

## **Invisible Presences: The Elusive Twin and the Empty Screen in *Personal Shopper***

In a 1996 article exploring the first decade of Olivier Assayas's career as a director, film critic Kent Jones characterises him as a “young French director whose name you're almost guaranteed not to know” (50). Twenty-five years later, winner of Best Director at Cannes in 2016 and in receipt of numerous other awards and considerable critical acclaim, this is unlikely to be the case. However, it remains that there is relatively little scholarship on Assayas's work and especially on his mediations on death, grief and memory, which permeate many of his films. *Clouds of Sils Maria* (2014), for instance, explores an actress's unsteady negotiation of the death of the playwright who launched her career and her personal grief at the loss of her youth; *Summer Hours* (2008) follows three adult siblings struggling to agree on how to preserve their family memories after the death of their mother. In seeking to explore this aspect of Assayas's oeuvre, which offers compelling reflections on the destabilisation and unknowingness of bereavement, this article focuses on his 2016 film *Personal Shopper*, which won Assayas the aforementioned Palme d'Or. The film explores and expands upon the territory established in those films noted above, offering a psychological portrait of sibling grief and the all-encompassing destabilisation of self following a significant death. In what follows, I contend that through its use of mirrors, screens and reflections, the film offers a complex and thoughtful representation of grief, not least in its active refusal to offer either its protagonist or the audience a sense of closure or certainty. In doing so, it seeks to capture not only the complexities and contradictions of grief, but the particular and cinematically under-explored experience of twin bereavement and the shattering of self that ensues.

In his films that deal with grief and loss, Assayas frequently returns to the motif of reflective surfaces: a highly polished marble gravestone or the shining family silver in *Summer Hours*, for instance, or the train window that reflects Maria's (Juliette Binoche) expression as she contemplates the death of her friend in *Clouds of Sils Maria*. The repeated use of reflections in *Personal Shopper*, however, which seem to bounce the protagonist Maureen's (Kristen Stewart) bewilderment and grief back at her from all angles, is particularly interesting given that this film deals with the death of a twin. A missing mirror image, in a visual world constructed of glass, mirrors and screens, haunts the film. Accordingly, this article frames *Personal Shopper* as both a significant addition to cinema's myriad reflections on death and grief, and as a representation of the complexities of twin loss,

drawing on interdisciplinary research from film studies, psychoanalysis, death studies and sibling psychology.

Right from the start, *Personal Shopper* invokes two uneasy, almost-mirror images. In the film's opening frames, a car glides towards the camera down a long, straight, tree-lined driveway. The branches are bare, the trees evenly spaced. Approaching an imposing, padlocked gate, a young woman emerges from the car and wordlessly unlocks it before proceeding the rest of the way on foot. The young woman is Maureen, and the large, rambling house up ahead is that of her deceased twin brother Lewis. By virtue of being dizygotic twins, Maureen and Lewis are their own imperfect mirror images. The twins both consider(ed) themselves to be mediums and, at the request of the prospective buyers, Maureen has arrived to determine whether her brother's spirit—or any spirit—is haunting his former home.

This quest to determine Lewis's presence, or indeed confirm his absence, remains the primary concern of Maureen, and of the film, throughout. From the beginning, then, *Personal Shopper* signals a preoccupation with the elusive, the liminal, and the (im)possible, not least in its visual reference to the famous long closing shot of *The Third Man* (Reed 1949), in which Holly Martins (Joseph Cotten) waits on the tree-lined road outside the cemetery to speak to Anna (Alida Valli), only for her to ignore him and continue walking. Here, *Personal Shopper* invokes a second imperfect mirror image. *The Third Man* centres on Martins' search for his old friend Harry Lime (Orson Welles) in post-war Vienna; told that Lime is dead, Martins attends the funeral but is increasingly convinced that Lime is alive. Martins is eventually vindicated in his suspicions as Lime emerges from the shadows of a Vienna night, a wanted man. Having bartered for the safe passage of Lime's girlfriend Anna in exchange for his cooperation, Martins becomes embroiled in the police pursuit of Lime through the city's sewers and eventually shoots his friend. In Lime's false death, resurrection, and eventual demise, *The Third Man* plays with the certainty of death. *Personal Shopper* picks up this same thread, offering the tantalising prospect of Lewis's continued existence even as it insists on his no longer being there.

