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OF THE

OTTAWA PSYCHOANALYTIC SOCIETY

THEME: BETWEEN GENERATIONS

The Son's Room / La Stanza del Figlio (2001)

Director: Nanni Moretti

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All the king's horses and all the king's men... can't put a dead child together again. A broken teapot's handle can be fixed with glue, but death cannot be fixed. The essence of life is here one moment and snuffed out in the next. Screaming and rage cannot relieve bottomless grief. A stanza is a group of lines arranged together to form a unit of a poem; without it, the poem collapses like a bridge with a shattered strut. A vacant room reflects a lost life and truncated memories.

Nanni Moretti's film, *The Son's Room*, won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2001, just after the tragic events of 9-1-1. The film seems to encapsulate a microcosmic view of the senseless losses of 9-1-1, and yet stands alone as a tragic familial drama of trauma, grief, struggles against mourning, and finally, mourning and letting go.

Giovanni appears on the screen during the credits, running through the port area of a city on the Adriatic coast of Italy - a place of movement, travel, boats. When he sees some hare krishnas dancing and chanting, he seems fascinated with them, smiling and following. He seems to be a man in search of something; perhaps he is attracted to their apparent strength of living in the present through belief in the eternal soul. Yet Giovanni stands outside religion as many people in the modern world do. We discover later that he is unable to use its comforts to soothe him over his losses.

The film proceeds over the next half hour to show us Giovanni's private and professional life through a series of short vignettes that subtly layer relationship

upon relationship to give us a sense of who he is. The first sign of his family attachments comes in the form of a phone call from his son's school, informing him that his son has been accused of stealing a fossil from his biology class. His son, Andrea, denies the accusation.

Then we are thrust into his work life as a psychoanalyst, as we eavesdrop on moments of his sessions with several patients. For the sake of making links with the problem of mourning which is the focus of this film, I'd like to focus on his patients' difficulties with just this issue. There is the female patient who accuses him of hardly having listened to her over many years of treatment and who tries repeatedly to leave him. She is probably replaying with him the unbearable distance she experienced with her own parents, growing up; to mourn her inner relationship with them, she would have had to give up on them and seek intimacy elsewhere. All she can do, however, is endlessly rehearse leaving her cold analyst *qua* parent and then return to continue complaining. Giovanni directively advises a second patient to drop his guilt, learn to wait, and be relaxed; this approach reflects the attitude of some people to trauma -- an attempt to simply will the pain away through self control. A third male patient on the couch named Oscar (who is the only one who is named because of his role in the family tragedy) recounts a dream while insisting that psychoanalysis is just a waste of time; he typifies the attitude of some people who deny or minimize the importance of working through troublesome inner thoughts and feelings to avoid the pain involved in doing so. In fact, Oscar is unable

to link his dreams to his recurrent suicidal thoughts. All he can do is emphasize the split between his external life and his inner life when he asks: "How is it you can live normally, feel good and still consider killing yourself?" A fourth patient rages about his attraction to child porn, terrified of actually becoming a pedophile; he uses anger to defend himself against the pain of not being able to enjoy normal sex with his wife, an anger that hardens him against any possibility of working through his difficulties toward change. A fifth patient is an elegant and arrogant business man who finds all sorts of reasons to resist beginning an analysis or trying to figure out when it will end but without wanting to settle in and actually experience himself in the analytic process; this is typical of people who avoid experience in the here-and-now, who live in the past or the future but not in the present: it involves less feeling which terrifies them. Finally, a woman with obsessive-compulsive rituals kills too much time with these rather than live her life meaningfully, which terrifies her so much that she fears becoming schizophrenic. So instead, she would rather kill time until time kills her.

When Giovanni rejoins his family from his attached office, we meet his beautiful wife, Paola, an art gallery curator, his 17-year-old son, Andrea, and his 15-year-old daughter, Irene, who is heavily involved with sports. We get the feeling that this is a warm, happy, upper middle-class family with intense personal interests and clear attachments to one another. A strong image of family closeness emerges in a car trip when the whole family joins Giovanni in singing a song on the radio about

love. Yet the lyrics foreshadow the problem of mourning that will soon concern this family. A line of the song states: "To live, you have to die a little...goodbye, my love, goodbye". To move forward in life, you have to give up what came before and feel the pain of its loss.

