

ANAMNESES

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ABSTRACT

Anamneses is a short experimental documentary that explores new strategies of authentication in my method of working with actors. Grounded in philosopher Bracha L. Ettinger's theory of the psychical matrixial borderspace, and influenced by the methodologies of filmmakers Chantal Akerman and Abbas Kiarostami, the film tells the story of a young man who discovers a need to confront the legacy of intergenerational trauma present in his family. Interweaving the live recordings of intimate conversations with self-described readers, the project pushes the limits of collaborative filmmaking to shed light on the therapeutic possibilities of unorthodox healing practices. Contrasting the matrixial qualities found in both Kiarostami's *Homework* (1989) and Akerman's *No Home Movie* (2015), I argue that *Anamneses* echoes features of both, and employs a collaborative approach inspired by Maya Deren's endorsement of amateurism to engage in an instance of aesthetic transsubjectivity and wit(h)nessing (Ettinger). My thesis project is an attempt to carve out a matrixial space (Ettinger) pointing toward a method of filmmaking that substitutes for the logic of domination an ethic of connection and compassion rooted in the maternal.

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INTRODUCTION

THE EVOLUTION OF MY APPROACH

The approach to my thesis project has evolved from a fictional film to a documentary experiment, but one core theme has persisted throughout: the mother-son bond. My interest was initially sparked by a consideration of the artistic and cultural lacuna surrounding the perspective of the mothers of male perpetrators. I believe the source of this idea can be traced back to my previous body of work, which conveys an interest in challenging audiences to empathize with underrepresented subjectivities, and investigating the limits of familial love.

Beginning with the fictional *Bound* (2015), I explored the systemic problem of modern slavery through a story about a rural shopkeeper who discovers his brother is exploiting immigrant workers. Instead of adopting the perspective of the victim, I imagined the experience of a witness. This angle offered me a window into the complex socio-economic circumstances underpinning the issue, rendering the film a character study of an anti-hero grappling with his moral impulses. Pitting sibling love directly against moral obligation, the story ended on a note of ambiguity, a reflection of the shopkeeper's internal anguish and ambivalence.

With *Thug* (2017), I was initially approached by the cast members to develop a project together. To find our story, I engaged them extensively in directed workshops and improv sessions to develop a fictional screenplay based on their lived experience as aspiring actors in the film industry. I strove to provide my actor-collaborators with an opportunity to defy the film industry stereotypes in which they are continuously pigeonholed (as thugs, prisoners, homeless people, immigrants, etc.) and which

function ultimately to reify and perpetuate anti-black attitudes both on and off screen. Ultimately, we developed a story about a trio of actors who risk their friendship to successfully audition for roles in a commercial film. In a sense, one could say I adopted the role of a witness in this creation process, with the objective of facilitating the cast's authentic self-representation. As a white filmmaker, I considered this approach an artistic choice as much as an ethical imperative. Between *Bound* and *Thug*, then, one could argue that I transposed the experience of witnessing from the imagined fictional protagonist of the former, to my lived experience as filmmaker in the writing process of the latter. The concept of bearing-witness-to injustice, oppression, and processes of dehumanization has played a significant role in shaping my voice as a filmmaker.

My initial thesis pitch was a realist narrative fiction about a feminist university professor whose belief system is challenged when her son is accused anonymously of sexual assault. In the context of this story, the legitimacy of the accusation would never be called into question. Rather, I was interested to explore the social and cultural prejudices confronted by the mother in the aftermath of her son's autonomous actions. Specifically, I was interested to critique and deconstruct the Bad Mother trope that pervades cinematic representations of mothers and elucidate the ways in which Western normative ideals of motherhood perpetuate mother-blaming attitudes. From Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) to Phillips' *Joker* (2019), Bad Mother tropes dominate the psychological-thriller genre as a story device to explain the origin of an adult male character's moral deviance and criminal behaviour. With my project, I wanted to challenge this overworked conventional bias and suggest that the root causes of misogynistic acts perpetrated by boys and men is more likely to be found in their social

and cultural conditioning to enact heteronormative ideals of masculinity. Shifting from the theme of the limits of sibling love in *Bound*, to fraternal love in *Thug*, I gravitated toward the limits of parental – specifically maternal – love with my thesis subject.

THE REVISED PROPOSAL

Instead of envying the script and dialogue writers, the trained actors, the elaborate staffs and sets, the enormous production budgets of the professional film, the amateur should make use of the one great advantage which all professionals envy him, namely, freedom – both artistic and physical.

– Maya Deren¹

Scaling my ambition to suit the program's structure, I opted to transfer some of the story's core themes to a non-fiction film in development with leading cast member Simon Mutuyimana from *Thug*. This new project, called *Anamneses*, would push the limits of collaborative filmmaking and bring new meaning to my role as a witness-artist to explore notions of otherness, the ethics of cinematic representation, and intergenerational trauma. The mother-son bond would remain a central theme. Inspired by the words of auteur film director Maya Deren, this new approach would be founded on the true meaning of creativity as an *amateur* – from the Latin *amatorem*, "lover", and *amare*, "to love"² – and allow me the freedom to experiment with ideas that had governed my body of work since its inception, ultimately informing my methodology and future practice. This, I believe, is the greatest advantage I could take to push myself to learn from my MFA thesis opportunity.

¹ Deren, Maya. "Maya Deren: Notes, Essays, Letters." in *Film Culture*, No. 39 (1965): p45

² Deren, 45.

A meditation on the meaning of empathy, *Anamneses* takes influence from the work of Abbas Kiarostami – specifically his early film *Homework* (1989) – and Chantal Akerman – her last film *No Home Movie* (2015) – while drawing upon recent research into the transgenerational transmission of trauma and the psychological effects of the aftermath of genocide. Beginning with an analysis of both influences, I will present a cross-comparison that explores the filmmakers’ organic and empathetic approaches to the cinematic inscription of trauma. I suggest that *Homework* and *No Home Movie*, while bearing similarities in their ‘amateurish’ methodologies and themes, can be differentiated by the directors’ distinct onscreen relationships to, and treatment of, their traumatized subjects as witness-artists.

Following this, I will explore artist and philosopher Bracha Ettinger’s conceptual theory of matrixial borderspaces and apply her system of thought to the aforementioned influences.³ I will juxtapose the phallocentrism inherent to Kiarostami’s paternalistic prodding of his student subjects with the non-phallic co-emergence inherent to Akerman’s matrixial encounter with her ‘m/Other’. According to recent research into the nature of intergenerational trauma amongst post-genocidal survivors, it is common to find a ‘veil’ or ‘code’ of silence emerge between survivors and the next generation as a coping mechanism to repress and protect against past horrors. This form of willful amnesia of traumatic experience is evident amongst the subjects of both filmmakers’ respective films as well as my own. After a discussion of this research, I will explain why I view my project *Anamneses* as an attempt to carve out a matrixial space with my subject, falling somewhere between Kiarostami and Akerman’s methodologies. I will

³ For the purpose of this essay, I have grounded my understanding of Ettinger’s theories in a close reading of her book *The Matrixial Borderspace*, in addition to several secondary sources.

seek to contextualize my own process of creation within the framework of Ettinger's theory, suggesting ultimately that it can be read as an attempt to enact her concept of aesthetic wit(h)nessing.

I: INFLUENCES

ABBAS KIAROSTAMI'S *HOMEWORK*

"[Children] don't play games in front of the camera... [They] are so receptive, so mischievous, always articulating themselves with stunning clarity... If I hadn't worked with children early in my career, I would probably have developed into a very different sort of filmmaker."

– Abbas Kiarostami ⁴

"Excuse us, sir. What's the film?" says a young winter-clad boy centre-frame, his eyes beaming with wonder, as he and his group of friends approach Kiarostami's 16mm production setup. "Did you do your homework?" responds the filmmaker's voice from behind the lens, an impromptu conversational interview that will prefigure the film's essential structure. Within the opening moments of *Homework*, Kiarostami completely tears down any traditional fourth wall storytelling convention. Guided by his own childlike curiosity and playfulness, the filmmaker observes the local boys in panning mid-shots as they make their morning commute on foot. There is an innocent fascination and awe in the air as the children first, and then an offscreen parent, inquire into the reason behind Kiarostami's filmmaking endeavor. "Is it a fiction film?" asks the anonymous parent. "No, it's a docu... I don't know. We have no idea yet" the director responds cryptically. "We don't know the style. There's no script, just an idea".

