

NINE EASY DANCES

NORA ROSENTHAL

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

October 2023

© Nora Rosenthal, 2023

Abstract

Nine Easy Dances is a making-of documentary about the creation of a short dance film about my parents, where collectively the two stories, ostensibly one fictional and the other non-fictional, bleed into one another to form a darkly humorous hybrid docufictional work with scenes both staged, documentary, and which blur that edge.

The central narrative involves my return to my family home, as a filmmaker and ex-dancer, to choreograph and film a dance about our family. However, when my parents fail to live up to my unrealistic expectations, and when my mother's ovarian cancer metastasizes, I hire dancers to play them, to the particular distress of my father, a retired actor once known for playing Lenny Kravitz in the Jewish coming-of-age film *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974).

What unfolds are a series of collaborative dance sequences emotionally underscored by their relationship to our family archive and by the nature of home videos themselves. The film explores that impossible urge to hold onto the past through a meditation on mortality and love.

Acknowledgements

I am so incredibly lucky to have the sort of strange and magical parents to have not only allowed this project to be made about them, but to have participated so eagerly in a film of such a personal and often difficult nature. Parents are often the co-authors of our existence, but these ones more than most. Thank you, Heidi Overhill and Alan Rosenthal, from the bottom of my heart.

An immense thank you to my thesis committee, Ingrid Veninger and Manfred Becker, who have had such an abundance of confidence in me, and who have been so generous with their time and thoughtful notes, and to Kuowei Lee, whose help has been invaluable, and in whose hands university bureaucracy is truly an art.

I'm very grateful for the support of my cohort at York, and of the entirety of my cast, crew, and post-production team, among them fellow MFA candidate Christina Dovolis, whose calm presence on set was so helpful. I would especially like to thank MFA candidates Michael Miroshnik and Kyle Gregory Sanderson, director-of-photography and editor, respectively, for their depth of friendship and collaboration, and for putting so much of themselves into realizing this film. *Nine Easy Dances* would not exist without Michael's long days problem-solving on set, and I would have been utterly lost without the hundreds of hours that Kyle spent editing this film with me. His patience and faith in this project have propelled it into existence.

Lastly, a very special thank you to Holly Small and Gerry Trentham, both of whom were such important dance influences growing up, and with whom it was such an honour to collaborate with again as an adult. Their emotional and choreographic experience and intuitions guided and grounded this film.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Images	v
Introduction	1
Docufiction	3
Why This Idea?	5
Preproduction: Suffering and Painting	9
On Failure	12
Heading Into Production: Abandoning, and Keeping	13
That's a Wrap	16
On the Essayistic and the Struggle of Voice-over	18
Why Dance?	21
"Memory Soup" and Recontextualizing the Home Video	24
The "Crying Dance"	32
Filmmaking as Eulogizing	34
Conclusion	36
Works Cited	39
Filmography	42

List of Images

Image 1: Screenshot from <i>Nine Easy Dances</i> showing a moment from “Souls”, 2001, choreographed by Holly Small.	6
Image 2: Screenshot from <i>Nine Easy Dances</i> showing me, aged 17, dancing in “Musical Chairs”, choreographed by Gerry Trentham.....	6
Image 3: Screenshot from <i>Nine Easy Dances</i> . The only moment where the model of the house appears within the house.....	9
Image 4: Screenshot from an unused scene in <i>Nine Easy Dances</i>	16
Image 5: “Untitled” 2016, Photograph by Heidi Overhill.	37

Introduction

Mimnermos¹ [...] lets this brilliant shape move through time like a needle stitching together the two moments that compose nostalgia. *Then* and *now*.

– Anne Carson, *Plainwater* (1995, 14)

At some point too long ago to remember, I hoped my film would be transformative. Thus, I was punished for my hubris and granted a genuinely transformative experience.

Before I started filming *Nine Easy Dances*, I wrote to one of my best friends, Greg, over Instagram:

It's probably not healthy to devote all school and career stuff to discussing family and mortality, but here I am.

Greg wrote me back:

Yeah, it's likely not the healthiest thing to have your school/professional work locked in a twisted, morbid embrace with your real family life. But some people do heroin? Right? Or like, drink a lot of soda pop? Artistically obliterating the boundaries between the academic, personal, and professional spheres sounds pretty mentally dangerous. But probably still better than meth?

My then-partner, meanwhile, jokes that my film is like a Large Hadron Collider² for everything that is troubling me, and boy, am I troubled.

On July 19th, 2022, *Momus*, a reputable international arts journal, published an essay I wrote about my mom's cancer that I was terrified of her reading. *Momus* is so reputable that they still let me call my essay "The Final Fart: A Meditation on Hannah Wilke's Final Work" (Rosenthal 2022). In it, I talk and talk about my mom's impending death. When she read it, she was only upset that I *thought* she was the "type of person" who could possibly be upset by an

¹ 7th century "Greek elegiac poet" (Britannica, 2017).

² The "world's largest and most powerful particle accelerator", located at the CERN (European Organization for Nuclear Research), headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland (CERN, 2023).

essay like this. It is in many ways a trial run of screening *Nine Easy Dances* for my mom, this film which at its center concerns both her terminal illness, and the grief my father and I feel out of love for her.

My thesis supervisor, Ingrid Veninger, had asked me before I filmed: “What’s in the soul of things?” She told me to lean into whatever that thing might be, smiling and suggesting such possible contenders as “fear”, or even “shame”. I so desperately wanted to know, stepping into the shoot, what was at the core of things, but I couldn’t find an answer, and I think, looking back, that all I knew was loss. Not all loss is bad, and so much loss is inevitable, but that tremor of dread and guilt and grief that accompanies loss was what propelled me onto my own set.

Docufiction

“Documentary as a genre, as a concept, is inherently unstable and continuously undergoing transformations” (Roscoe and Hight 2019, 24). I consider *Nine Easy Dances* to sit inside the genre of docufiction, insofar as there are staged scenes and spontaneously captured behind-the-scenes footage, all intermingled with archival material in a narrative arc that obscures what may or may not be truthful. As such, I want to begin by addressing the relationship between actuality, and its representation. This is the relationship, after all, which determines what films we do or do not consider documentary, itself a form of cinematic meaning whose separation from fiction has always been nebulous and paradoxical. Sometimes, as Trinh T. Minh-ha observes, “Reality is more fabulous, more maddening, more strangely manipulative than fiction.” (1991, 39).

The Filmmaker Georges Franju, in a 1971 interview, says, “You must re-create reality because reality runs away; reality denies reality. You must first interpret it, or re-create it” (Levin 1971, 121). Of course, no film is truly real or truly false, but this idea of reality fleeing makes me think of one of my favourite short stories, Nikolai Gogol’s *The Nose*, about a petty bureaucrat whose nose abandons him. That nose becomes more successful than the now noseless face to which he (or perhaps it?) formerly belonged. I can see reality now, trying to get away from my grasp to enjoy a life separate from mine.

“Roland Barthes wrote in 1972, “to do interdisciplinary work, it is not enough to take a ‘subject’ (a theme) and to arrange two or three sciences around it. Interdisciplinary study consists of creating a new object, which belongs to no one” (72, as cited in Loveless 2019, 31). It’s true that my film no longer belongs to me. I think, maybe, it may even have conspired against me. And what to do when your own nose may no longer recognize you?

