

Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics
Number 66, July 2014
ISSN: 2047-0622
URL: www.freeassociations.org.uk



REVIEW

ATMEN (BREATHING) (Dir. Karl Markovics, Austria, 2011)

Donald Campbell

Abstract: We are delighted to publish the text of Donald Campbell's discussion of this film following its screening at the 7th European Psychoanalytic Film Festival held in London on 1st November 2013.

Introduction

All of us have secrets. The most powerful secrets are not the ones that we keep hidden from the knowledge of others, but the ones that we, *unconsciously*, keep secret from ourselves. In *Breathing*, we watch the uncovering of a secret that Roman Kogler, an 18-year-old adolescent, does not know that he has.

Empathy

I would like to discuss the way *Breathing* illuminates the role of empathy in the recovery from trauma. Empathy is often associated with a cloying, cosy, feel-good contact. The danger inherent in sentimentalising empathy is that we fail to empathise with the negative aspects of the person's personality, such as his aggression or manipulation. Karl Markovics, the director and screenwriter of *Breathing*, does not make this mistake. The psychoanalyst Stephano Bolognini (2004) reminds us that although empathy is essential to psychoanalytic attunement the analyst cannot 'turn on' empathy. Instead, Bolognini observes that empathy emerges from within the analyst through a process that begins with an awareness that we are out of touch with ourselves,

with our own humanity. This awareness provides the analyst with the opportunity to find himself again through self-empathy. However, to be authentic and not sentimental one must empathise with those negative aspects of oneself that we recognise in the other.

This process is illustrated in *Breathing* by two characters – Rudi, and Roman’s mother, Margrit – who move through negative aspects of themselves to self-empathy, and then to empathy with Roman. Rudi, the driver of the mortuary van, begins by taunting Roman about his murderousness, which I felt was motivated by Rudi’s anxiety about Roman who he called ‘one of the real tough ones’.

I think that a turning point in the film occurs when Roman, Rudi and Schorn, his boss, attend to an elderly mother who died in her home. Up until this moment the scenes have been filmed in stark, barren, grey colours. However, we are prepared for something lively in the vibrant red colour of the bag worn by the woman who passes Roman and Rudi dressed in black and carrying the empty casket upstairs to the flat. There is a significant warming of the colours in the flat. There is also something transformative for Roman about being in a home with pictures of children and a plaster angel on the wall because it represents ordinary family life where we find moments of empathy. Roman is portrayed as someone who grew up in an orphanage and never really knew about life in a family home. He seems to gain strength from being in the flat and, for the first time, he stands up to Rudi’s bullying and denigration and pushes Rudi off his feet. I think Rudi gains some respect for Roman. Roman, in turn, is touched by how Rudi gently washes and dresses the dead woman. Meanwhile, in the hall, Roman is aware of Schorn’s compassion for the daughter-in-law’s distress. Although the men are matter of fact and unemotional about their response to dead bodies, they always show respect.

In *Breathing*, home is depicted as a place where things can be made all right between people; Schorn and the daughter-in-law, and particularly between Rudi and Roman, where the initial judgement is not the final one, and where things can be clarified, even if not clearly understood. In the film home seems to function as a metaphor for a psychological space where grievances can be sacrificed, and where internal relationships can be rebuilt.

This scene is followed by Roman reacting emphatically to the hysterical grief of a woman reacting to the sudden death of a man in the middle of a small city park. Like Rudi and Roman, we do not know if the man is the woman’s husband or father or friend. When the policeman tells

the woman to shut up, Roman goes to her defence and shouts at the policeman to 'shut up'. In another empathic response, Rudi pulls Roman away before he angers the cop.

The theme of home reappears when Roman's lack of a home is reinforced by following his mother to IKEA, an artificial setting of home furnishings designed to give a limited illusion of home. Near the end of the film, home is linked to the world outside the prison. The prison guard who earlier has told Roman to hurry because he wanted to go home, realised that Roman, who had grown up in an orphanage, had never lived in a home, and since he was 14 had never been free to experience the world outside prison. Once he recognised this, the guard, who at first treated Roman sadistically, could now empathise with Roman's wish have a beer with a girl like adolescents do in the outside world, and not report him.

Later Rudi talks about his own wishes for his future, a bigger motorbike, and the realisation that he may not fulfil his dream. I think Rudi's capacity to empathise with how difficult it is to fulfil his own dream enables him to empathise with Roman's inability to achieve a kind of professional status, represented by his inability to tie his tie, and shows him how to do it, not by doing it for Roman, but by letting Roman tie his own tie by watching Rudi tie his. It was the kind of thing a good enough father does for his son. As he walks past Roman, Rudi quickly pats him on the arms, a tender fatherly gesture. Later, we see Rudi throwing Roman the car keys thereby inviting him to learn how to drive, another typical father son moment. Rudi emerges as the unlikely father figure that Roman never had.

