The moving image: the aesthetics of loss and solace in the modern mourning film

Richard Armstrong

PhD

Freelance writer/film studies tutor

Faculty of Modern & Medieval Languages,
University of Cambridge

r.armstrong@cantab.net

Abstract: Bereavement and mourning frequently occur as subjects in fiction and poetry. This paper, based on a larger piece of research, explores mourning as it is articulated in film. Starting with an overview of literary and cinematic representations of loss through the 20th and into the 21st century, it uses the 2008 film *Genova* as a case study, demonstrating both how this particular film depicts grief in the context of the psychoanalytic and bereavement literature, and how the medium's particular qualities are especially suited to depict the bereavement experience. Cinema, it argues, may itself offer a powerful therapeutic means for the bereaved to explore their own experience.

Keywords: bereavement, film, representation, mourning, narrative

This paper presents a case study derived from a larger piece of research undertaken at Cambridge University 2006–09 on the representation of loss and mourning in modern European and American cinema. The research project sprang from an interest in how films exhibited in both multiplex and arthouse cinemas in the last 20 years have sought to explore mourning, and embodies a conviction that they have successfully done so in a dramatically convincing and aesthetically ambitious way.

The idea for this particular article emerged from a growing recognition that the modern mourning film may be a powerful therapeutic resource in that it can both illustrate and explore loss and its consequences in an intelligent way so as to enlarge our understanding of this experience, while also, perhaps, providing comfort to the bereaved.

Alongside reference to the works of film theorists such as Gilles Deleuze, Slavoj Žižek and Daniel Frampton, the research from which this article has emerged drew on the classical psychoanalytical writings of Freud, Lacan and others, and on the work of grief specialists such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, William Worden and Colin Murray Parkes. These works also inform the analysis of the film *Genova* that follows.

Films reviewed for the larger study ranged from the popular – *Titanic* (1997), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Three Colours: Blue* (1993), *Secrets and Lies* (1995) – to the niche – *Ponette* (1996), *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), *Under the Sand* (2000), *Kissed* (1996); from the publicly commemorative – *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Schindler's List* (1993) – to expressions of private grief – *Genova* (2008), *I've Loved You So Long* (2008);

from the aesthetically conservative – *Moonlight and Valentino* (1995) – to the aesthetically outré – *Morvern Callar* (2001).

The research had several aims. First, to provide a backdrop to cinema's investment in mourning, it explored the representation of loss in post-World War I literature. This was an era in which mourning and shows of commemoration were an integral feature of life in the belligerent nations. Moving on, in the inter-war years cinema became a mass art form, and its huge cultural influence can be felt in the 'cinematic' metaphors appearing in the modernist writings of Virginia Woolf and Hilda Doolittle, among others.

Turning to representations of loss and spiritual solace in film in the inter-war years, the research sought some stylistic precedents for their depictions in later decades. The archetypal film melodrama, with its ethereality and endlessly lachrymose sentiment, explored something of the fundamental nature of cinema as an apparatus that is dependent on the simultaneity of presence and absence.

At a basic, mechanical level, pre-digital film, with its frame-by-frame progression through the camera and projector, alternates image with blank space. The image on the screen is in truth but a flickering shadow on a blank wall. Thus cinema has always toyed with the possibilities of presence and absence. In the words of film writer Emma Wilson: 'Cinema is a mourning art' (Wilson, 2003, p.26).

This analogy is echoed in the literature of bereavement. Colin Murray Parkes, for example, writes: 'Grief is not a set of symptoms which start after a loss and then gradually fade away. It involves a succession of clinical pictures which blend into and replace one another' (Parkes, 1996, p.7). This mechanical and psychological coincidence makes film a singularly apt and powerful medium for the dramatisation of loss and grief.

Another generic model that influenced this study is the horror film. Concerned as they are with the mystery of human demise and what comes after, the most effective horror films are steeped in the tragedy of loss. By generating a *mise-en-scène* of mystery while shocking the spectator through its disturbing revelations of life beyond the grave, the ghost narrative – the spiritual strand of the horror genre – feeds on our apprehension about death and proposes vivid metaphors for responding to loss.

