Netflix Dramedy *After Life* and the Uncanny Nature of Grief

Gareth Schott, University of Waikato, New Zealand

Introduction

Responses to death are exorcised in a variety of ways. While the intense personal sorrow caused by the loss of a loved one is not in itself humorous, death and humour have always been deeply and inexplicably intertwined. Humour fulfils a range of social and cognitive management functions. As Martin (2007) explains, it is "a type of mental play involving a light-hearted, non-serious attitude toward ideas and events" (p. 1) denoting its value in situations that require adaptive cognitive reappraisal (Perchtold et al., 2019). In the application of humour individuals often attempt to "exert some form of social or discourse control … [and] repair or defuse unpleasant situations," (p. 19). As a "defiant, triumphant and life-affirming" act (Klein, 1986), humour often stands in contrast to, and gains meaning from the wretchedness, despondency or gloom of life. As a natural response to loss, grief is the emotional suffering that comes with losing something or someone loved (Smith et al., 2012). Grief is often characterised by feelings of anger and distress (Kübler-Ross, 1969), emotions that humour are known to be able to relieve or override (Papa & Litz, 2011). This paper examines a contemporary example of an artistic treatment of grief by UK writer and comedian Ricky Gervais, presented in the context of the episodic dramedy *After Life* (2019-2022). The series does not follow the conventional route of making light of death in an attempt 'tame' or remove its power (Klein, 1986), nor does it use humour to expedite a perceived grief process. Instead, audience expectations of humour are thwarted by a warm, heart wrenching portrayal of loss in which Gervais is also able to further a career-long pursuit into the meaning of comedy. As Gervais (in Marchese, 2019) has stated: "The misunderstanding with contentious subjects is that if a comedian deals with them people

think he's taking the wrong side." That is, making fun of individual or collective hardship, suffering, or the vulnerable.

Gervais has frequently been asked to discuss or comment on the nature, meaning and function of comedy in defence of what some deem his 'offensive' humour as a stand-up comedian. In a promotional radio interview with Sirius XM, Gervais (2013) declared the role of comedy is to "get us over bad things … there's no point in joking about good shit, we don't need it." He has also repeatedly claimed that offence taken at humour, is often based on a false pretence caused by a misunderstanding of the nature or focus of the joke ("Offence often occurs when people mistake the subject of a joke with the actual target. They're not always the same", Gervais, 2017). To illustrate this, Gervais (2013) provided an example of a response he made to a tweet that proclaimed "there is a cure for cancer, it is called praying" to which he replied "your application for chief of oncology in this hospital has not been successful." For him the humour of the response resides in the extreme idea of abandoning medical research and treatments for cancer in favour of prayer. His retort caused offence, generating comments that he was laughing at the idea that there is no cure for cancer. Gervais (in Marchese 2019) instead prefers to condone "laughing at the wrong thing because you know what the right thing is." *After Life* serves to further illustrate Gervais' perspective on humour as it functions to illustrate misapplications of humour as mocking, belittling, undermining, or attacking in response to the emotional distress, loss of self and deep anguish caused by grief.

"Grieve a bit, don't spiral, don't obsess, keep going" (Lisa, *After Life*)

Attempts to research and understand patterns of grief reactions broadly aim to set societal expectations, employer sensitivities, justify social support mechanisms and avoid grief

becoming so debilitating that it distorts all other aspects of life. Early research by Lindermann (1944) into the management of acute grief surmised that "grief reactions should be completed within weeks of the death of a loved one" (p. 362). Forty years later, research began to recognise that grief is a personal journey "that should not be expected to follow time limits and a specific path" (McClowry et al., 1987: 373). Today, Køster (2020) argues that any 'empirical sensitive account' should acknowledge that grief "manifests through a comprehensive affective register" (p. 125) ranging from emotions such as sadness, longing, anger, resentment, hostility, hopelessness, fear and guilt (Fernandez and Køster, 2019). Similarly, Corless et al. (2014) also recognise the dissonance caused by differences in the language of grief between those who experience it directly and professionals. Available via Netflix, *After Life* is a main*stream* mode of entertainment that explores grief as a "response to a significant loss that usually does not require professional help, although it does require ways to heal the broken strands of life and to affirm existing ones" (Schneider, 2000: 7). Strauss (2001) contends that "artists have always combated grave tragedy with grave beauty." Art gives form to death as a peripeteia whilst refusing to provide "false, saccharine comfort; rather, it offers a consolation by allying beauty and truth" (Brantley, in Strauss, 2001). Pre-Covid, the culture of death in the West has been frequently characterised as 'death denying' due to prolonged living and increasing possibilities for medical and technical rescue from death (Waldrop, 2011). Sadowsky (2017) has argued that such "cultural norms … discourage grief or socialize grief out of people" (p. 2) that necessitates a concerted 'willingness' to 'authentically experience grief.'

