

Me

and

Mine

Lucy Beech

Foreword

Steven Bode

Director, Film and Video Umbrella

An essay by Naomi Pearce
'When We Will Need You'

To accompany the film
Me and Mine, 2015, by Lucy Beech



How do you sum up a life? Me – a name on a headstone. Mine – all the things and the traces one leaves behind. People come and go, but Death is constant, eternal, implacable. It haunts us, like a shadow to the side of us; waiting in the wings, where its miscellaneous attendants (the undertakers, ministers and assorted dramatis personae of the funeral ceremony) hover discreetly, at one or two removes. The business of Death is a solemn affair, and its rhythms and rituals can also feel timeless, permanent, set in stone. But the contemporary funeral industry is changing, embracing alternative practices, acknowledging different voices, and, as Lucy Beech's film bears witness, increasingly fronted and influenced by women. Pivoting around an annual awards event at which the growing contribution of women to the sector is celebrated, *Me and Mine* records (and applauds) this transformation, but also pauses to reflect on what else these changes might be said to signify.

The arc of the film appears instructive: images of black-coated men with matching black hearses and horses contrast with an open-air women-only workshop whose participants affirm women's 'natural' facility for empathy – a show of affinity and belonging that later intensifies into a display of togetherness and solidarity as more and more female nominees scoop the evening's awards. How real are these expressions of fellow feeling, however, and how strong are the bonds between the women themselves? By highlighting internal tensions and uncertainties, Beech introduces other doubts. Although the quality of empathy may have a powerful currency in today's 'affective economy', and while the range of new bereavement services on offer chimes

perfectly with a culture that actively privileges self-realisation and emotional transparency, the basic premise of what is, after all is said and done, essentially a service performed for others occasionally blurs with older notions of so-called ‘women’s work’: caring, sharing; often selfless, sometimes subordinate – stereotypes that many had thought had been laid to rest but which can live on in other forms. Empathy may be a badge to wear, but it can also be a cross to bear. Incisive and provocative, *Me and Mine* demonstrates how the business of Death sheds unexpected light on the way we live now, and how the rhetoric of community that underlies people’s periodic appeals to the universal virtues of human society and interpersonal relationships sits ambiguously with an increasingly assertive politics of the self.

‘When We Will Need You’

Naomi Pearce



My mum was 19 when she saw her first dead body:

R.A.F. Corporal Hawke had melanomas the size of saucers. He was very, very tall and so, so skinny, his body was being eaten away.

Susan Sontag writes that metaphorically speaking cancer is not so much a disease of time as a disease of space. We think of it consuming us, we refer to it topographically: the way it shrinks or spreads.

Procedure to go through: washing him, combing his hair etc. before the family came in.

Does she omit for the sake of brevity how they closed his eyes or shut his open mouth, re-arranged his tongue, unclenched his hands? What painful evidence do we spare the living?

After they'd gone putting him in a white shroud ready to go to the Mortuary in a lidded metal trolley. They may do things differently now.

She was nurse, then mother. Maker of beds and lunches: no real distinction between public and private life, a giver of care (assumed to be natural carer), a woman with wants who like many before and others since was forced to submit in the wake of a split rubber. The white shroud: like those used by 'shrouding women' before death became a business. As neighbourhood caregivers, it was women who used to care for the dead.

What did I think? Well probably sadness, as such a young man. And arrrrrgb... my first dead body and he is only 25 and I'm 19... help, that's not fair. Cold flesh, a bit creepy. I could say anything and get no reply.



The dead can't speak and we who live don't like to speak of them.

It hasn't always been this way. Dying was once a public process. Think of old paintings depicting deathbeds like thrones, stages on which the sick would lie so the well could best observe them.

'Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death,' wrote Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay 'The Storyteller'. He thought the removal of dying from the perceptual world of the living was a contributing factor in the decline of storytelling.

What had once been a moment for families and friends to gather and reflect on the life of the soon-to-be deceased was now a process of disconnected necessity. Where life's meaning had once been delivered, an unarticulated lack took its place.

Me and Mine wants to tell a story about the women who work in rooms touched by death. In this way the bodies these female undertakers clean, bury or burn play a supporting role. In fact they are notably absent; this is a story that can't tell itself. Perhaps today, just as Benjamin had predicted, it's too difficult (maybe impossible) to be a storyteller: even when we face the dead head-on they manage to slip away. Lucy's camera traces mechanisms of support, the facilitators who empathise when asked and the practices they implement (ready to order).