This has implications for the cinema that emerged in the modernist post-World War II era. Earlier generic models such as melodrama, with its emphasis on tears, moral desserts and an ethereal *mise-en-scène*, showed evidence of subscription to traditional Christian ideas of death and the afterlife. By contrast, recent mourning films adopt an increasingly complicated, psychologically layered response to the end of life and loss. Where the odyssey of the protagonist of the classical melodrama passed through a vale of tears to arrive at consolation, the parallel experience of her modern counterpart involves far more complex, wayward and even delinquent responses to her predicament, as we shall see in the case study that follows.

If the modern bereavement journey is nothing like the straightforward mourning narrative of old, it is not without

unexpected moments of sublime reparation. Reiterating the serendipitous relationship between cinema and grief, Colin Davis could also be writing about the bereft heroine of *Genova*, the subject of the case study below:

'Film transforms the familiar world into a land of ghosts, between life and death, seething with dangers as yet unseen and unnameable. It exhibits haunted subjects who do not know by whom or what they are haunted, and who find themselves touched by death before and beyond any encounter in time and space' (Davis, 2007, p.42).

Genova: a case study

Genova, Michael Winterbottom's 2008 film about loss and mourning set in the medieval Italian port of Genoa (from which it derives its name), sets itself the difficult task of examining the grief of a child. Few films have attempted this with any degree of success. Touted in the press as a supernatural thriller but described more prosaically by Winterbottom himself (evoking the classical melodramatic genre) as one family's attempt to deal with their bereavement, *Genova* embodies the tantalising possibilities of a melding of melodrama and horror in the same way as it attempts to portray the painful contradictions of living with loss.

To briefly summarise the plot, Joe, an academic played by Colin Firth, and his two daughters, teenage Kelly (16) (Willa Holland) and her younger sister Mary (10) (Perla Haney-Jardine) are abruptly bereaved when the girls' mother Marianne (Hope Davis) dies in a car accident. Both girls were in the car with their mother and Mary inadvertently causes the crash when she covers her mother's eyes during a game. Offered a job teaching English literature in Genoa, Joe seizes the opportunity to remove his grieving daughters to a new city where he hopes they will be able to move on. Kelly takes one route – a secret liaison with an Italian boy; Mary, who blames herself for her mother's death, is haunted by sightings of Marianne, which become increasingly threatening to her own well-being.

Child as medium

The idea that children are especially susceptible to supernatural occurrences is one that recurs in 19th century Gothic literature and horror cinema alike. Henry James' short story *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), one of the most accomplished and vivid supernatural narratives in the canon, concerns a boy and his younger sister who mediate between the ghosts of a dead couple and their lonely and paranoid governess. The film adaptation – *The Innocents* (1961) – is one of the most celebrated supernatural horror films of all time, and is also a touchstone for the depiction of grief in modernist cinema. Its exploration of the 'intelligence' of children is especially relevant to the exploration in *Genova* of a little girl's spiritual instincts.

The presence of the child, or the childlike adult, in modern cinematic representations of mourning, whether marketed and critically described as horror or melodrama, indicates these

films' subscription to a cultural perception that children are more receptive to the metaphysical. In many literary and cinematic texts they serve as the *apports*, to use an archaic spiritualist term, that bring spirits into the house. They suggest childhood as a privileged space, a 'beyond' not yet apprised of scientific rationality and open to what a scientific era deems irrational influences.

Grief theorists concur with this perspective. Atle Dyregrov writes: 'Magical components are still part of [children's] thinking; they may assume that the dead person can see or hear the living, and they may work hard to please the deceased as a consequence of this' (Dyregrov, 2008, p.19). Arguably, *Genova* is all about a daughter's attempt to try to please the dead parent, or to make amends for something she has done.

This is no post-Enlightenment dispute between reason and witchcraft; rather these films proffer childhood as a scene of carnival, in which perhaps a post-secular, cultural moment is played out as an unsettling display of oddness, hallucination and instinctual image creation. The film creates a space in which childish games and startling visitations, abject horror and precipitate revelation are brought together in a mélange of the metaphysical and the quotidian.

'Like countless ghost, horror and supernatural films before it, Genova uses the age-old device of a child to create tension and discomfort' (The Quietus, 2009). Examples of unearthly visitation, warped visual logic and unsettling moods abound in the back catalogue of horror/mourning filmic narratives involving children. The best include *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944) and *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), and more recent examples such as *Le Petit Prince a Dit* (1992), *Ponette* (1996) and *The Devil's Backbone* (2001). With its indebtedness to both melodrama and horror, *Genova* suggests a modern mourning cinema that is becoming increasingly aware of its genealogical roots.

