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A CHILD'S PERCEPTION OF DEATH AND ITS RITUAL — CAROLINE LEAF'S FILM ADAPTATION OF MORDECAI RICHLER'S "THE STREET"

THELMA SCHENKEL

Mordecai Richler's autobiographical collection of stories about growing up in the 1940s on Montreal's St. Urbain Street became the source of inspiration for filmmaker Caroline Leaf, when she was asked by the National Film Board of Canada to contribute to a series of films based on Canadian literature. She turned to one chapter in that collection which she found especially moving and based her film The Street on the story of a little boy whose grandmother becomes ill and moves in with him and his family and, after a long painful illness, eventually dies.[1]

In the original story the environment in which the events take place is almost as important as the characters. In the film, however, the focus is on the little boy and on his perspective on the events. Before concentrating on the child's vantage point, a few words on "The Street" itself would be helpful. An enclave of mostly Polish- and Russian-Jewish immigrants, St. Urbain Street represented a transition between the old and the new ways of life. Caught between the WASPs and the French-Canadians, and beloved by neither, the Jews on St. Urbain St. had relationships with those in surrounding neighborhoods which were uneasy and, at best, problematic. To have their sons become doctors was the realization of their fondest aspirations. That, they believed, would be the route to economic security and ultimately to social acceptance. Needless to say, it was a long journey from the shtetl to a Montreal medical office—yet it occurred within one or two generations. With the grandparents rooted in the shtetl, the parents attempting to bridge the two worlds, it fell to the grandchildren to find their footing in the New World. And the humor, as well as the tensions and the misunderstandings inherent in that process were no less vast than the distance covered in both time and space. Seen within this context, it is no surprise that the grandmother's illness and death in The Street should bring to the surface so many powerful and conflicting emotions. And it is a testament to the artistry of the filmmaker that she succeeds in infusing the specific — the Jewish milieu, humor, and language — with the impact of the universal. One can view this film both as a depiction of a specific way of life at a particular time and place and as a portrayal of a universal dilemma which can be felt and understood across barriers of culture and of language.

One can view this film looking only at the specifics. An anthropologist might scan the film's surface to glean the ethnographic evidence and to raise such questions as:

Are the accent and intonation of the Kaddish from Galicia or Lithuania? What does the ambiance of the funeral reveal abou the extent to which tradition has been transformed in the move to the New World? The sociologist might focus on such questions as: What is the effect on family life when three generations of Jews live in the same household? How do the stresses and resiliencies manifest themselves? What are the attitudes to old people? What changes have they undergone in their encounter with the pluralistic culture of contemporary Canada? While these approaches have their interest, they are necessarily limited.

I would like to propose another way of viewing this film — one which takes advantage of the rare opportunity offered by art to explore the recesses of the imagination through the perspective of the one who is undergoing the experience — in this case a little boy of 9 yrs. old. Through the extraordinarily malleable medium of the animated film, which is limited by no laws of physics, unlike the live-action film which is bound to pre-existent space and time, the viewer has the rare privilege of seeing, hearing, and feeling that experience as it was perceived and remembered by the protagonist. I propose to explore some of the subtle ways in which the child's point of view, filtered through the veils of memory, is revealed in this film and, in so doing, perhaps gain some insight into how children view sickness and death, how they comprehend Jewish ritual during times of stress, and how memory functions when confronted with loss. Finally, perhaps it is through the innocence of the child's perspective that are reflected most clearly the feelings and beliefs of the adults around them.

The film opens with the sound of labored breathing, then a view of two clasped hands which almost seem like an abstract design[2]. The movement of the breath flowing with the movement of the hands indicates life, and as a simplified sleeping face is revealed, and we hear the narrator telling of the time his "grandmother was supposed to die," we realize that for him, his grandmother is sound. She is also smell; he tells of how she reeked in the summer heat when he gave her the obligatory kiss each day. The boy's memories engage many of his senses. Thinking back, he not only sees her; he can hear her and smell her.

He is surrounded by parents on whom the strain of caring for a sick old person is clearly visible, his mother saying, "God in heaven, what's she holding on for?" For his father, "It won't be long now, and she'll be better off, if you know what I mean." For the doctor, "It's in the hands of the Almighty." Among his friends, death is something one learns about from Perry Mason and the boys on the block (Before someone dies, they "roll [their] eyes and gurgle" and after they die, their hair keeps growing for 24 hours.). He wonders if Uncle Lou will come from New York for the funeral and give him $5, but his sister makes him feel guilty for even having such a thought ("You shouldn't say things like that or her ghost will come back to haunt you."). He has no relationship with his grandmother; she is too feeble to say more than "Bouyo-bouyo". He has been promised her room and wonders if she knows he is waiting for it. He feels resentment that he has to kiss her each day. When he asks about the room when his grandmother is put in the Old People's Home, because his mother became too ill to care for her, he is made to feel selfish for asking such a question.