The composition of *Personal Shopper*'s opening shot effectively makes it the dizygotic twin of *The Third Man*'s end and, given the latter's concern with a man who is there and yet not (indeed, dead and yet not), *The Third Man* is an apposite ghost to invoke as

*Personal Shopper* begins. In Assayas's film, the tension between presence and absence will resist resolution beyond the final frame. Whether or not Lewis is there is a matter of perception, or perhaps belief, but neither of these can nor do act as substitutes for certainty. Like Martins, Maureen is hopeful for a word from Lewis; like Anna, Lewis promises nothing. Instead, Maureen is compelled to search screens and mirrors in pursuit of her twin, and it is to the film's negotiation of twin bereavement through such screens that this article now turns. Rather than attempting to offer closure or quantify grief, *Personal Shopper* captures the ebb and flow of a sister's loss of her brother, her re-evaluation of her identity as a twin, and the contradictions of a technological landscape in which connections are constant and yet ephemeral. Despite the mirrors that promise reflection, and the screens that promise knowledge, death remains an elusive presence.

### **Screen captures: Life and death in the frame**

Scholarship on death and cinema has frequently reflected on the screen's ability to both capture death and negate it. For example, film theorist John O. Thompson, writing on the complexities of depicting the death of children on screen, observes that as the medium ages, 'the cinema as archive inevitably becomes fuller and fuller of *images of dead people*' (2000: 210), even as the screen also provides an opportunity for temporary resurrection. *Personal Shopper* plays with this possibility of transient immortality through its refusal to confirm or deny Lewis's continued existence and its reluctance to pass judgement on Maureen's quest to make spiritual contact. It is a film not so much about death as it is about grief, and yet the aforementioned ambiguities of screened death permeate its narrative. On the audience's screen, the dead subject is Lewis, unseen except for uncertain, fleeting glimpses that may or may not be him. However, this article is not simply interested in what occurs on the audience's screen, but indeed on Maureen's own screens *within* the screen. The screen here has multiple manifestations. It encompasses not only the screen on which *Personal Shopper* is watched as a film, but the screens, mirrors, windows, and reflective surfaces that are the building blocks—or perhaps walls—of Maureen's lived experience without her brother. What follows is a consideration of how these multifarious screens function within the film, and what they reveal about Maureen's negotiation of death and grief, with specific regard to the loss of her twin.

Maureen is firmly rooted in a contemporary technological landscape, in which much of her life is lived through screens. Her face-to-face interactions are minimal, both in

occurrence and substance; she rejects verbosity in favour of introspection. On the occasions when she does speak the quality is one of irregularity, as if she is unused to voicing her thoughts out loud. In many ways, she herself is a transient presence. She cuts an anonymous figure as she traverses urban landscapes on her scooter, bounces between London and Paris on the Eurostar, and slips in and out of hotels, boutiques, and apartments. As personal shopper for a celebrity client, Kyra (Nora von Waldstätten), she spends her time picking up and dropping off designer garments at Kyra's empty apartment, routinely met not by a person but by an alarm code and an envelope of money. There is something curiously spectral and unrooted about Maureen as she slips in and out of these physical spaces, and in the absence of sustained human connection, screen technologies allow Maureen to maintain an attachment to the world. She communicates with her boyfriend Gary (Ty Olwin), who is working in Oman, through video calls on her laptop, while the phone that is permanently in her grasp provides directions, instructions, distraction, and entertainment. One short sequence, for example, depicts Maureen boarding and subsequently alighting a train and negotiating the crowded platform and station, all while watching a documentary on her phone. At an outdoor photoshoot early in the film, Maureen's image is captured on the screen of a digital camera; a series of these black and white shots are shown before the film cuts to a monochromatic sonogram image of Maureen's heart, being monitored by a doctor for the same genetic condition that resulted in Lewis's death. A rootless and wandering figure, she is endlessly transfixed by, and captured by, screens.

