

Emotional Fusebox: Presence, absence and sibling loss in *Adult Life Skills*

In this paper I will be discussing the 2016 film *Adult Life Skills*, an independent British film written and directed by Rachel Tunnard. It focuses on Anna, played by Jodie Whittaker, who is a week away from her 30th birthday and currently living in a shed at the bottom of her mum's garden. As the film unfolds it is revealed that Anna is grieving the death of her twin brother Billy, who died around eighteen months before the film begins (how, it is never specified). I am going to examine how the adult sibling relationship is represented, and how the film—though initially solicitous of Anna's grief—drives towards a resolution in which Anna 'lets go' of her brother and pursues a more appropriate adult relationship with another man, exchanging adult heterosociality for heterosexuality and, indeed, heteronormativity.

[Slide: Edwards quote] In the UK, the majority of children grow up with at least one sibling. In 2015 the Office for National Statistics estimated the number of households with more than one dependent child at around 55%, though this does not include families with one child planning to have more, or families in which an older sibling (or siblings) has moved out. In the past, larger family sizes mean that this percentage would have been higher. Sibling relationships, then, are still fairly ubiquitous and experienced by a vast number of people. Though the quality, intensity and harmony of sibling relationships varies widely, the bonds between brothers and sisters should be understood on a general level as lateral bonds that have no true equivalent; while friends and peers may perform some of the same functions, there is a sense of security and knowledge ingrained in the sibling relationship that is not commonly replicated. Edwards et al.'s work on sibling identity exemplifies the significance of the sibling bond, as in the quote on the slide. Likewise, Robert Sanders suggests that our ties with our siblings are likely to be the longest-standing ones that we have.

However, perhaps because most sibling relationships are forged in childhood, they are most often discussed and framed in relation to childhood issues and identity development, ranging from work on conflict management, social development, play, competition and rivalry. Birth order is an oft-explored facet of sibling studies, again rooting elements of identity in childhood structures, as older siblings are frequently stereotyped as being more responsible while younger siblings are suggested to be more carefree or likely to be indulged.

Adult sibling relationships, in contrast, are much less frequently discussed, perhaps because in many societies there is a perception that close bonds in adulthood are primarily formed with partners and children. The need for a playmate, companion, “partner in small crime” (Perlman) or a “strong emotional bond” (Gillies and Lucey) is transferred onto a romantic/sexual partner, rendering the sibling relationship of secondary importance. This may be particularly true for brothers and sisters, who lack the same opportunities for homosocial adult socialising.

[Slide: shed images] It is notable, then, that in *Adult Life Skills* Anna and Billy’s relationship is configured as one rooted in childhood, despite the fact that they lived through most of their 20s together. As children, teenagers and adults, the two of them produced numerous comic videos in which they dress up in costumes and perform skits, spoof documentaries, self-help segments and detective parodies. These videos are archived on their website, and the paraphernalia of their play is contained within Anna’s shed. Adolescence is often referred to as a liminal space, neither one thing nor the other, and so Anna’s shed represents another liminal space, in which she is both child and adult, at-home and not-at-home, with Billy and without him.

[Slide: Anna images] In Billy’s absence, Anna resorts to making her so-called “thumb videos”, where her left and right thumb represent two space explorers—one

optimistic, one concerned—a “pair” that replicates the lost “pair” of Anna and Billy. Anna might be said to be living in a state of arrested development; at one point her mum declares that she looks like a “homeless teenager”. She rides a BMX to work (a sparsely-attended outdoor activity centre). Her nail varnish is perpetually chipped. She wears a school prefect badge pinned to her coat. When she has nothing to wear one morning, she resorts to wearing her old Brownie t-shirt. She and her friend Fiona—with whom Anna was meant to go travelling before Billy died—mark Fiona’s return with a “teenage night out”, on which they convince someone to buy them cider and play in a car park before going to a night club.

This apparent ‘return’ to the play of childhood might be understood as a form of regression, a way of Anna dealing with her grief. But it also symbolises the difficulty in separating siblinghood from childhood. Though the people around Anna—chiefly her mother—see her refusal to leave the shed and stop making silly videos as a regressive act of denial, Anna’s actions might be better understood within the framework of the sibling-childhood conflation, in which the only way that she can feel close to Billy is through wallowing in their shared childhood past. It is interesting that, in Robert Sanders’ work on siblings and in particular his discussion of sibling loss, there is no consideration of sibling bereavement past adolescence, as if the grief of adult siblings is subsumed by more general patterns of adult bereavement. Reflecting this, Celia Hindmarch refers to siblings as the “forgotten mourners”, whose grief is often overlooked or registered as less significant than that of parents or partners. In this sense, the film redresses this by prioritising Anna’s grief over that of anyone else. However, there seems to be a perpetual unease with what to *do* with Anna’s grief and a desire to reconfigure it as soon as possible.

As a result, both the sibling relationship and Anna’s grief at being the remaining twin are rooted in childhood, childishness and a sense of brittle nostalgia. Though *Adult Life Skills* appears to give space to the adult brother-sister relationship, it complicates