Kiarostami goes on to explain the inspiration for the project: back at home, his son has been overwhelmed with homework, and the filmmaker often finds himself more involved than his own child. Consequently, he wants to discover the source of the problem: is it his son, his parenting, or the educational system as a whole? "To be

⁴ Cronin, Paul. (ed.) *Lessons with Kiarostami*, 87.

honest, I should say it's not really a film, more a piece of research" Kiarostami tells the onlooker. In response, the parent wishes him a quiet good luck.

By the time Kiarostami produced *Homework* in 1989, he had already been making films just shy of twenty years. The proximity of his famous Koker trilogy in the timeline of his career – the series of three features *Where is the Friend's House?* (1987), *Life, and Nothing More* (1992), and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) – may have eclipsed the significance of the film, resulting in few writings on the subject. To an average viewer, the opening sequence may present itself as careless or unrefined. However, from my perspective, the opposite is true. Hidden on the sidelines of his more successful narrative works, *Homework* is a small gem in Kiarostami's oeuvre, providing acolytes of the director with a rare glimpse into his creative process.

Here Kiarostami adopts the role of the 'amateur' in the truest sense of the word (as Maya Deren would have it) and sets out to represent not a storyline or a character arc but a documentation of his own real-lived thinking-process. With his questions, his interviewees, and his intuition as his guides, the director seeks to free himself from traditional formal constraints and to uncover some kind of truth through a refreshing approach based on chance interactions. I would argue that Kiarostami's *Homework* must be understood within the context of an established filmmaker intentionally undertaking an exercise to rekindle and reinvent his ongoing practice. From this stance, it comes as no surprise that the film opens on the image of an inquisitive child. In

Lessons with Kiarostami, the filmmaker humbly advises the reader:

At its best, artistic work is a childlike process where elements of the unconscious grow in strength, eventually overwhelming the conscious. Re-connecting with youthful impulses isn't a choice for an artist. It's a necessity.⁵

⁵ Cronin, 89.

Kiarostami's youthful impulses take him from the street to the school's interior as we enter the first act of the film. A wide shot shows a non-descript room in which the filmmaker is seated across a desk from his first student interviewee. We listen in as Kiarostami provides directions to his two-man film crew who manage the lighting, camera and sound gear. All are positioned in a simple observational style within the frame, continuing the theme of self-reflexivity carried over from the opening. Are their actions and lines rehearsed? In my opinion, the answer is likely yes. But the authenticity of the crew's behaviour on camera is not important here. I would argue that what is important about this approach is Kiarostami's emphasis on their process of bearing-witness-to the students' personal testimonies. The act of witnessing the words of the children is of equal importance to the words themselves. Kiarostami renders himself a witness-artist par excellence.

"Why don't you do your homework?" inquires the filmmaker, in what feels like a soft interrogation of the schoolboys. In the beginning, the various students reveal a multitude of distractions and impediments to their productivity at home: absent or illiterate parents; too many assignments; too much housework. Recorded in neutral head-on close-ups, the children respond to Kiarostami's repeated questions, skimming only the surface of the endemic issue. Then, suddenly, a particular conversation sparks the introduction of a conceptual framework that Kiarostami will apply to the entire film. "If you don't do your homework well, are you punished?" asks the director. "My parents hit me" responds a shy six-year-old boy. "How?" follows up the director, to which the child shrugs uncomfortably: "I don't know." Unable to accept the child's silence on this matter,

Kiarostami employs his adult authority to push the vulnerable boy for more detail. The boy hesitantly elaborates: “With a belt.”



Figure 1. Film still. Abbas Kiarostami interviews a schoolboy, *Homework*, 1989.

The weight of the child’s evident abuse is palpable in the hanging moment of silence that follows. The impression one experiences is of Kiarostami’s mind hinging on the boy’s personal trauma like the discovery of a clue. Kiarostami seemingly improvises his next most important question: “Has anyone ever encouraged you?” Sadly, the boy answers with a simple “No.” The discrepancy between parental encouragement, on the one hand, and punishment, on the other, thereby becomes Kiarostami’s ad hoc guiding principle governing his pursuit of the truth(s) behind the local children’s collective struggle for independent learning and self-actualization.

With this foundation, we move into the second act of Kiarostami’s organic thought-process, marked by his expansion of these themes. Gradually, his line of questioning evolves and refines. “Do you know what ‘to punish’ means?” he asks

another boy who sports a colourful sweater. “It means to hit” the boy says under his breath, almost inaudibly. “And ‘encourage’?” follows up the director. The boy is at a complete loss: “I don’t know.” Edited with clear sequential intention, the local children reveal one by one that, while they may have an understanding – and experience – of the meaning of punishment, they are continuously incapable of defining the notion of encouragement.

Digging deeper still, Kiarostami asks the schoolboys to conduct a thought experiment and consider how they might treat their own future children if they were to misbehave. He juxtaposes two responses in particular. The first boy explains that, since his father does not strike him, he would not inflict any form of cruelty on his own children. By contrast, the next boy describes his abuse by his father. “How many slaps does he give you?” inquires the director. The boy responds with five to seven. Kiarostami then asks: “If you had a naughty child, how many would you give him?” In one of the most revelatory moments of the film, the shy boy gives his disturbing answer: “Seven.”

Kiarostami demonstrates his extraordinary capacity to employ his filmmaking tactics to transform a personal anecdote into a universal narrative. What began as a seemingly haphazard investigation into the source of his son’s personal struggle develops into a critical inquiry that throws into question the norms and disciplinary attitudes of Iranian parents in their domestic socialization of children across the nation. Incidentally, the witness-artist filmmaker sheds light on the intergenerational transmission of trauma, hinting at the cyclical pattern by which victims may come to (re)enact the violence of their past. Kiarostami’s six-year-old subjects are inherently

honest, unfiltered, and nondeceptive. Being so young and impressionable, they have not yet developed a mature moral ethos from which they can critically engage their parents' actions, let alone understand the filmmaker's intentions. In a sense, one could argue that their collective testimony provides Kiarostami direct and unmediated access to the truth(s) of their traumatic experiences. Each question is like a layer Kiarostami peels back one by one, gradually uncovering a reality the complexity of which far exceeds his initial musings.



Figure 2. Film still. Interviewees Majid and Molai, *Homework*, 1989.

Confronting this complexity, Kiarostami transitions the film into the convention of an authoritative voiceover describing factual information obtained through a school-wide survey conducted by his crew. The results support the children's testimonies regarding illiterate and absent parents. Ostensibly, there were no questions concerning encouragement, punishment, or physical abuse. Later, a local parent is interviewed, who highlights the harms of overworking the children, the importance of nurturing

creativity and playfulness, and the children's natural resistance to high-pressure impositions.

The final interview involves a child by the name of Majid who is so damaged by the education system that he cannot help but sob uncontrollably on camera, begging for the accompaniment of his friend, Molai. Eventually, Majid leaves the set, and Molai speaks on his behalf. In order to uphold his moral integrity onscreen, Kiarostami vocally confirms with Molai that he and his crew were not in any way responsible for Majid's emotional breakdown. Molai then testifies that his friend was beaten with rulers and sticks by his teacher, and describes the extent of his symptoms of trauma: "I don't know why he's always scared... Even the bell frightens him. He starts to cry. When the children go outside, he cries. At recess, he cries."

Eventually, Majid builds up enough confidence to return to the set, but not without his friend. The child paces uncomfortably. Kiarostami presses Majid to explain the explicit source of his fear, but Majid withholds a straightforward answer. Kiarostami dangles the prospect of returning Molai to class, sending him from the room to leave Majid alone, and the child once again begins to cry. Sympathetically, Kiarostami brings Molai back into the room. Majid needs Molai present as an active witness in order to feel safe and emotionally stable. He will not utter testimony to the truth of his traumatic experience, a limit against which Kiarostami insistently pushes and prods, before finally relenting.

