

Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dún Laoghaire
Faculty of Creative Technologies

“It is not the griever who has the symptoms of grief, but, as with a disease affecting the body, the grief “has” the griever, as it were.”

The Liberation from Grief in Film

By

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dún Laoghaire, in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Film and Television Production. Except where noted, it is entirely the author's own work and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed:

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For Dad

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how the feeling of grief is portrayed in film, what tools a filmmaker uses to show this emotion, and, most importantly, how they show liberation from this emotion.

Films that deal with grief, or, as Richard Armstrong has coined, "*Mourning Films*", are connected to the drama genre. I will explore three films that expertly showcase this journey: [Krzysztof Kieślowski's "Three Colors: Blue"](#), [Anthony Minghella's "Truly, Madly, Deeply"](#) and Robert Redford's "Ordinary People", and how they portray characters being liberated from their grief.

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INTRODUCTION

*“Put simply, the cinema is a space in which we see someone who is no longer there. In its very mechanism, in the furious alternation between presence and absence as the images and their frames rush over the projector beam, cinema technically embodies the play of presence and absence as states, and in consequence of this flicker of presence and absence we gaze up at, and typically adore, a figure who once stood before a camera, perhaps many years ago, yet is now nowhere to be found”.*¹

The "liberation from grief" in film refers to how grief is represented on screen and how it is a life changing process which can lead to emotional freedom, rather than just a heavy and deactivating emotion. This concept involves portraying characters as they navigate through the many stages of grief and eventually find a way to liberate themselves from the massive pain and sorrow that comes with the loss of a loved one.

*“Death and life are intertwined in cinema’s technological nature as a succession of still images animated by the projector’s inner motion, just as the shocking stillness of grief finds the mourner negotiating a succession of stillnesses in time. By proffering a means of moving beyond words to another means of negotiating death, cinema provides another kind of space for consolation and commemoration. For Jean-Luc Godard, this vocation is unique. Cinema is “invariably an operation of mourning and of reclaiming life”.*²

Cinema, or even the act filming itself, contains this power to hold on to not only a moment but even more importantly, a person, forever. Someone who has long since passed still possesses the power to move us emotionally and is engrained in life through the power of cinema.

Grief is a topic that I have been fascinated with for some time now, particularly the immediate effect it has on a person and their world. Because of this, I want to analyse the journey one takes to free oneself from it, be it negatively or positively. I will explore this by looking into how cinema is used to preserve a person so that they are never genuinely dead or gone. I will also delve into how filmmakers express grief in film in different ways, from cinematography and colour to the use of music and the use of realism and surrealism to show genuine emotion on screen.

¹ Armstrong, Richard. Mourning Films. A Critical Study of Loss and Grieving in Cinema. Jefferson, Mcfarland & Company Inc, 2013.

² *ibid*

Through three case studies, I will investigate each film and its portrayal of grief, the filmmaker's approach and the journey the characters go on to come to their liberation, which shows itself in different forms. Firstly I will take a look at *Three Colours: Blue* and how it portrays a person's grief through the use of cinematography, colour, score, and mise en scene and then I will track the film's protagonist, Julie's journey towards her form of liberation from her grief.

My second case study, *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, will explore how the film uses a classic Greek Tale to explore grief and, more importantly, how one moves on and liberates oneself from this grief. Finally, I will explore what grief does to the family unit and how liberation comes to this family in many different ways.

Over the years, many filmmakers have strived to portray grief genuinely, with all its emotional complexities and messiness. Authentic portrayals are essential because the audience can relate to the characters' feelings on a deep level. Grief is often liberating, and characters may experience cathartic moments where they release their built-up emotions. These moments are often intense and transformative, providing relief for both the characters and the audience.

Grief is shown as a transformative journey wherein characters undergo a personal change, self introspection, and massive changes in their perspectives on life. The process of mourning becomes a catalyst for change. Grief in films often culminates in healing and acceptance. Characters learn to live with their loss and find ways to incorporate the memory of their departed loved ones into their lives. In this thesis, the directors of the films I will be discussing use symbolism and visual metaphors to convey the emotional and psychological aspects of grief. These techniques enhance the emotional impact of the storytelling.

The emotional bonds that these characters form with one another play a crucial role in their emotional healing. Relationships, whether familial or romantic, provide solace and comfort.

Characters may use a creative outlet, like music, painting, or writing, to process and express their grief. This artistic expression becomes a form of liberation, allowing characters to channel their emotions and find meaning in their experiences.

While films don't always offer neat conclusions, they often provide some form of closure or resolution that signifies the characters' progression through the grieving process. This closure may come from emotional resolution or acceptance. This idea recognises that everyone grieves

differently. It acknowledges the uniqueness of each person's mourning process and how they deal with grief. When films explore grief, they present not only the characters' experiences but also how it affects the audience. Viewers can find comfort, empathy, and a shared relatability by observing characters learn to deal with their grief.

"Three Colours: Blue" follows Julie, a woman who is haunted by her grief after living through a tragic car accident which claimed the lives of her composer husband and young daughter. Her initial reaction is to withdraw from her relationships, lock herself in her apartment and suppress her pain. However, avoiding human interaction on the bustling streets of Paris proves impossible, and she eventually meets up with Olivier, an old friend who has a secret love for her and who tries to draw her back to reality.

