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LIBERATING A VENGEFUL SPIRIT:
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ANIMATION AS A GRIEF RITUAL

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Christie Widiarto is a Melbourne-based Indonesian Australian animator. Through her work, she explores the themes of family, community and nature. She often experiments with mixing techniques and processes to create immersive narratives.

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ABSTRACT

The process of animation is designed to bring static images or objects to life, yet animators across the world have used the art-form to tell stories about grief. This practice-based research explores the paradoxical relationship between animation and grief stories by proposing that the animation process can be used as a mourning ritual. There are characteristics of animation that can be considered ritualistic such as the series of repetitive motions performed in a sequence to create a film frame by frame. An autoethnographic animation approach will be used to perform the 'ritual' and develop a short, animated film. The film, which is currently in production, is a creative response to the Indonesian horror folklore story of the Kuntilanak. This vengeful vampiric spirit is widely believed to have been pregnant when she died, either from a stillbirth or from a violent attack. Her story has been interpreted through numerous horror films across South East Asia, often depicting her with the dual persona of an evil temptress and terrifying monster. The grief she experienced from losing both her child and her own life, is overlooked by most filmmakers, who instead focus on her bloodthirsty quest for vengeance. Throughout the archipelago of Indonesia, there are various rituals to ensure that, when a person dies, any negative emotions attached are released. Failure to do so may result in the spirit becoming vengeful. The 'ritual' process of creating this animation may be what is needed to free this spirit from its vengeful past and give her and this researcher a space to share their collective grief. In doing so, this research attempts to provide a cognitive understanding of why so many animators choose to tell stories of grief, and why these stories resonate with audiences worldwide.

KEYWORDS: Grief, ritual, mourning, trauma, kuntilanak, Indonesia, maternal

INTRODUCTION

Grief is a common theme in many animated stories worldwide. Disney animations have featured parental loss such as the death of Bambi's mother in Bambi (Hand, 1942), which both academics and film viewers have called one of the saddest and most traumatic in Disney history (Lammon, 2023). The recent short Netflix Animation, If anything happens, I love you (Govier & McCormack, 2020) takes us through the pain of parents mourning the loss of their child. In Song of the Sea (Moore, 2014), the family struggle over the grief of their mother who died giving birth to the youngest child. Grave of the Fireflies (Takahata, 1988) is based on the experiences of Akiyuki Nosaka who lost his sister to malnutrition (Animerica, 2011). This practice-based research explores the dichotomy between stories of grief, and animated films which create the illusion of life. The outcome of this research will be a short, animated film response to the Indonesian horror folklore Kuntilanak from a feminist lens, by focusing on her maternal grief. The film is currently in production and is due to be completed in 2026. An autoethnographic animation process will be used as a ritual to liberate the Kuntilanak from her grief. Instead of a monstrous vengeful woman, the focus is on her grief from losing her child, which is shared by so many women worldwide. The creation of this film is my attempt to work through my own grief from suffering a miscarriage and losing both parents. This reflexive process also allows for a cognitive understanding of meaning making through art to process grief.

The Kuntilanak is a vengeful vampiric female spirit who haunts the jungles of Borneo. Some narratives depict her as a victim of a violent attack while pregnant, while in others she died while giving birth to a stillborn child. There are numerous horror films across South East Asia that have told her story, often from the perspective of a male director. In Malaysia and Singapore, she is called the 'Pontianak' after the town where the legend is believed to have originated from (Duile, 2020). The Kuntilanak story is also about her maternal grief as a mother who lost her unborn child through violence or childbirth. Through her death, her child has also lost its mother. This practice-based research aims to focus on this part of the narrative by presenting an autoethnographic interpretation of the story.

Grief literature provides us with an understanding of the psychological conditions of bereavement through Freud's Mourning and Melancholia (Fiorini et al., 2009), how the loss of a parent can impact a child through Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), tasks to overcome grief by Worden (Worden, 2018), and stages of grief by Kübler-Ross (Kübler-Ross & Byock, 2011).

The practice component of this research is based on my own grief. Therefore, I use an autoethnographic approach, with a focus on maternal grief. This approach has been used by other researchers to document their own experiences of grief and trauma, such as through journal writing and animation.

Rituals are a way to understand beliefs and customs within a society. There are Indonesian grief and death rituals such as the double burial ritual that is practised to enable a deceased person to transition to the spirit world as an ancestral spirit. Failure to perform the ritual may result in the spirit becoming vengeful (Stephen, 1998). Perhaps the Kuntilanak is known for her vengefulness because there has been no ritual performed for her.

Some features of the animation process, such as the sequential and repetitive steps required to make an animation frame-by-frame, can be considered ritualistic. Catherine Bell's (2009) research into rituals is used to further identify ways in which the animation process can be performed as a ritual.

This study aims to understand the impact that animated stories of grief have on both the audience and the animators that

create them. Although the film is still in production, animation tests have started to reveal ways in which animation can make time for reflection, space to make meaning and provide a process for mourning after a significant loss. This research also aims to demonstrate how folklore stories such as the Kuntilanak can be reframed through a feminist lens.

KUNTILANAK NARRATIVE

The Kuntilanak is portrayed in popular Indonesian culture as a vengeful female ghost. Her anger stems from a violent or traumatic death while pregnant or through giving birth to a stillborn child. She can turn into a beautiful and docile female by inserting a nail at the back of her neck. The focus of this research is on her grief as a pregnant mother who lost both her life and that of her child. Through the loss of her life, the child has also lost its mother.

