

## Mandy and Me

By Elizabeth Orcutt

August 2006

I remember seeing the film *Mandy* (d: Alexander Mackendrick, 1952) for the first time when I was around eight or nine. One sequence, two discrete images, condensed my reaction and has remained with me since, leaving a persisting wraith of sorrow.

Caged behind a mesh of chicken wire, a girl child's face – eyes confused and face frowning – is resting on her forearm. She is framed by a hole in a back-yard wall: she looks from inside the home to the world outside, into a street in a non-descript post war town where other children are playing. This image, the film stills or short sequence has stayed with me since I first saw the film in the 70's.

Sunday afternoons in my childhood were usually empty. My parents would be resting or busy with jobs, my sister reading and me, I was “bored”. I would watch the Sunday matinee; it was the early seventies. I remember being grief-stricken, heart aching, by Mandy's story although I was unable to make sense of my feelings at the time and at that young age emotional hangovers don't hang around long. Watching the film earlier this year I was reminded of the bewildering emotion and all those other times when intensity of feeling inappropriately

outweighs the situation. The preparatory school me had identified strongly with the isolated little girl in the film, I was she and she was me. The connection I feel with that picture of Mandy in her grandparent's yard is pure fiction, a teleportation of myself immediately into and out of that image.

In her analysis of the same film, critic Annette Kuhn describes a similar experience, with the past intruding inappropriately into the present, literally unearthing an ancient reaction to the piece. Referring to herself in the third person, Kuhn says:

*"It is the mid 1980s: Annette is in a Soho wine bar with a woman friend, also a film critic. Somehow the topic of Mandy enters the conversation, and the two women chat for a while about the film, in the way people who enjoy cinema, and enjoy ideas about cinema, do. Suddenly Annette burst into tears.*

*If the memory passed in ruefully understanding laughter, it was certainly an odd one. The tears had come unbidden and insistent, from some part of Annette that was decisively not the film scholar, nor even the cinephile. The grownups' conversation had been interrupted by something inappropriate and other – a child's response, troubling and impossible to ignore. The little Annette had at last successfully waylaid the adult, forcing some difficult questions on to the agenda." (Kuhn, 1995, 27)*

Back in my own present: re-reading Kuhn's *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, re-watching the film and re-visiting the connection with the character Mandy gave me a pointer to understanding my preoccupation with the terminally ill children, whose lives I had been recording for the Chain of Hope, a

medical charity based in Luxor, Egypt. In 2001 I spent a week working alongside and documenting the staff and volunteers. But I found myself similarly, deeply affected by that trip.

The charity treats children, some with quite simple heart defects that are often treated *in utero* in the West. In Egypt although there is the medical talent to deal with these problems but there is little resource for the necessary specialist training and facilities. So the children who came to the Luxor clinics were part of a life or death lottery. Left untreated these congenital defects are fatal by the time the child reaches adolescence. The families were well aware of the probable outcome. Mostly under 10, the children often had an alarmingly grey pallor from cyanotic heart disease. Some had the typical clubbing of fingers and toes and occasionally they performed the classic squatting, to relieve their breathlessness. In desperation, some Palestinian families had travelled on a bus from Gaza, 24 hours along the banks of the Nile, with an anxious hold-up at the Israeli border, which added more delay.

However, I was mystified by my reaction to those families facing the loss of a child. My response was more than a simple case of imagining how their situation might feel but an intense empathy. Those live tableaux provoked a grief – including disbelief, sadness and anger – that seemed larger, deeper than could be expected from someone who was “only” a visitor.

As is often the case for adults of my age and nationality, my most significant experience of loss was the death of my grandparents. I knew them all and they died in fairly quick succession, one every year, around the time I saw the film *Mandy*. We did not live close to either set of grandparents. We would spend limited time with them as an extended family group: summer or Christmas holidays and family parties. They were kindly, distant, old people to me.

In her introduction to *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross describes how past generations were more accustomed to death and as a result how we are now even more distanced from it.

*“Widespread vaccination has practically eradicated many illnesses, at least in western Europe and the United States. The use of chemotherapy, especially the antibiotics, has contributed to an ever-decreasing number of fatalities in infectious diseases. Better child care and education have affected low morbidity and mortality among children. The many diseases that used to take an impressive toll among the young and middle-aged have been conquered.”* (1973, p1)

My parents – particularly my mother, who was devoted to my grandmother – were affected by their parents’ deaths. I was unaware of anything unusual at the time. My mother saw it as her duty as a nurturer to protect my sister and me from ‘bad’ feelings such as sadness. Kübler-Ross (writing when I was ten) describes my parents’ attitude quite accurately.

