

This Is What Mourning Looks Like

**'Beginners' sits shivah, postmodern-style and with profound
humor and heart**

Melanie Haupt

2011-06-24

“I don’t know if I would have been able to write *Beginners* if I hadn’t been in mourning,” says Mike Mills.

The death of Mills’ father in 2003 precipitated a years-long binge on life for the grieving, now- orphaned son. “There was this real compulsion to do like my dad did and just bite into [life] as hard as you can and just show everything,” explains Mills. “‘Eat the peach’ has become a big phrase in my life, and it means ‘get it,’” says Mills. “Dare to embrace. Peaches are lovely because they’re so messy and wet and sexual and ... messy.”

One result of Mills’ quest to experience life as akin to the drippy, visceral quality of a perfectly ripened peach is *Beginners*, the thoughtfully crafted document of Mills’ mourning. Rather than a maudlin bit of navel-gazery, though, the film is a joyous love letter to the father, a firework-burst of love and admiration for the man who demonstrated to Mills what it means to eat the peach.

Mills’ surrogate here is Oliver (played by Ewan McGregor), whose entire sense of himself is called into question when his widowed, 75-year-old father, Hal (Christopher Plummer), announces he is gay and that he wants to live out the rest of his life as his authentic self. The perplexed Oliver must then renegotiate and relearn who he is in relation to the people in his life. Hal is the bellwether of all of these explorations, even as he must come to terms with his own terminal cancer diagnosis. Beyond this basic narrative arc, *Beginners* is an exploration of the ways in which your generation shapes your reality. “It’s about individuating from the story you’ve inherited from your culture, your town, your time; the story you’ve inherited from your family; and the story you don’t know you’re telling yourself all the time,” says Mills.

All of these competing stories are the backdrop for the film. How do you tell the story of an extraordinary life, one rooted in compromise and deception but ultimately free, joyous, and steeped in love? And how do you tell that story alongside the story of how culture turns ordinary ideas and images into era-defining myths that have the potential to destroy lives? If you’re Mills - a graphic designer, writer, and director best known for his music videos and album art for such bands as Air and Sonic Youth, as well as his 2005 feature-length debut, *Thumbsucker* - you turn to structuralism, a branch of postmodern theory that examines culture as a series of signs and symbols. This approach allows him to hold these two themes in tension with each other, using the broader theoretical ideas to help unlock the very human, very personal story of a father and son relearning how to love. After the elder Mills died, the son catapulted himself into a heady exploration of, well, everything. “I was quite intoxicated for those first couple of years. Really, everything came back to me, including [Roland] Barthes, whom I loved in college.”

Barthes was one of the most influential thinkers within structuralism. In *Mythologies*, published in 1957, Barthes examines the various layers of meaning attached to words and symbols - what he calls myths - among the bourgeoisie. Red wine, for example, is considered the quintessential marker of French national identity, when in reality it is simply fermented grape juice packaged as a commodity to be consumed; further

complicating this celebratory view of red wine, Barthes argues, is the exploitation of Third World countries like Algeria (a French colony until 1962) as part of the production of the meaningful drink. Barthes was also the first to posit that children's toys took on signs and symbols of gendered behavior, conveying the prescriptive roles expected of children, particularly girls.

The same idea holds true for contemporary American culture: Think of how Snooki and her comrades have become the symbol of New Jerseyness (despite the fact that most of them aren't even from New Jersey and that there are plenty of perfectly nice people with appropriate personal boundaries and tasteful sartorial sense who hail from there) or how farmers' markets have become emblematic of a romanticized urban vision of relationship-based agriculture. In reality, Barthes might say, Snooki is just a trashy girl with bad hair and a drinking problem, and the farmers' market is just another place to buy food. To that end, separating the myth from its attached symbols, looking at a story within its historical and cultural contexts and troubling classifications, all in an attempt to determine that myth's true meaning is at the heart of Mills' project.

"I read in *Mythologies* how the bourgeois capitalist mindset undergoes a spell where history goes away, everything is devoid of its history and is magically out of time," says Mills. "I think the underlying silent theme of this movie is, how did everything happen in time? What is it like to be in love in 2003? What is it like to be in love in 1955? What are your emotional options in each time frame? The emotional options in 1955 were utterly different from the emotional options I have now. I could have called this movie *The History of Love*."

So, what would *Beginners* look like if it were called *The History of Love*? It would be a hell of a lot easier to describe, for one. The history of love for Hal involves capitulating to the demands of the dominant culture in 1955 - that he marry a woman and have babies with her. Then, 44 years later, he gets to overwrite that history with a new beginning, embarking upon life as a gay man who need not hide or fear arrest. His new history unfurls like a rainbow flag, a sign the movie suggests has a more hopeful meaning attached to it.

The history of Oliver's love looks much different. It looks like a mother who sulked and acted out in strange ways, whose eyes yearned for some deeper connection. It looks like a string of failed relationships, a broken strand of serial monogamy until at last he embarks upon a tentative love affair with Anna (played by Mélanie Laurent, who was so deliciously vengeful in *Inglourious Basterds*). Both Oliver and Anna are haunted by their parents' histories, and their jobs are to quiet the ghostly voices in their heads and really see each other. But what is most remarkable about Oliver is that it's really, really easy to identify with him. His role is so profoundly immediate in that everybody has parents, and most people will outlive their parents, and some of them will lose a parent to cancer. The stakes, then, are high for the actor who dares to portray the fictional version of Mike Mills.

"I really had to sort of think about the caregiver aspect to it; I just had to be there with Hal, you know, just kind of be there with him and determine how to play

a caregiver,” muses McGregor. “I tried to feel like Mike, and I did that by listening to the recordings I asked him to do of the dialogue. I listened to his voice, and I watched him, and I really loved being with him. I also worked very closely with Christopher and got very close to him. I felt like I could relate to looking after him and thinking of losing him. And then there was just being there with him in the scenes, and as Mike was with his dad, reacting to what he saw. Oliver’s sensitivity and his acceptance of his father comes from Mike, and that is in my performance.

“In a way that’s my job in the film, to portray that. But it was quite easy because I was working with great actors and a great director.”

And because this history of love is that director’s own personal history, there are traces of him all through the film. The drawings Oliver conjures while he lingers in his studio were done by Mills himself; Mills would start the drawings, and McGregor would either complete them or replicate them as part of the process of studying the character. The band for whom Oliver is supposed to design an album cover, the Sads, is an actual Los Angeles-based quartet for whom Mills has designed a number of album covers and gig posters. Mills adopted his father’s Jack Russell terrier, interpreted endearingly in the film by a canine actor named Cosmo, who gets some of the best (subtitled) lines in the film (“Tell her the darkness is about to drown us unless something drastic happens right now”). All of these touches of verisimilitude deepen the tribute to the elder Mills while messily blurring the lines between truth and fiction - sort of like life itself.

Mills wouldn’t have it any other way. “I feel like that’s what my dad and my family did: We got messy. We got much more real and visceral and wet and gooey, and it wasn’t easy, but I would do it again. My dad coming out was one of the best things to happen to me as his straight son, just because he became so much more alive.”

Beginners opens in Austin theatres this Friday. See Film Listings, p.60, for showtimes and review.

The Ted K Archive

Melanie Haupt

This Is What Mourning Looks Like

'Beginners' sits shivah, postmodern-style and with profound humor and heart
2011-06-24

The Austin Chronicle, 2011-06-24,

<archive.org/details/The_Austin_Chronicle-2011-06-24/page/n41>

www.thetedkarchive.com