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# Therapeutic creativity and the lived experience of grief in the collaborative fiction film *Lost Property*

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## Abstract

This collaborative project aimed to represent the embodied experience of grief in a fiction film by drawing on research, and on the personal and professional experience of all involved: academics; an artist; bereavement therapists and counsellors; and professional actors, cinematographers, sound engineers and other film crew. By representing grief in a more phenomenologically minded manner, the project sought to capture the lived experience of loss on screen while contributing meaningfully to the discourse on practice-as-research. Hay, Dawson and Rosling used a collaborative fiction film and participatory action research to investigate whether storying loss, and representing it through narrative, images and embodied movement, is therapeutic. Participatory action research was beneficial in facilitating changes in the co-researchers' thinking, feeling and practice, and in enabling participants to inhabit multiple roles in a manner that expanded their disciplinary boundaries. However, while the project's effect on some of the participants demonstrated the ways that creativity and meaning making can support adaptive grieving, it also revealed the risks of using participatory action research and fiction film to investigate highly emotive topics such as grief.

**Keywords:** grief, creativity, meaning making, practice-as-research, participatory action research (PAR)

## Key messages

- The ability of fiction film to produce a sensory and emotional experience via image, movement, sound, narrative and colour makes it a powerful medium for conveying the lived experience of grief, informed by a transdisciplinary knowledge that integrates academic research and personal experiences of loss.
- Practice-as-research collaborative fiction films and participatory action research can facilitate changes in co-researchers' thinking, feeling and practice in a manner that expands their disciplinary boundaries. However, using collaborative fiction film to research emotive subjects such as grief carries similar ethical risks to non-fiction films and social science projects.
- Storying loss, and representing it through narrative, imagery and embodied movement, can have a therapeutic impact. However, an individual's experience of this process (and the extent to which it is traumatic or therapeutic) varies.

## Introduction

Mainstream fiction cinema often relegates grief to a plot device, offering superficial depictions that fail to capture how it *feels* to grieve. These screen depictions can misrepresent the real impact of grief and construct grieving as a linear process that dissipates and ends. Therapeutic and academic discourses have contested this model, emphasizing the complex, non-progressive and individual nature of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969: 263; Corr, 2015: 1–6). By representing grief in a more nuanced and phenomenologically minded manner, the project discussed in Hay et al. (2019), *An Empathetic Realisation of Embodied Grief in Fiction Film*, aimed to capture the lived experience of loss in a fiction film while contributing meaningfully to the discourse on practice-as-research.

Funded by the Brigstow Institute, University of Bristol, UK, the project was a collaboration between two academics from the University of Bristol – Jimmy Hay from the Film and Television Department and Lesel Dawson from the English Department – and the artist, Natasha Rosling. It also involved therapists and counsellors who work with the bereaved, and professional actors, cinematographers and other film crew. Drawing on interviews with grief counsellors and palliative health-care professionals, and their own personal experiences of loss, the collaborators explored different ways of conveying the experience of grief through cinematic techniques and forms of storytelling, and considered how the creative process impacts memories and emotions.

Hay, Dawson and Rosling each brought their own aims and working methods to the project. Whereas Hay and Rosling were interested in capturing the fragmented, embodied experience of grief through non-linear cinematic techniques, Dawson wanted to explore the subject through narrative. Although these approaches were sometimes in conflict, the differences between them invigorated the creative process and framed the overarching design of the final film, which accommodates diverse methodologies, forms of storytelling and cinematic techniques. In this article, we will share the project's research methods and processes, the creative and practical problems faced, and how different agendas and methodologies led to the tensions which were crucial to the making of the film. We will describe the collaborative process of writing and filming the fiction film *Lost Property*, and consider how the project has impacted our research.

## The collaborators' backgrounds and aims

### Jimmy Hay

Jimmy Hay is an academic in film and television, and a practising film-maker, working mainly on creative practice-as-research outputs. His first project of this kind was the feature film *High Tide* (Hay, 2015), which explored, interrogated and portrayed 'neo-melodrama', a contemporary evolution of classical film melodrama that foregrounds the absence of a domestic space, locating its protagonists in unfamiliar, largely exterior spaces. More recently, and pertinent to this project, he has become interested in the capacity of film to create sensitive and authentic representations of grief, using formal elements of film language such as cinematography, *mise en scène*, sound design and editing.