Another foreshadowing comes one evening in bed when Giovanni is reading a poem by Raymond Carver. What is unstated is that Carver wrote this poem after a diagnosis of terminal lung cancer and the poem expresses his mourning over the coming loss of his body. Carver writes about having forgotten his own toes, what it felt like to be alive, to enjoy life. When Paola seems to be going to sleep, Giovanni makes love to her, but furiously, as if his body is trying to recall an old, lost pleasure just as Carver was.

It reminded me of my favourite old joke about aging: Two old men go to New York for a long weekend of fun. When they are settled into their hotel room, there is a knock at the door. One man opens the door to discover a luscious, sexy woman standing there. In suggestive tones, the woman asks "Can I interest either of you two gentlemen in some super sex?" The man contemplates the question and replies matter-of-factly: "I think I'll take the soup." It seems that all jokes about aging are attempts at mourning our losses over time through the wonderful defense of humour. My own late husband, when he was dying of cancer, used to talk about his "sense of tumour".

When Andrea confesses to his mother that he really did take the fossil as a joke, but it broke, causing him to hide the misdeed, we can see another way people avoid dealing with loss and destruction, by saying "It didn't happen, and even if it did, it wasn't me who caused the destruction". We are surprised, though, because we believed his denial; it seemed so sincere. That is the nature of denial: even the denier believes himself. However, Giovanni has already spent time worrying about his son, perhaps as a side effect of his chosen profession. He feels that Andrea is not competitive enough, that he deliberately lost a tennis match. He is also unconvinced that his son is innocent of the fossil theft. It is perhaps because his mother does not explore so deeply that Andrea is able to confess to *her* rather than to his father.

Oscar's phone call on Sunday morning, summoning Giovanni to his home to discuss his health concerns, marks the beginning of the second third of this film. The family has been planning how to spend the day together, but the interruption emphasizes how easy it is for a close family to dissipate into their own individual activities when one member removes himself. This, too, foreshadows the family's crisis.

The shock of discovering Andrea's death is expressed most eloquently in a series of visual images: the look of death on the face of the man who meets Giovanni on his return from the country; the sobbing of Andrea's friend and his inability to tell Giovanni what has happened to Andrea; the three surviving family

members desperately clutching one another in their grief; Irene asking the caretakers to remove the coffin lid so that she might have a last look at her brother; the coffin lid being soldered shut and the nails driven in.

The wordless imagery of the family's subsequent attempts to transcend their shock includes Paola's pitiful howling on her bed while Giovanni is at a carnival arcade, looking as shell-shocked and disengaged from life as one can possibly imagine as he is inundated with the noise and colour around him. He takes a dizzying ride, either to make himself feel something or to make himself unaware of anything beyond his dizziness. Irene becomes a parental child, making breakfast and pouring coffee for parents who are too traumatized to care for her.

Then we become aware of all the ways the family try to avoid going through a mourning process because that would imply letting go of Andrea which they are not yet ready to do. The camera goes dizzily back and forth between family vignettes and Giovanni's analytic sessions as if we, too, are stuck on a carnival rollercoaster that will not come to a stop.

The arrogant, elderly man who seemed so inert when he first came confesses he feels alive with Giovanni and wants to cry. He speaks for what Giovanni is not yet able to do. His pedophile patient tries to hug him, but Giovanni replies to his pain with the same platitudes he has always used, his energy being exhausted by his own inner struggles. His OCD patient tells him that she has stopped all her rituals because she finally spoke to her husband about them, and we feel that she found

the courage to do this to please her grieving analyst. Oscar worries about how his mother might react to the possibility that she might lose a son, then suddenly apologizes when he realizes he has touched his analyst's wound. But, of course, all his patients worry about him if they know of his loss, and they're all trying, consciously or unconsciously, to help him... by either helping themselves to change or by leaving therapy to ease his burden.