Nevertheless, as much as these screens might anchor Maureen in reality, they promote distance as much as connection. Her video calls with Gary frequently go unanswered, are cut off, or are at the mercy of technological glitches. The aforementioned photographs are a result of her employer's tardiness, with Maureen merely acting as a stand-in while the photographer sets up the shots that will eventually feature Kyra. Likewise, while hospital monitor screens may promise certainty—whether of a medical diagnosis, the proof of a heartbeat, or a time of death—ultimately they must be understood as an imperfect representation. As C. Scott Combs, writing about representations of death in American cinema, suggests, the nuances of life and death cannot be fully captured in the visual and aural signifiers of a medical setting. The 'familiar bleeping of vitality' of a patient's vital signs, or the electronic depiction of a flatlining heartrate, aim to provide confirmation of whether a person is alive or dead (2014: 12). However, as Combs argues, in reality death is not instantaneous and at best these signifiers are a crude approximation of certainty. The

echocardiogram may offer an image of Maureen's heart, but there is a distinct gulf between this prosaic scan of an organ and what it represents to a sister contemplating both the loss of her brother and her own mortality. The doctor's reassurance that 'what happened to Lewis was exceptional' cannot erase the distance between a living sister and a dead brother, to whom the unlikely medical event nevertheless did happen.

There is, then, a persistent ambiguity linked to the screen in *Personal Shopper*, both within the diegesis and outside of it. This is perhaps only right, in a film that is ambiguous about so much, including the existence of Lewis's spirit. Maureen's uncertainty becomes the audience's uncertainty, as her quest for Lewis—sometimes tentative, sometimes desperate—both reveals and withholds his presence. One of the film's most memorable sequences explores the possibility of Lewis's continued existence through the medium of text messages on Maureen's phone as she travels from Paris to London on the Eurostar. This journey places Maureen in a liminal space and state somewhere beneath the English Channel. With Maureen neither here nor there, in a space between departure and arrival, France and England, land and sea, a parallel space opens up in which Lewis may also be both demonstrably gone and yet (im)possibly here.

There is an imperfect symmetry to the first two anonymous text messages that Maureen receives, recalling her own non-identical twinship. The first, 'I know you,' is followed quickly by, 'And you know me.' Objectively, it seems clear that someone has obtained Maureen's number and is taunting her, particularly as the messages become increasingly provocative. However, neither Maureen nor the film immediately jump to this conclusion. The polysemy of 'to know' allows a grieving Maureen to consider that the suggestion is one of understanding and kinship rather than acquaintance. In the liminal space of the train, in which time and location are seemingly suspended, Maureen is permitted to entertain the possibility that these messages are from Lewis. What has been previously amorphous is here rendered concrete. Earlier in the film, wandering around Lewis's empty house, Maureen is confronted by indistinct sounds and vaporous visions, barely tangible markers of a spiritual presence. A sudden violent gush of water from a faucet might be her brother (or, indeed, a less well-disposed spirit), or simply a temperamental pipe in an old house. She may strive for certainty, but this is difficult to ascertain. Maureen finds herself unable to make any guarantees to either herself, the potential house buyers, or Gary, who presses the issue when she claims to have had a sign from Lewis. 'Are you sure?' he asks, at

which point Maureen retreats from her previous assertion. The text messages on her phone screen, however, offer the tantalising promise of the desired assuredness. Here is not vapour, or smoke, or running water as a substitute for Lewis, but words on a screen, being typed in real time.

Maureen's phone screen has been used previously in the film to bridge the gap between life and death, and it is closely associated with acts of discovery and knowledge. After the prospective buyer of Lewis's house tells her about the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint, who claimed to communicate with the spirit world through her paintings, an intrigued Maureen immediately uses her phone to research af Klint further. In the scenes that follow, she watches a film about af Klint on her phone. On the small screen, an artist who died in the mid-1940s, and whose art was not widely exhibited during her lifetime, finds a new audience. As Lucas Hilderbrand explores in his work on YouTube and cultural memory, despite their 'imperfect' and 'impermanent' limitations, video sharing websites such as YouTube, which Maureen also later uses to look up a movie based on Victor Hugo's table turning, allow for the (re)discovery of such 'ephemeral' content (2007: 54). That which might otherwise fade into obscurity or become inaccessible, or else be subject to laborious research, becomes immediately available, reshaping the boundaries of cultural memory (Hilderbrand, 2007) and revitalising the forgotten subject.