This film explores Julie's liberation from grief. Since the passing of her Husband and Daughter, she has been freed from the roles of Mother and wife. She believes her life has ended and retreated from everything to try and subdue the hurt. She begins to find herself once again when she decides to finish her husband's concerto piece.

"Truly, Madly, Deeply" Follows Nina, who struggles to cope with her lover Jamie's death, only to find that his ghost magically appears and moves back into her flat. When she falls in love with another man, she faces a choice between holding onto the past and facing the future. The central theme of grief in this film is learning how to move on after a loss, the want for things to be the way they were and then the realisation that it can never be the same. Nina is liberated from her deep hole of grief when she learns how to let go of Jamie and begins living again.

My third and final case study is of the film *"Ordinary People"*. Tormented by guilt following the death of his older brother, Buck, in a sailing accident, alienated teenager Conrad Jarrett attempts suicide. Returning home following an extended stay in a psychiatric hospital, Conrad struggles to deal with his mental anguish and, with the help of his psychiatrist, tries to reconnect with his emotionally wounded father Calvin and his mother Beth, who has grown cold and angry. This film deals with the danger and impossibility of perfection. The Jarrett family try desperately to maintain this ideal family image in the wake of a horrible tragedy. It delves into the idea of impossible expectations people set upon themselves and the inevitable letdown that happens in this pursuit.

In this thesis, I will look at how grief changes the family unit and its personalities. Julie, Nina, and Conrad go through transformative changes. While it is more centred on Nina and Julie, Conrad's entire family undergoes a change and liberation from grief. This thesis will delve into the different ways these characters are liberated.

CASE STUDY ONE

Three Colours: Blue

The films *Three Colours: Blue* (1993), *Three Colours: White* (1994) and *Three Colours: Red* (1994) are colour-schemed in the manner of the French flag, structured around the classic themes of the French Republic: liberty, equality and brotherhood. Kieslowski himself has said these concepts were chosen because the production funding came from French backers. The fundamental themes of the trilogy are more chaotic and exciting: the unending torture of love, the inevitability of deceit, the strength of men's fear and the loathing of women and one of the most prevalent themes: Throwing everything away, including one's very identity, and start again.

“Kieslowski was born in Warsaw, Poland, the son of Barbara (née Szonert) and Roman Kieślowski.[6] He grew up in several small towns, moving wherever his engineer father, a tuberculosis patient, could find treatment. He was raised Roman Catholic and retained what he called a “personal and private” relationship with God.[7] At sixteen, he attended a firefighters’ training school but dropped out after three months. Without any career goals, he then entered the College for Theatre Technicians in Warsaw in 1957 because a relative ran it. He wanted to become a theatre director but lacked the required bachelor’s degree for the theatre department, so he chose to study film as an intermediate step.”³

In an interview, Kieslowski speaks about life and filmmaking. In his films, he often asks who the characters are and what they want. Upon reflection, he notices that he doesn't know who he is and that he doesn't know what he wants. This interview speaks so much to his filmmaking style within this trilogy, wherein he delves into the lives of people who are trying to answer these very same questions.

The source of bereavement changes throughout the films, from the death of family members in *Blue* to the loss of masculine omnipotence in *White* to the shock of erotic betrayal in *Red*.

“Each of these three films is associated with different colours of the French tricolour and the ideals of the French Revolution. Blue represents the idea of Liberty. Blue prevails in the

³ Wikipedia Contributors. “Krzysztof Kieślowski.” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 1 Feb. 2024, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krzysztof_Kie%C5%9Blowski#:~:text=Kie%C5%9Blowski%20was%20born%20in%20Warsaw,and%20private%22%20relationship%20with%20God. Accessed 7 Mar. 2024.

film's colour palette. And blue is the colour of both the main character's grief and her liberation in the end."⁴

First, one must look at why the colour blue is associated with sadness in the first place. In the "Psychological Science, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science" by Laurie Burrows, she said:

*"sadness and emotion could influence various visual processes that are involved in perceiving colour. In this study, the results demonstrated that participants who watched a sad video clip were less accurate in identifying colours on the blue-yellow spectrum than participants who watched funny clips. Could this be the causative factor in the expression 'feeling blue?'."*⁵

A possible origin comes from the tradition of ships flying a blue flag when a captain died, another being in many West African cultures wearing blue during mourning ceremonies.

Blue follows Julie after a car crash in which her husband, Patrice, a celebrated French composer, and their young daughter, Anna, were killed. With this complete annihilation of her old life, Julie sets about freeing herself from everything she has known and burning the past. She destroys her husband's unfinished concerto and seeks to become invisible in Paris.

Julie goes through a metamorphosis throughout the film as she keeps discovering more about this old life that she has destroyed. It seems further and further she tries to escape this old life, the more it sucks her back in. The boy who finds her at the crash tracks her down and tries to return her daughter's necklace, which Julie refuses. She discovers that her late husband has a mistress who is pregnant with his child.