Roman's mother, Margrit, initially answers his question, 'Why did you give me up?' by saying it was 'the best thing I did in my life'. She seems unaware of the emotional pain this causes her son. In another insensitive response, she rejects his offer to help get rid of the old mattress and demonstrates that there is no place for him in her home by asking him to leave. The next time they are together she says, with self-empathy, 'I was a bad mother'. This acknowledgement of shame and guilt enabled her to empathise with how disturbed her son was by her first remark. As Margrit explains to him, all she wanted to do was sleep. I think she slipped into a momentary psychotic state absolutely intent on eliminating the noise that prevented her from sleeping. This ruthless violence, aimed at eliminating a threat to her sleep, is repeated by Roman when he hits (and inadvertently kills) Martin Stuppek to stop the suffocation that he believed would kill him. When Roman stopped crying, Margrit realised that it was her son who was the source of the noise and that she was killing him. She fought to bring him back

to life. I imagine that Roman was now relieved that his mother had not given him up because she hated him, but because of her own limitations as a mother. She may have saved his life twice, firstly, by resuscitating him and, secondly, by handing him over to an orphanage where he would be safe.

Recovery from trauma

Breathing is also about Roman's recovery from various traumas. Freud believed that conscious trauma has such power because it is linked by association to earlier unresolved *unconscious* infantile trauma. In *Remembering, Repeating and Working Through* (1914) Freud referred to repeating as a substitute for conscious remembering. The original traumatic experience is forgotten but lives on through the unconscious symbolic repetition of it in action. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) Freud noted that in some repetitions a painful, passively experienced event is turned into an active experience, often involving identification with the aggressor. This is dramatically illustrated by Roman's aggressive response to Martin Stuppek.

Trauma, by its very nature, is overwhelming and the victim defends against what is too painful to bear. One of Roman's defences is dissociation, that is he has withdrawn from the outside world, his language is fragmented, his room is bare, and he has no friends. While watching *Breathing* we recover Roman's memory in bits and pieces, just as he does. Karl Markovics gives us clues about the nature of the traumas before they are revealed. In the very first scene we learn that having something put over his face terrifies Roman. Although we don't know why he is in a juvenile detention centre, we know that the other boys are afraid of Roman. A boy gets out of Roman's path on his way to the shower. We wonder, just as Roman's work mates do, why an 18 year old would choose to work in a mortuary. We also know that there was something especially disturbing for Roman about dead bodies because he has an anxiety attack after he returned from the mortuary. Later, we learn of the trauma of Roman's manslaughter of Stuppek.

We become conscious of trauma as we move backward through Roman's life. The earlier trauma of the loss of his mother and life in an orphanage only emerges gradually. In Freud's terms these trauma are conscious for Roman. Seeing the naked corpse of a woman who bears his surname (Christine) Kogler motivates Roman to search for his mother. His uncharacteristic

persistence is a clue to an unconscious force that is driving him. I think Roman was worried that if he did not find his mother before she died, he would not get an answer to the burning question: ‘Why did you give me up?’ The answer was his mother’s secret. It was her answer to that question which led to the recovery of the unconscious memory Roman had repressed, that his mother had suffocated him. This was the secret that Roman had kept from himself. In retrospect, we can see that Roman’s time spent submerged in the pool at the Juvenile Detention Centre is another clue, an unconscious repetition in action of his suffocation. A staff member helped Roman overcome his anxiety about being able to breathe by telling him to breathe deeply “in and out”, which I thought was an enactment of his mother’s resuscitation of Roman after she tried to suffocate him. This cathartic experience with the staff member led to Roman breaking down in tears.

Conclusion

Tucked in the back of the DVD of *Breathing* is an advert for *The Forgiveness Project*, which uses real stories to explore how ideas about forgiveness, reconciliation and conflict resolution can be used to restore the lives of perpetrators and victims of crime and violence.

I have focused on the way *Breathing* illuminates the role of empathy in the recovery from trauma. I’m not sure that Roman forgave his mother, or even understood her. But Roman seemed to feel some empathy for his mother. Empathy is not the same as forgiveness, but it is a prerequisite for forgiveness. Being able to identify dark places in ourselves enables us to forgive the darkness in the other. *Breathing* is not about the act of forgiveness, but it is about how conditions are created that make forgiveness and understanding possible.

References

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