After Life principally follows the existence of Tony, a widower who is grieving for his wife Lisa (played by Kerry Godliman). As Gervais (2020) states, the series opens with "a woman, who we know has died, and she dying and she's leaving a little funny video for her husband."

Tony's grief is sustained by Lisa's post-mortem video messages, in which she lovingly attempts to guide him through the practicalities of life without her ("you're lovely, but you're fucking useless") and providing an aide-mémoire for basic tasks such as "feed the dog" and put the "bins out on Tuesdays." Yet, Tony is so overawed and overwhelmed by grief that he is unable to follow Lisa's (after)life advice - that includes "keep being funny, tell jokes," implying Tony was once a lighter and better person. Lisa's messages represent a crude digital resurrection that represents a broader and emerging interest in the digital afterlife, and "how technology such as artificial intelligence and brain-computer interfaces could one day be used to create digital replicas of ourselves or loved ones that could live on after death" (Solon, 2018). Rather than speculate on the possibilities of virtual human technologies or thanatechnology (Sofka, 1997) that seek to enable digital afterlives (explored elsewhere by the Black Mirror anthology in episodes "USS Callister" and "Black Museum"), Gervais is content to concentrate on the significant impact of possessing digital artefacts that retain "digital traces of past in-life activity" and how that shapes grief and the "survivors' posthumous storying of their dead" (Savin-Baden & Mason-Robbie, 2020, pp. 4-5; O'Connor, 2020).

Set in the small fictional English town of Tambury, viewers of *After Life* witness Tony's return to work post-bereavement, in which he resumes his job as a journalist for a free local paper (The Tambury Gazette). In his role Tony reports on individual eccentricities, idiosyncrasies, quirks and talents in an otherwise small, mundane and humdrum town. Hopelessly lost in his grief and anger, Tony is no longer prepared to tolerate meaningless pleasantries, inanities, aggravations or conform to social scripts to protect the feelings of others. Reflecting on themes of his body of work, Gervais has stated:

> ‘Derek’ is my Ph.D. about kindness. ‘After Life’ is my Ph.D. about social niceties during grief. ‘The Office’ was my Ph.D. about the mundanity of being thrown together in a 9-to-5. ‘Extras’ was my Ph.D. about ambition and fame (Gervais in Marchese, 2019)

On the one hand, Gervais’ contemplation on the experience of grief follows a conventional (if somewhat exaggerated) path in its portrayal of the most commonly understood emotions and responses to dying and death (Kübler-Ross, 1969). As Gervais states:

> Tony’s going through the stages of grief, shock, anger, denial then acceptance. I saw a therapist talk about grief once. They said something like, “Grief is like a heavy rucksack. It doesn’t get lighter, but you get better at carrying it.” He’s trying to answer the question from the beginning to the end as to whether if you lose everything, is life worth living?

On the other hand, in attempting to convey the phenomenology and experience of grief *After Life* seeks to present a deeper appreciation of the dislocation that grief brings as a result of a significant deficiency and absence in an individual’s life. Much like the function of *After Life*, explorations of grief owe a great deal to the nuanced and personal reflections that demonstrate “the power of emotionality and subjectivity to the mourning self” (Elsner, 2017: 88). Originally published in *Journal de deuil*, Roland Barthes’ (2012) *Mourning Diary* contemplated the manner in which grief transformed his reality and the surrounding external world. Barthes contemplates the change to *Café de Flore* and a bookshop (*La Hune*) with the loss of his mother. In doing so, Barthes chronicled the way his inner reality altered his experience of the external world in a way that only profoundly affected him. For Barthes the

experience is poignant, for he recognizes that he is the only one experiencing the spatial discrepancy caused by his mother's absence.

Similarly, *After Life* demonstrates that ruminations on, and considerations of the nature and experience of grief cannot be purely empirical, didactic or intellectual but also necessitates understanding at an 'emphatic,' 'sensual' and 'intuitive' level (Edensor, 2005, p. 164) in order to fully acknowledge and convey the affective and sensorial impact of grief. Gervais' portrayal of grief, like Barthes' account, reinforces the individualistic and personal endurance of grief, counter to empirical categorisations of the bereavement experience as universal (Corr & Doka, 1994; Worden, 1991). *After Life* acknowledges the non-linear, compounded nature of grief, as opposed to reclamation and resolution-focused models of loss (Daggett, 2002) that crudely outline responses (mourning rituals) and strategies (picking up the pieces, seeking support, and taking control) as phases toward a new event horizon (Battersby, 1993).

