THE PLACES WE LIVED

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN FILM
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

June 2021

ABSTRACT

The Places We Lived uses my parents' large archive of Super8 and digital home movies from the mid-1970s to late 1990s to grapple with the hopes, dreams, and disappointments of two South American immigrants who moved to Montreal in the wake of the excitement and optimism generated by Expo '67. This story focuses on my father, whose new life in Canada followed four hardscrabble decades in Chile and South America. Like my Argentinean-born mother, he lived a mobile life characterised by neither chain migration nor lasting social ties with members of his ethnic group. This is also a story about class, politics, inheritance, and the complicated histories of migration and exile.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Phil Hoffman, and my thesis reader, John McCullough, for their kindness, encouragement and assistance on this project; my internal external examiner Carlota McAllister for her insights and recommendations; Manfred Becker for always being quick to respond to emails about the program and being so supportive in other ways; Janine Marchessault who, along with Phil, enriched my life in Toronto and helped me out in so many ways. My course instructors: John Greyson for putting up with my early work in my first semester with such patience and care; Lina Rodriguez for continuing the support into my second semester as I worked on developing my own processes and techniques; Taien Ng-Chan for her breadth of knowledge, enthusiasm, and for expanding my ideas of what an essay film is; Marcos Arriaga, Stephanie Adamson, and Jon Hedley for being helpful with gear and tech help; Kuowei Lee for his sense of humour, patience and hard work behind the scenes. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for being friends and family, especially mom and dad, Kristine for putting up with my high-strung ways, and Brittany and Reggie for the cat cuddles.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF IMAGES

INTRODUCTION

Image 1. Photo from family archive. *Me in Montreal*. Montreal, 1970s.

This is a photo of me, engrossed in a comic book, sitting on an empty crate in front of a garage full of carboard boxes and flea market finds. It was taken by one of my parents in or around 1980, in the midst of preparations to leave our home in Montreal for what ultimately proved to be the empty promise of a better life in Alberta. My parents were working-class immigrants from South America, and they created a substantial archive of still photographs and home movies documenting our home life throughout my childhood and adolescence. My thesis

uses this archive – a record of the literal and figurative places we lived – to grapple with a series of difficult and possibly unanswerable questions about hope, disappointment, class, exile, and the meaning of fatherhood.

The above image lends itself especially well to the interpretive method of Roland Barthes, who wrote in *Camera Lucida* that photographs have two main elements: the studium (a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment to a photo, without special acuity, that one brings as a consequence of one's knowledge and cultural background), and the punctum – the accident that pricks or shocks the viewer with its poignancy.[1] From a cultural perspective of general interest – the studium – it is a photo from a family album, taken on film sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s. The photo was taken by my mother or father, and my mother explained it on the photo album page with the words "cleaning the garage, we sold the house and moved to Calgary. 1980?"

My mother has often talked about this move across the country, always making the point that she had to put her foot down and force my father to throw out a bunch of his "junk" to get the house ready to sell. What pierces me when I look at this photo – the punctum – are all the clues it contains about my parents' marriage, my childhood, and the years that were to come. Essentially, it encapsulates this entire thesis project. My father is outside the frame, a shadowy figure, but his presence is palpable in the things he has accumulated. He died in South America in 2012, and I see now that my thesis work has been an attempt to find him and bring him into focus. And I'm in that picture, alone, surrounded by all these things, concentrating hard on what I'm looking at, and trying to make sense out of his life and absence.

[1] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 27-28.

I encountered many roadblocks along the way while making “The Places We Lived.” It was the culmination of a lifetime of memories and of two intense years of making films through “Process Cinema” using my family archive, a fluid script, chance and serendipity. I got stuck and frustrated at many points, and ultimately had to learn to let go by respecting and trusting the process. Collect, reflect, revise. Collect, reflect, revise. Over and over. Not so much repetition as iteration. I pride myself on being an organized and efficient person, and by nature, I wanted to be tied to a script – a clear outline with a predictable outcome. I often focused on the target, and not the arrow.

Process cinema as a way of working was completely new to me, a big change from all of the films that I had made before starting my MFA. Back then, I would set out to make my films with a particular goal in mind and would try to force the films to do what I wanted them to do. With this project, I had to learn to trust the flow, embrace chance and change, and see the film as a means of seeking, not expressing. This was the light that guided me through the chaos.

THE PLACES WE LIVED: PART 1

My Parents

My story starts with two ordinary people, uneducated immigrants to Canada. One of them had found minor fame in her country for her daredevil antics and beauty. The other was a nearly illiterate drifter whose early life was and still is almost completely unknown. They arrived in Montreal in the early 1970s separately and alone, from South America. In many ways, they could not have been more dissimilar.

My mother, Vidozaba Vucadinovich, was born in Argentina in 1938. She was blonde-haired and green-eyed, nearly six feet tall, and proud of her Montenegrin and Italian heritage. She had enjoyed a life of privilege and minor fame in her native Argentina in the 1960s for being one of the first female skydiving instructors for the police forces, and for breaking an altitude skydiving record in the 1961. The event had appeared in local newspapers but was not recorded by the plane's altimeter, which meant that her jump was never officially recognized, an incident that left her bitter all her life. She had also formed her own skydiving club and acted as an instructor for recreational skydivers. My mother collected hundreds of photos and newspaper clippings about her parachuting career, and this memorabilia – often proudly displayed to visitors – also adorned the walls and shelves of our family homes. By the time I was in my early teens, she had become the main breadwinner in our family and her authority felt like it was absolute. Growing up, I always felt that her life story dominated, while my father and I were essentially minor characters orbiting around her. Even now, in her 80s, she is a force of nature with a loud voice and strong opinions on everything, and her diva-like personality means that if she is not the centre of attention she quickly loses interest in whatever is going on around her.

Image 2. Photo from family archive. *Mom posing with plane*. Argentina, 1962.

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Estos son los integrantes del cuerpo de paracaidistas con que ahora cuenta la Policía de la Capital. Antes de cumplir con su "Salto de Bautismo", posan en correcta formación junto a la instructora del grupo, señorita Vidozaba Vucadonovich. Es de hacer destacar este hecho importante: la instructora posee el record mundial de lanzamiento automático nocturno, señalado desde una altura de ~~8.100~~ 8183 metros.

Image 3. Photo from family archive. *Mother as skydiving instructor*. The text mentions her altitude record jump, which she has corrected. Argentina, 1960s.

Image 4. Photo from family archive. *Mom's fan club*. Argentina, 1960s.


Image 5. Photo from family archive. *Some of my mother's glamour shots*. Argentina, 1960s.

My father, Jose Eduardo Marchant, was almost the complete opposite. Unlike my mother, who prized glossy glamour portraits and newspaper clippings of her skydiving adventures and had photographs of her ancestors dating back to the late nineteenth century, nearly everything about his life before I was born in 1975, when he was 48 years old, is shrouded in mystery. He was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1927 with the surname Vidal, which he never used. The reason for this is not completely clear, but my mother has speculated that he might have adopted the name Marchant because he been born out of wedlock. He once told me that when he was in his teens his mother had died and his father had remarried. His new stepmother did not like him and wanted him out of the family so, according to him, she would put too much salt in his food so

that he would complain about it, thus giving her a reason to treat him poorly. I still vaguely remember this story when he told it in the 1990s in Calgary, Alberta, an almost Proustian memory prompted by the fact that my mother had mistakenly put too much salt in a salad. At another point, around the same time, he told me that his stepmother had kicked him out and he had gone to live with his grandfather. His grandfather, he said, lived in a one-room flea-infested shack. He recalled working with his grandfather to fight the pests by covering the dirt floor with cement made from crushed brick. Not long after, his grandfather died and my dad wound up on the street, having to beg to survive. He told me never to tell my mother about this.

Image 6. Photo from family archive. *Dad when he was single*. Locations unknown, c.1960s.

I know little else about my father's life before his arrival in Montreal in 1972 and my birth in 1975. I do know that he had a passion for "futbol," – soccer – and that he had supposedly played it semi-professionally for a Chilean football club in his younger days. But by the time he immigrated to Canada in the early 1970s, he was already in his early 40s and his days as a semi-professional athlete were behind him. He often got maudlin when reminiscing about his days as a physically fit younger man, and expressed disappointment that his body had aged without allowing him to achieve the fame and fortune that he desired. This failure to make it big in a physical sport is a primary reason that he often urged me to get an education; according to him, one's mind would never break down with age. The topic of aging was a common point of discussion in our home, which I suspect was due to the fact that my parents had me when they were fairly old: my father was 48 (just a little older than I am now) and my mother was 37. Simple math reveals that by the time I was in my twenties in 1990s Calgary, they were both senior citizens.

In contrast to my father, my mother often told the story of her first days in Canada, framing it as a story about overcoming adversity and hardship through hard work. She arrived in the early 1970s from Argentina, not long after her mother had died of cancer and her father had sold their family farm and moved back to his native Yugoslavia. After an acrimonious breakup with a wealthy boyfriend, my mother left Argentina and arrived in Canada in her early 30s, with neither savings nor employable skills. Although education was free in Argentina, my mother had neglected to get any sort of degree beyond an elementary accounting certification, which her older boyfriend had paid for in order to keep her close by at his accounting firm. Her coming to Canada was only supposed to be temporary. She had planned to fly her father, my grandfather,

from Yugoslavia to Canada for a visit, and then the two of them were meant to go back to Yugoslavia to live.

In the meantime, my mother worked as a hotel chambermaid. She has often told me the story of how, when she first started doing that job in Montreal, she cried because her hands became swollen and bruised because she had never done manual work before. Over time she got accustomed to it, and was later promoted to a supervisory role. To this day she is often mistrustful of other immigrants to Canada, especially if they receive financial support from the government, because, as she sees it, she had had to survive on her own without any outside help. Soon after, she met my father and got pregnant with me. Not long after this her father died in Yugoslavia, and she ended up remaining in Montreal. Much later she told me that she had never planned on getting married, let alone having children.

What my father did for the 40 years or so years of his life is a mystery to me. Every now and then, as I grew to adulthood, something from that life would come up in casual conversation. This was how I learned about his impoverished childhood on the streets of Santiago. He also told me that he had travelled throughout all of South and Central America in a Volkswagen Beetle or camper van. He loved those vehicles throughout his life and I remember how there were often broken down Volkswagens on the verge of "being fixed" occupying a spot in the garage in Calgary or in the overgrown grass lot right next to it. He also often nicknamed these vehicles. One of these, a white Volkswagen camper, was nicknamed "La Paloma" (the dove) and he often talked about going on a family road trip in it, which my mother ridiculed him about.

At some point before migrating to Canada, my father had learned to repair watches, appliances and electronic devices, supposedly gaining over ten years of experience doing so. His Canadian immigration papers show that he arrived in Canada in September 1972, with $400

CDN in his possession and 17 years' experience as a watchmaker. There is no indication of the legitimacy of his formal technical training, or if he actually had any, because no records of his education exist in my possession. From the time I was born in 1975 to about 1978 or '79 he worked at a decent-paying job in a watch-repair company. The money was so good that after my mother got pregnant, she was able to stay at home at their apartment in Montreal, and not long after I was born they bought a house in the borough of Saint-Hubert in the suburb of Longueuil. From what I understand about my father's job during this time, he had to not only fix watches but to hustle as a salesman as well. I think that he enjoyed the position not just for the money and material wealth that it brought, but also for the status that it conferred on him in visiting other people, wheeling and dealing, and playing the role of a respectable watch dealer.

My father had no formal education beyond the possible watch-repair certificate – he had been too poor and homeless as a youth. But he was curious about the world – the opposite of my mother, who had never gained any education and, in many ways, had gotten by in life mostly by trading on her good looks. I always felt that my father was somewhat angry at how opportunities for education had somehow passed him by. Later in life, among the things that he often surrounded himself with were books.

