

"Love is so short, forgetting, so long"

Examining memory, family stories, narratives and subjectivity in filmic auto/biographies

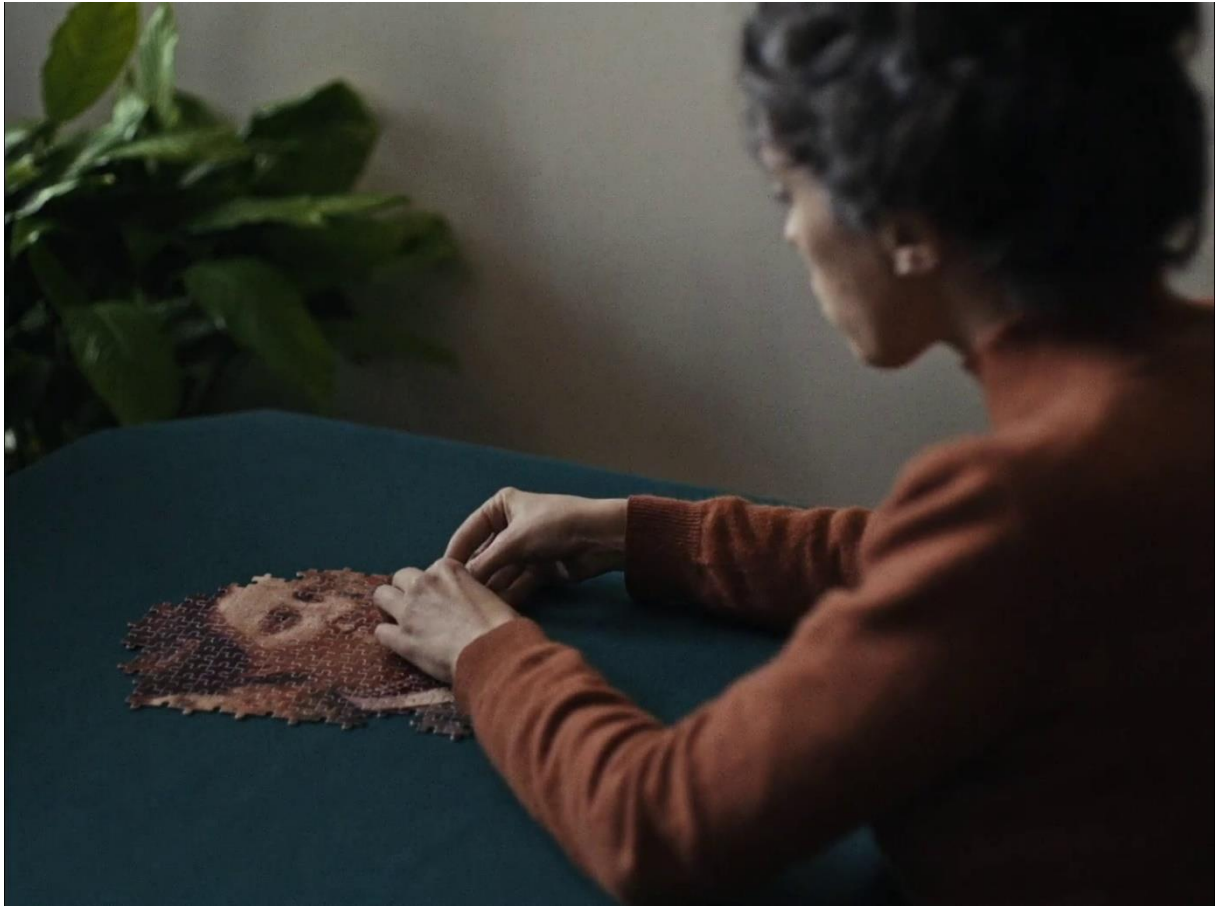


Figure 1) Capture THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS (2020), filmmaker Catarina Vasconcelos puts together a puzzle depicting a photograph of her grandmother.

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Introduction

"I'm interested in the way we tell stories about our lives, about the fact that the truth about the past is often ephemeral and difficult to pin down, and many of our stories, when we don't take proper time to do research about our pasts, which is almost always the case, end up with shifts and fictions in them, mostly unintended."

This excerpt from the documentary *STORIES WE TELL* (Sarah Polley, 2012) shows filmmaker Sarah Polley discussing where the initial impulse to make her documentary came from and simultaneously poignantly illustrates some of the core themes this thesis addresses, such as memories, stories, life narratives and the unknowability of truth. The universality of these themes is obvious; we all experience the misremembrance of events. Especially when we reminisce together with others about shared experiences, can the various "shifts and fictions" in our stories become glaringly obvious. This phenomenon has been well documented and can have far-reaching consequences, for memory is not only a personal matter but also occupies a crucial role within forensic investigation and the legal system. There are many instances known of eyewitnesses confidently misremembering aspects of a crime, such as when two men witnessed a robbery. One was convinced the robber was carrying a hammer, the other knew clear as day he had had a screwdriver in his hand.¹ But after a casual conversation between the two, the second witness was positive he had seen a hammer, completely forgetting the screwdriver in the process.² This demonstrates it is particularly in the recounting of events that errors occur. In describing an event, we place it within a logical narrative and introduce details in order to increase the story's coherence. Because human beings are natural storytellers, the unintended fictions in our stories are an unavoidable part of our lives. This is precisely what fascinated Polley.

The present thesis examines how two autobiographical documentaries respond to the "shifts and fictions" of stories and the ephemerality of the past. These case studies, *STORIES WE TELL* and *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* (Catarina Vasconcelos, 2020), are comparable in subject matter but differ in execution. Both films thematize family stories but where one focuses on the discrepancies within them (*STORIES WE TELL*), the other addresses their gaps (*THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS*). Both have been labelled 'documemoirs', a memoir in documentary format; both, however, have also been called "difficult to categorize" (*THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS*) and "genre-bending" (*STORIES WE*

¹ Loftus, Elizabeth F. and Hunter G. Hoffman, 'Misinformation and Memory: the Creation of New Memories', *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 118 (1989) 1, pp. 100-104, quoted in Resnick 2014, p. 540.

² Ibid.

TELL).³ This already hints at just how much these two female filmmakers push the boundaries of the medium they are working with, promising interesting and relevant objects of analysis with their respective documentaries.

In *STORIES WE TELL* Canadian filmmaker Sarah Polley traces her late mother's identity and her own origins. Consequently, the end result can be labelled both a biography and autobiography. In the film, Polley interviews her family members and her mother's friends, reconstructs home videos and depicts the filmmaking process. She also inserts herself in the narrative. In effect, *STORIES WE TELL* is highly self-reflexive. *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* is a film by Portuguese filmmaker Catarina Vasconcelos, Portuguese-spoken and originally released under the name *A METAMORFOSE DOS PÁSSAROS*. Similar to *STORIES WE TELL*, this is a biographical and autobiographical film. Spanning three generations, Vasconcelos illustrates her father's childhood, his mother's death and their shared experience of losing Vasconcelos's mother to cancer in 2003. Comparable to Polley, Vasconcelos inserts herself and her family members in film. In contrast to Polley, however, Vasconcelos takes a highly metaphorical and symbolic approach, telling her family history by means of fictionalized sequences and extremely stylized shots.

Nowadays, many scholars, especially in the field of (new) media studies, take issue with the term 'autobiography' or 'life writing' as it implies 'writing'. Contemporary representations of the self or one's life often occur online or through visual media. An approach which allows space for the focus on such media, and moreover emphasizes the effect of these media on the formulation of the self, is called automediality. This term was coined in 2008 by Jörg Dünne and Christian Moser and will be explicated further in the second chapter of the present thesis. Ümit Kennedy and Emma Maguire call the "interfaces between life narrative and media technologies" "an exciting space for new ideas and theories to flourish".⁴ It is unsurprising, then, that more and more scholars apply the framework of automediality to study such representations of the self. Be that as it may, it has thus far primarily been used to explore the expression of the self in new media: blogs on websites and vlogs on YouTube; social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter; and virtual reality and video games.⁵ It has not been applied to documentaries thus far, a gap the present thesis addresses.

³ Kiang 2020; Sperling 2013a.

⁴ Kennedy and Maguire 2018.

⁵ Ibid.

Correspondingly, the central research question this thesis answers is: Considered through the lens of an automedial framework, how do *STORIES WE TELL* and *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* represent, mediate and narrativize memory and construct auto/biographical subjects? In order to answer this question, several relevant theories are explored and fleshed out in the first two chapters, through a literature review. Broadly, the first chapter focusses on memory and the second chapter centres on the automedial framework. In the final two chapters, I put the discussed theories into practice in my close reading of the two case studies, analysing both content and form. As such, this thesis is concerned with both narrative and aesthetics. It recognizes that it is relevant to study these two in connection to each other, as they are interrelated.

The first chapter considers current research in the field of memory studies. Autobiographical memories are crucial to our conception of ourselves because they allow us to construct life narratives and, consequently, they play a huge role our formation of identity; they answer the all-important question: 'who am I?' This chapter explores the process of remembering, personal and collective (familial) memories, the mediation of memory, and lastly, the representation and narrativization of memory. The authors most important to this chapter are Robyn Fivush, Annette Kuhn and José van Dijck.

The second chapter considers autobiography and some of the media where it finds its expression. First, several relevant genres of life writing are examined, such as auto/biography, intergenerational writing and the memoir, and some of their criticisms. Then, I consider Dünne and Moser's theory of automediality and ponder how an auto/biographical identity can be analysed following an automedial approach. Next, I examine the genre of filmic autobiography, specifically in the context of automediality. This is done with the help of a list of genre- and medium-specific characteristics of filmic autobiography, which is based on Nadja Gernalzick's research.

Chapter three and four feature the analyses of my case studies, *STORIES WE TELL* and *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS*, respectively. After a brief synopsis combined with relevant background information, I reflect on both content and form. The films are considered through an automedial lens, most prominently in terms of the thematization of (familial) memory, auto/biography and subjectivity, fictionality and self-reflexivity.

The penultimate chapter features a discussion of the two previous chapters. I briefly highlight how the two case studies compare, illustrating their similarities and differences.

Finally, I conclude this thesis with a summarization of the present research and formulate an answer to the central research question. I briefly consider the case studies in a larger context and end with a suggestion for future research.

Chapter 1

Memory and remembering

This chapter considers memory and the process and biases of remembering. Memory occurs in social circles and is also always mediated, in linguistic, analogue or digital forms. Furthermore, memory's characteristics have influence on the way it is represented in texts.

Autobiographical memory is crucial to our understanding of ourselves. The current academic understanding of memory has been shaped by an unprecedented deal of scholarly attention it has received in the last thirty years or so, in a widely varying field of disciplines.⁶ In summarization of contemporary research, Robyn Fivush offers a definition of autobiographical memory:

“autobiographical memory is the memory of the self interacting with others in the service of both short-term and long-term goals that define our being and our purpose in the world”, it “moves beyond recall of experienced events to integrate perspective, interpretation, and evaluation across self, other, and time to create a personal history”.⁷

She differentiates between episodic memory and autobiographical memory. The former involves the “what, where, and when of an experience”, the latter is uniquely human and builds upon the former in three ways: 1. It involves autonoetic consciousness (the self is remembered as the experiencer of the event); 2. It links events into a personal history, a life narrative; 3. It serves social and emotional functions, such as “self-definition, self-in-relation, and self-regulation”.⁸ Moreover, autobiographical memories are informed and contextualized by received knowledge: representations constructed without personal experience, involving stories “of one’s early life, of family history, and of historical and cultural events”.⁹ All of this demonstrates just how important autobiographical memory is to selfhood: it enables people to define themselves and their pasts. Memory is not only concerned with the past, though. Mariette Clare and Richard Johnson rightfully point out that remembering is an activity of the present: “In the process of memory [...] the ‘now’ is as important as the ‘then’. Memory is a relationship between pasts and a particular present.”¹⁰

⁶ De Jong 2018, p. 12; Smith and Watson 2010, p. 22.

⁷ Fivush 2011, p. 560.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 560-561.

⁹ Reese and Fivush 2008, p. 202.

¹⁰ Clare, Mariette and Richard Johnson, ‘Method in our Madness: Identity and Power in a Memory Work Method’, in: Susannah Radstone (ed.), *Memory and Methodology*, Oxford and New York (Berg) 2000, p.199, quoted in Daniels 2013, p. 6.

Not all autobiographical memories are created equally of course; emotional weight, for example, can influence greatly how memories are remembered. To illustrate, van Dijck refers to neuroscientific research which indicates that negative emotional memories are remembered in far more detail than positive ones.¹¹ Paradoxically, traumatic experiences are entirely differently encoded into memory: “most often as an image that cannot be transformed into a narrative, allegedly remaining unprocessed in one’s memory”.¹² By contrast, John Kotre describes those memories that do get processed extremely well: key memories. According to him, these memories are vivid because the remembered experiences were novel, consequential, connected to a moment with great historical significance, provoked great emotion, or were perceived as symbolic to a person’s overall life narrative.¹³ Especially the last item is relevant to this thesis. It demonstrates something Paul John Eakin argues as well, that narrativization of one’s life does not start to occur at the level of life writing but at the level of living.¹⁴ Our key memories are formed in accordance with our perceived identities and life narratives.

Be that as it may, memory is not at all able to accurately represent our pasts. Contrary to the outdated belief that memory works as an archive one can access to retrieve and replay events exactly, thanks to the ground-breaking work of British psychologist Frederic Bartlett in the early 20th century, memories are now understood to be reconstructed each time they are accessed.¹⁵ Interestingly, more recent research into the “contextual nature of remembering” has even shown that memory and imagination are intimately connected: “They are now recognized as closely related functions of, if not a single cognitive system, kindred functions that have significant overlap and many of the same neural mechanisms”.¹⁶ Still, we ourselves are prone to think we are better at remembering than we actually are. Psychologist Daniel Schacter identifies five biases of memory which illustrate how memory works and serves us:

“Consistency and change biases show how our theories about ourselves can lead us to reconstruct the past as overly similar to, or different from, the present. Hindsight biases reveal that recollections of past events are filtered by current knowledge. Egocentric biases illustrate the powerful role of the self in orchestrating perceptions and memories of reality. And stereotypical biases demonstrate how generic

¹¹ Van Dijck 2007, p. 32.

¹² Bercuci 2019, p. 92.

¹³ Kotre 1995, p. 106.

¹⁴ Eakin, Paul John, *How Our Lives Becomes Stories: Making Selves*, Ithaca (Cornell University Press) 1999, quoted in Rak 2015, p. 161.

¹⁵ O’Rourke 2018, p. 15.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

memories shape interpretations of the world, even when we are unaware of their existence or influence.”¹⁷

Representations of the self that invoke autobiographical memory are therefore tainted by the way our memory works. Regardless, the discussion above reflects on memory as if it is a privatized activity, whilst in actuality, remembering is a collective experience.

