



## Trabajo Fin de Grado

“Wish we could’ve Stayed for Longer”:  
Fatherhood and Masculinity through the  
Eyes of the Daughter in *Aftersun* (2022).

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## Introduction

In May 2022, Scottish director, writer, and producer Charlotte Wells made her feature film directorial debut with *Aftersun* (Wells 2022) at the Cannes Film Festival, receiving immediate critical acclaim and winning the French Touch Prize of the Critics' Week Jury. The film had its theatrical release in October 2022 in the United States and in November of the same year in the United Kingdom. The film garnered sixteen nominations for the British Independent Film Awards, winning among others Best Independent Film, Director, Screenplay, and Cinematography. The actors' performances and chemistry were widely praised by critics; as Peter Bradshaw expressed “their rapport is a marvel, as is the way they have been directed by Wells” (2022). *Aftersun* also won the BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) for Wells's “Outstanding Debut by a British Writer, Director or Producer”, while the main actor, Paul Mescal, obtained his career's first Academy Award nomination for Best Actor.

The film follows the story of Sophie (newcomer Frankie Corio as child Sophie, Celia Rowson Hall as adult Sophie) as she looks back on the memories of the holiday she spent with her father Callum (Paul Mescal) in a budget Turkish resort some twenty years before. Newly entering motherhood, a grown-up version of Sophie revisits her childhood memories, now tainted with the melancholy and nostalgia of grief, in an attempt to make sense of her father's pain now through the lens of adulthood. The delicate yet powerful depiction of the father-daughter bond at the heart of this film has been praised by critics like A.O. Scott, who complimented Wells's expertise, highlighting how the director manages to unlock “the medium's often dormant potential to disclose inner worlds of consciousness and feeling” (Scott 2022).

Although the following analysis understands the feature as a “father-daughter film”, it is important to note that *Aftersun* also uses the conventions of the “coming-of-age” genre, which presents “adolescence as a transitional stage on the road towards adulthood” (Buckingham 2021). Child-Sophie is aware to a certain degree of her father’s suffering. But being an eleven-year-old girl approaching teen age, her mind is occupied with plenty of other things too. As *Sight and Sound* critic Leigh Singer observes, the film’s colour-saturated images and “semi-obsured framing” allow the filmmakers to depict both “young Sophie’s oblivious perspective” and her adult self’s “heightened attempt to (re-)construct a picture of her father that won’t ever fully shift into focus” (Singer 2022).

This essay analyses *Aftersun* as depicting of a father in crisis seen through the eyes of his daughter, which can be interpreted in relation to postfeminist discourse around fatherhood in the twenty-first century. The feature will be first defined as an example of the “father-daughter film” that has gained popularity in contemporary filmmaking, as well as symptomatic of a postfeminist cultural discourse, as explained by Hannah Hamad, which understands fatherhood as one of the features of ideal masculinity (Hamad 2017). Then the film will be subject to an analysis of the implications behind the use and manipulation of formal features like narrative levels and focalization, that collaboratively create a truly subjective account of the story.

## Cultural/Ideological Context and Theoretical Framework

### 1. Hannah Hamad Remarks on Paternity and Postfeminism.

Hannah Hamad's *Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary U.S. Film: Framing Fatherhood* is a key text to analyse the theme of fatherhood in recent filmmaking. In the book, she makes several remarks regarding the key concepts of masculinity and fatherhood, and how both have been represented in contemporary film and television. Hamad wrote about the cinema up to the 2010s, before the Me-Too movement spread all over Hollywood. In this sense, while her arguments are proved to be key in the drawing of an interpretation of fatherhood in *Aftersun*, it is important to note that, being a "Post-Me-Too" film, some ideological configurations that Wells's debut feature puts forward may have different implications or may rather move away from Hamad's main remarks. Due to its ongoing nature, it is certainly too early to draw conclusions or generalisations from the cinema of the 2020s. Still, this work aims to provide insights and theorising about its present state regarding the topic of fatherhood as illustrated by this 2022 film, which proves to be symptomatic of what Hamad identifies as the "paternal postfeminist melancholia" (2017, 24).