Similarly to both Dawson and Rosling, his interest stemmed from a personal experience of grief. This bereavement led to an awareness that mainstream films 'about' grief, or seeking to depict grieving characters, frequently use grief as a narrative starting point, an inciting incident from which characters can commence a journey

of self-discovery, forging new relationships, visiting new places and having a variety of life-affirming experiences, before – most importantly – finishing the final act with a palpable sense of closure and optimistic resolution. Julia Samuel, author of *Grief Works: Stories of life, death and surviving* (2017) and *This Too Shall Pass* (2020), criticizes this tendency of mainstream films in a recent interview; she asks: ‘How often do you see a movie that you think is like real life ... particularly when it comes to grief?’ (Lloyd, 2020). Instead, owing to the ubiquitous nature of the three-act narrative structure in mainstream cinema, films seldom deviate from having story arcs that provide continual forward movement, and neat and definitive conclusions, free of the messiness and chaotic emotional effects that grief causes. In terms of grief therapy, claims Samuel, the danger of these ‘satisfying narratives’ is that ‘it educates us to believe that that’s what life should be like, or is like’ (Lloyd, 2020).

While not making a critical value judgement about these depictions, it became clear that whereas a significant number of films have grief at the centre of their narratives, comparatively few actually attempt to explore how it *feels* to grieve, through an imaginative or empathetic use of film language. This is perhaps surprising, as cinema can be ‘defined as an emotional event that offers itself to be engaged with by means of its aesthetic system’ (Laine, 2011: 7). It is an ‘affect-charged psychological realm’, whose combination of image, movement, sound, colour and editing is well placed to explore emotional experiences in a phenomenological manner (Izod and Dovalis, 2015: 2).

Hay’s interest in this project from the outset was the collaborative element, and specifically whether the capturing of an authentic lived experience of grief was possible through creative teamwork, as opposed to one person’s individual artistic expression. In academic practice-as-research, there is a tradition of auto-ethnographic approaches, where the academic/artist can authentically and sensitively explore, through creative expression, personal and individual contexts and representation (see, for example, Massoumi, 2020: 200–20). This approach seems perfectly suited to the portrayal of grief, and, indeed, Hay intends to explore it in a further, yet to be completed, project. However, all three collaborators on this project were intrigued by the possibilities presented by a collaboration that replaces an individual and auteurist approach with the multiple experiences, expertise and points of view of an interdisciplinary collaboration. Would multiple voices offer a balanced and holistic perspective on grief, or would they universalize and generalize the grieving process in an unhelpful way?

## Lesel Dawson

Lesel Dawson specializes in literature and the history of the emotions, and has written on disgust (2006), lovesickness (2008), revenge (2018) and shame (2020). Much of her recent work focuses either directly or indirectly on grief and trauma, exploring, for example, the relationship between grief and revenge, the role that visual and aural hallucinations play in loss and trauma (Dawson, 2021), and the ways that artistic production can alternatively reinforce or reconfigure traumatic memories.

For this project, Dawson wanted to examine how objects allow us to engage imaginatively with the dead and the past. As psychotherapists, anthropologists and literary theorists have argued, objects provide a tangible connection to people we have lost: they concretize abstract emotions and evoke past sensory experiences, triggering and mediating memory (Gibson, 2008, 2010; Goldstein et al., 2020). Having previously considered these ideas from an academic perspective, Dawson was keen to explore grief and memory in a more personal, creative manner. Dawson also wanted to use the process of writing a script and engaging with other artists as a means of

investigating the relationship between loss and artistic production. What happens to emotions and memories when you engage with them as part of a creative process? Does representing painful memories deepen the anguish of loss, or does it alleviate pain, reconfiguring one's emotional responses and relationship to the past? Finally, in what ways do objects shift in their meanings and emotional resonances when they are redeployed?

### Natasha Rosling

Natasha Rosling's work explores the visceral and intellectual confusions that come from being a body in the world, by creating installations, public interventions and audio works that evoke and recall intense emotional states. She is interested in the feedback loops between what might be going on inside us and how we conceptualize these processes: how we imagine our internal bodily functions and how this relates, imaginatively and emotionally, to our sense of well-being and mental health. Several of Rosling's projects investigate corporality and the experience of embodiment. In *Field of Fingers* (2011–12; Figure 1), she explored people's relationship to their fingers, and to their feelings about bodily fragmentation. In *Heart in Your Hands* (2017; Figure 2), Rosling worked with the robotic art and design studio, Rusty Squid, and King's College

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**Figure 1: Natasha Rosling, *Field of Fingers*, 2011–12**




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**Figure 2: Rusty Squid and King's College London, *Heart in Your Hands*, 2017**



London's biomedical engineering specialists to inspire public curiosity in the emerging research about heart muscle function. While the scientists wanted to ensure that the robotic hearts corresponded to the exact wall thickness of the human heart, the designers put the emotional experience of those engaging with the hearts first. This clash led to the creation of robotic hearts that accurately characterized the heart's anatomical features, while also being arresting aesthetic objects.

