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Psychiatry in movies

Phantasm and suicide

Shisei Tei and Junya Fujino

Sudden death and suicide complicate grief. They can induce conflicting feelings of guilt and questions of who to blame. Casting light on such grief, the 1995 film *Maborosi* ('Phantom Light') portrays the universal experience of bereavement through a lens of uncertainty. This tranquil film depicts people's suffering and comfort and the ambiguity and flexibility of human nature.

Maborosi was the fiction film debut of documentarian and Cannes Palme d'Or winner Hirokazu Kore-eda, currently one of the titans of cinema. It is based on the 1979 novel by Miyamoto Teru (published in English in *Phantom Lights and Other Stories*), whose work explores 'the mutual proximity – or even the identity – of life and death'. This internationally acclaimed film allows us to sense how inconclusive grief is encountered and perceived.

Recounted by a young widow, Yumiko, who moves to a small coastal village to remarry, the story illustrates her suffering to understand why her first husband died by suicide without warning or apparent motive. Even after her remarriage to Tamio, Yumiko remains stranded at the crossroads between living and dying. As her spirit is slowly crushed, she unburdens herself to Tamio. Thoughtfully, he tells her a story of how fishermen sometimes succumb to the lure of phantom lights over the horizon. He suggests that perhaps something just drew her husband away from life, like the lights attracting the fishermen. Longing for death can be a force as unexpected and convincing as those distant phantom lights. As Yumiko halts her unsuccessful attempts at finding meaning in loss and flexibly resolves conflicts with reality and ideals, the film reflects on our experiences of grief that occasionally embody simultaneous but contradictory ideas of the inherent meaningfulness and meaninglessness of loss. It tells us that suffering may be aggravated by reaffirming selfish hope; mitigating such expectations while sharing these experiences of grief may provide clues to the riddles of life.

Fate, death and the will to live are sketched throughout the narrative, and *Maborosi* enables us to envision existential crises. Assuaging such crises might involve admitting uncertainty and withholding excessive judgement, reminiscent of Husserl's *epoché*. Furthermore, the film's dynamic landscape echoes the tapestry of human behaviour, interwoven with perceptions of identity and belief and sometimes entranced by ever-changing mental activity. Along with the breathtaking scenery of the coastal village, the ambiguous boundaries of light and darkness are unified in the seashore, perhaps describing the balance between the transient and eternal, modernism and tradition. The film's depiction of the acceptance of uncertainty and employing flexible perspectives in coping with grief may echo the recent suggestion of a 'middle path' for suicide prevention in Sjöstrand & Eyal's *BJPsych* paper 'The phantasm of zero suicide' (<https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2023.3>), which, considering the changing and uncertain psychosocial needs of patients, advocates personalised care for their medical condition while flexibly supporting their individual autonomy as appropriate.

Confronting death is challenging, but *Maborosi* reminds us that it need not be overwhelming; accepting uncertainty and adopting a flexible approach can lead us to the 'middle' path where the phantom lights reveal alternative views in appreciating life.

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