Collective memory communities

People remember and develop their identities in relation to communities. A contemporary of Bartlett and also a pioneer in memory studies, sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, was the first to distinguish between individual and collective memory.¹⁸ He added a social dimension to memory, arguing that it is in relation to other people that we remember.¹⁹ Reasonably so, as we often share experiences with other people, our memories are connected to them. Individual and collective remembering relate dialectically to each other.²⁰ On the one hand, individual remembering is always informed and shaped by frameworks of collective remembering, on the other, collective remembering is always engaged and interpreted by individuals from their own personal ways of seeing and understanding the world.²¹ In line with this, Halbwachs states that all individual memory is collective, because of its dependence on social groups for its existence.²² Fivush calls this inherently personal and social aspect of memory one of its enduring paradoxes.²³ Memory needs these social frames, and, according to Halbwachs, these frames overlap in spheres of communities, such as family, society, and nation.²⁴ Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley take into account the overlapping spheres, by conceiving of individual and collective relations “along a continuum from micro ... through meso ... to macro scales of remembering”, meaning personal memory, remembering within social groups and national/transnational memory transmission, respectively.²⁵ Studies into the macro scales of remembering contend that memory “is not only the result of neuronal streams and

¹⁷ Schacter 2001, p. 139.

¹⁸ De Jong 2018, p. 12.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Pickering and Keightley 2016, p. 39.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Halbwachs, Maurice, *The Collective Memory* [1950], New York (Harper & Row) 1980 (ed. Mary Douglas), p. 50, quoted in Reese and Fivush 2008, p. 202.

²³ Reese and Fivush 2008, p. 201.

²⁴ Van Dijck 2007, p. 9.

²⁵ Pickering and Keightley 2016, pp. 39-40.

conversations, but also finds its expression in objects, rituals and ceremonies that are used to form a group identity over several generations".²⁶

Memories organize themselves according to participation in a collectivity or community, and, often, this means we remember in terms of connectivity, rather than spatially or chronologically, even in cases when we reminisce by ourselves.²⁷ Memories are often accessed and shared through the telling and retelling of experiences within social groups. Unsurprisingly so, as research suggests that "recalling past experiences" frequently involves "defining and describing relationships with others".²⁸ Halbwachs states that human memory "needs constant feeding from collective sources".²⁹ Collective memories are subject to change for numerous reasons: fluctuating in importance or disappearing in case the group disperses or its members die.³⁰ The active, collaborative process of a group reconstruction has been called 'collective remembering'.³¹ It is an interesting process: in the case of collaborative reminiscing, memories can become increasingly similar or more contested among participants.³² Different aspects are highlighted with each retelling, and memories always remain subject to revision. What is more, these memory products are always also informed by a larger cultural, social and historical context.³³

The present thesis looks at memories in a familial setting. This is in contrast to contemporary research into memory, as that often relates its subject to its wider context.³⁴ This thesis explores a more intimate, personalized terrain. According to Fivush, family stories provide specific frames for defining self in relation to others.³⁵ Moreover, Kotre calls family stories "the most engaging collective memories of all" and Halbwachs' collective memory theory included the family as its prototype.³⁶ Likewise, Kuhn states "it is perhaps the family that provides the model for every other memory-community", because of "the shared remembering and complicit forgetting".³⁷ Remembering in a familial context, then,

²⁶ De Jong 2018, p. 13.

²⁷ Halbwachs, Maurice, *The Collective Memory* [1950], New York (Harper & Row) 1980 (ed. Mary Douglas), paraphrased in Reese and Fivush 2008, p. 202.

²⁸ Fivush 2011, p. 575.

²⁹ Van Dijck 2007, p. 9.

³⁰ De Jong 2018, p. 13.

³¹ Kansteiner, Wulf, 'Finding Meaning in Memory: a Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies', *History and Theory* 41 (2002), pp. 179-197, quoted in Reese and Fivush 2008, p. 202.

³² Reese and Fivush 2008, p. 202.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Carsten 2007, p. 4.

³⁵ Fivush 2011, p. 575.

³⁶ Kotre 1995, p. 221; De Jong 2018, p. 13.

³⁷ Kuhn 2000, p. 193.

can be viewed as a prototype to other communities, indicating the relevance of this type of research.

Mediation of memory

Memory is always necessarily mediated when it is recalled. As pointed out by Annette Kuhn: even our inner speech involves the secondary, arbitrary signifying system of language.³⁸ Furthermore, it would be wrong to think of memories as only being immaterial, as materiality is often involved. Van Dijck brings up “shoeboxes” and Kuhn describes “memory boxes”, where we keep analogue relics, bits and pieces, of our past.³⁹ They both draw attention to the fact that it is not just the act of keeping and storing them that is interesting, it is how these items influence our present, memories, stories and lives now.⁴⁰ Since the mid-20th century, humans have increasingly become able to store their memories permanently on external devices, and contemporary electronic machines “continue to become smaller, more efficient, more personal, and (with the exception of sound recording) more visual”.⁴¹ What is more, according to Kotre, these devices influence the way we conceptualise memory. An example of this would be calling our memories ‘photographic’. Every view of memory based on how machinery operates is, however, incorrect, as it paints memories as inanimate copies. The fact that memory can seemingly be permanently stored and remain stable on external devices, means that interestingly, memory bodes better in these places than in our minds. However, van Dijck draws our attention to the fact that these media are not “passive go-betweens”, instead, “their mediation intrinsically shapes the way we build up and retain a sense of individuality and community, of identity and history”.⁴² Van Dijck’s perceptive assertion here will be explored further in the second chapter, in the context of automediality.

Neither Halbwachs nor Bartlett focussed their research on memory in relation to media; however, recent studies into memory have.⁴³ In particular van Dijck’s seminal work entitled *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* (2007) provides an extensive overview of the study of memories in a digital age, as the title already gives away. She coins the term “mediated memories” to refer to both these shoebox items (letters, clippings, photos, etc.), audio and video recordings, as well as a mental concept.⁴⁴ She defines it as follows:

³⁸ Kuhn 2000, p. 189.

³⁹ Van Dijck 2007, p. 1; Ibid., p. 187.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Kotre 1995, p. 14.

⁴² Van Dijck 2007, p. 2.

⁴³ Pickering and Keightley 2016, p. 38.

⁴⁴ Van Dijck 2007, p. xii.

mediated memories are “the activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies, for creating and re-creating a sense of the past, present, and future of ourselves in relation to others”.⁴⁵ Moreover, with this terms she signifies that our memories exist at once inside our brain and in external memory objects.⁴⁶ They cannot be completely separated: they ‘live’ concurrently in both places, because “they are manifestations of a complex interaction between brain, material objects, and the cultural matrix from which they arise”.⁴⁷ Evident is that mediated memories are crucial to the formation of ourselves and our identities.

Van Dijck argues that the materiality of external memory objects has frequently been overlooked by memory scholars in the field of neuroscience who argue only the content matters, whereas she argues that the specific material artifact also affects the mindware that perceives it.⁴⁸ Cultural and media theorists do focus on this materiality but in contrast to them, van Dijck locates “memory not in the matter of items per se but rather in the items’ agency, the way they interact with the mind”.⁴⁹ Van Dijck argues against the erroneous assumption that external memory objects are stable anchors of memory. Despite their inanimateness, they work more like memory itself, changeable with each retrieval process.⁵⁰ The material is, after all, subject to decay and decomposing, and moreover, to our own revision, for example, when we delete photos.

Representation and narrativization of memory

As human beings, we create narratives of our personal lives. As Eakin explained, this does not start to happen when we pick up a pen to write our life’s story, but unavoidably as we live our lives.⁵¹ Naturally, we seek unity, coherence and patterns; key memories are even registered on the basis of how symbolic they are perceived to be within the context of the personal narratives of our lives.⁵² Memory, as we now know however, is not only crucial to the formation of our life’s narratives, it is also inherently unstable and ever-changing. Because of these qualities, Bunty Avieson, Fiona Giles and Sue Joseph argue in the introduction to their edited volume on memoirs, that it might be “counterintuitive” then “to

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 21

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 35.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 37.

⁵¹ Eakin, Paul John, *How Our Lives Becomes Stories: Making Selves*, Ithaca (Cornell University Press) 1999, quoted in Rak 2015, p. 161.

⁵² Kotre 1995, p. 106.

expect memoir to represent remembering as one smooth, stable, unraveling of experience" (sic).⁵³ Perhaps the medium and text should reflect the qualities of what it represents. This is exactly what Kuhn identifies in what she calls 'memory texts', cultural products representing memory.⁵⁴ In her study of diverse media, she recognizes shared formal characteristics across memory texts, conceding that these emerge to a lesser degree in texts that have undergone "considerable revision at a conscious level".⁵⁵ Most notable, according to her, is the treatment of time in these texts. Here, "time rarely comes across as fully continuous or sequential" and consequently a "memory text is typically a montage of vignettes, anecdotes, fragments, 'snapshots', flashes".⁵⁶ Additionally, these texts swiftly shift scenes and/or narrative viewpoint.⁵⁷ Furthermore, "[m]emory texts are metaphorical rather than analogical: as such, they have more in common with poetry than with classical narrative."⁵⁸ In memory texts, then, the form is typically as important as, or even more than, the content.⁵⁹ Relevant to this thesis is the medium film. Jill Daniels demonstrates that memory texts within film indeed exhibit such characteristics. She explains that the representation of memory in film in classical and chronological narratives is questioned:

"A significant debate amongst cultural theorists is whether the *sequential* narrative form is suited to the mediation of memory in films in general. Classic linear narrative conventions are generally insufficient as a mode to represent memory due to the difficulty of fixing memory to specific moments in time" (emphasis in original).⁶⁰

To illustrate, Daniels describes how experimental documentary filmmakers sometimes creatively approach memory as an aesthetic, meaning they take a non-linear, non-narrative poetic approach and show images associatively.⁶¹

Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter has considered memory and its mediation. Memory is crucial to our understanding of ourselves and our formation of our life narratives. It is, however, also inherently unstable and unreliable. It does not operate within a vacuum; ultimately, remembering and reminiscing are social activities. We remember in terms of connectivity

⁵³ Avieson, Giles and Joseph 2018, p. 16.

⁵⁴ Kuhn 2000, p. 185.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 189.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 189-190.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 190.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Daniels 2014, p. 92.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 89-90, 93.

and community. The family is an excellent example of a 'memory community'. Furthermore, memory is necessarily mediated, and to describe this, van Dijck coins the term 'mediated memories'. This term denotes a bilateral relationship: memories exist simultaneously in external objects and in our minds. The mediation of memory in media reveals a conflict. On the one hand, there is the human impulse to construct our past experiences into a causal narrative that provides coherence and structure, on the other hand, Kuhn identifies memory texts that are fragmented, non-linear and poetic. Also Daniels identifies these characteristics in documentaries that represent memory. The remainder of this thesis focuses on the mediation of memory.

Chapter 2

A brief overview of life writing, its genres and its pitfalls

This chapter considers autobiography in a broad sense. First, it looks at life writing and several relevant genres. Then, the theory of automediality is clarified. Lastly, the characteristics of filmic autobiography are considered.

Life writing is a more inclusive variant of the term which is more commonly used: autobiography. The etymology of the word autobiography brings us back to the Greek *autos*, 'self', *bios*, 'life', and *graphe*, 'writing'.⁶² Even though this already offers a clear definition of the genre, it can be explicated further. These are stories that chronicle a life, where the writer is at once subject and object and not only recounts the past but also reflects on the present. Nowadays, the term autobiography is used interchangeably with memoir, even though they are understood to be slightly different. Notably, memoir—lending its name from the French *mémoire* 'memory'—currently generally refers to life writing that focusses on a significant segment of a life, whereas the term autobiography also encompasses the cradle-to-grave type writing.⁶³ Moreover, according to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, a contemporary memoir is characterized by a density of language and self-reflexivity.⁶⁴ Kathleen J. Waites adds that the function of a memoir is for the maker to shed light on his or her identity.⁶⁵ Furthermore, Marie O'Rourke contends "that the writing and reading of memoir can only be strengthened by considering and reflecting on the processes and limitations of remembering."⁶⁶ Avieson, Giles and Joseph argue that memoir shows memory at work "[t]hrough a narrative shaping of events, characterization of actors, and other apparatus of story-making", memoir shows 'active memorialisation', which "reveals the nature of memory, and the palimpsest of collective experience".⁶⁷

A great variety of genres within life writing exist; this is clearly demonstrated by the glossary called 'Sixty Genres of Life Narrative', that Smith and Watson include in their seminal work *Reading Autobiography: a Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2010). Relevant to the present thesis is a brief discussion regarding the interplay of autobiography and biography, and familial subgenres within life writing. In contemporary

⁶² Smith and Watson 2010, p. 1.

⁶³ Avieson, Giles and Joseph 2018, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Smith and Watson 2010, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Waites 2018, p. 124.

⁶⁶ O'Rourke 2018, p. 13.

⁶⁷ Avieson, Giles and Joseph 2018, pp. 3-4.

studies into life writing, autobiography is often spelled 'auto/biography' or simply 'a/b'. According to Smith and Watson, this term and its slash signal "the interrelatedness of autobiographical narrative and biography".⁶⁸ Paradoxically, then, these forms are not only traditionally opposed but also interrelated. Eakin highlights this interrelation as well when he mentions that when writers tell the story of the self, they automatically tell the story of the other: with several characters being part of the narrative, their stories are recounted alongside the stories of the narrator.⁶⁹ According to Caitríona Ní Dhúill, the term 'life writing' itself already emphasizes affinities between autobiography "the story I tell of myself" and biography "the story I tell of someone else".⁷⁰

Nowadays, often the genres of autobiography and biography are mixed, which results in a 'relational' story. Initially, the term 'relational life writing' was coined in the mid-1980s as a specific description of selfhood in women's autobiographies since it was felt to exhibit a sense of shared identity with other women.⁷¹ That this only applied to female writing was later challenged and also Smith and Watson argue that all autobiographical writing is characterized by relationality.⁷² In any case, in relational memoirs, self-knowing is routed through others: "one's story is bound up with that of another" which "suggests that the boundaries of an "I" are often shifting and permeable".⁷³

It is unsurprising that relational life writing occurs in narratives of family. According to David Parker, the interplay between autonomy and relationality in intergenerational autobiography marks it as a subgenre.⁷⁴ Several genres of relational, intergenerational life writing exist and overlap. There are so-called filiation narratives and 'patriographies' and 'matriographies', tracing narratives of children and parents. Andreas Athanasiades argues that it is the fate of parents "to become their children's myths and memories".⁷⁵ Often called 'familial memoir' or 'domestic memoir', here the focus lies on accounts of family life. The making public of private life is interesting and, according to Nancy K. Miller, that

⁶⁸ Smith and Watson 2010, p. 256.

⁶⁹ Eakin, Paul John, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Ithaca (Cornell University Press) 1999, quoted in Danielewicz 2012, p. 271.

⁷⁰ Ní Dhúill 2012, p. 285.

⁷¹ Smith and Watson 2010, p. 278.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 86.

⁷⁴ Parker, David, 'Narratives of Autonomy and Narratives of Relationality in Auto/ Biography', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 19 (2004) 1-2, quoted in Smith and Watson 2010, p. 271.