The fraught dynamic between reality and its expression exists across creative disciplines. When the author Anne Carson talks about the challenge of written expression, she could also be talking about the sometimes-contradictory challenge of describing any idea, including a cinematic one:

We're talking about the struggle to drag a thought over from the mush of the unconscious into some kind of grammar, syntax, human sense; every attempt means starting over with language. starting over with accuracy. i mean, every thought starts over, so every expression of a thought has to do the same. every accuracy has to be invented [sic.] (Anderson 2013)

Perhaps this film is just my way of inventing the accuracy of my family, at this moment in time.

Why This Idea?

“A film is an idea, flashing out or slowly elaborated, but one that cannot be escaped, whose expression can only be cinematographic.” (Rouch and Morin 2003, 266, as cited in Eades and Papazian 2016, 86). Film is certainly the most expensive way of exploring an idea, but I too cling to the idea that my film must be a film. At the 2022 RIDM Talent Lab, filmmaker Pablo Alvarez-Mesa, the mentor assigned to my group, suggested that filmmakers should always be asking themselves “Why is your film a film? Why is it not, for instance, a chair?” and I try to keep asking myself, keep assuring myself that this film must be a film. Not only that, but that it must be a docufictional dance-on-film.

Still, the *why* of this film came to be the central struggle in both editing the film, and in writing the voice-over. For so long, even well after filming, I no longer understood my own *why* and as a result it wasn’t coming across in the edit. I shuddered, returning to the interview with Franju: “It’s as useful to have a precise question to answer in a documentary as it is for a fresco painter to have a wall—if there’s no wall, what the hell is he going to do with his fresco?” (Franju as quoted in Levin 1971, 120). Whereas months before shooting, I could revel in what felt like a darkly comedic anarchy, in the days and hours before shooting I felt instead the sickly terror of having no question, no wall, and no clue.

Nevertheless, the direction I ought to take with this film felt strangely and intuitively clear. My relationship with my father has always been predicated on our mutual understanding of performance, making the study of performance itself central to *Nine Easy Dances*. It was my father’s friendship—through an ex-girlfriend—with members of the Danny Grossman Dance Company, that led me to pursue a rigorous modern dance program from an early age. This is how I met choreographer Holly Small (cast as my mother and herself) when she cast me at age

11 in *Souls* (2001), her 46-person multi-generational dance work about the horrors of war (Image 1). Likewise, I knew the actor, choreographer, and dancer Gerry Trentham, cast as my father and himself, from my early dance career (Image 2).



Image 1: Screenshot from *Nine Easy Dances* showing a moment from “Souls”, 2001, choreographed by Holly Small.



Image 2: Screenshot from *Nine Easy Dances* showing me, aged 17, dancing in “Musical Chairs”, choreographed by Gerry Trentham.

In that intuitive spirit, the dark humour that drives this film is our family's dark humour. Any other tone would feel oddly inappropriate. This is self-mockery as a tool to obscure the things we are really and truly afraid of. My goal was to make *Nine Easy Dances* as self-deprecatingly Jewish and uncomfortably funny as Larry David's largely improv-based TV series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–), while somehow still grounded in the historical lineage of docufiction, from Godard's structural experiments (e.g., visual reminders of the filmmaker and his crew, as in the opening sequence of *Contempt*, 1963, among others). I also wanted to draw on more expressly docufictional work like William Greaves's sprawling "making-of" film-within-a-film, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968), and Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch's highly reflexive *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961).

I see building a family as a creative act unto itself, one of the most collaborative artistic endeavours possible. Thus, this film studying my own family needed to be grounded in collaboration, on the joint authorship and trust between image-maker and subject. I set out to make a work in part co-authored by these two people I love: my strange and remarkable parents. I wanted to orchestrate a situation in which we experience something completely new and strange together, and where we document the process for others to see. Here the re-telling of our own lives comes to involve a ballooning chorus of co-collaborators, all chiming in, all colouring how the story unfolds, but none more integral than Holly and Gerry. Their commitment to supporting my "original" parents, in observing them and echoing them, was what gave the dances their poignancy. This was what allowed my parents to play off them, in particular Heidi, the only lead performer without experience as such.

In the end, while I may have orchestrated this familial documentary experiment, and certainly exercised a great deal of real control overseeing the pre- and post-production phases, on

set my lack-of-control as depicted in the cut is not entirely the product of a clever edit. There was a looseness, a genuine experimentation, that sometimes did coalesce into the *right* kind of chaos, though not always. For instance, there were moments of actual unpreparedness, leaving significant moments behind-the-scenes uncaptured, which I would later curse myself for. Ironically, some of the mayhem didn't get captured on film because of the actual mayhem going into production. Then again, there can be an excitement to being caught off guard. When things do *click*, like the genuine bond struck up immediately between Alan and Gerry, it's utterly unforced.

Regardless, I have in many ways still been genuinely surprised by the process of making this film, and I'm sure that surprise is partly by dint of this chaos. I was struck by the hundreds of hours required to realize the edit, which was a longer process, no doubt, because of the moments *not* captured, by the largeness of certain logical and narrative leaps that absence left in its wake. I was surprised, too, by the suddenness of certain cutting-room epiphanies and the lugubrious and hard-won nature of others. I've been most taken aback, however, by how monstrously more difficult it is to write voice-over than any other kind of text. Likewise, the end results of the film were in many ways more coherent than I had anticipated. Once archival materials came into play, and once I accepted that my own voice was necessary to tie together the many disparate threads of the film, I was able to make something more legible than the bedlam I had originally pitched. Maybe, looking back, I just couldn't face a coherent narrative about losing my mom. It was much easier for me to write off the film as an avant-garde dance and documentary experiment than to examine head-on the real emotional stakes of the film and admit to myself the loss that lies at the film's core. I was in denial.

Preproduction: Suffering and Painting

My then-partner, Marcus, built me a model of my family home at 98 Roncesvalles, using the architectural drawings as a guide, and I made tiny miniature paintings to go on the walls, all to scale. It was designed as an obsessive pre-production tool, or potentially an animation backdrop as a backup scenario in the absence of funding. Eventually it made a cameo appearance towards the end of the film: the house lurking within the house itself but relegated to the attic, dust rising in the sun (Image 3).



Image 3: Screenshot from *Nine Easy Dances*.
The only moment where the model of the house appears within the house.

Building a model of your childhood home feels like a way of evaluating a shared life, since rebuilding something in miniature involves looking at it so closely and examining all the decisions made over the years. It feels as though every time I paint a room, I'm re-making the past, and that is a terrible feeling. The second you start re-creating anything you realize the sad futility of the gesture: how absolutely and irrevocably lost the past will always be.

Painter Philip Guston talks about how “a painter has two choices: he paints the world or himself” (2022, 13). He continues, “the best painting that’s done here [in New York City] is when he paints himself, and by himself, I mean himself in this environment, in this total situation” (Guston 2022, 13). I think that’s what I’m trying to do. I’m trying to paint myself in my situation, only on film. In *Technology’s Rituals* (2005, 7-8) Trinh T Minh-ha talks about how if an artist paints nothing but mountains,

[...] it’s not because they want to become an expert in mountains. Rather, I would say it’s because they receive the world through mountains. Even if one comes to exactly the same place and looks from the same point of view everyday, the mountain is never the same. It would change every single second. In other words, there is no such thing as “dead nature” or what in the tradition of Western arts is considered a still life. There is no concept of nature morte in ancient Eastern Art. Nature is alive, always shifting. It should be shown in its course. So you can draw thousands of mountains and you can devote your life to painting this single subject, yet each painting shows a unique mountain-instance. Painting here is inscribing the ever-changing processes of nature-that are also one's own. Painter and painted are, in a way, both caught on canvas in the act of painting. To paint nature is to paint one's self-portrait. (Minh-ha 2005, 7-8)

Minh-ha is speaking here of depictions of nature, not one’s family, but the obsessive union between the artist and their observations that she and Guston both allude to, feels apt to me. Instead of mountains, family and mortality obsess me. I often think, too, of the obsessive preoccupations of the Jewish painter Marc Chagall, whose paintings are littered with “clocks, deathless like the time which they so relentlessly mark off” (Charles 2011, 80). In Chagall’s work, “The clock rules over suffering and over the eternal” (Charles 2011, 81). Thus, whether the clock mourning Chagall’s wife’s death in his painting *Clock with Blue Wing* (1949) or the crucified figure whose head becomes the face of a clock in *Christ in the Clock* (1957) each clock instance marks a new instance of new suffering. Chagall never let go of the same ideas or motifs, but each iteration is a new portrait of who Chagall became.

