

# Father Figures

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## ABSTRACT

*Father Figures* is a 22-minute autobiographical essay film that reveals the evolution of my relationship with my estranged father, and at the same time, it establishes other men that were instrumental in my upbringing. These were my grandfather, my stepfather, and my uncle. They stepped in during my father's repeated absences, bringing different sets of values and challenges into my life, all of which helped shape my personality.

The narrative backbone of the story consists of four letters that I wrote to my Dad at different points in my life. The first one was written when I was 10 years old, the second at 12, the third, when I was 25, and now, at 35, many years after his death, I wrote the final letter. I then share memories of my other father figures to create a dialogue with the emotional content of the letters. Together, these elements build a story arc that represents my inner process of trying to come to terms with my damaged trust towards my father in the hope of finding acceptance and forgiveness.

Most of the photographs that were used in the film were taken by my father, an amateur photographer, using an old Russian camera. Unexpectedly, this film has become an artistic collaboration between my father and I, which stands as a symbol of healing in our relationship. Guided by a strong voice-over, the film is a love letter that follows a non-linear narrative moving back and forth between personal reflection, childhood memories, and present-time interviews with some of my father figures. Ultimately, *Father Figures* is about coming to terms with my own share of toxic masculinity, and at the same time, it is a cinematic documentation of the psychological process of re-parenting myself.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
LIST OF IMAGES.....	v
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Parent-Child Relationships in My Work.....	2
Making Films in Times of a Global Crisis.....	4
Cuba, Personal and National History .....	6
DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY INFLUENCES .....	10
Anima and Animus Depictions in Films.....	13
Integrating the Animus, Challenges and Achievements .....	15
Writing Letters as a Kind of Metabolizing.....	17
FORMAL CONSIDERATIONS .....	19
Superimpositions.....	19
Analog Film Visual Style.....	22
Water Symbolism.....	24
Voice-Over.....	26
Found Footage .....	27
Film References .....	29
CONCLUSIONS.....	31
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	35
FILMOGRAPHY.....	36
DIGITAL ARTICLES .....	37

## LIST OF IMAGES

Image 1: Sculpture, “The Homecoming.” Photo by Tamara Segura González.....	1
Image 2: Fatherland or Death Billboard, Cuba. Photo by Tamara Segura González. ....	7
Image 3: Screenshot of <i>Father Figures</i> .....	15
Image 4: Manuscript of my Final Letter to my Father.....	17
Image 5: Screenshot of <i>Father Figures</i> .....	20
Image 6: Screenshot of <i>27 Thoughts About my Dad</i> , by Mike Hoolboom.....	28
Image 7: My Father and I, circa 1990. ....	32

## INTRODUCTION

*“I want to write about love, about being a human being,  
about loneliness, about being a woman.”*

*Liv Ullman*

*Father Figures* started as just a title. The idea occurred to me while I was in Newfoundland a couple of summers ago. St. John's Bannerman Park is one of the frequent spots where I go for walks to get a fresh perspective on things after spending too much time in front of the computer. In a corner of the park, there is a bronze statue of a Royal Newfoundland Regiment soldier wearing a uniform. He is missing a piece of his ear—a reminder of the bullet that nearly killed him as it flashed past his head. He is holding the hand of a smiling young girl, presumably his daughter. The sculptor, Morgan MacDonald, named the monument "The Homecoming" and it was erected in 2018 to honor Newfoundland's war heroes.



*Image 1: Sculpture, "The Homecoming." Photo by Tamara Segura González.*

Four years earlier, I had released my first Canadian short film *Before the War*, with the support of the St. John's International Women's Film Festival. The film tells the story of a soldier who returns home suffering a post-traumatic stress disorder. His relationship with his family, particularly his young daughter, quickly deteriorates, and they end up parting ways after a bitter domestic fight. Although Morgan's sculpture has a markedly more life-affirming tone than my film, the thematic overlap with his work immediately captured my attention. The words "father figure" popped into my head as I stared at the monument—a literal male figure cast in bronze. For some time, I stared at it with great interest, and then I walked away and carried on with my day. A few days later, I caught myself still thinking about those two words, and I knew that the seed for a new film had been planted.