As such, technology, through the screens of her phone and laptop, provides Maureen with a sense of assurance. These screens offer knowledge and communication, conferring a kind of power. Just as the sender of the text messages purports to 'know' Maureen (and vice versa), screens give Maureen the illusion of absolute knowledge. The faulty logic that the camera never lies extends to the screen: what can be seen must surely be true. Indeed, this is perhaps what ultimately undermines the unspoken suggestion that Lewis is sending the text messages. While it is *possible* that Lewis could be responsible for the unquantifiable sights and sounds that his sister experiences in his old home, it seems much less credible that the solid, tangible words pinging onto Maureen's phone screen could be his doing. In essence, the text messages are too real.

This is not to say, however, that the screen either promises definitive answers, or negates Lewis's presence. Maureen's uncertainty over the anonymous text messages, and her evident desire to 'see' Lewis in the screen, is replicated in the film's own play with the

audience. It may be relatively easy to dismiss Lewis's role in the text messages— eventually revealed as the work of Kyra's murderous boyfriend Ingo (Lars Eidinger)—and even his presence in the house, which Maureen herself belatedly ascribes to another, malevolent spirit. However, the film refuses any neat conclusions that this might suggest in three scenes that occur towards its end. One of these, discussed in more detail below, forms the final moments of the film, in which Maureen, newly arrived in Oman, is confronted by a glass floating in the air. Prior to this, the film provides two further visual clues. After discovering Kyra's body, Maureen falls under suspicion from the police. She is questioned over the whereabouts of some Cartier jewellery, which she later finds has been planted in her apartment. The anonymous texter summons her to a hotel, anxious that she has informed the police about the messages. Leaving the jewellery in the hotel room, Maureen appears to recognise an unseen something or someone in the room. This is followed by silent shots of the hotel lobby and entrance, as if an invisible presence is walking through; the elevator and the sliding doors both open, although there is apparently no one there. There are faint echoes of *The Shining* (Kubrick 1980) here, not so much in appearance—this hotel is sleek and modern, positioned on a busy Parisian street—but in the ability of the hotel to function as a liminal space, capable of containing multiple lives and planes of existence. Considering this parallel, it becomes possible to once again entertain Lewis's presence. Immediately following the ghostly traversal of the lobby, Ingo is apprehended outside the hotel. The danger to Maureen has passed, and with it the invisible figure has departed.

The suggestion of a presence is also apparent when Maureen visits Lewis's former girlfriend Lara (Sigrid Bouaziz) and her new partner Erwin (Anders Danielsen Lie) before leaving for Oman. They discuss her brother and the possibility of his continued presence, which Erwin professes to feel but Maureen attributes to guilt. Afterwards, Maureen sits alone in the garden with her back to the house. In the kitchen window, the outline of a figure appears and moves, holding a glass, which then shatters as if it has been dropped. In the same way that Maureen dismisses Erwin's contention that Lewis's presence remains, she is practical about the dropped glass, suggesting that Erwin knocked it over as he left. Here Maureen and the audience's roles are reversed. When Maureen is confronted with the screened possibility of Lewis's existence on her phone, her hope and tentative belief is apparent; a broken glass and a shadowy movement is, however, quickly waved away. Conversely, the latter presents the same tantalising hope for the audience as the former did for Maureen, as the audience are presented with their own screened possibility of Lewis.



### **Through the looking glass: the twinless twin and the empty mirror**

Maureen's experience is characterised by an isolation that is heightened by the fact that she repeatedly finds refuge not in other people, but in screens and spirits. This is all the more notable for the fact that, before her brother's death, she was one of a pair. That Maureen appears to float through the film untethered to place or person underlines the extent of her existential trauma, wherein to find no trace of Lewis is to acknowledge the loss of part of herself. Crucial to this article's exploration of Maureen's grief and Lewis's death, therefore, is their status as twins. What follows is a consideration of the twin bond and the ways *Personal Shopper* negotiates this particular form of loss on screen and through screens, not least the mirrored screen.