Nicholas and Kline (2010) found that the Pontianak story, the Malay version of the Kuntilanak, defines two ways to be a woman. The first is as a rational human who is controlled by the nail in the nape of her neck. The other is as a spirit who is uncontrolled and irrational who does not conform to a Malaysian/Indonesian role of obedient wife, mother or daughter.

There are numerous movies about the ghost such as *Kuntilanak* (Mantovani, 2018), *Putri Kuntilanak* (Suharto, 1988), and *Revenge of the Pontianak* (Goei, 2019). Most feature her as a violent and vengeful antagonist. She is the epitome of the monstrous feminine. According to Barbara Creed, the monstrous feminine character in horror films is representative of men's fear of women (Creed, 2023). As a victim of violence and trauma, she is grotesque and terrifying. The loss of her child has meant that her role as a mother is unfulfilled. An analysis of Indonesian horror films between 1970 – 2020, found that the Kuntilanak was the most popular antagonist during this time (Adiprasetio, 2023). According to Adiprasetio (2023), the prevalence of horror film antagonists such as the Kuntilanak can be considered representative of societal fears and trauma.

Barker (2016) echoes Adiprasetio's assertion that modern Indonesian horror films reflect the trauma of Indonesian history. He believes the story of the Kuntilanak reflects cultural politics that females are threatening to men. This aligns with Creed's analysis of the monstrous feminine (Creed, 2023).

In film literature, the Kuntilanak or Pontianak, can be considered a feminist icon, challenging patriarchal views and perceptions of femininity and motherhood. Izharuddin (2020) identifies the Pontianak's laugh as a form of resistance in Muslim majority societies that view loud public displays of laughter by women as improper. However, to men her laughter may be considered a display of dominance. The fact that the Pontianak can be turned into a subservient and beautiful woman when a spike is inserted into the back of her head further indicates an attempt at patriarchal dominance over the female body and behaviour.

Although most of the Kuntilanak and Pontianak films have male directors, *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* (Baba, 2004) was written and directed by Shuhaimi Baba, a Malaysian female director. According to Izharuddin (2015), having a female director allowed the film a female gaze, in contrast to most Asian cinema. She contrasts this to Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, which is based on the idea most films are created for the cinematic pleasure of men (Mulvey, 1975). Through Baba's female gaze, women are able to find pleasure through the framing of the female character as the central protagonist. She is seeking retribution for past injustices, rather than being reduced to a helpless victim or grotesque antagonist. Izharuddin observed that in some films by male directors the Kuntilanak possesses qualities that are deemed unfeminine and monstrous. However, in Baba's version of

the story, she calls on a modern woman to correct injustices of the past. In doing so, Izharuddin (2015) argues that such horror stories can be used as a device to represent a more modern and egalitarian view of society.

This literature review reveals some key elements of the Kuntilanak's story. She is a popular figure in Indonesian horror as a vengeful female antagonist, and this representation is in response to patriarchal fear or need to dominate women in society.

DEFINING GRIEF, MOURNING AND TRAUMA

In order to understand the Kuntilanak's grief, and reconceptualise her story, an examination of grief literature is needed. Literature on 'trauma' is also examined, as this study includes grief from miscarriage, which can be a traumatic experience. The concept of mourning is explored through Freud's analysis of mourning and melancholia (1917, as cited in Fiorini et al., 2009). He defines these terms as psychological responses to a loss of something or someone significant. Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) provides further insight of grief from a break in the bond between a mother and child. Kübler-Ross (2011) identified stages of grief which she encountered through her work with terminally ill patients, offering a reflection on our own mortality. Worden defines "mourning" as a process in which we adapt to the loss and suggests tasks that can be undertaken to help process grief.

According to Freud (1917), "Trauer" or mourning, is a temporary condition in response to a loss of a loved one, country, values, etc. He describes melancholia as a more severe condition that requires further psychological treatment. With melancholia, the individual loses interest in the outside world. The ego is damaged as the individual loses self-regard and is disconnected from their feelings. Melancholia is considered pathological and can also lead to bouts of mania. In comparison, someone in mourning still has a sense of self. While the mourning process may be painful, they are eventually able to recover and be free (Fiorini et al., 2009).

Building on Freud's work, Bowlby's attachment theory addresses the loss of a parent and the impact that has on a child. Bowlby posits that separation from the mother figure, even a temporary one, is a traumatic event, causing the child much distress. The bond that the child develops with a maternal figure, is especially important in the first few years of life (Bowlby, 1982).

In her book, *On Death and Dying*, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross reviews mourning rituals that are performed across cultures. She attributes these rituals to possible feelings of anger or shame by the mourners. "This grief, shame and guilt are not far removed from feelings of anger and rage" (Kübler-Ross, 2011). She further suggests that this anger at the deceased person may be behind grief rituals performed by many cultures.

Through interviews with over 200 terminally ill patients, she identified the famous five stages of grief, which includes anger. They are the feelings experienced by those who know they are approaching death.

1) Denial of their situation.
2) Anger at their circumstance.
3) Bargaining in an effort to buy time.
4) Depression due to a separation from loved ones.
5) Acceptance of their fate.
   (Kübler-Ross, 2011).

According to Worden (2018), "grief" is a reaction to significant loss, whereas "mourning" is a process of accepting loss. Worden also identifies the unique nature of grief as a cognitive process, and describes 'traumatic bereavement' as a situation where a person's death is due to an unforeseen traumatic experience. He suggests that instead of stages,

there are four tasks that can be undertaken to more proactively move through the process of mourning. The tasks may be performed in any order according to the individual's needs.