### **Parent-Child Relationships in My Work**

When I first started my MFA at York University, my proposed thesis project was completely different from what it is now even though it revolved around a theme of parenthood as well. *Felicidades Mama* intended to be a 15-minute observational documentary depicting the first week in the life of a Cuban woman who has just given birth. The story was meant to be told through direct observation rather than through interviews. My goal was to critically explore the difference between the public perception of motherhood and the reality that a Cuban mother might face in her private sphere. This documentary project was an organic continuation of the themes of motherhood reflected in some of my previous films. In 2010, I won a post-graduate scholarship from the *Emergent Leaders for the Americas Program (ELAP)* to research the theme of "motherhood as a social construct" at Concordia University, Montreal. That same year I wrote *The Sunflowers*, the story of an older woman who decides to adopt a child. My award-winning

short film *Fireflies* is about the struggles of a Cuban single mother, while my feature-length script, *Migratory Birds*, reveals a mother struggling with the guilt of losing her son.

This fascination with stories about families and parent-child relationships is perhaps the result of the environment where I grew up—rural Cuba. It is a world where gender roles continue to be pervasively traditional despite the apparent female emancipation brought by Castro's Revolution. I spent the first five years of my life at my paternal grandmother's home in the city, under the care of my mother, my grandmother, and my aunt. We shared the house with my father and my grandfather, both of whom had full time jobs. After my parents divorced, my Mom and I temporarily moved to her parent's farm, where we lived with my grandmother and my grandfather and occasionally shared the space with my uncle.

From a very early age, I became acutely aware of the dominant presence of my maternal figures and the emotional absence of my father figures. The men would leave early in the morning and return home in the evening. I learned never to question this dynamic, as that seemed to be how the world worked. I also learned that women had control and power over almost nothing. The one place where they were allowed to have control was over the home and especially over children. In both of my family's houses, the female control over my siblings and me a direct result of their powerlessness towards men, was often overbearing. The male absences in both households became a source of anticipation and longing for me. I anxiously waited for their return in hopes that the women would shift their focus to the men, and I would be left alone. I experienced this dynamic throughout my childhood, split between fear of the men and their outbursts of anger; compassion towards the women in my family; yet secretly resenting them, and all the time hoping for the day when I could finally leave the nest. That being said, it's

not surprising that as an adult, the gender dynamic within families, particularly between parents and children, occupies a big part of my artistic imagination.

### **Making Films in Times of a Global Crisis**

*“Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water. If you can’t go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does.”*

*Margaret Atwood, The Penelopiad (2005, p. 18)*

The outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has been a shocking, disruptive event with enormous repercussions both on the social and economic front and at the individual level. Most of the affected countries implemented emergency lockdown procedures through mass quarantine efforts. I was ready and prepped to shoot *Felicidades Mama* in Cuba when the Covid-19 pandemic started in March 2020. Since most international flights were cancelled, and I couldn’t travel, I found myself without a realistic thesis project. Feelings of isolation and the desire to find a new grounding in the face of uncertainty, I turned to what I had at hand—my family photo album.

Around this time also, I was in the midst of developing my first feature-length documentary, *Seguridad*. In this film, produced by the National Film Board of Canada, I look at the subject of toxic masculinity throughout my family history. I create a parallel thread between an intimate family story and the enduring social effects of Fidel Castro’s Revolution. As I was editing the demo of *Seguridad*, it became clear to me that I could isolate one of the themes of that story and turn it into a short film for my thesis. My thoughts immediately circled back to the title *Father Figures*, and so I decided to explore the idea further.