Scholarship on siblinghood, which has proliferated since the early 2000s across various disciplines, frequently converges around the fact that, for those who are not only children, sibling relationships are likely to be one of the most enduring that many people experience (Sanders, 2004: 1). The length of a relationship with a sibling commonly goes beyond that with a parent, a partner, a friend, or a child, though the social expectations of siblinghood are generally weaker and experiences of sibling relationships vary greatly. For twins, there is a further presumption of a 'special, different, and much more intense' bond than with non-twin siblings, as Prino et al. observe in their work on the early development of twins (2019: 1385). As noted earlier, it is the polysemic meaning of 'know' in the initial anonymous messages that allows Maureen to consider the possibility that the person who *knows* her, and whom she *knows*, is Lewis, for the belief in a deeper understanding between twins is common. In this context, who could know Maureen better than her twin? Despite these frequent assumptions about twins, however, research into the effects and management of bereavement and grief have frequently overlooked the sibling relationship, including the twin relationship. As Rebecca Withrow and Valerie Schwiebert observe in their work on counselling bereaved twins, though fascination endures with the twin bond, such interest has not extended significantly to the question of how twins deal with the death of their co-twin (2005: 21). For adults, losing a sibling is typically considered to be less severe than spousal or parental loss (Segal, 1997: 153), even though evidence suggests that for older adults, the death of a twin or close sibling can have a demonstrably negative impact on the survivor's life expectancy (Withrow and Schwiebert, 2005: 24).



From the research that does exist on twin bereavement, it is clear that the death of a twin is particularly traumatic and devastating for the surviving sibling. It has been theorised by those working in the fields of psychology and grief counselling, variously, as a unique form of sorrow (Brandt, 2001), an ‘unbearable psychic trauma’ (Klein, 2012: 127), a loss akin to self-erasure (McIlroy, 2011), and an experience of ‘endless seeking for what they knew could never be found’ (Woodward, 1988: 175). Elizabeth Noble, reflecting on the psychological impact of losing a twin, suggests that ‘profound repercussions’ can be reasonably anticipated after such a death (2001: 1). One such consequence is identified by Song et al., who observe an increased risk of a surviving twin developing a psychiatric disorder following the death of their co-twin (2020). Such a ‘tragically deep wound’ (Withrow and Schwiebert, 2005: 6) is frequently perceived as a double loss, incorporating both the death of the twin and a concurrent ‘death of oneself’ (McIlroy, 2011: 8). Mary R. Morgan, herself a surviving twin, suggests that this stems from a feeling amongst twins that ‘when our twin is lost, the “WE” is broken or destroyed’ (2006: 1); that is, the joint framework through which twins have seen themselves (and been seen by others) is abruptly reconfigured. It may be, as clinical psychologist Barbara Klein argues, that ‘twinless twins are alone with their own worst nightmare’, the very person they would turn to for comfort being the one who is lost (2012: 132). When Maureen returns to Lewis’s house for a second night, hoping for more concrete evidence of his spiritual presence, she is dissatisfied with the paucity of signs. A blast of water from an upstairs faucet prompts an uncharacteristic outburst from her. ‘Is that it? Is that it?’ she yells, adding, ‘I need you to fucking talk to me!’ Without Lewis, Maureen is not only alone, but lonely. Paradoxically, her missing twin is the only person who can offer solace for his death.

The phrase ‘twinless twins’, as used by Klein, is also used by Withrow and Schwiebert (2005: 21) and Morgan (2006: 1) to capture this paradox. Another common word used to describe the effect of twin loss is ‘halving’ (Case, 2001: 24; Withrow and Schwiebert, 2005: 24; McIlroy, 2011: 4). Morgan articulates this sense of ‘halving’ as leaving bereft twins ‘feeling half of a person’ (2006: 1). It is significant, therefore, that the most persistent recurring motif in *Personal Shopper* is the mirror. The mirror serves as both a reminder of Maureen’s twin status—the reflection producing a reversed twin image—and its negation, as the mirror doubles the loss, revealing the extent to which she is alone. Following the film’s opening scene, which I have suggested above is a mirror of *The Third Man*’s ending, the audience first encounters Maureen’s mirror image as she roams through Lewis’s house,

unable to sleep. Maureen and Lewis are of course dizygotic, that is, fraternal or non-identical twins. However, research shows that twins are likely to ‘internalize a pair image and feel identical’ regardless of whether they are mono- or dizygotic (Prino et al., 2019: 1392). Certainly, the concept of a twin as a mirror image is repeatedly invoked through the film’s imagery. In the scene, Maureen approaches a pair of glass doors that lead outside and pushes them open. In this moment, she is reflected in the glass, the effect as if she is standing next to herself. Abruptly she turns, walks towards the camera, stops, and asks, ‘Lewis?’ What has compelled Maureen to call out for her twin, to speak as if she senses his presence, is unclear, yet that it occurs immediately after she appears on screen next to a shadowy, mirrored version of herself is surely very telling. Later, when discussing Lewis’s death and their shared heart condition with Ingo, he asks her, ‘Does it scare you?’ She responds, ‘No. It didn’t scare him.’ There is elision here between the twins, the sense that one is the other: the ‘you’ and ‘him’ briefly become the same entity.