My parents met in Montreal sometime around 1973 or '74. I only heard the story of how they met through my mother. She told me that my father had been sharing an apartment with a woman who had a husband in South America. This married woman's sister did not approve of this situation, so arranged for both of my future parents to meet at a party. There, my father approached my mother and asked her to dance, and she initially resisted because, as she told me, he was Chilean, and she detested Chileans. In Argentina, my mother had taught skydiving to some members of the local police force which later led to a brief position as a border agent.

During the later job, she had met numerous Chileans crossing over into Argentina, checking their immigration papers and the like. Based on this, she grew to despise Chileans, who she saw as dark, unwashed, coarse, and ignoble. I believe that there's also another aspect to this. Argentine arrogance is no surprise to any person from Central or South America; many Argentines see themselves as European descendants, separate from, and superior to, the mixed-race inhabitants of neighbouring countries. My mother was no different. Even though she was uneducated, she saw herself as better than other Latinos, and her experiences as a border guard made her dislike and distrust Chileans in particular. As fate would have it, she ended up starting a family with one.

My mother has told me numerous times that abortions were not possible in Quebec at the time and, worried about what her family in Argentina would think about a pregnancy out of wedlock, she got married. After a hasty wedding I was born less than nine months later, in July 1975. After my birth, my parents seem to have lived happily for a while. I think my presence distracted them from how incompatible they were, as my father earned a living as a watchmaker (a job that would soon become obsolete), and my mother tended to the home.

The Archive

Cameras and film were central to my parents' efforts to remake themselves as successful Canadians in their newly adopted home. My mother was used to being photographed, and she kept hundreds of snapshots and newspaper clippings about her, carefully sorted by date, in multiple photo albums. Pictures of my father before he met my mother, on the other hand, are few and far between, either having not survived multiple moves across different countries in a

vehicle, or, more likely, because there were few photographs taken. In total, I own only seventeen photographs that depict him as a bachelor. In any case, the number of photographs and Super8 film recordings that appear after my parents' marriage and my birth are striking.

From 1975 on, both my parents obsessively filmed my childhood and our family life. The archive of moving and still images they produced is substantial and rich, including dozens of reels of colour films featuring over-the-top birthday parties and other social gatherings, as well as the symbols of their upward mobility: new cars, holidays to Niagara Falls, Toronto, New York City and Boston, fur coats, a suburban house with a swimming pool, and many other things. Over a dozen large, full-sized photo albums comprise the photographic archive. I can see now, in retrospect, that these photos served multiple purposes. First, they were meant to serve me, an only child, as a history of the places we lived and the activities we did as a family. Second, I think they were meant to impress their circle of friends, predominantly other working-class Latinos, in Montreal. They are a record of things and lifestyles and achievements. Third, and as filmmaker Michelle Citron has written, my parents' photo albums and home movies "offer a fiction of the family that reinforces what they want to know about themselves and sanctions a public view of a most private space: the home."[2] In these home movies my father can be seen leaving for work, and stopping to kiss me goodbye as I play with a sled in the snow. He is shown as the main breadwinner, a generous host to many friends, surrounded by the trappings of new-found wealth – a stocked bar, a games room, a swimming pool – that he has earned through his hard work. My mother in these Montreal films and photos, meanwhile, often plays to the camera, showing off her youthfulness and good looks in poses that look strikingly similar to those captured on film by her earlier boyfriends in Argentina. Most importantly she also, I think,

[2] Michelle Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 14.

manages to convey the appearance of a smooth-running home while still maintaining a large amount of coquettishness, chic, and independence.

Image 7. Photo from family archive. *A stay at home mom that looks glamorous.* Montreal, 1970s.

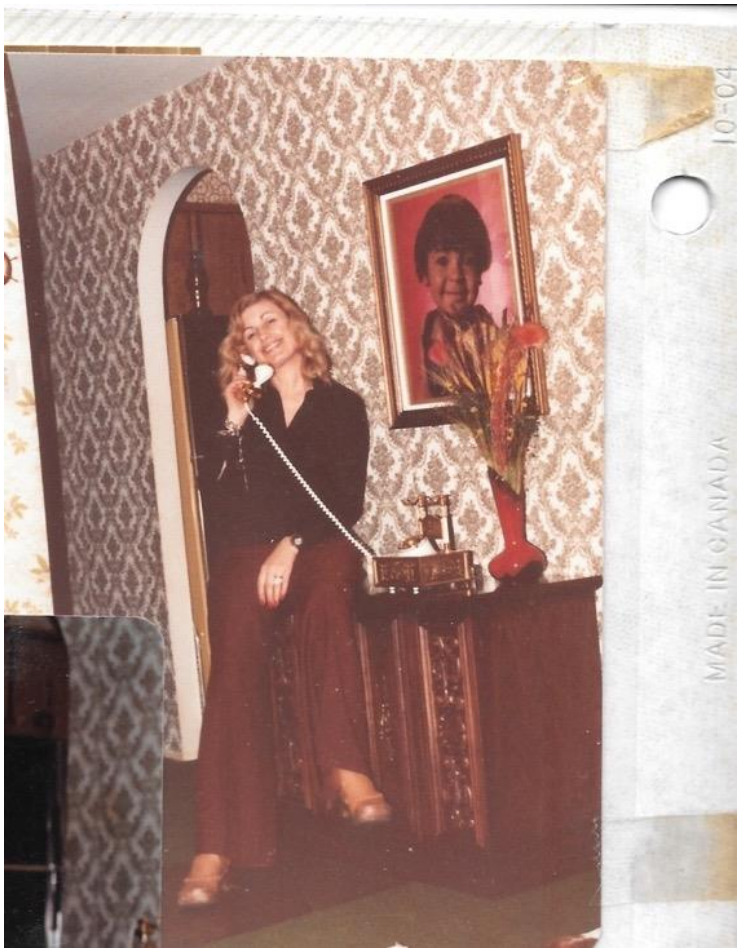

Image 8. Photo from family archive. *Aware of the camera*. Notice the large picture of me on the wall. Montreal, 1970s.

Lastly, the archive also contains many of the records of my school days, such as finger painted artworks, letters, awards and poems. My mother also kept (hoarded?) most of my report cards from grades 1 to 9 along with some of my old name tags and souvenirs from various theme parks that we visited.

Over the past several years, while making a series of experimental shorts on video and film, I began to look for theories and texts that might help me to understand the stories,

emotions, and processes of self-fashioning that were at the heart of my parents' home movies and still photographs. Their hopes, disappointments, and frequent disagreements are with me still, and I turned first to Marianne Hirsch's work on postmemory.[3] Despite its focus on the intergenerational transmission of family narratives that can be neither fully understood or re-created, I found that the concept of postmemory did not quite fit, not least because my parents' migration experiences were not linked to collective trauma or violence. I also sought – and largely failed to find – family stories like mine in scholarship on migration and films about immigrant families, much of which focuses on material hardship and the importance of kin, community, and a shared sense of ethnic identity. Right off the top of my head I am thinking of better known films such as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather: Part II* (1972), Alfonso Cuaron's *Children of Men* (2006), Marc Forster's *The Kite Runner* (2007), Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* (2008), and Gregory Nava's *El Norte* (1983). While lesser known films include Jonas Mekas' *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli* (1950), and some of Chantal Akerman's films.

Instead, my family's home movies seem to be a record of what historian Carolyn Steedman has called "lives for which the central interpretative devices of…culture don't quite work."[4] Trauma, diasporic nostalgia, and immigrant ties of solidarity and mutual support, themes at the heart of so many stories of 20th-century migration and its aftermaths, are noticeable only through their absence. Instead, the grainy visual archive of my second-generation immigrant childhood tells stories of rootlessness, aspiration, glamour, and disappointment – produced as my parents tried to will new and better lives and selves into being in front of the camera. Both

[3] Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory." In *Poetics Today* 29:1 (Spring 2008): 103-128; and Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
[4] Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman, A Story of Two Lives* (London: Virago Press, 1986), 5.

similar to and different from our rec rooms, kitchens, and backyards in Montreal and Calgary, my parents' family films were one of the "places we lived": part of a meaningful and (I think) not entirely conscious effort to help obscure the failed promises of place and the divide between labour skills that were always on the threshold of becoming obsolete, and the endless pursuit of material goods and other signifiers of having "made it." My parents yearned for, and tried, to capture a life of luxury and respectability that defied both political and psychological stereotypes.

The King of Silence

My parents did the best they could trying to raise me in a new-found country in an unfamiliar language, far from any familial support. I am sure my mother resented these new restrictions on her life, but at the same time she seems to have tried to continue to live life well. In the photos she continues to do her make-up, hair, dress fashionably and flamboyantly. She also used the opportunity to dress me, and in seeing pictures of myself of the time I cannot help but to think that she was making me into an accessory of hers.

At the same time, however, marriage and motherhood were big changes for my mother, who was suddenly in the position of having to tend to the home and devote her full energy to me – a far cry from the carefree life that she had enjoyed just a year earlier. I do not remember much of this period but my mother says that my father dealt with his new domestic and paternal responsibilities by going to the office to work and then afterwards living the unbound salesman's life. She said that he enjoyed the freedom of being able to go out, ostensibly to make money, pay for shelter and leisure, and put food on the table. This was probably one of the first hints that

maybe they were not cut out for each other. In any case, both my parents had largely lived single lifestyles for decades previously, so my presence changed things drastically.

Image 9. Photo from family archive. *Mom and dad dressed up for a day at the park*. Montreal, 1970s.

Image 10. Photo from family archive. *Dressed up for pre-school.* Montreal, 1970s.

As a result of my father's absence during the work week, my mother's inexperience at parenting, and being stuck in the home with her alone, I grew very attached to her. She tells me that as a toddler I would cry if I was away from her for any amount of time and that this became so bad that eventually, on the advice of her sister in Argentina who had three children of her own, she decided to put me in a daycare to deal with my separation anxiety. Mid-twentieth-century psychologist John Bowlby's writings about attachment theory seem to have been accurate here; Bowlby theorised that children had an innate need to attach to a primary figure, and that separation from this primary figured created immediate stress in the form of protesting, despair and detachment. Every child uses their experience from this to develop their own internal working model, and those who feel rejected will display avoidant behaviours later in life.[5] I am

[5] John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss, Volume II – Separation: Anxiety and Anger* (London: Basic Books, 1973).

not sure if I experienced any sort of long-lasting negative behaviours from being put in a daycare by my mother, but I do think that it explains why I became more inwardly focused and silent.

I don't remember much of those early days except for feelings of great anxiety. I remember feeling physically and emotionally sick in kindergarten due to being separated from her. Looking back recently at documents saved by my mother, I was surprised to come across a paper cut-out award in the shape of a red crown, probably from first or second grade, with the words "King of Silence" written on it by my teacher.

