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Kyle Day
Portland State University

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“Memories of a Family” (2021): A Reflection on My
Process as an Interviewer and Filmmaker

by
Kyle Day

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Requirements for the degree of
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In
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and
Film

Thesis Adviser
Professor Dustin Morrow

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Introduction

I recently got a hold of my family's home videos, camcorder, and VCR. I spent a lot of time viewing and analyzing the videos. I found that the family in the videos was very different from what I remember. The videos show a cohesive, consistently happy family with only fragments of what I remember to be true, or what I know to be true now. The videos made me feel uneasy, and I think it's because while my parents are going through a divorce they have shared negative memories of their marriage and the family that I had not known about. In effect, I have begun to internally reevaluate and reconstruct my memories of the family. The source of structure and security in my life had crumbled, and with this, the home videos confirmed that what I am feeling is disillusionment toward my childhood. In an attempt to cope with this transitional stage in my life and my family members' lives, I decided to create a personal essay film. By analyzing essay films and scholarship on the essay film form, I was able to create a framework in which my film could be ground in, and expand on, a discourse community. This assisted me in forming questions about how to achieve the complex process of remembering through the film medium. The question that guided my process is: How can my interactions as an interviewer and as a filmmaker with the multiple enunciators in my essay film communicate the complicated dynamic between personal and familial memory?

Essay Film

Even though "Memories of a Family" (2021) is a non-fiction film, there are formal and technical aspects to the film that diverge from an autobiographical documentary style. For one, my film is constructed heavily on expressive subjectivity. In his text *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, after Maker*, Timothy Corrigan, member of the editorial board of *Adaption* and professor of English and Cinema Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, states that expressive

subjectivity “has become one of the most recognizable signs of the essay film” (Corrigan 30). He compares expressive subjectivity in essay film to the first-person literary essay by comparing the use of a personal voice and perspective and states that this approach in essay film “highlights a real or fiction persona whose quests and questionings shape and direct the film in lieu of traditional narrative and complicates the documentary look of the film with the presence of a pronounced subjectivity or enunciating presence” (Corrigan 30). Therefore, the filmmaker can be seen as the main character of the film because their presence (subjectivity) in the film is what drives the narrative. Where this especially differs from an autobiographical documentary is that essay films, or essayistic subjectivity, refers not simply “to the emplacement of the positioning of an individual consciousness before and in experience but to an active and assertive consciousness that tests, undoes, or recreates itself through experience” (Corrigan 31). One experience is the experience of memory. To understand how I could communicate memory as an experience through the essay film form, I chose to analyze two essay films.

***Tarnation* (2003) and “Hitler! (Revisited)” (2004): Essay Films on Memory**

With the help of my advisor, I had chosen two essay films to analyze; *Tarnation* by Jonathan Caouette and “Hitler! (Revisited)” by Clive Holden. *Tarnation* is about Caouette’s troubled relationship with his mother, Renee, and her mental illness. Throughout the film, Caouette reconfigures his memories of his mother as fragmented and unstable. In “Hitler! (Revisited)” Holden attempts to regain memories of his brother, Niall, with whom he has been unable to communicate due to Niall’s mental health problems. I chose these films because they use home videos and home movies as material in which they deconstruct and reconstruct the images and sounds of the material into a different narrative and structure to communicate their processes of reevaluating or regaining their memories of, and relation to family members.

Through their editing techniques, they were able to position their expressive subjectivities within the film and actively reconstruct their memories. I found that essay films on memory lend themselves to an experimental approach in editing that allows for the freedom to express one's subjectivity. The techniques used by Caouette and Holden's films influenced my techniques in my film.

Even though these films influenced my experimental approach to constructing the film, I felt their strong enunciating position didn't capture the impact that their family members' subjective views and memories have on their personal memories. My film aims to communicate this relationship by including multiple enunciators, including myself, within my film.

