

Psychiatry in film

Aftersun

Owen P. O'Sullivan 

Set at a Turkish resort in the mid-1990s, writer–director Charlotte Wells' 2022 film debut dramatises a young, separated father, Calum (Paul Mescal), on holiday with his 11-year-old daughter, Sophie (Frankie Corio).

'When you were eleven, what did you think you would be doing now?'

Precocious Sophie is beginning to make sense of adolescence, more complex emotions and, indeed, her father.

'I think it's nice that we share the same sky.'

Calum is torn between efforts to ensure a memorable holiday and inner throes to maintain his own equilibrium. Sophie's exploratory curiosity contrasts with his slightly hurried sense of imparting wisdom and encouragement. Superficially composed, his struggles gradually become clearer. We see his various and eclectic self-improvement books dotted in scenes. He struggles also in the father role and reflects heedlessly to Sophie on his approaching birthday:

'Can't see myself at forty, to be honest ... surprised I made it to thirty.'

Switching to a more avuncular and parental mode, he encourages Sophie to be open with him.

'I've done it all and you can too.'

Sophie's memories of her father are recorded, remembered and sometimes both. Their camcorder footage is interspersed: sometimes played back, sometimes viewed 'live'. Visually, the entire film appears hazy and grainy with frequent languorous shots. The cinematography (Gregory Oke) strongly evokes a sense of reminiscence by rendering an ethereal hue to the story as it softly frames the lead actors' compelling performances.

Calum is moved to purchase her a Persian rug he likely cannot afford.

'Each of these carpets tell a different story.'

He speaks to her mother on a payphone, their valedictory expressions of love confusing Sophie. He embarrasses her by dancing alone.

Calum unravels further as his birthday nears. Sophie enlists the pair in a karaoke competition at the resort, but ultimately performs solo (R.E.M. – 'Losing My Religion') with a tense Calum watching on unwilling to join his daughter. Afterwards he criticises her performance then issues a conciliatory offer to pay for singing lessons: this is rebuked citing unkept past promises.

Fragments of Calum in arresting strobe-infused rave flashbacks are a recurring motif. Here, hidden agonies are writ large. Thoughts of turmoil, regression, catharsis and stasis in time are all engendered. Much later, Sophie joins – trying to find him – and they assume a more nightmarish nature. Musical accompaniment more directly belies Calum's deteriorating mental state as he struggles to stay afloat (notably, Queen and David Bowie – 'Under Pressure').

As their father–daughter holiday together ends, Calum films dropping Sophie for her flight back to Edinburgh. The viewer learns little of the cause of Calum's suffering or what fate befell him. All we know is he re-enters the rave.

'I just feel a bit down or something.'

In present day, we encounter adult Sophie – herself a new parent – watching home videos and retracing the contours of her childhood and father. Through a plaintive and melancholic lens, and replete with delicate symbolism, Wells' debut is a tender yet powerful meditation on temporality, childhood, parenthood, love, memory and loss.

Declaration of interest

None.

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