⁷⁵ Athanasiades 2021, p. 124.

which makes a memoir postmodern, as “it hesitates to define the boundaries between private and public”.⁷⁶

Regardless, it is doubtful autobiography as a genre is flawless. Numerous scholars criticise it for a multitude of reasons. For example, although Matthew Ricketson praises the power of the genre as it gives people the freedom to tell their own story, he also states that this single perspective is the genre’s shortcoming. This is because “[m]emoirists choose what to include, who to praise, denigrate, or ignore; they have the first word and the last word, and so the power to shape the story of their life”.⁷⁷ Ricketson ponders the ability of the biography genre to solve this problem of memoir. On the one hand, he argues, a range of perspectives provided by people close to the subject, including the biographer, can identify blind spots or expose information the subject prefers to hide.⁷⁸ Additionally, the biographer can check memories against records in order to more closely approach the truth.⁷⁹ On the other hand, when biographers have living people as their subject, there are often two contradicting aims: to have independence from and access to the subject at the same time.⁸⁰ *STORIES WE TELL* as well as *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* do not encounter this problem as their principal subjects have passed. Regardless, according to Ní Dhúill, due to biography’s mediation we still will not approach the truth, as “we read not just another life: we read another’s reading of yet another’s life traces”.⁸¹ In this respect, both *STORIES WE TELL* and *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* are highly self-aware, even thematizing the unknowability of truth. Not only biography is mediated; Ben Yagoda problematises the entire genre of autobiography, stating, “[t]here is an inherent and irresolvable conflict between the capabilities of memory and the demands of narrative”.⁸² This paradoxicality was demonstrated in the first chapter as well: Schacter points to our memory biases and Kuhn argues that memory texts generally take a non-narrative approach.⁸³ This conflict forms the basis of the present research as it asks how the case studies represent, mediate and narrativize memory and family stories, considering both deal with ‘discrepancies’ and ‘gaps’ within collective remembering.

⁷⁶ Miller, Nancy K, *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death*, New York (Oxford University Press) 1996, quoted in Smith and Watson 2010, p. 275.

⁷⁷ Ricketson 2018, pp. 44-45.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 46-47.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 48.

⁸¹ Ní Dhúill 2012, p. 282.

⁸² Yagoda, Ben, *Memoir: A History*, New York (Riverhead Books) 2009, p. 109, quoted in Ricketson 2018, p. 46.

⁸³ Schacter 2001, p. 139; Kuhn 2000, pp. 189-190.

Whilst extremely relevant, these criticisms completely gloss over the most problematic aspect of life writing: Historically, it has been regarded as if the medium is transparent, and merely a tool to depict a pre-existing subject.⁸⁴ A theoretical framework that does account for and complicates the medium through which the self and others are written, is called automediality.

Automediality

The term automediality was coined in 2008 by Jörg Dünne and Christian Moser in their seminal work *Automedialität: Subjektkonstitution in Schrift, Bild und neuen Medien*, to function as an alternative to the term 'autobiography', because automediality encompasses the entire "range of artistic and technological media applied to the task of self-representation".⁸⁵ Moreover, the term was introduced to call attention to the technology and materiality of the medium itself, which has a history of being disregarded by critics and autobiographers themselves.⁸⁶ Importantly, then, studies of automediality acknowledge that media are not neutral tools to express the self, but rather contribute to the shaping and producing of the self who uses them.⁸⁷ Ümit Kennedy and Emma Maguire express how a new, less limited, definition of auto/biography was needed that "expands beyond text, beyond narrative, beyond subject in any complete sense or form, to reflect the multiplicity of ways that lives are lived and recorded using new media today".⁸⁸ Next to acknowledging and analysing how a given medium contributes to the construction of the self, automediality also regards the subject as a process instead of a product and emphasizes self-reflexivity of self-representations.⁸⁹ According to Nadja Gernalzick, studies of automediality not only demand "a systematics and taxonomy of the constitution of the self in respectively genre-specific ways, but particularly also in medium-specific ways".⁹⁰ Likewise, Kennedy and Maguire suggest automedial research should delve into "the affordances, constraints and features" of a particular medium, to see how it has "shaped how a subject can inscribe, perform, or construct a self-presentation".⁹¹ Fortunately, Gernalzick provides an extensive taxonomy of the medium of filmic autobiography, which is discussed in a following sub-chapter.

⁸⁴ Gernalzick 2014, p. 226.

⁸⁵ Moser 2019, p. 247.

⁸⁶ Gernalzick 2014, p. 226.

⁸⁷ Moser 2019, p. 247.

⁸⁸ Kennedy and Maguire 2018.

⁸⁹ Ibid.; Moser 2019, p. 249.

⁹⁰ Gernalzick 2014, p. 227.

⁹¹ Kennedy and Maguire 2018.

Automediality offers tools to study auto/biographical identity. Kennedy and Maguire recommend considering “the different autobiographical “I”s: the narrating self and the narrated self; the subject and its creator” and “the online self and the offline IRL (in real life) self”.⁹² Most of all, an automedial approach takes “into account how the effects of media shape the kinds of selves that can be represented” and “understands the self not as a preexisting subject that might be distilled into story form but as an entity that is brought into being through the processes of mediation” (sic).⁹³ Moser argues that studying non-linguistic forms of automediality reveal that “the object of self-representation is always a fictional construct—an ‘other’ self, a persona—and that every self-representation therefore contains an element of autofiction”.⁹⁴

An example of the medium’s influence on self-representation is given by Moser. According to him, the influence and interplay of photography and written autobiography both prompted autobiographers to view themselves externally rather than adopting a traditional internal view, and, because of the snapshot-quality of photography, it provoked autobiographical narratives to take on a discontinuous, episodic form instead of the traditional linear and teleological narratives.⁹⁵ The medium photography enjoys a direct relationship with its referents. However, Kuhn draws attention to the problematic treatment of personal photographs: because of their indexical relationship to ‘reality’, they are taken “to stand as guarantors of the past actuality of some person or event”.⁹⁶ Roland Barthes, however, is keenly aware of this disconnect between the representation (present) and the referent (past). This awareness was sparked by seeing a photograph of his mother as a little girl and is tinged with sadness: something that is visible in the present is irretrievably lost in the past.⁹⁷ Barthes termed this exclusive and essential quality to photography “this-has-been”.⁹⁸ A photograph necessarily displays a real thing that is placed in front of the lens, as such “it is authentication itself”, whereas writing cannot give this certainty because language is “not able to authenticate itself”, in being inherently fictional.⁹⁹ Barthes compares photography and film and argues that in photography, “something *has posed* in front of the tiny hole and has remained there forever [...]; but in cinema, something *has passed* in front of this same tiny hole: the pose is swept away and

⁹² Kennedy and Maguire 2018.

⁹³ Maguire 2014.

⁹⁴ Moser 2019, p. 257.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 252-253.

⁹⁶ Kuhn 2000, p. 183.

⁹⁷ Barthes 1981, pp. 67-77.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 77.

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 76, 85, 87.

denied by the continuous series of images".¹⁰⁰ It is this duration that is the basis for Bazin's assertion that "a photograph does not have the power of film; it can only represent someone dying or a corpse, not the elusive passage from one state to the other".¹⁰¹ All of this demonstrates just how much various media influence the types of narratives and subjects presented in it. Moser explains how the self used to be falsely "thought to have direct access to the interior recourses of memory", which naturally articulated itself in the form of narrative and the medium was believed to neutrally represent this pre-existent story of the self. The problematality of this was put forth earlier by Yagoda and is something the present thesis addresses in its study of filmic autobiography.

First however, the medium of video should not be overlooked as it contributed immensely to the genre of autobiography. Since the 1950s, video grew to be its own medium and became available to ordinary people.¹⁰² Nora M. Alter explains that changes in video technology around the 1970s made the equipment, and in effect the medium, drastically more affordable.¹⁰³ Furthermore, these video technologies were lightweight, easy to operate and easy to disseminate.¹⁰⁴ This is direct contrast to film, with its expensive celluloid, complex production process and specific technological requirements for screenings.¹⁰⁵ Because video was so immediately available to record both sound and image of everyday life, it became associated with instantaneity, authenticity, intimacy and in public imagination was considered as having a more privileged access to reality.¹⁰⁶ "Amateur video was recognized as a way of revealing society to itself, for making visible previously hidden or inaccessible human experiences".¹⁰⁷ In its availability to ordinary people, activists and artists, it pushed the autobiographical genre forward. Particularly feminist, female filmmakers of the 1970s are responsible for this. They embraced the newly readily available medium of video not in the least because they found themselves excluded from traditional art circles.¹⁰⁸ According to Chris Straayer:

"The subject matter of 1970s performance video was personal, often articulated in the direct address of an artist performing alone. Autobiography, identity, relation of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁰¹ Bazin, André, 'Death Every Afternoon' [1949] (trans. Mark A. Cohen), in: Ivone Margulies (ed.), *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, Durham (Duke University Press) 2002, quoted in Lowenstein 2007, p. 55.

¹⁰² Newman 2014, p. 18.

¹⁰³ Alter 2018, p. 213.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 213.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 211.

¹⁰⁶ Newman 2014, pp. 2, 62-63.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁰⁸ Troy 2000.

self to others, questioning the female stereotypes, and the expansion of self through personae were recurrent themes."¹⁰⁹

The aesthetics of the video image, involving handheld shots, low-resolution images and a general unpolished air, means it was capable to signify authenticity and a direct relationship to the real world.¹¹⁰ Consequently, the medium was also integrated in television and film, in order to signify these aspects. In fictional media the "fake video camera view" was used to code this footage as personal and intimate.¹¹¹ In short, video material denotes a rawness where commercial narrative media was seen as "fictional, idealized, fantastical".¹¹² In order to keep my argument focussed I will not discuss video further in this thesis. Instead, because I am interested in the influence of the medium, filmic autobiography is the medium par excellence to consider, for, according to Matthias Christen, the autobiographical film "only exposes more clearly than other media structural constraints that hold true for all forms of self-representation" when it necessarily resorts to fictionality or intermedial montage.¹¹³

Filmic autobiography

According to Christen and Gernalzick, various terms exist to broadly describe the phenomenon of an autobiographical film.¹¹⁴ In the present thesis it is defined as a film where the maker is also the subject, featuring "a personal record of whatever a filmmaker chooses from her life and experience—based on moving images and sound instead of words alone".¹¹⁵ Naturally, "whatever aspects of a life are covered, it is achieved by the particular means of recording that film as a technical medium provides"; the fundamental multimodality of film means it includes language and photographic images.¹¹⁶ Waites calls filmic autobiography inherently paradoxical, as documentary's aim for objectivity conflicts with the subjectivity of the genre of autobiography.¹¹⁷

Moser reports how it took some time for film to be realized as a medium for self-representation, which, naturally, was partly due to the medium's initial heavy and complex apparatus. Even when lightweight and portable cameras had been developed, in the

¹⁰⁹ Straayer, Chris, 'I Say I Am: Feminist Performance Video in the '70s', *Afterimage* (1985), p. 8, quoted in Troy 2000.

¹¹⁰ Newman 2014, p. 68.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 69.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 70.

¹¹³ Christen 2019, p. 254.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 446; Gernalzick 2018, pp. 59-61.

¹¹⁵ Christen 2019, p. 446.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Waites 2018, p. 123.

beginning there was still quite a lot of technical skill required to singlehandedly be able to operate these devices and edit the footage.¹¹⁸ Additionally, the medium received its share of criticism in terms of ability to capture self-representation. Moser paraphrases literary critic Elisabeth Bruss, who, in the 1980s, gives two reasons for the impossibility of filmic self-representation:

a) the filmic autobiographer cannot say 'I', he cannot be in front of and behind the camera at the same time; b) filmic autobiography has no means of giving a truthful representation of the autobiographer's past; it must restage past events by fictional means and with the help of actors.¹¹⁹

As for point A, naturally, front-facing cameras and 'selfie sticks' had yet to come into being, but still, according to Gernalzick, filmic autobiography does not have to be just a one-person project but can also involve a small crew where the filmmaker still performs most roles, being camera operator, protagonist, editor and narrator in one.¹²⁰ Additionally, and Moser overlooks this counterargument, self-representation through filmic means has been explored as far back as the immediate post-war era, when the genre of the essay-film became a recognized form.¹²¹ In 1948, French filmmaker and critic Alexandre Astruc coined the term *camera-stylo* (camera-pen) to argue that cinema would soon be able to articulate intricate philosophical arguments, akin to works by Camus or Sartre.¹²² According to Astruc, the integration of sound meant film was able to develop its own language, allowing filmmakers to wield their cameras as writers would use their pens, hence *camera-stylo*.¹²³ As for point B, Moser argues that film can represent the autobiographer's past through the use of other media: voice-overs, documents, photographs.¹²⁴ It is, after all, a multimodal medium. He also argues against Bruss's criticism of fictionality, stating that this explicitly exposes structural constraints all media deal with.¹²⁵ Of course, both literary and cinematic autobiographies can and do incorporate fictitious elements or characters. Still, film and especially documentaries are exceptionally well-suited media to play with expectations of the real because of the indexicality of the moving images and viewers' expectation of reality in the latter case.

¹¹⁸ Christen 2019, p. 447.

¹¹⁹ Bruss, Elisabeth, 'Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film', in: James Olney (ed.), *Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Princeton (Princeton University Press) 1980, pp. 297, 307-308, quoted in Moser 2019, pp. 253-254.

¹²⁰ Gernalzick 2014, pp. 228-229.

¹²¹ Alter 2018, p. 102.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Moser 2019, p. 254.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Features of filmic autobiography

To analyse a filmic autobiography according to an automedial approach it is important to be aware of its specific features and ways it can construct the self of the filmmaker. In 2014, Gernalzick argued that studies of automediality should encompass a taxonomy of the constitution of the self in medium- and genre-specific ways.¹²⁶ Genre-specific qualities of filmic autobiographies are laid out by Gernalzick in an extensive overview of the main features of filmic autobiographies in her book *Temporality in American Filmic Autobiography: Cinema, Automediality and Grammatology with Film Portrait and Joyce at 34* (2018). These characteristics are taken as a guiding principle because as was noted previously, *STORIES WE TELL*, as well as *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS*, pushes the boundaries of genre and medium. Gernalzick's list is paraphrased below:

1. The filmmaker is autobiographer, narrator and protagonist. He is named in the opening or end credits, and is identified by this name within the diegesis of the film.
2. Lightweight and transportable camera equipment enables a first-person optical narrative perspective and supports subjective point-of-view shots by the filmmaker.
3. First-person verbal perspective is created by the filmmaker as narrator within the frame whose image and voice correspond to a real person outside the film.
4. Visual narration of the filmmaker's past is created by a combination of voice-over and images of photographs or home videos.
5. There is no traditional screenplay nor roles that are fulfilled by actors.
6. There is an element of self-reflexivity: both verbal in the sense that the medium or camera is addressed and filmmaking being a topic in narration, and visually because the camera and other equipment appear on screen.
7. The filmic material is produced by a single person or a small crew.
8. The postproduction is also handled by a single person or small crew.
9. These films have a low budget compared to narrative cinema and are comparatively more independent from the demands of the media market.¹²⁷

Relevant to the present thesis are points 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6, because these refer to the autobiographical I, the visualization of the past, fictionality and self-reflexivity. To summarize, filmic autobiographies are films where the filmmaker is both subject and maker, which is explicitly made clear. The perspective of the filmmaker is communicated

¹²⁶ Gernalzick 2014, p. 227.

