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**NOW YOU HEAR IT, NOW YOU SEE IT  
SILENCE AND TRAUMA IN AUTODOCUMENTARY FILM**

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**Abstract:** Although trauma and memory have been a focus of cultural studies for more than twenty years now, few scholarly works focus on medium-specific representations of trauma and even fewer comment on the tendency of trauma representations to be autobiographical in the twenty-first century. Since it was established as a genre in the 1960s, the autobiographical documentary has flourished due to the increased accessibility to recording equipment offered by technological advancement. The present paper will analyse two autodocumentaries, namely Sarah Polley’s *Stories We Tell* (2012) and Chantal Ackerman’s *No Home Movie* (2015), both of which represent the death of the filmmaker’s mother and its aftermath. However, while Polley’s autodocumentary was well-received by the audience, Ackerman’s personal documentary was seen as an improper representation. I aim to investigate the context of creation for both films and how their form made these representations of trauma successful and unsuccessful, respectively.

**Keywords:** address, autodocumentary, media, silence, trauma.

**Introduction**

Over the past 30 years or so, trauma has become a way of assigning identity to individuals and groups alike. Personal tragedies from sexual abuse to living through war, as well as larger-scale events such as slavery, the Holocaust or 9/11, have all been

described as trauma. As many have noted, labelling something as trauma endows it with considerable symbolic capital, “either as a category of intelligibility or as an object of compassion” (Fassin xi). This is not to say that trauma is not a valid clinical diagnosis, but rather that it is one which has become the cultural currency by which some individuals or groups are awarded victim status. However, the exact definition of trauma, along with its identifying characteristics, is still up for debate, with many trauma theorists recognizing the need to expand the scope of our analyses of trauma to include the specific contexts of representation. As such, I wish to focus on the demands made by the medium of representation, specifically the manner in which film influences the assignation of symbolic capital to trauma stories.

For this purpose, the present paper will analyse two autobiographical films, namely Sarah Polley’s *Stories We Tell* (2012) and Chantal Ackerman’s *No Home Movie* (2015), both of which represent the death of the filmmaker’s mother and the aftermath thereof. However, while Polley’s autodocumentary was well-received by the audience, Ackerman’s personal documentary was seen as self-indulgent. My aim here is to speculate on the distinctive elements pertaining to the context of their creation and their form, which contributed to their varying degrees of success as representations of trauma.

### **Trauma and its discontents**

In the 1990s, as the issue of trauma gained increasing attention in literary studies, Cathy Caruth argued that the reason why “trauma” as a label holds such power in our society is its universality, which provides a means for intercultural understanding, and, above all, access to the real. According to her, trauma is defined by belatedness, literality and unrepresentability; it is “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts stemming from the event” (Caruth, *Trauma* 4). In other words, trauma is a response to a singular experience that is too shocking to process and which is encoded in one’s memory in a different manner, most often as an image that cannot be transformed into a narrative, allegedly remaining unprocessed in one’s memory. Trauma can only be represented through a certain kind of language: “trauma must be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary, a language that defies, even as it claims our understanding” (Caruth,

Unclaimed 5). In line with Caruth, Dori Laub postulated that it is only the silent witness who can provide the most authentic account of trauma. Trauma then ends up as a nonexperience that is to be communicated through silence.

