

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
December 2016

Manchester by the Sea (dir. Kenneth Lonergan, 2016)

On Camera

Lee: Casey Affleck: *Gone Baby Gone* (07); *The Assassination of Jesse James...* (07)
Patrick, nephew: Lucas Hedges: *Moonrise Kingdom* (12); *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (14)
Joe, brother: Kyle Chandler: *Friday Night Lights* (TV 06-11); *Bloodline* (TV 15–); *Carol* (15)
George, friend: C. J. Wilson: *The Americans* (TV 13-14); *House of Cards* (TV 16)
Randi, ex-wife: Michelle Williams: *Brokeback Mountain* (05); *Blue Valentine* (10)
Elise, Joe's ex: Gretchen Mol: Woody Allen's *Celebrity* (98); *The Notorious Bettie Page* (06)
Silvie, girlfriend: Kara Hayward: the lead role in Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* (12)
Sandy, girlfriend: Anna Baryshnikov: Todd Solondz's *Wiener-Dog* (15); my former student!
Jill, Sandy's mom: Heather Burns: *You've Got Mail* (98); *Bored to Death* (TV 09-11)
Dr. Bethany: Ruibo Qian: one episode of *Broad City* (TV 14); *Mozart in the Jungle* (TV 16)
Pedestrian: The man who criticizes Lee's parenting on the sidewalk is Lonergan himself

Off Camera

Writer/Director: Kenneth Lonergan: *You Can Count on Me* (00) and *Margaret* (05/11) on film; *This Is Our Youth* (96), *The Waverley Gallery* (00), *Lobby Hero* (01) on stage
Cinematography: Jody Lee Lipes: several episodes of *Girls* (TV 12); *Trainwreck* (15)
Original Score: Lesley Barber: *You Can Count on Me* for Lonergan; Canadian movies and TV
Film Editing: Jennifer Lame: Noah Baumbach's *Frances Ha* (12) and *While We're Young* (14)

About Lonergan's other movies...

You Can Count on Me (2000) – The breakout film for Laura Linney and Mark Ruffalo, cast as a single mom in upstate New York and her driftless adult brother, who were orphaned as kids

Margaret (2005/2011) – Sprawling moral drama about a New York City high school student who inadvertently helps to cause a fatal bus accident and tries to atone; not released for six years

If you liked *Manchester by the Sea*, you might also enjoy...

Kramer vs. Kramer (1979) – Still one of the touchstones for single fatherhood in American film

About a Boy (2002) – Somewhat lighter tale of reluctant semi-paternal mentor and young charge

Win Win (2011) – Unexpected relationship builds between a wrestling coach and teenage athlete

Nebraska (2013) – Another contemporary, region-specific tale of two men with a similar tone

Facts about *Manchester by the Sea* you may appreciate...

After *Margaret* went over-schedule and over-budget, and after Lonergan's clashes with Fox Searchlight kept the movie out of theaters for six years after it was completed, fans fretted that Lonergan would have a hard time lining up more work in Hollywood—even after his Oscar nominations for writing *You Can Count on Me* and *Gangs of New York*, and despite his sterling reputation with actors. *Manchester* sold for \$10 million at Sundance, however, and has already re-cemented his status as a critics' darling and an artist many people want to work with.

Matt Damon was originally going to make his directorial debut with this project and also play the leading role of Lee. John Krasinski (of TV's *The Office*) signed on to co-produce with Damon and to act in the film as well. Scheduling conflicts and other factors prompted Damon to hand directing duties over to Lonergan himself, and eventually to drop the lead role, which devolved to longtime friend and collaborator Casey Affleck. Damon and Krasinski stayed as producers.

The movie filmed during March 2015—a much milder winter than New England had experienced in recent years, so much so that fake snow occasionally had to be imported for winter scenes.

Lonergan initially drafted the script in strict chronological order but kept being frustrated at the result. The image stuck in his head was of Lee shoveling, so he started over with that as his early, touchstone shot and allowed the past and present halves of the tale to unfold from there.