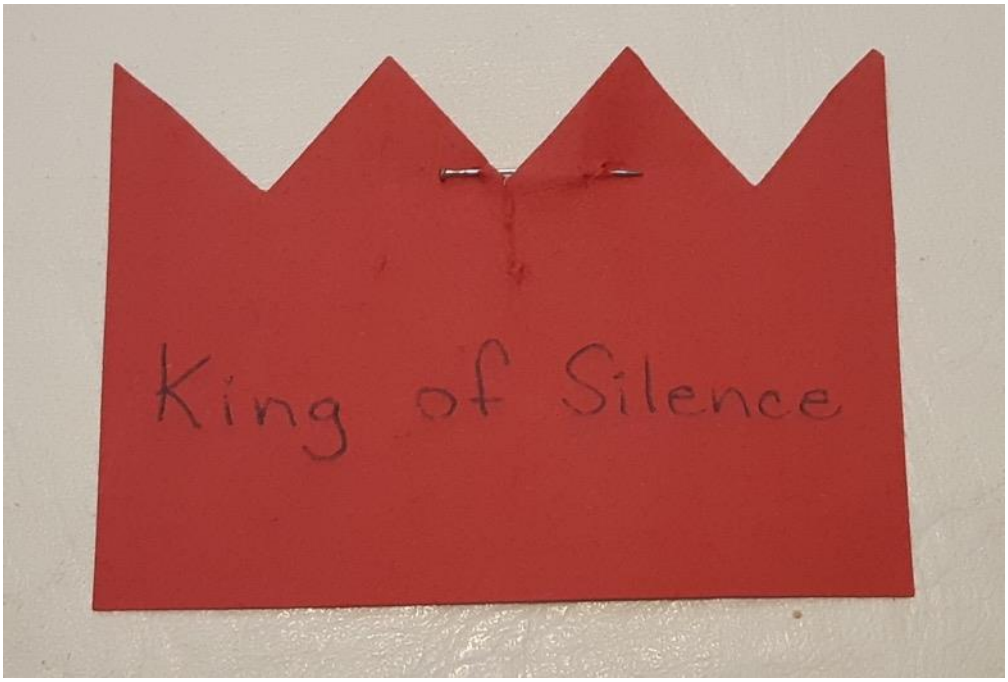

Image 11. From family archive. *King of Silence.* Calgary, early 1980s.

I have a vague memory of receiving this award in class a year or two after kindergarten, and it is not difficult to see what happened. I had retreated into myself, and from this quiet place, I, a child without siblings, lived inside my own vivid imagination. I suspect that ultimately this was the reason I dove into books and became such an avid reader. I do not remember having any

close friends in Montreal; instead, my best friends became books. The irony of this is that my parents themselves barely read, so I believe that from an early age I was trying to figure things out in my own way, eventually becoming an introverted bookworm.

In addition to buying me books, my parents showered me with toys and other kinds of gifts. I am sure that part of this, in addition to wanting to give me things that they had not had when they were children, was that they wanted to enjoy and demonstrate their new-found wealth. In Montreal, when times were good for us, my birthday parties were large affairs, and they were an opportunity to not only celebrate me, but for their adult friends to have a good time as well. After our move to Calgary and as our economic fortunes declined, the parties were for the children only, and eventually ceased outright.

Image 12. Photo from family archive. *A birthday party for me.* Each kid got a cart to play with. Montreal, 1970s.

Image 13. Photo from family archive. *A party for the adults as well.* Montreal, 1970s.

I was an average student during these early years in elementary school, not because I was not bright, but because I did not put much effort into things that did not interest me. My grades suffered and though this disappointed both my parents I remember that my father was particularly upset by this. I think the way he saw it was: look at all that he had been through as a child, what was my problem? He would get very angry and I would flee to my mother for safety. She often shielded me from his outbursts and the spankings I received. It also affected me in my teens in that when I started to get bullied I was too scared to defend myself and then he got very angry at me for not standing up for myself, and at my mother for (as he said) babying me too much. He resented what he saw as my weakness; he had grown up on the street and had to fend for himself, so why couldn't I? My father's resentment on the one hand, and the coddling I received from my mother on the other, turned me into a sort of battlefield for the both of them. Looking back now I see that though our household could have been much worse, it was in many ways a toxic place shaped by deep-seated conflicts.

A similar situation was described by American essayist Philip Lopate in his book *A Mother's Tale*. Throughout Lopate's childhood and youth in 1940s and 50s Brooklyn, his father had a manual blue-collar job and would return home each day exhausted to a wife who thought that whatever he did was not enough. She was a stay-at-home mother who despite having had many suitors in her younger days, had mistakenly (in her eyes) settled for a deadbeat husband, Lopate's father. Lopate writes,

> "What she was telling me was not so hard to grasp, even for an eight or nine-year-old: she was unhappy, dissatisfied with my father and our shabby living circumstances, and had dreams of a finer existence, which included romantic love and a singing career. Years later, I came to resent what appeared to me an inappropriate seduction: she was unburdening herself at the same time as burdening me with adult problems…that were robbing me of my innocence. This happy arrangement lasted until I was about fourteen, when I began to question her accounts or at least her interpretations of them. It seemed to me

> that she was being unjust in her assessment of my father, who was not nearly as blameworthy as she asserted."[6]

Looking back at our household, I see now that this exact scenario also shaped my childhood, as my mother turned me against my father, by blaming all of our family's woes on him. At the same time, I feel like my father was disappointed in me because I was not tough enough and because my mother came to me with her problems, rather than him. It wasn't until much later, when I was in my thirties and could look back at things with a clearer eye, that I realised that all through my teens and onward I had actually resented the both of them – my father because I (unfairly) saw him as an utter loser, and my mother because on some level I implicitly knew that she was using me to get back at him for her own unhappiness at the way things had turned out.

Cultural Capital / School

In his 1939 essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," art critic Clement Greenberg defined kitsch as popular, commercial art, magazine covers, ads, and Hollywood movies. Greenberg explored the rise of kitsch throughout history, arguing that it was the product of the industrial revolution, and tied to universal literacy. Learning to read and write, but not having the leisure and comfort necessary to understand and enjoy the city's traditional culture, the new urban masses demanded that society provide them with a culture fit for their own consumption. To fill this, ersatz culture – kitsch – was provided as a new commodity. Using the raw material of "elite culture," the makers of kitsch employed mechanical formulas and the techniques of mass production for sales

[6] Phillip Lopate, *A Mother's Tale* (Columbus: Mad River Books, 2017), vii.

and profit. In order for kitsch to flourish it needed at hand a fully matured cultural tradition that it could borrow from, convert into a system, and discard the rest. [7] The end result of this is that anyone could enjoy kitsch without effort. Greenberg continued this line of reasoning in his 1953 essay "The Plight of Our Culture," where he dismissed middlebrow, middle-class culture as "machine culture," and therefore, "as culture unacceptably democratized, simplified, streamlined, rationalized, synopsized, surveyed, abridged, and packaged."[8] He continues:

> The middlebrow in us wants the treasures of civilization for himself, but the desire is without appetite. He feels nostalgia for what he imagines the past to have been, and reads historical novels, *but in the spirit of a tourist* who enjoys the scenes he visits because of their lack of resemblance to those he has come from and will return to.[9]

My family's home in Montreal was full of kitsch and clutter, most of which had been accumulated by my father. Photos and home movies of this time in our lives reveal shelves overflowing with stuff. Kitschy art adorns the walls, landscape paintings that my father had somehow found during his ramblings and brought home hang in almost every room, large television sets and electronics are piled up, spillover from repair projects and his interest in the latest gadgets. Some objects appear to have been purposely put there in order to convey a sense of refinement, physical prowess, or social status: a tennis racquet on the mantel piece, for example, must have belonged to my father, but neither of my parents played or ever talked about any racquet sport. Our living room furniture included an organ, even though no one in our family knew how to play. The liquor cabinets look fully stocked in photos and film footage, but my parents were not drinkers. Bookshelves were full of books but neither of them were readers. It

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[7] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." In *The Collected Essays and Criticism of Clement Greenberg, Vol I.*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 9-10.
[8] Yoke-Sum Wong, "Modernism's Love Child: The Story of Happy Architectures," *Common Knowledge* 14, no. 3 (2008): 469.
[9] Clement Greenberg, "The Plight of Our Culture." In *The Collected Essays and Criticism of Clement Greenberg, Vol. III.*, ed. John O' Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 136. Emphasis added.

would be easy to dismiss all of these objects as the mere collections of a hoarding father, but I think they also speak to him trying to elevate himself with what he thought were the accoutrements of higher status. From this I learned the lesson that appearances to outsiders matter. There is also the possibility that he was hoping for something better for me – that perhaps I would want to learn to play the organ, for example, or take up painting, if I was surrounded by these kinds of objects. Perhaps he also felt that these would be the things that I would inherit when he was gone.

Image 14. Photo from family archive. *Some of dad's stuff.* Montreal, 1970s.

Image 15. Screenshot. *Kitsch*. Decorative bellows hanging on the wall, knick-knacks on the mantlepiece, painting on wall. Montreal, 1970s.

Image 16. Photo from family archive. *Painting on wall.* Notice also the organ in the background which no one in our house knew how to play. Montreal, 1970s.

Image 17. Photo from family archive. *Kitsch on wall and mantlepiece.* Notice the tennis racquet that presumably belonged to my father which I never knew him to play. Montreal, 1970s.

Image 18. Screenshot. *Dad's kitsch and clutter*. Also notice the photo of my mother on the wall at right; a sharp-eyed viewer will spot a similar photo of my mother hanging in my father's room in the 1990s Calgary video footage. Montreal, 1970s.

Image 19. Screenshot. *Calgary living room.* No more bookshelf, no more encyclopedias. Calgary, 1990s.

Image 20. Photo from family archive. *Calgary living room mantlepiece.* Reverse angle of previous photo. Fake fireplace and mantle. Mother's 65th birthday cards (which coincides with Christmas). Only one photo of dad is visible, while the rest of the photos pertain to me or my mother. Only my mother's knick-knacks and Christmas decorations are allowed. Notice father's camera tripod near back. Calgary, 1990s.

Image 21. Screenshot. *Calgary basement guest room*. Father was allowed a painting in the guest bedroom in the basement. Calgary, 1990s.

Image 22. Screenshot. *Basement game room guitar and kitsch.* A guitar (which no one in our house knew how to play), wall painting, and two souvenirs on the wall. Calgary, 1990s.

Image 23. Screenshot. *Mother's bedroom.* Uncluttered, devout. Just out of frame to the right is the large photo of me as a child that can be seen in image 8. Calgary, 1990s.

With our subsequent move to Calgary and my father's loss of status, the dynamic of our household changed. My own bedroom and the basement rec room remained free territory, as did my father's bedroom, but my mother was able to claim victory over the rest of the house. This is most evident in the living room, kitchen, dining room and hallways, though one can see that my father did get one concession from her with the living room painting (Image 19).

Theorists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, in their work "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction" argue that cultural capital – the various kinds of knowledge, skills and behaviour we possess by the virtue of being a part of a specific social group – plays an important role in one's social position.[10] As working-class immigrants, my

[10] Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction." In *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change*, ed. Richard Brown (London: Tavistock, 1973), 71-112.

parents' knowledge and beliefs were vastly different from the arts and humanities fields that I eventually ended up in; they tried to give me cultural capital but it was of the kind suited for a vastly different time and place. Growing up, for me, involved trying to navigate a world – Canadian society – in which my parents had few networks and resources. I largely had to figure things out on my own.

I was uninterested in my father's pastimes, which included playing chess and collecting coins and stamps, and my parents' interests more broadly struck me as boring and out of date. My parents eagerly signed me up for all kinds of "Canadian" activities and sports, and I remember trying golf, soccer, martial arts, drawing, and even breakdancing, but eventually, if they didn't keep my interest, I moved on to other things. As a result of all this I became a generalist, and found that though I would readily take formalised courses, I usually ended up taking the core teachings and then learning things later, by reading about them, or losing interest in them entirely.

This is the path I took, for example, when I decided to build a 16mm film scanner about five years ago. I had an electronic diploma but little hands-on experience, and no mechanical skills, yet I learned enough to stumble through the process of putting one together over many months. When I would get bored or stuck I would move on to something else for a while, and then come back to the scanner when I felt an interest in doing so again. This has led me to dabble in varied subjects including biology, languages (Latin and Greek), Icelandic sagas, early rock'n'roll, rockabilly, and bluegrass, rock-climbing, boxing, weightlifting, fixing old radios, and more. In a long roundabout way, this was how I came to film. These all required me to get out of my comfort zone, go out, and figure out something new. Learning these skills meant that I needed to be self-disciplined, and have a plan. Given the time, energy, and resources required to

do activities of interest to me that were not related to the work I did for pay, I also had to be very structured and organised with time. This has meant that a source of safety for me has always been to work in highly ordered ways, defined by routines, schedules and scripts.