In her later works, Caruth also focuses more on address and reinterprets trauma not as a repeated initial event, but as something that emerges in repetition. Her understating of trauma is based on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) as well as earlier texts, such as *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1885). Freud contends that symptoms of hysteria can be traced back to traumatic childhood experiences, especially sexual "seduction" and assault. However, this early event in the life of a child is not traumatic in and of itself, but in a dialectical relationship with another event capable of belatedly reviving it as a memory when sexual meaning can finally be grasped. In a process called *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action), trauma occurs when a second event triggers the memory of the first which is only then given traumatic meaning. Unlike the dreams explained away by the theory developed before *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, these dreams could not be accounted for as wish-fulfilment fantasies: "[t]hey arise rather in the compulsion to repeat, though it is true that in analysis that compulsion is supported by the wish to conjure of what has been forgotten and repressed" (32). They come thus to be explained not by the sex drive, but by the death drive, so that trauma mirrors the birth of consciousness and of memory. In Cathy Caruth's words, "since consciousness itself cannot bear witness to death, the life of the survivor becomes the repetition of the reality that consciousness cannot grasp. In the traumatic encounter with death, life itself attempts to serve as the witness that consciousness cannot provide" (Caruth, *Literature* 50). As such, it is not the recurring dream that marks the repetition of trauma, but awakening from the dream.

But what exactly repeats itself if not an initial event? According to Lyotard, inarticulate affect persists in trauma and explodes temporality, so that trauma is always now. Inarticulate affect is a phrase through which

excitation is present, i.e., as a cloud of energy not entirely fixed in psychic appearance but also not "free" either. The affect is present but not represented [...] This constitutes, at the same time, both its irrefutability and its insufficiency as witness. The affect only

“says” one thing – that it is there – but is witness neither for nor of what is there. Neither when nor where (Lyotard 32).

For lack of a better word, what causes this inarticulate affect is the *differend*, to which it bears witness. Another concept coined by Lyotard, the *differend* is a phrase that cannot yet be put into words and it includes negative phrases like silence. It also includes mismatches between discursive practices – affect phrases articulated in language that does not allow them to be understood or witnessed. As such, trauma is not necessarily silence, but a lack of address or the absence of a witness. The repetition of trauma is consequently not precisely a repetition, because each iteration includes an act of creation. In this sense, trauma is history, or archive, in Derrida’s sense of the word, which “is at once institutive and constitutive” (Derrida 7). Trauma strives towards conservation, erasure, or towards creation, depending on whether there is a possibility for address.

Such an understating of trauma has been criticized by the likes of Michael Rothberg, Roger Luckhurst or Stef Craps for allegedly creating a normative definition of trauma which excludes non-Western narratives. Silence, which has been read as the prerequisite for the representation of trauma in trauma theory, has especially incurred criticism for the way it censors difficult material and thus keeps victims quiet when they would otherwise benefit from voicing their suffering. Whatever side of the argument one considers, trauma is organized around address: the original event is to be communicated so that the narration of trauma is both authentic, in some sense, therapeutic, and decipherable by others. I hold with Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone who argue that we only have access to trauma through language, which means that later statements can only be understood in relation to earlier ones, in their shared framework; at the same time, they believe, earlier statements are kept alive in later ones, thus disrupting causality and temporality (6-7). This points to the necessity of taking into account not only the relationship between each iteration of a trauma, but also its relationship with other representations of trauma, the context in which it appears and the audience that reads, watches, or listens to it. For this reason, there is value in describing possibilities of address with regards to trauma. In what

follows, I will discuss such possibilities in the medium of autobiographical film as a language for trauma.

### **Trauma and autodocumentary film**

The medium of film lends itself to the representation of trauma through two of its medium-specific characteristics. The first one is its relation to temporality. According to Laura Mulvey, film is always in the process of reimagining time. Much like trauma or any archival technology, it “has had a major impact on reinforcing traditional [patriarchal] temporality, but has the potential to disrupt it as well” (Mulvey), i.e. to conceal or to expose temporality. Also, like trauma, film – photographic media in general – enjoys a special relation to the photographed or filmed moment. It is “somehow co-natural with its referent,” in that we can never deny “that the thing has been there” (Barthes 76), at least not before the advent of the very convincing deep fakes. The past of photography or film is “irrefutably present, and yet already deferred” (Barthes 77). On the one hand, this allows for the integration of, for instance, direct footage of a traumatic event. By the same token through which visual memory of trauma is considered ‘more real’ than narrative memory, the recording of a traumatic event, for example on film, should be considered more accurate, as well, even though filmic representation is, arguably, no more reliable than textual representation. As such, the movement of film resembles the movement of trauma: something of an initial configuration persists in spite of curation through editing, and film is repeated in different iterations every time it is shown. While it may appear that every showing of the same film is the same, disparities in time and space make every repetition different.

