

## FILM REVIEW

### *Ponette*

**Written and directed by Jacques Doillon**

Arrow Releasing, 1996, 92 min.

*Reviewed by L. Eileen Keller, Ph.D.*

Without the memory there can be no mourning, and without the mourning there can be no memory.

— Money-Kyrle, 1971, p. 104

*Ponette* is a beautiful and painful film, with a haunting musical accompaniment, that intensifies the feelings of grief evoked by the story of a four-year-old girl who loses her mother in a car accident. The lead actress, Victoire Thivisol, just four herself at the time of filming, lights up the screen with her grief, defense, sadness, and resolution. The plot revolves around Ponette's efforts to come to terms with her mother's absence and death, as she receives the news of her mother's death, attends the funeral, is left by her father at her Aunt Claire's house in the company of her two cousins, and is then sent to boarding school with her cousins. We see Ponette waiting for her mother to come, protecting herself from the disbelief of others, attempting magic to make her mother return, offering gifts, and then pleading with God to ask him to send her mother back. Her belief that her mother will return carries her through the multiple challenges of being left, over and over, as her father leaves her with her aunt, as her aunt delivers her and her cousins to boarding school, as adults try to feed her the cold comfort of mama being in heaven and tell her she is making her mother cry by being sad. The moments when her hopes desert her are devastatingly sad, as Ponette burrows into her bed, or sobs alone in a field, or digs into the dirt of her mother's grave.

The film presents us with the challenging account of the loss of the mother, a loss that we — as well as the adult characters in the film — find extremely difficult to contemplate. *Ponette* shows us how adults cannot bear Ponette's grief, and try to fob her off with bright smiles and a confusing story about the resurrection of Christ (her aunt's reaction), and with anger and insistence that she deny the reality of death and also accept it (her

father's reaction). We permit adults who have suffered grievous loss a period of mourning that is virtually indistinguishable from melancholia (Freud, 1917), and take it as normal that food will be repulsive, that it will be difficult to sleep, that the adult will be engulfed at times with grief or rage or a combination. What, then, makes it so hard to allow for that ordinary grief and mourning in a small child? We have all suffered the loss of our mother, beginning with the separation of birth, followed by weaning and development that usually allows us time to get used to getting along without mother's physical presence and to consolidate her warm, loving, comforting presence in our own good object inside. The primitive anxieties of these ordinary experiences of loss still live inside us and can be triggered by the child's experience of grief.

This unfathomable loss stirs the adults around Ponette to their own defensive strategies. Ponette's aunt smiles at her, over and over, ignoring Ponette's anger and protest. Instead of explaining to Ponette what happened to her mother, Claire offers the Resurrection story. Ponette is eager to grasp this as she takes it as confirmation of her wish that her mother will come back to her, really, in flesh and blood! Ponette's father is devastated by his own grief and anger. He attacks his dead wife for her stupidity, blaming her for the accident, rejecting Ponette's defense of her mother: "She didn't do it on purpose." He forces his own unbearable grief into Ponette, insisting that she promise never to die. Ponette is troubled by this, asking, "What about when we get old?" He angrily insists and she promises. Then, when he tells her he will leave her, too, at her Aunt Claire's, she begins to weep and becomes physically disorganized, trying to spit (the seal of the promise) and only drooling. We see Ponette trying to comfort her father, as the generations reverse in the face of this extreme loss.

What saves us from drowning in grief, as we are with Ponette in her painful longing, is the palpable presence of good mothers, represented in her Aunt Claire kissing and cuddling her, offering her own face for touching, as well as in the children's moments of showing warm maternal care to Ponette. Cousin Matthias, comforting Ponette as she lies ill with sadness and longing in bed, offers to put pretend cream on her tummy. He rubs her tummy, gesturing to her nose with a dab, accompanied by a playful murmuring in a clear imitation of a comforting mother. Cousin Delphine takes Ponette to the toilet, and explains Ponette's sadness to Auré lie, her school caretaker, who has only smiles and religious imagery to offer Ponette. We

also get a clear picture of Ponette's good mother, of the loving maternal care she has experienced. Once, after sneaking into the chapel at night, Ponette returns to her bed, believing God has heard her and mama will come. She tells her mother, "I have so many kisses for you, mama," kissing the air over and over as she pulls the covers over her head. This scene, among others, evokes the presence of the good mother with incredible sweetness and rescues the movie from unbearable sadness.