Affleck recalled in an interview with Deadline Hollywood that Lonergan spent full days talking with each actor who played one of the tenants in the opening sequence where Lee is going about his custodial duties. Though some co-workers balk at this level of detail with characters who are on screen so little, it is a hallmark of Lonergan's style and his interest in personality.

Williams has discussed having to craft an accent that was not only “Boston” or “New England” but specific to *Manchester by the Sea*. The residents of all the towns where Lonergan filmed insisted to her that each town had a slightly different sound and that she mustn't confuse them.

In an inexact echo of the controversy around Nate Parker and *The Birth of a Nation*, Affleck has seen his celebrity and industry cachet skyrocket since *Manchester* debuted at Sundance but has also seen past accusations of sexually harassing female collaborators and settling out of court resurface in the mainstream press. You can read more details here: <https://t.co/0DF8Ub3lmc>

In the last week, *Manchester by the Sea* earned the prizes for Best Picture, Best Screenplay, Best Actor (Affleck), and Best Breakthrough Performance (Hedges) from the National Board of Review, the oldest but also one of the most mysterious sets of film awards given each year.

Manchester by the Sea also earned three much more prestigious prizes from the New York Film Critics Circle, whose choices are often echoed by Oscar nominations: Best Actor (Affleck), Best Screenplay (Lonergan), and Best Supporting Actress (Williams, also for *Certain Women*).

Lonergan has earned paychecks in the past by writing or revising Hollywood comedies like *Analyze This* (1999) or *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*, though his next announced project is very different: a BBC miniseries re-adapting E. M. Forster's *Howards End*.

Broad conversation topics...

Genre and Emotion: I have been following a debate on Twitter between film writers who think of *Manchester by the Sea* as a melodrama, and others who think of it as “only” a drama. Critics in the first camp cite the extreme circumstances and the consequent emotions and legacies that Lee and the other characters must deal with, and the pervasive music in the film. Others see *Manchester* as taking a quiet, grounded approach to a tale that *could* have been told as a series of extravagant misfortunes. They note how the script confines the most devastating events to flashback. The debate about genre itself is probably less interesting than what it suggests about how people are experiencing the film. Did you feel overwhelmed by the emotions in the story, or did you experience the tale from more of a remove—filtered, maybe, by the film’s subdued style, and by a character who doesn’t like to talk about everything that has happened to him?

Loss and Guilt: *You Can Count on Me* opens with one scene of the main characters’ parents having a mundane conversation on the road before the accident that kills them; we then spend the rest of the movie with their orphaned kids, mostly after they have grown up. *Margaret* is all about the many after-effects of a terrible urban bus accident, which the lead character thinks she has caused, and whose consequences she believes everyone else is too eager to shrug off. *Manchester* engages similar themes. The pain of what happened to Lee in the past is only compounded by his sense of having caused it—and his surprise and possible horror that he is not punished to the degree he feels he deserves. What did you take to be Lee’s psychological or emotional foundation throughout: grief? guilt? numbness? despair? When and why did your answer change? If you have seen Lonergan’s other movies, how did this one compare?

Absences: Related to this theme of loss are the many characters who are defined mostly through absence. Lee and Joe’s brother Donny, for example, the one who now lives in Minnetonka, Minnesota, and whom Lee believed was a more obvious choice to be Patrick’s guardian (“I’m just a backup!”), never appears. Only in the last few shots do we understand that the boat, the *Claudia Marie*, is among other things a tribute to the men’s late mother, who shared that name. We never see a direct image of her. Lee is even distressed when Patrick’s mother, whom he is *used* to thinking of as one of these “ghost” figures, resurfaces. How did you respond to these much-discussed but never-seen characters? What other “present absences” did you identify?

Chronology: One decision that Lonergan made with his cinematographer and production designer was that the scenes set in the past would not look visually different from those set in the present, which is why it takes some viewers a while to realize we are moving around in time. By mixing these two time-frames and occasionally making them hard to distinguish, we get a sense that the past is just as “present” for Lee as current events. This is very different from the style of *Moonlight*, for example, where each era feels walled off from those that follow, and Chiron is barely recognizable from each to the next. How did you react to the nonlinear chronology of the storytelling? Did you wish Lonergan had kept to a straightforward plot?