In the large-scale collaborative project, *It Happens Anyway* (2019), Sachi Miyachi, Nina Glockner and Rosling transformed the physical space of W139 (an exhibition space in Amsterdam) into a 'collective body', a sprawling installation and series of events, designed to take participants on a physical, visceral and sensory journey that would explore relationships between death, decay, fermentation and digestion. As part of this wider project, Rosling made a fruit cake alluding to her grandmother's dead body (Figure 3). Rosling observes:

She died a couple of years ago and, to my surprise, decided to be embalmed. She loved baking, and was also quite a heavy drinker – there was one famous cake she used to make, which she would preserve over time in copious amounts of alcohol. It was really important for her before she died to make sure that we had a written version of this recipe. So I decided to make her body in that cake, and to get members of the public to feed it bottles of alcohol. Later, when I was in the process of grieving, and spending time with her body, I was also thinking about eating, and cycles of digestion, and how this could echo ways of processing grief, or at least this desire to fill an empty hole. ... At the closing event, we collectively ate her.

Keen to build on these ideas in *Lost Property*, Rosling wanted to explore how grief can lead to feelings of disembodiment and alienation, and how the sensory distortions or interruptions common to experiences of grief can be conveyed in the visual language and soundscape of film.

## The story and script: Creative differences and shared experiences of loss

The project emerged from discussions between Hay, Dawson and Rosling at the University of Bristol Centre for Health and Humanities research cluster on grief. Recognizing their shared interests in creative approaches to a wider understanding of grief, and their desire to work on an interdisciplinary and collaborative project, they formulated the idea for a film which would utilize each of their specific creative interests and skills.

At the beginning of the creative process, Hay interviewed professionals who work with the bereaved, including grief therapists from Cruse Bereavement Care and The Harbour, funeral celebrants, dementia care specialists and palliative care professionals. Qualitative in nature, these interviews asked participants to reflect on their sense of the phenomenology – or lived experience – of grief, the manner in which people experience grief differently, and the ways in which the type of death could impact on the experience of loss. For example, Hay probed how grieving for a loved one lost to a long and slow illness would differ from grieving for a loved one who died suddenly. The interviews were informal and personal, and they asked the participants to reflect not only on their professional observations of people in varying states of grief, but also on their own responses to, and experiences of, this grief. All participants were informed beforehand that the interviews would be recorded and shared between

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Figure 3: Natasha Rosling, 'Body cake' (process), *It Happens Anyway*, 2019



the project collaborators only, and they were free to remove themselves as participants at any stage. Hay, Dawson and Rosling drew on the recordings when developing ideas for the film.

The collaborators also drew on their personal experiences of loss, acting as both researchers and research subjects in order to explore how sharing their stories and engaging with them creatively would impact their grief process and creative product. Research has demonstrated the need for grief to be witnessed, and the importance of meaning making to integrating and accommodating loss. As Neimeyer et al. (2009: 456) argue, 'a central process in grieving is the reconstruction of a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss, understood in terms of world assumptions, life illusions, or personal constructs that are shaken or shattered by sometimes traumatic life events'. Journalling with a goal to meaning making results 'in lower levels of prolonged grief, depressive symptoms and posttraumatic stress symptoms', and, more widely, "'storying" our experiences allows us to incorporate and organize disruptive life events into our self-narratives, fostering a coherent sense of identity and shaping emotional reactions and goals for the future' (Lichtenthal and Neimeyer, 2012: 165). In incorporating their experiences into a fictional narrative, Hay, Dawson and Rosling investigated these ideas, exploring the extent to which storying loss, and representing it through narrative, imagery and embodied movement, has a therapeutic impact.

Dawson conceived the overarching narrative of the film, drawing in particular on the interviews and personal stories where death was sudden and unexpected. In particular, she was inspired by an account of a man's grief following the death of his ex-wife, in which survivor's guilt and anger complicated his grieving process. She was also inspired by furious female mourners in revenge plays (such as Clytemnestra, who feels rage as well as grief), and *The Tempest* (how memory operates in Shakespeare's play, how people and objects are lost and found, and the wider pattern whereby Prospero turns from vengeance towards forgiveness). Keen to create a narrative where the relationship between the mourner and the dead was complex and ambivalent, she began to develop the story of Clare, whose ex-husband dies unexpectedly several years after he has left her for another woman, Katie. One of her first ideas was the image of the axe-bearing Clare, furiously smashing up her ex-husband's old shed (Figure 4):

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**Figure 4: Julie Cox as Clare, behind the scenes of *Lost Property* (photograph: Clement Jochem)**



In my initial idea for the film, the camera pans through a house that is in total disarray. There are piles of old photos, letters, bills and clothes everywhere, and then we move slowly to the garden, towards the noise of Clare chopping up her ex-husband's old shed. Everywhere Clare looks, she can see traces of Daniel. She is haunted by these, and by an alternative version of her life, which she has lost, not once but twice. In sorting through and smashing up Daniel's things, she expresses her fury, grief and frustration, and attempts to carry on an unfinished conversation with him; she connects with Daniel through his things, both conjuring and erasing his presence through these activities.