Kiarostami's *Homework* is a fascinating exercise in the documentary form that embraces the freedom of an amateur aesthetic to document the filmmaker's real-lived thinking process as it evolves and crystallizes into a normative inquiry into the parental

and educational socialization of children across Iran. The nature of the discrepancy between encouragement and punishment emerges early on as the film's guiding ethical framework. However, I would argue that Kiarostami's handling of Majid could suggest the director's own betrayal of *Homework's* moral logic. By insisting to provoke and capture Majid's testimony on camera – which includes teasing the threat of removing his friend Molai from the set if Majid does not comply – Kiarostami ultimately resorts to employing a logic of domination and – at least hypothetically – punishment. Visibly triggered and upset, the frail boy nevertheless stands his ground and refuses to speak about the events that traumatized him. Instead, prompted by an impending religious studies quiz, and on Kiarostami's request, Majid closes out the film with the recitation of a prayer.

AKERMAN'S *NO HOME MOVIE*

“And then I realized that same moment that I could not speak on her behalf, she was the only one who could speak, and if she didn't want to speak, that should be *it*.”

- Chantal Akerman ⁶

No Home Movie, Chantal Akerman's final film before her tragic suicide, is an enigma that challenged audiences the world over, compelling some to praise it as her greatest masterpiece, while prompting others to walk out of the cinema. Whether intentionally or not, the film chronicles the final days in the life of Chantal's mother, Natalia, from within the confines of her modest Brussels apartment. Akerman

⁶ Kasman, Daniel. “Chantal Akerman discusses No Home Movie.” *Mubi Notebook Interview*, 17 Aug 2015, <https://mubi.com/en/notebook/posts/chantal-akerman-discusses-no-home-movie>.

documents her mother's insulated quotidian routines within the low-res and often dimly lit frame of a consumer-grade digital camera. The stark stylelessness of her approach is evocative of, and a testament to, the now bygone phenomenon of home movie recordings. While these types of recordings can inscribe deeply personal and unique intimacies, the amateurish repetition and banality of their protracted in-camera shots – often provoking family members to hit the fast-forward button – are qualities that Akerman embraces. However, as suggested by the title, this is no ordinary home movie. Anchored by several unabridged conversations between Akerman and Natalia, the director employs her filmmaking practice as a way to hold loving space for her mother in order to unveil and relieve the weight of her traumatic experience as a survivor of the Holocaust.

Like Kiarostami, Akerman inserts herself self-reflexively within the world of the film as witness-artist/interviewer/interlocutor. While the former conducted something of a soft interrogation of a largely anonymous group of schoolchildren, Akerman's treatment of her singular subject, Natalia, is predicated on a relationship that is immediate, deeply felt, and rooted in a lifetime of familial love. The bond between them is authentic and undeniable and comes to light most evidently in their reminiscences of Natalia's mothering of Chantal as a young girl, their mutual affection for each other spanning back over the decades. Endearingly, the world-renowned director calls her mother "Mommy" repeatedly and completely unselfconsciously throughout the film.



Figure 3. Film still. Akerman films her mother napping, *No Home Movie*, 2015.

In one scene three quarters of the way through *No Home Movie*'s two-hour runtime, Natalia is pictured in a wide shot napping in her favourite living room chair, the camera placed surreptitiously on some elevated surface. Chantal enters frame left with a second camera in hand. She quietly approaches and points the lens at her dozing mother. Off-camera, Chantal's sister Sylviane can be heard bustling around in the kitchen, before imploring: "Mommy, are you okay? Tell us a story." The daughters plead with their mother for an entire minute and a half, but no story comes. As Natalia slips in and out of consciousness, her daughters instead opt to help her exercise her dwindling memory faculties. "What did you do yesterday, Mommy?" asks Chantal. The filmmaker's anguish at her mother's imminent decline is palpable in the coarseness of her cry:

"Maman, dors pas! Maman!"

In my view, this scene is significant because it encapsulates Akerman's unembellished aesthetic and her methodology as daughter-interlocutor. *No Home Movie* is an observational documentary taken to its logical extreme. Akerman's fly-on-the-wall

camera is either recording from a concealed location unbeknownst to her ailing mother, or made to feel so ubiquitous that she must simply adapt to its omnipresent gaze: “Why are you filming me?” inquires Natalia one day over Skype; “I film everybody, Mommy. Of course you especially, more than others” responds Chantal. Subverting formal conventions of documentary filmmaking, *No Home Movie*’s essential structure should be conceived of as weblike, but not of a predatorial nature. This is not a spider’s web that schemes, manipulates, and ensnares. Rather, this web functions more like a netting, lovingly spun and draped by Akerman in every room of her mother’s home, waiting with unconditional patience for her stories to be gently uttered, then caught, caressed, and enfolded.

Nearing the film’s midpoint, Chantal records a conversation with her mother over dinner. The small camera is positioned clandestinely from behind the filmmaker on a tabletop, with Natalia as its focus. Like many of the film’s shots, the framing is not well-balanced or composed (a third of the frame is consumed by the tabletop, with the camera’s own power cable snaking into view). There are no imposing film lights and no microphones. Akerman strips her cinema frame of these artificial techniques and customs in a total embracement of the ‘Derenian’ artistic and physical freedom afforded to the amateur aesthetic. This is how she spins her netting, with her mother’s comfort and safety her central priority.



Figure 4. Film still. Akerman speaks with her mother over dinner, *No Home Movie*, 2015.

Chantal and Natalia discuss shared memories of their past – Natalia’s mothering of the children, former nannies, and the tension between Chantal’s late father and her grandfather (the latter having pressured the family to conform to his orthodox Judaism). Chantal quietly guides the conversation toward the subject of her relatives fleeing Germany in 1939. Organically, Natalia begins to describe her own experience of the German invasion and occupation of Belgium. “[T]hey were nice” Natalia explains, “They were likeable everywhere, they went to shops, bought things, paid with their funny money.” Gradually, Natalia begins to orbit the horror that followed: “[B]ut then, they started very slowly. Little by little, like...” she says, when Chantal interjects: “Like perverts.” Her mother nods in agreement: “Terrible, they got us.”

Both Kiarostami and Akerman engage the spirit of the amateur in their separate quests to create a zone of trust in which their subjects can open up and give utterance to the truth(s) of their traumatic experiences. For all of her efforts, the above scene is practically the closest Akerman ever gets to capturing her mother’s testimony. It

becomes clear that the weight of Natalia's trauma as an Auschwitz survivor is simply ineffable, the expression of which would invoke too much pain. Akerman does not push or prod her mother to give word to her experience. One of the film's final conversations in which Akerman chats casually with the housekeeper illustrates this barrier. Akerman testifies on her mother's behalf: "[T]he SS captured them, and sent them back to Poland again, to the concentration camps," to which the housekeeper replies with a big polite smile: "*Ahh! Oui!*" Evidently, there is no real understanding between them. "That is why my mother is like that" explains Chantal, mostly to herself, and to her audience. Instead, *No Home Movie* becomes a meditation on the meaning of silence for survivors of genocide and the incommensurability between their lived experience and spoken language.

II: BRACHA ETTINGER & THE MATRIXIAL

Bracha Ettinger is a contemporary visual artist, psychoanalyst, and theoretical philosopher whose conceptualization of the 'matrixial' has functioned to critique and expand the traditional thought of Western psychoanalysts such as Freud, Lacan, and Levinas. While her influence has been applied to visual arts, both by herself and others, Ettinger's ideas are not as widely discussed within media and film criticism. However, recent scholars have applied her thinking to works by filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman, suggesting her theories of the matrixial contain a rich potential to offer feminist film criticism and theory. Although this is not a philosophy paper proper, I will present a brief overview of three of Ettinger's primary concepts: the matrixial, wit(h)nessing, and metramorphosis. Following this, I will draw upon the written work of Brenda Longfellow and Lori Marso to apply Ettinger's thought to my interpretation of Akerman's *No Home Movie* and, by extension, Kiarostami's *Homework*. The aim of this section is to establish a foundation from which I can critique and present a matrixial reading of my own thesis experiment *Anamneses*.

THE MATRIXIAL, WIT(H)NESSING, AND METRAMORPHOSIS

Contemporary aesthetics is moving from the phallic structure to the matrixial sphere. We are carrying, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, enormous traumatic weight, and aesthetic wit(h)nessing in art brings it to culture's surface.

– Bracha Ettinger⁷

⁷ Ettinger, Bracha. *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 146.7-147.8.