Light and darkness

Histrionically powerful and exerting a tear-jerking and disturbing influence over the film as a whole, Perla Haney-Jardine's performance as Mary also resonates with therapeutic observations about grief. Mary is wracked with sorrow and guilt. The literature on grief repeatedly asserts the role guilt plays in childhood sorrow. Mary's guilt is both the representation of a universal grief symptom and specific to her own circumstances. From a film-historical perspective, Haney-Jardine's articulation of sorrow both roots *Genova* in the spiritual tradition of horror cinema and establishes its status as a developed and intelligent modern mourning film. An examination of cinema's mourning archive produces precedent figures in the (serendipitously-named) mourner Amy (meaning 'friend', and resonating with 'Mary') searching for her lost mother/'friend' in *The Curse of the Cat People* and in Ponette, the little French girl who loses her mother, also in a car crash.

This dual typological status is also reflected in *Genova*'s look and rhythm. The film seems constantly poised between worlds. It inhabits liminal spaces. Throughout, the spectator gets the sense that Mary, her father and Kelly are living on the edge, inhabiting the interstices, the cracks between the paving stones in the childhood game. The adolescent Kelly deals with her loss by drowning real experience in her iPod soundtrack. Joe's stoic taciturnity, his adamant need to maintain a stable emotional atmosphere, is an understandable reaction to loss, but it also typifies the repressed and stoical male role in the mourning saga, which tends to revolve around female protagonists.

Consonant with its liminal mood, *Genova* makes much of daylight and darkness and the transition between them – the picturesque succession of shots of Genoa as darkness falls; Mary and Kelly wandering the old town in semi-darkness, the tall medieval buildings illuminated only by thin strips of sky far above. A number of scenes, like that at the girls' piano lessons, shot by cinematographer Marcel Zyskind in Winterbottom's trademark hand-held fashion, elliptically concentrate our comprehension with rapid movements, cuts and snatches of dialogue. This highly cinematic sense of intermittence, of something appearing, then disappearing from the spectator's view, is set up from the outset in the game the girls play in the family car in which they cover and uncover their eyes repeatedly and which leads to Marianne's

death. This intermittence of perception will underwrite this tale of supernatural visitation, coming to a climax near the end of the film.

Distance and disassociation

There is what could be described as an intermittent quality to the characters too – a sense in which they appear split and dislocated both from each other and from themselves. This is vividly announced at the funeral when Kelly, trying her first marijuana cigarette, vomits in the snow. This sense of dislocation is widely acknowledged in the therapeutic literature on grief and mourning. Tony Lake writes: 'There may also be times when you feel completely disassociated from your own feelings, as if you are watching yourself from outside your body, looking down from a high position' (Lake, 1988, p.114). It finds expression in Kelly's almost perpetually spaced-out quality, with her father and sister on planes and trains and on the beach but also apart and in her own world. As Joe struggles to control Kelly and involve her in family life, her burgeoning adolescence and her buried grief increasingly distance her from the suffering Mary, adding to her sister's isolation. Kübler-Ross could be observing Kelly and Mary when she writes: 'Children will react differently to the death of a parent, from silent withdrawal and isolation to a wild loud mourning which attracts attention and thus a replacement of a loved and needed object' (Kübler-Ross, 2003, p.158).

Genova's precipitate quality, expressed in characters' behaviour and in the film's aesthetics alike, takes its stark cue from the dramatic premise in which the mother's sudden death leaves no time for goodbyes. 'It is a terrible shock when a life is cut short,' says the priest at Marianne's funeral, and the film concurs with a series of shocking awakenings. From the beginning of the film, it is Mary whose actions announce this precipitate quality as it shapes the film. Paradoxically, it is precisely her isolation in her grief that makes her engage so totally with what has befallen the family. The cut away from the moment of the car accident is marked by Mary in tears, distressed at the memory of her mother's death and the perception that she caused it.

