense of loss but can interfere with the resumption of interest in reality-based object relationships.

Ana has to cope with the almost impossible task of mourning alone (Furman 1974). Because she cannot find security in her mother's love, she seeks solace in the regressive experience of having sex with her young lover every night. She clings to magical thinking: her father named her Ana because it is a palindrome, and palindromes "bring luck." She seduces Otto into believing a fantasy about a magical place, the Arctic Circle, where they might find blissful union. Magic and fate are characteristically used as a defense against superego guilt and the expectation of punishment. Children who have been subjected to soul blindness often turn to magical thinking that ascribes omni-

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potent powers to thoughts, perceptions, and gestures (Jarass and Wurmser 2007). Magic is a defense against helplessness that offers the illusion of safety and control. In particular, it counteracts the basic wound of being unlovable, shameful, and guilty—feelings that make up the legacy of the abused or ignored child. Magic prevents the individual from unleashing punishment upon the self, but this is at the expense of the development of the capacity to experience empathy and to form real relationships with others. When the child has been subjected to trauma, he turns to “sexualization . . . as an attempt to regulate affects” (ibid., 10).

The death of Otto’s mother has deep implications for both youngsters. Having renounced Ana and his father, Otto is bereft. He goes through a period

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of abject despair when he retreats to a room where he is alone with the photograph of his mother. When loss has been experienced as traumatic, there is an attempt at refusion of the self and the representation of the object. In this state of refusion, idealized ecstatic states and terrifying, aggressive states plague inner life (Kernberg 1980). Melancholia gives way to mania and grandiosity (Freud 1917). Otto turns to multiple meaningless sexual encounters that enact his need for

punishment. For Otto, sexualization is a turning passive into active, a denial and an externalization of the conflicts stimulated by the loss of his mother. He engages in sex with multiple partners to defend against hopeless longing for the one partner he has lost forever. Action serves to protect against traumatic helplessness that is magnified by childhood loss. He goes through a phase where he reverts to narcissistic love to repair his damaged self (Freud 1914).

Gradually, Otto begins to re-experience psychic equilibrium. He observes that, having left Ana, he is “without destiny.” In order to heal, he recognizes that he will need to “create” his destiny since his life is devoid of a masculine figure who can provide a supportive avenue for identification (Herzog 2001). Moreover, guilt resulting from his Oedipal victory over the father forces him to maintain distance from him. Unconsciously, he is drawn to forge himself in the image of his namesake—the German pilot Otto. Otto reaches for identification with a fantasy figure that is imbued with the love he still holds for his parents, and forges a new integration of his masculine self by becoming a pilot. He slowly gains enough personal strength to forgive his father and to maintain contact with him. “I have changed a whole lot” he tells his father. “I am not afraid any more.” There is, however, a driven quality about him as he pursues his childhood fantasy. Otto is unable to forge a true renewed vitality, or to engage in the real world. His conflicts relating to the unconscious meaning of the losses he has suffered are not adequately resolved. Hence, he is lim-

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ited to repetition and is drawn toward a regressive compromise that interferes with psychic equilibrium.

Ana, too, undergoes a process of mourning. She is able for the first time to see Otto as something other than a need-satisfying object. She recognizes the impact on him of having renounced his mother, and can understand his need to renounce her. "His guilt was so great that it also included me," she acknowledges. Maintaining a cold distance from her mother that creates a boundary for her own longing, Ana turns to other sexual relationships in an attempt to fill her emptiness. Her unresolved Oedipal feelings are again in evidence when she becomes the lover of Otto's former schoolteacher, a man her father's age who used to be the lover of her female teacher. This is an ill-fated attempt that aims to regain her childhood father, and to achieve a sense of identity by unconsciously assuming her mother's role. Ana needs to *be* her mother, so she might feel her presence in her life.

Ana is stuck in an interior world devoid of stable self or object representations. She has been unable to grieve for her dead father and, after the loss of Otto, is frozen in her capacity to establish relationships. Unable to consolidate a sense of identity that promotes ongoing maturation, she retreats to her adolescent fantasy—she will actualize her longing to be at the center of the circle, to feel encircled and subsumed in the mother person. She rents a cabin on a lake in the Arctic Circle and imagines herself surrounded by a magical protective boundary. In this distant place, peopled with imaginary, loving parent substitutes, she can face her longing for her mother and her disappointment at the failure of their relationship. Ana has initiated the separation from her mother and feels strengthened by taking this initiative. But this move does not promote her ability to mourn or to bridge the chasm that divides them. She has regressed into an adolescent fantasy that promises to actualize a sense of bliss at the center of the circle, because she is still beholden to the wish for security that comes from a primordial closeness. It is an ill-fated search because fusion cannot overcome early disturbances in the development of attachment that interfere with the sense of internal security.

The regressive pull is great and both protagonists are drawn to repeat the past. Ana again beckons Otto to take a risk, to penetrate the magic circle and fuse with her. The movie shows the reflection on the surface of the lake as Ana's body, partially submerged, is genitally penetrated and seems to become one with Otto's plane flying overhead (Figure 3). Otto, seeking merger with his loved one, leaps from his plane into the realm of fantasy to actualize the promise of his childhood wishes. The regressive nature of this solution does not bode well for a successful outcome in the real world. Ana and Otto are caught in an insoluble conflict—they have gratified unconscious Oedipal wishes and they are locked in a regressive pattern that saps their resources and interferes with their capacity to focus on the real world (Orgel 2007).

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*Figure 3. Ana, partially merged in the water, seems to be penetrated by Otto's plane flying overhead.*

### **Conclusion**

In this evocative film, Julio Medem portrays two characters, would-be lovers whose capacity to love and to grow has been hopelessly compromised by traumatic loss and soul blindness. The theme of circularity, which is central to the structure, lends the film a claustrophobic quality that gives artistic expression to the pathological experience of regression. Victims of trauma who have been unable to mourn their losses, the main protagonists are caught in a circle of regressive defense and repetition that impedes their developmental progress (Figure 4). Otto and Ana cannot consolidate a sense of autonomous identity that would enable them to establish a mature relationship with each other. Unable to undergo a healthy process of mourning that would restore their psychic equilibrium, they recede into fantasy—Ana longs for fusion; Otto for merger. Both long to be encircled in safety and permanence. Ana seeks to quell the sense of emptiness that is attendant to feeling unloved by her parents. Otto strives to achieve forgiveness for Oedipal transgression, and anger. Neither has been able to find respite from unresolved intrapsychic conflict.

Medem has been successful in creating a compelling, poetic portrayal of the lives of two characters that lends meaning to his singular concern with circularity. His main protagonists seek in fantasy the realization of what was missed or lost. Repetition and regression are portrayed as the fateful consequence of early failures that distort the course of development. A tragic beginning—the massive impact of the trauma that is perpetrated by the invisibility of the child's emotional needs in the eyes of the parents—presages a tragic end.



*Figure 4. Otto is encircled in Ana's gaze at the moment of her death.*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Lovers of the Arctic Circle* consolidated Medem's reputation as a major filmmaker. The movie was the recipient of many awards, including two Goya prizes in 1999. The actress Najwa Nimri, won a Premio Ondas for her portrayal of Ana, and Alberto Iglesias won a Goya Prize for the score. Medem's subsequent work includes *Lucia y el sexo* (*Sex and Lucia*, 2001), and *Caotica Ana* (*Chaotic Ana*, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Translation courtesy of Dr. Pirkko Graves.

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