In the introduction to her work, Hamad explains that the 1990s saw how fatherhood as defining characteristic of the masculinity of the male protagonist gained popularity across a much broader range of cinematic forms and genres (Hamad 2017). Thus, her main thesis is that in the twenty-first century, postfeminist fatherhood "has become normalized as the default position from which to negotiate hegemonic masculinity" (Hamad 2017, 15). This prevalence of "popular cinematic fatherhood" in twenty-first century film, Hamad argues can be historically located "in relation to contemporaneous discourses of postfeminist masculinity", which can be set in contrast with those film put forward before second wave feminism (2017, 5). For Hamad, the

focus moved away from of previously “priced paternal characteristics” (e.g. breadwinning, disciplinarianism) onto the favouring of “affective qualities” (e.g. sensitivity, nurturance, emotional articulacy) (2017, 8-9). Hamad claims that postfeminist fatherhood “has become a structuring theme of contemporary movie masculinity” almost to a total extent. Consequently, various scholars have signalled the emergent “hegemonic relationship between fatherhood and masculinity in postfeminist fatherhood” (Hamad 2017, 16). Fatherhood seems then the way to overcome the uncertainty as to how to express masculinity in postfeminism times, and its hegemony answers to the crisis that masculinity undergoes as a consequence of the internalization of feminist discourse.

Hamad detects two common features shared across *fatherhood films*: the marginalization of the figure of the mother and the use of the melodramatic mode. She quotes Modleski contention, to assert that men seem to answer to the feminist demand for their participation in childrearing “in such a way as to make women more marginal than ever” (qtd. in Hamad 2017, 18). In harmony with the conventions of melodrama, she argues postfeminist fatherhood is regularly articulated through a “melancholic affective register”, which gives rise across the representational landscape to the “ubiquitous figure of the widowed single father” of contemporary popular cinema (Hamad 2017, 17). According to Hamad “paternal postfeminist melancholia” manifests in a plethora of “twenty-first-century narratives of single fatherhood”. This register, she claims, prompts “audience investment in melancholic fathers and their emotional trajectories, as they transcend grief and/or cement bonds with their children” (Hamad 2017, 24).

Furthermore, Hamad draws from Diane Negra’s concept of the “postfeminist female melancholic”, whose affective charge is bound up with female aging and later lifecycle stages, to define the “postfeminist male melancholic” often embodied in “the figure of the traumatised or bereaved father”. This notion is to her “the dominant affective

register of the male melodrama of postfeminist fatherhood". She argues this conforms "a disingenuously apolitical appeal for victim status" that garners "sympathy for lost male power" while it sets "inherent antifeminist undertones by seeming to speak through a feminist espoused masculine ideal", perpetuating masculine hegemony (Hamad 2017, 26).

After explaining the notion of paternal postfeminist melancholia, in chapter five of her book, Hamad speaks of a rising discursive intersection between male melancholia, immature adult masculinity, and postfeminist fatherhood in contemporary cinema (2017, 91-112). Aligned with postfeminist culture's paternal imperative, immature adult masculinity is offset with how these films employ fatherhood as a means for immature protagonists to transcend their masculine derogation (Hamad 2017, 91), in other words, as a means to overcome their crisis of masculinity. In simpler terms, Hamad's main contention is that in these narratives of immature masculinity, protagonists are "transformed through fatherhood or matured in preparation for incipient fatherhood" (2017, 93). The author explains that narratives of postfeminist fatherhood may chart the paternalized recuperation of (immature) masculinity by means of the aforementioned affective register of male melancholia (Hamad 2017, 110). Taking *Somewhere* (Coppola 2010) as an example, Hamad identifies how the early scenes of the film set its melancholic tone for the father's indulged immaturity, while they also establish "the eventual likelihood of a transformative paternal epiphany" as his daughter signs the cast on his arm (2017, 110). This concept of "paternal epiphany" will be later recuperated and further discussed in the analysis section regarding the protagonist of *Aftersun*.

## 2. The Crisis of Masculinity.

Throughout the previous paragraphs, the terms “crisis” and “crisis of masculinity” have been mentioned several times, as well as the idea that many contemporary films present fatherhood as the way to transcend or overcome said crisis. This has been implied too by author Katie Barnett in her work *Fathers on Film: Paternity and Masculinity in 1990s Hollywood* (Barnett 2021). She explains that due to the first and second waves of feminism, women were increasingly allowed to enter the professional sphere, which led to the reconfiguration of the domestic one and the so-called “crisis of masculinity”. As the series’ editors Angela Smith and Claire Nally explain in their foreword to Barnett’s book, consequently this implied that men turned to “the constancy of fatherhood” (Barnett 2021, xi). As Barnett describes it:

In fatherhood, an apparently uncertain future could be transcended. It becomes what I term a ‘saving mechanism’, capable of delivering men from the widely discussed yet contentious crisis of masculinity and restoring their sense of worth and dominance. Throughout 1990s [...] fatherhood is constructed as the answer to a much masculinized sense of uncertainty and feared loss of purpose. (2021, 2)

Although Barnett illustrates her argument referring to films of the 1990s, her claim can be extended to the cinema of the twenty-first century too. Moreover, much like gender is constantly in flux, so is the concept of masculinity or femininity, being all constructs determined by society and culturally performed (Barnett 2021, 5). The concept of crisis implies previous stability, yet the frequency of these so-called “crises of masculinity” suggests that this concept “may be better understood as an inevitable ebb and flow of anxiety over men’s roles and status, rather than something that can ever be decisively resolved” (Barnett 2021, 6). Then, in this way, Barnett argues that in many of

Hollywood's output, fatherhood is deployed as a 'saving mechanism' for masculinity amidst all uncertainty, blame, and confusion. Barnett's contentions then are complimentary to Hamad's arguments, and of great use to outline the concept of crisis of masculinity in relation to Callum in *Aftersun*.

### 3. *Aftersun: A Father-Daughter Film Seen Through the Eyes of the Child.*

Lone father-daughter relationships have long been represented in film. It is the case of *Paper Moon* (Bogdanovich 1973), which is among the repertoire that the director herself has mentioned as one of her influences when writing and directing *Aftersun*. In recent times, there has been a proliferation of "father-daughter films" that deal with the theme of single fatherhood as one of their main subject matters or of central importance, as is the case of Christopher Nolan's renounced sci-fi drama *Interstellar* (2014). As happened with the broader concept of *fatherhood films*, a recurrent convention in "father-daughter films" is also the marginalization of motherhood, usually translated in the absence of a mother figure—a topic that could also be focus of a different analysis. This absence of a mother figure for the child, and of a parenting companion for the father, has an impact in the configuration of the relationship between father and daughter. Furthermore, in the case of the father, it can be a contributing element for the so-called "crisis of masculinity" discussed before.

*Aftersun* can be said to be part of a specific subgroup within this realm of films, where the main if not the sole focalizer of the action is the daughter, who sees her father undergo either a physical or psychological struggle or pain that she fails to fully understand because of her young age. In other words, "father-daughter films" that deal with a father in *crisis*, seen through the eyes of the daughter. Other examples of this kind of narrative are *Somewhere* (2010), *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Zeitlin 2012), *Leave No*

*Trace* (Granik 2018), and *Scrapper* (Reagan 2023), all presenting a father-daughter story where she is the main focalizer of the action.

*Somewhere* provides an example of immature adult masculinity in single father Johnny (Stephen Dorff), a melancholic Hollywood playboy who much like Callum is part-time in his daughter's life. Despite Johnny's daughter delayed appearance, it is her focalization the one that prevails over the film. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* deals with the story of a six-year-old motherless girl from a fictional island land surrounded by rising waters, and whose father has recently contracted a mysterious illness. Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis) has to endure environmental disaster as well as loss, while she sees her father undergo serious physical pain. The almost total prevalence of her focalization over the film is probably the most evident case of daughter focalization in the group of father-daughter films taken as examples here. *Leave No Trace* tells the story of Will (Ben Foster), single father and war veteran, and his daughter Tom (Thomasin McKenzie), who are living off the grid and away from society until a small incident reveals them to authorities. Tom is the main focalizer of the action and main witness of her father's PTSD. *Scrapper* sets a stark contrast in this group of father-daughter films because of its use of comic conventions. Its humorous yet moving tone presents the story of resourceful 12-year-old Georgie (Lola Campbell), who has recently lost her mother and now lives secretly alone in her flat and making money out of stolen bikes. One day her young and until-then-absent father Jason (Harris Dickinson) comes back to Georgie's life. Adjusting to their new circumstances, they discover they both have a lot of growing up to do, and that they can do so together.

What binds all these father figures together is the experience of a crisis, which can be also understood as a struggle or uncertainty, that the films portray as seen through the daughters' point of view. Another common trait among many of these daughters is how

they show signs of precocious maturity, which at times translates onto how they express love and affection by means of taking care of their fathers, a role reversal of sorts. This aligns with Hamad's premise that father/daughter pairings in film usually present "wise daughters of single fathers", whose precocious maturity counterbalances immaturity or deficient fatherhood (Hamad 2017, 111). These daughters usually help their fathers transcend paternal melancholia by means of a transformative "paternal epiphany" (Hamad 2017). Unlike the rest of the films in the aforementioned group, in *Aftersun* there is no epiphany: the father is unable to transcend paternal melancholia.