The tasks are:

1) Accepting the reality of the loss. Rituals such as attending the funeral can help the mourner accept the permanence of the loss.
2) Process the pain. This involves experiencing all the associated emotions such as sadness, fear, anger.
3) Adjusting to a world without the deceased. This includes an external adjustment, internal adjustment and spiritual adjustment which involve finding a new role in the world without the deceased. Eg. When a mother loses a child, they might question their new role in life.. This can also incorporate meaning making.
4) Find a way to remember the deceased and embark on a new life. The mourner finds ways to memorialise their loved one and find an appropriate place for their memory within their lives.
(Worden, 2018).

These theorists present pathways to understanding the Kuntilanak's trauma and grief. It is likely that Freud would diagnose the Kuntilanak as experiencing melancholia, with her mania resulting in violent attacks on those who cross her path. Bowlby's attachment theory focuses on the importance of maternal attachment. The attachment between the Kuntilanak and her unborn child is often overlooked. Through Kübler-Ross's stages, we can start to understand grief in terms of our own mortality. Also, through Kübler-Ross's observations of grief rituals, she discerned a link between feelings of anger and grief. The Kuntilanak's anger and grief may stem from the break in attachment with her child. Worden's tasks of mourning illuminates how activities such as performing a 'ritual' can assist those who have suffered a significant loss, to process their grief.

DEFINING RITUAL

This research uses animation as a ritual for bereavement. According to Bell (2009) the term 'ritual' was previously linked to study of religions, but has evolved to include cultures and societal behaviours. There are five characteristics of rituals that Bell identifies:

1) Formalism: A formal way of speaking or acting such as at a formal gathering.
2) Traditionalism: Repetition of actions that have a cultural or religious history such as traditions around celebrating significant days, e.g., Christmas or Hanukkah.
3) Invariance: Little or no difference in the way the action is carried out each time.
4) Rule Governing: A set of rules that govern the action such as sports rules.
5) Sacral Symbolism: This may be symbolic activities, such as swearing an oath on a bible, or objects such as a national flag.
(Bell, 2009).

According to Bell, although there are certain characteristics that can define what a ritual is, there is no universal understanding. There may be certain levels of formality or authority to the actions, but the general concept of 'ritual' is that it is a series of culturally significant actions (Bell, 2009).

ANIMATION AS RITUAL

Drawing on the characteristics of ritual described by Bell (2009), I developed a ritual process for my animation. My ritual process is not based on spirituality but instead on actions that have particular significance to me through my art-making practice.

One of the characteristics I employ is invariance. According to Bell, these are, "a disciplined set of actions marked by precise repetition and physical control," (Bell, 2009). Animation involves a series of repetitive actions to create a film frame-by-frame. There are only slight variations in the actions in order to give the impression of movement. Repetitive movements are required to create an animation cycle. According to Dan Torre, the animation cycle is, "a formal structure, of sequential images that are repeated, at least once, in a consistent order," (Torre, 2017). By creating repetitive animation cycles, I apply a level of invariance to my process through physical control of my body as I draw each frame. The repetitive process frees my mind from thinking about what action to perform next and gives me space for reflection.

One of the examples of sacral symbolism that Bell provides is the creation of a miniature garden. There is a ritual element to this activity, where different components are brought together to symbolize a greater meaning, such as harmony or balance (Bell, 2019). Within my animation process, I am bringing together symbols that are meaningful to me. The fauna depicted in the film represent the garden that my mother grew. The characters symbolize different aspects of the losses I have experienced. Together, these form a visual metaphor that represents my personal grief.

INDONESIAN RITUALS AND BELIEFS

If rituals are culturally significant actions, then some comprehension of Indonesia's grief rituals should provide an understanding of Indonesian beliefs and perceptions of grief. Although the film that will be created from this research will be a response, rather than a retelling of the Kuntilanak story, it is important to pay respect to the cultural origins of the original folklore. The diverse grief rituals across Indonesia are sometimes violent and macabre, reflecting Indonesia's turbulent history. The period of Dutch colonization was filled with conflict and left a lasting impression on the archipelago. This was followed by Japanese occupation during World War II and revolution. The brutal 1965-66 massacres of Communists and ethnic Chinese left an indelible mark on the country. Suharto's New Order "Orde Baru" or "Orba" brought much development but also even more political instability and civil unrest, leading to further massacres and Suharto's resignation in 1998. The 2004 earthquake and tsunami that hit the northern part of the Indonesian island of Sumatra and other parts of Asia caused a wave of grief in the area (Hannigan, 2015). This turbulent and violent past combined with a widespread belief in spirits has led to the prevalence of many ghost stories across Indonesia.

Michele Stephen's analysis of the 'double funeral' burial in Bali and Melanesia provides insight into the types of rituals performed in Indonesia. The first phase of the ritual involves allowing the body to decompose out in the open. Stephen used Freud's childhood development theories to explain how this first phase is representative of releasing any hostilities that still bind the spirit to its mortal life. This replicates the process of growing out of childhood destructive fantasies. Any feelings of guilt, hostility or fear of ghosts returning, fade away as the flesh deteriorates. The second burial marks the end of mourning and allows the deceased to turn into an ancestral spirit (Stephen 1998).

There are other rituals such as Trunyan cemeteries where bodies are left to decompose under Banyan trees before their bones are put on display, or in Tana Toraja where the dead are considered 'makula' or sick and reside alongside their living relatives who clothe and care for them as if they were alive. The bodies are included in family activities such as meals and special events (Daniel, 2022). This blurring of boundaries between the dead and the living is in conflict with some of the earlier grief theories that view death as the end of life. These rituals present death as a journey into a new form of existence.