Gender: *You Can Count on Me* and *Margaret* made Lonergan famous as a great writer and director of female protagonists. But not only is *Manchester* dominated by men, some viewers have been irked at how little time the female characters receive and how “typed” most of them feel as wives and girlfriends (and unreliable or penitent ones, at that). Did this bother you?

Specific touches worth contemplating...

Credits: The opening title reads “A Picture by Kenneth Lonergan,” a throwback terminology (as opposed to “A Film by...”) that already aligns the film’s genre and style with older traditions.

Image and Sound: The conversation Lee had long ago on the *Claudia Marie* with his then-young nephew Patrick about whom he’d rather live with, Lee or Joe, clearly foreshadows the nature of the dilemmas that our main characters will face in the movie. Lonergan even circles back to this now-portentous conversation a few times . . . but rather than film it up close, the camera is several yards away from all three people on the boat, whose facial expressions are impossible to read. The dialogue itself is also mixed lower than the all-female, baroque-style choral music that reprises repeatedly in the film. What is the effect of holding us from a slight visual *and* sonic remove from such an obviously important and thematically significant scene?

Score: Speaking of that choral music, a writer at IndieWire noted that the singing sounds almost unpredictable or improvisatory as the women’s voices move around different notes and hold them for varying lengths of time, but the longer you listen, the more you realize they actually repeat certain phrases or arrangements. In these ways, the music is structured like the script, and like Lee’s mental space: full of small, loose movements that might feel self-contained or arbitrarily related, but subject to a bigger design, and prone to cycling back to key passages.

Characterization: Not to enforce symbolic responses to every image in every film, but the second time I saw *Manchester*, I was struck by how our first impressions of Lee include him shoveling a sidewalk that still never seems free of snow; cramming more and more trash into a dumpster that obviously can’t hold it all; and talking with various tenants about leaks that keep sprouting and clogs that must be released. There’s a motif here of endless labor, of futile attempts to discard or repress, and of “stuff” that overflows every effort to contain it or flush it away.

Editing: You can see why studio heads or impatient viewers who wish Lonergan’s movies were shorter feel bewildered at why they can’t be cut down. Individual scenes often have an unclear relation to the whole, and we frequently hold on to characters that might never appear again in the film. The early scenes with the tenants are an obvious case of material that seems like it could be trimmed. The scene of Sharon purposefully spilling her beer on Lee to start a barroom conversation is another. The later cameo by Lonergan himself as a judgmental passerby could be another. Did you resent these self-contained but not-quite-momentary pauses with peripheral characters, and/or were they instrumental to your experience of this film and its ideas?

Production Design: *Manchester by the Sea* mostly commits to realistic dialogue, performance styles, and visuals, and was filmed in many of the towns where the action purportedly takes place, though it occasionally includes a larger-than-life gesture—for example, the *huge* towers of paperwork and clutter where Mr. Emery, Lee’s boss, chastises him for being rude. (This Tony-nominated actor, Stephen Henderson, will resurface again in this month’s *Fences*.) Mr. Emery also has an antique cash register on his desk rather than any visible computer, though it’s facing away from him, so possibly isn’t used. Lee isn’t the only person stuck in the past.

Behavior: Before you learn about Lee’s notoriety in the town and his tragic history, what did you make of his violent attack on those two men in the bar? What seemed to be the logic of that?

Sexuality: We see many times how Lee uses alcohol or violence as an outlet for clogged and unexpressed emotion, and how the former often leads to the latter. Noticeably, however, he refuses every invitation to sex or romance or even sympathetic talk with women: Sharon at the bar, Sandy's mother Jill, et al. How quickly did this pattern emerge? What does it suggest?

Music: During Lee's assault on the men in the bar, the soundtrack is dominated by an old song whose refrain is "Everything's Going My Way." Lonergan sometimes uses pop lyrics that either comment directly on the action or, as in this case, contrast ironically with it. (The rock song Patrick later plays for Lee starts, "I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me for what I did...")