In juxtaposing Clare's furious destruction of Daniel's shed with her more tender engagement with other items from their shared history, Dawson aimed to highlight how objects mediate Clare's ambivalence towards her ex-husband, and offer opportunities for her to change her ongoing relationship with him and his other family. In this way, the film would also explore how 'events such as bereavement and household disbandment instigate emotionally charged processes of decision-making about what things might mean, their value (and for whom) and where they should go' (Gibson, 2010: 55).

After planning an opening and a basic story arc, Dawson shared a draft with Hay and Rosling, and the three met to discuss ideas for the film, and to share their own experiences of grief. Drawing on several of the interviews, they agreed that the film would explore how the grieving process is never 'completed', but rather evolves over time alongside the continued, internalized relationship with the person who has died. They talked about the significant role clothes and objects have played in their memories: how they concretize intense emotions and offer opportunities to connect with, or to change our imaginative relationship with, those who have died. They also talked about times when a 'workaholic mode' had functioned both as a means of evading emotion and of processing it – even, at times, as a kind of therapy. For example, when Rosling was renovating her boat during a period of emotional burnout, she would lose herself in DIY as a means of processing her anger and trauma. These stories influenced their depiction of Clare and Katie, who engage in intense physical work in the face of isolating and debilitating emotions (Figure 5). These all-day meetings moved seamlessly between personal stories and evolving ideas for the film, so that these narratives became increasingly intertwined. When Dawson returned to the script following this series of meetings, she integrated ideas from

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**Figure 5: Danielle Bjelic as Katie, behind the scenes of *Lost Property* (photograph: Clement Jochem)**



these conversations and reformulated details from their lives into the script. Once she had a draft, the collaborators took turns editing it and passing it back and forth with changes and revisions. A third female character was added: Clare and Daniel's daughter, Lilly.

There was an ongoing productive tension between Dawson's desire for the film to have a strong story, and Hay and Rosling's drive to disrupt linearity and narrative, and to introduce more abstract elements that would immerse the viewer in the character's sensory experience. Furthermore, Dawson was primarily concerned with the story and dialogue, whereas Hay and Rosling were also attentive to the way that the film would look and sound. Although these differences caused creative tensions in the early meetings, the collaborators moved slowly towards a shared vision of the film that would accommodate all their aims: the narrative remained, but it would be structured around (and expressed via) non-linear, abstract moments where the soundscape and visual content would capture the phenomenology of grief. Much of the initial editing process thus involved cutting down dialogue and condensing the story to open up sufficient space to tell the protagonists' stories visually; this allowed the characters' emotions and interiority to be conveyed, not only through what they said, but also through their bodies and moments when the camera was aligned with their perspective. As it progressed, the process of shaping the script and blending its visual and verbal aspects was increasingly collaborative.

From the outset, the film blended personal and fictional stories of loss, and considered the significance of places and objects in remembering and reconfiguring those who have died. The collaborators experienced this viscerally when filming began, as their intimate objects were reconfigured as props, and Dawson's and Rosling's homes were used as locations.

The screenplay integrated and reformulated details of the collaborators' experiences of grief. For example, Hay observes:

Following the death of my Dad, I found myself in the possession of all of his tools. He had been a builder for years, and yet I had managed to remain neither interested nor at all competent at DIY. In the years that followed, however, I found myself taking on incrementally larger and more physical DIY projects. These projects would often disrupt and interfere with my work, family and personal life, in a way that I was just blind to. I would take weeks off from concentrating on my PhD to remodel the back garden, or insist on retiling the bathroom, just to learn how, but in doing so would lose far too many evenings to it, when I should have been spending time with my wife and my children. I now realize that this engagement amounted to a 'working through' of my grief, a way of connecting with Dad through the inanimate objects of his tools, and of some attempt to purge my grief through the physical exertion of the building projects. I don't know whether this has worked or not. I certainly haven't 'worked through' to a point of completion, but I think we all realize – and the interviews I conducted for this project also testify to this – that there is no point of completion with grief. It did definitely help though, to occupy my mind, challenge my body, and then reach a point where I could reflect and know that it was never actually about the building. I had this compulsion to fix things and build things. But Dad's death couldn't be fixed – no amount of screws and power tools was going to bring him back or sort out how I felt about his absence. So then I was able to stop (mostly). Which I absolutely needed to, because it wasn't fair on the people closest to me.

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**Figure 6: Behind the scenes of *Lost Property* (photograph: Clement Jochem)**




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This element of the grieving process – which tallies with Dawson’s and Rosling’s experiences – can be seen clearly in *Lost Property*. The film opens with the two protagonists working in different ways on objects connected to the deceased male character (Daniel) who connects them both. Clare, Daniel’s ex-wife, is using his old axe to smash up the garden shed he built, while Katie is repairing and repainting the boat that Daniel bought at the start of their relationship. Labour, and absorption in an engaging activity, helps both women assuage and process the pain of loss; the physical work is also a working through of grief, and the objects – the shed, the axe, the boat, the tools, the safety equipment – are part of its reconfiguration (Figure 6).