I suspect that my process growing and learning is shared by other people who operate on their own, in the margins and away from big cultural and creative centres. For me a large part of this came from having working-class parents whose formative years were spent in a foreign country and a different era: it was largely up to me to figure out what my vision of my future should be. I got through primary and secondary school and made plans for post-secondary education, having no idea what I would major in. My parents did not understand how university worked; they only knew that I should be a doctor or engineer because in South America, those people had status and wealth, and it meant not having to do tiring manual work. I started out like many students who go to university – I took a bit of everything. Over time I noticed that I had a knack for the humanities as opposed to math and the hard sciences. As for fine arts, film, theatre and the like, these were nowhere on my radar when I began my undergraduate studies as a young adult. At the time I would not have been able to fathom how a person could get into, say, filmmaking. I see now that I was experiencing how class and cultural capital shape the lives and futures that people are able to imagine for themselves in powerful ways.

My intellectual interest in film began when I took an undergraduate history course on interwar German and French cinema at the University of Calgary in the mid-1990s. I eventually ended up majoring in history, and wrote an MA thesis on the history of the relationship between Canada and Latin America during the Cold War. After graduating I felt directionless, and I did a brief stint in the Canadian army. I taught English in rural China for several months, then ended up interning with the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington DC and South

America. This was a revelatory experience, not least it was my first experience with well-educated and wealthy Latinos my age. We had language and some cultural things in common, but in other ways could not have been more different. I noticed that many of them spoke a type of Spanish that did not sound like that used in my household or among my second-generation friends back in Canada. Many of my fellow OAS interns were fair-haired and light-skinned, which also came a surprise to me because until then I had not seen racial hierarchies so explicitly manifested along class lines. I ultimately left the OAS feeling class-related anger and a bit of shame – I was too poor to continue working for little pay in Washington – and ended up getting a job in the defence industry in Ontario (a story for another time). While related to my graduate training in history and military studies, I found the hierarchies and monotony office life to be disheartening and after several years I obtained a certificate in electronics which allowed me to get a steady-paying job in the oil and gas industry in Edmonton, Alberta. It was in Edmonton that I discovered several video stores that had non-mainstream Hollywood films including sections for international and experimental films. I rediscovered my love of 1930s cinema and expanded from there to watch anything I could get my hands on. I did not start making films – I had no idea that a person could even do this – until 2013 when, with a bit of free time on my hands, I took an introductory filmmaking course at the Film and Video Arts Society of Alberta (FAVA) in Edmonton. This was a life-changing experience that revealed the possibility of producing my own films. I began working on other peoples' sets to gain filmmaking experience, collaborated with other independent artists in the Edmonton community, and started to learn how to manipulate analog film. I also produced my first student short and began planning more ambitious projects.

After being in Edmonton about a year my partner got a job in Lethbridge, Alberta, so we moved there. The filmmaking community in this city of 100,000 was very small. I took the skills I had learned in my short time in Edmonton and continued with my self-taught ways of learning and doing things, driving up to Calgary or Edmonton for workshops whenever I could. I built a darkroom in our basement and acquired a Steenbeck editing machine and a collection of old cameras and analog equipment. Operating mostly alone and without much external guidance, my early work reflected my academic background in history, my unhappy experiences of white-collar work, and my aesthetic and affective interest in local histories, landscapes, and place. None of these films, however, focused on my own family.

Pre-MFA Films

I made ten short films and many unfinished audiovisual experiments while living in Lethbridge, and I will discuss a few of them here. My first short, *Visions of An Imperfect Mind* was a black & white silent piece that explored the limits of language in dealing with the emptiness of repetitive white-collar work. The protagonist, played by myself because I had yet to meet any actors in Lethbridge, wears a suit and is shown writing at a desk like some sort of office clerk. It is not clear what he is writing – it could be a letter or perhaps a confession. As he writes, we dissolve into small vignettes that take place in his imagination. At the end of the film, he puts his pen down and looks torn between wanting to rip up the letter, or leaving it intact. His body does one thing, while his reflection in a piece of glass next to him does something else. The film came about as a way of exploring the negative emotions that I had mostly repressed while working in a cubicle maze in an air-conditioned office. I felt like my years were passing me by,

and I wanted to revolt against this. Given that the character is a buttoned-down office worker, he uses the letter writing as a way of letting some of those negative feelings out.

Image 24. Screenshot. *Visions of An Imperfect Mind.*

My second film, *The Hitch-Hiker* (2014) was inspired by German expressionism, film noir, and the rural highways and fields of southern Alberta. It was a crime story that traced the psychological breakdown and self-delusion of two characters amidst a stylised, bleak prairie landscape. I placed a 1965 Chrysler New Yorker inside a garage and used rear-screen projection around the vehicle to give the impression that the actors were driving, while at the same time conveying the obvious simulated background. I was obsessed with ideas of artifice and tactility, hence my use of a rear screen with a black & white projection on it. I had originally wanted to

shoot the short in film, but – lacking in crew and equipment – I settled on video, desaturating and colour-grading the monochromatic look of the film in post while adding film grain to give it a more tactile and film-like feel. The film was an exploration of the psychological state of two damaged men, and it asked questions about the things that we delude ourselves about and the lies that we tell others.

Image 25. Screenshot. *The Hitch-Hiker*.

I made *Built In Their Image* (2018) using found footage and contemporary advertising to critique the marketing techniques used by housing developers for their new suburban projects. This was the first film wherein I used found footage. I also continued my analog explorations; my 2016 short, *Walking to Save-On* had used rapid montage editing techniques inspired by Oskar Fischinger's *Walking from Munich to Berlin* and the work of Winnipeg filmmaker Guy

Maddin, to chart my journey on foot from our home in Lethbridge to a crumbling local grocery store whose days were numbered. I used hand processed and digitised Super8 film for this project, which I had learned about by taking a one-day workshop at the Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers (CSIF). *Parallax* was another hand processed film, in which I used time-lapsed footage without editing to strip away ornamentation and capture a mountain landscape over time. I was inspired to make this film as a counter response to making increasingly overwrought and stylised shorts about suburban and small-town life. I sought to return to a stripped-down film, with little or no edits and camera moves to capture a feeling of something in an unidealised way. I shot the film in Super8, which I hand processed myself.

Image 26. Screenshot. *Built in Their Image.*

Image 27. Screenshot. *Walking to Save-On.*

Image 28. Screenshot. *Parallax.*

In trying to find a unifying theme among all of these works I realised that they all had a common connection in their use of found footage, remediation, and hybridised analog-digital recording practices (16mm and Super8 film). I see now that I was interested in things that grew in the ‘spaces in between’: between capitalist promises and suburban disappointments, urban landscapes and their hinterlands, personalities in conflict, and diasporic lives and the memories left behind. Recognising these themes in my earlier films in this way helps me to understand where I am situated with respect to my current work, and makes me realise that though the subject matter of my MFA is entirely new, my interests in borderlands and the spaces in between are still similar.

Based on my several years of experience planning, shooting, and editing my own films in the hinterlands of Southern Alberta, by the time I came to start my MFA I felt comfortable in using a camera and editing. My biggest challenge, it was clear, was going to be a more metaphysical one: how to grapple with a personal family archive that was loaded with emotional and mental weight. By this point, I had had the family archive in my possession for about seven years; my mother had kept asking me what she should do with the reels of Super8 film, since she had already digitised them. Fearing that she might throw them out, and encouraged by my own interest in working with analog film, I had taken them from her, along with several photo albums and a sack of my old school papers. I had never attempted work like this before, and I would often look at my parents’ reels of film and photo albums with a sense of trepidation and uncertainty. How could I use this archive? What kind of film could I make? Why would anyone care to see it, and would it just turn into a naval-gazing self-pity film? I also experienced feelings of doubt as to whether I even had the aesthetic know-how for such an undertaking. At this point, I had sought out the films of Maya Deren, Guy Maddin, David Lynch, Bela Tarr and some other

well-known experimental filmmakers, but for the most part I was unaware of the large field of biographical, ethnographic and diaristic cinema. It wasn't until 2017 and on the advice of a friend that I discovered the works of Philip Hoffman. His explorations of diaspora, memory, and family using experimental techniques had a profound impact on me. They showed me the possibilities of what film could do, and how one could tell personal stories in innovative and affecting ways. His films lead me to the work of other artists like Jack Chambers, Marion McMahon, Mike Hoolboom, and films from the so-called "Accented Cinema" category. These films started to open new possibilities for me, and in seeing how these artists worked with their own materials I started to imagine how I might start to represent my own family.

Despite finding this new language, I remained very inexperienced with it all in practice. Thus, my goal when I arrived at York was to use my family archive for class assignments as much as possible, in order to experiment with different techniques and methodologies. For my first MFA assignment in John Greyson's production class, I was provided with these limitations: make a 2-5 minute film using any one object or prop. The result, *My Father the Watchmaker*, uses an old antique clock as an acknowledgement of my father's past job as a watchmaker in Montreal. The film, though incomplete, is about the flows of time and our place in them. It opens with a quote from fifth century Roman writer Boethius, written while he was imprisoned and awaiting execution for treason.[11] Boethius engaged with questions about the nature of predestination versus free will, human nature, virtue, and justice, among other things, and I thought his writing about time was relevant to the big ideas I was trying to grapple with. The film I made is a mix of video and hand processed 3378 high contrast 16mm film. The central element of the film is when my hand, both metaphorically and concretely, reaches into the frame

[11] Anicius Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1999).

to “turn back time” on the hands of the clock. Once this happens it activates the still clock and we travel back in time. I then present images of my father at various stages of his life from young to old. At the end of the film, the spell is broken and the clock advances forward once again. This was my first foray into my family’s personal archive, memory and the use of objects. Though it amalgamates video and film nicely, I consider it a video sketch which is far from finished. It did provide some ideas that I would explore in later films: a fascination with clocks, gears and watches, the passage of time, aging, and obsolescence. One of the things I wanted to address was the process through which my father’s watch-making skills – and by extension his status both within the home and outside of it – became obsolete, but that was too much to cram into a film this small and would have to wait until a future work.

Image 29. Screenshot. *My Father the Watchmaker*.

My next project in John Greyson's class, *The Sweater*, was a 5-minute film about a drab, ill-fitting light-blue sweater. For many years my parents had slept in different bedrooms, and by around 2011 they had decided to divorce. My mother was staying in Canada and my father was going to Argentina to live. He divested himself of all his stuff, packed up what he could, and left. The sweater was the last thing he gave me before leaving. Through voice-over, I relate several stories that characterised our relationship, accompanied by hand-processed 16mm film and found footage. At the end of the film, shot in video, I try on the sweater, silently look at the camera, shrug, and walk out of the frame. The film is essentially about the lack of communication between us, with the sweater acting as a symbol of our relationship; in my opinion, there is no better example of not knowing someone than by buying them an unsuitable gift. The sweater does not fit me well, is a bland baby blue colour, and is made of thin synthetic material. A corollary of this film was remembering the incident at the vending machine.