Film is another story, though, because it takes so damn long to pursue an idea on film. My script was one self-portrait in 2018, my shoot was one self-portrait in 2022, and my edit is another in 2023. My self-portrait is broken and holographic. If my film were a painting it would be *pentimento*³ both in the sense of showing multiple images and in the sense of trying to repent, to “obliterate by overpainting” (Britannica 2014)—to obscure from my current self the earlier self who got me in this mess.

Maybe I dwell on painting if only because painting the model of my childhood home depressed me far more than any other phase of production. I really stared at all the tiles that were never changed from the previous owner after the home’s purchase in 1994, really examined all those dark paints, the colours described as pastels by my father but which are all just variants of gray. Gray-green. Gray-yellow. A second, different gray-green. A specked, creamier gray-green. One mysteriously bright yellow basement laundry and furnace room which has never seen the sun. The colours I bought at Curry’s to mimic my parents’ walls all literally contain the word “ash”. Ash-yellow, ash-green, ash-blue.

³ A visible trace of an earlier painting still seen in the final work.

On Failure

Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch declare towards the end of *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), about their film's participants, "if people think they're hams or exhibitionists, then our film's a failure." My father is undoubtedly a ham, and I am undoubtedly an exhibitionist of some kind. For other reasons too, my film is also already a failure, but since I built failure into the proposition, does that mean it can be more than a failure, also? If confusion and dread and death (the ultimate, multi-organ, failure) are part of the story, can I transcend my own failure with this experiment?

Lars von Trier, in *The Five Obstructions* (2003) announces that "sometimes everything suddenly turns out to be crap". If only that were the worst thing that could happen to me.

Heading Into Production: Abandoning, and Keeping

I wanted to embrace a state of not-knowing as I went into production, and as a result so many details changed once we were all on set, perhaps none more so than the relationship between my dad, Alan, and the performer who plays him, Gerry. Alan was written into the script as having tremendous antipathy towards Gerry, but as soon as they tried on their Groucho outfits they began spontaneously embracing, and that dynamic no longer made sense. It was as though they'd been friends for years, divulging all their old secrets, prancing and palling around even when the cameras weren't rolling. Thus, while Alan still calls Gerry an "imposter" in the film, it's their genuine friendship which comes across in their scenes together.

Holly's relationship with my mom was less instantaneously warm, but quietly intense and focused. It was Holly's suggestion that we should cut her hair off as a closer approximation of my mom's post-chemo look, and mine that my mom should do the cutting. The hair-cutting scene became one of my favourite moments in the film, obliterating any kind of dichotomy between natural and unnatural, true and false: two women dressed somewhat arbitrarily as Joan of Arc, sitting on a front porch in Toronto, surrounded by a largely student crew, yet both of them completely absorbed in their private moment.

The greatest change, however, concerns what was going to be the climax of the film: a big Steadicam shot that followed the whole cast and crew through the house. In the end Brian Sakalauskas, originally slated to be the director-of-photography, and who had been practicing on The Steadicam at home, got COVID, and could no longer shoot my film. It comes to feel providential that my now ex-husband, only a month after leaving me, might get too sick to make this movie together.

No more Steadicam. No more Brian. Chaos has arrived, and the shot can be mercilessly abandoned. The spirit of it can somehow remain. Sobbing incoherently, I called Michael Miroshnik, a friend in my MFA cohort, from a side street near my parents' house, and he agreed to shoot the 16mm components of my film, having originally been slated to shoot only the "documentary" coverage.

Michael told me: "Nora, you asked for chaos and now you have it." There is no choice but to embrace the overabundance of madness, in much the same way that certain initial ideas for this film had to be pared way down. For cancer reasons, for money reasons. For many reasons. What I had initially envisioned as a sprawling act of replacement where everyone, cast and crew alike, including me, would come to be replaced, just wasn't going to work. We had to find some way to keep the intensity with fewer people. The result is more melancholic. It is slower. It has to be.

I'm increasingly grateful for those moments where there is no choice, creatively or personally. When life intervenes and points the way forward, whether you like it or not.

Abandoning that which doesn't work has been key to making this film. Abandoning the line that doesn't scan, the shot that is no longer possible, the person you can no longer work with because the love that bonded you is gone. I am sloughing off the old like a bug molting, entering some new horrendous and predatory phase with my old skin crumpled on the ground and my new skin fresh and raw as air.

I had this idea about borrowing from T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*: "I grow old, I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled" and "Shall I part my hair behind?"⁴ We

⁴ Eliot, T. S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock>.
Accessed Jul 21, 2023.

were going to roll our pants as a dance motif. We were going to part our hair behind and eat peaches over sinks. In the end, it doesn't happen. In the end, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* exists only as a fruitful Zoom conversation with Holly and Gerry, a way of tossing out ideas. In the end, we are too busy being consumed by motion and emotion to go back and think of Eliot.

Some plans do stay, however. There was from an early phase the notion of scooping Holly out of bed “as Heidi” that became “The Carrying Dance” in the film. Embracing that which works was just as important as abandoning that which didn’t. There’s something about lifting Holly up out of bed that felt just as *right* in the moment as it did when putting down ideas in the “script”. This is one of the few moments that felt exactly as imagined, and it was Michael who had the perfect instinct to place my parents secretly in the frame, darkly observing some potential future.

This whole crazy endeavor is about trying to do something creative together that can’t forestall the inevitable (death), but where workshop and performance blend into one, where we achieve something of that inexplicable specificity where the intellectual and emotional stars align—something special and strange and bonded to that one moment in time and space, not unlike Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope as “the co-ordinates of time and space invoked by a given narrative” (Oxford Reference, 2023). Somehow, by some bizarre kismet, some of that inexplicable magic did reveal itself during our three days on set: the moment formed before us and dissolved when everyone left. It was strange for it to be over so quickly, but “Of necessity, to create is a temporary state and cannot be possessed, because you learn and relearn that it is the lie and mask of Art and, too, its mortification, which promises a continuity” (Guston 2022, 29).

That's a Wrap

At the end of the shoot my parents and I went out to dinner on a post-performance high, drinking Beaujolais and eating steak tartare and fries. Our little wrap party. My Dad tells me the next day he's never felt closer to me. I am so proud of him. I didn't expect this to be such an emotional experience. I had been so afraid he'd do a bad job that I wrote it into the script, but he did a great job. He was honest, and he went to all the terrifying places I asked him to go. There is a scene which didn't make the cut where he applies Preparation H Hemorrhoid cream under his eyes (an old performers' trick) and says, "so many of my friends are dead" and we both knew in that moment that he was conjuring in his head all the real people he had lost (Image 4).



Image 4: Screenshot from an unused scene in *Nine Easy Dances*.