Images of twins and doubles are common across cultures, mythologies, and literatures, suggesting a pervasive and enduring fascination rooted in ‘widespread beliefs pertaining to the intimate, often enigmatic relationship between twins’ (McIlroy, 2011: 2). Whether the *doppelgänger* originating in German folklore, the *vardøger* of Norse mythology, or the twins of Egyptian mythology, from Nut and Geb to Isis and Osiris, the notion of a paired entity ‘reflects timeless preoccupations’ that persist into the twenty-first century (Humann, 2017: 2). For Humann, this ongoing fascination with doubles intersects with issues of identity and fear, with the figure of the *doppelgänger* a common cultural indicator of ‘internal psychological struggles’ (2017: 2) and ‘fears about the self and the other’ (2017: 3). One distinct fear that Humann identifies as being associated with the double is a ‘fear of annihilation’ (2017: 8). Maureen’s continual return to the mirror might be usefully read in this context. For if her twin has been annihilated, suddenly and unexpectedly, might her own destruction be imminent? There is a reported phenomenon amongst surviving co-twins of confusion ‘when looking in the mirror, deciding who was dead and who was alive’ (Withrow and Schwiebert, 2005: 24), and there is a sense that while Maureen is using these mirrors to seek out her brother, her missing half, she is also searching for herself. In particular, she is searching for proof of her own wholeness and of her continued survival: the ‘exceptional’ event that has claimed Lewis has not yet erased her.

Elsewhere in the film, Maureen is continually subjected to her own mirror image. Though she is prohibited by Kyra from trying on the clothes, shoes, and accessories she buys and borrows for her client, the sales assistants are frequently persuasive. More than once, Maureen is cajoled into donning designer garments and confronted by the resulting reflection. There is a sense here that Maureen is trying on not only a different set of clothes but a different identity, someone that she—and Lewis—might struggle to recognise. Maureen is particularly enamoured of a mirrored dress she procures for Kyra. The mid-length silver Chanel dress is covered in hundreds of tiny mirrored segments, fragmenting and refracting her image as she illicitly tries on the dress and admires herself in the huge mirror in Kyra's apartment. Another screen provides further reflection, as Maureen holds up her phone to take a photo of her multiple-mirrored self. The screen as mirror is a potent metaphor frequently utilised by film theorists to describe 'an archetypal relation enacted by the cinema' (Elsaesser and Hagen, 2009: 55) and Todd McGowan, reflecting on film's relationship with Lacanian theory and the power of the gaze, suggests that it 'affords the spectator an almost unqualified sense of mastery' over the image (2003: 28). Here, too, Maureen is afforded the same experience. Just as in Lacan's mirror stage (1977), where the mirror becomes a point of identification for an infant and induces in them the capability to conceptualise themselves as 'I', Maureen unconsciously uses her reflection to confirm her own ongoing existence. The act of using her phone to photograph herself in the mirror, while wearing the mirrored dress, is the logical extension of this quest for mastery, capturing and further circulating this image of herself as she sends the image to the anonymous texter. As a form of self-portraiture, the selfie has been understood as both a form of narcissism and as a powerful form of self-expression, particularly for women (Murray, 2015). Mehita Iqani and Jonathan E. Schroeder suggest that the selfie '[combines] questions of subject and object' (2016: 413), in much the same way as the cinema screen is often conceptualised as both lens and mirror, objective and subjective (Shetley and Ferguson, 2001). The self-portrait of herself in the mirrored dress proclaims Maureen's existence, her ability to be in the frame, at the same time that it foregrounds the possibility of fragmentation. As object, Maureen exists outside the frame and as subject she exists within it, an act of metaphorical self-halving that replicates the twin-halving discussed above.