As the pandemic unleashed, filling our lives with uncertainty while emptying production sets worldwide, the mandatory lockdown doubled as film “obstruction.” These new limitations forced me to develop an entirely different film idea that would allow me to use mostly found footage and archival materials.

A few weeks earlier, while I was taking Phil Hoffman’s “Process Cinema” course, I had an assignment in which I created a visual haiku using found footage and digital manipulation techniques. For this assignment, I used some photos from my family album, mostly photos that had been taken by my father. The results of this exercise sparked something in me, and I decided to expand the idea.

Prior to enrolling in the MFA program, my films had been fundamentally “realistic”, meaning that I had only worked with either professional actors in my fiction films, or with real life participants in my documentaries. During the MFA program however, I began to focus on a more experimental approach to storytelling and for this purpose, I used mostly my personal archives, as well as any other found footage I could collect from the internet.

The pandemic, however distressing, also gifted me with a state of mind that allowed me to go deeper into my emotions and memories. Over the course of a year, the world changed, and so did I. I slowly started to embrace and appreciate the value of passivity. Perhaps without realizing it, my storytelling started to become more “feminine”. Less concerned with results and more captivated by processes. Less interested in taking a narrative story line from point A to point B, and more focused in sensorial experiences. I can say without a doubt, that 2020 was the year where I found my own interpretation of what it means to be a feminist filmmaker.

## **Cuba, Personal and National History**

*“There’s no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”*

*Maya Angelou*

My father Jorge Luis Segura was born in 1959, the same year in which Castro’s Revolution took power in Cuba. He grew up fascinated with guns, long beards and the epic tales of the Revolution. The 1960’s in Cuba were filled with contradictions within a repressive political atmosphere. On the one hand, the middle class was being pushed away to Florida, and on the other hand, families from the poorest regions of Cuba were experiencing a huge economic improvement. Education was free, and soon enough my father, who had been very gifted as a boy, was chosen by the communist government to attend the prestigious Counterintelligence School. This was a huge honour for our working-class family whose lives had vastly improved after the Revolution and who genuinely believed in its integrity. At the Counterintelligence School, Dad quickly became a political leader very committed to the Communist Youth Union.

Photos of those times show him surrounded by schoolmates, feeling invincible, holding rifles. Popular and good-looking, Jorge was certainly the poster boy of “The New Man” that Che Guevara intended to create. According to Che, Cuban society should have enlightened young elite whose Marxist-Leninist ideology would constitute the driving force of the Revolution.



*Image 2: Fatherland or Death Billboard, Cuba. Photo by Tamara Segura González.*

One day, when he was only 21 years old, Jorge was having drinks at home with friends when he got into an argument with the police. The police reacted excessively, and the family tried to intervene. As a result, the police raged against them and even Jorge's little sister Maria, who was still a teenager, was brutally beaten. My father and my grandfather went to jail as political prisoners under "Disrespect to The Authority" charges. In prison, their pride was crushed, and their mental health became deeply affected. At the same time, on National TV, Castro was touting the aggressive model citizen that his political agenda needed. In public spaces, schools and sports events, civilians of all ages and genders were bombarded with propaganda persuading them "to fight or to die". After my father was released from jail, he went back to university where he met my mother. My parents' relationship shortly brought normality back to his life but without any psychological treatment, his mental health was rather precarious. One of his coping mechanisms was photography.

During the 1980's, Dad had a Russian still camera and an improvised laboratory in our house laundry room. For most Cuban families at the time, having their photograph taken was rare. Only during very special occasions, when they would either hire a photographer or walk to a photo studio. This wasn't the case with our family. My father's passion for photography

translated into dozens of photos depicting candid moments of the family. Dad was far from being a perfectionist when it came to technical rigor. His photos show curiosity for people's state of being rather than an interest in light and textures. Since his "lab" was also very primitive and in constant negotiation with my grandmother's laundry schedule, many of the photos would come up either overexposed, or accidentally overlaid with other images from the camera roll.