The only symbols that Julie has kept from her past are the pendant with blue gems from a mobile in her daughter's bedroom and a piece from her husband's unfinished concerto. This use of colour to portray grief is pitch-perfect.

The first thing Julie does when she arrives in a new apartment is to hang this pendant on the ceiling, a constant reminder of her daughter and a link to the past, physical pieces of fragmented memories held together by threads. Whenever Julie interacts with the beads she is obstructed by them, caught in the mix of her grief, of her memories of those gone.

⁴ Mariamidze, Magda. "Three Colors: Blue and the Path to Liberation." Film Obsessive, 31 Oct. 2022, filmobsessive.com/film/film-analysis/film-genres/world-cinema/three-colors-blue-and-the-path-to-liberation/?expand_article=1. Accessed 5 Mar. 2024.

⁵ Laurie Burrows Grad. "Why the Color Blue Is Associated with Sadness." HuffPost, HuffPost, Dec. 2016, www.huffpost.com/entry/color-blue-sadness_b_13233778. Accessed 5 Mar. 2024.



Fig 1.

*'Now I have just one thing left to do: nothing. I want no possessions, no memories, no friends, no lovers — they're all traps,'*⁶ Julie tells her mother. She has been liberated from these “traps”, but she is not yet ready for true liberation from her grief.

Reflections and refractions are frequently used throughout the film, evoking distortion or separation, further diving into the symbolism of grief and Julie’s internal world of being separate from life—the most symbolic and practical reflective element found in the film is water. However, in this case, water reflects and allows for immersion within. Every time Julie has to deal with the past and relive the pain, she goes to the swimming pool and immerses herself in the blue of the water, thus becoming part of the reflection of said past and pain. This idea of immersion and submergence is prevalent across these case studies. This metaphor is used in *Ordinary People* to a similar effect, and the theme of being submerged is relevant to *Truly, Madly, Deeply* but in a different sense. All of these characters enter an underworld, a metaphor for their grief. Later, I will discuss the importance of these themes and visuals in each case study.

⁶ “Three Colors: Blue (1993) | MUBI.” MUBI, 2023, mubi.com/en/ie/films/three-colors-blue. Accessed 10 Mar. 2024. - Timecode 55:58

*“The music should depict the film, but cleverly so. This means that there is no need to deal with the external events we look at on the screen, but what is there in the people, what is in the actors, and at the same time in us ourselves, in the audience, that is..”*⁷

These words, spoken by the film’s composer, Zbigniew Preisner, express the essence of the way he worked with Krzysztof Kieslow.

One of the other pieces of the past that Julie holds on to is a piece of paper which has some of her husband's unfinished concerto. Music is the other motif that works hand in hand with the use of blue in this film. Julie's liberation from grief and her past is reflected within the score.

*“Two motifs—as we later learn, from the music of fictional composer Van Den Budenmayer—are repeatedly heard throughout the film. The first is the funeral music which is linked to Julie’s grief and the memories of her loss. The second is ‘memento’.”*⁸

Much like Julie, the score changes along with her, many times even stopping her in her tracks and fully facing her. This motif returns each time that Julie is reminded of the loss. The funeral motif disappears once Julie decides to confront the mistress, thus facing her past.

The other piece of music (which alludes to the unfinished concerto) haunts Julie throughout the film. It comes to her often and abruptly, reminding her constantly to finish it. This piece ultimately culminates Julie’s journey through pain and grief, symbolising her liberation. Music is equally important in the second case study of *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. I will speak more about this point in the next chapter.

This confronting of grief is present not only in the finishing of the concerto but also when Julie gives Sandrine, her late husband’s mistress, her old estate instead of selling it, leaving it behind for Patrice’s son as a legacy to his father.

Throughout *Blue*, there is a distinct lack of non-diegetic music; music appears only diegetically or meta-diegetically, which gives the impression of music being a character itself, “a physical body that is not just a fiction and a fantasy, but represents reality, is a real part of Julie’s life, a genuine reality, however ugly or beautiful that reality might be.”⁹ The film starts without music for

⁷ “Music and Grief in Three Colours Blue.” *Film Positivity*, 5 Feb. 2021, filmpositivity.com/2021/02/05/music-grief-in-three-colours-blue/. Accessed 3 Feb. 2024.

⁸ “Music and Grief in Three Colours Blue.” *Film Positivity*, 5 Feb. 2021, filmpositivity.com/2021/02/05/music-grief-in-three-colours-blue/. Accessed 3 Feb. 2024.

⁹ *ibid*

almost nine minutes; then, it rocks the audience when it arrives as Julie watches the funeral on TV. This sets the stage for the importance of the music in this film, which causes it to cut extremely deep.

“The music, composed by Preisner, illustrates her grief, crashing on her in unannounced waves as she sits by a fire eating a piece of blue candy or swims laps in a cerulean pool. For a moment, time stops, and the screen goes black; we experience the musical intrusions as if we were inside Julie’s head. She tries to destroy the score, but a friend tells her, “That music is beautiful. One can’t destroy things like that.”¹⁰

Actor Juliette Binoche heavily involved herself in the music process,

“To play her musically gifted character, Binoche learned from Preisner how to write notation and also travelled to Poland to hear the music recorded before the shoot. Binoche says that when the score was played on set, it proved to be “a great companion for acting,” especially given Julie’s solitude for much of the film.”¹¹

Music is front and centre in this piece, as seen when Julie discovers a copy of her husband’s concerto and quickly turns it into a rubbish truck.