Writing responses to condolence notes, even to people they don't remember. Irene requesting a mass for her brother: she says "it's the least sad thing", and we realize that they are all pussyfooting around their sadness, trying to avoid mourning at all costs. Giovanni running at the port again, trying to drown his feelings in the regularity of his routine. Paola sitting in Andrea's room, as if she wants to inhale what is left of him to keep him inside her. Giovanni trying to undo the accident in a myriad of ways. He replays the same few seconds of music obscured by static, as if going backward might erase the flaw. He endlessly imagines an alternate Sunday when he would have refused to see Oscar and would have gone running with his son instead, as if the fatal accident might somehow have been prevented. He visits a scuba diving store to get information about faulty equipment, as if that would explain what happened to his son. He and Paola discuss the mysterious evidence of the accident, the uncertainty of which no amount of conjecture can resolve. All these little scenes impose the weight of their attempts to avoid letting go of their son.

Once the family can no longer deny their loss, Irene is suspended from her beloved basketball team after a fight with the referee, illustrating a common defense against sadness - "better mad than sad". Giovanni crumbles into his own angry responsiveness when he complains that everything in the house is chipped and damaged. He irritably derides the meaninglessness of the priest's statement "If the master knew when the thief would come, then he would not be robbed," and rages about the impossibility of religion bringing him any comfort. However, we do remember his nostalgic wish to blend with the Hare Krishnas, but from an unspannable distance. Giovanni fights with Oscar in the consulting room. Irene fights with Matteo and they break up. Giovanni and Paola cannot agree on how to move forward and they become estranged.

The third and final part of the film represents the phase of mourning and letting go. It begins with Paola receiving an unexpected letter addressed to Andrea. When she discovers that it comes from a girl he met for one day on a recent camping trip and who claims to love him, she wants to contact her to let her know of his death. She wants to meet Arianna just because she remembers everything about that single day they met, even his clothes; we get the feeling that Paola wants to steal this unknown experience for herself, in yet another attempt to hold on to Andrea.

Yet it is Paola who ushers in the phase of letting go by wanting to speak of Andrea - to friends, to Arianna. Speaking of him at this point means dealing in the

realm of memory and loss rather than holding onto him as if he were still alive. And it is *Giovanni* who resists the letting go more than she. *Paola* accuses him of not wanting to talk about *Andrea* because it makes him feel as if he's losing something. And she's right... talking brings out their grief and is part of the mourning that they have been resisting. But *Giovanni* resists the pain of making his loss real and he is unable to compose the letter to *Arianna* informing her of *Andrea's* death. It is *Paola* who is able to call *Arianna* and complete this task. When *Giovanni* clings to his fantasies of how he might have prevented the accident, still desperate to undo the death, *Paola* confronts him with his impossible attempt to turn back time. This is the moment that the couple is the farthest apart psychologically, and so they are unable to share the same bed that evening.

It is in session with his patients that *Giovanni* begins to crack. When one of them tells him that *Giovanni* seems to transcend guilt with him, we know this is not true of *Giovanni's* own overwhelming internal guilt about *Andrea's* death, even though this guilt is as irrational as the patient's. Interestingly, it is with a new patient who knows nothing of his loss that *Giovanni* breaks down and sobs when she says she loves children but could never have any. We see that *Giovanni's* armor is beginning to crack and he is beginning to mourn.

Giovanni feels so removed from the life he had before *Andrea's* death that he no longer feels comfortable practicing psychoanalysis. The loss has emptied him out so that he even questions his attachment to his wife. He makes one last

desperate attempt to reconnect with his dead son - by buying a music CD "for someone his son's age", as if Andrea were still alive.

When Arianna arrives, she becomes the family's missing child by association. They act protectively toward her and her new boyfriend, and find themselves spontaneously driving the couple to the French border. This car trip recalls the earlier one with Andrea, when they all sang together as a close family unit. The car trip with Arianna serves two functions in this family's mourning. On the one hand, clinging to Arianna rather than letting her leave on her own is yet another act of resistance to recognizing that they have been diminished as a family. On the other hand, they are rehearsing a leave-taking that will turn out better for them than the one in which Andrea died.

So, when they finally drive into a lovely coastal town in the morning, and Irene awakes and asks where they are, the parents start laughing at the incongruity of their situation. It is the first time they have laughed since Andrea's death. This is an important moment of transition, because they have emerged out of their traumatized state to spontaneously do something for someone else, and their adventure has brought them back inside their own lives. When they put the young couple on the bus, it seems like a natural, voluntary goodbye to Andrea, because they are now in a place where they are finally letting go of him. They walk along the beach - separately, but no longer lost.