A few days after our wrap party, I admit to my parents that my thirteen-year relationship has ended. I've been hiding its dissolution from them for over a year in the hopes that it wasn't true. If I can't tell them at this moment, then when? I'd thought that if I didn't tell anyone about

Brian, that if he still shot my film, he might stay with me. It felt as though maybe then, something could be salvaged. But so many processes, once set in motion, cannot be undone. The phrase I will later speak in voice-over: “Transformation looks like destruction, a lot of the time,” feels hard-won, most days. I feel more like a “real” filmmaker now that I’ve made a “real” film. I’m more confident in certain ways, and things are professionally falling into place in a way they never have before. Then again, I am also much, much less happy. Who says people can’t change?

Too fearful of FedEx-ing my film, I took the train to Montreal with an old black duffle bag full of film cans on my lap so I could drop them off directly at the MELS processing lab and unburden myself to friends.

On the Essayistic and the Struggle of Voice-over

Setting up the world of *Nine Easy Dances* was a challenge, one which often felt hopeless.

Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers* (2009) may have a crazy premise, but that premise is still laid out lucidly enough that we accept the trash-humping world almost immediately, and wholeheartedly. My lofty goal was to render the madness of *Nine Easy Dances* as intelligible as that of *Trash Humpers*.

Von Trier likewise lays out his experiment so clearly in *The Five Obstructions* that I have wistfully watched his opening conversation with Jørgen Leth many times, thinking of all the different ways I too could have sat my parents down in a room and just explained the film's central idea to them, on camera, even if von Trier's "interview segments brazenly straddle some barely perceptible line between the real and the scripted" (Reinsch 2016, 634). Yet, in the absence of such interviews, and in the absence of sufficient footage that shows rather than says, the voice-over emerged as part of a sneaky recontextualization of everything, as an essay film after-the-fact not unlike any episode of John Wilson's *How To With John Wilson* (2020–). Sneaky insofar as glances appear out of order, motivations are attributed which may never have existed, but still embracing Herzog's "poetic truth", and still embraced *by* the participants themselves. My parents and their dancer-doubles saw themselves mirrored back upon viewing the film, even if the glass may distort at the same time that it reflects.

Thomas Elsaesser identifies a "maxim" that "in the essay film "theme substitutes for plot," and that argument and association prevail over anticipation and narrative momentum"" (2017, 241). *Nine Easy Dances* has a discernible plot, thus not succumbing to this essayistic trope, but it nevertheless leans into the essayistic, especially in the film's constant use of an untrustworthy and utterly subjective authorial "I". I see this as an essayistic "staging of

subjectivity”; a playful “representation of the self as a performance” (Russell 1999, 276) that gives the film an autoethnographic undertone.

It had initially been my intention to include my parents’ reactions to *Nine Easy Dances* within the film itself, in part to render that autoethnographic “I” more diffuse, and transform it into a sort of shared “we” similar to how Agnes Varda collects the reactions of the gleaners who feature in *The Gleaners and I* in *The Gleaners and I: Two Years Later* (2002), or to how Rouch and Morin also screen and discuss *Chronicle of a Summer* towards the end of *Chronicle of a Summer*. In the end, however, there’s only so much one 19-minute film can contain. In the end, contrary to my initial intentions, I decided to lean heavily into voice-over, to utilize the framework of the essay film to render the emotional subtext of *Nine Easy Dances* intelligible to an audience unfamiliar with my family. As Varda herself says when discussing *The Gleaners and I* (2000), “who cares about an intention, what is important is the film you see” (interviewed by Rigg 2005, as cited in Kline 2005, 183).

I discovered that writing *to* an image is a very different and far more conversational act than writing in the absence of an image, that is to regular essay writing that takes place on a page or on a laptop screen, in which any images are in the reader’s brain instead of in front of them, the way they are in an essay film. It’s a dialogue rather than a speech, between word and image, and word and silence, so the question of what to divulge hovered at the margins of this project from the beginning. I tried to make this apparent from the very first moment of voice-over: “I’ve been told that I need to explain this to you, but it’s hard to discern what needs to be explained, and what’s best left alone” (Rosenthal, 2023). Harun Farocki announces in *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995): “Disequilibrium and balance, this is the law of cinema narration”.

It was never my intention to rely on voice over, but once in the cutting room with Kyle Gregory Sanderson, it became very apparent that my voice was necessary to give some kind of coherent backbone to the footage. It was a process of writing and recording, re-writing and re-recording, over and over again, as each breath and each new idea had a ripple effect on the film as a whole. There was the film as it was intended and scripted, which already had a central component of experimentation, and of chaos, but conveying chaos in a way controlled enough to elicit emotion is a different story. This sentiment is echoed in a discussion of William Greaves' seminal docufiction *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968): "The structure of the film was to be created during editing, the crucial step in reining in the disorder of the film shoot to create a coherent product: "The film had to be chaos, but chaos of a very special character: intelligible chaos"" (MacDonald 1992, 24 as cited in San Filippo 2001, 218-219).

Why Dance?

Because this is a story that I barely understand, and one that I feel in my body, acutely, it demands, somehow, to be a dance.

I often accuse films of containing dance. The infamous flailing screaming breakdown in Andrzej Żuławski's *Possession* (1981) strikes me as being very much a dance. Likewise, the way Joe Morton moves in John Sayles' *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984)—with those ginger alien steps after crash-landing in a bedraggled Brooklyn. Countless action stars have a physical swagger that could rival members of Pina Bausch's company, and imagine a world in which Bruce Willis would have performed Bausch's "Café Müller" (1985) in his heyday.

That I even conceive of movement this way owes a huge debt to Bausch and her Wuppertal Dance Theater, but Bausch herself also had a significant cinematic presence. Bausch directed a single film: *The Complaint of an Empress* (1990), but her work has taken on a cinematic life on numerous occasions, with "Café Müller" opening Almodóvar's *Talk to Her* (2002) before a version of the piece also appeared in Wim Wenders' 3D documentary *Pina* (2011). The closest *Complaint of an Empress* comes to a story is depicting the changing seasons during a year. What unfolds is an emotional collage utilizing "dance" that in another context might not read as such, like the dance of older men trudging through fallen leaves. If dancer and choreographer Bob Fosse crossed over into directing through narrative musicals, Bausch did so largely without language, and almost entirely without plot.

Bausch's work makes you squirm: movements go on for seemingly far too long and then by dint of that endurance test, the repetition reaches an ecstatic place, transforming something in the viewer. Fosse's choreography, at his most effective, however, transports an audience emotionally *because* of a narrative arc. The dance number for the song "Bye, Bye, Life" in *All*

That Jazz (1978) is moving not because of the dance alone, but because of the dark humour of a dying man belting out his glitzy farewells. The band, the audience, the chorus of dancers wearing full-body leotards decorated with veins and arteries, all contribute to a subversive melodrama, but one rooted in a traditional story structure.

I mention both Bausch and Fosse because I am seeking out some in-between place with the dance segments in *Nine Easy Dances*. For instance, the movement in the “Stairs Dance” physically embraces a style of movement (and way of generating movement) which is similar to the ethos of the Wuppertal Dance Theatre, but the audience’s emotional connection to this dance is tied to their knowledge of what the stairs represent. The same goes for all the dances in the latter half of *Nine Easy Dances*. The first dances, “Waltz (Dance),” “Disco Ball Dance,” “I Should Just Rub My Face in the Glass Dance,” are exuberant and strange, while the dances in the second half of the film follow in the aftermath of our knowledge of my mother’s illness: “Stairs Dance,” “Carrying Dance,” “Crying Dance.”