“The theme plays in Julie’s head as she throws it into the back of a garbage truck, and as the sheet music is pulped, the music similarly becomes mangled and destroyed on the soundtrack itself. The destruction of art is a particularly powerful image, and Julie’s actions demonstrate the strength of her intention to disconnect, as well as emphasising the power and depth of her grief to the audience, as “Although music is not A living being, especially not a loved living being, the destruction of the score is experienced as the death of a loved person.”¹²

The score is a constant reminder of Julie’s past, and throughout the film, it invades her mind to remind her of the pain. After denying its entry for the majority of the film.

“Rather than destroying and denying her musical impulses and inclinations, Julie reconnects with Olivier (Benoît Régent), a composer colleague of her deceased husband and former lover, and the two set about completing the unfinished Concert for a Unified Europe. As the two complete the composition the camera becomes unfocused, and the emphasis is entirely on the music they are creating, “the external is completely overawed by the internal, material

¹⁰ Greiving, Tim. “Under the Sign of Sadness: Zbigniew Preisner’s Three Colors Scores.” *The Criterion Collection*, 7 Feb. 2023, www.criterion.com/current/posts/8063-under-the-sign-of-sadness-zbigniew-preisners-three-colors-scores. Accessed 3 Feb. 2024.

¹¹ Graeme. “Music and Grief in Three Colours Blue - Graeme - Medium.” Medium, Medium, 5 Feb. 2021, filmpositivity.medium.com/music-and-grief-in-three-colours-blue-5a6f5f0c9539. Accessed 17 Feb. 2024.

¹² Graeme. “Music and Grief in Three Colours Blue - Graeme - Medium.” Medium, Medium, 5 Feb. 2021, filmpositivity.medium.com/music-and-grief-in-three-colours-blue-5a6f5f0c9539. Accessed 17 Feb. 2024.

gives way to idea, reality is lost so that the whole of the being can be immersed into the sound and the imagination".¹³

In conclusion, *Three Colours: Blue* is firing on all cylinders to convey grief in both a poetic and realistic way. The audience is brought along Julie's journey down into the depths of her sadness. Throughout the film, director Krzysztof Kieślowski skillfully navigates the depths of grief, presenting it not as a still state of despair but as a moving process of self-discovery and emotional transformation.

Whether consciously or subconsciously, Julie's journey to liberation mirrors Kieślowski and Poland's liberation from Communism. The Three Colours Trilogy itself contains themes of liberation and self-discovery. The unification of Europe is a running theme across the entire trilogy. Although there is no direct address to Poland's journey out of communism, this trilogy shows Kieślowski's awareness of the socio-political landscape in which he lived.

Julie is a symbol of strength in the face of overwhelming loss. Her initial attempts to sever emotional ties and retreat into isolation reflect the instinctual response of withdrawing from pain. However, as her story unfolds, Julie's journey becomes one of gradual liberation as she confronts her grief head-on, embracing the memories and connections that once brought her joy.

This film offers a profound meditation on grief's nature and emotional liberation's transformative power. Through Julie's story, the film reminds us that grief is not the end but rather a gateway to profound self-discovery and renewal. As the audience, we are invited to witness Julie's journey and find solace in the enduring resilience of the human spirit.

¹³ "Music and Grief in Three Colours Blue." Film Positivity, 5 Feb. 2021, filmpositivity.com/2021/02/05/music-grief-in-three-colours-blue/. Accessed 3 Feb. 2024.

CASE STUDY TWO

Truly, Madly, Deeply

Truly, Madly, Deeply takes a look into the loss of a partner and how one learns to not die with their love but to continue living for themselves. Although this film delves into the supernatural, it contains a raw emotional realness which grounds the film's narrative. This is where we begin with the character of Nina, where we first see her delving into the underground tube station in London. This sets the stage for Nina's arc as she heads down further into her grief. She heads to her therapist, and immediately the audience sees how deep her sadness is.



Fig 2.



Fig 3.

The protagonist of this film, Nina, shares a similar connection to music as Julie in *Three Colours: Blue*. Where *Three Colours: Blue* used music to show the inner turmoil with Julie, music is the agent for change within the story of *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. Jamie's cello acts as a physical totem for Nina to desperately cling to. It is such a strong symbol of her late lover that when Nina's sister asks if they can have it, Nina responds in anger, stating that she might as well be asking for his body. When she is at her lowest, she comes to the piano and begins to play for comfort, and in doing so, she conjures Jamie, who returns to playing his cello. When we approach the film's ending, Nina is seen closing the cello case, symbolizing her liberation from grief and her acceptance that her memories of Jamie will always be there, but she must move on with life.

Director Anthony Minghella expertly navigates the complex maze of emotions within the experience of grief.

“Although he never says so and may not consciously have intended it, the film also works beautifully as a re-imagining of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. It explores the hermetic qualities of communication that enable a grieving person to pass through the underworld of loss and return once again to the daylight world of ongoing life and love.”¹⁴



Fig 4.