### Collaborative practices and practical challenges

Hay, Dawson and Rosling acted as both researchers and research subjects, integrating their experiences of loss into the film, and examining the impact this had on their grief and creative process. This approach fits into the model of participatory action research, in which the impact is ‘embedded in research process’, rather than coming at the end of a project (Banks et al., 2017: 543). Participatory action research ‘entails people with a stake in the issue under study being involved in carrying out aspects of the research’, so that often ‘the distinction between researchers, research informants and research users is blurred’ (Banks et al., 2017: 542, 556). In this project, it was the co-investigators rather than the community that experienced the primary change, so the political was embedded in the personal. Using participatory action research for investigating difficult subjects offers opportunities for changes in thinking, feeling and practice in the co-researchers. However, when the research is focused on a sensitive subject such as grief, and when the research also involves the personal experiences of the researchers, there are also significant risks (as this article will demonstrate).

Some of the main challenges for creative practice-as-research projects are financial and logistical. The available funds to pay artist collaborators are often less than could be expected in a similar industry-funded project, and yet a short fiction film cannot really be made without professionals. Whereas a single-camera, single-author documentary or even a found-footage experimental film (both of which are common in practice-as-research) can be achieved to a very high standard with a relatively small number of people and resources, a fiction film almost always requires a reasonably large crew. On *Lost Property*, the crew was reduced to the bare minimum, but even then

this included a director of photography, two camera assistants, a first assistant director, a producer, a sound recordist, a make-up artist, a script supervisor and a runner, who was also the stills photographer on the shoot. There were also the three professional actors – Julie Cox (Clare), Danielle Bjelic (Katie) and Anna Rømcke Høiseth (Lilly) – who had to be paid a minimum day-rate, plus several extras (all of whom were, thankfully, found via our respective friendship groups, and were happy to be paid in lunch, coffee and goodwill).

Another challenge is that often, during the development period of a project, the academics and other collaborators are working to very different timescales. Rosling has frequently found this in her collaborations. She explains:

When working full time as an artist or as part of a creative studio, you've got a defined series of phases or milestones that need to be reached on time in order for the project to be economically viable. Yet when the creative outcome is research based, the end result is also undefined and requires a high degree of flexibility to enable it to incorporate multiple voices meaningfully. Collaborating with a university can be a very slow process, particularly when the researchers are doing these collaborative projects for passion on the side; they've always got to prioritize other academic demands. So calibrating workflows and extracting the meat can be really tricky, and sometimes requires the creative partner to drive the management and alignment of expectations. And it's not through lack of caring. University partners are usually more excited about these sorts of collaborations than their own everyday stuff, but it's just the practicalities of how their time is split, and the bureaucracy of the procedures they need to follow.

To overcome this issue, Rosling advocates working with the academics in advance to map out the shared aims and timescale of a project, clarifying responsibilities and lines of accountability, and the amount of time that will be expected of creative partners.

Hay and Rosling also knew that they would need to decide how to direct together on set without overrunning their ambitious timetable. Sarah Smither, the director of photography, was worried about this aspect of the project:

Most of the time, if you have three people who are thoroughly invested in a project – all, in a sense, leading it – this will cause problems. Essentially, you have too many cooks: each person will have a different idea about how a moment should be shot or acted, and this leads to conflicts and disagreements. Thankfully, this wasn't the case. There was a respectful and open atmosphere during the filming, and I was given space to take the lead when I had ideas. I think it helped that it was a female-dominated set: two of the three collaborators, all the actors and most of the crew were women. I believe that embedding women in the architecture of the project enhanced the storytelling (the film is, after all, about three women) and contributed to an atmosphere where women's voices were heard. It is a testament to Jimmy [Hay] that he worked so well in this context, and wasn't at all threatened.

Hay and Rosling prevented conflicts by ensuring that most of the creative decisions were agreed ahead of shooting. There would not be enough time to have long discussions in between shots, or to shoot a particular scene in a variety of ways and then make the creative decisions in the edit room. It was also essential that the crew,

in particular the director of photography and the first assistant director, knew who to approach with creative questions, or queries about changes to the shooting schedule. Especially on productions of this size, speed and clarity are of the essence.