Secondly, film is multimodal. The subject of film is rendered in different codes (verbal, visual, acoustic). This characteristic of film is at odds with what non-visual, autobiographical narratives have been able to offer to the representation of trauma – the authenticity provided by the witness perspective. When it comes to representing the autobiographical subject, visual media entail a laying bare of the fact that the subject needs to be represented through multiple avatars. It stands to reason that the proliferation of autobiographical trauma narratives in visual media means that these media offer trauma narratives enough to strengthen their claim to the real.

The structural characteristics of film allow for the disintegration of the subject, a process specific of trauma, to be depicted as a metaphor through film editing techniques. Narrative progression in film is built on the sequence of shots used in the film, which follow each other owing to causality, temporality, space, or formal connections (parallelism, oppositions etc.). For this reason, the structure of the plot in film is constructed by elements that define shots such as point-of-view, framing, and *mise-en-scène* (cf. Belleur 1979). The nature of point-of-view in film is of particular interest, as it is arguably the most defining feature affecting how the self and trauma are constructed in film. Robert Stam defines filmic point-of-view as “the optical perspective of a character whose gaze or look dominates a sequence, or, in its broader meaning, the overall perspective of the narrator toward the characters and the events of the fictional world” (85). In turn, the narrator is the agent that recounts the events of the fictional world and who is inscribed in the filmic text. The perspective of a character is not necessarily tied to the body of the character who appears on screen but can be rendered in an infinite number of ways so that it is unclear where affect in film stems from, similar to how Lyotard defines his inarticulate affect. I will showcase this in what follows, through a close reading of two aut documentaries.

### ***Stories We Tell (2012) and No Home Movie (2015)***

*Stories We Tell* (2012) is an autobiographical documentary written and directed by Sarah Polley. The film tells the story of Diane Polley, Sarah’s mother, an unconventional woman who died of cancer when Sarah was eleven years old. The film centres on the revelation that Sarah was actually a product of her mother’s extramarital affair with Canadian producer Harry Gulkin. Although it is a Canadian production, the documentary was a great success worldwide, especially in the United States, where it received numerous accolades and awards. In this section I will argue that, even though the revelation of Sarah’s paternity seems for most of the film to be the logical climax of the story, it is displaced in its function by a doubling which reveals Diane’s death and the rippling effects that it had on Sarah’s life to be the only exceptional event in the film.

Before I begin my analysis, I wish to point to several elements of the context in which the film appeared. These elements reveal how stories of trauma function within society: according to Roger Luckhurst (2008), something called “judicious truth” is at

work when trauma narratives are judged to be adequate within public discourse. The “judicious truth” refers to the process through which the reader and the community of readers probe the autobiographical pact, working as detectives to determine the degree of verisimilitude that a trauma story has. What this implies is that there is a correct way to tell a story of trauma while any other will be dismissed as fake.

Sarah Polley, aware of the kind of cultural demands that are made of autobiographical products, refused to give any interviews before the official release of the movie, releasing a blog with an explanation of her refusal instead. Here she states that “I have spent five years deciding, frame by frame and word by word, how to tell this story in this film. I’d hate to see my inability to think before I speak wipe out years of work with one stupid comment that I haven’t thought through,” which reveals her awareness of the kind of demands that the audience makes on personal documentaries in general and of stories of trauma in particular. She also states that, because her family is made up of famous actors, directors, and producers, she did not want her story to slip into sensationalism as it needed to “be out there in the words of the many people who lived it.” In other words, the story needs to follow a certain pattern, use a certain kind of language, and be told by a witness.