Everything is and yet is not what it seems. Like Lucy's previous films, *Me and Mine* performs the documentary as fiction, presenting scenes that unfold like re-enactments: scenarios faithfully recalled yet critically reinterpreted. Sometimes even the voices we hear don't belong to the actors. 'Reality' is reassigned to narrate orchestrated scenes. To focus upon unpicking the truths embedded in this narrative or to search for its seams would be a waste of energy: its power rests in attempting to transgress these categories. The nuts and bolts or raw materials for these 're-enactments' are fabricated from 'field notes', research collected through active engagement in workshops, counselling sessions and networking events: contexts that demand group performance whilst blurring the boundaries between work and play.

This time we're concerned with a burgeoning network of female funeral specialists – gravediggers, embalmers, celebrants and funeral directors. The film wants to give a voice to these women and their efforts to gain visibility outside of an industry dominated by men. Part of the purpose of this story is a form

of consciousness raising, a tool consistently deployed by the Feminist Movement and a strategy loaded with historical baggage in the ways women relate to other women.

For the last two years Lucy has documented the Good Funeral Awards, a weekend celebration of alternative funeral excellence. Workshops and seminars covered topics such as ‘Self Deliverance’, ‘Digital Goodbyes’ and ‘Credible Passion’. Award Categories included: ‘Best Bereavement Resource’, ‘Green Funeral Director of the Year’ and ‘Major Contribution to the Understanding of Death’. Described by one of its participants as ‘the nucleus of the industry’s female revolution’, this event forms the narrative framework from which *Me and Mine* takes its shape.

This is Lucy’s methodology – she embeds herself to bear witness. In this case empathy isn’t enough: she must have details. In an interview with Chris Kraus, writer Sheli Heti describes these tactics as ‘getting knowledge by putting our bodies through things’. To tell a story about deaths, be they actual bodies or archetypes, Lucy had to live through them first.



Although her camera always prefers to look at women, *Me and Mine* shows us men first: a head of grey hair concentrates, a double chin shakes as rough hands rub and polish. Lucy doesn’t linger long on these actions, not like she does when she’s with Vivian, the film’s protagonist, an employee of The Co-operative Funeralcare. Caught in profile at an upstairs window, Viv has the kind of face whose expressions are hard to interpret. Can someone look conflicted and content at the same time? The sound of her ripping a white shirt into rags breaks the silence and it feels like a release: breaking up or breaking down as dust particles wait, suspended mid air.



Or maybe Viv has got it together and she's just going through the motions. Shirts must be ripped to make rags. This opening sequence of individuals grafting, turning like cogs, carrying out procedures, these scenes prepare us, maybe seduce us. *Me and Mine* wants us to watch when we're under the influence, sensitive to its specific rituals. Are we being enticed to perform emotional labour? In her book *The Empathy Exams*, Leslie Jamison writes that empathy is work: 'To say going through the motions – this isn't reduction so much as acknowledgement of effort – the labour, the motions, the dance – of getting inside another person's state of heart or mind.' Feelings don't simply happen; we have to construct them first. Perhaps this sequence of actions is another example of how we toil? We build feelings through objects and habits, by sewing gold trim on the edge of a cape or combing the hair of a horse's mane.



'We are the *natural* carers' declares Helen, a representative of Eco Alternatives. See the logo branded on her chest, embroidered into green fleece. Lines are drawn and sides taken through acts of naming. Apparently one woman who Lucy interviewed at the awards referred to The Co-operative as 'the dark side': it's too expensive, too off-the-shelf; it hasn't got the needs of the bereaved in mind. Not surprising that independent outfits rally against a corporate chain. You just have to look at the numbers: more than 60 million in profit last year, 900 funeral homes and counting. Or you could look at the exposés: the TV programme *Dispatches* filmed the wrong body being sent to a funeral, whilst others were stored in warehouses, shunted back and forth like faulty TVs.

Bad press means Viv must keep a low profile: actually *be* a shrouded woman. She tampers with her nametag, hiding allegiances, hedging the political in an attempt to be personal. Just Viv.

This nametag is a shifting marker that symbolically reflects Viv's experience. An unlikely amulet – first it's concealed, then lost, before it's found, revealed and reconciled. It also allows Helen to show just how good a carer she can be. Returning it to Viv, employer exposed, her accepting smile evidence of empathy even when faced with 'the dark side'.

Helen speaks about caring like it's an essential female trait, something universal or shared. In her essay 'Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain', Leslie Jamison narrates the ways that wounded women are similarly evoked: 'The moment we start talking about wounded women, we risk transforming their suffering from an aspect of the female experience into an element of the female constitution – perhaps its finest, frailest consummation'. Jamison struggles to reconcile the facts of female pain with the cultural fetishisation of wounded womanhood. She thinks to invoke can legitimise, almost legislate more suffering.