¹²⁷ Gernalzick 2018, pp. 68-70.

via a first-person voice-over and point-of-view shots. The past is constructed by means of a combination of voice-over and photographs or home videos. The cast consists of real people; there are no actors fulfilling roles. Lastly, the film is self-reflexive because it shows equipment and discusses filmmaking.

In elaboration of the autobiographical I, Gernalzick also discusses how the first-person narration provides cohesion and can create narrative complexity. The combination of voice-over and moving images gives the filmmaker unique tools for self-processing.¹²⁸ She quotes Patricia Hampl, who deems the voice in a memoir film “unusually powerful” because it never falters, even though the footage might.¹²⁹ Additionally, according to Hampl, it is a “thinking voice” which muses and wonders, and not simply reports.¹³⁰ Gernalzick argues that film’s combination of images and voice give it its unique ability to relay different tenses.¹³¹ In contrast with writing, film can use multiple features to combine tenses. For example, a voice-over playing over home-video footage allows linguistic past narration to play over filmic material recorded in the past.¹³² She calls this specific ‘combination tense’ the standard for most filmic autobiographies. In addition, Waites draws attention to the fact that there is another I in documentaries: the camera eye. It “has a mind/Eye of its own, freeing viewers to see beyond the telling ‘I’, and from a perspective that complicates and mediates the reality presented”.¹³³ This wordplay on ‘eye’ and ‘I’ emerged in studies on autobiographical film in the 1980s and signifies the interplay of the perspective of the camera ‘eye’ and the narrating ‘I’.¹³⁴ For example, the viewer may pick up on things within the frame, via the perspective of the camera, that the narrating I is not consciously aware of. It is not surprising, then, that Moser mentions that “[m]ore pointedly than in the context of other media, this dependence on technology signals the determining function of the medium in filmic autobiography”.¹³⁵

Furthermore, Gernalzick identifies shared aesthetical properties in autobiographical films. These works often feature shaky camera movements, uncommon lighting, varying sound quality and quick panning shots.¹³⁶ Additionally, she calls it “a

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

¹²⁹ Hampl, Patricia, ‘Memory’s Movies’, In: Charles Warren (ed.), *Beyond Document: Essays on Non-Fiction Film* [1995], Middletown (Wesleyan University Press) 1996, pp. 56-57, quoted in *ibid.*

¹³⁰ Gernalzick 2018, p. 82.

¹³¹ Gernalzick 2014, p. 237.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Waites 2018, p. 135.

¹³⁴ Gernalzick 2018, p. 63.

¹³⁵ Moser 2019, p. 253.

¹³⁶ Gernalzick 2018, p. 70.

hallmark of filmic autobiography” that the camera is included in the filmic images: shots can show the filmmaker in the reflection of a mirror, holding the camera, or a second camera can be used to film the first.¹³⁷

Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has considered the genre of literary life writing, automediality and filmic autobiography. Current research on life writing recognizes the interrelatedness of autobiography and biography and encompasses many genres which are termed ‘relational’. It is especially prominent in stories recounting family life. The genre of autobiography is not without criticism and the framework of automediality addresses an important aspect of it: it acknowledges the influence of the chosen medium on self-representation, viewing the subject as a process rather than a product. Furthermore, this theory is inclusive because it encompasses the divergent range of media used for self-representation. In order to analyse the self which is represented in a medium, it is important to be aware of the medium- and genre-specific qualities. Gernalzick’s overview of the features of filmic autobiography emphasizes the dual role of maker and subject, the interplay between voice-over and images, fictionality and self-reflexivity. The following chapters will put these theories into practice through the analysis of two case studies.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 71.

Chapter 3

Background and plot

This chapter considers Sarah Polley's *STORIES WE TELL*. After a brief synopsis and background information, the film is considered in terms of auto/biography and subjectivity. After this, the representation, mediation and narrativization of memory is discussed. Finally, I look at fictionality, aesthetics and self-reflexivity in *STORIES WE TELL*.

J: "What would you say, this documentary is really about?" [...] "Memory, you said."

S: "Memory, and the way we tell the stories of our lives. I think, in many ways, it's like, you know, trying to bring someone to life through people's stories of them."

Towards the end of *STORIES WE TELL*, this conversation takes place between Polley and her brother John. John 'breaks the fourth wall' and asks her how she envisions this documentary, a project she struggled to define at other points in the film. The description she gives him in response, however, hits the nail on the head. The critically acclaimed documentary *STORIES WE TELL* is about memory, auto/biography, life narratives and family stories. Polley attempts to tell the story of her own family, her mother in particular, by interviewing her family members and her mother's friends and colleagues. *STORIES WE TELL* is not a, what Smith and Watson call 'genealogical story' which objectively charts family history, but instead, Polley is interested in subjective stories of remembrance.¹³⁸

Her mother, Diane, died when Polley was only eleven. Just as Polley's father Michael, she was an actor. She is described to be an outgoing, vibrant and energetic woman. The idea to make this documentary arose when Polley found out she was not the biological daughter of Michael, but of someone her mother met whilst doing a play in Montreal, *Harry*. This realisation raised questions regarding her mother and her own identity. In a process that took five years as a whole, she ultimately ended up making this documentary, touching upon universal themes of identity, memory, human relationships, family, the nature of truth and our urge to construct narratives.

Polley was born in 1979 in Toronto, Canada. She is an actress, director and producer: the *INTERNET MOVIE DATABASE* credits her with 10 projects as a director and 53 acting jobs.¹³⁹ She has been called an exceptional actress and received an Oscar

¹³⁸ Smith and Watson 2010, p. 271.

¹³⁹ *INTERNET MOVIE DATABASE*, 'Sarah Polley'.

nomination for her directing debut *AWAY FROM HER* (2007).¹⁴⁰ In *STORIES WE TELL*, she is not only the director, but also takes on the role as interrogator and investigator. Consequently, she has a place behind and in front of the camera.

Auto/biography and subjectivity

It is truly an auto/biographical approach, as Polley interviews her mother's friends and family to learn about her mother's double life, and the effects her secrets had on her family and Polley herself. Polley's methods are questioned in the film, notably Harry disagrees with the notion of letting a story be told by numerous people who were not directly involved. However, Polley's stance on this is clear: From the start of the film Polley establishes this story is as much about her mother as it is about her family and herself. She makes a graphic connection between Diane, herself and the rest of the family, as is visible from figures 2-5. Here, shots of family members sitting down to be interviewed are crosscut with shots of Diane right before an audition. Especially shots 3 and 4 are telling, for even though Sarah was not keen on making this film all about herself, the visual connection she draws between herself and her mother is obvious. This not only establishes an auto/biographical story, it also suggest that they are, in some sense, one and the same.

Furthermore, the visual connection between all family members hints at how much the other is involved in autobiography. Waites argues that the fact that "[t]he camera focuses alternately on the interviewees and on Polley herself, call[s] attention to



Figure 2) Capture *STORIES WE TELL* (2012), Mark is sits down for his interview.



Figure 3) Capture *STORIES WE TELL* (2012), Diane sits down before an audition.



Figure 4) Capture *STORIES WE TELL* (2012), Close-up of Polley.



Figure 5) Capture *STORIES WE TELL* (2012), Close-up of Diane.

¹⁴⁰ Turan 2013.

the crucial role of the other in her self-representation".¹⁴¹ It also exemplifies a characteristic of relational memoirs: self-knowing is routed through others, because "one's story is bound up with that of another" which "suggests that the boundaries of an "I" are often shifting and permeable".¹⁴² Bercuci picks up on this 'self-knowing being routed through others', when she argues that it is in fleshing out the complicated identities of her parents that Polley constructs herself, clearly having inherited traits from Diane, Michael and Harry.¹⁴³ As the director, Polley recognizes the permeable boundaries of the I and reflects this. She complicates the autobiographical I in multiple ways. Gernalzick points out that filmic autobiography is characterized by subjective point-of-view shots from the filmmakers perspective, but Polley begins her film with a landscape rapidly moving, as seen from a train in motion (figure 6). Then we see Diane looking out of the window (figure 7). This suggests her subjectivity. Other points in the film do feature Polley's subjective point-of-view. Another way Polley complicates the autobiographical I is that it is not Polley herself who provides the majority of the voice-over, as Gernalzick establishes is common in filmic autobiographies, rather, it is her father Michael who fulfils this role.¹⁴⁴ During the film we hear him read the manuscript he was inspired to write in response to the revelation of Polley's parentage. At other times, the voice-over consists the audio recordings of the interviews with various family members. Polley deliberately did not use first-person narration "because it felt false, self involved, and besides the point", she states in a blogpost.¹⁴⁵ Rosy Martin and Jo Spence argue that the genre of filmic autobiography already complicates the notion of one self, for, in being both maker and subject: "there is no single self but many fragmented selves, each vying for conscious expression, many never acknowledged".¹⁴⁶ Polley's auto/biographical story, then, encompasses both the



Figure 6) Capture STORIES WE TELL (2012), a moving landscape.



Figure 7) Capture STORIES WE TELL (2012), Diane looks out of the window of a train.

¹⁴¹ Waites 2015, p. 544.

¹⁴² Smith and Watson 2010, p. 86.

¹⁴³ Bercuci 2019, pp. 101-102.

¹⁴⁴ Gernalzick 2018, pp. 68-69.

¹⁴⁵ Polley 2012.

¹⁴⁶ Martin, Rosy and Jo Spence, 'Photo Therapy: New Portraits for Old', *Putting Myself in the Picture: a political, personal and photographic autobiography*, London (Camden Press) 1986, p. 172,

'auto' and the 'biography' and as such, she introduces many selves. In doing so, she reflects a characteristic of families: "your family will always be a different one to the one your sister or brother grew up in. Or even that your parents parented. It is a matter of perspective, and perspective will always be subjective."¹⁴⁷ In combining a range of perspectives, Polley recognizes and gives the floor to multiple subjective experiences. This multitude of perspectives is interesting in regard to automediality as well, after all, Kennedy and Maguire recommend looking at the several autobiographical *Is* when taking an automedial approach. According to Waites, this is one of the ways Polley complicates the memoir genre, "which typically relies on the memory and consciousness of a single remember-er".¹⁴⁸ On the one hand, this could mean the boundaries of the memoir genre have become too flexible, on the other hand, this might reveal an unexplored area of our understanding of self and memoir.¹⁴⁹

In the first part of the film, Polley coaxes interviewees to tell stories about Diane. What emerges are differing accounts. Moreover, the interplay of images and voice-over complicate the narrative: in one instance as home videos depict Diane smiling, her son says in a voice-over: "She hated living in Toronto".¹⁵⁰ Generally, however, the film retains a direct and literal relationship between the voice-over and images, as when her children discussing her affair is accompanied by footage of Diane singing "I'm misbehaving". Visible here as well is Gernalzick's argument that in filmic autobiographies, the past is constructed by means of voice-over and images of dated footage.¹⁵¹ Polley reveals in a voice-over that she struggles with constructing her mother's identity, stating: "Every time I feel I have my footing, I lose it". Harry states that Diane is "really the only person who could provide, I mean, the essence, the essentials, of what took place." Evident is ultimately that in her construction of the film Polley sets the viewer up for a parallel experience: the conflicting accounts, narrative complexity and reconstructed home videos leave the viewer with questions of who Diane really was, and, if there even is a way of knowing. This sentiment is further exemplified when Polley's brother Mark remarks: "Why is it that we talk and talk [...] without somehow conveying what we're really like?"

quoted in Daniels 2014, p. 104.

¹⁴⁷ Avieson, Giles and Joseph 2018, pp. 1-2.

¹⁴⁸ Waites 2015, p. 553.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Thornham 2020, p. 265.

¹⁵¹ Gernalzick 2018, p. 69.

Even though a large part of the film focusses on Diane's (love) life, Polley never really blends into the background: directing her father or asking questions during the interviews. Increasingly, her presence grows as the plot regarding the mysterious man Diane had an affair with, involves Polley's search and discovery of her biological father. Together with Harry, she re-enacts their first meeting and the realisation they are father and daughter. Realising one's parentage is different than previously thought, shakes one's own identity, in effect, the search for one's biological father is a search for oneself. Towards the end of the film, Polley reveals that it is during the production process, in email correspondence with Michael, that she realises "The film is really about me." However, in a later interview, Sarah states "I wasn't interested in exposing myself", instead her drive to work on the project was triggered because of the way her father and biological father had responded to the news of her parentage.¹⁵² That she was not interested in exposing herself is also evident from her leaving out her personal reactions. One article in the *Los Angeles Times* notes that whilst Polley "peels back the filmmaking process, filming set-up shots and voice-over sessions", she omits other details, "particularly her personal response to the shocking revelation" about her parentage.¹⁵³ In actuality, Sarah was so affected by the news that she became physically ill and had to remain in bed for two weeks.¹⁵⁴ Even at the time of writing of the article, a couple of years after the revelation, Sarah cannot go to the place she first heard the news, Montreal, without getting sick.¹⁵⁵ In not providing her personal account, Polley complicates the other stories even



Figure 8) Capture STORIES WE TELL (2012), Polley observes as her father records the voice-over.

further. For when Michael states he remembers feeling lucky to focus on taking care of Polley when Diane passed away, Polley's sister Joanna reveals she feels he neglected Sarah during this time. Polley herself, however, never comments on the way she experienced it. Occasionally, in the first part we see her sitting behind a sound board listening to her father's story, but she does not show any real discernible emotion (figure 8). Polley clarifies the absence of her personal opinions in a blog post:

"Whatever my own feelings are about the events that are outlined, about the many dynamic and complicated players or the stunning, vibrant woman my mother was, they are ephemeral, constantly out of my grasp, they change as the years pass. [...]"

¹⁵² Sperling 2013a.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

But I found I could lose myself in the words of the people closest to me. I can feel and hear and see their histories, and I wanted to get lost, immerse myself in those words, and be a detective in my own life and family. Anything I want to say myself about this part of my life is said in the film.”¹⁵⁶

In Polley’s refusal to include her own narrative she shows herself aware of the elusive nature of truth. Again, it is clear that through the construction of her film she lets viewers have a parallel experience. Furthermore, this excerpt indicates Polley actively delegated the subject role to others. Bercuci calls out Polley’s absence, stating: it “makes the story seem less personal, and more like an item worthy of scientific enquiry”, although she concedes that paratexts and genre-conventions indicate Polley’s subjectivity.¹⁵⁷ All in all, this auto/biographical story is marked with a curious mix of absence and subjectivity. In a way, Polley’s absence from the narrative mimics that of another key player: Diane.