Actor and choreographer Bernardo Montet, interviewed about his role creating the “training routines” in Claire Denis’ *Beau Travail* (1999), says, “You have to feel before moving. Before you can dance, you have to accumulate and sustain a certain energy and then allow it to explode” (Weston, 2020). This seems so akin to how the dancers playing my parents, Gerry and Holly, both intuitively understood the nature of this project. They somehow absorbed our family dynamics and proceeded to move from that basis. Gerry, seated at the base of the stairs during a rehearsal of the “Stairs Dance” spontaneously cried, sensing all that the stairs contain.

Ironically, for a dance film utilizing the act of “replacement”, but also employing “pedestrian” choreography and choreographic prompts that owe a huge debt to, again, Pina Bausch’s legacy, as well as to other dance and theatre movements in the 1960s, Bausch once

noted that “Everything has to do with the person who is performing” (as cited in Homans 2023). She believed that “If that person is replaced, it becomes just a role” (as cited in Homans 2023). Perhaps it is fitting then, that the roles of Holly and Gerry, even while they “replace” Heidi and Alan, were always intended for Holly and Gerry and for no one else.

Bausch’s “works are constructed through and by the body in its proper “logic”—fragmented, multiple, incoherent, and complex” (Fernandes 2002, 10)—a description in which I hear echoes of Adorno: “The essay refrains ‘from any reduction to a principle’, instead ‘accentuating the fragmentary, the partial rather than the total’; it ‘thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than smoothing them over’” (Adorno 1984, 157, as cited in Eades and Papazian 2016, 164).

Dance on film provides many opportunities for fragmentation that don’t arise on stage. For example, “jump cuts and matches-on-action have enabled new forms of dance as choreographic continuity is spread across bodies and locations” (Brannigan, 2001). Yet, while I have cut together dance sequences in music videos I’ve directed (*Love is at the End of the World* (2020), *Gemini* (2022)) in a similar way, the dances in *Nine Easy Dances* exist largely in their full length. This is in part an attempt to hint at the house as a theatre, as a dark musty performance space differing wildly from the bright sunny street outside, a place in which we can watch from a doorway as two men roll a disco ball across the floor, as if from one darkened theatre wing to another.

“Memory Soup” and Recontextualizing the Home Video

On November 19, 2022, while attending the RIDM Talent Lab at L’INIS in Montreal, filmmaker Miryam Charles spoke to the group with her editor, Xi Feng. She talked about her original intention to edit by herself, but how, when faced with the footage from her impossibly personal and tragic *Cette Maison* (2022), she instead just cried alone in front of her computer.

It took me until December 21, 2022, to meet with Kyle to discuss this exact same problem. I hadn’t even really made it to the solo late-night weeping phase, that’s how uselessly overwhelmed I was. I laughed, reading Julia Vassilieva expound on editing as “the euphoric fantasy of total control over the film” (2020, 180). A fantasy indeed, when for me it had become an excruciating state of non-control. Thus, Kyle entered the scene to comb through my family archive, one too familiar to possibly observe on my own.

The dances in *Nine Easy Dances* (note there are neither nine, nor are they especially easy⁵) were pre-conceived in the script, but not rehearsed, blocked, or performed (categories which, in a making-of film, are deliberately muddled), until the shoot, and there was not enough footage, in the end, to rely solely on the interplay of the behind-the-scenes footage and the 16mm footage, as I had initially intended. Unable to capture more footage of the set, I turned to my dad’s early acting career, to home videos from the 1990s, to 16mm footage shot largely by my Zadie, George Rosenthal, in the 1950s and 1960s, videotaped dance performances of myself as a teenager in the Canadian Contemporary Dance Company (CCDT), childhood photographs, and digital video recordings from the 2000s, both of a family trip to BC and of my Mom at work, lecturing at Sheridan College. Combing through this archive fundamentally changed the film. It

⁵ One might ask, “Why still call the film *Nine Easy Dances*?” but the title has been with this idea for so long, arbitrary and catchy alike, that it feels too late to be rid of it now.

became about the nature of the archive itself – both burdensome and beautiful—and about how you get stuck with a select array of memories, a curated vision of the past of which *Nine Easy Dances* inevitably becomes a part.

It was during this time, and on Kyle's suggestion, that I borrowed his Arri ALEXA Classic and began shooting within the house: largely quiet, low key shots of the interiors where mostly only cats wander into frame. One morning I walked downstairs to discover my mom napping on the couch. She woke up and laughed to discover me struggling to shove a 40lb camera on its tripod in the dark. It's at this moment that I shot her resting, when I then left the camera rolling to curl up and put my head on her legs. She reached out to pet my head. Somehow these shots of the empty house can feel like shots of a house in the aftermath of a death. We sense the transport forwards in time, away from the shoot, but this shot of my mom and I both asserts her presence in the present tense.

There is a beauty to any archive as a tool of time travel and the pain of the archive as the same. My Bubie, Lilly Rosenthal (herself not identified in the film), encapsulates this in her narration of archival 16mm footage. You can hear the mournfulness in her voice when she says, "We're all so young and happy." My father and I too experienced this sentiment while watching a VHS from 1991: the big sadness at time passing. There is also the physical burden of the archive: the photos of the great-grandparents that are too precious to throw out, the boxes of negatives, the accumulation of materials that only increases exponentially as each generation takes more images. In the edit, the archive also became a way of speaking through generations. There is a scripted scene where Gerry helps me to use my inhaler after I succumb to coughing and wheezing in the dusty attic. It is a scene I was struggling to find a home for, and considered abandoning entirely. However, browsing through unused footage from my father's *The Groucho*

Tapes (1988), I found my dad also pretend-coughing before shouting “cut” in his own film. In *Nine Easy Dances*, the two coughing Rosenthals cut one into the other, my father and I impossibly co-existing in our thirties.

While my dad, Alan, gets to inhabit his best self in the film—to return to his performance-verse in all his vaudevillian nature—it has been a key challenge to try and have my mom show her best self, on film. She was a professor, therefore an orator/performer, but that is not quite the same thing. On set, she’s tired and appears a little out of her depth. It was critical to discover a taped lecture of Heidi 20 years ago: visible evidence of Heidi from before the cancer, witty, smart, dark, and strange. Heidi as Heidi. It seemed only natural that her lecture should focus so acutely on mortality. Perhaps I simply latched on to the mortality theme contained within her lecture on Baroque art and architecture. Likewise, in the archival materials narrated by Lilly Rosenthal, it’s the tiny excerpts that spoke to the passage of time, to memory, to the nature of the archive itself, that made the cut.

One central paradox of *Nine Easy Dances* is that in adding to an already overwhelming and oppressive pile of stuff (by creating the film in the first place), determining what is worthy of keeping becomes increasingly difficult. Stuff is a stand-in for memory, for the past as contained within objects and images. What we keep and what we throw out thus becomes a stand-in for what is worth handing down (things and thoughts alike) and what, in turn, can be forgotten. An entire constellation of thought hovers around any object or image, and the hoarder’s dilemma is that to get rid of the object means lessening the power of the memories, maybe even the people, or the era, which that object represented.

On some level, I intend *Nine Easy Dances* to function as a film about our house as much as a film about our family: the house of the almost-hoarder, in which these images and things and

memories are already stored, *en masse*. In resituating the entire production as a kind of giant home movie, the film becomes both an aide-memoire to access the past as well as a series of physical objects (the 16mm canisters, the hard drives) that now themselves will end up stored in the house, to encumber (both emotionally and physically) some future generation or even my future self. "We are all of us lost in the chasm between our desire to recapture the past and the impossibility of a pristine return" (Renov, as cited in Russell 1999, 282). Maybe I'm operating under the illusion that if the chasm fills with enough old DVDs, I can just walk across it.