Many of the perpetrators of Indonesia's 1965 and 1966 violence, have not been brought to justice and there is little acknowledgement of the events by the Indonesian Government. There are reports of hidden mass graves across the islands. Markers placed by locals to ensure they can be found, are later removed by government officials. However, some of these sites are still known and acknowledged by the local communities around them through the planting of trees, provision of offerings and performing of religious rituals. These places are also frequented by gamblers who believe that the spirits can help them win the lottery or give them luck. Such places are looked after by a 'juru kunci', a caretaker who can talk to the spirits and guide relatives and gamblers to these places. They act as an intermediary between the living and the dead. These places enable these injustices to be remembered (Leong, 2021).

Juxtaposing grief theory alongside Indonesian grief rituals and beliefs reveals a disconnect between Western ideas of grief and Eastern traditions. Much of the grief literature reviewed was based on the loss of someone or something significant and the importance of adapting to that loss. Within Indonesia's rituals and beliefs, the mourner's relationship with the deceased has not been completely lost but instead manifests in spirit form. Rituals exist to help transition spirits from a mortal existence to a spiritual plane. There are some examples of confluence such as Stephen's (1998) application of Freud's theory to double burial rituals. However, this is still an application of Western ideas to Eastern tradition.

MATERNAL GRIEF

One of the ways in which this research overcomes the disconnect between Western theories of grief and Indonesian beliefs and traditions is to focus on maternal grief. The bond between a mother and child is universally understood and is addressed by Bowlby's attachment theory as a significant part of a child's development (Bowlby, 1982). The following is a review of literature concerning maternal grief in Indonesia, and worldwide. Through this analysis, we attempt to identify a universal understanding of maternal grief.

Indonesia's fast economic growth since the 1990s has meant that it is now a strong and stable economy (The World Bank in Indonesia: Overview, n.d). However, the continued prevalence of stories such as the Kuntilanak are a reminder of the effects of centuries of violence and political instability. In her article, "Indonesian folklore of vengeful female ghosts hold symbols of violence against women", Damayana (2017) presents the Kuntilanak as a victim of the country's poor access to health services, gender-based violence and inequality. A 2015 study reported a high rate of maternal mortality in Indonesia compared to other areas of the Asia-Pacific region and more developed countries. Post-partum bleeding (30.3%) and preeclampsia (27.1%), a serious pregnancy condition, were found to be two of the main causes of these deaths in 2013, yet they are both avoidable with the right healthcare (Damayana 2017).

A 2004 study (Andajani-Sutjahjo & Manderso, 2004) of maternity in East Java found that women who had experienced stillbirth or neonatal death lacked understanding of their health needs and mental health support. Due to this deficiency in their knowledge, some failed to seek medical attention during the pregnancy or received incorrect advice from friends, family and neighbours. They also sometimes weren't told the full details of why the baby had died. As a result, some of the women experienced feelings of guilt as they perceived that the death of their child was their fault. Some women would avoid social situations or even leave the city for a few months because of their shame (Andajani-Sutjahjo & Manderso, 2004). The plight of these Indonesian mothers is hidden in horror story narratives.

Having spent almost three years conducting fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau, Einarsdottir's (2021) research found that

even though the country has one of the highest rates of child mortality in the world, the mothers generally still had a strong bond with their children. She also found that economic conditions and cultural beliefs may affect the way in which a mother expresses grief for their child. However, Einarsdottir warned against judging a mother's behaviour as a lack of love for the child. This research was important in understanding the universal nature of maternal grief (Einarsdottir, 2021).

GRIEF AND ANIMATION

This research posits that grief is a common theme in animated films and attempts to explore the reasons behind this. This involves identifying how grief theory is embedded in these narratives and how animation has been used to give life to these stories that centre on death.

A number of animation filmmakers have talked about the process of creating their film as a kind of therapy. During her childhood, Anne Koizumi's father was a janitor at her school. She was embarrassed by his position and how it reflected on her. Her short animated documentary, "In the Shadow of the Pines" (Koizumi, 2020), addressed the shame and guilt she felt about her past behaviour and attitudes towards her father. She said the film helped her family grieve more openly and they were able to talk to each other more about his loss (Greenaway, 2020). Making the film was a way that Anne could honour her father and process her grief. Her process aligns with some of Worden's tasks of mourning. She used her animation practice to find meaning in his loss. Meaning making is part of Worden's third task of adjusting to a world without the deceased person in it (Worden, 2018). The film honours his memory, which aligns with the fourth task of finding a way to remember the deceased (Worden, 2018).

Aranjuez's (2015) study of the Disney film, Big Hero 6 (Hall & Williams, 2014), uses elements of Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, 2011) to discuss the protagonist's emotional response to the death of his brother. In particular, Hiro's anger and quest for vengeance against the person who was responsible for the death of his brother is attributed to the 'Anger' stage. Anger, along with shame and guilt, is another emotion that is addressed by Kübler-Ross (2011) as connected to feelings of grief. This anger is part of Hiro's grief journey and drives the narrative until he moves into the next stage of acceptance.

Frank E Abney III was inspired to become an animator after watching Simba lose his father at an early age in "The Lion King" (Allers & Minkoff, 1994). He used animation as a medium to express grief in his own film, "Canvas" (Abney, 2020). Although it is the father figure that is lost, the expression of grief in these films demonstrate to some extent, Bowlby's attachment theory, which highlights the enduring effect that the loss of a parental figure can have on a young child (Bowlby, 1982).

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Another way in which I aim to reconcile grief theory with Indonesian perceptions of death is through an autoethnographic approach based on my own life experiences. This methodology allows me to bring together my Chinese Indonesian culture, my Australian upbringing and "Western" understanding of grief.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method where the researcher uses their personal experiences and relationships with members of their society to reflexively interrogate cultural beliefs, behaviours and experiences. It was developed due to an increasing awareness of the importance of identities and personal narratives. Also, the research community was increasingly finding limitations and ethical concerns around existing knowledge and research methods (Adams et al.,

2015). Autoethnography allows for consideration of multiple cultural identities and has been used by researchers as a way to explore grief.