Memory: representation, mediation and narrativization

As seen in the first chapter, memory is crucial to the formation of one’s identity. In absence of her mother to tell her own story, Polley uses the collective memory of her family and close friends of her mother to construct Diane’s identity. Even more so than how Avieson, Giles and Joseph describe literary memoirs show active memorialisation, the cinematic counterpart *STORIES WE TELL* is able to depict remembering in real time, when Polley’s interviewees recount their memories, truly revealing “the nature of memory”.¹⁵⁸ As was pointed out in the first chapter, the collaborative process of a group reconstruction is called ‘collective remembering’.¹⁵⁹ Here, memories can become increasingly similar or more contested among participants. Even though Polley interviews the participants in isolation, she captures this paradoxical nature of collective remembering by shedding light on discrepancies between stories. For example, Diane is described by one friend as guileless and by another as someone who was very secretive, or alternatively, as excited for her pregnancy and absolutely not. In juxtaposing these responses, Polley leaves the truth open. The mosaic medley of stories that remains also beautifully illustrates Athanasiades’ earlier referenced point, that it is the fate of parents to become their children’s myths.¹⁶⁰

In losing her mother at such a young age, Sarah necessarily relied on externalities to construct her mother’s identity next to her own memories. Next to family stories, which

¹⁵⁶ Polley 2012.

¹⁵⁷ Bercuci 2019, p. 97.

¹⁵⁸ Avieson, Giles and Joseph 2018, pp. 3-4.

¹⁵⁹ Kansteiner, Wulf, ‘Finding Meaning in Memory: a Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies’, *History and Theory* 41 (2002), pp. 179-197, quoted in Reese and Fivush 2008, p. 202.

¹⁶⁰ Athanasiades 2021, p. 124.

demonstrate “received knowledge”, she had to rely on relics of memory such as home video footage and photographs.¹⁶¹ These mediated memories “create[e] and recreat[e] a sense of the past, present, and future of ourselves in relation to others” and are prominently featured in the film, such as the photograph in figure 9.¹⁶² She questions these containers of memory in her manipulation of them, reconstructing and inventing them based on the collective memory of her family. For example, when John describes at length the way Diane would talk on the phone, Polley lets an actress re-enact this precisely (figure 10).

Jill Daniels discusses the way memory can be mediated in experimental documentary films by analysing the difficulties of representation.

Obviously, a memory itself cannot be captured on film. According to Daniels, filmmakers can turn to referents of memory, such as “witness testimony and interviews, archive or stills from the past or evoke it through filmic strategies such as fictional enactment”.¹⁶³ However, she also quotes David MacDougall, who points out that many documentary films link interviews of people talking about the past with contemporaneous photographs, archival footage and newsreels, falsely presenting these external memory objects as memories of speakers.¹⁶⁴ His conclusion is that these objects from the past cannot convey memories, they can only be used as touchstones for construction or retrieval. Polley employs referents of memory and filmic strategies to convey memories as well, most notably interviews, archival footage and fictional re-enactment. Towards the end of the film, Sarah transparently reveals the film’s fictional element by showing the staged footage being taped, with her behind the camera. In a later interview, she states that around 60% was faked and around 40% of the family footage was shot by her father originally, with a Super



Figure 9) Capture *STORIES WE TELL* (2012), Harry holds a picture of a young Polley.



Figure 10) Capture *STORIES WE TELL* (2012), Diane is speaking on the phone.

¹⁶¹ Reese and Fivush 2008, p. 202.

¹⁶² Van Dijck 2007, p. 21.

¹⁶³ Daniels 2014, p. 88.

¹⁶⁴ MacDougall, David, ‘Films of Memory’, in: Lucien Taylor (ed.), *Transcultural Cinema*, Princeton (Princeton University Press) 1998, p. 232, quoted in *ibid*, p. 89.

8 camera.¹⁶⁵ She taped the staged version with a Super 8 camera as well.¹⁶⁶ Daniels lists a host of cinematic tropes that can be used to signify memory, such as flashbacks, flash-forwards, alteration of age of the characters and changes in the *mise-en-scène*.¹⁶⁷ In the staged scenes, Polley uses alteration of age and *mise-en-scène* to signify the past, next to the Super 8 camera quality. In transparently presenting the fictional aspect, she does not do what MacDougall takes issue with: falsely letting externalities represent memory.

As was argued by Yagoda, the capabilities of memory cannot meet the demands of narrative. Still, as humans we cannot help but construct patterns, coherence and structure into our life narratives. This is exemplified in the film as well: When discussing the discovery of Diane's affair, one sister remarks it did not have an impact, only then to correct herself and remark that all female siblings got a divorce shortly thereafter. This demonstrates how it is after events occur, in their remembrance, that memories find meaning in larger life narratives, and can be placed in a cause and effect structure. It illustrates Fivush's argument as well: that autobiographical memory "moves beyond recall of experienced events to integrate perspective, interpretation, and evaluation across self, other, and time to create a personal history", linking events into a life narrative.¹⁶⁸

Polley experienced a need to develop her story into a narrative.¹⁶⁹ Michael and Harry had a similar response, demonstrating just how much we as humans are wired to narrativize our lives. It is only in hindsight that we are able to discover patterns and provide coherence. Self-aware, *STORIES WE TELL* opens with Michael narrating a passage from a novel by Margaret Atwood: "When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion ... It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you're telling it, to yourself or to someone else." The film features many varying stories, which come together in a sequential, mostly chronologically told, classical narrative form. It is Polley's specific instruction to her interviewees, to tell the whole story, from the very beginning till the very end. This, however, goes in against the non-narrative, non-linear approaches to memory as described by Kuhn and Daniels. In *STORIES WE TELL* we are presented with a sequentially ordered beginning, middle and end, albeit not an entirely "smooth, stable, unraveling of experience" (sic), in the words of Avieson, Giles and

¹⁶⁵ Sperling 2013b.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Daniels 2014, p. 90.

¹⁶⁸ Fivush 2011, p. 560.

¹⁶⁹ Sperling 2013a.

Joseph.¹⁷⁰ In an interview at a film festival, Sarah relates the story of how initially, *STORIES WE TELL* was meant to have an entirely different structure. She explains how this structure resembled that of the 1950 Japanese film *RASHOMON*, famous for featuring various versions of the same incident, as told by different characters. Polley would first tell her story, then Harry, then Michael and so on, after which all persons participating in the film would watch and debate these stories.¹⁷¹ Later on in the process, she decided on interweaving the interviews combined with her father's story as the "thread that would be the spine throughout the film".¹⁷² Additionally, she explains how she moved the revelation of her mother's first marriage and divorce to the middle of the story, opposed to telling it chronologically.¹⁷³ This choice generates tension in the narrative. Polley emphasizes that this was also done to mimic the way she found out these stories, giving the viewer a parallel experience.¹⁷⁴ Likewise, the viewer experiences the discrepancies in the family stories just as Polley did. With this text then, she mirrors the nature of memory itself, furthermore exemplified when she calls her own memories "ephemeral" and "constantly out of [her] grasp".¹⁷⁵ In this sense, *STORIES WE TELL* illustrates a characteristic of Kuhn's memory text: the form is as important as the content; here they are mirror images.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, Bercuci suggests *STORIES WE TELL* has a therapeutic function: Polley and Michael construct a narrative around the trauma of Diane's death in order to overcome it, "exposing the narrative means through which this is done verbally as well as visually".¹⁷⁷ Also Kuhn argues that memory texts have a therapeutic function, stating: "These practices often embody, though not always explicitly, a wish and a conviction that the wounds of the past be healed in the very



Figure 11) Capture *STORIES WE TELL* (2012), Polley re-enacts a conversation with Michael.



Figure 12) Capture *STORIES WE TELL* (2012), Polley chats with the actress portraying Diane.

¹⁷⁰ Avieson, Giles and Joseph 2018, p. 16.

¹⁷¹ ND/NF Q&A: "STORIES WE TELL", SARAH POLLEY.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Polley 2012.

¹⁷⁶ Kuhn 2000, p. 190.

¹⁷⁷ Bercuci 2019, p. 102.

activity of rescuing memory from the oblivion of forgetfulness and repression".¹⁷⁸ The instance in the film where Polley is seen talking with the actress who portrays her mother feels therapeutic. It is framed in exactly the same way Polley's re-enacted conversations with her fathers were staged (figures 11, 12 and 13). Aesthetically, it looks as if Polley is able to have a conversation with her mother again, indicating the explicit wish to heal the wounds of the past. In this sense, then, *STORIES WE TELL* exhibits features of a memory text.

Fictionality

Even though Gernalzick argues that in filmic autobiography there is no traditional screenplay nor roles that are fulfilled by actors, the documentary medium does allow and often features fictional re-enactment.¹⁷⁹ Arguably, especially because of viewer expectation and the indexicality of the images are documentaries the medium par excellence to play with fictionality. As was observed earlier, Polley inserts fictionalized footage depicting home videos. The re-enactments draw on Polley and her family's memory. It is interesting that in Polley's representation of memory, it is reminiscent of the way we reconstruct memories and the blurred border between memory and imagination, which were addressed in the first chapter. Polley plays with genre-expectations; Gernalzick addresses the visualization of the past, stating this is achieved by a combination of voice-over and photographs or home videos in filmic autobiographies.¹⁸⁰ This is why we initially have no reason to distrust the footage presented. Even so, in watching the film, the viewer might occasionally marvel at or question the fact so much of what the voice-over states is accompanied by corresponding home video footage. Towards the end, Polley cues the viewer in by showing some behind-the-scenes footage. Even though she does this, apparently some audience members were still baffled at the end of the film, only realising the fictionality of some fragments when reading the credits on screen.¹⁸¹ About this, Polley states: "I didn't want to intentionally confuse people but I did want people to have moments where they wondered, but in a conscious way, what was real and what wasn't".¹⁸² Polley uses this aspect of fictionality, then, to play into the larger theme of the unknowability of truth.

Performativity of the self is a recurring theme in the film. It cannot be overlooked that many of the actors involved were literally that, actors. One sister calls her mother's

¹⁷⁸ Kuhn 2000, p. 184.

¹⁷⁹ Gernalzick 2018, p. 69.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Sperling 2013b.

¹⁸² Ibid.

funeral “some kind of production” where “[she] felt like [she] was in a big play or something.” Michael mentions at the beginning of the film that he feels like Diane essentially fell for the characters he embodied on stage, not his introverted self. He demonstrates he is conscious of his own performativity when he responds to Sarah’s request to restate a line in the recording: “I was being so real”, or, at the end of the film stating when he is emotionally touched: “There was no acting in any of that.” Sarah only adds to the performativity of course, in creating a fictional past: “Polley highlights the degree to which the self that is represented in and produced by the film is a dynamic, ongoing performance constructed in relationship to others”.¹⁸³ This sentiment is echoed by Moser when he argues that every self-representation object “is always a fictional construct—an ‘other’ self, a persona—and that every self-representation therefore contains an element of autofiction”.¹⁸⁴ Next to actors playing family members, the family members also play younger versions of themselves. Daniels notes these strategies are frequently employed in experimental autobiographical documentaries, in order to explore the past.¹⁸⁵ In re-enactment, the filmmaker can use the medium to explore memories, also in the very literal sense, by essentially reliving them. This can be observed in *STORIES WE TELL* in multiple instances. For example, when Polley stages her first meeting with Harry (figure 13), voice-overs of her family members and Harry provide the story as the scene plays out, their mouthed words even corresponding to the voice-over at times. It should be noted that employing fictional devices to show the “constructed nature of identity and memory-driven storytelling” is also a staple of the literary memoir genre.¹⁸⁶ Yet, the objective nature of documentary, the realist tradition of film, and the one-on-one correspondence between ‘reality’ and filmic images, make it a particularly powerful medium to play with fictionality. Still, according to Waites, the fictional aspect of *STORIES WE TELL* is not its most interesting part. She states:

“Of particular interest to students of life writing is not the fact that Polley employs self-reflexivity and blurs the lines between fact and fiction, since there is ample precedent for this in literary memoir, but that her film process augments the



Figure 13) Capture *STORIES WE TELL* (2012), Polley re-enacts her first meeting with Harry.

¹⁸³ Waites 2015, p. 543.

¹⁸⁴ Moser 2019, p. 257.

¹⁸⁵ Daniels 2014, pp. 99-100.

¹⁸⁶ Waites 2015, p. 544.

constructed nature of the self, demonstrates the elusiveness of truth, and enhances the self-reflective element necessary to memoir. A visual artist, she “stages” remembered events, as the writer of literary memoir does with scene, in order to bring the past into focus and to gain perspective. But here her camera-self is winking at the audience, as if to say: “Yes, I am reaching back into the past to find and tell the truth to ascertain the self,” while at the same time conceding that even if her mother were still alive and could speak for herself, the truth would likely remain elusive.”¹⁸⁷

Waites emphasizes that Polley does with a camera “what the writer does with the pen (or the keyboard) and the artist does with the brush”, a sentiment which obviously resonates with Astruc’s *camera-stylo*.¹⁸⁸ In doing so, Waites acknowledges film as a medium capable of articulating complex thought. The medium film enables Polley to go further than its literary equivalent in allowing her a visible self-awareness and enhancing the articulation of “the constructed nature of the self,” “the elusiveness of truth,” and self-reflexiveness. In *STORIES WE TELL* Michael acknowledges the enormous power Polley holds as the director, the operator of the *camera-stylo*. He argues that letting an interview “run as it is” would approach the truth, “whereas [her] editing of this will turn this into something completely different.” He is right in calling attention to this but misreads her aim: Polley is not interested in truth as an absolute, singular concept but as an elusive, ephemeral and fluctuating plurality.

Aesthetics

Gernalzick states that many filmic autobiographies feature shaky camera movements, uncommon lighting, varying sound quality and quick panning shots.¹⁸⁹ Whilst most of *STORIES WE TELL* is shot in high quality static shots, the home video footage and enacted scenes are shot with a hand-held camera and do feature shaky camera movements. The Super 8 film format is not only the same as the one actually used by Polley’s father on family holidays, it is also “a medium of a certain time. We associate Super 8 with home movies lost in basements”, perfect for invoking the look of the 1970s, as explained by one of the film’s producers, Anita Lee.¹⁹⁰ Moreover, as was laid out in my previous discussion of the aesthetics of video, the handheld shots, low-resolution images and general unpolished air, lends the medium a feel of intimacy, authenticity and directness.¹⁹¹ Even though technically film stock differs from video tape, within this context they are aesthetically highly comparable. Again, Polley subverts her viewers expectation: these images look real

¹⁸⁷ Waites 2015, pp. 552-553.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 544; Alter 2018, p. 102.

¹⁸⁹ Gernalzick 2018, p. 70.

¹⁹⁰ Mongrel Media 2012.

¹⁹¹ Newman 2014, p. 68.

and extremely personal, only in actuality the majority is faked. Diane, the real and the actress portraying her, are only seen in this format, which, according to Thornham, renders Diane a particularly fragmented and elusive subject.¹⁹² This is already evident from the sequence of Super 8 footage at the start of the film: we see fragments of staged and real home videos, varying in distance and angle but always obviously hand-held. Diane moves in and out of focus, is completely in the frame, seen from a distance, in fragments (figure 14) or extremely close by (figure 7). The fast-paced editing in the opening sequence furthermore illustrates Diane's energetic and somewhat chaotic personality. Additionally, the sequence showing Diane in the beginning, in figures 3 and 5, is in black and white. This, according to Thornham, "produce[s] a sense of temporal disturbance and impossible synchrony".¹⁹³ The



Figure 14) Capture *STORIES WE TELL* (2012), the camera captures Diane's feet as she moves away.