Multiple Enunciators

Based on Corrigan's definition, it seems that a singular enunciating presence (the authoritative position that directs the film) is favored in the essay film form. This idea is reinforced through the strong enunciating positions created by Caouette and Holden. But upon further reading, essay film scholar and theorist Laura Rascaroli provides a way in which multiple enunciations is possible within the essay film form. In her book *How the Essay Film thinks*, Rascaroli claims that the filmmaker can work against "straightforward identification" through the "debunking of authority that makes space for a more open and dialogical structure" (ch.1). A filmmaker can debunk their authority by questioning the legitimacy of their position—this is done well in "Hitler! (Revisited)". Holden struggles to regain his memories of his brother, Niall, who has spent the majority of his life in a mental institution. He often juxtaposes, through text, his subjective view of his brother with stories about his brother told by a nurse who is the only person Niall chooses to communicate with. Unlike Holden, I have the privilege of being able to communicate with my family members. Because I have this direct line of communication, their

personal subjectivities and perspectives are immediate and directly influence my thoughts and memories—there is no gap.

As a way of communicating this immediacy and direct connection to my nuclear family members, I decided to include them as enunciators in my film. Instead of debunking my authority as the only enunciator, I debunk authority by confusing the position of enunciator. In effect, the viewer is unaware of who is influencing my manipulations of the home video material. Therefore, I can communicate that I feel as though my family members directly impact how and what I remember through sharing their perspectives of relationships and experiences within the family.

I chose to establish the multiple enunciating positions through voice-over narration, the most common—and most effective in my opinion—method of enunciation in essay films (Rascaroli ch.1). I was able to achieve this by interviewing my family members.

Interview Process

In *Tarnation*, Caouette had the opportunity to interview his mother but she was unwilling to speak to him. I think this was because he didn't plan to interview her, rather he approached her with a camera and demanded answers. I wanted to avoid this with my film members.

The purpose of the interview is to get my family members (especially my parents) to reiterate what they have been telling me recently. I separately interviewed my mother, father, and brother, Connor. For the most part, I asked the same questions about their memories and subjective views of relationships and events in each interview. I adjusted the questions for my brother so that they were directed toward his perspective, but they addressed the same topics as the questions asked of my parents. I made sure to inform my family members that they were being asked the same questions to eliminate the feeling of being personally attacked. My parents

are still going through a divorce, so wounds are still fresh; I found a neutral position to be the best approach.

Corrigan puts forth the idea of the interview process as being a tool that can assist an essay film in “keeping re-inscriptions alive” by creating “gaps and detours that invites one to move in more than one direction at a time” (Corrigan 88). I wanted to achieve this effect with my interviews because it allows for freedom of subjective expression. I employed some tactics of my own to ensure this outcome.

Firstly, before getting into the question and answer section of my interviews, I had each of my family members watch a couple of home videos with me. I wanted to allow my family members to take in the images and sounds of the home videos so they could ease into the process of remembering things. I made sure to tell them that if any thoughts or memories of the events or similar events came up, they should feel free to share them. So we had a steady flow of dialogue our memories going before the interview; this made for a more comfortable setting in which my family members could share their memories and perspectives.

Secondly, the only recording device that I had was an audio recorder—no camera. This greatly diminished the anxiety and awkwardness that comes with the understanding that my family members are not only addressing me, but rather, an audience of people they don't know. This allowed for a more conversational interview in which my family members felt comfortable taking detours. The camera can be an intimidating thing that makes the subject feel compelled to perform in a way that protects their representation, or the pressure to do so could cause them to misrepresent themselves.

Finally, instead of following the strict question and answer structure, when my family members went on a detour, I encouraged it. If this was for a commercial film, I would feel more

inclined to keep the subjects on track for the sake of continuity editing. But, with my film, tangents were encouraged because they are a part of the subject's process of remembering. Even if it doesn't apply to the question perfectly, their response is still linked to the question or topic being address.

Overall, the conversational or dialogical nature of the interviews allowed for each family member to provide their uninhibited subjective views and memories of the family. This created the dialogical structure of my film and the context needed to work with the home video footage.

Deconstructing and Reconstructing Home Videos: Editing Techniques

My family's home videos depict a very different view of the family than what my parents, brother, and I had discussed in the interviews. Considering this, the home videos can be seen as depicting a certain image of that family that suggests cohesiveness—an image the family would want to remember. I use these videos as a materialized form of collective (familial) memory that I then deconstruct with the voice over narration from my family members, and subsequently reconstruct using editing techniques that recontextualize, and distort the original material (image and sound).