As a solution, the collaborators agreed in advance that they would each direct different sections of the film. Rosling would direct the more poetic, expressionist moments – the stand-alone shots that punctuate the film and that exist independently of narrative chronology. Rosling and Hay devised these reflective, contemplative moments in an attempt to portray the effect that grief has on time and memory, and to reflect the fragmented and momentary ways in which memory punctures our waking lives. We do not remember in complete, three-act story arcs, but in individual moments that appear in our consciousness in a seemingly random order. The majority of these images were filmed in extreme close-up, sometimes in slow motion, and they would not be linked logically to the conversations or scene progression of the film. These images would demand interpretation, and thus seek to mirror the experience of grief and the griever's struggle to make sense of their new reality.

Meanwhile, Hay would direct the scenes involving the actors. This division made sense, as Rosling is a visual artist and Hay has directed several fiction films involving multiple actors. Hay chose to meet individually with the two lead actors – Julie Cox and Danielle Bjelic – before the shoot, not only to talk through the script and discuss their characters, but also to speak in detail about the genesis of the project and the creative research aims that underpinned it.

Dawson's main role on set was to support Sara Turner, the producer. Dawson's home served as the base for actors and crew, and she helped to feed the crew and to ensure that everyone was looked after and comfortable. Like Hay, Dawson also spent time talking to the actors about their roles and their experiences of loss. Bjelic found these conversations invaluable:

You don't normally get the opportunity to speak to the writer about the role. Usually you have to make up your own mind about a character's past and motivations to give the performance depth and coherence. But on *Lost Property*, I was able to talk to Lesel [Dawson] about Katie's back history and what the timings were of her relationship with Daniel and Daniel's divorce from Clare. Often Lesel confirmed my thinking, and there were times where we worked together to explore a particular moment. In one scene, there's a flashback where you see the characters speaking but there isn't any scripted dialogue. Lesel and I talked through what had happened in the run-up to this moment and together worked out the details of what was being said, which hopefully helped bring a truth and authenticity to the scene.

As the project had been collaborative from the outset, it seemed natural to involve the actors in the research process. This created a productive and healthy atmosphere on set, where they were invited to be involved in their own direction.

The collaborative, participatory action research approach was greatly enhanced by the willingness of several of the cast and crew to share their experiences of loss and their personal connection to the project. These intimate conversations about grief highlighted that the ethical issues that arise when fictionalizing sensitive topics can be similar to those found when working in the social sciences or in non-fiction art forms. The research team provided the relevant cast and crew with consent forms, which allowed them to choose whether or not their personal stories could be included in research outputs, and whether they would be identified by name or anonymized.

The cast and crew who shared experiences all chose to be identified by name in their stories.

Julie Cox was startled by the way the narrative of the film mapped on to her life:

When I read the script, I was taken aback by how closely the story resembled recent events in my life – there were even odd, little details that were the same. But it was different too. This made the shoot intense, but very rewarding creatively. Afterward, I was exhausted, physically drained. This sometimes happens. Even though the role you're playing is fictional, the emotions you experience in that role are real. I don't 'act' when I'm in a scene – I don't pre-empt or plan what I'm going to do, or how I'm going to feel. I just make sure I'm relaxed and open, so that I can react authentically to what is happening in a scene as it happens. It's in this way a real experience that you put your mind and body through, so even though I know it's not real and can detach myself from it afterwards, it's the effect physically that lingers. Playing Clare brought up a lot of things. It was intense, but also very therapeutic.

For Cox, *Lost Property* enabled her to engage with, and to express, intense feelings about recent events, while also offering some protection by recontextualizing them in a fictional narrative.

Sarah Smither, who was widowed in 2012 when her husband died of bowel cancer at the age of 33, also felt personally connected to the film's storyline:

We shot some of the scenes at Arnos Vale, which is where my husband's headstone is. It has always been a special place for me – a place of peace and reflection. Watching the small ways that James's headstone has changed over the years, and seeing the seasons come and go in the cemetery, has allowed me to reflect on my experiences, and has reminded me that life goes on. It felt poignant to shoot these scenes in a place so meaningful to me personally. Seeing the actors portray their feelings of grief and loss reinforced how far I've come emotionally since James passed away.

Through talking in detail about the lived experience of grief, and the film's ability to convey this, the actors and crew felt able to bring their own personal experiences to the project. This all fed into an organic and ongoing process of direction and expression on set, in which the process actively became the research in a way that could not have been quantified or defined in advance.

## The impact and afterlife of the project

### Methodologies and approaches

The collaborators all feel that the project has made them more self-aware practitioners, and has opened them up to new methodologies. Rosling observes:

Previously, I've worked with scientists and engineers. This time it was very different, as I was collaborating with academics in the arts who are also artists and writers. By developing new skills in directing, I felt as if I was almost able to hijack a new artistic language. The project also opened me to other approaches. My work is non-linear, and often really disorientating, but I was able to find a middle ground where there was a bit more narrative, while still using my own creative methods.