Music: As Lee drives to Beverly to (he hopes) see Joe in the hospital, we hear a string composition on the soundtrack. I am not enough of a music aficionado to identify the piece, but I noted that it was *non-diegetic* music, meaning it plays for *us* but is *not* presented as what Lee hears inside his car (if, indeed, he is playing any music). I couldn't figure out why Lonergan kept resorting to music that didn't seem to match his characters' tastes at all; it felt imposed, and sometimes overbearing. I read an interview with him, though, where he said that he wanted passages of Handel's *Messiah*, Albinoni's *Adagio*, and other musical selections to keep elements of pure beauty in the film, even when the story emphasized sadness. What did you think of the music?

Editing: Often filmmakers hold on an actor's face at peak emotional moments (or important moments of *refusing* outward emotion), as when Lee learns in the hospital hallway that Joe is already dead. Artists and audiences typically want to watch characters react "in real time" to such heavy events. Lonergan, by contrast, cuts quickly to five different shots of Lee between the moment he gets this news and the first response he makes. We can talk about the different reasons he and his editor might have done this. Did you notice, here or elsewhere, that the film often cuts more often than a usual movie would, and that individual scenes, like individual shots, tended to be shorter than they often are in this kind of movie? If so, did you like that?

Costumes and Acting: Elise is upset at Joe's hospital bedside because the men and eventually the female doctor strike her as making too many jokes about Joe's cardiac condition. If anything, though, her costuming suggests that *she*, not they, represents the off-key element. Not only is her orange, pink, and brown blouse—cap-sleeved, and fringed on the bottom—kind of odd for a hospital garment, but those garish colors are not repeated anywhere else in the shot. Later in the movie, Elise has a different hairstyle, different color palette, different ideals, and different ways of talking and moving, but she still seems like a fish out of water—and clearly not all of her behaviors have changed. What did you think about how the film presented her?

Sound: Given how often Lonergan emphasizes overlaid music, sometimes instead of any *diegetic* sound (i.e., what the characters would actually be hearing in the scene), it is all the more striking that the scene where Lee sees and kisses Joe's body in the morgue has no music at all.

Production Design: This next attribute of the morgue scene isn't legible until later, but the wall behind Lee as he confronts Joe's body is a kind of pale lime green. This same color appears on the wall of Joe's bedroom, once Lee starts sleeping there. It also returns on the wall of George and Janine's dining room, where Lee negotiates with them to take Patrick. The repetitions of this unusual color underline how the fact of Joe's death pervades these other scenes and spaces.

Sound: The scene where Lee is calling funeral homes offers a good instance of how Lonergan uses sound and also how he likes to reverse expectations in a scene. Silvie's entrance, her opening and closing the refrigerator and setting down silverware, Patrick's entrance and loud pouring of cereal, and other sounds are mixed pretty loud. They therefore feel kind of intrusive on Lee's attempt to hold an important conversation over the phone. That we're expecting *him* to feel oppressed by *them* makes it all the more surprising when Silvie thinks *he* is being insensitive.

Characterization: Everyone is surprised that Joe didn't ask Lee about being Patrick's possible guardian, especially given his meticulous estate planning. What did this choice imply to you?

Framing: I didn't note until my second trip that Joe is one of the guys partying too loud in Lee's basement the night Randi kicks them out, which is the night of the fire. Did you spot him?

Editing: Some of the densest cross-cutting in the film happens as Lee sits in the lawyer's office while the film flashes back to that fateful night in his house. Many of these edits suggest more than one link between these scenes. At one point, for example, the film cuts to Lee buying beer at the convenience store just as the lawyer mentions "Patrick's mother" as another option to be Patrick's guardian. Given that Lee and Elise share a weakness for drink, this scene tells us as much about Lee's guilty past as about his present reasons for not trusting Elise to step up.

Image and Sound: Lonergan pulls out several stylistic stops with the police-station scene and those that are cut together with it. The camera slowly zooms into Casey Affleck's face as he explains the accident to the police, which the camera in this film seldom does. Albinoni's *Adagio* bridges the whole sequence, with strings and organ that can sound lachrymose, and are mixed quite loud, especially at the moment Lee tries to shoot himself with the cop's gun. The movie cuts to the grayest, snowiest shots of water and land we have seen to that point, using grim landscape in a blatant way to suggest rock-bottom emotion. For a film that in many ways uses soft-spoken or mundane "slice of life" scenes to add up into a whole you don't necessarily see coming, this sequence is as emphatic as it can be about the level and the type of emotion it is soliciting. Did you react well to these strong cues, or resist the movie pushing so hard?