In the film, we see the flashes of archival footage interspersed throughout as "memory soup". Memory is insane, unreliable. It makes no sense. Memory is more like a terrible hallucination: painful and erratic, a private chaos. The idea of the "memory soup" is to convey the ways in which nostalgia drops down like caterpillars from a swarmed tree; each thought its own gross scraggly wormy thing suddenly in our grips or in the folds of our pants, only to be brushed to the ground a moment later. I believe these snippets of archive; the 16mm, the digital, the VHS, all indecipherably collapsing in on one another, are the best way of representing some of how memory really feels. Perhaps this archive also functions similarly to the home videos in Richard Fung's own film about love, loss, and sickness, *Sea in the Blood* (2000), "provid[ing] occasions for commemoration rather than distancing" (Fung 2008, 37).

There's also something about a truly glorious moment captured on home video that to me gets at the heart of sadness. A beautiful afternoon in sunshine is a reflection of the stakes of the expected loss: my mom holding me in my aunt's suburban pool and pointing at the camera, holding me in a dappled patch of countryside flowers, or showing me thousands of tulips in bloom. It's the unfettered happiness of the home-video, even the cliché of it, that becomes devastating. I take as my narrative and emotional model the technique in Lars von Trier's

Dancer in The Dark (2000), where every jubilant song and dance precedes a new loss, the fear and sadness of reality hitting that much harder after the fleeting escape into fantasy. And what, really, is memory if not fantastical, in the sense of invented?

I also feel a kinship with Richard Fung in the ways he deals with illness in *Sea in the Blood* (2000) and how a general absence of hospitals and treatments functions “against the bog of sentimentality in which this subject matter could easily become mired” (Fung 2008, 38).

While I do use an abdominal CT scan to first reveal my mother’s cancer, later reading her latest CT report over the “Carrying Dance,” I am still conscious that a story about maternal cancer can dip perilously into the saccharine. Like Fung, I wish “to engage the emotions, but not to deaden the intellect” (Fung 2008, 38). My approach to finding a lightness in pathos is rooted in dark Yiddish humour (as made literal by my father’s transformation into Groucho Marx), as well as in the unexpected strangeness of the dance elements, rooted particularly in the dark physical comedy, once again, of Pina Bausch and the Wuppertal Dance Theater, which itself embraced and built upon aspects of Brechtian theatre, among them “unexpected comic moments” (Fernandes 2002, 3).

Striking the right tone of tragicomedy was one of the larger editing challenges; how to make this film funny without being crass. How to laugh without being untruthful about the enormity of sadness involved. Some laughs are so tiny as to be secret, like noticing only after listening to my own voice read my mother’s CT report that the word “restaging” emerges: a kind of secret joke about cancer and performance. I imagine my mother’s cells doing their own invisible metastatic dance for her inner audience of horrified organs.

Two recent previous York thesis films, both of them short documentaries about loss, feel like important antecedents to consider when editing my own film: Sofia Bohdanowicz’ *Point and*

Line to Plane (2020), and *Still Processing* (2020) by Sophy Romvari. Bohdanowicz' narration, in its reckoning with death in conjunction with art, feels particularly relevant. Likewise, Romvari's explicit reference to family archives. These are both very vulnerable films. My challenge was to somehow capture that level of vulnerability without losing sight of the dark gallows humour that was central to my intentions.

Tonally, I wanted to fill the shoes of a meaner and wilder Sarah Polley in *Story We Tell* (2012) where (surprise!) my dad has been my biological dad all along, and there is no great gossipy revelation, only the process and the inevitable march of time. I want to embrace the megalomania of Orson Welles in *F is For Fake* (1973) but tempered by the indefatigable and chatty kindness of Agnes Varda. Perhaps all that is to say: I wish to find my own voice.

If I am repurposing sickness as comedy, then I also want to repurpose comedy as something tender. How can the goofy *Animal Crackers* (1930) song, "Hello, I Must Be Going" become devastating? And is it possible for the audience, after one brief glimpse of Groucho Marx singing "Hello, I Must Be Going" early in the film, recognize the song when my dad later sings it to my mom? Here, instead of one man reluctant to leave a party, it's one man reluctant to leave his wife. Leaving by staying in the land of the living—a reversal of abandonment. In my father's final rendition of this song, serenading my mom, it is my conscious decision to close on Alan's face only, in the realization of his alone-ness to come. Since so much of the voice over centers on my mother, on her soon-to-be departure into death, I wanted to end on the remaining parent who is forced to contend with this reality, and who, in that brief moment after my call to "cut", stops performing entirely.

Throughout, I imagine Alan as a kind of neurotic Dieter Dengler from Herzog's *Little Dieter Needs To Fly* (1997). Dieter, who performed his "documentary" scenes multiple times,

“had to become an actor playing himself. Everything in the film is authentic Dieter, but to intensify him it is all re-orchestrated, scripted and rehearsed (Herzog as quoted in Reinsch, 2016, 644). Alan may already be an actor, rather than a charismatic non-actor, but nevertheless, he remains authentic to himself in the heightened and altered reality of the film shoot.

Typically, “Whereas in a fictional film we assume that the proto-filmic event was constructed solely for the purpose of the story, in documentary we expect that the events we see on screen *would have happened, as they happened, even if the filmmaker had not been present.*” (Roscoe and Hight 2019, 21, emphasis in the original). In *Little Dieter*, the artifice and the multitude of takes⁶, is largely obscured if you take the text of the film alone or at face value, but it is glaringly obvious in *Nine Easy Dances* that absolutely none of these events would be taking place if they had not been initiated by me. Still, this idea and ethic of truthfulness hovers everywhere: none more so than in the desire to represent my parents—and myself—in our essence, even if the artifice of the film calls constant attention to itself.

From the beginning of this process, I joked that my film is like Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing*⁷ (2012), except about my family. Yet, logline parodies aside, there are nevertheless truths revealed in Oppenheimer’s film-vignettes-within-a-film which I doubt that any conventional documentary could have elicited. In the case the of the death-squad leaders Anwar Congo and Adi Zulkadry, the fictionalized gangster narratives they play out in *The Act of Killing* (2012) seem to allow them just enough of an illusion of fiction that they speak with a horrifying honesty, but this candor—one afforded by the freedom of performance—is precisely what I sought in playing this filmic game with my family. There are real emotions too large to let

⁶ Dieter “Dengler performed some actions 10 times (five in each language)” (Reinsch 2016, 61).

⁷ A film about mass-killings in Indonesia in which the former leaders of death-squads are invited to live out cinematic fantasies.

loose in the course of a normal day together, but as our house transformed into a movie set, there developed a safety, an excuse, even a liberation in performance. That freedom allowed us to express something true, not in spite of, but because of, the premeditated nature of the experiment.

The “Crying Dance”

I keep wondering if you can reveal a character’s inner life with a gesture, or with a dance. If you boil down the movement of suffering into its simplest iteration, can that dance just be the act of sobbing?

The Crying Game as it appears in *Nine Easy Dances* is based on a real game my dad and I used to play when I was little. We would sit facing each other with a stopwatch between us, and the first person to produce a real tear would win. There was no special skill involved other than making ourselves brutally sad. In my child’s brain I would invoke images of parental loss (by car crash, typically) or imagine killing off our cats in various terrible ways. It had been years since I played, and I was worried I wouldn’t be able to do so in a group, and on camera, but it turned out my dad and I have ducts ready with a year of stored sadness, and almost instantly sobbed. We filmed it twice, sitting awkwardly with our wet faces while we waited for the film magazine to be changed.