By the time I was 5 years old, the Soviet Union collapsed and with it, Cuba's supply of oil, food, and machinery. In the following years, Cuba's gross domestic product shrunk 35% and many domestic industries completely disappeared. Waiting for public transport could take several hours, power outages could last up to twenty hours, food consumption was cut back to one-fifth of its previous level and the average Cuban lost about twenty pounds each.

Constant hunger, something not common since before the Castro's Revolution in 1959, suddenly became a daily experience. Some of the many items that became literally impossible to find, were of course film rolls and photographic paper. For a while, Dad continued to take photos with the remaining expired film that he already owned, until he ran out of stock and his DIY photo lab quickly declined. His photographic endeavor wasn't the only thing to perish during those years. His mental health, already compromised by his traumatic experiences in jail, crumbled like a house of cards.

I witnessed my father's downward spiral into depression and addiction while I moved back and forth between my paternal grandmother's home, and my maternal grandparent's farm. Meanwhile, the rest of the men in my life, who held a more or less functional role, stepped in as "substitute fathers". They brought economic support and different sets of values and challenges into my life that helped shape my personality. Along with it, they also brought their own share of toxic masculinity, concealed insecurities, and anger issues.

As I was going through my father photographs in preparation for my Process Cinema assignment, I realized that my image of “Fatherhood” was in fact made up of multiple men. Trying to represent the idea exclusively through my biological father would have been reductive. This resonated with the title *Father Figures*, and that’s how this project took a step forward. Cuba’s post-colonial, patriarchal society was also a determining factor for the context of the film. The particularities of a country so unique in terms of cultural heritage and political landscape made Cuba a fertile ground for the destructive attributes associated with toxic masculinity in both men and women. My desire however is to portray it through an intimate lens rather than through social analysis.

Cuba’s culture, tropical landscape, and political system have been a recurrent topic in international documentaries for many decades. From Agnes Varda’s *Salut Les Cubains* to the more recent Netflix series *The Cuba Libre Story*, Cuban stories have been told about the last century. Most of the time, Cuba is addressed from the historical and socio-economical perspective; however, there has not been much that explores the psychology of Cubans. This realization was a determining factor in my decision to explore the documentary genre through a more personal lens.

## DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY INFLUENCES

*“The first man a woman meets is the father. The father has therefore a very decisive influence on a young girl. If the relationship to the father constellates itself negatively, the girl reacts negatively towards the father. The father might not be an evil man in himself, but the girl might not like him, or the father might be a difficult person. Then there’s generally also later difficulties with men and difficulties to find her own masculine side. In other words, the animus, her own masculinity, is a problem to her, and such a woman also tends to behave towards herself as her father did to her. If the father was tyrannical, later, even if the father has died, the woman tyrannises herself with ideas and opinions which still come from the father image. And so the detachment from the father and the relationship to the father plays always a big role in the development of a woman.”*

*Marie-Louise Von Franz, The Way of the Dream (1988)*

My work has increasingly started to focus on hybrid techniques that serve as visual outlets for representations of the unconscious, and I credit my recent studies at York University for this shift in focus. I have combined cinema vérité footage with surrealistic cinematic imagery that tackles subjects such as womanhood within the contemporary immigrant experience and family dynamics under mental health issues. Outside of York, I have completed online studies for several years at the Centre of Applied Jungian Studies, South Africa, and have become progressively more involved in exploring the intersection between psyche and cinema. Through my independent research, I have found that certain aspects of psychoanalysis, including Jungian theory, offer an illuminating framework through which understand the metaphorical, allegorical, and symbolic expressions of film.