## *Aftersun*

*Aftersun*'s paternal figure, Callum, fits Hamad's concept of "parental postfeminist melancholia". The character shows signs of trauma and bereavement, a feature intrinsic to this subcategory of the postfeminist male melancholic. The film also showcases in a way the "marginalization of motherhood" typical of postfeminist fatherhood, while it sets it in contrast with other father-daughter films that present a widowed father: the mother figure is here absent due to parental separation. The audience does not have access to the story behind said separation yet come to know that they are still fond of the other—they even say "I love you" to each other, something child-Sophie fails to fully comprehend.

It is true that Sophie's mother seems to be in a better place than Callum. It is implied that she has moved on with her life and may have a new partner, while he is dealing with serious mental health struggles and money problems. The specific reason behind his predicament is never openly disclosed—according to the film's director, this was a conscious choice on her part since this is not the focus of the story (Wise 2022). Callum's situation entails uncertainty, confusion, and even blame, as connecting with Barnett's contentions he is undergoing a "crisis of masculinity". The focus of the film is to present this crisis of masculinity through the eyes of the daughter. The following analysis will discuss how narrative structure and focalization are used to portray how Sophie perceives Callum's suffering.

## 1. A Rather Unconventional Narrative Structure: Discussing the use of Narrative Levels in *Aftersun*

One of the main features of *Aftersun* is its unconventional narrative structure. The majority of the scenes are set in the late 1990s, the years of Sophie's childhood, during a summer holiday she spent with her father in a holiday budget resort in Turkey. In addition, a smaller number of them render adult Sophie replaying the memories as a thirty-year-old woman and living with her partner and their newborn. As *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott explains, it does not seem right to just simply say that the film works through flashbacks and dreams; the implications of the form go a bit further than that. For Scott the story is articulated in a way that follows "the logic of emotion rather than the mechanics of plot" (2022), implying that it is as close as one can get to a true representation of how mourning works: it is a direct reflection of Sophie's psyche. The narration then is restricted to the character of Sophie, to what she knows and what she feels. This section of the analysis will explain how by means of its specific narrative structure *Aftersun* presents a story that combines the sensibility of adult reflection with the naivety of child perception.

*Aftersun* can be said to operate onto three different narrative levels, all of which account for Sophie's experience and together create a particular emotion on the spectator. Although the pace and tone of the film seem at first glance rather quiet, they contribute to the creation of a buildup of contained emotion, much in tune with the melodramatic mode, that makes the spectator long for, if not an explanation, at least release. This is what Scott refers to when he says that the film's form follows the "logic of emotion", for it is this feature that is ultimately bringing the audience's feelings closer to Sophie's. The development of connection with the characters can be in fact argued to be one of the film's greatest achievements.

The first narrative level would be “the past” or Sophie’s memories of the holiday in the late 1990s. This is seen both through the handheld camera footage and the film’s actual images. The nature of the camera footage has an element of objectivity that is quite relevant to the film’s narrative, for it implies that what was recorded was true and unaltered. The main object of the look of this camera is Sophie. Callum is usually holding the camera and never turns it towards him, making obvious that he does not want to be recorded. When Sophie is holding the camera and manages to catch a glimpse of him, he is usually backlit and barely on focus. His absence from the recorded footage (and distortion when we get to see him) could be interpreted as a way of pointing to the suffering he hides within himself, and from her.

In contrast, the actual footage of the film, outside the recorded with the handheld camera, is charged with child-Sophie’s subjectivity, and thus symptomatic of her child perception. In fact, the very few scenes where Callum is shot alone in a room or outside can be argued to be a way of “filling up the blanks” in her memory—for she cannot possibly know what he was doing when she was not with him or asleep, she can only imagine. He is usually partially shot and tends to occupy small and odd portions of the frame, veiled behind glass, or seen through reflections on different surfaces. Although it is never explicitly stated, it is implied that Callum died sometime after the holiday, which is why adult-Sophie is giving so much importance to these events and why she tries to recall them: to try and find some answers to what her father was going through at the time.