Even though my dad and I cried the most vigorously, I could hear moaning all around us. The night before I had practiced crying in bed just to make sure I could do it on command. I had a wide array of triggers on my mind that afternoon, among them imagining my mom’s future corpse. However, what really did it for me on this more public occasion was repeating in my head, over and over again “you’re a worthless piece of shit.” Like countless annoying artists before me, there I am, ego and all, weeping about myself.

On the one hand, this was a weird parlour game, yet at the same time there *was* a profound feeling of togetherness as all of us—cast and crew alike—cried for the camera, with secret motivations to our sadness. There was a strange transference where I could feel Gerry crying, as though his shaking tears passed through his hand on my dad’s shoulder. Holly I could

feel through her hands next to my knees, on the chair I was sitting on. There was a terrifying give and take from salty face to sweaty palm, to salty face. As I had hoped, there was something true to what we experienced as a group: the scene being just a scripted excuse to feel that which is painfully real.

My dad Alan cries throughout *Nine Easy Dances*. This is partly to joke about, and revel in, Alan's genuine sensitivity and warmth, partly to joke at the genuine sadness which has taken over his life. Early in *Nine Easy Dances*, my dad flips through an album of long-dead cats and sobs real fat tears that drip down from his face. I referred to this album as his "trigger book", and while he suspected what was inside, he wasn't allowed to see it before we filmed the scene. As with the crying game, the tears are instigated, yet real.

Played for laughs, and partially recontextualized as Alan weeping after being "fired" from his role as himself, this nevertheless feels like a critical moment in the film. We watch as Alan is devastated by the power of the archive (the cat photos) as a stand-in for time passing and for death. At the same moment we come full circle as the entirety of *Nine Easy Dances* becomes its own home movie, right before our eyes.

Alan weeping in this attic room is one of various moments of collapse and repetition throughout the film. First, he cries alone with the photo album, later with that same photo album, but in the presence of Holly and Gerry, who try to comfort him. All while the character of Nora as Bully Director, pushes him into feeling worse. This repetition is intended as a moment of tragi-comic futility at the same moment that it reveals the act of filmmaking.

Filmmaking as Eulogizing

There was originally a line of voice-over about this film being “a eulogy long before the big event,” except I then realized that this isn’t a eulogy, it’s a waiting game. As Edwidge Danticat describes in her wonderfully elliptical work about her mother’s death from cancer, *The Art of Death*: “I started reading C.S. Lewis’s *A Grief Observed* as part of my anticipatory grief. (And grief still feels like fear. Perhaps, more strictly, like suspense. Or like waiting, just hanging about waiting for something to happen.)” (2017, 146).

Filmmaker Kirsten Johnson’s work pre-eulogizing her father likewise takes the form of waiting, with the series of playfully crafted death scenes that comprise *Dick Johnson is Dead* (2020): a series of games designed to pass the time. I wanted to love *Dick Johnson is Dead* more, wanted to feel more affinity with Johnson’s own comedic take on parental loss. While I love the conceit behind her film, I ultimately found the scenes of fantasy didn’t deliver a necessary catharsis. They felt too polished: a disjointed series of music videos rather than something painful, murky and strange. Johnson is, insofar as there even *is* such a thing as documentary, a wonderful documentarian. She captured the real with enormous and convincing pathos, including the behind-the-scenes footage of her father’s stunt-double falling, but the bright and schlocky imaginative scenes didn’t hit me as hard as I wanted them to. Yet, knowing what you don’t want is as critical as knowing what you do, so I was thankful for this lesson, pointing me towards a different vision in representing my own grief-stricken game of passing the time.

Rilke writes in the last stanza of her poem “Memory” in the *Book of Images* (1991, (original German edition 1906):

And then all at once you know: that was it.
You rise, and there stands before you the fear and prayer and shape
of a vanished year.” (81)

Rilke's choice of the word "prayer," in particular, admits that to remember is as simultaneously meaningful and futile as all our devotional acts, all our rituals of love and death. Sometimes I view *Nine Easy Dances* as its own series of invented rituals, ones that can't be replicated outside of our family home, but which retain an intense meaning within it. The narrator in Trinh T. Minh-Ha's *The Fourth Dimension* (2001) says: "to perform a ritual, one must slow down." There's an unnatural focus to a ritual that leads you to another mental state. Maybe rolling the disco ball and trying to cry together, even organizing the film shoot itself, become our strange rites, like a surreal and comedic reading of the Kaddish.

Conclusion

Andrei Tarkovsky writes that “The image is tied to the concrete and the material, yet reaches out along mysterious paths to regions beyond the spirit—perhaps that is what Pushkin meant when he said that ‘Poetry has to be a little bit stupid’” (1989, 114-115). I worry that my brand of poetry, in *Nine Easy Dances*, is a maudlin shade of stupid, but I do love this understanding of the mysterious and intangible ways in which the image, as that parcel of filmic poetry akin to the word, contains something blunt and simple in the same ways it can contain something so grand as to defy explanation.

I keep looking at images of Cookie Mueller in her casket. She is so magnificent in that golden Nan Golden image, *Cookie in Her Casket, NYC* (1989) whose yellow glow immediately makes me think of Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987). I don’t think Mueller would mind the association, somehow. She may have only “stumbled onto wildness” (Mueller 1990, 97), but she was nevertheless wild. I think, too, of the terrifying photo my mom took of my grandmother in her casket (Image 5). A nameless photograph, taken 2016. What’s an ending without a casket? In *My Mother’s Death, Or, An Introduction to Family Photography* (2006, 170), photographer Nobuyoshi Araki furtively touches his mom’s “still warm” dead body, touching her nipple before bursting into tears. Later, before his mother is placed in her coffin, he takes a photograph of her, forgoing the ones he really wants to take: “I wanted to photograph her nipples, her pubic hair, but I was already getting suspicious looks, and so I didn’t take the shots (Araki, 2006, 171). Not everyone is as outré as Araki, but so many people are extra-strange about mom-death, it seems to me. *Nine Easy Dances* is my way of being strange about my mom’s death, looming before me.



Image 5: “Untitled” 2016, Photograph by Heidi Overhill.

Most of us die in bits and pieces rather than all at once. This film might on the surface address the problem of maternal death, but it’s really about mortality. My mom in the here and now is not the same person I’m mourning. Hopefully my viewers can feel that the woman lecturing about the Baroque in the film, this strange and loving neurodivergent woman, has been existentially changed by her proximity to death. Even if my film is a eulogy, I want it to emerge before my mom’s death, which makes me think of William Faulkner’s Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*, who listens to her son hammer the nails into her coffin. I wonder what it must be like for my mom to see the nails going in. Actually, she would be fascinated by the make of the coffin, by the type of wood used, the quality and colour of the varnish. No one thinks the way my mom, Heidi, thinks. That’s what we mourn with death: one person’s way of looking at the world that’s gone for good.

Sometimes I sit down to write my mom's eulogy, knowing that when the real moment comes, words will escape me. That sense of the failure of words, the failure of images, is what motivates the final voice over in *Nine Easy Dances*:

An ending, even to a happy story, is a hard thing to imagine. It's much easier to believe that endings are something that happen to other people than to realize there's something waiting, something without contours or mass, for which there can be no word, nor image (Rosenthal, 2023).

