Review of Pieces of a Woman

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Birth on Film
Pieces of a Woman
Director: Kornél Mundruczó
Writer: Kata Wéber



A review by Megan Disley

SPOILER ALERT: This review describes the plot of the film in some detail.

Birth featured on film can often be depicted in an unrealistic way, or cause controversy.*Pieces of a Woman* , directed by Kornél Mundruczó, has certainly sparked a great deal of conversation – and even uproar – within the birthing community. The film depicts a deeply personal story of a new mother's home birth which ends in unfathomable tragedy. Martha (Vanessa Kirby) begins a year-long odyssey of mourning which fractures relationships with loved ones whilst she learns how to live alongside her loss.

I know when the film was first suggested to me with a brief synopsis I immediately had my reservations given the topic, and for a while I didn't wish to watch it at all. I wondered how it could possibly be anything but scaremongering and how it could possibly help to change common misconceptions around

home birth, particularly as it is set in an American city where the role of the midwife is still largely misunderstood and a more medical model of care is preferred. However, after hearing it discussed on various platforms, I gave it a go and quickly came to realise it was much more than its intense opening and devastating tragedy suggests.

The film begins with Sean (Shia LaBeouf) working as an engineer on a bridge build, the two ends working towards completion in the middle.

The twenty-four-minute, continuous, real-time birthing scene was filmed all in one shot, taking the viewer with Martha and Sean throughout their entire journey in a very personal way, making the tragic end result even more gut-wrenching.

The birth scene starts out with the couple's midwife being unable to attend as she is in the middle of assisting another birth, so Eva is sent as a replacement. A couple of points I noted were the lack of the continuous request for consent from Eva and Martha having to wait to be told when she could push. Watching the film a second time around, I noticed it more and it really made me feel uncomfortable, particularly having knowledge of birth rights. If seen by a viewer who doesn't have this knowledge, there is a risk that this behaviour will be seen as the norm, something we should be moving well away from.

We are immersed in the birth scene right along with Martha, as the score washes over us as if we are underwater, embryonic even. The sounds and movements of the scene create a wave, from the crescendo of Martha's writhing on the floor to the collapse of the couple's calm embrace in the bath, just like the contractions themselves.

When tragedy strikes, the camera leaves the focus of what was a calming environment and begins to follow the chaos until it sets on the flashing lights of the parked ambulance. The focus never fully returns to the scene after that: the viewer is always left on the edge of the scene as to signify the turmoil and mourning that we are witnessing and the couple's inability to let one another in.

As time goes on, this is signified by the progress of the bridge being built. The pieces of the bridge are/seem eager to meet in the middle, whilst the couple tries to piece together what happened to their daughter, to work through their grief, and to rebuild their relationship.

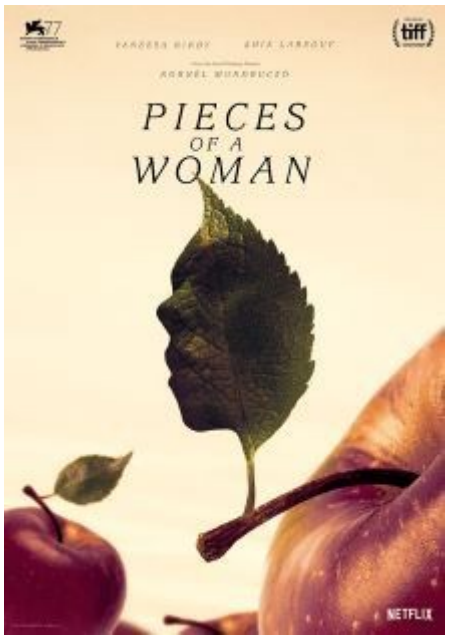
There are other moments of symbolism entwined throughout the film, the most notable of them all being the apple, a symbol of fertility. It appears during encounters with a parent and child. Martha notes later on that her daughter smelt like an apple. She takes the seeds from an apple core and nurtures them. In the final moments of the film, she checks on the seedlings and finds that they have begun to sprout. From this moment, Martha begins to reconnect with those around her.

We don't ever come to understand what happened to Yvette, the baby daughter. We do know that a civil suit was started against Eva, reminiscent of witch-hunts against midwives.

The viewer is left with a bittersweet ending. Martha is seen scattering the ashes of her daughter on the

very bridge that Sean helped to build. As we watch the ashes disappear into the river below, the scene dissolves into that of a little girl walking through a meadow to climb an apple tree, before Martha calls her name and the two go inside together. In this way, the two sisters are symbolically connected.

Overall, although there were moments during the labour scene and enquiry that have left me with unanswered questions, I wonder if this is a deliberate move by the filmmakers to add empathy to Martha and Sean's tragic loss. This is a very raw and real take on infant loss, and well worth a watch.



Pieces of a Woman is available to stream on Netflix.

Author Bio: Megan is just beginning her journey as a student midwife and advocate for birthing people. She volunteers for AIMS on the Birth Information and Health Inequalities Teams. She lives in Essex with her young son.