"If you're watching this, I am not around anymore" (Lisa, *After Life*)

While memory holds the power "to resurrect and restore the past in the present and unite the two" (Wilson 2012: 484), Michael Sheringham (1993) recognises that the 'memory's terrain' can be an "uncanny intermediacy between the living and the dead" (p. 303). In the 'afterwardness' of grief (p. 293), Tony carries the hurt of a wholeness, contentment and happiness that has left him as he attempts to live without Lisa. In addressing his grief, he also torments himself by observing footage of his past life, which only emphasises the 'unhealable rift' (Said 1984: 173) and the distance between past and present, in which his past self is now the 'other.' While the 'uncanny' is more typically associated with experiences that are 'ghostly' or 'strange', Nicholas Royle (2003) also emphasises the displacement or the

uninvited feeling of a "sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home" (p. 1). This notion of the uncanny serves to encapsulate Tony's position in his 'after life' as we witness the mésalliance between him and his home. The marital home he continues to live in is transformed from the domestic setting that once staged his past life. The absence of Lisa creates an empty space in which his hurt and loneliness is reinforced. In this 'commingling' of past and present Tony is now aimless with no Lisa to tease, no one to provoke laughter from, or for. Instead his uncanny is "bound up with a sense of repetition or 'coming back' … [a] reoccurrence of the same thing, a compulsion to repeat" (p. 2) as he re-watches past happiness of the home on his laptop. Royle might categorise Tony's actions as extreme 'nostalgia.' Lisa's video messages intend to help Tony cope in, and with, her absence but they are viewed alongside Tony's own documentation of the many pranks he played on Lisa, exacerbating his grief. As Royle (2003) notes, the uncanny "is never far from something comic: humour, irony and laughter" (p. 2).

Lisa's post-mortem presence is both familiar (in the case of the footage captured by Tony) and strange. The advice vlogs are recorded in hospital while Lisa was dying, in the moments 'between,' when alone on the ward and Tony was not present. This is confirmed in Episode 5, Season 1 when Tony is heard interrupting one of Lisa's messages by entering the ward. Lisa quickly suspends the message. Then in response to and off camera query from Tony of "What are you doing?" she lies: "Twitter." Watched in Tony's 'after life' they allow him to return to that period of his life in the abridgments of his absence. Furthermore, the uncanny nature to Lisa's vlogs resides in its complication of the 'multi layered reality' that occurs as a consequence of the fact that a "loved object no longer exists" (as Freud wrote in *Mourning and Melancholia*, p. 223) as they address Tony in the here-and-now, from moments of a past that he is unable to relive or recall.

Heidegger's *unheimlich* or *unhiemlichkeit* also notably refers to a 'not-at-home-ness' (McLeod 2000: 219-20). Indeed, throughout *After Life* the home as a secure safe haven is regularly fractured by the outside world. Those on the margins of society involved in shady and insalubrious practices are invited to enter the home, further upsetting the home as a domestic inner sanctum. As a relief from his colleagues and friends, Tony develops a range of transactional relationships with a drug addict and sex-worker (who he pays to perform domestic duties, such as washing his dishes before they become friends). Tony also gradually learns to tolerate his overfamiliar local postman Pat (played by Joe Wilkinson) who from the outset of the series shows acute awareness of the fallacy of the home as a site of private contentment and happiness. He shows little respect for Tony's past domestic boundaries. Rather than anonymously post mail through a letter box, he reads Tony's mail and hands it to him personally on the street. He also picnics in Tony's front garden. Tony comments to Pat: "It's like a Zombie movie, you're always outside trying to get in". His overfamiliarity eventually leads to him request entry into Tony's house to use the toilet which he then exploits and extends to taking a bath. The uncanny space as a "space of displacement" (Risser 1992: 70), becomes a place for the otherwise displaced (that exist outside the home) in *After Life*. While Tony fails to let people close to him help, he repeatedly opens his doors to others that are dislocated from society and are in pain. The uncanny becomes "a contamination of the home, as a moment when we suddenly perceive the strangeness of familiar, previously comfortable environments" (Connon 2010: 31). Gervais also uses these characters to emphasise the collapse of 'marital continuity' (Francis et al. 2005: 94) that otherwise continues to be embodied within material objects and the domestic space. Daggett (2002) reports that bereavement experiences for men often included changing their routine to control and avoid emotional responses and triggers, examples included changing the how and

where they park their car when returning home or reading to fall to sleep to gloss over past routines of going to bed together.