Leith (2009) used autoethnography through a year-long diary, medical notes and Memorial Book entries to reflect on her three miscarriages over nine years. Through writing her story, she interrogates what it means to search for meaning and the idea of making sense of her experiences. Her work challenges the Western ideals of positive transformation and instead contemplates the messiness of grief and potentially hopeless search for meaning.

Mathew's (2021) Indo-Canadian heritage allowed him to incorporate Indian rituals to his autoethnographic research and journey through grief. He found that within Western society, he was told to move forward quickly from his grief without allowing time to process it. This was in conflict with the Eastern traditions he was familiar with which saw death as a journey into the afterlife. This journey involves rituals which, according to Mathew, "… are not only designed to bring peace to the deceased, but they are also responsible for guiding the living out of the dark, liminal spaces incurred through loss" (Mathew, 2021). The rituals used in his father's passage incorporated both Western and Eastern Christianity. There was a sense of structure and sequence in which they were performed, based on rich histories of cultural traditions. Through the action of performing these rituals, he was able to find an outlet for his pain. Sensory experiences such hearing chanting and watching incense smoke rise gave Mathew space for self-reflection, and slowly find acceptance. Through evocative autoethnographic storytelling, he was able to capture his experience of "braiding western and eastern cultural rituals," (Mathew, 2021). Mathew's work demonstrates the ability of ritual to encapsulate a hybrid cultural experience of grief and provide a structure for processing and documenting the experience of bereavement through the performance of rituals.

Where Leith's work reveals the complexity and messiness of researching grief, Mathew's work demonstrates the ability of ritual to create a structured approach. Using rituals, Mathew found a way to encapsulate the lived experience of grief within a hybrid cultural identity. By using repetitive and pre-defined steps, this gave him space to feel his grief, embody the emotions and channel them through actions. His writing was an extension of this process, allowing him to further delve into his emotions. As part of the contemporary Indonesian diaspora in Australia, it is important to me to be true to the original Kuntilanak story, but also be able to reconcile it with my Western experiences and understanding of grief and storytelling.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ANIMATION PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

Animation researchers, Andi Spark (2019) and Susan Young (2021) used a practice-based approach to autoethnographic research. Young conducted research into the cognitive effects of animation on practitioners who have experienced trauma (Young, 2021) while Spark used a reflexive approach to explore her experiences of post-natal depression (PND) (Spark, 2019).

Young's (2021) found that visuospatial tasks such as moulding clay and tapping on a keyboard, along with an animator's ability to visually rescript trauma, assists with the ability to moderate disruptive memories that trauma brings. Spatial hand movements had a similar impact on intrusive thoughts. Animators in her study reported feeling empowered by being able to manipulate the actors and reframe the narrative, as well as finding comfort in the repetitive nature of the practice (Young, 2021).

Spark (2019) used animation to reflect on the difficult maternal experience of post-natal depression and noted,

"Animation is a way of visualising the invisible". Animation uses many narrative strategies such as synecdoche, symbolism, metaphor, choreography and sound to provide a deeper understanding of the screen vision. According to Spark, animation provides elements of stories that are, "too painful or impossible to photograph or real-life events that have not been caught on film and are incapable of adequately being recreated" (Spark 2019).

The work of Spark (2019) and Young (2021) demonstrate how a practice-based approach can be used to research grief. Their work has informed my own practice in creating an animation in response to the Kuntilanak story. Repetitive visuospatial tasks will be performed as a ritual to both moderate intrusive thoughts and allow time for self-reflection. The ability to control the narratives will allow for a sense of control over the uncontrollable nature of grief. Narrative strategies such as symbolism and metaphor will be used to represent emotions that are too difficult to express directly.

The purpose of using animation practice as a ritual is to liberate the Kuntilanak and allow me to process my own grief. Just as the double burial ritual performed in parts of Indonesia, are intended to liberate the spirit from its mortal life, the animation ritual will be performed to liberate the Kuntilanak from her grief. By focusing on her grief, I hope to also give myself time and space for mourning.

METHOD

Currently, the film is still in production. The script and storyboard have been completed, and some first draft animations have been produced.

Developing the Narrative

In starting the practice component of this research, I had no desire to recreate the Kuntilanak narrative. Instead, my story is a response to hers, told through my own grief. I position myself alongside her to share her burden of anguish and loss. Through my own gaze, I see not a monstrous feminine, but a survivor of trauma, navigating the chaotic and painful journey of grief. Her story of grief is also the story of so many women who have lost a child during childbirth or through miscarriage. The challenge is to now ensure that the completed film will represent our collective story.

Initially, I used reflexive writing to create a 'grief diary' in a similar way to Leith (2009). However, this led to avoidance and procrastination. After creating a seemingly soft entry about a cat that ran away, the feelings of loss were still overwhelming. I found myself depressed for days that all my attempts to find the cat were in vain. Doubts formed in my mind about my ability to tell my story and find meaning in the process. Leith also struggled to find meaning through diary entries (Leith, 2009). I determined that dealing with the topic directly was too difficult and potentially futile.

Robert Neimeyer's (2012) research discusses the importance of meaning making using creative approaches such as narrative storytelling. According to Neimeyer, such techniques can be used to assist those who suffered a traumatic loss to find meaning in their lives again. Techniques such as "the virtual dream" enable the mourner to explore their feelings and experiences through telling a story within 8 – 10 minutes. Numerous prompts are given that can be used in any order and give structure to the story. Prompts should allow for a combination of conscious and subconscious thought, replicating a dream state.