In terms of the relationship to its subject, *Stories We Tell* (2012) can be included in the category of participatory documentaries, as the documentarist both observes and participates in the film. This type of documentary is typical of ethnographic or anthropological recording in which the filmmakers also film themselves filming, as a note on the impossibility of complete objectivity. Although she rarely appears on camera, Sarah Polley acts as a researcher in her own life, bringing forth a portrait of her family. Thus, she becomes both the subject of the film and the object observed, but both roles are structurally delegated to someone else as she films other people telling her story – even the voice-over narration is written and delivered by her father. The effect is that it makes the story seem less personal, and more like an item worthy of scientific enquiry. At the same time, the film is described through paratextual means as a personal documentary, and its genre foregrounds how much subjectivity in film depends on framing and editing.

An important element of the documentary is the archival footage of Diane, which is accompanied by staged footage that is made to match it minutely. The largest part of

the documentary, though, is made up of interviews with the Polley family, family friends, and acquaintances who knew her mother. These interviews, however, can also be considered direct footage, as parts of the story develop in real time. If the story itself is quite straightforward, the emplotment reveals other types of information (for example feelings and attitudes) not known beforehand because the interviews are unscripted.

The story that the film tells is deceptively simple. At first glance, it seems to be a story of adultery: Diane Polley is dissatisfied with her now stale marriage to Michael Polley because they are mismatched, so she has an affair with Harry Gulkin while away on tour as an actress. Ten years later, Diane dies from cancer and leaves Sarah Polley, the result of her affair with Harry, in the care of Michael, who is unaware that Sarah is not his daughter. However, everyone in the family suspects that Sarah is not Michael's daughter, so that it becomes a running joke among close relatives. The melodramatic nature of the story is underscored by the complexity of the characters and metatextual elements, both of which are revealed through the particular shape the story takes.

The first frames of the film show snippets of Super 8 footage, which sum up the gist of the story. In voice-over, we hear Michael reading a quote from *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood. Juxtaposed with this quote, the footage that we see at the beginning seems indeed to be just made up of random images brought together – it is only at the end of the movie that the viewer understands what their connection to each other is. It is important to note here that the final frame is from Diane's funeral, although the story the documentary tells goes beyond that and speaks of events that happened after her death, as well. This first part serves to foreshadow what is to come – in this sense, everything is revealed before the opening credits, but can only be fully understood after one has watched the whole film. The order in which moments filmed at different times appear in the movie suggests a jumbled temporality typical of trauma, in which the order of iteration of trauma is not as important as the affect repeated in them.

The next scene shows Sarah and Michael climbing the stairs to the studio where Michael will be recording the voice-over track for the documentary. Sarah is helping Michael along as he seems out of breath and asks how far they are going to go. He seems reluctant about their undertaking, while she has a firm grip on him, telling him to take a break when he needs to. They are filmed from above, so one can see the staircase spiralling up and down around them (Figure 1). This scene is mirrored by another one



that appears towards the end of the film: Michael recalls how Sarah started making films. For her first assignment in film school, she had him sink fully-clothed in their pool, pushing him (her subject) beyond his limits (Figure 2). Both scenes function as metaphors for how the documentary was made: Sarah filming Michael reading the story he wrote about the death of Diane, egging him on. At the same time, this process mirrors how Sarah and Michael pushed through after Diane's death as they were left alone to care for each other and how Sarah learned the art of storytelling from her father.



Figure 1



Figure 2

The next scene shows how the framing of the story is set up: Sarah leads Michael into a studio where he is instructed to read a story he wrote about his life with his wife, which is then used as voice-over to move the plot forward. Michael's story is illustrated by Super 8 footage, some of which is his own and real (40%), and some of which is staged (60%). The voice-over narration often slips into metaphor to illustrate his feelings towards what is told. The camera, too, takes its cue from the narration, contributing with visual metaphors. These are sometimes literal representations of what is said. For instance, when Michael illustrates his loneliness by referring to the solitary fly, he keeps as a pet and sometimes talks to, the camera shows him doing so. At other times, however, the visual metaphors translate the written ones in other ways. Take for example the following quote from the voice-over narration:

Life was beginning again. You know all about it and you know it's a delusion. "It's all done with mirrors, mate," they used to tell me. Yes, the mirrors in which you can see yourself clearly, what you really look like.