In this very difficult situation, the boy experiences a wide range of emotions, many of them conflicting: the obligation to care for elders and to respect them, the

wish to alleviate the burden on the household, the fear of what death is all about, the hope that he will soon have his own room, resentment that he cannot, guilt that he has such thoughts, ad infinitum. Perhaps the best summation of how difficult the situation is is reflected in the irony of the father's statement when his wife goes to visit her mother in The Home. Facing the viewer, whom he addresses directly, he tell us, "I was born lucky, and that's it." Later, when she returns, bringing her mother back with her, he says: "I knew it. I was born with all the luck." The child does not have the resources for irony that the adult has. He has to look elsewhere for tools to deal with sickness and death.

What exactly is the boy's sense of what is happening? Can he make sense of what is happening around him? Does he need to? We learn that he and his friends enjoy peeking up the nurse's skirt as she climbs the stairs on her daily visits. He plays out on the street a lot with his friends because, as the story says, "my mother felt it was not good for me to see somebody dying." When he arrives home one day to learn that she had died, his parents try to shield him from death. He asks where his mother is and his father says "In the bedroom with ... You'd better not go in." He says:"I want to see her" and when he goes into the room where the men are saying Kaddish around the bed, his mother tells him his grandmother died and he should go wash his face and comb his hair. She tells him that baba left a ring for his future wife. He does not see his grandmother. The film moves from the hushed bedroom to the living room where an enormous crowd who have come for the funeral, many of whom have probably not seen each other for a long time, makes a lot of noise.

He hears snatches of conversation and moves through the crowd quickly, escaping to the porch where he overhears an exchange between his uncle, the rabbi, and Dr. Katzman. It is this moment which seems to be the emotional climax of both the film and the story. It goes as follows:

> "I know exactly how you feel," Dr. Katzman said. "There's been a death in the family and the world seems indifferent to your loss. Your heart is broken and yet it's a splendid summer day...a day made for love and laughter...and that must seem very cruel to you."
>
> The rabbi nodded; he sighed.
>
> "Actually," Dr. Katzman said, "it's remarkable that she held out for so long...It's amazing. The mysteries of the human heart...Astonishing."

As they are talking, our attention moves from the two characters and is drawn along the courtyard, taking in clotheslines of fresh laundry, birds chattering, and children playing. A white sheet, framed by a bright sunny sky, flutters behind them. Suddenly, with an abruptness which seems almost harsh within this context, the sky darkens into sunset, the passage of time echoing visually what we are hearing the men discuss. Thus, we experience within a very brief span of time, as the boy remembers perceiving them, the mourners saying Kaddish over the body, the mother mourning, the visitors busily conversing, and the magnificent sunny day suddenly turning into evening. Dr. Katzman's attempt to help the uncle come to grips with the paradox of death in the midst of life is heartfelt. It is also the closest the film and the story come to an attempt to confront death and to find some solace through it.

As for the boy, we do not learn his response to this interchange, but whereas the story ends on the balcony, the filmmaker chooses to end the film by returning to the boy and his sister falling asleep in their room. She tells him that he can finally move into the back bedroom. He says, "Are you crazy?...She died in there...I couldn't sleep in there now. He is frightened and wants to talk; she wants to scare him, and when the lights are out, she drapes herself in a sheet, raises her arms, and wails "Bouyo-bouyo. Who's that sleeping in my bed? Woo-wooo." And the film ends on the mysterious image of a grey ghost in a pitch-black room filling up the frame. What starts as a child's game becomes, from the boy's point of view — the entire film and story are experienced from the boy's point of view — a frightening shadowy presence. The film which starts with the words "The summer my grandmother was supposed to die" ends with a ghostly image. Perhaps, from his perspective, it is the realization of the threat uttered earlier by his sister, that his grandmother's ghost would come back to haunt him.

Throughout the film, the boy experiences a mixture of feelings of obligation, resentment, and guilt. Perhaps he is being punished at the end for having wished that she would die, so he could have his own bedroom, for having wanted the funeral to take place so he could get $5, for ...for.... Perhaps in his mind, the ghost is somehow connected with this constellation of feelings. Perhaps ghost stories children like to hear, the ghost-games they play, are their way — the only way they know how — to come to grips with a very mysterious and alien fact. Perhaps it is only through their imagination, through story and play, that children can become familiar with the same fact that, in other terms, the doctor and the rabbi are grappling with in the sunlight: One moment one is full of life, pulsing and vibrant, and the next moment, one <u>is</u> no longer. How to apprehend such a fact?

One way to come to grips over time with impossible-to-comprehend truth about death is to filter the pain through the distortions of memory, as if to do so were to minimize the pain associated with the loss. For the adult narrator looking back, one might well ask whether his way of viewing the past is meant to block out the pain and the discomfort and to focus instead on more pleasant memories. One might also wonder why in both the story and film, there is so little evidence of love for his grandmother. Does this make it easier to lose her?