For Bracha Ettinger, the matrixial is a new ontological paradigm that challenges the phallogentrism of mainstream psychoanalytical schools of thought founded in large part on the theories of Freud and Lacan. According to Ettinger, traditional psychoanalytic theory is predicated on “an unconscious phallic structure” (Ettinger, 123.4) that defines a mode of human subjectivity based on masculine sexual difference alone. For example, Lacan’s theories on the formation of the phallically constituted human subject relies on the theory of an originary “cut” (126.7) or “incision” (127.8) that effectively “engenders the subject as split” (125.6); a “symbolic castration process” (41.2) leading to a world of relations defined by binaries that separate entities impermeably. Within this castration paradigm, the Other is rendered “forever unattainable” (40.1) to the Self, and the feminine can only exist as the “lacking other of the masculine... a negative function: not-man, lack, absence, the thing, the real, death” (Pollock, “Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in the Era of Trauma”, 855). Ettinger highlights Lacan’s inclinations toward a sexist bias, emphasizing his view that the pre-natal unconscious realm of the maternal womb “and its jouissance between conception and birth is considered [by Lacan] occultism and mystification” (Ettinger, 130.1).

With her theory of the matrixial, Ettinger offers a paradigmatic shift that functions to supplement and transform this phallic mode of knowledge and subjectivity by rooting it in the structure of the womb. As a “site of feminine/prenatal encounter” (140.1), the womb involves “psychic intimate sharing” (139.0) through the “simultaneous co-emergence and co-fading of the I and the uncognized non-I... in neither fusion nor rejection” (139.0). In other words, in its archaic, primordial state, the becoming human subject – before the development of seeing and spatialized awareness – is constituted

by “an unseeing feeling with, or sensing of, an unknown but co-emerging other” (Pollock, 858). Lacan’s phallic cut is, according to Ettinger, a splitting away from the “archaic body/mother, first amalgamated in symbiosis and then forever separated from me” (Ettinger, 126.7). For Lacan, the subject begins and is defined by the cut; for Ettinger, the fact of human subjectivity actually precedes the cut, within the liminal and pre-natal unconscious realm. Ettinger’s matrixial is a “transsubjective psychic sphere” (124.5), a symbolic concept resembling a borderspace modeled uniquely on feminine sexual difference. Like the mother-to-be who engages in a transsubjective encounter through her impregnated womb, the matrixial metaphor designates a zone embedded in “joint traces of I and non-I... a joint voyage ramified between inside and outside...between different partial-subjects and partial-objects” (139.0). This “archaic encounter” (Ettinger, “Traumatic Wit(h)ness-Thing and Matrixial Co/inhabit(u)ating”, 92), according to Ettinger, is the singular “prototype of trans-subjective knowledge” (92).

For Ettinger, so too the concept of wit(h)nessing has its origin within this archaic prototypical encounter. In the context of artistic creation and expression, the artist can engage in an analogous encounter as a partial subject who “takes part and testifies to/for... the trauma of an-other” (93-94). This is the activity of wit(h)nessing, binding the artist and the subject of their gaze by “matrixial threads” (93):

Thus, as I cannot fully handle events that concern me profoundly, they are fading-in-transformation while my *non-I(s)* become wit(h)nesses to them. It may happen that because of their highly traumatic value I cannot physically handle ‘my’ events at all. In the matrixial psychic sphere, ‘my’ traces will be trans-scribed in others, thus my others will process these events for me. (92)

In this sense, the artist as non-I “is not an intruder to be rejected or assimilated but rather a ‘partner in difference’” (Ettinger, “Woman-Other- Thing: A matrixial* touch”, 12). Unlike metamorphosis, which describes a development of total transformation, Ettinger’s concept of ‘metramorphosis’ is a “poietic-artistic process” (Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 140.1) that induces change through “a hybrid webbing of links between several subjectivities, who by virtue of that webbing become partial” (140.1). Metramorphic transformation inscribes “imprints of trauma and encounter, and conducts such traces from non-I to I... [transferring] the knowledge of these events with-in-to the matrixial psychic sphere” (143.4) which enables these imprints to be “transmitted into culture and open its boundaries” (143.4).

This common subjectivizing space/process is not without significant ethical implications. The activity of wit(h)nessing is a risky, self-fragilizing and painful experience because “the matrixial accessibility to the other implies becoming vulnerable in the Levinasian sense: being exposed to the Other, to the point where the Other becomes traumatizing to me” (144.5). However, as Ettinger contends, this painful fragility is not the consequence of “a sacrifice of myself in a disappearing for the sake of the Other, but rather a partial disappearing to allow jointness” (144.5). This partial disappearing is the flip side of “a transsubjective matrixial alliance” (144.5) enabled through the practice of compassionate wit(h)nessing. Ultimately, for Ettinger, the end goal is to confront “the limits of trauma’s shareability and the jouissance of the Other” (147.8) and open up the “possibility of accessing, via artwork, one’s own trauma” (157.8), heralding “a new healing potential” (147.8) that bears “ethical and even therapeutic consequences” (147.8).

FORMIDABLE ACTS OF RESISTANCE & MOTHERWORK

In her article “The Matrixial Borderspace: The Complex Inscription of Trauma in Chantal Akerman’s *No Home Movie*”, scholar Brenda Longfellow offers an interpretation of Akerman’s film that is grounded within the framework of Ettinger’s concept of the matrixial sphere. Echoing the views of feminist art historian Griselda Pollock ⁸, Longfellow suggests that Akerman’s entire filmmaking oeuvre can in fact be read as “a long journey home” (Longfellow, 116) toward this site of originary repression within the director’s family, a site which, through the filmmaking process, becomes “a transitive and transsubjective encounter mediated through a relation to the maternal” (115). A child of holocaust survivors herself, Ettinger and her theories, Longfellow argues, correlate with Akerman’s artistic praxis because both figures suggest “an alternative paradigm of meaning, subjectivity, and aesthetic and ethical practice mediated through a coeval and compassionate relation to an other coded in the feminine” (119). The central ethical question for both, Longfellow contends, is not the essence of goodness or justice, but “the more grounded and possibly more urgent question of how to respond to the other” (120).

Maya Deren and her exaltation of the ‘amateur’ once again comes to mind when Longfellow discusses a reading of *No Home Movie* as a “failed film” (114). In its ‘amateurish’ formal approach, the film can be dismissed as a technical failure. However, for Longfellow, the failure of the work is not by technical means but because “it fails as

⁸ See Longfellow’s reference to Pollock’s book *After-Affects, After-Images: Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum* on page 115 of her article.

an act of deep subversion” (115). Referencing Jack Halberstam and his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Longfellow suggests a rethinking of the meaning of failure in a positive, creative light as “an act of aesthetic and political resistance” (115). In its radical matrixial engagement with its subject matter and its disregard for formal documentary conventions, *No Home Movie* can certainly be read this way as aesthetically and politically subversive. For Longfellow, the film’s essential failure is the result of two opposed and formidable acts of resistance: the resistance of Natalia to testify to her experiences of the Holocaust, on the one hand, and the countering resistance of Akerman to testify in her place, on the other. In this reading, the double bind between the filmmaker-daughter and her mother-subject, while leading to a perceived ‘failure’ of representation of Natalia’s experiences, in fact constitutes the film’s conceptual core as a matrixial inquiry into the limits of shareability and transmissibility of the trauma of genocide. Whereas a conventional documentary might approach the same subject matter with the explicit aim of eliciting, and rendering a spectacle of, testimony, Akerman presents an “ethical refusal to speak for the other” (123) and instead draws her focus to the meaning of silence “through a complex orchestration of form and affect that is... more subject to a logic of association than a logic of revelation” (122). Silence itself becomes the medium through which Akerman and Natalia process the family’s inherited trauma, pointing to the “gross inadequacy of language” (123) to transcribe the pain.

Directed by a compassionate logic of association - between mother and daughter, fiction and memory, past and present, what is spoken and unspoken – Akerman invokes the “weight of ghosts and spectral imaginings” (124) within a maternal

realm “where emptiness and space register a trauma that resists representation” (132). These are the reasons why, for Longfellow, *No Home Movie* manifests Ettinger’s aesthetic wit(h)nessing and the metramorphic process “modeled on the archaic mutuality of the matrixial” (127) and its transsubjective relationality “in its ability to meet the other, not as a “frozen” object, but as a coeval subject in becoming” (127). A fragile partner-in-difference, Akerman respectfully sculpts her dying mother’s silence into “that other death, the death that could have happened in Auschwitz” (132).