The story in the film about vending machine is something that I had forgotten about for many years, until I came across a similar incident in a book recommended by my historian partner. In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, British historian Carolyn Steedman contrasts her mid-twentieth century girlhood, shaped by social mobility and the welfare state, with her working-class mother's bitter and disappointed life. Her parents' marriage was also strained, and the book describes a standoff that took place when her father picked some flowers from a private estate and he was berated by a groundskeeper.[12] Reading and reflecting on that text brought to mind my own experience with a business owner in Calgary who publicly yelled at my father for popping chip bags in a vending machine that he serviced. The memory of this scene, which I had forgotten about for two decades, struck me like lightning. And though I read the passage in a

[12] Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London: Virago Press, 1986), 49-51.

book instead of seeing it in a photograph, the memory of the event became an intense moment, a punctum of sorts, the detail of which, "overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration. By the mark of *something*, the photograph is no longer 'anything whatever.' This *something* has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock…the passage of a void."[13] Walter Benjamin observed something similar decades earlier, when he wrote that the past is seized "only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."[14] I knew then that I had latched on to something significant about childhood, emotions, masculinity, and the birth of class consciousness, and that I would have to come back to this story.

Image 30. Screenshot. *The Sweater*.

[13] Barthes, 49.
[14] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 255.

Based on some reactions that I received from people who have seen the film (it was clear that the vending machine scene 'pierced' them, too), I informally polled friends to see if they had experienced similar incidents. I had assumed that this experience – wherein a child witnesses their all-powerful father being publicly humiliated and diminished by another authority figure – was a defining moment in most people's childhoods. I slowly came to realise that this was something that is only experienced by children of working-class parents. For all of these reasons – the toppling of my father, thoughts about class consciousness, and shame at remembering my own lack of action, in that instant I knew that I had something significant that I would try to bring back for my thesis film.

My next two films, *Looking at Family Pictures With My Mother* and *Playing Telephone*, produced for Lina Rodriguez's Hybrid Cinema class, juxtaposed audio recordings of my mother and I looking at and talking about our family photos, with images of celebrities and models. One of the things I was trying to do with this film was to explore the line between fiction and lived experience. As Michelle Citron writes, "It's in the narrow current between the two that the truth breathes. It's at the border that we learn."[15] At first the photos of the subjects are of normal, everyday people, but as the film continues the pictures of celebrities become more numerous and prominent, while my mother and I continue to talk normally about these images. I was aiming for something that would bring into relief the answer to the question of whether there is a difference between narrative fiction truth and documentary truth.

[15] Citron, xiv.

Image 31. Screenshot. *Looking At Family Pictures With My Mother*.

Playing Telephone is similar in that I discuss photos in the family archive with my mother. It is different, however, in that I had a very specific thing I was trying to explore with her. I had noticed a pattern, in a dozen photographs, where my parents and I (but mostly my mother) posed for the camera while pretending to talk on the telephone – a pose that echoed images that I had seen in contemporary advertisements. I recalled the words of Roland Barthes: "Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing," I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image."[16] I was certain that these poses used by my mother were at least partly meant to demonstrate my parents' success and my mother's glamour. This was the idea that I had going into the project, around which I planned my production. But no matter how certain I was

[16] Barthes, 10.

that my mother was posing the way she was to play to the camera, she herself had a completely different explanation as to her reason for doing so. No matter how much I tried to convince her that she had been intentionally posing to show off her outfits, our family's new-found wealth, and material goods, the more she dug in her heels and tried to tell me otherwise. This taught me a valuable lesson about the risks in trying to create a clear narrative with a single authoritative voice. It made me recall Elida Schogt's film, *Zyklon Portrait* (1999). In that film Schogt discusses the Holocaust with her mother and remarks that this was the first time they'd talked about it, while her mother responds, "that's alright, because that's *your* way of looking at it. Everyone has their own way of going back to what really happened."[17] In essence, the mother in that film, like my own mother, was privileging her own (subjective) response, over my clumsy attempt at objective or historical truth. Her pushback to my interpretation of images in our archive made me wary about making assumptions about things in our photographs and films in the future, and it reminded me that we do not always look at past events the same way.

[17] *Zyklon Portrait*. Directed by Elida Schogt (1999).

Image 32. Screenshot. *Playing Telephone.* My mother with her brother, my uncle. Argentina, 1960s.

Reflecting on these last four projects, I can see that I was avoiding getting too close to some of the tough questions about my family because they contained painful memories. At the core of it was my mother and father's divorce, my father's final departure to South America – a second exile, as it were – and my own misguided blame towards my father for most of my life. The memories of my father retreating to his room after yet another bout of hectoring from my mother, and my own detachment from it all, stung. I was uncomfortable about getting at the painful aspects of those stories, so those earlier films really became an exercise in working with voice recordings, family archive images, and a simple narrative. Michelle Citron's description of working with her family archive really resonated with me: "formalism…[was] asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn't pick up barehanded…this is how formalism functioned for me. It taught me the pleasure of images and something of how images communicate, in both

the aesthetic and affective realms. It also kept me safe; by expressing feelings and fleeting moments, it contained that which I wasn't prepared to touch."[18] I became determined to grapple with the more difficult aspects of my family archive – to touch and be touched by them – in my next project and to try to leave the safety of formalism behind.

A Life on the Borderlands, created in Philip Hoffman's Process Cinema class, was my first real attempt to sit with some of the uncomfortable truths about my parents, especially my father's poverty, the mystery about his surname, his migration story, and the enigma of his life before my parents' marriage. My father had never fully related his past to me, partly because he was reluctant to talk about it, and partly because I never asked. I cannot remember which happened first – coming across the photocopies of my father's immigration documents and seeing his name printed therein as "Jose Eduardo Marchant Vidal," or a conversation with my mother who brought it up. In any case, trying to get at the reason for his name change and the story behind it became the main spine of this film. I found that I needed to adopt a third person voice of the narrator in addition to the conversation I had with my mother, via phone conversation, in order to fill in some details about the materials. Ironically, I found that the more I tried to leave the safety of formalism to tackle these personal questions head-on, the more conventional my filmmaking became. *Borderlands* is essentially my attempt to find out more about my father's past, contextualising his life with reference to Chilean history and the significant differences between his experience and other, well-known narratives of Chilean exile after Pinochet's coup in 1973.

[18] Citron, 47.