this by erasing one of the pair. Pairs are a recurrent visual motif in the film, from the walkie-talkies that Anna uses to communicate with her mum and Clint, to the separated pair of shoes by the side of the road and the thumb characters in Anna's videos, but unlike the shoes Anna and Billy cannot be reunited. The adult sibling relationship, therefore, is only ever figured on screen as one that twins presence with absence. When Billy is encountered, it is only in Anna's imagination, although he appears as a tangible figure; though it is made reasonably explicit that this is Billy, in the credits he is only credited as "the snorkeller", denying his presence once again. This is not the only film that deals with a close relationship between an adult brother and sister through erasure. **[Slide: ALS/PS]** In *Into the Wild*, Chris and Corrine McCandless's relationship is glimpsed briefly in early scenes, which confirm the close bond between them and their status as consanguineal allies against their difficult parents. However, the pair are separated by Chris's decision to travel alone to Alaska, where he dies. That Corrine is the primary figure in Chris's life is confirmed in a closing caption, in which the film states that Corrine (and not, for example, their parents) collected her brother's ashes and brought them home, but this closeness is mitigated first through geographical separation and then death. Likewise, in *Personal Shopper*, released the same year as *Adult Life Skills*, Maureen is haunted by her twin brother Lewis's memory (and perhaps by Lewis himself), but the intertwined nature of their lives is offset by Lewis's lack of concrete presence. Given that all these examples focus on an adult brother and sister, an unconscious anxiety of incest may partially explain this tendency towards absence; although this may seem extreme, certainly there seems to be a persistent reluctance surrounding the representation of this relationship in terms that allow both parties to remain present.

It is interesting, in this sense, that the film does not immediately qualify Anna and Billy's relationship. The two of them are first glimpsed in a photograph on the wall of Anna's mum's house, but there is no context here as to their relationship; this could just as easily be a picture of a daughter and her partner, for example. When Fiona

first comes home she reminds Anna that “you’re not the only one that loved him”, which lends an ambiguous possessive element. Lending weight to this anxiety, the other characters in *Adult Life Skills* are preoccupied with shifting Anna’s focus away from her brother and onto her love life.

Anna’s mum, in particular, is keen for her daughter to “stop moping about” and consider a more productive relationship. **[Clip: garden argument]** She invites her unappealing hairdresser round in a bid to set him up with Anna, and her quest is echoed by Fiona and by her grandmother, who believes that most of Anna’s problems (and indeed her own) could be solved by more “shagging”. Brendan, a nice though socially awkward friend from Anna’s childhood, becomes symbolic of Anna’s heterosocial redemption; he is also the estate agent that persistently shows Anna around empty flats at her mother’s behest, which in itself symbolises the adult life Anna is resisting. Brendan is characterised as a good-enough option, not necessarily ideal but certainly *there*.

There remains a sense that Anna would always have had to “let go” of Billy, whether or not he had died, in order to avoid expending her energy on the “wrong” heterosocial pairing. There is no future in Billy, and this is as true in life as in death. In her shed, Anna keeps a pot of her own hair, cut off when her brother died so as to preserve a piece of herself from when he was still alive. She explains to Clint, a young boy from the activity centre, that your cells are continually regenerating so that eventually, your whole body is a new version of itself. This notion of time moving forwards, and Anna’s futile attempt to preserve the past, suggests that a commitment to the future must prevail. The futility of her connection to her brother is revealed in a scene in which Anna and “the snorkeller” have a conversation (one of a number in the film), but unlike the earlier scenes this one is shown from Clint’s perspective, in which Anna is revealed to be talking to thin air. **[Slide: snorkeller image]**

There are echoes of Lee Edelman's work on reproductive futurism here, and the refutation of a queer space outside of that social and political drive towards the future through heterosexual reproduction. For Edelman, queerness names this space in which self-serving pleasure threatens to disrupt the linearity of a reproductive existence. Within this framework, Anna and Billy's relationship occupies this queer space, analogous to the liminal space of the shed, an in-between place that symbolises stagnation rather than progress. The issue is not that Anna and Billy are (or were) close, but that Anna's continued refusal to "let go" of Billy is hindering her own possible future. It is a relationship between an adult man and woman that remains unproductive and located in some version of the past, and since Billy's death it has held Anna back from pursuing a heterosexual, potentially reproductive relationship of her own. In *Brendan*, the film presents one possible solution.

[Slide: future images] This is augmented by the appearance of Clint, the eight-year-old boy whose mother is dying, who quickly attaches himself to Anna. Although the two are initially united through grief, Clint is a more productive vessel in which Anna can invest her time and energy, inducing a quasi-maternal instinct in her. Anna cannot save her brother, but she can (and does) save Clint. There are parallels drawn between Billy and Clint at various points in the film. After visiting Anna's shed, Clint starts wearing one of the siblings' penis badges on his cowboy costume. He wears one of Billy's jumpers after it shrinks in the wash. The picture he draws for Anna gets mixed in with the existing childhood stuff of Anna and Billy. Yet the fact that the film offers up Clint not as a replacement brother but as a redemptive project for Anna suggests that he is better understood as a symbol of the future. Finally, at the end of the film, Clint and Billy are pictured side by side in the frame—one real, one not—and as Billy disappears Clint is left. **[Flip back to previous slide]** It is at this point that Anna asks him if he will blow up her shed, underlining Clint's symbolic association with the future.

[Flip forward to slide] Clint, or rather his dad, becomes the destroyer of Anna's material link with her brother. Not only the shed, but many of its contents—including Anna and Billy's childhood toys and many of Billy's belongings—are included in the explosion. This is Anna's birthday present to herself, and it is framed in the film as a moment of triumph, accompanied by the sounds of Whitesnake's "Here I Go Again on My Own". This is Anna's brave new world, one in which she can wear the handmade badge made for her by Brendan, bearing the legend "Adult Life Skill: Lone Twin". Notably, Brendan is finally allowed into the shed in these final scenes, and it is him and Anna who are the last people to occupy this space. The badge is a reference to Anna's earlier question: "Am I still a twin if my twin's dead?", to which Brendan has provided the characteristically blunt answer of "no". Anna's acceptance of her status as a "lone twin" is tied intrinsically to adulthood and survival here, in which the future can only be envisaged once she has released her grip on that queer liminal space of the shed and her unproductive attachment to Billy in favour of a more "adult" connection.