The second narrative level would be “the present”, or adult-Sophie *replaying* her memories and the camera footage, where the memories of a happy childhood mix with the sadness and grieving of adulthood. This level is given much less screen time and appears in a smaller number of instances than the rest of the levels. The colour that

predominates in these scenes is blue (see Fig. 1), which sets a stark contrast with the yellow and orangey tones that surrounded child-Sophie in “the past”, while establishing a resemblance with the blue hue that surrounded Callum when shown at that temporal moment. Although it is not as noticeable, adult-Sophie can be also seen on the reflection of the TV when the tape is rewound. In this sense the chronological time of the past virtually coexists at times with the present that recollects it in the form of a tape.



Figure 1. Adult-Sophie replaying the tape in her living room.

The movie heavily relies in this two-colour palette and sets a contrast between them to convey meanings. Yellow and warm, orangey tones are used to represent childhood, innocence, happy memories, and tranquillity, while blue and cool tones are associated with adulthood and used to convey sadness. As exemplified before, they contrast how the two characters lived the holidays: yellow is mainly associated to Sophie, while blue is mostly associated to Callum. In some instances, each take up on the other colour: their room is filled with yellow light when Callum carefully applies aftersun lotion on Sophie's face (a happy memory for him), and Sophie leaves behind her yellow t-shirt to wear a blue dress when hanging out with the older teens (dressing-up as adult). Another colour that becomes meaningful in the movie is red, which can be used to imply rage or

even shame. Callum wears a red polo when he violently spats onto his reflection on the mirror after Sophie asks him if he ever feels tired and down—as if his bones did not work or as if he were sinking—a question he leaves unanswered. The three colours come together in the rug that Callum buys, signifying how they all illustrate different sides of life. As the vendor tells him: “each rug tells a different story”. In everybody’s lives, these emotions mingle in different ways, knitting different patterns of experience. The one Callum buys has very little yellow, only at the edge of it, symbolic of his suffering.

The third and last narrative level that the film can be said to operate on is the level of “the imagination”, or this recurrent scene throughout the film that the director herself has called “the rave scene” (Quinlan 2023). This scene is cut into several parts that are put in-between events and days in the holiday and constitutes the main break in continuity. This level can be designated as not real because adult-Sophie coexists with 90s-Callum, reinforcing the theory that he died sometime after the holiday. He wears the same striped shirt that he wore then she waved goodbye to him at the airport, signalling how she probably never saw him afterwards. The first time this level is presented, in the second scene of the film, only adult Sophie is shown standing among strangers in a dark room with strobe lighting with a blue hue. As the film goes on, Callum is seen in the room too, dancing, first far away and then the camera progressively approaches him, which in a way mimics how Sophie may be “getting closer” to her father through her mental process.

The flashing, intermittent lights of the rave distort the image, in a way that makes unclear what is happening in that space as well as establishing a connection with the confusing mental state that Callum might had been in. This recurrent scene may be the most abstract of the film, but it is the one that offers more room for interpretation, and there lies its value. In an interview with Caitlin Quinlan, Wells says that she debated whether or not to include this scene, which was not in the original outline of her plan but

emerged in the writing process (Quinlan 2023). But one can clearly notice, as it reappears throughout the course of the film, how it becomes quintessential: the mystery that surrounds this space becomes what the film is ultimately about. Adult-Sophie exploring this fictional place can be interpreted as her exploring the mind of her troubled father.

The very last time that the “rave scene” is shown is at the film’s climax. We see Sophie embrace her father to the chords of the song “Under Pressure” in a dance sequence where reality and imagination intersect. Throughout the whole film, 80s and 90s songs are used not just to set the scene, but also to get across what the characters cannot or will not put into words, the most obvious case being “Under Pressure”. Despite trying his best to hide his negative emotions and habits, as the film goes on, Callum’s predicament becomes more apparent. This contained emotion finds here its release. The song articulates through the lyrics what has been unspoken. The lyrics become outrageously telling as the vocals are stripped off the original instrumental music and become part of the movie score. Freddie Mercury and David Bowie’s voices in the song seem almost at conversation, replaying to each other, paralleling Callum’s contradictory thoughts: those that tell him to keep on going for love and those that tell him to give up.

Returning to Hamad’s contention about immature adult masculinity, she argued that paternal melancholia can be transcended by a transformative “paternal epiphany”, a recuperation of masculinity through ameliorated fatherhood. Daughters play a big part in this epiphany, for it is a moment where the immature father verbalizes what he has been avoiding to say. This is clearly the case in other father-daughter films (in *Somewhere*, for instance, Johnny apologises to his daughter for his long absence) but not the case of Callum. He never explicitly recognises to Sophie his struggles. Instead, he stays in the stage of denial hiding his emotions. The use of “Under Pressure” and the character’s final embrace (a moment where the memory of the holiday coexists with Sophie’s imagination,

see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3) almost signal what could have been but was not. Callum is unable to have a “paternal epiphany”, unable to embrace fatherhood as saving mechanism, as Sophie is going to be away from him in a matter of hours and he will be alone again. He is not able to transcend his “paternal melancholia”, and therefore is not able to move past this troublesome state. For adult-Sophie, reuniting with Callum in this space may signal her making peace with the past; she embraces the father she knew, despite knowing she may never get to comprehend the man that Callum was.