In her recent essay “Camerawork as Motherwork,” scholar Lori Marso argues for a consideration of Akerman’s filmmaking aesthetic in *No Home Movie* as a form of motherwork. While she does not reference Ettinger’s thought, Marso’s language and arguments strongly support an interpretation of the film as distinctly matrixial. Drawing upon the original Latin meaning of the term ‘camera’ as ‘chamber’ or ‘room,’ she argues that Akerman’s camera should be regarded less as a recording technology and more so “as another kind of orifice – a chamber to hold our feelings, a room for holding and exploring discomfoting fantasies and experiences” (Marso, 731). According to Marso, Akerman employs these techniques to carve out “liminal spaces of encounter for characters and spectators to confront difficult feelings in regard to mothers” (731) and ultimately “to feel our way towards new forms of care for each other” (732).

Without referencing Western psychoanalytical schools of thought, Marso’s reflections on received Western attitudes toward mothers, their othering, and the implications this has for subject formation echoes Ettinger’s critique:

Mothers are our first human contact and are cast as the absolute *other*. Mothers are simultaneously powerful sorcerers, insignificant vessels, ultimate caretakers. Mothers create and nurture new beings; their work reminds us of our vulnerability

and dependency; the presence and actions of mothers destabilizes the border between self and other. Mothers are present at the birth we can't remember, and they also remind us of the death we want to avoid. Simone de Beauvoir says that mothers are domesticated *precisely because* of this proximity to death and life, a proximity that makes them seem scary, strange, and much too powerful (732).

Motherwork as camerawork, for Marso, is not simply a matter of establishing a “loving gaze” (749), nor in merely representing the day-to-day mundanities of traditional domesticity (as in Akerman’s 1975 masterpiece *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975)). Rather, motherwork – normative and non-normative – takes on many forms and denotes a set of conflicting and complex feelings that help us “to think more honestly about the nexus of care and violence at the heart of intimate relations” (730).

For Marso, Akerman’s filmmaking can be conceived as motherwork because “the camerawork she does is also for others, and not just for her alone” (734). While not a biological mother herself, Akerman nevertheless transforms into a “cyborg mother” (750) by joining with her camera to hold her mother in a web of associative logic “as at once a vulnerable and powerful, dangerous and alluring, distant and proximate, intimately known but also mysteriously unknown and unknowable primary other” (746). In this sense, Akerman strives to stage an above all honest encounter where she can share her mother with us, the viewers, with the deserved respect of a multifaceted human subject “to be seen in all her moods, desires, contradictions, and ambiguities, in her aging body” (746). Consequently, this metamorphic, subjectivizing and humanizing process functions to undermine the objectifying role of “myths of castrating mothers, dark and dangerous (m)others, the myths of easy relationship, of connection without sacrifice, of full autonomy and unmitigated individual freedom” (747).

KIAROSTAMI'S EXPECTANT GAZE

Is what I do insensitive and manipulative? Perhaps, but manipulation isn't always a bad thing. It has always been a valid way to capture truth on film.

– Abbas Kiarostami ⁹

Returning to Kiarostami's *Homework* for a moment, I will argue that it is possible to observe the film through a matrixial critique. In contrast with some of the key ideas offered by Longfellow and Marso's perspectives, I would suggest that, while the film does demonstrate some inclination toward matrixial mutuality, Ettinger might recognize in Kiarostami's gaze the attributes of a phallogentric bias in his approach to exhibiting the schoolchildren's trauma. I would argue that Kiarostami's comportment in relation to his subjects does not fully meet the criteria to be characterized as an ethical act of wit(h)nessing.

For Kiarostami, the relationship in *Homework* between filmmaker and subject, self and other, is already entrenched within the hierarchical structure of a Tehran primary school in 1988, not to mention the broader context of the patriarchal theocratic rule of Khomeini's post-revolutionary Iran. In his engagement with the male pupils, the director frames himself deliberately as a mysterious, if not sometimes intimidating, figure of authority and dominance. He exploits this dynamic to his advantage, inviting the children to testify to their experiences before the bright light beams of a production setup that evokes the setting of a formal interview. Of course, working over thirty years ago, Kiarostami is operating within the constrictions of the 16mm technology of his day, and such a setup would have been necessary to capture a professionally exposed

⁹ Cronin, 96.

image indoors. Nevertheless, by comparing his approach to Akerman's use of handheld digital cameras decades later, it is possible to ask questions about the matrixial, metamorphic potential of the film.

On reflection, traditional 'fatherwork' – in place of 'motherwork' – appears to be at the nexus of Kiarostami's intention to produce *Homework* in the first place. His own son's struggle with his homework assignments, and Kiarostami's personal identity as a father, are his initial motives to uncover the origin of what is revealed to be a widespread problem afflicting the entire school. This disciplinary framework informs Kiarostami's 'detective's mission' to uncover the truth, a mission which relies heavily on the self/other split that defines the hierarchical relationships of child and parent, pupil and teacher, confessor and confidante.

For Kiarostami, the words of the children are sacrosanct, and his treatment of them as equals in conversation goes a long way to earning their trust. As Kiarostami has advised in his masterclasses, "The most important thing is that children don't feel that you, the filmmaker, are judging them, that you feel more important than them. They can immediately sense if you are doing this, and will resist your presence" (Cronin, 88). I would argue that there are hints of Ettinger's matrixial mutuality here, as Kiarostami employs his filmmaking to engender a dignifying, humanizing and subjectivizing space for the children to assert the reality of their repressed and uncognized traumatic experiences. It is difficult to name another filmmaker working in the documentary form who has shown the same passionate preoccupation with, and respect for, child subjectivity.

However, in the case of *Homework*, the metamorphic qualities of the film seem to subside following the first disclosure of abuse. The viewer can sense Kiarostami's curiosity piquing at this new and unexpected information. From here on in, I would argue, the filmmaker's methodology adopts a logic of revelation, as opposed to association, and ultimately serves to render a spectacle of the children's testimony. Compared to Akerman, Kiarostami is arguably less preoccupied with the Ettingerian question of how to respond to the other, so much as he is interested to incite the other to respond and thereby reveal themselves through his process of penetrative questioning.

Following the initial revelation, Kiarostami pushes and prods to uncover the truth of an epidemic of household parent-on-child violence. Almost uniformly, the perpetrators of violence are the patriarchs, the fathers of each family, exerting punishment – and not encouragement, positive reinforcement, or nurturing – in their misguided efforts to enforce discipline on the struggling schoolboys. As Ettinger has claimed, the transsubjective experience of wit(h)nessing involves a degree of vulnerability and exposure that can itself become traumatizing for the subject involved. It goes without saying that the fragile Majid, under Kiarostami's expectant gaze, for whom the boy's silence is not quite enough, undergoes a form of re-traumatization.

III: PROCESS OF CREATION: *ANAMNESES*

In previous sections, I have discussed the origin of my ideas and the profound influence of Abbas Kiarostami, Chantal Akerman and Bracha Ettinger in shaping the course of my thesis project development, with a view to elucidating the meaning behind my documentary experiment *Anamneses*. I have suggested that *Homework* and *No Home Movie* can be compared and juxtaposed along a spectrum of Ettinger's matrixial inquiry, with the latter superseding the former for its authentic aesthetic wit(h)nessing. In this final section, I will argue that my thesis project can be situated along this spectrum somewhere between both. Whereas these two films center themselves upon survivors of direct traumatic experience, *Anamneses* is focused on the effects and experience of intergenerational trauma. Following a brief overview of recent research into the nature of genocidal trauma, I will discuss the genesis of the film, my process of work with my actor-collaborator, and how this process has cultivated my understanding of strategies of authentication in working with actors in the future.

BREACHING THE SILENCE OF GENOCIDE

Can private pain be made public in an ethical and consensive manner that respects the storyteller's wishes while also responding to a societal need to break psychologically impairing silences?