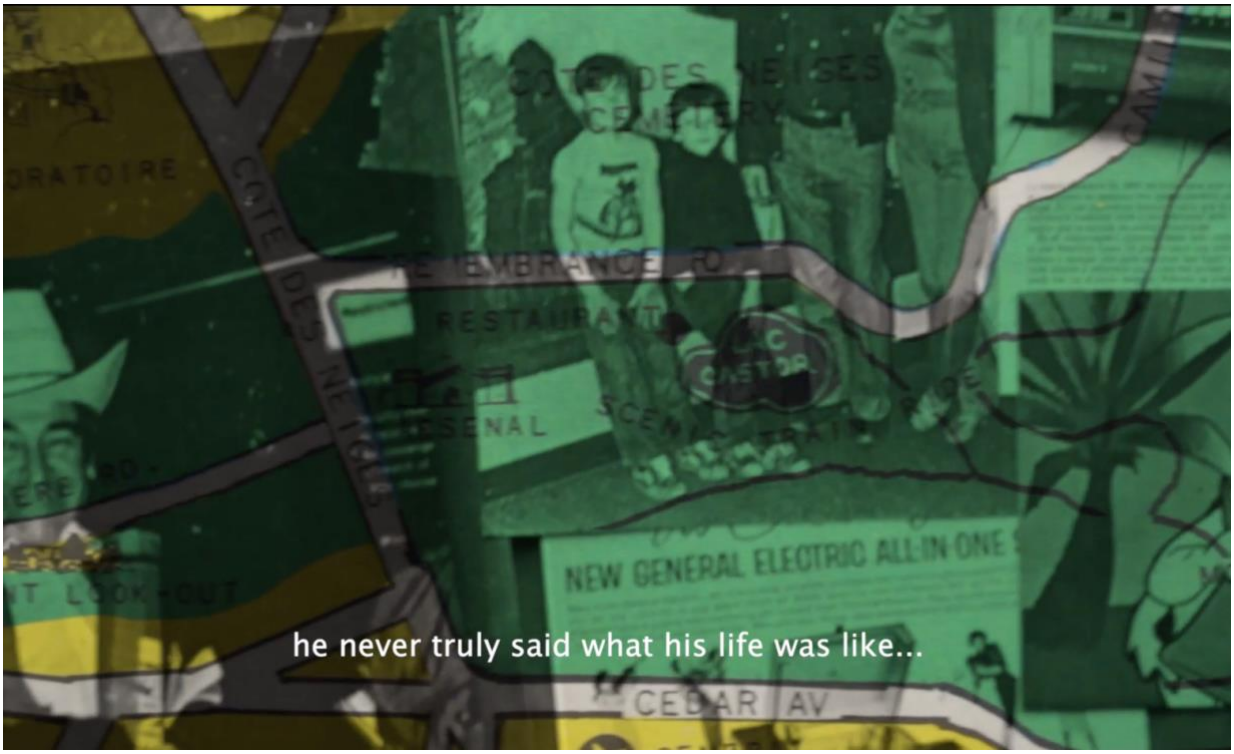

Image 33. Screenshot. *A Life on the Borderlands.*

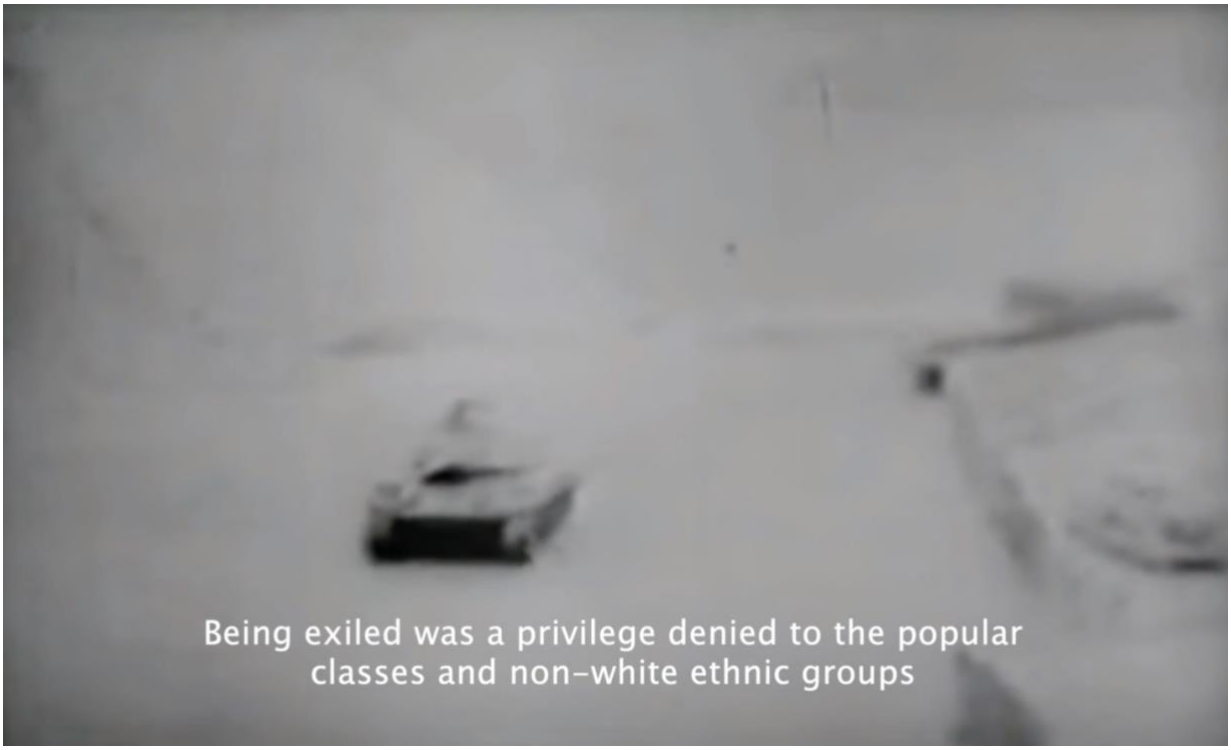

Image 34. Screenshot. *A Life on the Borderlands.*

Borderlands was also the first film in which I used a multi-layered superimposition technique. This was by no means original – Jack Chambers used it in *The Hart of London* (1970), while two of my favourite films, Bruce Baillie's *Castro Street* (1966) and Philip Hoffman's *Passing Through/Torn Formations* (1988) also employ it extensively. I had not used this technique too much in my own previous films, so it was a new formal direction for me. In *Borderlands* I found myself trying to grapple with an incomplete image of a person – my father – who has been nearly ten years dead. All I have are small snippets, fragments of stories and anecdotes, that paint a picture of who he was. My main challenge was: how to grapple with, make sense of, and portray this ambiguous life on a screen? The solution I came up with was to create a collage of objects and references to popular culture that I felt constituted his interests, hobbies, dreams, and hopes. William Wees has written that while collage is unapologetically fragmentary in form and content, "it openly announces its affiliation with the everyday world of ordinary objects, consumer products, and popular culture."[19] Therefore I was able to place together various seemingly mundane images such as a picture of the "Rat Pack" (Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., Frank Sinatra, and Peter Lawford) playing billiards, alongside a picture of an upside-down Jesus (as a reference to my father's feelings towards formal religiosity) next to each other to create some kind of meaning. I also experimented with printing and cutting out some aspects of photos from my family albums such as a photo of my dad proudly wearing a fur coat, and a picture of my father at the pool table. These images of my father, along with objects that I thought were representative of him, when bunched together created a sort of collage of impressions and memories. The result is that the images themselves, "simply being fragments, exist in attenuated form as stimuli – but never with any absoluteness, only relative to an

[19] William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993) 50.

individual's attention."[20] In other words, the viewer themselves will latch on to, and provide meaning for, individual images for their own various reasons. My only problem with using them in this way is that they were my own, often too literal, interpretation of images. I needed to cloudy them up somehow to make them more ambiguous so as to not assume a position of authority in relation to my father.

At the same time that I was playing with these ideas, I continued to add to my collection of maps, tourist guides, brochures and ephemera of the 1970s and 1980s of Montreal and Calgary. I have always had an interest in old tourist materials and until recently I could not have given a reason why this is the case; whenever I would come across such items in flea markets or second-hand stores, I would buy them. I suppose that if I were pressed to explain why I was drawn to these items I would say that not only did I like the aesthetic look of these items, but that they conveyed a sense of familiarity in the places they represented, while at the same time being a statement of temporality – as archaeological objects from a time in the past that I remember living in, yet which is now unreachable. In looking at these objects, we become tourists looking back at history. I felt a link between this idea of tourism and my father because his life, according to the little he told me, had been that of an itinerant, never staying in one place for long and always being on the move before he met my mother and settled down at the age of nearly fifty. In a sense, this life of mobility, moving between places, cultures, classes and selves made my father something of a tourist. I have always had an interest in maps and topographical items, and I wonder now if perhaps this was due to his travel tales and the odd bric-a-brac from all over the world that he would bring home from the flea market when I was a youth.

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[20] Donald B. Kuspit, "Collage: The Organizing Principle of Art in the Age of the Relativity of Art." In *Relativism in the Arts,* ed. Betty Jean Craige (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 131.

I played around with different techniques but found that when I superimposed images over each other I could have moving images on the screen, which at certain times would reveal themselves for fleeting moments before disappearing again. It ultimately only makes up a few minutes in the film, but this superimposition technique finally gave me the result that I wanted in trying to portray my father's life, personality, traits, and interests, in a non-literal sense. I was acutely aware that the technique might be a mistake; I had read Andre Bazin's essay, "The Life and Death of Superimposition" in which he argued that the technique has been in use since Méliès to denote dreams and hallucinations, and that it did not "portray in any way what hallucinations or dreams are really like…"[21] I almost fell into a trap of coming up with an idea, over-thinking it, and talking myself out of it. However, with Phil's guidance, I harkened back to Beat writer Jack Kerouac's essay "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," wherein he wrote that one must "…begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at *moment* of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release…"[22] Though Kerouac was referring to a different medium, poetry and the written word, I thought that he was correct in my own case. I went with my gut, embraced the process of working through it, played with the technique a bit, and let it ride. The superimposition eventually became one of the main formal elements of that film and something that would be an integral part of my thesis. I felt that by putting two or more things together, the superimposition was an effective way of trying to find a memory. Ironically, for my next and final film I only relied on a collage of advertising footage and not on the superimposition technique. Moreover, through a happy accident, I ended up using parts of my moving image

[21] Andre Bazin, "The Life and Death of Superimposition (1946)," *Film-Philosophy Journal*, Vol. 6 No. 1, January 2002: 3.
[22] Jack Kerouac, "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose." Ann Charters, ed., *The Portable Beat Reader* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1992), 58.

archive that I had originally not planned on using at all. These would provide me with the final pieces for starting to put my thesis film together.

My last MFA course-work film was *A Parent's Wishlist*, which I made in Taien Ng-Chan's Essay Film class. The project came about slowly. By the time I started to take this class in May 2020 I had been immersed in my family archive for nearly a year. I would look at the Super8 footage and family photo albums again and again, reflect, talk to my mother, chip away at another class assignment, look at found footage, return to my archive, and so on. It was process cinema in a nutshell. I am not sure when it happened; I do not know if I noticed it in a photograph and then started to think about its meaning, or if it was the opposite, but I started thinking about objects and then went looking in my archive for documentation of them, and all at once I noticed our family's encyclopedias in a bunch of places. I found that a set of Encyclopedia Britannica's showed up in several photographs and Super8 footage that were taken in Montreal from 1975-1980, while in the Calgary footage from 1980 onward they seem to have disappeared. For a while I thought nothing of this until, on a whim, I started looking at newer footage shot in Calgary in the 1990s and early 2000s and saw the encyclopedias in the footage there too, only now they were shelved in my father's bedroom instead of being prominently displayed in the living room. All at once, the words of John Berger made sense: "one looks at one's surroundings (and one is always surrounded by the visible, even in dreams) and one reads what is there, according to circumstances, in different ways."[23] I had been seeing these encyclopedias in the photos and home movies, for months, years even, and I can distinctly remember seeing them in my father's room, but until this moment I did not realise the profound meaning of what it meant, especially when they were moved from the living room to my father's bedroom. Things now

[23] John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling: A Possible Theory of Photography* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1982), 172.

started to fall into place as I dug into the story of these encyclopedias, and my father's relationship with them, and it was clear that this was what I needed to explore in my final class project.

Reflecting on the relevance of the encyclopedias I began searching for explanations. The set looks heavy – it must have weighed over a hundred pounds – and my first thought was to wonder what would possess him to lug them across the country from Montreal to Calgary, and then, once in Calgary, through multiple more moves within the city. I asked my mother about them and she told me, rather petulantly, that they belonged to my father; she was too busy working, she said, to have time to read them. She also complained about the weight of them, and that they, along with a bunch of other books and "junk" that they loaded into the moving van, ended up costing them a lot of money when they moved from Quebec to Alberta. Having clarified then that she saw them as his, and not hers, I reflected on what it all meant. First off, our home was not a place that contained many books. My parents were not readers, though my father, who was barely literate in English, read (in Spanish) more than my mother. I always got the impression that he wished that he could have pursued more formal schooling. When he and my mother started sleeping in separate rooms in Calgary in the late '90s, books, magazines, maps, VCR tapes, cassettes and flags were the objects that adorned the bookshelves and walls in his room. A set of English-language encyclopedias were not of much practical use to him, but they fit with his character as a person who valued, but did not have, education and knowledge.

To my mother, not surprisingly, the encyclopedias embodied wasted money – both in the cost to purchase them, and in the freight charges they generated when my parents relocated us all to Calgary from Montreal. In Montreal, when times were good, they could both agree that the set should assume a place of prominence in the living room bookshelf because the encyclopedias,

along with all of their other publicly displayed material goods, were symbols of "having made it" in Canada, and they could let visitors see this. After our move to Calgary and the financial hardships that followed, the encyclopedias came to symbolise all of the things that my mother disliked about my father – his stubbornness in hoarding "worthless junk," bad investments that did not pay off, and obsolescence. At the same time, as I explain in *A Parent's Wishlist,* I believe that the encyclopedias represented not only his own dreams of reward, but his hope of a better future for me. He often told me that when he was gone everything that he owned would become mine. I often scoffed at this because I only thought of an inheritance in financial terms. I suspect he felt that he was holding onto these books of knowledge until the day that they would be bequeathed to me. Unfortunately, his hopes were misguided and anachronistic; the internet was rising in prominence by the late 1990s, books were being shifted onto compact discs, and it was clear that the days of print encyclopedias were numbered.

Image 35. Screenshot. *A Parent's Wishlist.*

Image 36. Screenshot. *A Parent's Wishlist.*

The final thing that I learned in Taien Ng-Chan's class was the realisation of the form that I would use for my thesis project. In the most general sense, it would be the essay film. However, I wanted to include some of the hand-processed material from my earlier MFA class films along with some of the maps and travel pamphlets that I had collected plus other materials such as photographs, View-Master slides, found footage, voice recordings and music. The tension between how essayistic versus how experimental to make my film was always in the back of my mind. I flip-flopped on this multiple times throughout my classes; *My Father the Watchmaker*, for example, was very much what I would consider an experimental film, with an emphasis on the tension between the analog and digital mediums. *The Sweater* was experimental but also introduced the first-person voice over narrator to provide the connecting flow between the stories. *Looking at Family Pictures With My Mother* and *Playing Telephone*, were what I would characterise as hybrid films with a loose or fictional narrative based around personal

stories, while *A Life on the Borderlands* articulates the formal and aesthetic with the historical and political. One of the films that encouraged me to not worry too much about the category of my film was Haroun Farocki's *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1988). Characterised by critics as an essay film, Farocki nevertheless introduced voice over, contemporary and historical footage, historical lessons and more, "in the context of modern – increasingly postmodern – mass media, technoculture, and technowarfare.[24] I was particularly concerned about using voiceover to convey ideas, but came to the realisation that I could not accept an utterly pure, silent flow of images as exploring some of the themes I wanted to grapple with. Ultimately, I realised that the question of how experimental or how essayistic to be with the film was a silly and moot one: I gave myself over to the process and trusted it to allow it to take me where it needed to go.

[24] Nora M. Alter. "The Political Im/Perceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki's Images of the World and the Inscription of War." In *Essays on the Essay Film*, edited by Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 135.

THE PLACES WE LIVED: PART 2

Process Cinema and The Places We Lived

Process Cinema is "a creative tradition in alternative filmmaking that is unscripted, improvisational, [and] participatory," where the scripted production model of filmmaking is "replaced by a fluid integration of writing, shooting, and editing, and not necessarily in that order."[25] The process approach to filmmaking could not have been further from the way of working I had established before coming to York, and from the start of my MFA, I often struggled. I had been used to using structure to manage the various responsibilities and time commitments of salaried jobs while trying to produce my films. My time and energy were limited and I had to be self-disciplined with the expenditure of both if I wanted to complete projects. I had always felt that I needed to start with the outcome in mind, and was reluctant to diverge from the original vision.