Figure 2. Rave scene. Adult-Sophie and 1990s Callum embrace.

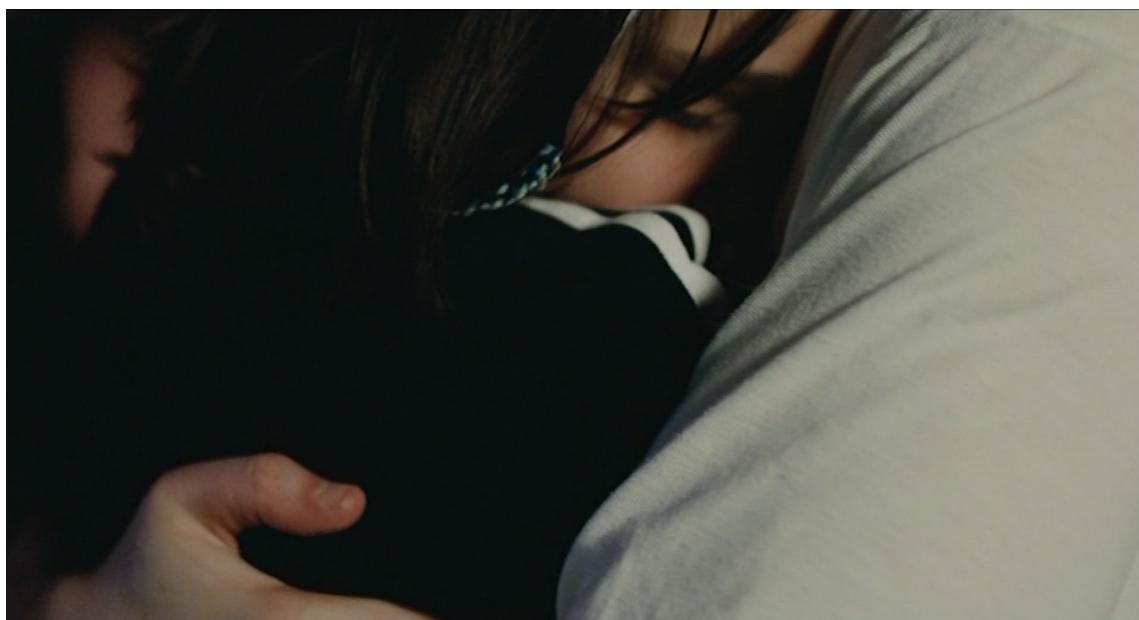


Figure 3. The memory of the holiday, film footage. Child-Sophie and Callum embrace.

Furthermore, through the character of adult-Sophie the film is moving the scope from the particular discourse around fatherhood, onto the general: parenthood. For herself, adult-Sophie presents a different kind of parent, and a different approach to the discourse on parenthood, that present-day everchanging society is bringing to the fore. Being in a relationship with a woman, the basis of the values and beliefs that stem from culture's gender roles no longer apply. In Sophie's case, as happens with many same-sex couples, there is no longer an appointed role that each parent should adopt. First feminism altered the established order by questioning the part that men and women had been said to play in the world, bringing a crisis in conduct, and a subsequent change in culture. Similarly, the LGBTQ+ community brings a different kind of "crisis" of conduct and social dynamics that call for societal reformation, for it essentially takes the gender out of roles. Newly entering motherhood, Sophie recalls her own father, nostalgically revisiting her memories as now life experience may shed light onto what was like to be him. This process not only grants her understanding, but she may also learn from the memories of her father how to become herself a better parent.

All in all, *Aftersun* alters its narrative structure to articulate its story in a way that follows Sophie's logic of emotion in the process of remembering her bereaved father. Causality, space, and time are of key importance to narrative form (Bordwell and Thompson 2001), as they create connection between events. This film can be said to "lack" the explicit causality, as no cause is disclosed for Callum's suffering. This enigma is what adult Sophie seems to be trying to make sense of too, like the audience, and thus why the film mimics how her mind works in her grieving process. The film shares the perspective of Sophie's child-self—as will be further analysed in the next section—, which restricts not only the information the audience has about the story, but also the information she has about her father's feelings. Furthermore, this lack of causality of the

narrative structure as well as its ambiguous open ending of sorts allows the filmmakers to create a feeling of vagueness that, rather than imposing an interpretation in the audience, sparks conversation.