– David A. Wallace et al ¹⁰

Scholars David A. Wallace et al make an important argument for the significance of breaching the silence of survivors of genocide. They relate their findings specifically

¹⁰ Wallace, David A., et al. "Stories for Hope-Rwanda: a psychological-archival collaboration to promote healing and cultural continuity through intergenerational dialogue", 300.

to the plight of survivors of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, but their research bears universal implications for all instances of genocide, such as the Holocaust, and provides an interesting context to think through Akerman's work and connect it to my own. According to the authors, the 1994 Rwandan tragedy, which saw decades-long hostilities between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic identities erupt into unprecedented systematic violence, was perpetrated in large part by ordinary citizens committing indiscriminate face-to-face killings (Wallace, 282). The killings were carried out almost exclusively by the majority and historically disenfranchised Hutus against their minority Tutsi counterparts, with over 900,000 Rwandans estimated to have lost their lives in the conflict (281). The legacy of such violence is considerable and, according to recent studies, is estimated to have caused symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) amongst up to 25% of the Rwandan population (283).

In the aftermath of such horrors, a commonplace coping mechanism emerged between survivors and the next generation in the form of a "veil," "code," or "conspiracy" of silence (277). Today, survivors have a tendency not to discuss and pay testimony to the atrocities under any circumstances, opting instead to consciously repress their traumatic memories. This type of reaction is completely understandable and human, considering the legitimate concerns facing survivors of "evoking trauma, revenge seeking, or espousing genocide ideology that might incite new ethnic hostilities" (277). However, according to the observations of the researchers, there is a detrimental consequence to this widespread phenomenon. Despite the survivors' sincerest intentions, this silence results in a "chosen amnesia" (277) that interrupts the transmission of personal and historical memory, hindering the identity formation of

Rwandan youth, spreading distrust, and ultimately obstructing the possibilities for reconciliation and collective peace (277).

I would argue that the effects of this phenomenon of silence on later generations of post-genocidal subjects constitutes a manifestation of intergenerational trauma. Also known as transgenerational trauma, intergenerational trauma is defined in its most basic form as a “process of transmission of trauma from parent-figures to their infants of children, resulting in the effects of trauma experienced by the second generation without exposure to the original traumatic experience or event” (Isobel, “Intergenerational Trauma and Its Relationship to Mental Health Care: A Qualitative Inquiry,” 632). These effects can manifest in a variety of ways, such as through “interactional patterns, genetic pathways, and/or family dynamics” (632). As a behavioural pattern inherited from their survivor forebears, this veil of silence in second generations represents a type of psychosocial conduct that echoes “their caregivers’ traumatic adaptations” (632).

At its immoral, logical core, genocide seeks not only to dehumanize and deliberately eradicate the bodies of a targeted national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, but to erase entire cultures, histories, and any linkages of that group to their identity and to their past. By severing post-genocidal offspring from their past, the symptom of the silence of survivors can be regarded as an extension of genocide’s depraved logical schema. For the researchers mentioned above, one possible antidote to this silence is storytelling. In their project Stories for Hope-Rwanda (SFH), the researchers facilitated open and archived dialogue sessions between Rwandan youth and their survivor elders – such as a parent, older sibling, mentor-figure, or other trusted person – in a community-based, participatory process. Ultimately, their stated goal was to determine

“whether intergenerational dialogues among youths and elders in a post-genocide society enhanced healing for the second generation” (Wallace, 279). Storytelling elders were treated respectfully and given total control over the nature and extent of their discussions and personal disclosures. The results of this exercise were overwhelmingly positive and appeared to induce a variety of benefits in the self-reporting participants, including a decrease in feelings of loneliness, a newfound sense of trust and freedom to speak openly with others, an improved understanding of the particular events of the genocide, increased community engagement, and a shift toward a more hopeful vision for the future, among other benefits (294-298).

CONCEIVING THE FILM

Since our first collaboration together on *Thug*, I have always had a great deal of respect for Simon not only as an actor, but as an artist in his own right. I wrote several scenes from that film that were inspired by his and the other cast members’ lived experience, and a strong foundation of trust was paramount to the consent and success of that process. By the time the opportunity to collaborate again on this new project arose, we were good friends both interested to push the limits of collaborative filmmaking into uncharted territory. Taking place toward the end of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, we felt stirred to create a project exploring themes of self-reflection and self-care, the stigmatisation of mental health issues, and a sense of optimism and hope for regeneration and growth. The height of the pandemic was rife with uncertainty and social unrest, and the prospect of a better future weighed heavily on our conscience.

After some brainstorming, our curiosity was piqued by the character of a psychic. From the gritty neorealism of Vittoria De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, to the fictive horror of Stanley Kubrick's masterful *The Shining*, the mystique of the prophetic clairvoyant has had a hold on the imagination of influential filmmakers across the genre spectrum. Personally, I identify as a rational sceptic, and have been quick to roll my eyes at the professed ability of professional readers to interpret a person's life path, commune with the dead, or predict the future. However, after undergoing a tarot card reading organized spontaneously by a friend, I realized that the system of the cards has unique psychological applications as a mode of introspection through self-storytelling. Bypassing the practice's questionable mystical dimension, we initially attempted to collaborate on a written character of a fictional reader. Following several failed trials, we changed course and settled on Simon's suggestion to record his real-lived conversations with self-identified psychics.

My awareness of Simon's personal background in Rwanda has been limited to a handful of details. Supported by the research mentioned earlier, he was understandably reticent, if not fully guarded, on the subject. To this day, I do not know the full details of where he and his family members identify on the Hutu-Tutsi spectrum. Respectfully, I have felt it is not a question that needed to be asked. What I do know with certainty is that, having been born just after the Rwandan genocide, Simon, like Akerman, would have experienced the effects of the events second-hand, and he and his family undertook the arduous journey of leaving their home country behind for a better life on this continent. I considered the possibility that our exploration of alternative methods of therapeutic dialogue, such as through guided tarot readings, might facilitate a zone of

trust in which Simon could reckon with his family's legacy intergenerational silence. Simon was enthusiastic about the prospect and we embarked on a comprehensive online search for a variety of professional readers.

While I made my own suggestions, I encouraged Simon to follow his intuition and to take a lead role in the selection. For his own comfort, I ensured he would have final approval on those selected. As Akerman did with her mother Natalia, my aim was to prioritize the establishment as much as possible of an Ettingerian transsubjective psychic sphere, a loving space wherein myself, the readers, and the viewers could partake in an instance of compassionate wit(h)nessing as partial partners-in-difference. Together, Simon and I would work to test the limits of trauma's shareability through the collaborative filmmaking process and, hopefully, illuminate the healing and therapeutic effects of such an endeavor.

The question of whether I should myself partake in the film's world – to be present in front of, and not just behind, the camera lens – was something we discussed prior to production. Both Kiarostami and Akerman step into the frames of their films and perform the roles of active interviewers in their attempts to elicit the testimony of their subjects. In my experience working with Simon before in the context of the fiction film *Thug*, I had no desire to centre myself or my story. The virtue of our collaboration, it seemed to me at the time, was to employ my skills and vision to build a platform of representation where the cast's real-lived passions, hardships, and internal conflicts as black actors could be self-reflexively depicted, shared, and validated. Withholding my participation in the film's world felt like an ethical choice, and I believed the result would simply speak for itself.

Early on in our creative brainstorming, Simon and I did discuss the prospect of my own self-reflexive involvement in my thesis project. However, on making contact with the readers, we quickly realized that my participation in the setting of their dialogues would be disruptive, distracting, and unnecessary. Each reader required total privacy in their communication with their client (in one particular case, with the reader Rica Gudino, while the presence of the camera was permitted, my physical presence in the room was not). Applying my previous experience from fiction filmmaking, I thought the most appropriate course of action would, once again, involve my withdrawal into invisibility. This was decided with the intention of providing a safe and comfortable space for the conversations to freely unfold.

However, I recognize that my non-participation as an active subject within the frame may in fact have the effect of raising important concerns about the nature and ethics of cinematic representation. As a white filmmaker, the observational approach offered by my camera lens could be read as an assumption of documentary objectivity, evoking a problematic filmic gaze. Compared with the aforementioned filmmakers, it could be argued that my subjectivity as the artist is not implicated within the work to the same degree. In my resistance to appear and testify to my own presence, yet to bear witness to and capture Simon's process of testimony for a viewing audience, a contradiction emerges that may suggest the limits of my own role as a wit(h)ness.