Figure 15) Capture *STORIES WE TELL* (2012), Polley stands behind the camera.

footage of the late subject also evokes Barthes' photographic 'this-has-been' quality. Not only Diane appears in Super 8, however. Throughout the film, Polley uses it to show herself (figure 4), her re-enacted encounters with possible fathers (figure 13), and the filmmaking process (figure 15). In exposing the process, the grittiness of the image contributes to the feeling this then is depicting reality, in contrast to the clearly more constructed and static digital shots. Furthermore, this draws another visible connection between Polley and her mother. It lends these images of Polley the same intimate and authentic view. Polley uses the medium to implicate herself in the past, perhaps attempting to overcome the 'impossible synchrony'.

Self-reflexivity

As argued by Moser, self-reflexivity is an important aspect of automediality: "It signifies how a self-representation relates to and stages the media it employs".¹⁹⁴ Additionally, Gernalzick identifies it as one of the main features of filmic autobiographies.¹⁹⁵ *STORIES WE*

¹⁹² Thornham 2020, p. 267.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 269.

¹⁹⁴ Moser 2019, p. 249.

¹⁹⁵ Gernalzick 2018, p. 69.

TELL is as much about the filmmaking process as anything else, resulting in many explicit instances of self-reflexivity. It opens with Michael and Polley entering a recording studio so he can provide the narration of the film. This sequence establishes Polley as director, clearly taking authority over the film in giving her father instructions. After this, we see Polley setting up her family members and mother's friends in order to interview them. Of course, towards the end of the film, when it is revealed a large part of the home videos was staged, we can see Polley directing it. *STORIES WE TELL* demonstrates both the verbal and visual self-reflexivity Gernalzick addressed in point 6 of her taxonomy of filmic autobiographies: filmmaking is a topic in the film and equipment is shown on screen, respectively.¹⁹⁶

Seeing the themes of the documentary, it is perhaps unsurprising that it is so self-reflexive in nature. Daniels notes that "In many documentary films that interrogate memory there is a discourse centred on personal identity and self-reflexivity where identity is articulated through the inscription of the filmmaker's self into the film".¹⁹⁷ According to Waites this self-reflexivity, both the exposing of the filmic process and the fact that the director is framed as the self-reflexive subject of the film, in effect remind the viewer that storytelling and identity "are both under narrative construction".¹⁹⁸ Polley herself explains that because the film is about storytelling, "I thought it was really important to include the process of making this film itself in the film".¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Daniels 2014, p. 101.

¹⁹⁸ Waites 2015, p. 548.

¹⁹⁹ National Public Radio 2013.

Chapter 4

Background and plot

This chapter features a close analysis of *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS*, by Catarina Vasconcelos. After a brief synopsis and relevant background information, the film is considered in terms of auto/biography and subjectivity. Then, the representation, mediation and narrativization of memory is discussed. Lastly, I study fictionality, aesthetics and self-reflexivity within this film.

When the grandfather of filmmaker Catarina Vasconcelos was close to dying, he ordered his children to burn the letters he and his late wife Beatriz (Triz) wrote to each other when he was gone overseas. His six children, amongst them his oldest son and namesake Henrique, complied, albeit reluctantly. When Henrique, Vasconcelos's father, initially mentioned his father's plans to her, she tried to protest.²⁰⁰ After all, her grandmother died two years before she was born, and the letters felt like the only way to get to know her. In the end, she realised the secrets of her grandparents were theirs to keep, but this ordeal did spark the interest in making *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS*. With this hybrid documentary, Vasconcelos reimagines the content of the letters, and tells a poetic auto/biographical, intergenerational story of her family. Themes such as memories, motherhood, the past, present and grief are interrelated and connected across generations by means of visual and verbal metaphors. Some are subtle, others a bit more heavy-handed, as is visible from the capture on the cover page where Vasconcelos literally constructs her grandmother's image (figure 1). Nevertheless, what emerges is a beautiful, deeply personal and intimate family portrait, an ode to life, mothers and death.

Premiering at the 2020 Berlin Film Festival, *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* won the FIPRESCI Prize for Best Film.²⁰¹ The film can be divided up in two parts: the first consists of chronologically ordered and fragmented fictionalized scenes of family life, whereas the second part is more abstract, combining voice-overs with symbolic images and following a more emotional logic. The first part re-enacts aspects of family life before the death of Vasconcelos's grandmother, the second part represents the period after that, including Vasconcelos's own story. For this film not only illustrates Vasconcelos's attempt to get to know her grandmother, it also gives an account of her relationship with her own father, and their shared experience of the loss of her own mother. Her grandmother died in 1983,

²⁰⁰ Q&A *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS*.

²⁰¹ Romney 2020.

when her father was 36, and Vasconcelos lost her own mother in 2003, when she was only 17.²⁰²

This film is truly a family affair: the majority of the cast consists of the members of Vasconcelos's family, including Vasconcelos herself. Together with her father, she provides a large part of the voice-over. Additionally, she casts her nieces and nephews as Henrique and Beatriz's children. Moreover, the real life grown-up children, all in their sixties and seventies, also appear towards the end of the film. In order to get to know stories of her grandmother, Vasconcelos interviewed her family members in the process of making this film. Still, she felt blank spaces, gaps in the stories her family told her.²⁰³ Realising this is an inevitability of family stories, she took this as a *carte blanche* to rewrite her family history. These gaps directly influenced the form of the documentary: Earlier, Vasconcelos's aim had been to make a more classical documentary but being left with many remaining questions inspired her to go into the fictionalized direction.²⁰⁴

Vasconcelos desired to use real and significant objects and locales to film. She hoped to film at the house her grandparents had lived in, but unfortunately, it was sold during the production period.²⁰⁵ She did manage to film on one of the ships her grandfather boarded during his time as sailor.²⁰⁶ Additionally, although the letters were destroyed, her grandmother Beatriz did leave many tangible objects behind, such as photographs, memorabilia and even a voice recording. The backdrop of this intensely personal story is a changing, modernizing Portugal; throughout the film the oppressive role for women in society and Portugal's dictatorship and colonial past flickers through.

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS is Vasconcelos's debut film, building on themes she developed in a short film she made during her Master in 2014, called METAPHOR, OR SADNESS INSIDE OUT (METÁFORA OU A TRISTEZA VIRADA DO AVESSO).²⁰⁷ She studied at a fine



Figure 16) Capture THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS (2020), a shot depicting a table with food resembles a still life painting.

²⁰² Dale 2020.

²⁰³ THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS Q&A WITH CATARINA VASCONCELOS.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Dale 2020.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

arts academy, obtaining a degree in graphic design, and has recently completed her Master's degree in Visual Communication at London's Royal College of Art.²⁰⁸ Her strong interest in art also shines through in the film; in the presence of paintings (figure 17) and the meticulous way she composed her shots, expressing in a later interview she wanted the film to resemble still life paintings (figure 16).²⁰⁹

The origin of the title of the film *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* shines through when Vasconcelos explains in a voice-over that bird migration used to be a mystery to mankind: they confused the birds that disappeared in winter with the ones that appeared simultaneously: "Linnets left at the same time as thrushes seemed to arise from winter trees." Never appearing at the same time, they were believed to be one and the same, albeit with a different appearance and characteristics. Both the theme of metamorphosis

and nature are present throughout the film. Mothers are likened to trees, fathers to seas and their children to birds. Additionally, Vasconcelos explains in a later interview, "[t]he question of metamorphosis is linked to the idea of how the character portraying my father in the film, transforms into me."²¹⁰ This brings us to the way Vasconcelos deals with auto/biography.

Auto/biography and subjectivity

The film opens with an extreme close-up shot of the eyes of the actor portraying Vasconcelos's grandfather. We hear him say "Triz. I always liked this short and delicate name by which you liked to be called". He then tells her he now resides in an old people's home and touches upon aspects of his life since her death. Commencing with Triz's name signals her importance to the story, moreover, it is literally addressed to her. Henrique senior may open the story as the narrator, he talks mostly of his beloved Trish, describing how he



Figure 17) Capture *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* (2020), the painting by Sorolla hangs upon a wall.



Figure 18) Capture *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* (2020), Beatriz is seen via the reflection of the mirror.

²⁰⁸ Smith 2020; Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Smith 2020.

²¹⁰ Dale 2020.

took a reproduction of the painting *Mother* by Joaquín Sorolla to his new apartment, because it has always reminded him of her: “I’ve always thought it was you lying there with one of our children” (figure 17). Using a referent to depict Beatriz signals the way *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* captures her, as more of an approximation than anything else. The first time viewers see Triz, they glimpse the woman portraying her via a mirror (figure 18). Another time, a magnifying glass enlarges a picture of her.



Figure 19) Capture *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* (2020), Beatriz is seen through a magnifying glass.

Vasconcelos very literally depicts what the voice-over says: “Henrique saw the family grow from away” is accompanied by a shot of the photo of Beatriz magnified (figure 19). For the most part, Beatriz is only seen in glimpses or reflections. It seems a metaphor for the subjects we can construct of people when we only get to know them via stories and memory objects. Much like a mirror image, it is only a reflection of the ‘real’ Beatriz.

In the second part of the film, Vasconcelos thematizes her relationship with her father, both portraying themselves on screen. She narrates her father’s story and her father narrates her story, literally illustrating what Polley demonstrated as well: the crucial role of the other in self-representation.²¹¹ Furthermore, this exemplifies the connections between their stories. In addition to this, the metamorphosis theme is visually illustrated multiple times as well. At one point in the film, her father is seen reading a letter,



Figure 20) Capture *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* (2020), Vasconcelos holds up a mirror which reflects her father reading a letter.

mirroring the letter exchange in the first part of the film. Vasconcelos narrates the content of the letter. In the shot, we see her father in the reflection of a mirror she holds up (figure 20). Just as her father, Vasconcelos is also sitting down. In a *trompe-l’oeil* effect, Henrique’s legs seem to melt into hers. Whilst visibly connecting the past and the present, Vasconcelos also comments on the self and the other, letting them blend and tell each other’s stories. It is, then, abundantly clear Vasconcelos tells an auto/biographical story: she recognizes the interrelations between autobiography and biography, and foregrounds this to create a coherent, cyclical narrative. In doing so, she goes further than the

²¹¹ Waites 2015, p. 544.

seemingly incidental affinities Eakin spots in autobiography: that stories of the self automatically involve the other.²¹²

Visually, the second part is marked by distance, depicting open spaces of nature. Vasconcelos herself is not directly seen, sometimes hiding by blending into her background with the help of mirrors (figure 21). We cannot even be sure this is her, although the part proceeding this sequence involved counting and voices shouting names, including hers, invoking a children's game such as hide-and-seek.

Metaphorically, by hiding behind trees and reflecting them back, she draws a connection between herself



Figure 21) Capture THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS (2020), Vasconcelos holds up a mirror reflecting the forest.

and Beatriz, who is likened to trees throughout the story. Additionally, this hiding behind a mirror complicates Vasconcelos's subjectivity: in the same manner as Beatriz, Vasconcelos is an elusive subject, but in opposition to Beatriz, we never see Vasconcelos's entire face. In shots she hides behind mirrors, has her back towards the camera, is filmed from a distance or only visible in the moving reflection of water. The repeated use of mirrors for representation is interesting: "while mirrors are used to create an illusion in cinema, they also serve to portray people as accurately as possible".²¹³ As such, mirrors occupy a paradoxical place between illusion and faithful representation. Where the second part of the story is marked by absence and distance, the first part is marked by intimacy and closeness in its depiction of close-ups and warm-toned shots. It seems the subject was better grasped in retrospect; the hindsight and inventions of memories and stories allow for a better reconstruction. The subject in the present is more elusive. In this light, Atwood's excerpt quoted by Michael in *STORIES WE TELL* is relevant again: in the middle, the story is only a confusion.

There are multiple narrators who tell this family history. For this reason, it has been called a "polyphonic diary".²¹⁴ It presents multiple narratives and narrators, alternating between the first and third person. In constructing the story like this, Vasconcelos subverts the first-person narratives in filmic autobiographies Gernalzick identified and emphasizes

²¹² Eakin, Paul John, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Ithaca (Cornell University Press) 1999, quoted in Danielewicz 2012, p. 271.

²¹³ Bercuci 2019, p. 100.

²¹⁴ *BERLINALE*, 'A metamorfose dos pássaros'.

the significant role of the other in the formation of the self.²¹⁵ Furthermore, Vasconcelos often leaves unclear whose voice is speaking in the voice-over. This way, she shows the autobiographical I has permeable boundaries.²¹⁶ At the same time, in later interviews, Vasconcelos reveals the voice-over we hear was written in its entirety by her.²¹⁷ Here her control as auto/biographer shines through, although she opts not to reveal this within the film. In this sense, Vasconcelos does not take overt authority over the text, even distancing herself further through the use of third-person narration. Still, she does not remove herself from the narrative completely, for she inserts parts featuring her own personal experiences here and there. For example, when she reminisces about her mother's death in a voice-over. Yet, as the film as a whole is so fragmentary, what remains are many questions left unanswered. We never learn for how long Henrique senior was at home during the year, nor how important the role of housekeeper Zulmira was in the upbringing of the children. Of course, these gaps mirror the gaps Vasconcelos encountered when hearing the family stories. Evident is how Vasconcelos carefully constructs the story in such a way that it creates a parallel experience in the viewer.

Memory: representation, mediation and narrativization

Memory and remembering play a large part in the narrative of *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS*. After all, the story is constructed from the remembered family narratives of the Vasconcelos family, and Vasconcelos fills in the gaps of memory with fact and fiction. Memory, as well as the different shapes it can take such as nostalgia and mourning, is thematized. Beatriz is envisioned as a keeper of memories when she is shown collecting her children's locks, drawings and childhood treasures and toys, neatly categorizing them (figure 22).

In a voice-over, she states that when everyone is sleeping her "hands start gathering our children's childhoods. They guard them with secrecy as if they were relics." She talks about finding her children in these memorabilia, when they've long grown up: "we will visit our children, when they were little." This theme of remembering through objects is reoccurring. In the beginning of the film, Henrique states: "Today our children began taking our house apart. They will find you there, I know."



Figure 22) Capture *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* (2020), Beatriz keeps João's childhood toys in an envelope.

²¹⁵ Gernalzick 2018, pp. 68-69.

²¹⁶ Smith and Watson 2010, p. 86.

²¹⁷ *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS Q&A WITH CATARINA VASCONCELOS*.