The camera here rotates around Michael's room which is in disarray and stops on him typing on the computer. His is a comment on the nature of representation: while mirrors are used to create an illusion in cinema, they also serve to portray people as accurately as possible. The movement of the camera suggests that the best way to get to the core of a person is to film their environment (here Michael's room which also stands for his inner life) along with their self-representation.



Figure 3

Whenever the frame is exposed, i.e. we do not only hear Michael reading, but we also see him, Sarah is looking at him through the studio window, so that we are watching her watching him (Figure 3). This way, the documentary constantly reminds the viewer of the mediated nature of the story. Moreover, it allows Sarah

herself to stay mostly quiet, which fulfils the requirement for the silent witness in the narration of trauma. Sarah only speaks in the frame at the beginning, when she (jokingly) tells her father that her film is not a documentary but an interrogation, suggesting that the filmic as well as the verbal representation have the potential to do violence to both the story and to its witnesses.

The other instances in which she speaks in the frame are when she makes Michael repeat some passage that is particularly emotionally raw. Michael believes that Sarah is asking him to repeat because she did not like his intonation, but in fact both versions of the fragment appear in the final cut of the documentary. Thus, elements related to trauma are repeated incessantly, in accordance with Cathy Caruth's definition of how trauma is recalled.

A large part of the documentary consists of interviews with individuals showcasing three degrees of involvement with Diane's affair: the three people directly involved in it and its effects (Michael, Harry, and Sarah), their close family who were impacted by the presence and then absence of Diane, and, lastly, their circle of

colleagues and acquaintances. Sometimes the fourth wall is broken as Sarah gets asked back the same questions. For instance, she thus reveals that she thinks the documentary is about bringing someone back to life and that she did not know Diane was going to die even though everyone else in the family did. Sarah was presumably shocked by her mother's sudden absence, and, through her autodocumentary, is engaged in healing the caesura, the trauma caused by narrating her life in such a way that her mother somehow becomes present again, through the memory of others.

During the interviews, the viewer never sees Sarah on camera – she is only heard, as opposed to the frame where she is only seen. She does, however, appear in the Super 8 footage which illustrates the narration of how she discovered that Harry was her father. Her meetings with Harry are all staged and instead of Michael narrating their encounters, Harry and Sarah in turn read aloud their emails to each other. The text of the emails is also showed on screen, one of the many media quoted in the documentary. Other inclusions consist of other films (e.g. a documentary about Harry's Marxist affiliations), photographs, letters, computer screens, as well as cameras and microphones that are often not hidden. The plurality of media and recording equipment parallels the plurality of voices that retell Diane's story. This reflects Sarah Polley's belief, stated in the film, that the past becomes ephemeral through retelling and remediation. It also suggests that, in every retelling, trauma becomes a point of possibility for art, while at the same being in danger of being obscured by the confusion of temporality.

It is also suggested that Sarah is, in some sense, her mother through the superimposition of the two frames above (Figure 4 and Figure 5), in which Sarah's face blends into her mother's. Diane is often shown to be performing the same physical acts that the others are performing on screen, amplifying her lingering presence among them, especially for Sarah. In many ways, *Stories We Tell* is Sarah's tribute to both of her parents, whose legacy was passed on to her: it is often hinted at how she inherited her mother's looks and complicated personality, as well as her father's talent and analytical mind. In fact, the information added to the basic story throughout the progression of the film mainly works to reveal the complexity of Diane and Michael's personalities and the particulars of their love for each other. As a consequence, the

documentary becomes a means through which Sarah reconstructs her mother as well as herself. Trauma thus becomes the point at which the self is reconfigured.