THE DIALOGUES

The film is comprised of six dialogues showcasing six different card readers. Each reader was decided upon based on a set of criteria that were tested during

preliminary offscreen phone conversations. These terms included: viability as independent and self-employed professionals; a demonstrable history of positive reviews, both public and word-of-mouth; zero tolerance of racist attitudes and prejudice and, ideally, an active awareness of current discourses of decolonization, among other criteria. At Simon's discretion, we narrowed our search specifically to locate readers who identified as black or non-white and who employed alternative non-Western traditions in their methodologies. It was pivotal that Simon and the readers had some form of natural chemistry in order so that a bond of trust could organically co-emerge onscreen. After contacting more than thirty self-identified psychics, we settled on a shortlist that would, perhaps save for one conversation, code the dialogues in the feminine. All readers were aware of, and signed off on, the recordings. Following production on the dialogues, Simon expressed a description of his dynamics with each reader by analogizing them to different figures of love in his life, whether fictional or real. The majority of these figures were feminine in nature (the Mother, the Sister, the Aunt, etc.) which, I would suggest, likens the film's approach to Akerman's in her attempt to hold loving familial space for Natalia, as opposed to Kiarostami's soft interrogatory style.

I will now present an examination of each dialogue. It is important to note that no reader was provided any personal background information on Simon's life, history, or family prior to these virtual encounters. Each recorded session happened only once and lasted anywhere from 20 to 60 minutes in duration. They have been intricately edited down, restructured, and reorganized to reflect an intentional narrative arc of change.



Figure 5. Film still. Simon speaks with a reader, *Anamneses*, 2024.

DIALOGUE I: MYST (THE OLDER SISTER)

Myst Milano is a gender-neutral Canadian artist, rapper and electronic musician (<https://www.mystmilano.com/>) whose interest in performing part-time tarot card readings was made known to us through word-of-mouth networking. This conversation was challenging for a few reasons. As this was in fact the first recorded dialogue, Simon's skepticism of the reading process may have interfered with his ability to engage deeply, compounding his reticence. Additionally, as suggested by Simon himself, the power dynamic that transpired between the two young artists was not conducive to a trusting bond. The relationship analogy used by Simon to describe the dynamic was that with a slightly older sibling, not unmarked by a sense of rivalry, competition, and therefore judgment. For creative reasons, I have utilized the footage to open the film on a neutral plane. Simon's initial skepticism is hinted at, while the most fruitful thinking provided by Myst is edited to herald the beginning of his journey to confront, and ultimately honour, his family legacy.

DIALOGUE II: RALPH (THE FATHER)

Ralph Hamelmann, otherwise known as “Psychic Ralph”, is a Toronto-based writer, musical artist, and former television producer and college professor, with 30 years of experience as a professional reader. From the outset, Ralph adopts a definitively paternalistic disposition that, I would suggest, more closely resembles Kiarostami’s authoritative approach to his pupil subjects than Akerman’s receptive humility toward her mother. While his strong intuition may, with some accuracy, identify key psychological conflicts that impede Simon’s self-expression, Ralph’s condescending demeanor serves to heighten Simon’s wariness and ultimately reinforces his emotional inhibitions.

It is easy to imagine Natalia reacting with the same resistance had Akerman (it is admittedly harder to imagine) taken a similar approach. Inspired by Akerman’s filmmaking perspective, my intention has been to enable a matrixial borderspace in which the silence of survivors is accorded its due respect, becoming the sculpted material that alludes to spectres of intergenerational trauma. At no point during these conversations did I interrupt to impose direction or shape the subject matter. On reflection, Simon categorized this dynamic as similar to that of a father figure. Ralph’s comportment is reminiscent of Kiarostami’s expectant gaze, lightly pushing and prodding for the revealed testimony. Running up against Simon’s intractable opposition, the conversation reverts to the question of the resistance itself. It is proposed that this impediment is ego driven, to his own detriment, and rooted in a fear and distrust of others. Not surprisingly, the conversation did not develop much further beyond this point. This sequence is intentionally featured at the film’s beginning because it

establishes the formidable strength of Simon's resistance which, as the project progresses, is gradually allayed by an organically expanding zone of trust.

DIALOGUE III: GILLIAN (THE YOUNGER SISTER)

Gillian Witter is another Toronto-based professional reader and life coach with a background in teaching who is currently studying to become a psychotherapist through the Gestalt Institute. The immediate warmth, earnestness, and joviality of her approach cast an air of patience and understanding over the conversation that guides Simon to show the first signs of authentic trust. The saturated colours and lighting palette of the scene is intended to reflect this optimistic development. The atmosphere is free of any tension or pressure for testimony. Employing an improvisational logic of association, Gillian draws her cards at random and discusses her interpretation of the meaning of their imagery. Her intention is for Simon to find his own associations between the stories of the cards and his innermost, unarticulated feelings. I would argue that the creative freedom and respect for privacy, individuality, and equality inherent to this process evokes a sense of matrixial mutuality. The relationship analogy Simon used to describe this conversation was one with a younger sibling – a relationship defined by some difference and distance, but built on a solid foundation of trust, respect, and common experience.

DIALOGUE IV: ELLE (THE AUNT)

Elle Esse has been conducting virtual readings in Canada using the same Thoth tarot deck for 30 years. Despite her relative anonymity online, we connected with Elle

through our word-of-mouth networking. The conversation with Elle is the first in which the spectre of intergenerational trauma comes to the surface, albeit indirectly. Her approach embodies a combination of some attributes of the previous readers. Just as Ralph confronted Simon's resistance, Elle identifies a layer of protection, but she speaks to him in terms of a cyclical pattern, an inheritance beyond his control, and a fertile territory which she encourages him to mine. Just as Gillian drew associations through the cards, Elle describes the imagery she sees in her folded deck. Simon described their dynamic as one he might have had with an aunt – approximating a mother-son bond, but a step removed from paternal judgment.

For the first time in our process, Simon feels comfortable enough to speak openly about his struggle to do precisely that – to open up with honesty. When asked about what he thinks is provoking his layer of protection, Simon describes a sensation almost like a tone, but not quite a memory: "Sometimes it's in the room, sometimes it's not". I would suggest that this juncture of the conversation should be regarded as an instance of poiesis, and should not be taken literally, but figuratively. The presence and weight of intergenerational trauma, specifically amongst second generation victims, is not a phenomenon that can be easily scientifically measured or proven quantitatively. The original undiscussed and uncognized trauma of the parent-figures, the resulting veils of silence and chosen amnesia, and the variegated effects manifested through unconscious genetic and social patterns, all compound to engender an experience of the events that persists, lingers, and haunts unseen.

DIALOGUE V: LA' CHEA (THE MOTHER)

Simon first came across La' Chea through her YouTube videos performing live Tarot card readings and thought immediately that her style of conversation could be conducive to our project. I encouraged him to reach out to her and set up a time to talk. It took some time for us to earn La' Chea's trust, and she took more time than the rest to seriously consider her involvement. The relationship analogy used by Simon to describe their connection was that closest to a mother-son bond. From the offset of the dialogue, La' Chea's maternal energy is palpable. She unveils her care for their connection in visceral terms, expressing her own feelings of anxiety and nausea rooted in the pangs of her stomach.

The conversation gives rise to the first of many moments of ease and animated laughter. Anticipating this, Simon and I dressed the scene using a bright colour palette, warm lighting, and plenty of natural plants to convey a vulnerable, meditative setting. La' Chea does not rely on the images of the cards in her unique method of communication. Instead, between bouts of shared giggling, she provides an esoteric reading that feels akin to motherly advice, with reminders to hydrate and eat properly, while ultimately foreshadowing and prepping Simon for the direction of the film's final epilogue. Through her loving speech, La' Chea introduces the concept of our project as a process of sacrifice and healing – a sacrifice of the protective shield in order to confront and begin the healing of a legacy of intergenerational suffering.