Significantly, the narrating of the accident and the wintry funeral takes place before the film's credits. The main action of the film, played out five months later in Italy in high summer, is thus rendered positionally as well as visually distinct in its garish colours from the sombre blacks and greys of the earlier scenes. It narrates another life for these characters: one seemingly dramatically different, yet linked to the old life by Mary's insomnia and weeping, which frequently mark the end of one shot and scene and the beginning of the next. Her keening wrenching sobs, as visceral as an animal in pain, are very affecting. As William Worden starkly observes: 'People in pain make us feel helpless' (Worden, 1991, p.52), and there is perhaps no more poignant a figure for mobilising pity in our culture than a little girl in tears. Mary's nocturnal wailing descends from a rich tradition of sorrowful Victorian spectres, while providing a measure of the emotional depth of this film.

The sense in which Mary bears *Genova*'s emotional and psychological freight is borne out more subtly in her drawings – haunting charcoal sketches of a car with a spectral driver, a mysterious figure seen in a window, strange Munch-like scenes. These accumulate throughout the film as though forming its unconscious: unspoken, fleeting, dream-like and mysterious, but begging to be felt and heard. As always in this film, comprehension – *the* meaning (as if life's events and phenomena always only have one) – is always already in motion and moving out of reach.

Genova suggests a modern mourning cinema that is becoming increasingly aware of its genealogical roots

---

Genova's emphasis on Mary's drawings, along with its elliptical visuals, announces the mourning film's especial investment in the image, as opposed to words. As Joe remarks: 'It's hard to know what to say.' In this way *Genova* expresses the conviction that mourning is particularly inaccessible to explanation, peculiarly susceptible to literary or artistic articulation, but poignantly favoured by cinema's language of presence and absence, reality and visuality. Echoing Worden's advice to grief's witness, it is as though film already knows something about a theme before which verbal language flounders: 'This helplessness can be acknowledged in a simple statement like, "I don't know what to say to you"' (Worden, 1991, p. 52). Film, meanwhile addresses the space between words and experience, and that between the griever and the dead. While indicative of the primal creativity of grieving children's play that we find in mourning films from *The Curse of the Cat People* to *Ponette* and *The Sixth Sense*, Mary's drawings also evince a theme of creativity which is perennially explored in modern mourning films from *Interiors* (1978) to *Three Colours: Blue* (1993).

Between life and death

In the scene at the monastery in which Mary confesses to family friend Barbara (Catherine Keener) that she has been seeing her mother and speaking to her, Mary walks out of the door and seems literally to disappear into the sunlit glare outside. It is an apt visual metaphor for her existence: half with the living, half 'beyond'; half involved in normal daily activity, half deranged by desperate nocturnal instincts and perceptions. It is perhaps a mark of Mary's vindication, the sincerity of her grief, its eventual truth in the face of a familial unconcern that comes to seem mendacious, that we too, increasingly, will see her mother when Mary 'sees' her. These visitations are presaged by a series of odd moments in which we see Mary from just beyond the space of the Genovese apartment, suggesting that perhaps she is being watched by someone who is not there. Indeed, the credits sequence unfolds over a series of aerial shots of Genoa as if seen from Heaven above. When her mother, Marianne (Hope Davis)

comes to Mary at night, there is a naturalism about the bedside scene which we know is as much about the memory of nocturnal mother/daughter meetings in life as it is about yearning for a mother who is no longer there.

Visitations by the dead are commonly attested to in therapeutic literature, seeming to be an actualisation of the grieving person's ongoing conversations with the departed. It is precisely this curious blend of the uncanny and the quotidian that the scenes of Marianne's appearance evoke. Far from the billowy wraiths of Victorian literature, manifestations of the dead in modern mourning cinema have a matter-of-fact, contemporary quality, which they presumably possess for the mourner who is experiencing them. The ghost comes with the mien and appearance that they possessed in life, and often – as in *Under the Sand* and *The Sixth Sense* – they are seen from the perspective of the seer, rather than from a neutral perspective that would suggest objective presence.