At first glance, it seems that the documentary is about Diane's betrayal or how she falls out of love with Michael and in love with Harry. It is only halfway through the film that we find out that Diane had been married previously and had left her first husband for Michael. The narrative then changes to suggest that she did not divorce Michael when she met Harry for fear of losing custody of her children. At the very end of the movie, however, it is revealed that she had several other affairs, so that Sarah's paternity stops being the focus of the story. Instead, Sarah says the following in voice-over, reading from an email sent to Michael:

This is the tsunami she unleashed when she went, and all of us still flailing in her wake, trying to put her together in the wreckage, and her slipping away from us, over and over again, just when we begin to see her face.

Michael, too, admits towards the end of the movie to having suffered more of a shock than he had previously thought. The story then stops being about Diane's affair with Harry. The viewer is led to focus on the trauma of Diane's death and how Michael and Sarah construct a narrative around it in order to overcome it, exposing the narrative means through which this is done verbally as well as visually.

*No Home Movie* (2015) is also a personal documentary about the loss of the artist's mother. However, it is very different from Polley's work as the film offers only raw footage of conversations Akerman had with her mother during the year leading up to her death. While Polley was relatively unknown when she directed her autobiographical documentary, Akerman was a well-established director who was known for creating experimental works in the 1970s. Akerman's most famous movies such as *I You He She* (1974) or *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) criticise exactly the kind of meek housewife lifestyle that her own mother was leading. Akerman's mother, Natalie, was a Holocaust survivor. In the film, when prompted, she talks about this in very matter-of-fact and modest terms, contrasted with her daughter who comes across as distant as she films her mother. Natalie dies of old age at 85 when her daughter is 65. In the previously discussed film, Diane dies when

Sarah is 11. The tragedy thus escalated by the aftermath of the event in which a child had to grow up without the care and guidance of her mother. The situation was further complicated by Akerman's suicide right before the release of the documentary, which lends more weight to the film's claim to referentiality.

*No Home Movie* can be best described as a journal entry-type documentary, as well as a participatory one. Akerman uses small handheld cameras and cell phone cameras, which give the film the aspect of a home movie. The audience hears Akerman's voice from behind the camera, but the questions she asks do not seem to be aimed in any particular direction. While heavily edited – 40 hours of footage were cut down to 115 minutes - the documentary contains a lot of superfluous details (long shots of empty rooms for instance) that make it look uncut. This gives it a sort of immediacy that *Stories We Tell* does not have. As is the nature of autobiography, both movies portray a retrospective view on trauma. Thanks to this sense of immediacy, *No Home Movie* appears to simply be subjecting the audience to trauma rather than offering an account of it. The audience is exposed to graphic images of Natalie's deteriorating body without the effect of silent shock that is expected in the aftermath of trauma. For instance, extensive scenes in which the old woman coughs and struggles to breathe or eat are shown. *No Home Movie* in fact arguably gives the impression of reproducing an original traumatic event in a way that allows for creative possibilities at the site of address of trauma, i.e. repetition without creation.

Like Polley's documentary, Akerman's also uses visual metaphor to convey trauma. A succession of traveling shots of a desert is shown. In another context, scenes from the desert might suggest the feeling of silence and emptiness. However, because the documentary gives the impression of immediacy and incoherence, it is easy to dismiss these as superfluous detail – simply shots of the director traveling from one place to another. Even so, a certain structure is discernible in *No Home Movie*. The movie is thematically divided into two parts: one depicting happy domesticity and another depicting the dark underside of trauma. The first part resembles a home movie thought out as a tribute to Akerman's mother. It depicts scenes of domesticity and portrays the affectionate relationship shared by Chantal and her mother, in spite of the distance between them. This is explained by Akerman in a Skype conversation with her

mother in which she tells her the following: “I want to show that there is no distance in the world. You’re in Brussels and I am in Oklahoma. Look, there is no distance.”