Klein coins the phrase 'alone in the mirror' to describe the feeling of acute loss experienced by a bereaved twin (2012: 125). Here, the mirror remains a potent symbol of both Maureen's desire for, and lack of, her twin. In another scene, Maureen tries on an array

of Kyra's clothes, moving from the mirrored walk-in closet to the bathroom, where she continues to dress and observe her reflection. Following this, she retreats to Kyra's bedroom—still wearing Kyra's clothes—and masturbates before falling asleep. It is an act of pleasure that, requiring no one else, further underlines Maureen's singularity. For all her mirrored selves, she again finds only herself.

Although mirrors feature prominently when Maureen is alone, one striking visual component of those occasions when Lewis's presence is sensed by either Maureen and/or the viewer is glass. This is clear, rather than mirrored, glass, and it occurs in various forms. Windows feature prominently, including the window in which Maureen is half-reflected when she first visits Lewis's home and is prompted to call his name, and the window through which the shadowy figure is seen at Lara and Erwin's house. There are also the glass sliding doors of the hotel that appear to part for the invisible figure, and the two glasses that are dropped, one in Erwin's kitchen and one in Gary's accommodation in Oman. Crucially, while glass—being the mirror's primary material—evokes the mirror, it denies its power to see clearly any reflection or confirmation. In this sense, it is a poor facsimile of a mirror, a visual motif that acts as a barrier to Maureen's quest for her brother. The glass can only be seen *through*, revealing the nothing that so scares Maureen as the twin left behind.

The scene in Oman is the film's final sequence. It maintains the ambiguity seeded throughout the rest of *Personal Shopper*, regarding both the question of Lewis's presence and Maureen's own belief. Finally persuaded by a sceptical Gary, Maureen decides to stop searching for a sign of Lewis and travel to Oman. Shown to her accommodation, she is immediately startled by a noise in the next room. On inspection, she finds the room deserted and a glass floating in the air. The glass smashes, and Maureen—despite her earlier assertions to Erwin that he was simply imagining Lewis—asks for her brother one last time: 'Lewis? Are you here?' What follows is a series of questions from Maureen that are met with dull thumping noises. 'Have you been waiting for me?' she asks. 'Are you at peace?' These are met with single thumps; when she asks, 'Are you not at peace?' she receives the same response. Frustrated, her next question, 'Are you playing with me?' is met with silence, and Maureen declares, 'I don't know you.' And yet, much like one last look in the mirror, she cannot resist a last attempt. 'Lewis, is it you?' Two thumps, then her final, fearful question: 'Or is it just me?' The reply—a single thud—is, like the rest of the film, inconclusive. The twinless twin stands alone, shattered glass at her feet, contemplating her loss. As an image, it

is potent: that which was whole is no longer whole. Maureen's entire identity as a twin, as half of a bigger entity, is fundamentally broken. It recalls the question posed by Anna (Jodie Whittaker) in another film about twin loss, *Adult Life Skills* (Tunnard 2016), released the same year as *Personal Shopper*: 'Are you still a twin if your twin is dead?' Much like the film's conclusion, which splinters the idea of certainty and refuses a stable denouement, Maureen's sense of herself has been fractured. As the screen fades to white, the answer to her final question is suddenly immaterial. Glass, mirrors, and screens cannot bridge the gap: Maureen is without Lewis.

### Conclusion

One of the most prevailing models of grief is the Kübler-Ross model, which posits five distinct stages, encompassing denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The existence of such a model is suggestive of an 'end point' of grief, a process to be worked through with the prospect of closure on the horizon. Though the reality of grief and bereavement is personal, variable, and prone to non-linearity, the promise of closure can be compelling. As such, the Kübler-Ross model has endured in the popular imagination even as grief research has continued to evolve. Klass et al., for example, theorise a model of 'continuing bonds', in which the bereaved do not progress to a 'stage of disengagement' but rather maintain 'connections' with those who have died (1996: 2). The act of 'breaking emotional bonds with the deceased' is no longer assumed to be the 'ultimate goal' of grieving amongst scholars, who increasingly acknowledge the enduring nature of grief (Rothaupt and Becker, 2007: 9). However, just as the acceptance stage of the Kübler-Ross model provides a potent suggestion of completion, outside of the avant-garde and experimental, film too has a commitment to narrative closure. Films about death and grief, then, are commonly in pursuit of a double closure: the narrative denouement, and a sense that the characters have processed their grief and are ready, in some capacity, to move forwards.