Compare early instances of Marianne's appearance with that of the ghostly Zoia in the 1915 Russian spiritual melodrama *After Death*. Rather than springing up before our eyes clad in a wispy nightgown, as Zoia does before the grieving hero and as she would be seen by anyone in the room, Marianne appears in the interstice between Mary's looks to the bottom of her bed, as though sutured between shots of Mary perceiving and our looking. 'She comes to me sometimes, she comes to forgive me,' Mary tells Barbara. This matter-of-fact, almost nonchalant confession has a realist patina because it is necessary, and that is because it is what Mary experiences as a result of her grief. Through its technical facility, cinema is peculiarly able to articulate the spectral visitation. As Emma Wilson writes: 'Film itself has proved a privileged medium for the exploration of the hesitation between life and death, of phantoms, of the living dead, of wish-fulfilling animation, visual memories and hallucinations' (Wilson, 2003, p.7). That the *apport* (the paranormal conveyance) of the unearthly, unbidden image/memory is, in mourning cinema's salient works, a girl/woman testifies again to the dominance of the female gaze in the mourning film.

The extent of Mary's sense of dislocation is played out in her conviction that her mother wants her to follow her and so, in the film's climax, we see Mary, lost amid the busy Genovese traffic, pursuing Marianne's image. Again, we see Marianne because Mary sees her in a scene that is disturbing because it appears that Marianne has taken Mary to this dangerous place purposefully to cause her accidental death, perhaps fulfilling some secret mother – daughter contract in which Mary follows her mother in order to be with her in death, to assuage her guilt. This seems all the more dramatically apposite when we consider that this film is book-ended by car crashes. It is apt that such a precipitate near-tragedy should serve as the climax of a film so precipitate in its moods and instincts. The film's visual music of intermittent visuality comes to a fluent crescendo here in its beautifully orchestrating shots of Kelly and Joe running to find Mary, the little girl hesitating, then stepping out before speeding traffic, Marianne

wandering away on the far side of the thoroughfare. The traffic climax also resonates with observations grief theorists have made about 'searching': that urge the mourner has to try to re-find the dead person. 'There is a restlessness, inability to sit still, moving about in an aimless fashion, *continually searching* for something to do' (Erich Lindemann, quoted in Parkes, 1998, p.50). Visually, what is so striking about this scene is the sheer oddness of the prospect of a little girl pursuing a figure who seems to get further away the closer she gets to it. We are reminded of the drawings of M.C. Escher, in which some twist in perspective makes the eye's traversal of the image yield simultaneously explicable and inexplicable readings. Gem Duncan could be approaching the same scene from the perspective of the mourner: 'Death means that our things have separated from us like objects in space no longer governed by gravity. They float indiscriminately, but inexorably, away' (Duncan, 2009, p.3).

Conclusion

Much of the critical literature that has arisen around *Genova* has acknowledged its debt to the classic British horror/mourning saga *Don't Look Now* (Nicolas Roeg, 1973), another tale of a family fleeing a death to Italy (Venice, this time) and refusing to work through its grief adequately. There the drama revolves around the bereft mother of a little girl who has perished in a drowning accident, an incident for which her father blames himself and sustains a complicated grief in the process. However, in *Don't Look Now* the father's grief and its tragic consequences will move further into the foreground; in *Genova* Joe's loss and feelings about his bereavement remain perpetually invisible to us and to those around him. I have written about *Don't Look Now*: 'Few horror films have explored the hurt at the heart of the uncanny with such a sense of sorrow' (Armstrong, 2007, p.469). Of *Genova*, a film that comes increasingly into its own the more you see it, it could be said that few melodramas have explored the uncanny at the heart of hurt with such a sense of sorrow. ■

Armstrong RT, Charity LH, Winter J (2007). *The rough guide to film*. London: Penguin/Rough Guides.

Davis C (2007). *Haunted subjects: deconstruction, psychoanalysis and the return of the dead*. London: Palgrave/Macmillan.

Duncan G (2009). *Grief and grieving – a personal testimonial*. Unpublished [available from the author].

Dyregrov A (2008). *Grief in children: a handbook for adults*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Kübler-Ross E (2003). *On death and dying*. London: Routledge.

Lake T (1988). *Living with grief*. London: Sheldon.

Parkes CM (1998). *Bereavement: studies of grief in adult life*. London: Penguin.

The Quietus (2009). Available at: thequietus.com/articles/01375-genova (accessed 24 May 2011).

Wilson E (2003). *Cinema's missing children*. London: Wallflower.

Worden W (1991). *Grief counselling and grief therapy: a handbook for the mental health practitioner*. London: Routledge.