## 2. A Story Told Through the Eyes of The Daughter: Discussing Sophie's Focalization

In the first section of the analysis, narrative levels were argued to be a way for the film to convey Sophie's perceptual subjectivity. Sophie's memories, much like a camera, go in and out of focus; the naiveness of her child-self look, unconsciously blocks parts of the story. Therefore, in addition to narrative levels, the film also employs focalization to establish her perceptual subjectivity. Sophie looks at her father, but her curious look also looks at other families, other teens, games, books, and magazines. This section of the analysis will discuss how child-Sophie's focalization prevails over the film, providing a child-like view of Callum's crisis and melancholia, and explaining how the film infers a sense of nostalgia in the revisiting of this child-focalized past with adult lens.

The film constructs Sophie's perceptual subjectivity mainly by means of making spectators share her point of view, meaning that the narration usually only gives the spectator access to what she sees and hears. A clear example of how the film manages to do this is the “telephone cabin scene” (15:10-17:40). As the scene begins, Sophie is inside the cabin, and we hear her talking as if we were inside with her and outside noise is muted as if the door was shut. She is talking to her mother, although her voice is never heard. She seems to be asking about how she is doing and shows interest in how Callum is doing too. The camera is framing Sophie in a medium close-up and is right at her eye-level, while Callum is shot through the reflection on and through the glass, never directly. She is then asked to pass the phone to her father and goes to the rest room, which constitutes a narrative ellipsis as to what her parents are talking about. While in the toilet, her point of view is reinforced as eyeline matches depict her watching two teens though the stall's keyhole.

Returning to the telephone cabin, Callum is shot in a close-up from a low angle, the camera looks up to him as if it were Sophie who is looking at him (See Fig. 4). The

next shot confirms it, as she is shot from outside in a close-up and attentively watching him (See Fig. 5). Although he tries to hide it, this conversation is a turning point for Callum. In the short section of his conversation with Sophie's mother that the film grants the audience access to, one can infer that she is telling him something important. It is something that apparently makes her happy, but that leaves Callum in a saddened state. His eyes give away his true feelings, he is trying to contain the pain that the news that Sophie's mother gave him are causing him. This is seen through Sophie's focalization.



Figure 4. Callum inside the cabin, from Sophie's point of view.



Figure 5. Sophie outside of the cabin, looking at Callum

Possibly one of the most interestingly shot scenes of the film in this sense is the “television scene” (50:34-54:00), a single long and static take that shows a fragmented view of Sophie’s father. This moment may be the only one where Callum briefly opens up about a traumatic event of his past, the memories of his eleventh birthday. This scene correlates with the opening scene of the film, where adult-Sophie is replaying this specific moment in the tape. The first time we see this point in time, she rewinds the tape just after her child self asks what turns out to be a very tough question for her father, whose answer has remained attentively *recorded* in her “mind camera”, as she told him it would. The scene frames him telling his story while the pair is reflected on the television screen (see Fig. 6), which in a way connects with adult-Sophie rewatching in her living room and remembering what remained outside the recorded footage.



Figure 6. "Television Scene". Callum and Sophie in their room talking, seen in the reflection of the screen.

Sophie’s curious look not only looks at her father, but also at other families too at the holiday resort. At the beginning of the film Callum and Sophie share a moment by the poolside while he is putting sunscreen on her back. Sophie attentively watches at a family of four (mother, father, and two girls) and Callum tells her to go and introduce herself, to what she replies no and returns him the question. These four people can be regarded as

the idyllic, “proper” family model. Both Sophie and Callum are reluctant to mix with them, as the film in a way sets them as different from this “model” family—not necessarily better, simply different. Towards the middle of the film, Sophie sees another family model: a man forcibly dragging his child, visibly angry at him. This father is presented as aggressive and tough, establishing a contrast with Callum’s tender and loving nature as a father. Lastly, towards the end of the film, Sophie watches an old couple slow dancing together. By the look on her face, we can infer that she is looking at this couple thinking that that is what her parents will never be (or maybe used to be but are not anymore). The film in these three models sets a contrasting image to what Callum is/can aspire to be, setting him as outsider to the norm. Through this comparison the film also portrays child-Sophie as slowly understanding that her then family may be different, but that “different” does not necessarily have to mean “worse” or “better”. Later adult-Sophie for herself being newly entering motherhood with her partner is setting another type of family model, two mothers and their child.