The pixelated mauve dancer⁸ that precedes my father's final song to my mom is intended as a tiny portal to that other world of dance, a world so often leaned on to describe the indescribable, in this case the sadness and love and grief of this moment. The dancer really is my younger self, but she's also just a person hovering at the margins of the world. Obscured by shadows, obscured by the very act of image-making. She could even be crying for all we see of her face. Of course, dance *can't* capture the indescribable. Neither can my father's final serenade. Neither can my film. But in admiration of the flailings and failings of others, I'm adding to the world my little attempt to see the brutality of the cosmos with a half-smile and a wink. As Barthes says in his *Mourning Diary* (1977, 7), written in the aftermath of his mother's death, "Who knows? Maybe something valuable in these notes?"

⁸ From a live video-generated component of a recorded performance of "Saving Molly", choreographed by Gerry Trentham.

Works Cited

- Alter, Nora M. and Timothy Corrigan, Timothy "Introduction" in *Essays on the Essay Film*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.
- Barthes, Roland., et al. *Mourning Diary : October 26, 1977-September 15, 1979*. 1st American ed., Hill and Wang, 2010.
- Brannigan, Erin. *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image*. Cary: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Mimnermus". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 29 Jun. 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mimnermus>. Accessed 31 July 2023.
- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "pentimento". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9 Dec. 2014, <https://www.britannica.com/art/pentimento-oil-painting>. Accessed 31 July 2023.
- Carson, Anne. *Plainwater : Essays and Poetry*. 1st ed. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1995.
- CERN. "The Large Hadron Collider" <https://home.cern/science/accelerators/large-hadron-collider> Accessed Aug 1, 2023
- Charles, Victoria. *Marc Chagall*. Parkstone International, 2011.
- Danticat, Edwidge. *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story*. Minneapolis: Greywolf Press, 2017.
- Eades, Caroline and Elizabeth A. Papazian. "Cinéma-vérité and Kino-pravda: Rouch, Vertov and the Essay Form" in *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics, Utopia*. Edited by: Elizabeth Papazian and Caroline Eades. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
- Eliot, T. S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock>. Accessed Jul 21, 2023.
- Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. New ed. New York: Random House, 1964.
- Fernandes, Ciane., et al. *Pina Bausch and the Wuppertal Dance Theater the Aesthetics of Repetition and Transformation*. P. Lang, \$c 2002., 2002.

- Fung, Richard “Remaking Home Movies” in *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*. Ishizuka, Karen L, and Patricia R. Zimmermann, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- Gogol, Nikolai. *The Nose and Other Stories*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
- Guston, Philip. *I Paint What I Want to See*. London: Penguin Books, 2022.
- Homans, Jennifer. (March 20, 2023) “The Afterlife of Pina Bausch”, *The New Yorker*.
- Kline, T. Jefferson. *Agnès Varda: Interviews*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013.
- Levin, G. Roy. *Documentary Explorations : 15 Interviews with Film-Makers*. 1st ed. Garden City: NY: Doubleday, 1971.
- Loveless, Natalie. 2019. *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mueller, Cookie. *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1990.
- Oxford Reference. “chronotope”
<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095611483;jsessionid=3F0FE0AFA37B64E81D862CA0ADD3B319#:~:text=A%20term%20employed%20by%20the,as%20a%20spatio%2Dtemporal%20whole>. Accessed July 31, 2023.
- Reinsch, Paul N. “Overlapping Truths: The Conversation Between the Dogma 95 Documents and Werner Herzog’s ‘Minnesota Declaration’.” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 33:7 (2016), 630-651, DOI: 10.1080/10509208.2015.1094362
- Rosenthal, Nora. July 19, 2022. “The Final Fart: A Meditation on Hannah Wilke’s Final Work” *Momus*. Accessed Aug 2, 2023.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. 1994. *The Book of Images*. transl. Edward Snow. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Russell, Catherine. “Experimental Ethnography” and “Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self” in *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 275-281 & 301-314.
- Roscoe, Jane, and Hight, Craig. *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2019.

- San Filippo, Maria. "What a Long, Strange Trip It's Been: William Greaves' 'Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One.'" *Film History* (New York, N.Y, vol. 13, no. 2, 2001, pp. 216–25, <https://doi.org/10.2979/FIL.2001.13.2.216>).
- Tarkovsky, Andrei. "The Film Image," in *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*. London: Faber and Faber, 1989. 104-124.
- Trinh T. Minh-Ha. "Technology's Rituals" in *The Digital Film Event*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Trinh T. Minh-Ha. "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning" in *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Weston, Hilary. (2020) *How Bernardo Montet Infused Beau travail with His "Choreographic Thought"* The Criterion Collection. (accessed July 26).
<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/7126-how-bernardo-montet-infused-beau-travail-with-his-choreographic-thought>
- Vassilieva, Julia. "Montage Reloaded: From Russian Avant-Garde to the Audiovisual Essay," in *Beyond the Essay Film: Subjectivity, Textuality and Technology*. Book Editor(s): Julia Vassilieva, Deane Williams. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020.
- Vartanian, Ivan, Yutaka Kambayashi, and Anne Tucker. *Setting sun: writings by Japanese photographers*. New York: Aperture. 2006.

Filmography

- Almodóvar, Pedro. 2002. *Talk to Her*. Warner Sogefilms.
- Bausch, Pina. 1990. *The Complaint of an Empress (Die Klage der Kaiserin)*
- Bohdanowicz, Sofia. 2020. *Point and Line to Plane*.
- Charles, Miryam. 2022. *Cette Maison*. L'Emboscade Films
- David, Larry. 2000- *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. HBO.
- Denis, Claire. 1999. *Beau Travail*. Pyramide Distribution.
- Fosse, Bob. 1979. *All that Jazz*. 20th Century Fox (North America), Columbia Pictures (International).
- Godard, Jean-Luc. 1963. *Contempt*. Rome Paris Films
- Greaves, Williams. 1968 *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*. Produced by William Greaves, Manuel Melamed, and Louise Archambault.
- Herzog, Werner. 1997. *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*. Werner Herzog Filmproduktion.
- Johnson, Kristen. 2020. *Dick Johnson is Dead*. Big Mouth Productions.
- Korine, Harmony. 2009. *Trash Humpers*. Drag City.
- Kotcheff, Ted. 1974. *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. Astral Films.
- John Sayles. 1984. *The Brother from Another Planet*. Cinecom Pictures.
- Lars von Trier. 2000. *Dancer in The Dark*. Zentropa Entertainments.
- Trier, Lars von. 2003. *The Five Obstructions*. Zentropa Real ApS.
- Trinh T. Minh-Ha's. 2001. *The Fourth Dimension*.
- Morin, Edgar and Rouch, Jean. 1961. *Chronicle of a Summer*. Produced by Anatole Dauman.

Oppenheimer, Joshua. 2012. *The Act of Killing*. Det Danske Filminstitut (Denmark), 16. Dogwoof Pictures (UK).

Polley, Sarah. 2012. *Stories We Tell*. Mongrel Media.

Romvari, Sophy. 2020. *Still Processing*.

Rosenthal, Alan. 1988. *The Groucho Tapes*.

Rosenthal, Nora. 2022. *Gemini*. Music Video for Emma Worley.

Rosenthal, Nora. 2020. *Love is at the End of the World*. Music Video for Basia Bulat.

Rosenthal, Nora. 2023. *Nine Easy Dances*.

Varda, Agnes, 2000. *The Gleaners and I*. Ciné Tamaris.

Varda, Agnes, 2002. *The Gleaners and I: Two Years Later*. Canal+

Welles, Orson. 1973. *F is for Fake*. Planfilm and Specialty Films.

Wenders, Wim. 2011. *Pina*.

Wilson, John. 2020- *How To with John Wilson*. HBO Entertainment.

Żuławski, Andrzej. 1981. *Possession*. Gaumont Film Company.