Fig 5.

“So the mourner is important in two places, here and “there.” “Along with ... the teller of ghost stories, the griever is always on the edge of another universe, a cosmos that aches with possibility, like a phantom limb.”¹⁵ This idea of phantom pain or limb is prevalent in all mourning films. A loss so large that a piece of you is gone lies at the centre of what the feeling of grief is to a person.

¹⁴ Bower, Jody. *Relinquishing Grief: Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes in Truly Madly Deeply*.

¹⁵ Armstrong, Richard. *Mourning Films. A Critical Study of Loss and Grieving in Cinema*. Jefferson, Mcfarland & Company Inc, 2013.

In Minghella's commentary on the movie, he states, "*the past is already fictional the moment it passes.*" Nina is clinging to this idealised fantasy of how things used to be, using nostalgia as a coping mechanism. Her dreams of being with Jamie have no future and don't have any connection to the real world. Nina is locked in limbo, stuck between the land of the living and of the dead.

In Jody Bower's thesis, "*Relinquishing Grief Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes in Truly Madly Deeply*" "*she delves into Nina's journey through the "underworld" of grief to get Jamie back, only to realise that she must move on. This idea of holding on to grief is not only harmful to the living but also means the deceased soul cannot be freed.*

*"The dead loved one becomes only memory, and their soul is free to move on. The dead need to continue their journey, and they need our help to do so. Grieving is not only for us; it is for them."*¹⁶

This journey of loss, acceptance, and moving on is not just for Nina but for Jamie. Minghella speaks to this idea of being aware of wanting something so bad that it happens. Upon Jamie's return, he says that perhaps he did not die properly so that's why he's able to come back. The deeper we go into the story, the more we realise that Jamie hasn't come back, but Nina has entered the underworld to join him. This point becomes more clear when other members of the dead start hanging around the house, as well as Jamie cranking up the heating to an unbearable heat.

*"Nina's longing and music have opened the door to Hell, and it's now in her living room. As a modern Westerner would expect of Hell, it's unbearably hot and unpleasant and teeming with dead souls."*¹⁷

In some versions of the Orpheus myth, it is Hermes who brings Orpheus back to the land of the living. The character Mark fits perfectly into the model of Hermes; he is a man who uses "*the power of humour and ridicule in the face of harsh authority [to outwit] a powerful opponent*"¹⁸.

He is the god of displaced persons, which is exactly what Nina needs in her life; although she

¹⁶ Bower, Jody. *Relinquishing Grief: Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes in Truly Madly Deeply*.

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

still struggles with with the idea of moving on from Jamie, Mark is a positive force in her life who slowly starts to bring her back.

In Mythology, the reader only gets Operheus's point of view, so one must wonder whether Eurydice wanted to come back, Minghella uses Jamie as an exploration into this idea, as Jamie doesn't seem to mind being dead, and has already made many friends, and has taken up Spanish lessons. Jamie only returned because Nina wanted him back, or so he thought.

Minghella states that Jamie has returned with a mission, to show Nina *"what she thought this relationship brought her was just one element of the truth of it."*¹⁹ Jamie has some lovely qualities, but he can also be selfish and thoughtless at times. His goal is to show Nina that she no longer needs him and how eventually, she would grow tired of him. Instead of just saying this to her, Jamie needs Nina to realise this. Unlike Orpheus, Nina gets the chance to take a long, hard look at Eurydice to see truly; to be able to look past the idealised projection of the person.

*"That is the true tragedy of Orpheus: he never experienced what love truly means. Had he even once seen Eurydice as a real person and found the bittersweet reality of love, he might have been able to love another after she died."*²⁰

Nina is almost at the point of this realisation about her relationship with Jamie. When she returns home to find the place a mess with the dead, she confronts Jamie, and they get into an argument. She explains how her home doesn't feel like hers anymore, that her sanctuary is gone, realising the consequences of opening that door to the underworld.

Nina begins to see Jamie for what he is, and he realises that his time has ended, so he recites a Spanish poem called "La Muerta" by Pablo Neruda.

*"forgive me. If you are not living, if you, beloved, my love, if you have died. All the leaves will fall on my breast, rain on my soul night and day. My feet will want to march to where you sleep, but I shall go on living"*²¹

¹⁹ Bower, Jody. Relinquishing Grief: Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes in Truly Madly Deeply.

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *ibid*

This reading lets Nina know that Jamie understands and that she has permission to go and live. Nina seeks out Mark and admits to him that Jamie is dead and wants Mark's love and a new life, *"She is free to go with Hermes now and let him guide her out of Hades."*²²

When someone is grief-stricken,

*"A sympathetic ear like the one Nina's counsellor offers, or well-meaning advice like her boss gives her, may only reinforce the person's sense of being displaced, out of step, not part of the world any more."*²³

Hermes advises one to use tricks and charms to bring a laugh to someone. This way can bring someone back to life and make them realise that there are things worth living for. Mark does this at every opportunity with Nina; by making her hop on one foot by the Thames he is inviting her to dance with the living.