I used Neimeyer's narrative approach to project my grief onto fictional characters in a fictional setting while still capturing real-life events and my emotional responses to them. The temporality of his technique also meant that I could choose to escape the narrative after the time limit was up, or remain within it. This made the research more approachable and allowed for self-care during the process.

Performing the Animation Ritual

Just as Spark (2019) and Young (2021) used a practice-based research approach, I am using my animation practice as a ritual to understand and process my own grief. The nuances of my process inform my unique ritual. For example, I always start work by making myself a cup of tea. Usually, I work in silence. My work involves using hybrid techniques, mixing mediums and processes. I identified two techniques which I determined were most suitable for the ritual process. The first was stop motion animation, and the second was 2D hand drawn digital animation. Unlike 3D or generative animation which greatly rely on mouse and keyboard clicks, the stop motion process of repeatedly bending forward to move an object in a frame, then stepping back to take a picture, allowed a more visceral connection to the work. I found the same connection with the 2D process of drawing on a tablet or piece of paper. My hand movements are directly connected to the motion of the animation. By feeling these movements, I was able to better consider my emotions through the ritual performance. The use of familiar techniques freed my mind from the burden of learning, and instead I was able to focus on doing. Interweaving my personal story within a fictional narrative invited memories to slowly infiltrate my thoughts as I created each frame.

DISCUSSION

The process of developing the script, storyboard, character designs and initial animation tests has already yielded some understanding of my own grief. Using animation as a mourning process has allowed me time to reflect on how grief has shaped me.

The Characters

In a webinar by Henry Lien (2022) on "Non-Linear Story Structures from non-Western traditions," he discussed the film, *Rashomon* (Kurosawa, 1950), a Japanese film where the same series of events are told from the perspective of multiple characters. According to Lien, although it may seem repetitive to hear about the same event from three different characters, each version of the story gives us a different insight into the events. He attributes this cyclic structure to an Eastern way of storytelling.

Lien's presentation provided a way in which grief could be divided to make it more manageable. This also seemed to be an appropriate way to address the different aspects of my grief individually rather than all at once. By creating three separate characters, we see grief from three different perspectives. The characters I created are also different ages, representing my own journey at different stages of life.

The characters are:

The Teenage Girl who is a horror movie fan.

The teenage girl has grown up with just a father. The maternal bond is broken leaving her with a feeling of emptiness. According to Bowlby (1982), this bond can be replaced by a similar maternal figure. Her father tries to fill this role but is unable to completely do so as he himself is still mourning the loss of his wife. As a result, the girl feels the need to search for her mother and find some sort of connection with her. Through the girl's eyes, we see the Kuntilanak as a grieving mother, looking for her lost child. Her grief is shown through shimmers in the foliage and batik materials around her that indicate the spiritual presence of her mother. Her mother's love of batik and flora reflect my own mother's love of both growing and painting flowers. Flowers also filled my mother's palliative care room. I would spend hours drawing them while she slept during my visits. Now I'm drawing them as a reminder of her continued presence. Recreating the flowers and batik patterns form the symbolism in my ritual. This is consistent with Bell's assertion that a characteristic of ritual is sacral symbolism (Bell, 2009).

The absence of the mother also reflects my experience of having an absent father. My parents divorced when I was two years old and we moved to Australia without my father. Although he died after my mother, I hardly knew him. However, throughout my childhood, his presence was always felt through stories shared about him.

The Woman who lost her child through a miscarriage.

The woman embodies a living Kuntilanak, existing in between the living and the dead. Grief through her story is told through silence and empty spaces. A missing heartbeat is



Fig 1 Concept art of the girl. Christie Widiarto. 2024.

how many women, such as myself, learn they have had a miscarriage or stillbirth. Therefore, her grief is silent. These moments of quiet represent moments of self-reflection and mourning. Unlike the Kuntilanak, the woman has survived giving birth to a stillborn child. However, she has yet to accept the reality of the loss. Accepting reality is the first task of Worden's mourning process (Worden, 2018). By denying the loss, she has turned her into a mummified version of herself. She is a living ghost.

The Older Woman who is near death.

The older woman's character is based on the concept of a "juru kunci", a caretaker of places of death where spirits reside (Leong, 2011). She also holds much knowledge about the Kuntilanak story which she shares with the young girl. This woman's grief is shown through a mourning altar with flowers and incense. Throughout my life, my own mother had a similar altar dedicated to her mother. By including an altar in this story, I am continuing my mother's ritual. Through this character, I also acknowledge my own mortality. She has gone through Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief (2021) and has arrived at the "Acceptance" stage.

The Story

The finished film will be a ten-minute animation. In the film, the characters are neighbours who live in a small city that borders a jungle. Their area is like a "kampung" (village in Indonesian and Malay) as it is located on the outskirts of the city. The girl and her father have just moved back after living abroad for many years. This city is where the girl was born and she is keen to learn more about her home town.