*“Death is viewed as a taboo, discussion of it is regarded as morbid, and children are excluded with the presumption and pretext that it would be “too much” for them.”* (6) And Kübler-Ross goes on to suggest that that approach can give a child “unresolved grief”. I would not say that I was a universally miserable child. But I remember not being happy. I felt I rarely got things right for others and this grieved me. I had the mantra, *“What’s wrong with me?”* running round my head.

So my Luxor experience, seemingly prompted by the children’s plight, left me wondering what death meant in today’s world. I had little familiarity with it, although no real fear of it. But what was it about death that so repelled people to the point of denial? My research took me to the work of various artists, shows and texts: from studies of autopsies by Sue Fox (considered alarming enough to be on restriction in the University library) and Andres Serrano, via the catalogues of post mortem photography, *Le Dernier Portrait*, at the Musee d’Orsay and *The Dead* at the National Museum of Film, Television and Photography in Bradford. I ordered books – like *The Natural Death Handbook* and a cardboard casket from it. I wandered around cemeteries and nagged my parents to think about their own passings and any wishes or arrangements they might like. I immersed myself in death and its literature. I found I was engaged by the imagery and interested by the texts yet I got no closer to the feeling and the explanation of it.

I was left cold. The common thread seemed to be intensity of feeling, the brew of bereavement.

So it wasn't the potential death of the children that was touching me. It was what a child meant to those families and the mesh of relationship that is threatened, exposed under such conditions. The families made a picture of devotion and feeling which was strikingly significant to me. Somehow I was transferring the child I carry with me onto those tableaux of dutiful families that were all around the Luxor hospital. I was projecting myself onto the scene.

*Projection is the psychological process that involves the attribution of unacceptable thoughts, feelings, traits or behaviours to others that are characteristic of oneself (Sandler 1989; Clark 1998). Whereas in transference the therapist or others are experienced as having the same attributes as significant others, in projection is the disowned aspects of self that are 'transferred' onto the other. (Grant & Crawley, 2002, 18).* The key part of this definition for me in relation to the Luxor families is the disowning of something personal and unbearable. What I needed to do was look at myself in relation to my own family and examine the sense of bereavement that I hold within my younger self. The

family photograph then becomes the key, the artefact through which to re-visit those places.

My family's early years archive of photographs is kept in a corrugated cardboard box, the type for storing hanging files. When I was a child, it lived in a stationery box in the bottom drawer of my mother's desk. My love of the photographic image was born with those clandestine moments spent looking through the photos. There was something naughty about the act, bound up as it was with the privacy of my mothers' intimate possessions. Crouched on the carpet, I never tired of looking again and again at those familiar images. I always expected to see something new and was I reassured and comforted that I did not.

Like the image of Mandy, these photographs can transport me back to that time. By looking through that cardboard box of those family photographs, I found a discrepancy between what I remembered and what the pictures were showing. As I searched that box of images I was disquieted by their familiarity and unfamiliarity: a condition that gave me a strong sense of *déjà vu*.

One of my earliest memories is having a picnic in a field with my nanny, Marion, my mother and my sister. I remember being hot (the band of my sunhat was

close-fitting and my shoes felt tight), the smell of the grass, the pollen from the buttercups and being slightly snifflly, itchy-eyed from it. There are many photographs from a picnic like that one and I cannot be sure if the images support my memory or if my memory is made from those photographs.

In his book about memory, *Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older*, Dr Douwe Draaisma, describes an incident in the childhood of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. Piaget had clear memory of a near kidnap when he was an infant in which his nursemaid beat off the kidnapper and received a material reward. Many years later she converted to Christianity and her conscience would not allow her to keep the prize so she returned it with the confession that the episode had been invented. Yet Piaget had a clear memory of the incident, including the lesions on the nurse's face.

As I look at those photographs from my childhood I little recognise the child that physically resembled me; there is a discrepancy between what I remember and the child in the pictures. That gap between the image and the experience and the memory is universal. The exhibition catalogue for the Barbican show *Who's Looking at the Family?* written by Val Williams, includes the family album images of June and Hilda Thompson as children and describes that gap as propaganda. Years later, the women had murdered their father who had cruelly and systematically abused them.