In the end, we see that Nina has reclaimed her sanctuary and has shut off her flat from the underworld. She greets Mark outside as Jamie looks on from the window. She leaves without looking back. Hermes brings Orpheus back from the underworld as Eurydice remains.

In this film, Minghella shows how dangerous unchecked grief can be to a person. It can cause someone to separate themselves from life completely and to shut down. Just like Orpheus after his loss, we can idealise the departed as this "perfect person" instead of a regular human being, full of complexities and flaws like the rest.

By the end of this film, Nina has been liberated from this grief and the image of an idealised love. She ventures through the underworld to come to this realisation and gives herself permission to move on and return to the land of the living. Its use of supernatural elements with the mundane city life complements each other to create a beautiful piece that conveys the emotional journey of acceptance of letting someone go. This mundanity is a powerful device within these stories and used in *Ordinary People*, which I will discuss further in the final chapter.

²²ibid

²³ibid

This exploration of the Greek story is a blueprint for the liberation from grief motif present in all of these films. In the next chapter, I will discuss the similarity of Orpheus and Eurydice's story. Nina needed to go through all of these trials and tribulations so that she could free herself from the clutches of grief from the memories that were holding her back. Jamie was an agent of change for her to help her see that she could not die with him but to be able to reconcile with the loss and to be able to live on.

In the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, "To live is to suffer; to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering." In the midst of grief, there are several ways we can embrace pain, accept support, and pursue hope.

CASE STUDY THREE

Ordinary People

This journey through grief has been portrayed in many ways, but one film, in particular, does a fantastic job of showing different stages of grief in different people at the same time. That film was *Ordinary People* by Robert Redford.

Tormented by guilt following the death of his older brother, Buck, in a sailing accident, alienated teenager Conrad Jarrett attempts suicide. Returning home following an extended stay in a psychiatric hospital, Conrad tries to deal with his mental anguish and also reconnect with his mother, Beth, who has grown cold and angry, and his emotionally wounded father, Calvin, with the help of his psychiatrist, Dr Berger. Although Conrad is the protagonist of this film, and we follow the story through his perspective, this is an analysis of what grief does to the entire family unit and how it affects different people in different ways. After the death of Conrad's older brother, the Jarrett household becomes one of closed doors crumbling under the emotional repression that Mother Beth is holding over it. She is the model of the suburban mom; she *“runs the home, taking part in community organisations and fastidiously overseeing every detail of their manufactured lives. To be sure, on the surface, their house and family look immaculate.”*²⁴

The story begins upon Conrad's hospital discharge and his return to school. He returns to the swim team, but it's quite clear he isn't into it. Actor Timothy Hutton gives a pitch-perfect performance of a boy grieving, that feeling of being stuck in a vast ocean of sadness and not being sure where the boat is.

It's clear throughout the film that Buck is Beth's favoured child and holds some contempt for Conrad, which only fuels his survivor's guilt after the tragic event. This contempt is further compounded by the fact that Conrad tried to take his own life, something which Beth can't understand when she keeps everything so prim and proper throughout the house. She believes that Conrad is behaving this way by choice and not as a response to his environment, wherein he feels his mother doesn't love him. *“She'll never forgive me for getting blood all over the bathroom floor,”*²⁵

²⁴ “The Structure of “Ordinary People” on JSTOR.” *Jstor.org*, 2024, www.jstor.org/stable/43797288?seq=5. Accessed 23 Feb. 2024

²⁵ *ibid*

Beth and Conrad can't connect, and this is shown very clearly throughout the film. Calvin, Conrad's father, is trying to act as the bridge between the two and has love to give but isn't sure how to express it outwardly. Calvin and Beth have been together for a long time, but it's becoming evident to Calvin that there mightn't be any love left between them anymore.

This film shows the benefits of therapy through the character Dr Berger, whom Conrad goes to see throughout the film.

"The six visits presented with Berger depict Conrad's gradual emergence into a state where he can express feelings."²⁶ Berger's ability to disarm and question what Conrad and Calvin are saying during therapy shows the benefits of sharing this pain with others. "Dr. Berger relied on the analytic framework for each session; he utilised the free association and transference technique and addressed Conrad's resistance. In Psychoanalytic therapy, the therapist maintains an analytic framework or procedure throughout treatment."²⁷

He always lets Conrad lead the conversation and asks simple questions to let him work things out himself. For Calvin and Conrad, Dr Berger is instrumental in aiding them to find their liberation from grief in some way.

For Conrad, it was helpful in him getting over his survivor's guilt by learning that Buck's death was not his fault and that he must forgive himself. His anger is at Buck for being so irresponsible and weak, *"Thus Conrad is paralysed by impossible emotions: anger for someone he loved who died a horrible death. The anger itself is hateful, unforgivable."²⁸*

"Freud writes of how there was a stranger behind every person we loved, however familiar, and behind every profession of love, however ardent, lay a desire to subdue its opposite, an instinct to hate. This ambivalence informs the distinction at the heart of Freud's most important statement on grief."²⁹

²⁶ "The Structure of "Ordinary People" on JSTOR." Jstor.org, 2024, www.jstor.org/stable/43797288?seq=5. Accessed 23 Feb. 2024.