While the film conveys that the primary focalizer of Callum’s suffering is child-Sophie, the fact that adult-Sophie is the one revisiting the events adds another layer of meaning. In his book *Youth on Screen: Representing Young People in Film and Television* David Buckingham discusses the concept of nostalgia in film. He identifies it as a trend popularised by the Hollywood cycle of ‘youth nostalgia’ movies (or ‘youth films’), initiated by George Lucas’ *American Graffiti* (1973) (Buckingham 2021). Wells’ *Aftersun* can be seen as to share features of the ‘youth film’, for it implicitly views youth from the perspective of adulthood, therefore by definition entailing a sense of nostalgia for the happy memories shared with her father. As Buckingham explains:

Films about young people are made by adults – and as such, they are almost bound to be retrospective. Looking back to the past [...] need not entail any desire to return to it – that is, nostalgia. Nostalgia entails a sense of loss and regret: it is caused by the comparison between past and present and by a sense of discontinuity between them (Buckingham 2021).

In an interview with Deadline, Wells confesses the autobiographical and nostalgic element that inspired the film. As she claims, she drew inspiration from old photographs of her father as she approached his age—much like adult-Sophie looking back at the camcorder footage. This autobiographical element, she explains, translates into certain elements present in the plot of the film (e.g. Fanta lemon and package holidays) and mostly into feelings that are inferred (Wise 2022). In this sense it is a nostalgic portrait of the 1990s for Wells as a “90’s kid” and likewise, a nostalgic portrait for Sophie, longing for more time with a father that went away too soon.

In fact, thinking about the title of the film, it heavily charged with symbolic implications too. Throughout the course of the holiday, Callum shows great care for Sophie’s skin, as he is seen on several occasions applying Sophie sunscreen and aftersun lotion. In this sense, sunscreen may act as a metaphor for how he tried to protect her from being exposed to his suffering, how he tried his best to hide the pain he was in during the time spent together. At night, he also carefully applied aftersun lotion onto her face, ensuring that if damage has been made, it is repaired in her sleep. But it is this process of remembering these last moments shared together, the outlining of this nostalgic portrait, what is helping her heal from all the pain and suffering. It is a symbol of her working through the trauma that losing a father so young had caused. The revisiting of the past through the lens of adulthood is the aftersun lotion for the sun damage of the tragedy.

## Conclusion

Taking everything into account, one can say that *Aftersun* presents a collection of snapshots of a distant holiday in a simple and tender way, that together create a beautiful and nostalgic illustration of a father-daughter relationship. By means of altering the narrative structure of the story, the film develops something that closely resembles the functioning of the human mind working through grief. It chooses to do so through the innocent look of the child-self of the protagonist, a look that restrains access to a part of the story, while it allows the film to bring to the fore the beauty in the unjudging and loving look of the naivety of childhood. The actors' naturalistic and delicate performances seem almost as an extension of the camcorder footage and constitute the heart of the movie.

The film can be said to be symptomatic of postfeminist discourse around fatherhood, under which Callum can be understood as an example of immature adult masculinity, and as a father figure that fails to transcend what Hamad defines as "paternal melancholia". He is undergoing what Barnett refers to as the "crisis of masculinity", the cause of which the film never openly discloses, and one can just simply speculate. Callum's suffering and denial is seen through the subjective perception of his daughter Sophie, as she recalls her childhood memories through the lens of adulthood, and recent motherhood. This remembering of the past is for her a healing process from the pain that losing a father so young had caused.

As time goes on, film history grows and evolves developing new ways of making and talking about cinema. Mothers and fathers alike have been a recurrent theme in film since its beginning. Films are a direct reflection of their time, therefore looking at how they depict mothers and fathers is like placing a mirror onto the society of their time and its discourse regarding parenthood. One can say that both concepts have always been

constant change and evolution. Yet, in the last few decades, feminism may have debated them more than ever. Maybe film discourse in the twenty first century can move away from concepts like motherhood and fatherhood onto broader discussions of parenthood as all-embracing term, still it is too soon to call it. After the Me-Too movement and the apparently progressively more assimilated feminist discourse, a change in how parenthood is dealt with in contemporary filmmaking is more present than ever.

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