DIALOGUE VI: RICA (THE FRIEND)

Rica Gudino is a Toronto-based artist and freelance card reader who identifies as a nonbinary trans queer autistic person of mixed Mexican-Canadian and Mexihka ancestry (www.ricagudino.com). Drawing on her Latin-American heritage, Rica self-identifies as a bruja – the Spanish term for witch or sorceress – and practices brujeria, a form of witchcraft blending indigenous, African, and European influences. We connected with Rica through a private word-of-mouth recommendation. It is worth noting that this sequence was shot, by Rica's request, in total privacy. While I conducted the camera and lighting setup, only she and Simon were to be present during the entirety of the session. For this reason, the camera remains in a single stationary angle, evoking the intentional imperfections of Akerman's carefree framing. The relationship analogy used by Simon to describe their dynamic was one of authentic, equal friendship.

This dialogue is the most significant of the selection and, while chronologically recorded last, also serves as the film's structural climax. Rica's unique insight, respectful demeanor, and radical empathy position her to encapsulate all of the themes discussed by the previous readers, ultimately inspiring and pointing the way forward to the project's denouement. Rica identifies Simon's resistance as a blockage concealing and protecting a lifelong and inherited grief which Simon spontaneously, and for the first time, articulates as feeling genetic. Echoing earlier dialogues, she suggests that this grief represents a form of knowledge that is buried in his unconscious – in her terms, the body/spirit – but which eludes understanding and cognition as he has no sensory memory or even factual information regarding the original traumatic events. Bringing us

full circle to the film's opening thoughts, Simon inquires about the meaning of honouring this legacy. Discerningly, Rica discusses the power of naming as a first act of honouring, acceptance, and healing. She implores Simon to return to the site of originary repression through a relation to the maternal – by reaching out to his biological mother. According to her reading of her cards, an ancestral team of women beckon him down this path.

EPILOGUE

Up until this point, the film's material has been comprised of intricately edited real-lived and one-time dialogues held between Simon and his conversational partners-in-difference. Derived from hours of unabridged audiovisual recordings, the sequences have been built upon an intentional dialectical logic, beginning with the tension of Simon's resistant silence, confronting that silence with a variety of partial-matrixial approaches, and finally synthesizing a release of the tension through a co-emerging awareness of its unconscious origin. It goes without saying that this release is embodied in Simon's wordless sigh.

For the film's resolution, I have taken inspiration once again from Kiarostami and his broader oeuvre, specifically the ending of his film *Close-Up* (1990). In that film, Kiarostami, a master of hybrid cinema, mounts a partially staged sequence that has the paradoxical effect of startling the viewer with what appears to be a raw and candid moment of encounter between the film's real-life protagonist, Hossain Sabzian, and his filmmaker idol, Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Kiarostami plays the scene to be spontaneously

captured imperfectly by his failing audiovisual equipment, employing the freedom of an amateurish aesthetic to heighten emotional impact.

In a similar vein, as well as for narrative purposes, Simon and I staged the ending of the film to suggest the imminent – if not immanent – real-life dialogue to be held with his mother. The atmospheric rumblings of a storm combine with the white noise of the metropolis and are overlaid with the lightness of wind struck chimes to invoke the weight of intergenerational spectres of trauma hanging over the meditative, yet optimistic, present. The buds of spring are pictured dangling resiliently in the cold through a window frame. This soundscape fades away as Simon sits himself down and greets his mother quietly over the phone, with the hint of a smile rising on his face.

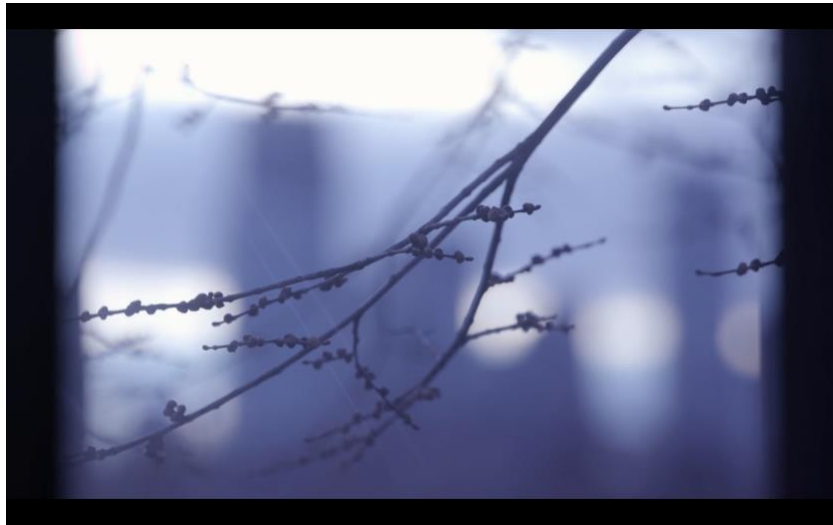


Figure 6. Film still. Buds of spring inside a window frame, *Anamneses*, 2024.

CONCLUSION

My thesis project has been a long creative journey that has evolved through several manifestations. My interest in challenging my method of working with actors, my passion for questions surrounding the ethics of representation, otherness, and the idea of a witness-artist, and my exploration of the cinematic inscription of trauma, all compound to form the makeup of my experimental documentary *Anamneses*. From the inception of my original proposal, to the actualization of this project, the mother-son bond has consistently remained a central theme.

Through an examination of my primary influences Abbas Kiarostami and Chantal Akerman and their films *Homework* and *No Home Movie* respectively, I have aimed to provide an application of Bracha Ettinger's paradigmatic artistic-philosophical theory of the matrixial in order to lay the foundation for a matrixial reading of my own work. Both filmmakers employ an observational, unembellished and Derenian amateurish aesthetic to explore the notion of testimony from divergent, but not dissimilar, angles. I have suggested that Akerman's approach to the question of representing her m/Other's experience of genocidal trauma more closely approximates Ettinger's definitions of wit(h)nessing and metramorphosis, as her work responds to her mother's silence with a logic of association grounded in a compassionate filmic gaze. I would further suggest that *No Home Movie*, while 'failing' to provide a conventional representation of genocide, can be read as a matrixial web that functions metaphorically to signify the incommensurability between language and genocidal trauma.

In the production of *Anamneses*, I was confronted with a double bind involving two acts of resistance analogical to Akerman's. On the one hand, I refused to speak or

provoke testimony on behalf of my br/Other, Simon; on the other hand, he, like Natalia, and his family members before him – and much for their own reasons – refused to give testimony. Unlike Akerman who, despite her act of resistance, nevertheless appears in her film and partakes as an active speaking and questioning subject, my own resistance in support of Simon manifested as non-participation in the world of the film. While my own refusal to embody presence and to speak (the film crew can in fact be partially seen reflected from within a mirror in one scene) was decided upon with the intent to facilitate a safe and comfortable zone of trust, my role as wit(h)ness does present its limitations. However, through the collaborative process between myself, Simon, and the readers, I have attempted to weave a matrixial web of our own, enabling psychic (Ettinger's term) intimate sharing in a zone of trust where the weight of highly traumatic events for one can be shared, handled with loving care, and ultimately lessened, by others.

Ettinger's concept of the matrixial necessarily involves a critique of what she refers to as a mainstream phallogocentric bias inherent to Western psychoanalysis. As I have previously discussed, this bias for Ettinger is predicated on a libidinal loss and originary cut that separates the self from the other by an unbridgeable abyss. In Ettinger's view, by contrast, the matrixial borderspace, modeled on the metaphor of the womb, operates to subvert this paradigm by bridging the abyss through a radical form of transsubjective knowledge. This knowledge is defined by feminine, and not masculine, parameters, and reframes our collective thinking around the meaning and reality of trauma.

With my project *Anamneses*, I have sought to apply this thinking to the notion of intergenerational trauma, a concept that has been traditionally neglected, disregarded, and mystified for its lack of clear scientific understanding. My intention has been to draw parallels between the phallogentric mystification of the maternal, the feminine, and the m/Other, on the one hand, and the mystification of the transmission of genocidal trauma, on the other. Reserving judgment, I have chosen to explore this tension by way of observing the compassionate communication styles of unorthodox self-identified card readers who practice their esoteric techniques on the fringes of mainstream scientific and psychological schools of thought. The outcome of this filmmaking exercise in matrixial mutuality, I would argue, is a project that embodies aspects of Ettinger's aesthetic wit(h)nessing and documents the artistic-poietic story of a man who breaches his own silence and unveils his inherited spectres of trauma, culminating in a reunion with both his literal, and archaic/metaphorical, m/Other.

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