While spousal bereavement represents a parting, or separation, the residual traces of a marital continuity remain within the home and embodied domestic practices (Richardson, 2014). The home typically holds a major function in married couple's lives (Mason, 1989) that deepens throughout life course transitions and age. Marriage possesses a status as the "primary expression of and preferred locus for the most meaningful and socially beneficial forms of intimate belonging" (Wardle 2011: 289-90). Ruth Richardson (1993) uses the example of the custom of carrying the bride over the 'threshold,' to illustrate the manner in which a formal union also incites symbolic practices that reinforces the crossing of a boundary from public to private life - Moving expectantly into domesticity and intimacy. In contrast, when spousal death disrupts 'marital continuity,' subsequent interactions that the living have with personal or household objects connected to the dead sustain a bond metonymically (Hallam & Hockey, 2001). As Tiley (1999) states: "One entity is taken as standing for another entity" (p. 5). In an article completed posthumously by her PhD supervisor with input from her husband, Richardson's (2014) research presents rich examples of the way personhood can be extended beyond a 'body-boundary' (Gell, 1998) leading to "residual belongings or traces of someone who has died carry[ing] a particular charge" (p. 67). Participants in her research described the tactile nature of objects, not as a sign for an absent partner, but *as* their partner. As one of her participants stated with reference to a coat: "it's just my wife, you know, this was my wife, this is my wife, that's her" (p. 68).

Conversely, Gibson (2004) identifies how 'objects of the dead' can "appear abandoned, even unhomely" due to the absence of the other, but the "relationship between the material and

emotional is [in fact a] quiet, often unspoken aspect of personal grieving" (p. 297). To this effect, there a several moments in *After Life* that signal grief as the unceasing presence of an 'empty space' (McClowry et al., 1987). In the context of his work as a local journalist, Tony wearily trapses from one reporting assignment to another, covering the most trifling, ridiculous and exasperating stories. Examples include, the dustbin that sounds like Chewbacca when it is dragged, a woman in Bagdon Road who woke up Chinese, a water stain that looks like Kenneth Branagh and the boy who plays the recorder using his nostrils. During the course of season one and two Tony's annoyance and anger at individuals' desperation to be in the paper is slowly replaced by an appreciation for the underlying function and purpose that his role for the Tambury Gazette serves. Whilst reporting on the story of the man who has received the same birthday card five times, the interviewee exclaims "my Denise *will be* tickled by this." He then quickly glances at the empty chair next to his, part of a twin set, reaches out and pats the arm of the empty chair and states "my wife … she passed away last year, light of my life. Anything that happens I go to tell her, nothing's as good if you don't share it." The scene serves to acknowledge the nature of 'empty space' as a recognition of the presence of an absence. The scene is also framed to accommodate the presence of two people. The widower occupies the left of the screen with Denise's empty chair taking up the space on the right. Positioned in front of both, is a small table on which tea cups and saucers and two plates with half eaten cakes rest. While the one set belongs to Tony, he is positioned off screen, allowing the tea and cake to both intimate a presence and accentuate an absence (Denise). At the end of the interview Tony incidentally wishes the man a happy birthday, a poignant and revelatory moment in which his loneliness is revealed by his reaction.

Mourning can involve an adjustment of "memories to the emptiness of the places that were once filled with the presence of the now-absent person" (Elsner 2017: 90), reinserting the lost back into those empty spaces. Practices of cohabitation are easily reevoked by Tony's habitual movement around the home and its objects. For example, a scene where Tony is alone at home, slumbering on the couch, is overlaid with a memory of when he rested his head on Lisa's lap whilst in the same position. As a mode of sensory engagement with our environment, Classen (2005) notes "bodies learn to 'speak' a certain language of touch" (p. 13). There are several moments when Tony's video memories of life with Lisa transects the present as he watches clips that are filmed in the same space and from the same angle he is currently sitting. In a scene from the first episode of the second series, Tony is sat on the sofa, watches an exchange with Lisa on his laptop. In the video she is somnolently drunk on the opposite sofa (now empty). In the video he warns her that drinking is not good for her health. She responds by raising her glass and toasting: "Here's to me dying first." In the present, Tony looks up from the laptop to the empty sofa and raises his glass of wine joining Lisa's toast.