“Tommy Thompson’s photographs of his severely damaged children acted as propaganda, both within and outside the family, and positioned him as a seemingly loving storyteller who dealt, persuasively, in idylls.” (1994, 30)

The damage enacted on the little girls is unseen in the images; they appear together with smiling faces.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes the family photograph in similar terms

*“Because the family photograph is a ritual of the domestic cult in which the family is both subject and object, because it expresses the celebratory sense which the family group gives to itself, and which it reinforces by giving it expression, the need for the photographs and the need to take photographs (the internalization of the social function of this practice) are felt all the more intensely the more integrated the group and the more the group is captured at the moment of its highest integration.”* (1990, 30)

I needed to remake those images and express those different elements: The fiction of my memory, the party line of the family and the bridge between past and present and include the old self still contained within me now.

Initially, I worked with artefact and memory. I was intrigued not just by the images but by what appeared within them. One photograph shows my first writing lesson with my great aunt. I struggled hard to write the letter “E”, adding too many horizontal strokes, getting it wrong, and my sister, with helpful energy,

looks on. We were working at a small, round, wooden table that belonged to my mother's mother and is now in my family's home. That image and table provided the link between the past and the present. By re-photographing the table and fusing the images together, table now with image of then, I could make a new photograph that expressed the past in the present. As I worked on the *Memory* series of images, they became less attached to specific instances and artefacts and more concerned with general memory: the ghost of the child that was me and her fantasy and aspiration projected into the present and expressed in terms of the past. However, these pictures still did not articulate the sense of bereavement that followed my childhood or the discrepancy between how I remember me and the child that was I in the images. I needed to re-introduce myself, to obscure myself then with me now.

I collected clothes from charity shops and watched the weather for the right conditions; I had to check lighting and shadow direction. Working variously with my own children as the photographer we shot the images again and again until the light resembled the original and shape I was throwing matched or fitted the original. Finally, when constructed, the images were saying what I wanted: with myself as the bridge between the past and the present, obscuring my child self, a deadpan Lilliputian anomaly, out of time and out of place, a jolt and a jar to the vernacular.

In his wide-ranging analysis of child photography Chris Townsend says:

*Childhood is an imaginary place colonised exclusively by adults. Children – aware of their different status, but not knowing what that status is – do not live there. They are always somewhere else – gone...into imaginary spaces that we, as adults, cannot enter. To compensate for the child's absence, adults substitute representations: photographs, films, stories. Childhood becomes a screen for our own projections – both present: what and who we imagine "our" child is, what they are doing, thinking, now and past: what and who we believe we were and cannot properly remember. Media exist that "fix" those projections: still photographs, the flickering, stained and damaged reels from sixties' cine-cameras, the hyper-real and still false footage of the nineties camcorder. We need the image, and we need the fix, the fiction of fact, as a guarantee for our stories. (Townsend, 1998 p13-14)*

When my own children were small I was resistant to making images of them: friends would say how strange they found it, with comments like "I'd love to be able to make great images of my child, why don't you?" On analysis my stance was childish: an infantile stubbornness that now my children have grown has benefited no one. I believe now that my reservations were based on my unease about being photographed: the obstinate photographer was really the wilful articulation of a younger self and the images of my childhood are much more to do with the fiction woven around my parents' lives than a description of mine.

The neurologist Dr Oliver Sacks describes a life as narrative,

*"It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative,' and that this narrative is us, our identities...for each of us is a biography, a story. "* (Sacks, 1985, 105) And the American scholar, Paul John Eakin, articulates further, *"The self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure,* (Eakin, 1985, 3). The family photograph is a manifestation of that invention.

Elizabeth Orcutt: Practice bibliography

Bourdieu P (1990) trans. Whiteside S, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*. London: Polity Press

Draaisma D (2004), *Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older: How Memory Shapes Our Past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Dow Adams T (2000), *Light Writing and Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press.

Eakin P J (1998), *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Representation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

Grant J and Crawley J (2002), *Transference and Projection*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

Haverty Rugg L (1997), *Picturing Ourselves*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press

Kuhn A (1995), *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*. London and New York: Verso

Kubler-Ross, E (1970), *On Death and Dying*. London and New York: Routledge

*Mandy* (1952), d Mackendrick A; p Norman L; sc Whittingham J and Balchin N; cast: Jack Hawkins (Richard Searle), Terence Morgan (Harry Garland), Phyllis Calvert (Christine Garland), Mandy Miller (Mandy Garland); US title: *Crash of Silence*

Townsend C (1998), *Vile Bodies: Photography and the Crisis of Looking*. Munich and New York: Prestel-Verlag in cooperation with Channel Four Television Corporation

Sacks O (1995), *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*. New York: Summit

Williams V (1994), *Who's Looking At the Family*. London: Barbican Art Gallery