Even Ponette's father, with whom we are very disappointed, saves her doll, Yoyotte, from the coffin where her cousins have insisted that she place it, as a gift to her mama. He seems instinctively to know that she cannot get along without Yoyotte. This doll accompanies Ponette on her journey of grief and recovery, always under her arm or held close to her heart, listening to her plans for recovering her mother. Ponette explains mama's death to Yoyotte, gets angry with Yoyotte, and then comforts her. We see Ponette using Yoyotte as a transitional object (Winnicott, 1953), helping Ponette bear her mother's absence and also helping Ponette begin to integrate her mother's death, as she explains to Yoyotte that mama was broken and the doctors could not fix her. Yoyotte is confirmed as a true transitional object as she loses her relevance unnoticed; perhaps when Ponette dreams her mother comes to her, for real. "She smelled me and I smelled her," she tells her cousin, who asks, "What did she smell like?" "She smelled good," Ponette says, "then she held me in her arms," and she embraces her cousin. We do not see Yoyotte again as Ponette continues to find ways to recover her good mother inside.

How can we help a child who has suffered such an unimaginable loss? Likely we would agree that children should be given an opportunity to talk about what happened and to express their feelings, and their longings as well, and to be told in terms they can understand about death and the specific facts of the death of their loved one (Castro, 2001). This seemingly simple prescription, though, is exactly what is hard and painful for adults to carry out, as this lovely film shows us. Erna Furman (1986) describes two opposite positions we may have when faced with a traumatic death. The first is that we may feel it has happened to us and become overwhelmed with the feelings of loss. This position is illustrated by Ponette's father, who, in his own grief, forces experiences into Ponette that kindle her distress. The second position, at the other extreme, is that we shield ourselves and behave as if the situation is not real, well illustrated by Ponette's Aunt Claire and

Auré lie, who smile at her or tell her she shouldn't be sad. We cheer Ponette on when she responds, "I should be sad!"

Money-Kyrle (1971) tells us:

... the capacity to mourn, or pine for a loss, and the capacity to remember the lost object are inseparably linked. Without the memory there can be no mourning, and without the mourning there can be no memory. (p. 104)

What we see in *Ponette* is her ability to recover the lost object, to use that recovery to integrate some sense of unity with the maternal good object within, and begin the work of accepting her terrible loss. We hear Ponette explaining to her father that her mother cannot come again "in flesh and blood." He, having also come some distance in his own mourning, is able to simply take in her story of playing all day with her mother, and to respond in kind, when he agrees with Ponette that "she cannot keep making round trips."

This haunting and beautiful film does what art is supposed to do: help us bear terrible sadness.

#### REFERENCES:

- Barroso Castro, A.M. (2001). In the theater of confusion: Mourning and its consequences for a four-year-old child. *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, 10, 1, 41-47.
- Freud, S. (1917). Mourning and melancholia. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 14, pp. 237-258). London: Hogarth Press.
- Furman, E. (1986). *What nursery school teachers ask us about*. Madison, CT: International University Press.
- Money-Kyrle, R. (1971). The aim of psychoanalysis. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 52, 103-106.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1953). Transitional objects and transitional phenomena. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 34, 89-97.

L. Eileen Keller, Ph.D.  
 5435 College Avenue, #201  
 Oakland, California 94618  
 (510) 654-2420  
 kellerphd@gmail.com  
 www.kellerphd.com