The distinction between imagination and reality is effaced continually throughout *After Life,* in which, recollections overlay the present space causing the imaginary to appear in reality (Freud, 1919/1955). Tony sees Lisa as he walks through the town of Tambury, memories of how she occupied these spaces in their everyday life. She is seen waiting outside shops, swimming in the lake or in the sea. In this way, the uncanny is less strange for Tony, but "grounds for a reinterpretation of the ordinary world" (Connon 2010: 31). Interestingly, one of these reflective sequences produced a strong reaction and response from audiences and critics. In Episode 5, Season 2 Tony is again portrayed remembering back to a happier time whilst walking his dog through a local park. The space triggers a memory in which he recalls

filming Lisa swimming in a small lake. However, viewers found the scene distracting and unreal as they felt Godliman's face looked to have been roughly and amateurly superimposed onto the swimmer's body (see Fig 1). Producer Charlie Hanson explained that the footage was shot on an iPhone by Gervais for authenticity. The device triggered an auto-exposure feature on the subject's face that created such a stark contrast to everything else in the frame. The distortion and breaking down of realist codes, placed the audience within an uncanny moment in which the footage destabilises otherwise familiar 'scopic regimes' (Grayson & Mawdsley, 2018) in which customary practices of seeing and representing are interrupted. This veers into the territory of the uncanny outcome of particular artistic practices. Superimposed images often occur from multiple exposures on analogue film or photography, creating ethereal images as a result of layering.

Figure 1 –The Questionable Superimposed Scene from After Life from Episode 5, Season 2 (Left), Gervais Filming the Scene on an iPhone (Right).

Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1986) acknowledged that objects, like people, have life spans. During those life spans and their use they are able to undergo a process of 'singularisation' (p. 80) in which "object meaning emerges from moments of social action in the life of an object" (Stoner 2019: 1). Links are then created to the "social being, and public and private" (Wilson 1985: 2). In 'Worn Worlds: Clothes, mourning and the life of things,' for example, Peter Stallybrass (1993) describes the experience of an item of clothing belonging to a deceased friend:

> And it was this that he had put on that day: If I wore the jacket, Allon wore me. He was there in the wrinkles of the elbow, wrinkles which in the technical jargon of sewing are called 'memory'; he was there in the stains at the very bottom of the jacket; he was there in the smell of the armpits (p. 36)

In this passage we get a clear sense of how embodied and intersubjective dimensions of personhood are preserved in clothing and furniture. In her examination of the social and cultural history of fashion, Elizabeth Wilson (1985) considers the exhibition of garments in museums and comments: "We experience a sense of the uncanny when we gaze at garments that had an intimate relationship with human beings long since gone to their graves" (p. 1). In this way, the bereaved are able to sustain a relationship with the deceased when they remain surrounded by objects that contain the embodied presence of loved ones. As Richardson (2014) identifies the domestic setting that widows or widowers continue to inhabit "constitute an environment of memory" (p. 61). In promoting the series Gervais (2020) explained that: "Even though [Tony] doesn't believe in an afterlife, which is sort of a play on the title, the afterlife is after his life ended when his wife died, but *she still is there*."

After Life draws attention to the lasting strength of habituated presence that complicates a concrete absence, revealing how "our sense of self-familiarity – that is, feeling at ease and at home with ourselves – is not something that is self-reliant and self-contained" (Køster 2020: 130). As the Tony attempts to explain, "I don't miss doing things with Lisa, I miss doing nothing with Lisa. Just sitting there knowing she was there." 'Existential coordinates' such as the presence of a partner lying or sitting nearby trigger the uncanny as they are not

‘devastating experiences’ that represent a ‘complete uprooting’, but disorienting and unsettling (Sallis, 2006). As Køster (2020) argues:

> When we share our lives with intimate others, the invisible threads of intentionality that integrate is with our habituated world will tend to be inextricably interwoven with a particular person. In such cases, the very practices, places, things etc. that constitute my habituated world retain their meaningfulness only through a reference to a person (p. 132)

The ‘lived synchronism’ (Minkowski, 1970) of being in partnership with another represents a mode of ‘contemporality’ (Fuchs, 2018) that two people can bring with them to negotiate the future. With loss this is dissolved leading to a loss of a ‘dyadic futurity’ (Riley, 2012). The loss of a shared future fuels Tony’s anger, but also the lack of time that now constitutes the past is perceived as cut short - “I’m angry, I’m petty, I’m sad. I’m jealous of anyone who’s still got someone.” Tony engages in the funerary ritual of visiting Lisa’s grave in which he strikes up a relationship with Anne, a widow who visits her husband Stan’s grave that is set next to Lisa’s. In one of their many honest and compassionate encounters throughout the series, Anne reveals that she “had the most wonderful life” with her husband who never disagreed with her in their 48 years together. Tony responds: “I didn’t get that long.” Indeed, when Anne and Tony first meet at the cemetery, she enquires: “Your mum?” gesturing to the grave Tony is visiting. He responds: “My wife.”