The main editing technique that I emphasize in my film is the displacement of the native properties of the original footage. These properties include noise, static, static lines, glitches and sounds from the tape being played, rewind, stopped, and ejected. Static/static lines appear on tapes in which the magnetic tape itself is damaged. I chose to express these properties as damaged memories. I wanted to make sure the static/static lines were superimposed over images in a way that is in dialogue with what is being narrated in voice over. The effect is that when a family member says something that goes against the familial memory, that memory is visually

tested against said family member's personal memory or subjective view. This also effects the flow of the images in which the narrative becomes disrupted or fragmented.

I use these properties similarly to how Holden and Caouette use their home movie and home video material. In "Hitler! (Revisited)", Holden uses a video of his brother that was initially shot in Hi-8 video, but in during the editing process, Holden superimposed textures of Super 8mm film (grain, stains, and scratches). By superimposing the Super 8mm textures over his video footage, Holden expresses "not only his shifting understanding of [his brother], but also the temporal gaps between shooting and editing" (Kim ch.4). Even though I am working with only video footage, by displacing textures (properties) that baked into the footage and superimposing them over specific images that express my family members' and my own subjectivity in the present, I am able to create a shifting understanding of my relation to my family members since the videos were taken, and it draws attention to the video material as a piece of the past when transferred to a new digital media format (MP4).

I also used Holden's framing technique, in which the projected video of his brother is off-center. Holden seems to employ this technique to allow room for his on screen texts, and eventually, to allow lead room for when he walks into frame. I used this technique for the sections in which I disrupt the narrative to interject my memories as an enunciator. I feel that it allows for me to position myself in the film in which I take authority over the home video footage.

Caouette's intensive and dense collage of images and sounds in *Tarnation* influenced a variety of my editing techniques such as layering images and audio (collage), slow motion, reversing video and audio, blur, and colorization effects. What all of these techniques achieve is the reframing of original images. With all these techniques and the home videos and movies as

material, Caouette reframes, and subsequently, recontextualizes the original images. This creates contradiction between sequences of images that “block the viewer’s transparent understanding of the documents and thereby suggests the unstable and fractured aspects of his memory” (Kim ch.4). I use these techniques, especially slow motion, reversing video and audio, and collage to achieve the same effect. The multiple enunciating voices provide a fractured narrative that contradicts the original home video images. I then manipulate the images to match the contradicting voices. For example, if there is a moment in which some tension or conflict can be interpreted between family members in the videos, I will “zoom in” and slow the image down to match the tone of what it being communicated in the voice over. The purpose of reframing these images is to invite the viewer “to reflect on the practices of reading visual evidence” (Rascaroli ch.7). Just as I reflect on the meanings and intentions behind the home videos, my aim is to communicate the same thing to the viewer.

Conclusion

My process as a filmmaker began with understanding what I wanted to communicate, and how best to communicate it within an established film form and discourse. Corrigan and Rascaroli’s texts and Caouette and Holden’s films assisted me in establishing a framework that allowed for my—and my family members’—subjectivity to direct the film in a way that reflects dynamic between personal and familial memory. Not only did they help me ground my film, they provided me with the opportunity to expand on the possibilities of the essay film form by challenging the idea of the single enunciator; this was essential to communicating how I my family members impact the way I remember my childhood. Caouette and Holden’s films provided editing techniques that informed me of the many ways in which I could manipulate the home videos to get my message across.

When I asked my mother why she stayed with my father for 30 years, and built a family and life with him despite wanting a divorce after their honeymoon, she simply stated, “I thought thing would get better.” As experienced in my film, things never really got better. I learned that the home videos offer an actualization of the family that my parents aspired to build, but could not achieve outside of the videos. After taking the time to interview my family members and express my thoughts and feelings through my art during this time in which the family is even more divided, I feel like I’ve come to terms with my childhood. I am now able to see myself outside of the family, and can focus on moving forward as an individual—just as everyone else in my family is doing.

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