Dawson similarly feels that the project expanded her creative vocabulary, and has changed her approach to future research:

I've always seen writing as a solitary process, but this has made me want to be more collaborative. Although it was sometimes painful to have my writing edited and changed, I could see how these interventions improved the script – and also how sharing ideas made the critical process faster. I think that's true for my own academic writing: that I might have this vision but, actually, if I put it in dialogue with somebody else's, that the sum total will be more interesting than what I would do on my own.

Rosling appreciated being part of the early stages of the project, and feels that it is important for academics and universities to involve creative partners in the *development* of research, rather than just the output:

I think there's a sort of generalized attitude that artists are brought in for public engagement. Whereas many artists – myself included – are more interested in behind-the-scenes research. It doesn't necessarily matter if there's a physical thing that's made, even though that thing can be a useful vehicle for sharing and developing ideas. But an artistic product is not the be all and end all. There's a lot of talk about how to bring in an embedded researcher into the creative industry, and vice versa. But we need to co-define stronger financial and practical models for this, which will allow creative partners access to resources and people at the university, so that they can be part of the development of research.

This can be obstructed by the practicalities of timing: often creative partners are only brought in once a grant is secured, as it is only then that they can be paid.

Expanding opportunities to embed creative partners within the research culture of a university (through residencies, fellowships or other structures) would enable them to participate in the development of research, as well as in the co-production of engagement outputs.

### **Good Grief: A festival of love and loss**

The Brigstow seed corn funding has led to the development of other collaborative projects and grant applications. Dawson and Hay were both co-applicants on the successful Wellcome Trust Public Engagement Grant, Good Grief, Bristol: Bristol Grief Festival 2020 (<https://goodgrieffest.com/>), led by Lucy Selman (Senior Research Fellow, and member of the Palliative and End of Life Research Group at the University of Bristol). The festival is a partnership event led by the University of Bristol with charities, bereavement services and cultural venues, including St Peter's Hospice, Creative Youth Network, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, Arnos Vale Cemetery, Off The Record, Winston's Wish, Watershed, the University of Bath, The Harbour, Bristol Black Carers, The Good Grief Project, Sue Ryder, Grief Encounter South West, Cruse, and the Centre for Death & Society at the University of Bath.

The festival aims to destigmatize grief and to open conversations about bereavement with the public, including disadvantaged young people and Black and minority ethnic communities, who access bereavement support less frequently than other groups. Postponed due to COVID-19, it took place as a free online festival from 30 October to 1 November 2020, helping nearly nine thousand people in the UK and worldwide to better understand and process grief at this time of global crisis. The

festival featured panel discussions, talks and workshops, with speakers including actor Robert Webb (*Peep Show*); the comedian and host of *Griefcast* (<https://cariadlloyd.com/griefcast>), Cariad Lloyd; the psychotherapist and author Julia Samuel MBE (*This Too Shall Pass* (2020), *Grief Works* (2017)); and palliative care doctors Rachel Clarke (*Dear Life: A doctor's story of love and loss* (2020)) and Kathryn Mannix (*With the End in Mind* (2017)). It also featured workshops on grief after suicide, childhood bereavement, stillbirth, life-threatening illness, substance misuse, pet loss, traumatic loss and grieving during COVID-19, facilitated by bereavement experts, researchers and those with personal experience. Following the success of the Good Grief Festival, the collaborators held a second virtual festival in March 2021, this time partnering with Marie Curie to help mark the national day of reflection on COVID-19.

Dawson and Selman have also been awarded a Medical Humanities Research Grant for a project to explore Grief and Baby Loss (with Cleo Hanaway-Oakley, Lecturer in English Literature, University of Bristol) (Dawson et al., 2020a). Dawson, Hay and Selman have also secured Brigstow follow-on funding for the project *Creative Grieving*, which will explore the therapeutic potential of creativity, demonstrating the different ways that art and the imagination can enable the bereaved to express and process their loss (Dawson et al., 2020b).

### **The risks and benefits of investigating grief through participatory action research**

The project's effect on several of the participants highlights both the therapeutic benefits and the risks of engaging creatively with difficult emotions. Smither's return to Arnos Vale Cemetery for filming allowed her to see 'how far she had come' since her husband's death, and to appreciate her ability to remember the final weeks of his life with gratitude as well as grief. For Cox, the script's resemblance to her life initially generated painful feelings. However, she also found the experience of sharing her story and inhabiting the role of Clare profoundly therapeutic, as it enabled her grief to be embodied and witnessed in a compassionate environment. Dawson was also positively affected by the project. When she began devising the screenplay, she drew on her experiences of guilt and grief following her son's premature birth and his subsequent brain bleed. As the film evolved, however, Dawson realized that she was also reshaping childhood memories of her parents' divorce and remarriages, and that her desire for narrative closure also represented a form of wish fulfilment. While the film eschews such a tidy conclusion, Dawson found its move towards reconciliation and forgiveness deeply satisfying. All three of these reactions support research that demonstrates the therapeutic aspect of creativity, and the importance of meaning making in adaptive grieving. However, Dawson's experience also raises further questions. While comforting, Dawson's drive to provide her story with a different 'ending' than the one she experienced suggests that the therapeutic storying of grief can also sometimes involve a falsification of the past. It asks: To what extent does storying grief need to correspond to one's real lived experience to be beneficial? Can therapeutic storying of the past also involve a fictionalization – or even fabrication – of our lives and experiences?