Imagining a new, fluid and unscripted way of working was terrifying at first. I had a huge archive to sort through, complicated feelings about what I saw in there, guilt over how I had treated my father, and also some guilt over not being completely honest with my mother about what the project entailed. Initially, the only thing that kept me going was using the films I had made in classes as a guide. These each allowed me to work on them in small increments. They also allowed me to tackle my giant audiovisual archive a bit at a time by focusing each of my class films on a different part of that archive. One strategy I used to sift through the chaos was to write down various stories and objects on cue cards and paste them on my wall. I colour-coded

[25] Janine Marchessault and Scott Mackenzie, "Introduction," in *Process Cinema – Handmade Film in the Digital Age*, ed. Scott Mackenzie and Janine Marchessault (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019) 3, 4.

them according to whether it was an object or idea, what themes were associated with it, and so on. This allowed me to play around with a rough structure of the film as a sort of living script.

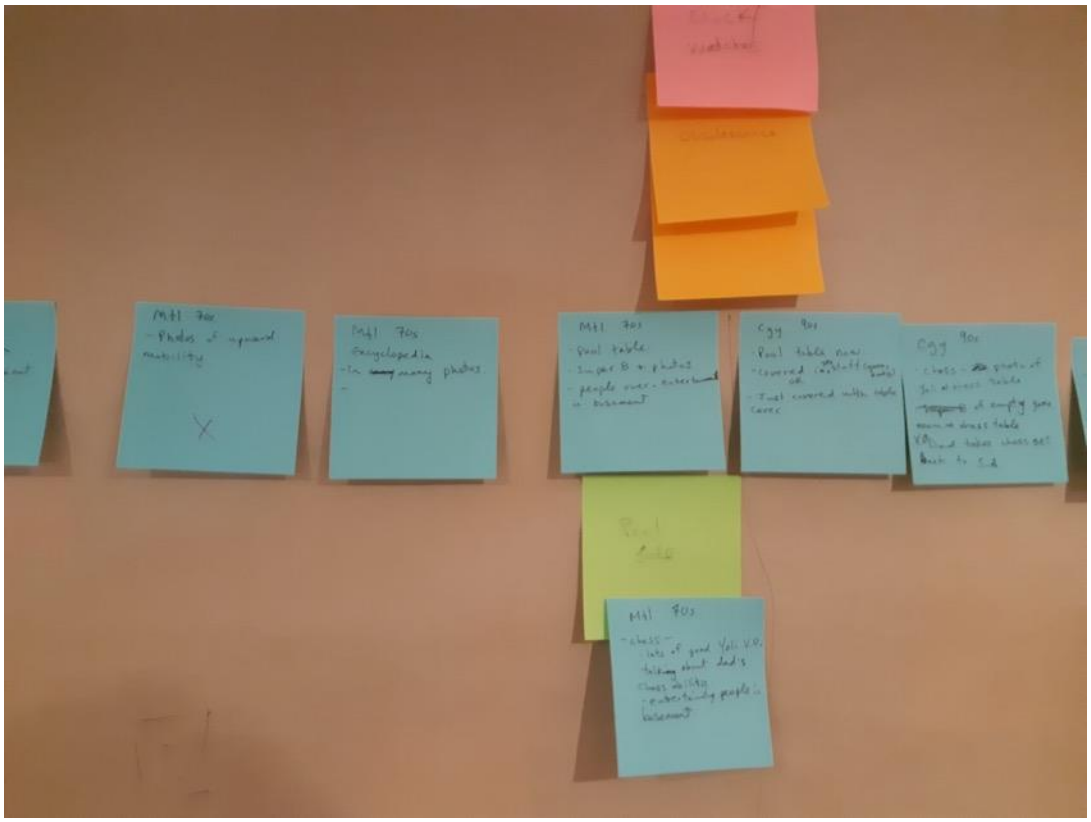

Image 37. Photo. *One of several cue card timelines*.

One of the passages that I came across that signalled this new way of thinking was spoken by Philip Hoffman during an interview about his film *The Road Ended at the Beach* (1983), "I collected images and sound over six years of travel through Canada…I focused on people and places, my relationships to them, and the changes that occurred between each visit. I would collect these images freely later to examine and make meaning of, during the editing process."[26] Hoffman's method of making meaning afterwards, during the editing process, was a

[26] Philip Hoffman, "The Road Ended at the Beach." Philip Hoffman website. Accessed May 1, 2021. https://philiphoffman.ca/filmography/the-road-ended-at-the-beach/

completely new and non-forceful way of navigating through a work. I found a similar mentality in a Georg Lukács comment that, "the essay is a judgement, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is *not the verdict* (as is the case with the system) *but the process* of judging."[27] These are both ways of talking about the filmmaking process as one not of domination or pre-determination, but of questioning and staying open to possibilities.

I had my first go at my thesis film by taking all of the films that I had made in my grad classes and putting them together on a single timeline, and trying to work backwards from there. I got stuck in several places. One friend who watched the film said that I should frame it from a personal perspective rather than from a socio-political one, but I was reluctant to throw the baby out with the bathwater and remove the socio-political angle completely because I felt that it was important to contextualise the people with information about the time and place that they existed in. Another person missed the stories and the object at the centre of *The Sweater*, but I had trouble inserting them into the thesis without the sweater taking over much of the film. Someone else said that she wasn't interested in my father; what she cared about was my father's relationship with me. It was only when I took my initial big timeline apart and started over again that I was able to find a structure that I thought worked. I started from the place of focusing on my father and me and went from there. I had to go through the process of learning to respect and trust the process. Collect, reflect, revise. Collect, reflect, revise. Over and over. Progress came by working iteratively – where the outcome of each repetition became the starting point of the next.

Old habits die hard, however, and I was not able to completely leave my old methods behind. I asked myself some questions to help guide me, such as: how might technology, global capitalism, and obsolescence (planned and otherwise) have shaped my aging father's diminishing

[27] Georg Lukács. "On the Nature and Form of the Essay." In *Essays on the Essay Film*, edited by Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 40. My emphasis.

power in our family? What might a comparison of the photographs and home movies between Montreal and Calgary tell me? I hoped that as I searched for these answers my path would somehow magically present itself. I immersed myself in the materials, watched and re-watched the films and photo albums, asked my mother questions about those times, reflected and wrote my thoughts down. Sometimes I would reflect on a small memory from my childhood, start to explore it, and find something in the archive that was linked to it; at other times I would find something in the archive – for example a picture of an object in the background of a photo, or a place – that would trigger a memory. It is these types of incidents and "working from within" that made up the initial structure of the film. As I worked my way through the film I was constantly going back and revising things, cutting things out, putting other stories in, trimming, and sculpting. This would not have been possible to do in my earlier style of filmmaking.

There was much that I was unsure about including in the film, but one thing I was certain about was the need to establish the importance of time and place. One narrative that was often talked about in our family to try to understand our failure at not quite attaining a middle-class life was that of Montreal as a utopia. The shift in my father's status can be clearly delineated across two time periods – the time from 1975 to 1980 in Montreal, and the time from 1980 onwards after we had moved to Calgary. This allowed me to track and think about my father's status during the prosperous times in Montreal in comparison with the more modest times that followed.

What I was doing here, which I did not discover until after the fact, was essentially channeling Russian scholar M.M. Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope. Literally, "time-space," Bakhtin proposed the chronotope as a way of studying texts in terms of their representation of

spatial and temporal configurations, and as a tool for analysing the forces in the culture that produce these configurations.[28] He writes:

> "It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of event. And is so thanks precisely to the special increase in density and concreteness of time markers – the time of human life, of historical time – that occurs within well-delineated spatial areas…thus the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materialising time in space, emerges as a centre for concretising representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. All the novel's abstract elements - philosophical and social generalisations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect, gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work."[29]

If we substitute the word "film" for "novel" in Bakhtin's quote, we are left with a passage that describes the overarching approach to my film. Montreal, as the place that I understand it in history and based on our family narrative, was a dynamic and cosmopolitan city, where foreigners were welcome and lots of economic opportunities were available for anyone who wanted them. This was the place where wealth could be accumulated, and where two unskilled immigrants could make a good life for themselves and their child. Conversely, Calgary represented the bad times, a cultureless backwater full of racist rednecks, a place where economic dreams failed.

In discussions throughout my adolescence and young adulthood, my mother and father looked back to Montreal as if it was a Garden of Eden. Scholar Hamid Naficy expressed a similar sentiment when situating the chronotope within the context of diasporic and exilic filmmakers. He wrote that, "one typical initial media response to the rupture of displacement is

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[28] Quoted in Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 152.
[29] Mikhail Bakhtin. "Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel." In *The Dialogic* Imagination, edited by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020), 250.

to create a utopian prelapsarian chronotope of the homeland that is uncontaminated by contemporary facts."[30] My parents' prelapsarian chronotope, however, was not South America: it was Montreal. In Montreal, my father had a stable income and my mother did not have to work for pay. It was a place where – in contrast to Calgary – they had both been young and enjoyed carefree, prosperous lives.

In other words, this was how the two cities were fashioned in our imaginations and talked about over and over in our home. I like to think about how writer Philip Lopate described the stories that people tell about themselves: "Another curiosity was how someone goes about fashioning a life story from certain favorite anecdotes. Why those dozen and not a hundred others that might have proven equally significant? I am tempted to say that the signature of one's personality resides in just which recollected vignettes one chooses to keep retelling."[31] Ultimately, my film presents Montreal and Calgary in a fashion that reflects my parents', and to quite a large extent my own, attitudes towards those two places.

Despite having established this overarching temporal structure, I struggled to find the flow of the film. I felt that I did not have a good overarching theme to connect everything together; instead, I only had vague notions of things I wanted to address when I began putting it together. One advantage I had were the previous films that I had made which allowed me to identify some of the important stories that I wanted to include and themes that I wanted to explore. So, for example I knew I wanted the story of the vending machine and store owner, and I also wanted to include something about the encyclopedias, so those went in. Progress came about in tiny increments. I used my cue cards, moved things around, deleted and inserted. We

[30] Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 152.
[31] Lopate, xi.

each find our own methods of working, and in my case I began with lots and whittled away, like a sculptor starting with a large block of marble and chiselling away pieces. I found that keeping a fluid script was both useful and necessary for this as I moved sections around, and I tried to keep myself open to chance and randomness, while trying not to let the amount of material overwhelm me. This practice worked well for me because I had essentially collected most of the visual materials over the last several years. Ultimately Phil's astute observation about the literal and metaphorical gifts my father had given me acted as another guide to help me move forward. Once I was able to isolate what these gifts were, it was much easier for me to decide what to keep and what to throw out based on how it spoke to these two things.

Another significant challenge I faced was trying to find the right balance between my mother, my father, and my own voice. We each have and had different interpretations of events. My father, who died in Argentina in 2012, was not available to talk about his interpretation of events, and I was reluctant to try to put words in his mouth or make assumptions about him. I definitely did not want to create stories for him and knew that I would instead have to rely on stories that I remembered, being careful to tell them in a way that was clearly from my own point of view. Trinh T. Minh-ha addresses this challenge in her first film, *Reassemblage* (1983): "I do not intend to speak about; just speak nearby." What she meant is that when one decides to speak nearby, rather than speak about, the first thing a person must do is acknowledge the possible gap between themselves and those who populate their film. In other words, the filmmaker must leave the space of representation open so that, although they may be very close to their subject (for instance a family member), they're also committed to not speaking on their behalf, in their place or on top of them. In order to speak nearby requires the filmmaker to deliberately suspend meaning, preventing it from merely closing, and hence leaving a gap in the formation process.

This, Trinh argues, allows the other person to come and fill that space as they wish. Such an approach gives freedom to both sides – the filmmaker and their subjects.[32] What this meant for me practically is that I aimed not to assume a position of authority in relation to my mother and father; as much as possible I tried to let my mother's voice say what it needed to say, whereas for my father I tried to speak only from the perspective of relating a story that I personally remembered.