Before this conversation, the movie is concerned with setting the scene: the audience is introduced to the mother’s apartment, where most of the action takes place. Thus, we see the kitchen, the living room, the dining room, and the bedroom. The *mise-en-scène* of the shots of these rooms offers metaphors for the mother’s personality. The apartment hints at a comfortable middle-class life. The furnishing, the art, and the books in the apartment point not only to the financial status of the family, but to the norms and culture that come with that status. As the mother and daughter talk about recipes, her mother’s carefully timed walks, and various family events and obligations while watching the mother shuffle around the house obsessively engaged in punning, the viewer is given the impression of partaking in the unbearable routine of an older middle-class woman’s life. The first part of the film echoes Akerman’s other more famous cinematic endeavours. As Zain Jamshaid points out about *Jeanne Dielman*:

Simply put, the film is not simply concerned with shedding light on the monotonous drudgery that women subsumed within a patriarchal system frequently endure on a daily basis. It is also concerned with giving us a sense of time as it is lived by such women; its character’s anxieties are not contained within the film. They reach out to the spectator as well.

Thus, we watch Natalia’s life in almost real time in 4-minute long uncut shots and this produces a reality effect.

The next excerpt in the film is placed between two Skype conversations, the one mentioned above and one in which Natalia tells her daughter that she does not like being filmed or photographed, and that she does not want anyone else to know what she tells her. It shows Chantal and Natalie eating in the kitchen. The mother and daughter reminisce about Natalie’s internment in the concentration camps during the Second World War. The first part of the conversation focuses on Akerman’s maternal grandparents. It is revealed that they were Polish and escaped to Belgium with the help of a lawyer with whom Chantal’s grandmother was having an affair. They lived there for two years before they were sent to the labour camps.

However, Natalie remembers her parents' marriage as a happy one, centred on her father who was incapable of harbouring any negative thoughts towards his wife and daughters. The viewer also gets a glimpse into the workings of a Jewish middle-class family before the war: Natalie remembers having to learn prayers every day, especially the Shabbat blessing, which she reiterates on camera, and remembers feeling safe in Belgium even when the Germans came. She confesses to seeing them as amicable at first and their transformation as 'insidious,' until one day they were asked "to write 'Jew' on their identity cards" and signs were put up, saying "No dogs, no Jews." This scene is the first time we get a sense that Natalie has suffered trauma as a result of her experiences during the Holocaust: she admits that she has memory lapses and there are parts which she does not remember at all. Chantal's probing questions give the impression that she does not honour her mother's trauma; there is a lack of silence and an excess of representation.

The second part of the conversation concerns Chantal's paternal grandparents. Here, the viewer is offered a look into an Orthodox family. Natalie remembers her father-in-law as being very conservative, i.e. watching over everything the family did in order to make sure everything was kosher. His wife is remembered to have suffered trauma as a result of the internment. She is revealed to have been a recluse and to have constantly neglected grooming and frightening her grandchildren as a result. Chantal's father, as a Communist, was opposed to his father's practices. Once his own father was gone, he pulled Chantal out of Hebrew school, and stopped the family from following any religious practices. Interestingly, the end of this scene represents the first time we see Akerman on camera: so far, she had functioned as a silent witness, at least on a visual level, as we hear her occasionally ask her mother questions. Even so, there is a sense that her mother's life is overexposed, as the excerpt concludes with the Skype conversation quoted above, in which Natalie expresses her displeasure at being filmed at all times. This gives the impression that the trauma is not properly heard, or that the address has failed.

The above-described scene concludes the first part of the movie, with the first shot of the desert, which will be repeated three times by the film's conclusion. These scenes are metaphorical representations of Chantal's trauma, caused by the death of her mother and the loss of her home – echoing the title of the autodocumentary. These

desert shots fulfil two demands in terms of the representation of trauma. First, they avoid showing the trauma (the death of the mother) directly, and, secondly, they represent intrusive visual images of trauma that are repeated obsessively. The emotions that these images conjure up are a sense of emptiness and loss, effectively re-enacting Natalie's disappearance from the world. These scenes are echoed by two further visual metaphors. One of them is the penultimate shot, showing Chantal alone in her room, silently staring at the wall, then drawing the curtain so that the screen becomes black. As the film concludes, we see a shot of Natalie's empty apartment. This contrasts strongly with the beginning of the film, when her shuffling was constantly in the background even when she was not on screen. This time, however, there is only silence.