Characterization: Patrick's two girlfriends are named "Silvie" and "Sandy," which rhyme so closely that they could sound like a writer's joke about the girls being interchangeable, or at least interchangeable to Patrick. Eventually we hear that Lee doesn't want Silvie coming over because he doesn't like her, whereas he keeps willingly driving Lee to Sandy's house and even suggests her coming over once. I admit, I kind of shared Lee's biases. Did you? Did the film seem weirdly stacked against Silvie? Did you care? What did you think of these two girls?

Editing: When Lee takes that surprise call from Randi, the film elects to hold on Lee for the entire scene, and even filters the sound of Michelle Williams's voice so that we cannot forget that she is far away from Lee, and from us. Another movie might have cut back and forth between Lee and Randi—the way, for example, that we *do* cut to Elise in the later moment when Lee takes a surprise call from her. What do we learn in this scene by *not* cutting away to Randi?

Characterization: When Randi brings her husband to the funeral, he looks wealthier and more elegant than Lee but is another stubbled brunette with ice-cold blue eyes. She still has a type.

Framing: In Lee's scenes of packing and unpacking his photos in his old apartment, in subsequent scenes in his new room, and in Patrick's scene of staring at the three framed photos on Lee's table, we never get our own glimpse of the photos. What is the logic of the film withholding these spectacles? And how does it square with the later moment where Lee dreams about his daughters while he is burning dinner—why does the film stop withholding their images?

Dialogue: How often does Lee say a version of the line “I don't want to talk about this anymore,” “I don't want to talk about this right now,” or “Do we have to talk about this?” It's tempting to say that Lee will do anything to avoid difficult conversations or confrontations, but if he *fully* committed to such avoidance, he would make very different choices than he does in this movie—say, by avoiding Patrick entirely. How did you understand his levels of avoidance?

“Privileged”: If we didn't get that we are not meant to be sold on Elise's fiancé Jeffrey, played by Matthew Broderick, his quickly-glimpsed e-mail to Patrick isn't even correctly spelled.

Music: After Lee and Patrick sell Joe's guns, save the boat, and take Sandy sailing, we hear the Ink Spots and Ella Fitzgerald duet on a song called “I'm Beginning to See the Light.” In a film that has rarely been afraid to use songs and lyrics to forecast fairly directly the emotional shifts in a scene, this music cue might amplify what already seems clear from the action of the scene: that Lee and Patrick's relationship is solidifying. So it's all the more surprising, maybe, when Lee decides that he just cannot get there, and the movie pursues a different ending than we might have guessed. *Did* you guess it? What would you say about the men's bond at the end?

Exoneration: The sidewalk conversation between Randi and Lee does not work, or at least does not culminate in the renewed contact she is seeking, even though she apologizes so profusely and insists that she was “wrong” to say whatever “terrible” things she said to him in the past. But is the exoneration itself the problem? We see how hard Lee finds it when the police clear him of any wrongdoing in his kids' deaths. Is it any better for him when Randi absolves him?

Dialogue: “But you don't have to. It's up to you,” Lee insists to Patrick, after nonetheless laying out a fairly detailed plan about how George and Janine will adopt him, when the house can be sold, etc.—a plan that he has apparently coordinated at least a *week* before he informs his nephew. Patrick has objected before that Lee asks him his opinion or his desires even when Lee has no real interest in them, or has already decided what will happen anyway. Has this pattern actually changed? Is Lee doing his best for the boy, or just repeating his usual habits?

Performance: “I can't beat it. I can't beat it. I'm sorry,” Lee says to Patrick at the culmination of this crucial scene, and then his mouth moves as though he is saying a fourth thing, but he doesn't actually supply any words. I wondered what else he would have said, and wondered if Lee has refused to express himself for so long that his body literally cannot do it. Such a smart and mysterious choice, especially in a film that has been so relentlessly and elegantly verbal.