What similar transformations do we enable when we assign care-giving and empathy as elements of the female constitution? Do women care because they want to, or because they're repeatedly being told they should? Perhaps the caring woman, like the wounded woman, gets constructed. Sometimes she is, but that doesn't mean she's not true.



www.mortuarylift.com is a real life website despite its oxymoron name. I think of a machine that's morbidly uplifting; I wonder whether it's possible to feel like that? A video demonstrates this convenience at work: a body is cradled in white canvas straps, suspended above a coffin like livestock above a pen. A woman with a remote presses a couple of buttons – she doesn't break a sweat.

'It's changed everything,' says one woman to another during the bus scene. Is this the kind of cyborg Donna Haraway had in mind? Flesh and metal eventually unified – the body's final movement enabled by technology. A machine to help women with what they lack organically, that is the strength to lift the dead?

1985, Donna Haraway, predictions for Paid Work Place:
development of new time arrangements to facilitate the homework economy (flex time, part time, over time, no time); homework and out work; increased pressures for two-tiered wage structures; significant numbers of people in cash-dependent populations world-wide with no experience or no further hope of stable employment; most labour 'marginal' or 'feminized'.

Is this push for female undertakers just another way of making the most of a gap – a gap in faith, belief systems and new forms of eco-consciousness? Are we being asked to see this event as a way of capitalising on these gaps – of branding yourself, and your business, or filling that gap with alternatives that are based on celebrating individualism.

The actress who plays Helen worked as a life coach as well as an actor. She's a mother, an actress, a waitress and a wife. Experienced in filling multiple gaps, at plugging holes.

In some ways these 'alternatives' are as much smoke and mirrors as men polishing hearses: it's how convincing your performance is that counts.

What about the female undertaker as the ultimate feminist killjoy? Viv as this ominous presence, waiting for her moment to call these essentialist readings out.

I see the final scene at the hotel as consolation – an ending that performs Haraway's desire for coalition through affinity



not identity. Viv and Helen speak, their conversation a climax of sorts. Difference is acknowledged – Eco Alternatives meets The Co-operative – but no resolution achieved. It's more complex than that. There is always time for polite conversation.



In a 1979 article for *Feminist Review*, Angela Martin asked filmmaker Chantal Akerman: 'Are we looking for images of real women or films which are really about women?' *Me and Mine* elicits a similar response. As the group gathers for a workshop by the swimming pool, their skin bright from the reflection of the water, I think about Marks & Spencer and relatability. Legs together ladies, heads up, that's right, strong, casual, yes, beautiful: you're ageing comfortably. The middle-aged woman is so very rarely muse, that when we're forced to look at her (for lack of other bodies), we are suspicious, questioning motives, second-guessing intentions. Are we being asked to laugh? I want this film to be like a safe space not a coffee morning, more self-defence class than a hen do.

Recently I was at this Women's Meeting and a man heckled us as we sat outside the pub in a circle. The weather was nice and the grass dry. He pushed his body between ours and asked: 'What are you, a coven?' Woman is still limited to wife or witch or mother.

Other female archetypes: the drowning woman. Lucy delivers her to us again but this time different. Viv jumps in the pool, strong and deep. Where a limp and lifeless form would usually be, broad shoulders break the surface and billows of wet fabric float. The smiles in her leap, like the rip of the rags, an escape from feeling alienated, a kind of carefree cleansing.



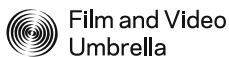
I wonder if Lucy is a communitarian? Whether she wants communities to endure? Her camera seems suspicious of the means by which we form bonds, the ways in which we come together through shared understanding. Chantal Mouffe argues that we don't have to choose – 'we are in fact always multiple and contradictory subjects, inhabitants of diversity, of communities constructed by a variety of discourses and precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those positions.' We're pulled together like cut skin. Open wounds that struggle to heal without the encouragement of laced thread: to enable this soothing, we must pierce the surface again first.

Objects can also aid this suturing. Awards, like sport kits or boy band merchandise, are at the same time full of meaning and yet empty sites for the coalescence of multiple desires. 'I'm not going to get an award from this lot any time soon,' said the real Viv to Lucy as they smoked a cigarette outside the hotel. Objects are coveted because they physically exist. In the film, we watch groups of women pass the statuettes around; the Egyptian God Anubis realised in miniature. This new revolution adopts a mascot whose very old history reinforces this community's authenticity. As protector of the dead and embalming, Anubis did a lot of work and waiting. His blackness was intended to signify the discoloration of the corpse after embalming, but also rebirth. Lucy's female funeral specialists represent a similar act of renewal. Their domestic approach to the practices of death a return to an old order of shrouded women from a pre-industrial landscape. In this sense, *Me and Mine* is trying to look back so it can look forward; it's a recollection of a story we once might have told.



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