Among the ways the filmmaker depicts the capacity of memory to reconstruct the past, and among the most powerful moments in the film, are those instants of metamorphosis when for a second one has the impression that all the laws of physics have been called into question: Space is everywhere and nowhere, time does not exist and is eternal, anything can be transmuted into anything else. Caroline Leaf is known for these metamorphic epiphanies; they appear in her other films, but seem especially appropriate in this film, where the passage of time is central to the film's point of view. In one particularly lovely series of transmutations, activities of the mother's hands metamorphose lyrically from swirling ingredients in a mixing bowl to brushing the boy's hair in the same direction to washing the floor and back to mixing food again. All the activities flow into one another in such a way that one gets the impression of an endless stream of manual labor — presented in a lyrical, loving way, which is how the son chooses to remember his mother. Thus, Leaf draws on the enormous potential

of animation for depicting subjectivity, not only in terms of moments in the present, but also in regard to the patterns of association one uses to structure moments of the past in one's memory.

For Caroline Leaf the essence of this story is the little boy and how he apprehends the reality of death. For this reason she left a great deal out of the film, such as background on the grandmother's late husband, the famous Zaddik, and on their life together. She also left out material that she felt would have made the film harder to take, because, she believed, it was "so direct and earthy" in regard to the reactions to the grandmother's dying, such as the mother's statement, "It's not my mother anymore in the back room, Doctor. It's an animal. I want her to die."[3] Leaf wanted to cut out what she sensed as the cynicism in the story and to soften it emotionally, giving it the warmth and feeling she felt it lacked. Despite these efforts, for a long time people responded to the film by saying it was too direct in regard to its treatment of death for children to watch. That has gradually changed, as attitudes have changed. No longer so anxious to shield their children from contact with death, perhaps influenced by the work of such writers as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, there are many advocates in the United States and Canada of more honesty and openness on the subject of death in general. This shift in attitude has permeated their approach to children as well.

It is one thing to attempt to free the subject of death from the taboos and secrecy is has been covered over with on a social level. It is quite another matter, however, when it comes to looking back on one's own childhood experiences. That calls upon a different kind of courage. The little boy in The Street seems to be floating through a world in which someone very close to him is dying. No one seems to be concerned to talk with him about it, to explore how he feels. He is kept away from the religious ceremonies associated with the funeral as far as we can see, in order to shield him from death (even though, in the story, he says that he is old enough to go to the funeral). How can he make sense of what is happening? How can he integrate it in a meaningful way? According to the filmmaker, for the child meaning is derived from "a succession of details, a series of strong elements, whose effect is cumulative, rather than continuous."[4] The child is left out, yet his childhood goes on — his friendships, his playing, his ghost-games. Yet how can we know what he really felt then or what he really feels as an adult many years later? It is only in entering the territory between past and present that one can gather hints about his feelings.

To look back on one's childhood through the prism of memory is to enter a hall of mirrors in which one's present form is eclipsed by the reflections rippling off the distorting surfaces of the glass. One is neither that which one perceives nor that which one thinks one really is. An amalgam of the self one believes oneself to be and the vision bouncing off the surface begins to take form. It is this in-between region where the interest lies, the liminal territory between fact and wish, between knowledge and projection, between actuality and dream. And it is out of this concatenation of factual evidence, fear, and wish that a mythology is constructed, and one sees what one wants to see, what it serves one's purposes to envisage. It is precisely the construction of this mythology that reveals more of who one really is than any videotape of the events of the past might reveal.

How much truer this is when one looks back on a painful experience, when one re-examines a loss that occurred at a time in one's life when one lacked the resources of an adult, however meager even they may often seem. The little boy whose grandmother died when he was 9 years old after a long illness is now an adult, and reflecting back on his experiences of that time he discloses who he is today as well as who he was as a child. In reliving the memories of childhood, he touches some of the deepest feelings he has carried with him through the years since that event. Thus, The Street reveals that it is the process of filtering, the veils through which memory does its work, that is endlessly fascinating. Perhaps it is in exploring those veils of memory that one can begin to repair the tears of loss rent in the fabric of childhood. Perhaps it is precisely this yearning to make whole what can never be so again that has inspired Richler, Leaf, and myself to work on The Street.

NOTES

[1]Completed in 1976, The Street is a 10 min. 12sec. animated color film. It was created one image at a time, painted on a panel of milk-glass, directly under the camera. Using tempera paints, oil, and a rag, Leaf painted the events of the film, filming and erasing them as she went along. Among the many awards it received are the Academy Award Nomination (1977) and the Grand Prix of the International Animation Festival, Ottawa, Canada (1976).

The film is particularly noteworthy in that it is a rare example in film animation of a deeply moving work of art that is on a Jewish subject.

The Street is available in Israel through the Film Department of the Histadrut ("Machleket Hakolnoah Shel Hahistadrut") at Shenkin 12 in Tel Aviv; elsewhere it can be obtained through the offices of the National Film Board of Canada.

[2]The visual style of the film is almost childlike in its simplification of form — as though it were drawn by the 9 yr. old boy himself. To add to the roughness and freshness of the film, Leaf uses paint in a way which reminds one of children's finger-painting.

[3]Telephone interview with Caroline Leaf, 26 July 1985.

[4]Ibid.