“Out of Date Scotch Egg Sold to Teen” (Headline of the Tambury Gazette)

Throughout *After Life* Tony’s mourning assumes a different nature, visibility and appositeness in different spaces and places. As already stated, in the house that was once a

home, Tony's existence lacks the care, activity, energy, laughter and presence of Lisa. Tony's work life comprises a separate domain distinct from the phenomenology of the home that once served as a 'second body' and a "place of initial stability and a foundation for the self" (Jacobson 2009: 361). Yet, at work Tony demonstrates an unwillingness to acclimatise to the professional demands of his job. His grief state does not allow him to compartmentalise or shut off his grief, for the lost object is set up within the self (Elsner, 2017). His subjective experience of the world is entirely altered and shaped by loss. Schieffelin (1987) has argued that while anger is an affect that is feared it is also admired. In this respect *After Life* taps into comedy observations that connect with shared irritations, annoyances and exasperations. Tony is consistently provoked by disgusting habits (sniffing, slurping & eating), unbalanced or self-centred conversations or unthinking platitudes that fuel his annoyance for the way the living are squandering life ("Here's what's what – Humanity's a plague, we're disgusting, narcissistic, selfish parasite and the world would be a better place without us. It should be everyone's moral duty to kill themselves"). Indeed, Tony's behaviour constitutes a "fracture in the collective pact of communication" (Connon 2010: 32) exposing what ought to remain politely overlooked but is brought to attention.

Toward the end of the first series of After Life Tony realises that the Tambury Gazette is "not for reading, it's for being in … everyone should be in it at least one. I woz here." In doing so, Tony refers to an age-old individual compulsion to mark presence via graffiti, either written or carved on walls. During the second series Tony covers the story of a woman who claims she can talk to cats but, during the interview, reveals that her husband and daughter have both passed away. As Tony leaves the room, he comments to photographer Lenny: "That's so sad. She wants to see her husband and her daughter's name in the paper - that cat thing is just an in, she's lonely." He then goes back into the room and

gives her a hug. Tony's conversations with Anne (at Lisa and Stan's graves) go some way to restore the value of symbolic immortality and future-oriented thinking in Tony when she tells him that: "A society grows when old men plant trees, the shade of which they know they will never sit in. Good people do good things for other people." Indeed, Gervais' dramedy slowly incorporates the 'negotiation' stage of grief in which Tony is "saying come on world, why should I stick around, what have you got for me." In doing so, he considers whether there is value to "sticking around and making my corner of the world a better place." The change in Tony, doesn't mean he's happy, ready move on, less pessimistic, or no longer entertains suicidal thoughts. He admits to Anne that: "I remember what it was like to be normal and I do a good impression of that."

Conclusion

Charity organization Widowed and Young describe *After Life* as a "searingly accurate reflection of what it's like to be widowed at a young age" (Cooper in Banim 2019). A number of widowers have also commended the series on Twitter, praising Gervais' for the manner in which he represented their lived experience. As Russell Thompson (2019) tweeted: "as a widower of nearly 2 years .. It's as if you wrote it for me. I needed it and have taken so much from it that I can't really explain. Obviously you didn't but it's brilliantly perfect in so many ways." While BlobbyH (2019) tweeted " From a widower of 5 years who … saw himself in literally every excruciating frame - even at the end as I think I may have come through it too. Thank you for nailing how it feels - loud eaters were also on my "list".

In its account of grief *After Life* reaffirms the "autobiographical or personal nature of uncanny experience" (Connon 2010: 40). The phenomenology of grief possesses the triggers for uncanniness as the boundaries between the real and unreal, I and not-I are significantly

disordered, severed by physical separation, yet maintained within a vast array of embodied practices, material objects and, digital memorialisation and communication through 'thanatechnology' (Bassett, 2021). As Køster (2020) states, "the sources of emptiness are paradoxically also the sources of presence of the person who passed away" (p. 140).

References

Banim, Julia, Ricky Gervais' After Life Is 'Painfully Accurate' Portrayal of Life as a Widower, *Unilad*, 17 March, 2019. https://www.unilad.co.uk/featured/ricky-gervais-after-life-is-painfully-accurate-portrayal-of-life-as-a-widower/

Bassett, Debra. Ctrl+Alt+Delete: The Changing Landscape of the Uncanny Valley and the Fear of Second Loss, *Current Psychology*, Vol. 40, (2021), pp. 813-821.

Barthes, Roland, *Mourning Diaries*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2012.

Battersby, Christine, Her Body/Her Boundaries: Gender and the Metaphysics of Containment, *Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts*, Vol. 4, (1993), pp. 30–39.

Connon, Daisy, *Subjects Not-at-Home: Forms of the Uncanny in the Contemporary French Novel*, Leiden: Brill, 2010.