For all its inherent ambiguity, *Personal Shopper* also pursues this double closure. Lewis's house must be sold; his former girlfriend must embrace her new relationship; Maureen must make a decision about her future. Throughout the film, she has largely evaded Gary, who has been reduced to a mere screen presence, but this too must be resolved. All these narrative elements indicate forward movement into a space where Lewis may be remembered without those closest to him being unduly anchored to their grief. The drive towards narrative closure, then, is also a drive towards grief closure. In deciding to travel to

Oman to be with Gary, Maureen appears to accept the principle of closure as an ‘end stage of grief’ (Berns, 2011: 49), drawing a line under her confusing and often alienating time in Paris.

The principle of closure, however, must not be mistaken for its achievement. The beginning of this article invoked *The Third Man* as *Personal Shopper*’s shadow twin, and it is to this film that it returns briefly. In the closing stages of *The Third Man*, Martins and the Viennese authorities pursue Lime through the city’s sewers. When Martins catches up to Lime, under instructions to shoot his friend, the two share a long look before Lime nods in resignation, or perhaps recognition. The audience hears the gunshot but does not witness the shooting; the scene that follows depicts Lime’s (second) funeral and thus confirms his death. And yet the audience, like Martins, has already witnessed Lime’s *first* funeral at the beginning of the film, an event whose ceremonial function of closure is undermined by the fact that Lime is not dead. The second funeral, therefore, is both a correction of the first (this time, Harry Lime really is dead) and an echo of it (could he have survived a second time?). The funeral professes certainty and yet leaves open a possibility—the audience has *seen* neither the fatal shot nor the body—that resists definitive closure. Likewise, Maureen’s decision to leave Paris and stop searching for Lewis’s spirit is only an imitation of closure, as the encounter in Oman reveals only too quickly. Like Martins leaving behind a Vienna in which nothing is ever quite as it seems, Maureen escapes the confusion and isolation of Paris, but cannot hope to evade her grief, nor the treacherous hope for her brother.

That the film’s two final sequences both feature glasses smashing is evocative, speaking to the shattering effect of grief but also the specific ‘unbearable psychic trauma’ of bereaved twinship noted above (Klein, 2012: 127). Morgan’s suggestion that when a twin dies, ‘the “WE” is broken or destroyed’ (2006: 1) remains significant here, the shattered glass symbolising that which cannot be put back together. However, it is not simply the ‘we’ that is destroyed, but Maureen’s own sense of ‘I’, too. Her identity as a sister and as a twin is fractured, but unlike Lewis, she is not simply gone. The starkness of McIlroy’s suggestion that twin death resembles a form of self-erasure (2011) is tempered here, as Maureen is not erased, but rather must renegotiate her sense of self. Herein lies the difficulty, as she must learn to live without these broken pieces.

Furthermore, the repeated image of the broken glass is suggestive of Maureen's need to look beyond the screen as she contemplates the future. It is notable that the scenes in Oman are some of the only moments in the film when Maureen is not holding her phone (indeed, the shots of her journey to Gary's village emphasise its rural, technologically-disconnected nature). However, this suggestion that Maureen should look beyond the screen is complicated by a split-second breaking of the fourth wall after Maureen asks, 'Or is it just me?' The responding thump makes her jump, and Stewart looks directly at the camera for a brief moment. At the exact point that Maureen appears to confirm—or certainly entertain—her aloneness, looking beyond the screen forges a connection with the viewer, recalling once again the Lacanian constitution of the 'I' in the mirror. That same slippage between subject and object discussed above occurs again here. There is a suggestion of affinity, as Maureen and the viewer are reflected in each other. In conceptualising the cinema screen as a mirror, Elsaesser and Hagen observe that the spectator is 'confronted with an image as if with our own reflected self' (2009: 55); here, Maureen's gaze marks this point of confrontation. As stated in the introduction, *Personal Shopper* is less a film about death as it is about grief, and this is where Maureen's singularity becomes multiplied, not in the discovery of her brother but in the implicit recognition of the universality of grief. Here, the screen-as-mirror reveals everyone else: it is not 'just me'. Imbued with a relentless, unresolved ambiguity despite its late overtures to attempted closure, *Personal Shopper* maintains an unease at its core that recalls C. S. Lewis's observation in *A Grief Observed* (1964: 1): 'No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.'



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