Another related challenge involved establishing the place of my own voice in the film. I struggled to decide to what extent I should use voice over, and am still not completely at peace with the decisions I ultimately made. There are certain things I needed to ensure the audience knew about in order to follow my narrative, such as the story about the vending machine, or the importance of the flea market to the development of my worldview. On the flip side, there were also some things for which I felt that words had no place. Video artist Richard Fung has written that, "home movies do not speak for themselves," and in some parts of the film I had to have faith that I had presented enough evidence of the people and places that I did not need to say things explicitly or vocally.[33] One example of this is my mother's posture and facial expressions in the Calgary photos, where she looks unhappy or shrinks away physically from my father, compared to earlier photos in Montreal where she looks more relaxed, affectionate, and content. Another example is the look on my father's face as he stares off into the distance during the skiing footage in Calgary, after it had become clear that our fortunes were not improving and that

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[32] Trin T. Minh-ha, "There is No Such Thing as Documentary: An Interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha," in *Frieze,* issue 199, Nov-Dec 2018, https://www.frieze.com/article/there-no-such-thing-documentary-interview-trinh-t-minh-ha

[33] This is one of the challenges that Richard Fung discussed in his essay about working with his own family archive. Richard Fung, "Remaking Home Movies," in *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories, ed.* Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2008), 35.

his status had diminished, along with his youthful vigour and strength. And finally, I had to accept that sometimes, words are unable or are not enough to explain something. An example of this was my story near the beginning of the film wherein he told me of his early experience of poverty, and him making me promise not to tell my mother. At the time he told me this, I did not understand why he wanted to keep the secret from her; I can see the reason for this now, but I did not feel the need to say so in the film. Another example where language was inadequate in explaining something was my reaction to the vending machine incident, where I "like to imagine" that I said or would have acted a certain way but ultimately explain that I was at a loss for words and did not remember saying anything at all.

I was initially worried about mixing so many different mediums in one film. I wanted to ensure that all my formal decisions were well-motivated, and I was questioning whether I was mixing Super8, 16mm, photographs, View-Master slides, and advertisements for the proper reasons. I particularly struggled with the 16mm B&W footage at first because I had hand processed this footage and it looked glaringly different from the rest of the materials. I overcame this hurdle by deciding that the 16mm footage would be used in only three places in the film, to denote three stories about my father: the first is the old clock, which speaks to him as a watchmaker, time, and obsolescence; the latter being a reference not only to old objects but also to the people who service those objects. This opens up the question of: what happens to the people who maintain obsolete clocks and watches when their skills maintaining those objects also become obsolete? The second instance of 16mm film is footage of the flea market and what it revealed about the possibilities about the world. The third is about the vending machine, which taught me about class, power, shame, and (later on) anger. All of these were connected in one thread of the film and allowed for one particular kind of aesthetic, with 16mm hand processed

film used as memory. The other two threads were the discussions between my mother and I, and finally my voice over.

Many stories and images ended up on the cutting room floor. There was a whole section where I described the racist bullying I experienced when we lived in Northeast Calgary. One of the reasons for this cut was that it took too much focus away from my father. I did have a way to make it about him again – that he got angry at both me for being weak, and at my mother for coddling me – but it would have made the film too long. Another story that did not make it into the film was the time, when I was around seven years old, when I was playing on a parking block in a parking lot. One of my parents, I cannot remember which one, had gone inside to buy some things. The other parent who stayed outside with me warned me to stop playing on the block because I was going to fall, and indeed I did. I got a large gash on my head and had to be rushed to the hospital as a result. My father was furious with me at this, and at the time I remember hating him for it. It was only much later, as a grown-up, that I undrestood why he always got mad at me over such things. Looked at through the lens of today, one could say that this was a particular type of twentieth century working-class masculinity, and it was all that he knew. This would have been difficult to convey in a way that did not cast him in a very poor way without adding many extra lines of exposition.

My method of selecting the music for the film was also a primer for me on process cinema in practice. In previous shorts I had wanted to include music but this was difficult to do for, say, a 5 minute short film because a song that was three minutes long ended up playing too prominent a role. For my thesis I ultimately ended up using three songs. My decision on the first one was serendipitous: the song “Don Palucha,” a rhythmic Cuban Son song, starts at around the five-minute mark with the section titled “Good Times.” This upbeat song coincides with the

large display of merriment and plenty in the halcyon days of Montreal. My family is seen playing in the snow and around the pool with guests, culminating in my second-year birthday party. This reaches a climax with adults horsing around and dancing in the garage and ending with a conga line. The song actually exists on the soundtrack of that section of Super8 film, and I was able to find it online by searching for the lyrics. I was initially unsure about using music in a major key with an upbeat tempo (a "happy" song, in other words), but listening more closely to the lyrics convinced me otherwise. The song's protagonist is a man called Don Palucha who is singing to his lover about all of the things he will buy her. He is mocked by the chorus for not having money anymore, a fact of which he seems unaware. Don Palucha continues to sing, listing all of the things that he will do with his lover in the future including buying her a house and an automobile, and going for getaway trips to Mexico, Venezuela and Brazil. Needless to say, the way my mother has talked about my father and of how he once had money but then later became broke, this song was a perfect fit for the film. My only misgiving about this song and its location in the film is that it plays while my mother is talking, so putting subtitles for the lyrics competes too much with the viewer. So instead I decided to let this song play as is, without subtitles. Viewers who understand Spanish will understand the lyrics, while those who do not will at least be treated to what they might imagine is a typical Latin-type song.

The second song I decided to use, "El Cachivachero" by Alberto Castillo, also came about as a happy accident. In watching some of the 1990s home video footage I noticed that my mother referred to my father's junk as "cachivache" several times. I initially thought that this was some sort of made-up word. I looked it up on the internet and was completely surprised to learn that it was an actual Spanish term, used pejoratively and colloquially in the southern cone, to refer to "junk." I was even more surprised to learn that it was also a popular tango song from

the 1930s, Argentina's so-called "Infamous Decade," during which the country experienced a series of electoral frauds and government crises. The song is about a junkman who travels throughout a neighbourhood buying people's cast-off goods. The junkman will take anything including rags, old pieces of brass, empty bottles and so on. Given my father's habit of collecting things, along with my mother referring to him as a "cachivachero," the song seemed perfect for the film. Additionally, I felt that a song about varied pieces of bric-a-brac was a good metaphor for my father: a mystery man, constituted by a patchwork of fragmented objects and anecdotes, and carrying his few, materially worthless things upon his cart like an itinerant junk dealer of sorts. Furthermore, he later worked in a flea market, so one could say that in a way he actually did become a cachivachero of sorts. There was initially another song that I wanted to use in the film instead, "Cambalache," – another Southern Cone word for a junk shop – a 1930s tango, but I felt that "El Cachivachero" had a tempo that fit better with this section of the film and that my mother's use of the term gave it extra importance.

I found the final song in the film, "La Partida," during my searches for Chilean folk music. I wanted to find something that was Chilean, subdued, and wordless so that it could give a viewer a moment of quiet reflection during the closing credits. "La Partida" means "the departure," or "the farewell," which I thought was an appropriate title for where the film ends, with my father departing for Argentina and his subsequent death there. The song was originally composed by Chilean singer Victor Jara in the 1960s. He was arrested, tortured, and murdered shortly after the September 11, 1973 coup by Augusto Pinochet, and I thought it fitting to use this song given that my father felt himself to be in a sort of exile from his previous life and went back to Argentina, rather than Chile, after my parents' divorce. Another reason for choosing this song is that I remember tango, the music of Argentina, playing in our home but I have no

recollection of any sort of Chilean or Andean music that was played by my father. Finally, I felt that the hodgepodge percussive instruments of the song accurately symbolised my father's life as a patchwork of stories and experiences of many different places and things, coalesced into a single entity.

CONCLUSION

In 2006 my parents moved from Calgary to Ontario to be closer to where I was working at the time. Not long after that, maybe around 2008 or 2009, they divorced: my mother remained in Canada while my father decided to return to South America, moving to a small apartment in a rural area outside of the city of Cordoba. I suppose Argentina felt like one of the last few untarnished places for him; his childhood in Chile had been fraught with deprivation, and his life in Calgary had been one of exclusion and silences, while Montreal – where he had been happy nearly forty years before – had changed and become more expensive.

I often think about this, and continue to marvel at how much of his life remains completely unknown to me. I set out on this project trying to find out more about who he was, and I have now accepted that I will probably never know. He continues to be the shadowy figure outside of the frame, but I feel his presence in the stuff I see in the pictures.

Image 38. Screenshot. *Contemporary Montreal.*

In 2017 I traveled with my partner to Montreal. She was attending a conference there, and I spent an afternoon consulting virtual maps and visiting my parents' first apartment downtown, and our house in the suburb of Longueuil. I brought a Super8 camera because I was then already thinking about making a film with my family archive, and I suspected that I might need some contemporary footage of my old family homes. At the apartment I was not able to get past the lobby door so I walked around outside, shot some footage, and quietly took in views of the building from across the street. I walked around the neighbourhood and tried to visualise what it must have looked like around nearly 50 years ago with little success. I then took public transit to Longueuil and walked from the bus stop to our old house at 5270 Rue Begin, shooting some Super8 footage along the way. At the house itself I was startled by how much had changed, yet how much looked familiar. One of the small conifers in the front that I remembered from our family photos had become a giant pair of trees. The front yard seemed smaller, even though it

Image 39. Screenshot. *Contemporary Montreal.*

was denuded of shrubbery and flowers. Instead of a path from the front door to the driveway and then the sidewalk, the path now went directly to the sidewalk. The front entrance had been enlarged to accommodate a set of double doors, and though it was daylight, the outside light above the front door was blazing.

The family living there saw me filming their house from outside, so they came out to ask me what I was doing. After explaining to them in my rusty French who I was, they, a family of Algerian immigrants, invited me into their home. While they did not feel comfortable with me shooting inside, they took me on a quick tour through the more public areas of their home – the living room, dining room, kitchen, basement and garage. The walls and layout of the house were the same as what I remembered and what I saw in the photographs, but everything else inside was different. The garage and basement were used as storage spaces, not places to entertain guests. The walls were adorned with types of decorations that were alien to me, reflective of

Image 40. Screenshot. *Contemporary Montreal.*

memories and cultures other than my own. Through one of the sons acting as translator, they told me that they had moved to Montreal from Algeria several years ago, and the father asked me some questions about my family. They took me out into the backyard where I could film. The swimming pool was still there, but perhaps because of the season it looked unused. My mother's carefully tended flowers and plants were long gone, as were the picnic tables that had been the sites of outdoor barbecues and birthday parties. So much had changed from the moments frozen in my mind and in our family photos, that what I felt then is almost indescribable: a mix of a sense of loss, nostalgia, and uncanniness at how similar it all looked to the photos, yet how different. I went back home to Lethbridge, put the footage away, and got on with other things.

When I watched the footage recently I started feeling slightly nauseous, and I did not know why. It was not until I read this passage by Barthes that I began to understand: "if the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive,

as corpse: it is the living image of a dead thing. For the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive."[34] In other words, the people and places in my home movies and photographs are very much still alive in my mind, so that when I see images of contemporary Montreal it comes as a shock. One of the "places I live," so to speak, is still 1970s Montreal. I have been back to Calgary several times in the last twenty years and the result there is similar, though perhaps not as extreme because the difference in time is not as great. It's been a few years since that visit to Montreal, and though the shock of this difference between old and new – or dead and alive – has diminished somewhat, I am not sure if it will ever go away.

In closing, I do not think that I will ever have the answers, and that I will always be sitting here, like in that photo, surrounded by stuff, looking for my dad. He will always be that shadowy figure outside of the frame. But somehow, I think that I will find him in other ways: through objects that interest me and that I collect, through my own mannerisms and behaviours, and through my memories.

[34] Barthes, 78-79.

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