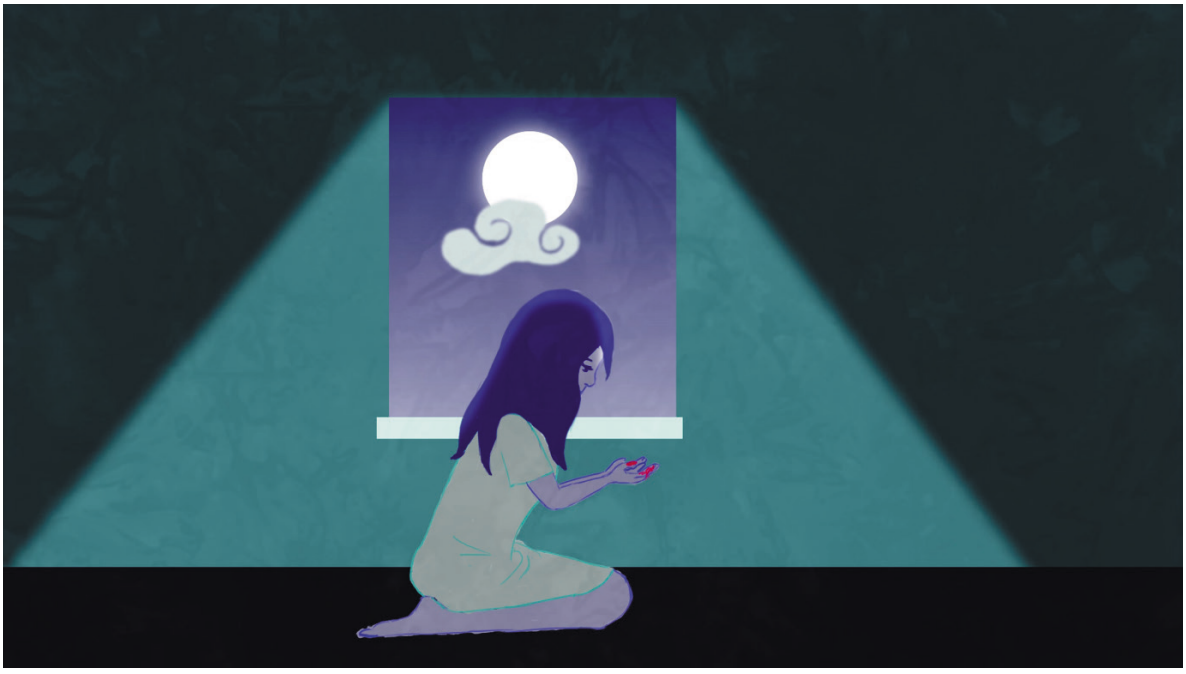

Fig 2 Concept art of the woman. Christie Widiarto. 2024.

Initially, the movie emulates a horror film. The horror comes in the form of a miscarriage for the woman, and a screen monster for the girl who encounters the Kuntilanak for the first time at a local cinema screening. These two events disrupt their lives in different ways. Initially, the woman embodies the societal representation of the monster. Her ghostly figure haunts the background of the story. The girl becomes obsessed with the Kuntilanak. The spirit fills the girl's thoughts and haunts her dreams, though it is unclear to her why that is the case.

The rest of the story is a journey through their grief. The role of the older woman is as a spiritual guide through their journey.

The woman is seen frequenting the jungle at night. The older woman explains to the girl that the jungle is where spirits from the village live after they have died. One night, the girl decides to follow the woman into the jungle. When they meet, they become aware that they are both looking for the spirits of the people they have lost. It is revealed that the girl's mother died while giving birth to her. They are both victims of birth traumas.

According to Millar and Lee (2021), horror films are ideal vehicles for representing the phenomenology of grief. Monsters are akin to the initial shock and trauma that causes the grief, disrupting the lives of the people affected. In confronting the monster, the antagonist is performing the first of Worden's tasks of mourning (Worden, 2018) which is confronting the reality of what has happened to them. By overcoming the monster, they are performing another of Worden's tasks which is to adjust to a new way of understanding their world and find new meaning for their lives (Worden, 2018). The film provides a container for the viewer to place their fears and



Fig 3 Concept art of the older woman. Christie Widiarto. 2024.

anxiety. Being able to look away, pause or finish the film gives the viewer a feeling of control.

In my story, there is no clear monster to overcome. There is no victory or end goal. The quiet strength of surviving such trauma is what is highlighted in this story. Instead of avenging her death, both the girl and the woman are given a chance to process their grief as survivors of birth traumas. Through their eyes, the Kuntilanak is not a vengeful spirit, but is another survivor. Although she is no longer mortal, her spirit lives on as a symbol of strength for enduring the loss of her life and the loss of her child. There will be no clear conclusion but an acknowledgment of shared pain and acceptance of an uncertain future together.

THE ANIMATION PROCESS

The film is in the process of development. Early animation tests have already proven useful in understanding the relationship between ritual, the making of moving images and grief.

Stop Motion Tests

The first animation tests were conducted using stop motion animation. I chose to use a teardrop shape, which could be transformed into symbols of femininity, motherhood or grief. When I configured them in a circle, they looked like flowers or milk ducts. Laying them haphazardly with the points facing up created raindrops or tears. By finding meaning through shapes, patterns and symbols, I created space to connect with my grief. Sacral symbolism is a characteristic of ritual (Bell, 2009) and using this motif was part of my animation ritual.

The repetitive action of moving around the space to move the shapes and then stepping back to take a picture, gives my body a reason keep going. I find that my mind is often occupied by keeping track of what I moved for the last frame and what to move next. When emotions do come, it is during times when I have determined the next few actions, and have developed a rhythm to executing them. They are not sudden or disruptive but form slowly as the images form in front of me.

Animated Vignettes

After creating a narrative for the film, I started creating vignettes using a 2D digital animation process, which gave an insight into the grief of my characters. With this process, the animation ritual involves repetitively drawing the same character but slightly differently each time to give the sense of movement. Invariance, or lack of variance in this case, is one of the characteristics of ritual described by Bell (2009). By using a 2D animation process, I was evoking past traditions of animation practice.