The issue of silence becomes more complicated in the interaction between Chantal and her mother in the second half of the movie. After the first time the desert scene interrupts the documentary, we are shown Natalie at the dinner table, talking with a relative. Her body has become frail, as she is increasingly unable to eat. She reveals to this relative that it is in fact Chantal who is making her anxious "with her stories." The camera angle then shifts to the other side of the apartment. It is now night-time, as the camera moves through all the rooms again, but starting from the opposite side. Behind the camera we hear Chantal sobbing, and the documentary is interrupted by another desert scene. In the last excerpt of the documentary, the viewer is shown different shots of Natalie being lethargic and unable to eat. What follows are several long shots of Natalie sleeping, or lying between sleep and wakefulness. During these shots, Chantal appears to be intoxicated, as it becomes obvious from a conversation with her sister.

The antepenultimate scene of the movie, before the documentary cuts to the last desert scene, consists of a conversation between Chantal and her mother's maid. She tells the woman that her mother's affliction was caused by the war. Chantal, then, appears to be suffering from vicarious trauma, as the daughter of a Holocaust survivor. However, the relation to her mother's trauma remains complicated. It seems that, as her mother suggests, her constant filming and inquiries as to Natalie's wartime experiences have two functions. One function is to structure the narrative of trauma that is *No Home Movie*. Natalie's stories of the Holocaust and the symptoms that they produce (lethargy, lack of appetite, loss of memory, desire for silence) punctuate the narrative of the film in a manner that is in accordance with the demands of trauma theory – that the scene of



trauma be repeated obsessively. The other function is to suggest that Chantal's narration of them might constitute retraumatisation for her mother, as well as vicarious traumatisation for herself. The question that the film poses is whether overrepresentation of trauma might not have led to the death of both Natalie and Chantal (Akerman committed suicide shortly before the documentary was released). Thus, by not conforming to the demand for silence when it comes to trauma, the documentary both comments on what is expressed in relation to trauma, while at the same time being taxed by audiences for the callousness of its overrepresentation.

### **Conclusions**

In effect, while the two documentaries depict the same kind of trauma, they differ widely in terms of how the story is emplotted. In *Stories We Tell*, Diane's death is relegated to the background at the beginning, as the story of Sarah's paternity takes centre stage. During the course of the film, Diane's death crops up more and more, interrupting the plot in the form of silences. For example, Sarah is always silent in one channel of the film: sometimes the viewer can see her, but not hear her; when she speaks, she always speaks off camera; when her writing is filmed, we neither see, nor hear her. The way silence is used in the documentary culminates in the shot in which all the members of the Polley family are shown solemnly silent as they come to terms with Diane's death. The trauma of Diane's death, and especially its aftermath, is also depicted through visual metaphor, responding to the call to portray trauma through poetic language. In *No Home Movie*, Natalie's deteriorating health takes centre stage. Her decline is portrayed chronologically in what almost feels like real time. Unlike *Stories We Tell*, the lack of silence here seems jarring, as the audience is spared no graphic detail.

As I mentioned in the introduction, trauma theory is concerned with the communicability of trauma by conveying to the audience an authentic account of a traumatic event. However, a documentary like *No Home Movie*, which reproduces the traumatic event for the audience, is not considered an appropriate representation of trauma because it carries markers which allow the viewer to see the hypothetical creative instance as careless and insensitive. Even though it never reproduces the traumatic event itself, a film like *Stories We Tell* is seen as a successful representation of

trauma because its form and the context in which it appeared are in line with the audience's expectations of what the effects of trauma might be.

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