Later on, Vasconcelos and her father alternate in stating where they find their respective late mothers, in appearances, traits, nature, places and objects. Henrique states: “My mother is in the tidying up of chests, in the tidying up of our childhoods by age. [...] My mother is in the love letters that are locked in a chest.” Moreover, in an interview Vasconcelos explained that it felt like Beatriz died for a second time when her letters were burned.²¹⁸ People seem to live on in the objects they leave behind. This sentiment is perhaps best illustrated in a voice-over statement earlier in the film: “Objects have their own secret lives”. The way Vasconcelos represents memory illustrates van Dijck’s concept of mediated memories, which simultaneously exist in material objects and our minds, and are capable of “creating and re-creating a sense of the past, present, and future”.²¹⁹

In a voice-over, Vasconcelos explains she felt she truly got to know her father once they discussed his mother, a conversation which “opened the doors he had locked.” She states she realised then “there was a part of [her] father that [she] had never known: the part he was with you, the part that disappears with the birds when they migrate.” In other words, the part of yourself that you lose when someone close to you dies, as they take your shared memories with them. As was demonstrated in the first chapter, evident from this sentiment as well is how collective memories can disappear when members of the group pass.²²⁰ With Beatriz’s death, the second part of the film starts, featuring highly symbolic shots and sequences. It opens with the sound of a polaroid camera producing a picture. This picture is brought into frame, completely blank at first. As it starts to develop Vasconcelos and her father reminisce about Vasconcelos’s birth and her mother’s death. Slowly, the picture gains colour and we can see it depicts Vasconcelos’s mother directly after giving birth, smiling happily as she is given her baby (figure 23). Beatriz’s death brings us into the present, very symbolically with the birth of Vasconcelos, representing another metamorphosis. The second part establishes many visual parallels with the first part, connecting the past and the present. The visual parallels here also illustrate Clare and Johnson’s argument in the first chapter, that



Figure 23) Capture THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS (2020), Vasconcelos’s mother smiles as she looks upon her baby.

²¹⁸ Q&A THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS.

²¹⁹ Van Dijck 2007, p. 21.

²²⁰ De Jong 2018, p. 13.

memory denotes a relationship between the past and present.²²¹ In casting the new generation and via rhyming visual imagery (figures 24 and 25), Vasconcelos articulates the past in the present, recreating it there.

In an interview, Vasconcelos talks about the process of conceptualising the film, explaining she started with the images. Perhaps unsurprisingly, considering her fine arts background, but when she started writing the film, she started writing descriptions of images.²²² She accompanied these with small notes on the text, sequence and narrative of the story. It was only after the entire film was shot and edited that she spend 5-6 months creating the script for the voice-over.²²³ This making-of is interesting to consider in light of Kuhn's musings. Kuhn wonders whether memory is similar to dreams and fantasies, whether it shares the same imagistic quality, reflecting: "functioning in much the same way as the dreamwork, with its condensations, its displacements—gaps, non-causal logic, discontinuous scenes. The language of memory does seem to be above all a language of images" (sic).²²⁴ In constructing a memory text, Vasconcelos seemed to speak this 'language of images'.

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS reflects several characteristics Kuhn identifies in memory texts, even though this film undoubtedly has undergone "considerable revision at a conscious level", in its 5-6 year production process.²²⁵ The most prominent feature of memory texts is its discontinuous ordering of time. Whilst overall, events in THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS are ordered chronologically, which is discernible in the growing-up of characters and the move from past to present, what Vasconcelos shows is typical for



Figure 24) Capture THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS (2020), Henrique lies on the ground, looking at the camera.



Figure 252) Capture THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS (2020), an older Henrique lies on the ground, looking at the camera.

²²¹ Clare, Mariette and Richard Johnson, 'Method in our Madness: Identity and Power in a Memory Work Method', in: Susannah Radstone (ed.), *Memory and Methodology*, Oxford and New York (Berg) 2000, p.199, quoted in Daniels 2013, p. 6.

²²² THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS Q&A WITH CATARINA VASCONCELOS.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Kuhn 2000, p. 188.

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 189; THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS Q&A WITH CATARINA VASCONCELOS.

a memory texts; she illustrates moments, “anecdotes, fragments, ‘snapshots’, flashes”.²²⁶ Instead of relaying scenes from Henrique’s childhood in a more conventional, dramatized way, we see glimpses, fragments, a string of moments: children playing Yahtzee, bath time, a birthday party. The events are not related causally, but placed in a cyclical narrative: events, or rather, fragments, are mimicked and repeated throughout the film (figures 24 and 25). In doing so, Vasconcelos appeals to timelessness and universality. Kuhn explains: “recurrent scenes ... produce a sense of time as cyclical: a version of ‘timelessness’ in which life’s peak events, the rituals of birth, marriage and death, inexorably repeat themselves, but never change”.²²⁷ Vasconcelos overtly addresses this theme in her film: in a voice-over she says her father

“would then think of all the mothers that had ever existed and died. And all the mothers’ mothers, and all the mothers’ mothers’ mothers, and all the mothers’ mothers’ mothers’ mothers [...] And he realized that what he felt was nothing new.”

According to Kuhn, in its specific, cyclical organisation of time, memory texts can capture universally “shared meanings, shared feelings, shared memories” through its articulation of the personal.²²⁸ In her deeply personal family portrait then, Vasconcelos is able to capture universality. Next to this, *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* exhibits other characteristics of Kuhn’s memory text. It is a shining example of how “memory texts are metaphorical rather than analogical”, having “more in common with poetry than with classical narrative” and demonstrates shifting narrative viewpoints.²²⁹

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS not only chronicles a story of remembering, it is also a story of loss, of mourning. Mourning is, according to Kuhn, “another kind of remembering, one that involves a repeated recalling to memory of the lost object in reality a process that, unlike nostalgia, will end with letting go”.²³⁰ Furthermore, memory texts can have a healing, therapeutic function. Kuhn states:

“In their staging of memory, revisionist autobiography and visual autobiography can encompass a therapeutic aspiration. These practices often embody, though not always explicitly, a wish and a conviction that the wounds of the past be healed in the very activity of rescuing memory from the oblivion of forgetfulness and repression”.²³¹

²²⁶ Kuhn 2000, pp. 189-190.

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 191.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 190.

²³⁰ Ibid., p. 188.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 184.

Vasconcelos herself states in an interview: “there were some things about my own mother and my own memories [...] I started to have the feeling that I was forgetting them, and some of them that I would never get to know, because my mother died far too young.”²³² In her film, Vasconcelos symbolizes exactly what Kuhn describes, healing through rescuing, and, more to the point, inventing memories. She demonstrates this in a sequence in the second part of the film, where she plays footage of her plucking leaves in reverse: essentially restoring them (figure 26). It takes on more meaning when we remember that she continually calls mothers “trees”. It is also not insignificant that during this sequence, Vasconcelos describes in a voice-over that she had a dream where her mother came to visit and insisted she had not died. At the end of the sequence Vasconcelos is standing in front of a tree, her back towards the camera. When she steps away from the tree, she reveals flowerpetals within a hollow part (figure 27). This feels ambiguous: the glaring red obviously invokes the image of a gaping wound, but at the same time, if we consider the hollow part of the tree the wound, then it looks mended: filled in and decorated with flowers. In its ambiguity it is perhaps the most fitting metaphor for healing through remembering and the lingering pain of grief.

In a sequence where Vasconcelos’s father talks about his memories of the day his mother died, he states: “I still can’t remember that day very well, because the days when something that big happens, like a mother dying, never become memories. They stay stuck to us forever, like skin moles that never leave. They are too painful to reach the brain. That’s why we keep them on our skins.” This excerpt exemplifies what was argued by Loredana Bercuci, that traumatic experiences are cannot be processed in one’s memory.²³³ Moreover, she states, trauma can only be represented through a literary language, as that

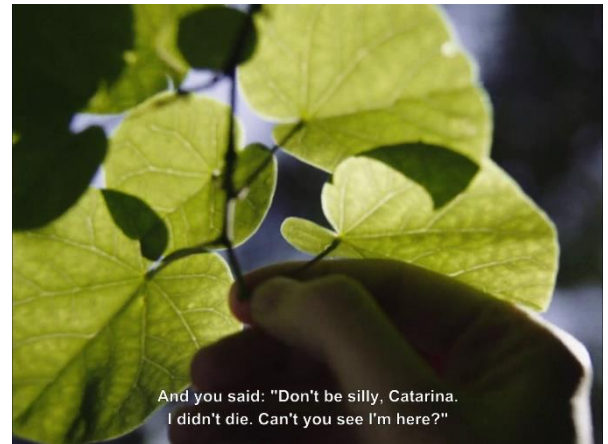


Figure 26) Capture THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS (2020), Vasconcelos ‘restores’ leaves to plants.



Figure 27) Capture THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS (2020), Flowers adorn a tree.

²³² THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS Q&A WITH CATARINA VASCONCELOS.

²³³ Bercuci 2019, p. 92.

is defiant even if we understand it.²³⁴ The poetic tone of Vasconcelos's film certainly meets this requirement.

Fictionality

"And when you can't remember... invent." This sentiment appears and reappears throughout *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS*. Naomi Greene reflects on memory: "Marked by its 'distance' from history, [...] memory seeks less to recapture the past than to re-create it; it wants not to confront the ghosts of history but rather to establish a place where they may flourish forever".²³⁵ Similarly, Vasconcelos invents the content of her grandparents' letters and re-enacts and recreates scenes of family life based on accounts her family told her in preparation of this film. Vasconcelos's self-insertion and re-enactments complicate how the film presents the 'real'. Kuhn views autobiography and fictional storytelling as strictly separate, but this hybrid documentary, and others like it, complicate her argument.

According to Kuhn:

Autobiography differs from fictional forms of storytelling in two main ways: events narrated make a claim to actuality (they 'really' happened); and the narrator, the writing I, is set up in a relation of identity with the central protagonist, the written I. Writer and subject purport to be one; the writer in the moment of writing being the same as, or a logical extension of, the self of the earlier years of the real life being written about.²³⁶

Immediately after this she concedes that autobiographies with linear, teleological narratives are in and of itself a kind of fiction, a point this thesis underlines as well. Still, on the basis of her divide between fictionality and autobiography, it is evident just how much *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* problematizes Kuhn's definition. In *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS*, the story, whilst not stating 'this is how it really happened', definitely makes "a claim" to actuality, and through self-insertion, Vasconcelos lets filmmaker and subject be one.

Whilst it is clear from the get-go this documentary recreates and fictionalizes scenes, it is only at the very end that Vasconcelos reveals that the letters have been burned, betraying that the voice-overs during the first part were complete fabrications as

²³⁴ Caruth, Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, narrative and history*, Baltimore (John Hopkins University Press) 1996, p. 5, quoted in *ibid*.

²³⁵ Greene, Naomi, 'Empire as Myth and Memory', in: Marcia Landy (ed.), *The Historical Film*, Great Britain (The Athlone Press) 2000, p. 247, quoted in Daniels 2013, p. 8.

²³⁶ Kuhn 2000, p. 180.

well. She also re-enacts and dramatizes the burning of the letters. Henrique and Beatriz's children, portrayed by themselves, are gathered around the fire and a voice-over states: "They each imagined the words that were in those bundles of letters. If they couldn't have them, they had the right to invent them, and thus imagine their mother again" (figure 28). Again Vasconcelos highlights invention, once again moving freely between the closely connected functions of memory and imagination.

As was noted previously, it is not uncommon for documentaries to employ experimental strategies to explore the past.²³⁷ Daniels calls the people cast in the place of the characters who are absent, as acting as "surrogates".²³⁸ Vasconcelos's family members act as surrogates for their ancestors. As viewers, we are not tricked as we are by Polley's recreations. From the very first shot in Vasconcelos's film it is clear this is a highly stylized and fictionalized approach to storytelling. Moreover, as the film progresses, some shots are so outlandish, there is no doubt Vasconcelos does not intend to trick us. These shots are outright surreal and alienating, as when the camera rises from a close-up of housekeeper Zulmira's hands preparing food, to reveal she is wearing a rubber chicken mask. During this, the voice-over states: "Sometimes it seems that the garden birds live in our bedrooms" as bird noises play. This is also illustrative of how Vasconcelos often establishes a direct and literal relationship between the spoken word and image. Another example of this is visible in figure 19, when the voice-over states: "Henrique saw the family grow for afar" and the shot depicts a picture of Beatriz and the children as seen through a magnifying glass.

After the last shot of the film, a voice recording of Beatriz plays over a black screen. It is a record of a message for her husband, that she taped together with four of her



Figure 28) Capture THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS (2020), the grown-up children are gathered around a fire.

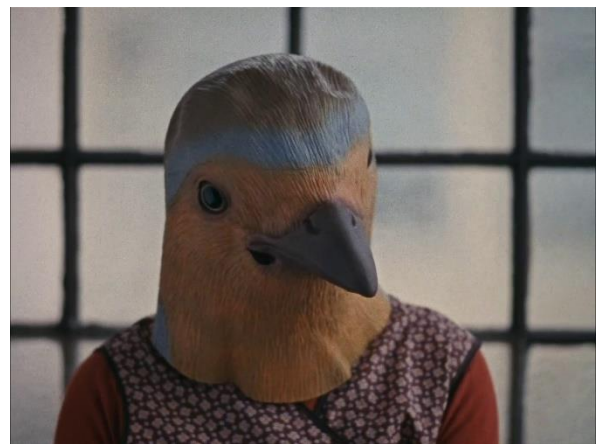


Figure 29) Capture THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS (2020), Zulmira is revealed to be wearing a bird's mask.

²³⁷ Daniels 2014, pp. 99-100.

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 100.

children in 1957.²³⁹ They express they miss and love him, and wish him to be safe on sea. This precious artifact is the only object containing Beatriz's voice and words. Vasconcelos explained afterwards that she included it "to remember that [Beatriz] did actually exist".²⁴⁰ It makes her more tangible, more real and is the only instance in the film where Vasconcelos does not require a fictional stand-in. Thematically, it also fits very much with the theme of love letters. When the credits finally roll on screen, Vasconcelos ultimately does not elucidate her film further. We only see the names of the people involved, not the parts they are playing, and in effect, the exact family structure remains unclear to the viewer (figure 30).

Aesthetics

With its alluring, warm-toned shots, *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* is a visual marvel. The first part of the film is primarily comprised of close-ups of mostly objects, people and art, often depicted in static shots combined with voice-over. It takes place in and around the house, or on the ship. The second part is still mostly comprised of fixed shots, but now they are marked by distance and exteriority: extreme long shots show rolling landscapes and dense forests. The first part is shot on 16mm, which was "the standard for amateur documentary and news crew filmmakers for over 50 years", since its introduction in the 1920s.²⁴¹ Shots are grainy and sometimes out of focus, contributing to the feeling we are watching fragments from family home videos. Additionally, the old-fashioned academy ratio lends this film its dated feel. In the middle of the film, however, there is a shift

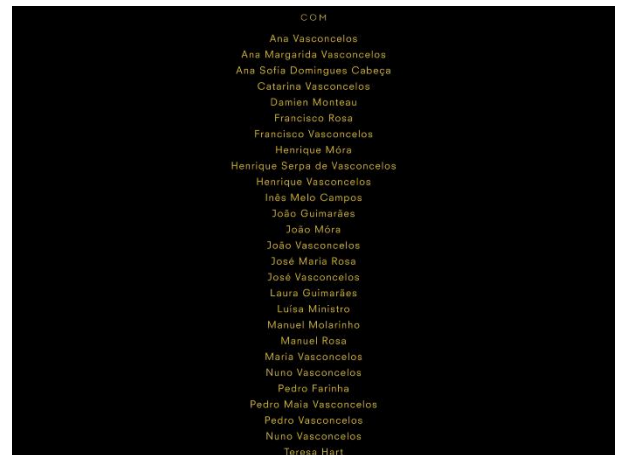


Figure 30) Capture *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* (2020), the credits.