Corless, Inge B., Limbo Rana, Bousso Regina Szylit, Wrenn Robert L., Head David, Lickiss Norelle & Wass Hannelore, Languages of Grief: A Model for Understanding the Expressions of the Bereaved, *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (2014), pp. 132-143.

Corr, Charles, and Kenneth Doka, Master Concepts in the Field of Death, Dying, and Bereavement: Coping Versus Adaptive Strategies, *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, Vol. 43, No. 3, (2001), pp. 183-199.

Daggett Luann, Living with Loss: Middle-Aged Men Face Spousal Bereavement, *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 12, No. 5, (2002), pp. 625-639.

Demjén, Zsófia, Laughing at Cancer: Humour, Empowerment, Solidarity and Coping Online, *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 101, (2016), pp. 18-30.

DuBose, Todd, The Phenomenology of Bereavement, Grief, and Mourning, *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 36, No. 4, (1997), pp. 367-374.

Edensor Tim, The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins: Ordering and Disordering Memory in Excessive Space, *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*, Vol. 23, No. 6, (2005), pp. 829-849.

Elsner, Magdalena, *Mourning and Creativity in Proust,* Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017.

Fernandez, Anthony Vincent and Allan Køster, On the Subject Matter of Phenomenological Psychopathology, in Giovanni Stanghellini, Matthew Broome, Anthony Vincent Fernandez, Paolo Fusar-Poli, Andrea Raballo and René Rosfort (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. pp. 191–204.

Freud, Sigmund, Trauer und Melancholie [Mourning and Melancholia], *International Journal for Medical Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 4, No. 6, (1917), pp. 288–301.

Freud, Sigmund, The Uncanny, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1919/1955.

Francis, Doris, Leonie Kellaher and Georgine Neophytou, *The Secret Cemetery*. Oxford: Berg, 2005.

Fuchs, Thomas, The Phenomenology of Body Memory, in Sabine Koch, Thomas Fuchs, Michela Summa and Cornelia Müller (Eds.), *Body Memory, Metaphor and Movement* (pp. 9-22), Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2018.

Gell, Alfred, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Gergen, Kenneth, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, New York: Basic Books, 1991.

Gervais, Ricky, Tweet, *Twitter*, 30th March, 2017.

Gervais, Ricky, Ricky Gervais and the After Life Cast Break Down Grief and Real Life Heartbreak, *Netflix UK & Ireland*, (2020). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbQBKpb17no

Gervais, Ricky, Ricky Gervais Chats After Life, *Heart*, (2020). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3kazr5H1vM

Gibson, Margaret, Melancholy Objects, *Mortality*, Vol. 9, No. 4, (2004), pp. 285-299.

Grayson, Kyle & Joselyn Mawdsley, Scopic Regimes and the Visual Turn in International Relations: Seeing World Politics Through the Drone, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 25, No. 2, (2019), pp. 431-457.

Hallam, Elizabeth and Jenny Hockey, *Death, Memory and Material Culture*, Oxford: Berg, 2001.

Howard, Annie, Ricky Gervais on Humor: "There's Nothing Funnier Than Real Life," *The Hollywood Reporter*, (2015). https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/ricky-gervais-humor-nothing-funnier-803292

Jacobson, Kirsten, A Developed Nature: A Phenomenological Account of the Experience of the Home, *Continental Philosophy Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3, (2009), pp. 355-373.

Jentsch, Ernst, Die Laune - Eine Arztlich-Psychologische Studie, *Grenzfragen des Nerven- und Seelenlebens*, Vol. 2, (1902), pp. 1–60.

Klein, Allen, Humor and Death – You've Got to be Kidding!, *Play and Humor*, Vol. 13, (1986), p. 43.

Kopytoff, Igor, The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process, in Arjun Appadurai (Ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (pp. 64–94), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Køster, Allan, Bereavement and the Meaning of Profound Feelings of Emptinesss: An Existential-phenomenological Analysis, in Christian Tewes and Giovanni Stanghellini (Eds.) *Time and Body: Phenomenological and Psychopathogical Approaches*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 125-143.

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, *On Death and Dying*, New York: Macmillan, New York, 1969.

Lindemann, Erich, Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief, *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 101, (1944), pp. 141–148.

Marchese, David, Ricky Gervais on Provocation, Picking Targets and Outrage Culture, *The New York Times Magazine*, 19 March, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/03/19/magazine/ricky-gervais-after-life-comedy-twitter.html

Martin, Rod, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, Elsevier Academic Press; Burlington, MA, 2007.

Mason, Jennifer, Reconstructing the Public and the Private: The Home and Marriage in Later Life, in Graham Allan and Graham Crow (Eds.) *Home and Family*, Palgrave Macmillan: London, 1989.

