

**This Black  
Hole's Dark  
Heart**

## This Black Hole's Dark Heart

Sophie Robinson

At the centre of it all is a black and hungry hole. The hole is a small round mouth the size and shape of an inverse nipple. The hole fills with milk.

At the centre of all Carol Morley's films is a sacred absence. My first encounter with Morley's work was *Dreams of a Life* (2011), a moving and boundary-pushing account of the life of Joyce Carol Vincent, who died in her bedsit in North London and was not discovered for three years. It seems important that we don't see any images of the real Joyce until the last seconds of the film, that our impressions of her are formed through the lens of those who loved and knew her. The film artfully builds up a picture of Joyce by gathering her friends, co-workers and ex-partners around the black hole of her absence, the dark and unknowable heart of her death. Morley restores dignity to Joyce through focusing on her fundamental unknowability, rather than the gory details of her death. Dignity is also restored to Joyce through the complexity and contradictions of her character as filtered through the subjectivity of others: she becomes real in her own absence.

At the centre of it all is a black and hungry hole. The hole is a small round mouth. The hole fills and empties, fills and empties. The hole growls. The hole growls.

Watching Morley's other work, I am struck by a repeating pattern of films structured around a central absence. *Out of Blue* (2018) orbits around the death of an astronomy professor who was getting — in her own words — *closer and closer to this black hole's dark heart*. *The Falling* (2014) presents us with absence in a different way, through the unexplained syncopes of schoolgirls — a kind of hysterical absencing of the senses, a trance or hypnotic state, a loss of consciousness. And in *The Alcohol Years* (2000), it is Morley herself who is absent, out of view, sharing neither the screen nor the memories of the participants. Morley's documentary revisits the years she was drinking heavily in Manchester and London, attempting to piece together a portrait of a time lost to her memory through interviews with those who knew her then.

At the centre of it all is a black and growling hole. The hole is hungry. The hunger hurts, the hunger is ashamed.

At several points in *The Alcohol Years*, the participants encourage Morley to put herself in their position, to move in front of the camera, but she doesn't. It feels structurally important that she doesn't, and those of us who have lost ourselves (our time, our memories, our bodies, our lives) to alcohol understand this. The alcoholic blackout is a strange phenomenon. We can move around the world and have no recollection of it. It is not the brain's moment-to-moment function that goes offline, but the neurons that allow for memory formation. A cleaving between past, present, and future. Streaming but not recording.

At the centre of it all is a black and growling hole. The hole pushes out from the centre to the edges, punching its nothingness into the everything of living, sucking in the universe through a straw and darkening it all.

In *The Alcohol Years* Morley's bandmate Debby Turner talks about their ambitions for their band, TOT. *We just wanted to be known*. The bravest thing about *The Alcohol Years* is Morley's willingness to face the wreckage of the past. The film begins and ends with anger and impatience; several of the participants are reluctant to say the least, and candidly unkind about Morley's behaviour during those lost times. Who amongst us really wants to be known at our worst?

At the centre of it all is a black and knowing hole. The hole is hungry. The hunger hurts, and the hurt feeds on love, and the love comes in and is destroyed, and the hurt feeds on life, and the life comes in and is destroyed, and the hurt feeds on time, and the time goes in and is destroyed, and the hurt feeds on memory, and the memories go in and are destroyed.

The steadfastness of *The Alcohol Years* comes from its resistance to both tidy narrative closure and to the hungry annihilation of alcoholism. Like Morley's later *Dreams of a Life*, it is the complexity, contradiction and commitment to the unknowable humanity of its subject that gives the film both light and life. Placing light and life in the centre of the hungry hole, rolling the camera, and seeing what happens to the hunger.