

David Dixon is dead.

a film by David Dixon

TREATMENT

Everything hinges on knowing whether an ordinary existence, breaking with time's cruel routine, encounters the material chance of serving a truth, thereby becoming, through subjective division and beyond the human animal's survival imperatives, an immortal.

–Alain Badiou, *St. Paul, The Foundation of Universalism*

David Dixon is dead. is a feature length motion picture being developed to explore the implications of my art piece *Museum/Mausoleum* and its accompanying “pre-mortem post-mortem declaration”. The movie is both documentary and fictional narrative following the format of my last feature, *Unloosened and Root*, completed in 2006. At the center of both movies is the desire to expand death rituals beyond inherited religious traditions, the shared premise being that cultural identity is intimately tied to and expressed by death rituals and that current western traditions of interment no longer satisfactorily reflect contemporary beliefs.

David Dixon is dead. follows the story of a young artist named David Dixon who makes an unorthodox “pre-mortem post-mortem declaration” concerning the preservation of his mortal remains in a sculptural construction titled *Museum/Mausoleum*. The declaration outlines how, after his death, his head should be removed from his body and cleaned down to the skull using standard osteological techniques; his body should be cremated and the remains from these two processes (skull and ashes) should be placed within his sculptural assemblage.

The movie begins with a party at David's studio. His studio is located in Brooklyn, New York in a former mortuary building constructed in the 1930's that is now occupied by artists and businesses. The purpose of the party is to publicly read his “pre-mortem post-mortem declaration” and reveal his new art piece, *Museum/Mausoleum*, to friends and supporters. At the party, among the gathered guests, we see his two roommates who will be featured later in the film: club kid Rayne Barron and Argentinean composer Fernando Otero. Conversations ensue regarding unusual burial techniques and the qualitative merits of David's art piece, primarily negative. Comparisons are made to artists Damien Hirst, Gabriel Orozco, and Zuberan. Rayne socializes as Fernando entertains by playing the piano. A mysterious art dealer arrives late and leaves early, uninterested in the art he sees.

A few days after the declaration has been made, David is murdered in the loading dock of the mortuary building. His friends are unwilling to carry out the final requests made in his declaration, hence his father, who is a Southern Baptist preacher, comes to the city to do so. The father stays in his deceased son's studio.

David was the father's only son; therefore the father must struggle, not only with the death of a son, but also with the loss of the only recipient of his genetic patrimony. This disruption of genetic linear time informs the film's structure, manifest formally in a gentle fragmentation that employs repeated dissolves to black.

While staying in the studio, the father gets to know his son's former life in the city by watching segments from his documentary works-in-progress including one titled *X-Funeral Home Movie*. We rarely see David in these clips but we hear his voice and get a feel for his sensibilities: there is an interview with an old man named Vinnie who lives across the street and gives a personal history of the mortuary building; there is an unorthodox wedding in a nightclub for his roommate, Rayne, and her husband Rainblo; there is the delivery of a grand piano for his composer roommate, Fernando; there are snippets of the streets around the building and the interior. In addition to this documentary footage is the son's murder itself, which was partially captured on tape—the son was shooting in the building's loading dock when the assault occurs. This footage is especially interesting to the father, yet it gives no definitive clues as to the identity of the murderers. Throughout the film we know that we are watching the son's documentary footage because he shot in his preferred atavistic analogue Hi-8, 4:3 format. This is contrasted with the narrative fiction shot in HD, 16:9.

The father is having trouble sleeping in his son's studio; he goes to the kitchen in the middle of the night where he meets Rayne who is dressed extravagantly, preparing for a night of clubbing. A sympathetic exchange occurs, the father feeling as if he knows her from having watched her wedding on tape. Rayne invites the father out and, desperate for distraction and curious about the New York life his son lived, he complies. We follow him and the newlyweds, Rayne and Rainblo, to Club Cane. The father is somewhat baffled by it all but touched by the kindness he is shown by the club kids.

The next day, the father removes the sculptural assemblage *Museum/Mausoleum* from the studio wall and begins to follow his son's instructions for carrying out his post-mortem wishes, the most gruesome of which is picking-up his head and ashes from the morgue. The father must then transport the head, contained in a cooler, by car to Oklahoma City to be cleaned at Skulls Unlimited.

We have visited Skulls Unlimited earlier in the film, the son having gone there with his Hi-8 camera to interview and ask its owner, Jay Villemarete, to supervise his post-mortem skull cleaning. Skulls Unlimited is the largest distributor of osteological specimens in the world and is staffed with an interesting and intelligent group of people. Also interviewed are Joey Williams, the Director of Education, and Dale Dorsey, the Flenser (flensing is the cleaning of flesh off of bone), who would, if all agree, perform the cleaning of David's skull—Dale also happens to be a Goth and a fan of Industrial music.

Subjects discussed at Skulls Unlimited are the emotional differences between a scientific specimen and a skull with remembered individual history; the cleaning of a gorilla skull as opposed to a human one; the legalities of handling human remains; cremation as a

contemporary alternative to burial; the invasiveness of embalming; Egyptian necropolises and other cultural traditions of burial; and Del Close, the infamous Chicagoan actor that, after death, wanted his skull to be used for Yorik in *Hamlet*.

We also visit the processing facility at Skulls Unlimited where animals are stripped of their flesh and organs, the bones dried and cleaned. In some cases, the skeletons are articulated for museums or individual collectors.

The father's arrival in Oklahoma City is mixed with footage from the son, the son having earlier traversed much of the same landscape. After a lengthy trip of driving and carrying the cooler from car to diner to hotel and back again, the father approaches Skulls Unlimited with trepidation. The son's head is removed from the cooler—this is the first time it is seen—and placed on Dale's table to be flensed. At Skulls Unlimited, a place where death is daily routine, the father, a religious man, is confronted with the radical materiality of the animal body. Any notion of spirituality, if it can be constructed, must be built on the bare reality of this ontological foundation.

We next see the father at his country house. As he comes through the door, finally safe within the familiarity of his home, the trials of the last week are emotionally expressed. A woman (presumably a wife or sister) enters the room to comfort him.

One morning, while having coffee, the doorbell rings. It is the art dealer from the city that was at the declaration party. He has heard about the son's death and despite the fact that before he had dismissively left the party, now has an interest in the son's work. The father distrusts this smooth-talking opportunist but realizes that he is the conduit necessary to fulfill his son's desire: the dealer has the connections necessary to place *Museum/Mausoleum* into the Metropolitan Museum of Art's permanent collection. The father allows the dealer to represent his son's artistic estate.

Conclusion:

The father, out of love and respect for his son, is willing to compromise his own beliefs to fulfill those of his son, even while understanding that those beliefs directly undermine the traditions he himself upholds. For this reason, the father is the hero of the story. The son's motivations, on the other hand, are somewhat dubious. He is a progressive with avant-gardist ambitions; he sees himself as an outsider who critiques and questions received traditions. Yet, in the interview with Jay Villameratte at Skulls Unlimited, a tribe from Papua New Guenia is discussed. As a part of its traditions, this tribe ate the decomposing brains of dead ancestors causing a disease to travel through the tribe similar to mad-cow. Once the source of the disease was determined the practice was stopped, leading one to conclude that not all cultural celebrations of the dead are equally acceptable. It is within this frame of natural and/or cultural protocol that one must determine if David Dixon's project has gone too far.