Figure 31) Capture *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* (2020), a seahorse adorns Beatriz's ear.



Figure 32) Capture *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* (2020), a seahorse adorns a young woman's ear.

²³⁹ Dale 2020.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Romney 2020; Anon. 2019.

from 16mm to digital film. This is visible in figure 31 (16mm) and figure 32 (digital). Vasconcelos does this deliberately: the first part of the film centralizes her grandmother and her father's youth, it is only after the middle point, Beatriz's death, that the film centralizes Vasconcelos's life. For Vasconcelos, it was a straightforward choice: her grandmother did not live in the digital era but in the 50s, 60s and 70s. She lived in the era of film, and Vasconcelos wanted the medium to reflect that. Furthermore, Vasconcelos explains, for her it was significant because film has a physical dimension: it can be touched and it can be lost, reflecting our human physicality and ability to die.²⁴² With this, she recognizes the unreliability of external memory objects to eternally store memories, as laid out by van Dijck in the first chapter.²⁴³ After the switch, the film maintains its old-fashioned feel, as Vasconcelos upheld the filmlike quality in the editing process.²⁴⁴ When considering this through the lens of automediality, it is clear "the materiality of the medium constitutes and textures the subjectivity presented".²⁴⁵

Self-reflexivity

In the words of Moser, self-reflexivity is considered important to automediality because "[i]t signifies how a self-representation relates to and stages the media it employs".²⁴⁶ Additionally, Gernalzick addresses self-reflexivity in point 6 of her taxonomy of filmic autobiographies, explaining this happens verbally (the filmmaking process is mentioned) and visually (the equipment is shown).²⁴⁷ Vasconcelos's film is not highly self-reflexive, only verbally addressing the filmmaking process in one longer sequence. In a static shot, Vasconcelos's father is visible via a mirror she holds up (figure 20). He is reading a letter. In a voice-over, Vasconcelos states:

"Dad, when you read the script for this movie, you said: 'Some things didn't happen exactly like this.' I answered: 'If they didn't happen like this, then what's the problem?' 'But they could have! My name isn't even Jacinto!' 'But it could be. It's much more original than Henrique.' 'Yeah, but my mother called me Henrique.' 'Sorry, dad, but it would be confusing if we had two Henriques in the film.' 'Catarina, it's not children who decide their parents' names. Time doesn't move backwards. I understand that might not be very reassuring, but that's how it is.'"

²⁴² THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS Q&A WITH CATARINA VASCONCELOS.

²⁴³ Van Dijck 2007, p. 37.

²⁴⁴ THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS Q&A WITH CATARINA VASCONCELOS.

²⁴⁵ Nick Couldry, 'Mediatization or Mediation? Alternative Understandings of the Emergent Space of Digital Storytelling', *New Media and Society* 10 (2008), paraphrased by Smith and Watson 2014, p. 77.

²⁴⁶ Moser 2019, p. 249.

²⁴⁷ Gernalzick 2018, p. 69.

With this, Vasconcelos offers a small peak into the filmmaking process, although the conversation could be entirely fabricated, for all we know. Evident from the quoted excerpt in particular is her willingness to fictionalize aspects of her family history in order to tell the story she wants to tell. The name Jacinto, after hyacinth, not only prevents confusion, it is also very symbolic: connecting him to the world of Beatriz (who is compared to trees) instead of his father (who is compared to water). In its self-reflexivity, this small excerpt does remind the viewer that the storytelling is “under narrative construction”, as was argued by Waites.²⁴⁸ The fact that Henrique is seen via a mirror is interesting considering the context. After all, Gernalzick called it “a hallmark of filmic autobiography” that the camera is included in the filmic images, for instance, via mirrors.²⁴⁹ Even though *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* abounds in mirrors, many directly facing the camera eye, Vasconcelos never shows the filming equipment.

²⁴⁸ Waites 2015, p. 548.

²⁴⁹ Gernalzick 2018, p. 71.

Chapter 5

This chapter briefly compares the two case studies. As was demonstrated in previous chapters, in many ways they are remarkably similar, yet numerous differences can be observed. As the subject matter of these documentaries is so deeply personal, it is perhaps unsurprising that their shape is so unique to their respective filmmakers.

In terms of auto/biography, both documentaries present a polyphonic perspective. The films feature not only first-person voice-over, but also third-person storytelling. Both allow various voices to tell the story of the other. Vasconcelos appears more in the background of her own film, whereas Polley overtly takes authoritative control from the very beginning, when she directs her family members from behind the camera. Interestingly, behind the scenes, Vasconcelos has more authority than she lets on: the entire voice-over was written by her. This is in contrast to Polley, who chose her father's written account and the stories of her interviewees to be the basis of the voice-over. Vasconcelos does not however, remove herself from the narrative, the way Polley does by not speaking about her personal experiences on camera. In the end, both leave the truth up to the imagination of the viewer. They remain elusive subjects, much like the subjects who are the focus of the films: their (grand)mothers. In a similar way, these mothers seem always out of grasp. Often shown in fragments (STORIES WE TELL) or observed via external objects, such as mirrors and a magnifying glass (THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS). It seems a fitting metaphor to present the people who we get to know only via stories and memory objects. It approaches but never quite reaches.

STORIES WE TELL and THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS are structurally and narratively very different, although both are clearly influenced by the nature of memory itself. Polley supplements the interview footage with scenes depicting home videos or re-created events, whereas Vasconcelos, despite having interviewed family members in preparation of the film, opts not to include interviews. Instead she chooses to construct a more poetic narrative, made up almost entirely of fictionalized footage. The structures of both films function to invoke a parallel experience in the viewer: for Polley, this meant exposing the discrepancies between stories. For Vasconcelos, this meant telling the story in a fragmentary manner, leaving gaps along the way. In Polley's interviews, the viewer can actually see active memorialisation, and the way people put their life stories into perspective with the help of their memories and hindsight. Whilst Vasconcelos does not show active memorialisation, her approach does hint at processes of memory, such as it

involving reconstruction and imagination. Furthermore, she signifies having a better grasp of the subject in hindsight versus the subject in present, via the stark contrast between the first and second part of her film. Where Polley's film follows a mostly linear, classical narrative, Vasconcelos presents a film with a poetic, cyclical and fragmentary narrative. This way, *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* exhibits characteristics of the so-called 'memory text'. Memory, remembering, mourning and nostalgia are important themes in the film and indicate many aspects of memory itself: their existence in objects and other people, their fragmentary, imagistic nature and their connection to the present. The narrative of *STORIES WE TELL* is somewhat experimental, but largely chronologically and sequentially told. As such does not align with the treatment of memory Kuhn identifies. Still, the narrative can be said to mirror memory itself because of the discrepancies it features and furthermore, it does feature the therapeutic function that is generally exhibited in memory texts.

Aesthetically, the interplay between digital footage and film stock is another similarity between the two documentaries. Overall, it functions in a similar way: to reflect the past. This is most straightforward in *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS*, here Vasconcelos films the first part which is set in the past with 16mm film, and the second part which depicts the present digitally. Polley mostly maintains the same strategy, which allows her to initially trick the viewer into believing all home footage is real. Differently, however, Polley also uses Super 8 to show herself standing behind the camera and in staged sequences of more recent events. The quality of the footage invokes a sense of realness, less structured than the static shots in the rest of the film. It exposes the filmic process and allows Polley to show herself as self-aware, as she is literally reaching into the past to approach the truth of past events. Additionally, filming both herself and (representations of) her mother in Super 8 draws a visual connection between her and her mother. Vasconcelos also makes use of visual connections, but these mostly take the shape of 'rhyming' shots that appear at different points in the film. Less self-reflexive in nature, *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* does include one moment where Vasconcelos exposes the filmic process, reminding the viewer, just like Polley does, that the story and identities are under narrative construction.

Both films use the correspondence of image and sound to tell complicated stories. Vasconcelos takes a very literal approach; in *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS*, the image often literally depicts what the voice-over expresses. Her fantastical approach enables her to do so. In contrast, Polley sometimes lets voice-over and images clash, for example when Diane smiles but a voice-over says that she hated living in Toronto. When the combined

images and voice-over clash, they complicate the notion of truth. Still, in *STORIES WE TELL* image and voice-over often do correspond, illustrating what the storytellers are saying. A large difference between the films is that *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* mainly articulates its ideas by means of metaphor, whilst the narrative in *STORIES WE TELL* is more straightforward. Via associative metaphoric language, Vasconcelos is able to emphasize the connection between past and present, the universality of human experience and the importance of the other in articulation of the self. Both filmmakers, then, use the multimodality of film, the interplay between sound and image, to tell stories in their own unique ways.

The documentary format comes with specific affordances, constraints and conventions. Vasconcelos explores the ability of the medium to represent the self and others. She lets the medium reflect which story it tells, hers or her grandmother's. Also *STORIES WE TELL* pushes the boundaries of the medium, specifically in its handling of fictionality, aesthetics and self-reflexivity. It plays with viewer expectation by subverting genre-conventions such as the absence of actors and integrating real video footage. This home video footage also contributes to the questioning of truth, as it traditionally has been associated with perfect indexicality to the real world. Additionally, Polley explores personal and collective memories by restaging them and even acting them out herself. As a consequence, Polley highlights how self-representation always involves performativity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has considered a wide variety of topics: memory, family, storytelling, narrative, subjectivity and the auto/biographical film. Memory is crucial to the way we understand our self and form relationships with the people around us. It is also inherently unreliable and imaginative. From the very start of our lives we are part of a proto-type memory group: the family. Within this group we define ourselves and engage in collective remembering. Memories do not only exist internally, there is also a definite material aspect to them.

As human beings, we look for structure, patterns and coherence in our past experiences, and as such, we create narratives of our personal lives. This is, however, an inherently paradoxical practice, for the capabilities of our memories do not satisfy the demands of narrative. Some artists therefore turn to the fragmented, non-linear memory text to represent their memories. Yet, there is an entire industry of autobiography and memoir, wherein still the myth persists that the medium can transparently and narratively reflect a pre-existing self. This is where the framework of automediality offers a solution as it acknowledges the effects of media on the formation of self.

It is with these theories regarding memory, the self and mediation in mind that I have analysed these case studies, and can now formulate an answer to the central research question: Considered through the lens of an automedial framework, how do *STORIES WE TELL* and *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* represent, mediate and narrativize memory and construct auto/biographical subjects?

Both filmmakers take an auto/biographical approach to tell the story of their family and specifically, their (grand)mothers. Polyphonic and with multiple subjects, both films complicate the autobiographical I and draw attention to the constructive role of the other in the formation of the self. In terms of voice-over, even though both films are polyphonic, Polley retains authority over the text and clearly denotes who is speaking when, whereas Vasconcelos moves to the background and presents the various voices as a stream-of-consciousness of sorts. Both cast their family in their films, but Polley supplements this with actors as well. Vasconcelos literally speaks for her father and her father relates her story, and also Polley allows her storytelling family members to tell her and Diane's stories, in their absence. In letting people speak for others they point to the unknowability of someone's true identity, and so refuse to formulate the self as a pre-existing subject. Instead, the various selves that emerge from their unique ways of storytelling are all

similarly fragmented. Having trouble grasping their subjects themselves, both reflect this in their films by presenting them as elusive.

Both Vasconcelos and Polley use and are formed by the various affordances and constraints of the medium film. Fundamentally a multimodal medium, the interplay of voice-over and images in both these films is interesting. Both are quite literal in their approach to the relationship between text and image, both however are able to construct complicated and very different narratives in doing so. What is more, in resorting to fictionality to reconstruct their (family member's) memories and pasts, they demonstrate how film exposes structural constraints that apply to all media: the past is always related in a reconstruction. Moreover, in their reconstruction and re-enactment they are able to explore their own memory spaces. Both creatively approach memory, demonstrating its imaginative side. However, where Polley experiments with the narrative to expose the ultimate unreliability of memory, Vasconcelos's film exhibits characteristics of the memory text: reflecting the fragmentary and episodic nature of memory. Furthermore, in their self-reflexivity Polley and Vasconcelos expose the filmmaking process, emphasizing again how their identities and stories are subject to narrative construction. Moreover, both *STORIES WE TELL* and *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* capture the past in a medium of the past, Super 8 and 16mm, respectively. In doing so, the various subjects that emerge are textured, shaped by the particular medium they are represented in. In their differences and similarities, *STORIES WE TELL* and *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* demonstrate the interesting ways the representation of memory can be approached. Where Polley experiments with narrative devices to thematize memory and stories, Vasconcelos uses the medium film to tell a highly metaphorical story and draw visual connections between past and present. Polley highlights discrepancies between stories and Vasconcelos refuses to provide a 'true' narrative, by foregrounding the fantastical and dream-like. This reflects their interests: Polley aims to demonstrate the various versions of truth and Vasconcelos wants to paradoxically fill and expose the gaps in her family's history.

In terms of automediality, it can be concluded that both films subvert genre expectations, whilst adhering to conventions of the medium. Both films often deviate from Gernalzick's list of genre-specific characteristics of the autobiographical film, particularly in their use of fictionality. Automediality takes into account "how a subject can inscribe, perform, or construct a self-presentation".²⁵⁰ Resorting to fictional montage to represent

²⁵⁰ Kennedy and Maguire 2018.

the past is not a new phenomenon in the autobiographical film, but Polley and Vasconcelos's self-insertion presents them as explorers venturing into their own (familial) memory. Particularly the way Polley stages the re-enacted scenes with her fathers allow her to come across as self-aware to the viewer. In fictionalized or stylized sequences, performativity of the self is highlighted. Via metaphor, Vasconcelos performs a ritual to heal the traumatic memory of her mother's passing and Polley's film constantly draws attention to the performativity of the self, not in the least because of its employment of actors. Technologically, with the use of Super 8 and 16mm or digital film, both filmmakers comment on the kinds of subjects they represent. Even though *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* is more experimental in nature, it ultimately does not escape filmic conventions such as continuity editing. This indicates the constructive role of the medium in the shaping of the end product. With its linear, classical editing, *STORIES WE TELL* also adheres to the conventions of the medium. It is in their treatment of subjects and content that both leave the truth up in the air. In doing so, not only do they refuse the formation of a pre-existing subject, but they also mimic their experiences with family stories: the unavoidable blank spaces, diverging stories and ultimate unknowability of truth.

When zooming out and considering these documentaries in a larger context, it is evident they are representative of a trend that has emerged in the last twenty years or so. Daniels explains that contemporary autobiographical films have focussed on the personal and memories of the past, documenting a (sometimes difficult) life, intimate personal and familial relationships, and the filmmaker's sense of identity.²⁵¹ Additionally, other recent films by female filmmakers also construct identities of absent female subjects by means of the narrated memories of others.²⁵² The fact that both *STORIES WE TELL* and *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BIRDS* are documentaries made by women is highly relevant and interesting, and should not go unnoticed. Whilst the above indicates they are part of a distinctive female trend, taking into account this gendered aspect ultimately was beyond the scope of this project. Future research should take this relevant angle into consideration.

²⁵¹ Daniels 2014, pp. 100-101.

²⁵² Thornam 2020, pp. 263-264.

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