McClowry, S. G., E. B. Davies, K. A. May, E. J. Kulenkamp and I. M. Martinson, The Empty Space Phenomenon: The Process of Grief in the Bereaved Family, *Death Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 5, (1987), pp. 361-374.

McLeod, John, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Minkowski, Eugène, *Lived Time: Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

O'Connor, Mórna, Posthumous Digital Material: Does It 'Live On' in Survivors' Accounts of Their Dead? In Maggie Savin-Baden and Victoria Mason-Robbie (Eds.) *Digital Afterlife: Death in a Digital Age*, London: Taylor & Francis, 2020.

Papa, Anthony and Brett Litz, Grief, in Crissa Draper and William O Donohue (Eds.) *Stepped Care and e-Health: Practical Applications to Behavioral Disorders*, Springer-Verlag: New York, 2011.

Perchtold, Corinna, Elisabeth Weiss, Christian Rominger, Kurt Feyaerts, Willibad Ruch, Andreas Fink and Ilona Papousek, Humorous Cognitive Reappraisal: More Benign Humour and Less 'Dark' Humour is Affiliated with more Adaptive Cognitive Reappraisal Strategies, *PLoS ONE*, Vo. 14, No. 1, (2019).

Richardson, Ruth, Death's Door: Thresholds and Boundaries in British Funeral Customs, in Hilda Ellis Davidson (Ed.), *Boundaries and Thresholds: Papers from a Colloquium of the Katharine Briggs Club* (pp. 91–102), Stroud: Thimble Press, 1993.

Richardson, Therese, Spousal Bereavement in Later Life: A Material Culture Perspective, *Mortality*, Vol. 19, No. 1, (2014), pp. 61-79.

Riley, Denise, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, London: Pan Macmillan, 2012.

Risser, James, Sitting Order at the Limits of Construction: Deconstructing Architectural Space, *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 22, (1992), pp. 62-72.

Royle, Nicholas, *The Uncanny*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.

Sadowsky, Michael, Grief as a Skill, *Sophia*: *St. Catherine University Repository Website*, 2017. https://sophia.stkate.edu/msw_papers/787

Said, Edward, Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays, London: Granta, 1984.

Sallis, John, *Topographies*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006.

Savin-Baden, Maggie and Victoria Mason-Robbie, *Digital Afterlife: Death in a Digital Age*, London: Taylor & Francis, 2020.

Schieffelin, Edward L., Anger, Grief, and Shame: Towards a Kaluli Ethnopsychology, in Geoffrey Miles White and John Kirkpatrick (Eds.), *Person, Self and Experience*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

Schneider, John, *The Overdiagnosis of Depression: Recognizing Grief and its Transformative Potentials*, Traverse City, MI: Seasons Press, 2000.

Sheringham, Michael, *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

Smith, Melinda, Lawrence Robinson and Jeanne Segal, Coping with Grief and Loss, *HelpGuide*, (2012). http://helpguide.org/mental/grief_loss.htm

Sofka, Carla, Social Support 'Internetworks,' Caskets for Sale and More: Thanatology and the Information Superhighway, *Death Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 6, (1997), pp. 553-574.

Solon, Olivia, How Close are we to a Black Mirror-style Digital Afterlife? *The Guardian*, 9 Jan, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/jan/09/how-close-are-we-black-mirror-style-digital-afterlife

Stallybrass, Peter, Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things, *The Yale Review*, Vol. 81, No. 2, (1993), p. 36.

Stoner, Jo, *The Cultural Lives of Domestic Objects in Late Antiquity*, Boston: Brill, 2019.

Strauss, Neil, The Expression of Grief and the Power of Art, *New York Times*, 13 Sept, 2001. https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/13/arts/the-expression-of-grief-and-the-power-of-art-91977770195.html

Tilley, Christopher, *Metaphor and Material Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

Waldrop, Deborah P., Denying and Defying Death: The Culture of Dying in 21st Century America, *The Gerontologist*, Vol. 51, No. 4, (August, 2011), pp. 571–576.

Wardle, Lynn, The Boundaries of Belonging: Allegiance, Purpose and the Definition of Marriage, *BYU Journal of Public Law*, Vol. 25, No. 1, (2011), pp. 287-316.

Wilson, Colette, The Photobook as Object of Memory and Nostalgia, in Patrizia di Bello, Colette Wilson and Shamoon Zamir (Eds.), *The Photobook from Talbot to Ruscha and Beyond*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2012.

Wilson, Elizabeth, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, London: Virago, 1985.

Worden, James, Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner, New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1991.