²⁷ "Therapeutic Therapy in Dr. Berger's Ordinary People - 1625 Words | Cram." Cram.com, 2015, www.cram.com/essay/Therapeutic-Therapy-In-Dr-Bergers-Ordinary-People/PCPF6HVKVR. Accessed 23 Feb. 2024.

²⁸ "The Structure of "Ordinary People" on JSTOR." Jstor.org, 2024, www.jstor.org/stable/43797288?seq=5. Accessed 23 Feb. 2024.

²⁹ Armstrong, Richard. Mourning Films. A Critical Study of Loss and Grieving in Cinema. Jefferson, Mcfarland & Company Inc, 2013.

This statement is at the centre of Conrad's conflict with his grief. He feels so torn about his anger toward himself and his brother; why did he let go? Why didn't he listen to Conrad? These questions haunt him. In his penultimate visit with Dr Berger, Conrad is finally able to face these questions and work his way through them with Berger's help. Berger enters a performative role, acting as Buck to allow Conrad to speak to him and let out his frustrations. "You said Hang on, hang on, then you let go. Why did you let go?" Berger explains how it hurts to be mad at Buck. He then asks Conrad how much longer he is going to punish himself for the myriad of things that he could have done or should have done in the situation. This breakthrough makes Conrad realise that he can't keep beating himself up for what happened; it wasn't anyone's fault, but his survivor's guilt has consumed him up to this point. This is the moment Conrad gets liberated from the grief in some way. The pain is still there but he has begun to deal with whatever guilt he felt.

Director Robert Redford wanted to investigate the "Grey zone" of American life. He came across people who did things and those who did not, so he wanted to look into these people who had to have their lawns just right but could not look into their feelings, about people who were afraid to look inside themselves.

Redford masterfully directs *Ordinary People*, not through flashy means but with a full understanding of the material and the characters. As I stated in the previous Chapter about *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, the use of the mundane in mourning films brings the audience into the familiarity of their world. It bakes itself into the average American life that has been put to the screen so many times: the swim meets, the first dates, and family gatherings. It's within these boundaries of normalcy does an extraordinary story takes place. Redford brings the audience into such a realistic world with such raw emotion that there's no wonder why it took home the Oscar in 1980. He managed to show this journey through grief in the eyes of three characters at different phases with different outcomes.

Ordinary People doesn't treat anyone as the villain, even when it seems evident that Beth is the antagonistic force of the film, she is a broken character. Her grief for the loss of her son feels more tragic to witness as she acts as if nothing is wrong and is desperately trying to latch on to the facade of the normal upper-class life.

Marie Tyler Moore expertly displays the complex emotions within Beth, who is unable to open up and change. In the final conversation with Calvin, he tells her “that she must have buried all her love with Buck” when he died. It’s clear that Beth either cannot (or refuses to) face her grief, as she knows it will change everything. It is simply the fear of change which scares her and causes her to revert to survival mode. If she keeps everything neat, there will be no mess, which is exactly what Calvin says is her problem.

She clings to this facade of a happy life after her favourite son dies. She is too caught up with the image of perfection and never goes deeper to question her feelings. It again is quite similar to this idea of Orpheus and Eurydice where the image of the thing is what they are gleaming onto.

She fights for this normal life and begs Calvin to join her, but Calvin is always on the lookout for Conrad. This presents the main problem for Beth and her son; she sees Conrad as a threat to her normal family life; not only does she see his suicide attempt as more of a stunt, but she feels that Conrad is taking Calvin away from her.



Fig 6.

Every scene with Beth and Conrad is covered in this layer of awkwardness where they can't meet each other in any emotional way. Calvin is trying to be the bridge between these two, but

as he might, it doesn't come to pass. At lunch with Beth, Calvin brooches the idea that they all go to see Dr Berger and talk about it, but Beth shuts this down immediately. She doesn't want any more change and just wants to hold on to what she's got, making a point of saying that any problems they have, they can take care of in the privacy of their own home, again wanting to keep this all behind closed doors and maintain this image of a happy family.

Calvin, who has finally had enough, bares all to Beth about how he doesn't love her anymore and thinks she left so much of herself in the coffin with Buck. Beth walks away, and only when she is alone does she let herself finally feel something. Still, she packs her bags and leaves in the morning, unable to give herself to her emotions yet. Beth's liberation is in a more literal sense as she physically gets away from Calvin and Conrad, very similar to the beginning of Julie's journey in *Three Colours: Blue*, the removal of self from the grief. However, in an emotional sense, there's still a long road ahead of her to reach that liberation from grief internally. Beth's journey fits perfectly into Orpheus and Eurydice's tale with a twist, Beth has decided to stay in the underworld, submerged underwater with Buck, unable to listen to Hermes (Calvin).

Calvin's headspace is made clear upon his visit with Dr Berger. Calvin says, *"I can see himself, and then I see the two of them drifting away, and I can't do anything to stop them."* He feels desperate to do something but is not quite sure what. It's as if he's sitting on a fence, and they are on opposite sides. *"Death means that our things have separated from us like objects in space no longer governed by gravity. They float indiscriminately, but inexorably, away"*³⁰. This speaks to Calvin's liberation and how it is very tough on him emotionally, he knows it's over with Beth and that she will leave, but on the other hand, he is aware that Conrad is on the right track. Calvin sees both sides of this situation while also having to navigate his grief.