Through the creation of the vignettes, I found I initially was focused on defining who the character was and how they embodied me. When animating the girl, I reflected on what kind of teenager I had been and my relationship with my mother at the time. In the process of drawing a walk cycle of her, I embodied the mood and movements of the character through my hand gestures across the drawing tablet. The absence of the girl's mother meant that grief was kept at a distance. The foliage around the girl shimmers, representing the presence of her mother. These shimmers are not seen by her, but happen just outside her field of view. By creating this symbolic representation of the teenager's mother, not only was I reminded of my own mother's absence, but also her continued presence in my thoughts.

The woman's vignette is filled with silence. In her room, she looks at her bloody hands without making a sound except for

shallow breathing. There are also no sounds coming from outside. The scene has almost no motion. My thoughts went to the gentle motion of the clouds or the slight movement of the curtains rather than to her situation. Although I drew her looking at blood on her hands, these few drops are a complete departure from the bloodthirsty attack scenes within many existing Kuntilanak films.

Creating the final vignette of the older lady was the hardest. It involved delving into childhood memories and sensory recollections. The imagined smell of burning incense filled my nostrils as I animated the smoke. I could almost feel myself holding an orange as I drew the older woman putting an orange on her altar. As I child, I was often tasked with putting oranges on my grandmother's altar so she could eat them in the afterlife. The act of creating an altar for my mother in the film as she did for her mother in real life, gave me a sense of connection with them. This was a ritual that my mother passed on to me and I felt I was honouring her memory by recreating it through animation.

The Process of Mourning through Animation

The act of animating a story about death feels paradoxical at first. Animation has etymological roots in the Latin word 'anima' meaning spirit or life (Hani et al., 2019). However, as I was animating, it felt increasingly natural to process my own grief in this way. The ritual of animation that I created was my mourning process. Through this ritual, I was performing Worden's tasks of mourning (Worden, 2018).

The first task involves accepting the reality of the situation. According to Worden, performing rituals is a way to undertake



Fig 4 Bloody hands. Christie Widiarto. 2024.

this task (Worden, 2018). Through creating the story of a mother who lost her child, and a child who lost her mother, I was acknowledging my own losses. My experiences were coming to life through my story.

Through developing the narrative of the film, I was undertaking Worden's second task of experiencing the pain (Worden, 2018). I would translate this pain into words in the script and visually through my vignettes. The woman looking at the blood on her hands is a visual representation of the miscarriage I experienced.

The third of Worden's tasks is to adjust to a world without the deceased (Worden, 2018). After my mother's death, I had to stop myself from phoning her or booking tickets when I saw an event that she would have liked. I also had to stop myself from buying things for her. My role as her daughter was over. After my miscarriage, I imagined conversations with the child I never had. We talked about what games we would have played and places we would have visited together. Although I have since given birth to two children, they look and act differently to the child I imagined. I am also different to the mother I imagined I would be. In designing the backgrounds for the film in my storyboards, I felt that I was rebuilding my world. The film setting is loosely based on villages in Indonesia. It felt cathartic to create a remote place for my grief to exist. Within this space, I could explore different parts of myself through my characters as they were trying to find their own place in the world after their losses.

The final task is to find an enduring connection with my loss (Worden, 2018). This film will be submitted to film festivals worldwide for two years after its completion. After this, I aim to make it available online for anyone to watch. By telling the story of my grief, I am allowing the memory of those I lost to live on. Perhaps part of this process of sharing my story with an audience is also my way of finding connection as well. Through connecting with others who are in mourning, this may give my story a sense of meaning.

CONCLUSION

Although the film, which forms the practice component of this research, is still in production, I already feel a sense of progress within my grief journey. The liberation of the Kuntilanak has begun through the vignettes of the women in my story. Through my film, the Kuntilanak is not an abject woman, but as a mother and survivor. Upon completion of the film, her emancipation will be complete. The film will be a lasting memorial to those I have lost. But in confronting my personal traumas through the reappraisal of this character, will I have experienced any liberation from my own grief? Early experiments in using animating as a ritual have given me space and time for self-reflection, but not a sense of healing. There is still much to discover in my cognitive journey into grief through animation.

I'm aware that at the end of this journey, I may not have found closure. Grief is as unpredictable as it is complex. After a screening of one of his films, *The Darra Dogs* (1993) in 2022, I found myself asking the director, Dennis Tupicoff, if his filmmaking process is cathartic in any way and whether he felt a sense of closure after completing his films. Dennis simply said, "No", Darra Dogs tells the story of the many dogs he encountered through his childhood and their unfortunate ends. Due to these traumatic events, he still cannot consider getting a pet dog today.

Tupicoff (2022) suggests that the last laugh is on the living because animation is in fact just an "illusion" of life. This may be what attracts animators and animation audiences to this artform. By experiencing these illusions, it allows us to explore what it means to both celebrate life and grieve for those who once lived amongst us.

Perhaps what this research demonstrates is that autoethnography is just the beginning. It begins by acknowledging our own story. The process of performing the animation ritual is what gives us the ability to work through our pain and transform it into something that has meaning. By using a practice-based approach, I am able to cognitively understand how a creative process can limit disruptive thoughts to allow for self-healing.

The fact that we continue to make animated stories of grief speaks to our collective resilience and strength. This may be what drives audiences to watch these films. Using animation as a ritual has allowed me space to reflect on my experience and find meaning within it. Literature on grief and ritual has provided me and understanding of how to approach the heavy burden of addressing my grief, such as through Worden's tasks (2018) and treating my animation process as a ritual. Perhaps the outcome of this research is not to overcome grief, but to be able to seek connection through the sharing of stories.

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