The project's afterlife has not proceeded as expected, for reasons that could not have been foreseen. All of the shooting has taken place, but the footage has yet to be edited into a final film. This is primarily because Hay – who was due to edit the film in collaboration with Rosling – suffered a double ischemic stroke the day after the shoot was completed. While it would be too simplistic to attribute Hay's stroke

directly to the film (a key cause was an unknown pre-existing condition), its timing nevertheless highlights the significant impact that grief can have on the body and mind, which has been demonstrated by an abundance of research (Genevro et al., 2004; Hart et al., 2007; Stahl et al., 2016). For example, bereaved people have been shown to have 'a higher risk than nonbereaved participants of dying from any cause ... including cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease, stroke, all cancer, smoking-related cancer, and accidents or violence' (Buckley et al., 2012: 129).

A complete shock to everyone, Hay's stroke has understandably affected his ability to engage with the editing and, as he explains, with the project itself:

I've been writing about the project for this article the past few days, and it has struck me in quite a powerful and at times upsetting way how difficult it has been to write about. I guess I haven't reflected on it in a concerted way, but because of how close to the finishing of the shoot the stroke occurred – I had only that morning finished clearing away the shed that we used for the opening scene – I actually have a considerable amount of associated trauma when it comes to the film. I have tried on a few occasions to start editing the film during my recovery, thinking that it would be a good and physically restful exercise to engage with. I have even managed to get as far as organizing all of the footage into scene folders and have started to assemble the opening scene. But then I stopped, and for reasons that I'm only now starting to understand, have managed to find any number of reasons not to return to it since. I thought that this was most likely to do with my relatively poor editing ability in a technical sense, something that could only be improved by actually sitting down and editing! I now believe – and, as is often the case, it seems blindingly obvious – that the shock of my stroke is so entangled with the physical and mental exertion of the film shoot itself that I just haven't been able to disassociate the two. It also hasn't escaped me these past few days that there is an irony in my trauma preventing me from engaging with a project for which trauma, and its long and invisible hold over people, is a central theme.

Reflecting on and writing about the project has helped Hay realize that the collaborators need to hand the editing to someone else. This is what they have now done, which is exciting, because it means that the film is actually now very close to being a real thing that people can watch. The prospect of an audience is also incredibly scary, of course. What if the film does not achieve what it hoped to achieve? What if the aims are not realized in the way that was intended? Nevertheless, as with all practice-as-research projects, it is also the case that the process is as relevant and illuminating as the finished product.

## Conclusion

The making of *Lost Property* demonstrates the ways that conflicting aims and methodologies stimulate the collaborative process. Drawing on a wide variety of experiences of loss did not result in a depiction of bereavement that universalizes the grieving process. Rather, while the film is anchored in some shared experiences (the experience of flashbacks, the guilt and anger that often accompanies grief, the way objects mediate the relationship to those who have died, the sense of the grieving process as something that is never completed), it also depicts two different responses to a single death, emphasizing how grief is unique to the individual in

ways that reflect their personality and history, and their relationship to the person who has died.

The project's use of participatory action research extended the research and impact by enabling many of the participants to engage with, and reflect upon, personal experiences of grief. Several of the co-researchers found the experience of sharing stories and engaging creatively with loss therapeutic, demonstrating that creativity and meaning making can support adaptive grieving. However, while fiction film's ability to produce a sensory and emotional experience – via image, movement, sound, narrative and colour – makes it an ideal vehicle to convey the never finished, embodied experience of grief, using immersive methodologies to research emotive topics that affect the co-researchers personally can pose risks. The relationship between grief and creativity is therefore complex, as there is no single way that the artistic process impacts a person's memories or emotions. The effects of the artistic process on the self and psyche are as individual and multifaceted as the grieving process itself.

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**Jimmy Hay** is a film director and scriptwriter, and a senior lecturer in film theory and film practice at the University of Bristol, UK. He has directed the feature film *High Tide* (2015), which achieved a UK-wide cinema release, as well as the short films *Stuart and Kate* (2012), *Ex Libris* (2014) and *Zero Sum* (2016).

**Natasha Rosling** is an artist who uses installation, audio and experience design to explore the ways we make sense of mortality. Often illuminating the porous boundaries between the interior spaces of the body and the outside environment, her work examines the ambiguities of what it means to 'be' a body, and the connections between emotional and bodily processes.

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