*"We refer to death not by its dreadful name but as "loss," as if in such a sanitized era we are unable to face the grisly biological facts of human demise and decay but can see death only in terms of a missing person, a void in our lives. It is as though these usages have displaced emphasis from the ghastly event which ends the life of another, one experienced by the dying person yet in a vital sense inexperienced, to the consequences for the living. The dead are not now dead, they are "missing."*³¹

³⁰ Armstrong, Richard. *Mourning Films. A Critical Study of Loss and Grieving in Cinema*. Jefferson, McFarland & Company Inc, 2013.

³¹ *ibid*

The Jarrett family are all feeling the loss or void of Buck. This film explores the void of the person from different perspectives of the family unit. How some people are ready to accept the grief, and some people are not then, and not to vilify them for that.

By the end of *Ordinary People*, our characters are all on the first step towards being liberated from grief, but there is a long road ahead. Conrad and Calvin can be open with each other so they can move on together into the world, whereas Beth is unable to make that step.

"We fear death, but human language seems inadequate before the end of life. No other experience we have matches the conundrum by which something happens to us, of which we know so little. And no other experience can seem so awful: "For true horror is fear without a definable or specifiable object."³²



Fig 7.

³² Armstrong, Richard. *Mourning Films. A Critical Study of Loss and Grieving in Cinema.* Jefferson, Mcfarland & Company Inc, 2013.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, these three films explore different aspects of the same emotional process, showing their character's journey to breaking free from the chains of grief. All three directors grasp what this unexplainable feeling is and how to show it through the use of visuals.

These films all look at people who are stuck in time, as it were. Julie is unable to mourn; she hides herself away from the world and life. *Three Colours: Blue* contains a timelessness to it, much like how water plays such a big part in the film, so too does this lack of time. Julie is literally and metaphorically floating through life while dealing with grief. This idea of floating through the world is across all these case studies. This idea that all characters are lost at sea has been used throughout time to convey a person's sorrow and feeling of loss. It's no wonder why the imagery of water is so heavily used in *Three Colours: Blue* and *Ordinary People* and that this theme of submergence is prevalent across all three films.

*"Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim."*³³ This quote from author Vicki Harrison encapsulates the journey through grief. By the end of all three films, our protagonists have "learned to swim" in their grief.

This metaphor visually explains this idea of grief liberation perfectly. The unfathomable depths of grief can bring one to mirror the ocean in its vastness and its unknowableness to the unending power and domination waves have. That is the beauty of the ocean and water as a metaphor for grief because it also symbolises Renewal and rebirth. Julie uses the pool to hide herself,

*"She takes to the water because the water makes her feel and look the way she feels and looks to herself, cocooned by her condition while her motives and intentions are fractured into a million slivers by the shimmering water."*³⁴

About Conrad, Water is a symbol of anxiety for him. He quits the swim team and witnesses Buck die in a storm out at sea. Conrad steers clear of the water for the majority of the film until he faces this memory of the accident with Dr Berger and sits with it.

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³⁴ Armstrong, Richard. *Mourning Films. A Critical Study of Loss and Grieving in Cinema*. Jefferson, Mcfarland & Company Inc, 2013.

Across all these diverse stories, one can see the transformative power that grief can have on a person or family unit as they deal with the emotional torment and uprooting of normal life.

Through expert filmmaking and truly raw performances, these films have portrayed the multi-layered issues that every human being will deal with when facing grief.

Through the use of visual metaphor in *Three Colors: Blue*, the supernatural parts of *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, or the multilayered dynamics within the family unit of *Ordinary People*, each film gives its perspective on the liberation of grief and the transformative evolution that lives in the mourning process. The liberation from grief isn't the ending of pain; it is a contemplation in the acceptance of a loss and the realisation that the world has changed and how we as people need to change if we want to stay above water or to drown in sorrow.

As an audience, we sympathise with all of our characters as death is the biggest fear we humans have; it's a never-answered question and leaves us trying to make sense of what seems so illogical, so to witness characters go through this journey and to come through the other side is inspiring, and with the use of film, we remember the universality of grief and the unending strength of the human connection to be able to overcome the deepest of sadness.

In Conclusion, *Three Colours: Blue* is a deep reflection on the inner turmoil of grief's nature and how isolation feeds it. Julie's journey and liberation show the strength of the human will to go on against all odds and how one can come back from the precipice by being surrounded by people.

Truly, Madly, Deeply shows how difficult it is to move on from a lost lover but also how one cannot die with the deceased. That the dead need to be let go in order for both parties to move on to the part of the journey of grief. That although they are gone, they are not forgotten.

Ordinary People is a perfect showcase in how speaking about the grief and allowing oneself to feel the pain is how one grows and learns to move past the wave of grief and can move forward. It also shows how not everyone is on the same path to liberation and that the road might be longer for others.

*“Where I come from Nobody knows
And where I’m going Everything goes,
The wind blows, The sea flows,
And nobody knows.”*

- Robert Nathan

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