*Father Figures* is, to a large degree, influenced by Depth Psychology and Jungian concepts involving Shadow Work and the Collective Unconscious. Based on this, I created poetic symbolism rather than direct representation of reality. I used images that I had recorded over the years for reasons I cannot explain, but that had spoken to me loudly at the time. This film was an opportunity to give meaning to those images, and to explore the relationship between

them, and the contents of my personal unconscious. Together they build a story arc representing my inner process of damaged trust towards my father while reflecting on my own “Animus”, a psychological concept that describes the unconscious inner masculine side of a woman. This Jungian term, a vital element of his contribution to the study of gender, stems from a time when gender roles were more traditional and clearly differentiated. Today, we know gender identity is fluid and, on a spectrum, as the movement of gender non-binary and trans people have insisted on the mutability of difference and identity. However, in my case, being a cisgender female, much of Jungian theory still has value and is relevant to me. For the sake of explaining the aspects of Jungian theory relevant to my thesis, I will describe some of these concepts in their most strict and traditional terms.

According to Carl G. Jung, the human psyche contains both the feminine and the masculine. It is innately an androgynous entity regardless of the physical gender of the person. In Jung’s worldview, a personality would take on the gender role that they are physically born into. Women would adopt a feminine role and social identity while men would take on a masculine role and social identity. The psyche would compensate for this by developing a contra-sexuality in order to balance out the natural one-sidedness of the personality. They are called Anima in men and Animus in women. The Animus of a woman governs her rational thinking function and her ability to relate as a whole human being to the world and other people. The Animus is the image-making capacity that she uses to draw inspirational, creative, and intuitive images from the inner world.

Considering that I’m a filmmaker, whose livelihood and identity depends on bringing images to life, I started to become increasingly curious about my own Animus. Under normal circumstances the inner masculine of a woman will be modeled on the first imprint of the

masculine—the father. However, if there is an absent parent the child will base the initial archetypal “blueprint” on a parental surrogate. In my particular case, the collective nature of my “father substitute,” would make my Animus not only multifaceted, but also contradictory. On her essay “*The Animus: A Jungian Perspective on the Films of Jane Campion*”, Tary Louise Ricketts refers to the dysfunctional Animus as follows:

*An individual can become 'possessed' by their contra-sexual nature, resulting in negative behaviour. For example, a man possessed of his anima can become moody, highly sensitive and irrational. A woman possessed of her animus can become aggressive, wordy, and hard-driven. Acknowledging the contra-sexual nature of the psyche, and withdrawing its projection, has the positive effect of leading an individual to experience their true self. (2000, p.16)*

As the pandemic unfolded and I went deeper into my memories and reflections, I realized how many traits I shared with the men that raised me. Whether I liked it or not, their inner demons, their insecurities and their melancholy, were things I could deeply relate. Even their violence found a way to mirror back into my own life, a violence that I exerted mostly against my own feelings. This brought a type of awareness that was hard to ignore. I had a hard look into my own eyes, and I saw how ruthless I had been to myself in the past. I had made decisions that were diametrically opposed to what my heart desired; I favoured intellectual awareness over emotional expression; I refused to engage in any activity unless it had a clear purpose. It felt as if a symbolic man and woman lived inside of me whose relationship had gone hopelessly awry, with the inner man tyrannically taking control of my behaviour.

Even my style of filmmaking had been somehow “colonized” by masculine principles: the need for a clear story arc; sticking to cause and effect narrative principles; creating “active” characters with clear purposes and the drive to achieve their goals. Those were the symptoms of a kind of filmmaking that I learned and assimilated in my previous Cuban film schools. Even

though my stories revolved around intimate family dynamics, their materialization was carried by Logos rather than Eros. How could I possibly call myself a feminist, when so much of my own femininity was so fundamentally repressed?

As I delved into my Jungian studies, I realized how much I embodied the same toxic masculinity and its negative attributes that I was fighting. It became obvious to me that in order to have a more integrated psyche, it was necessary to bring the Eros principle back into my life. As I embarked in a journey of self-discovery, self-acceptance and reclaiming my own authority in the context of personal filmmaking, I approached my thesis film as the ultimate documentation of a psychological process. By lovingly and critically examining my paternal figures, I was also putting to practice the empowering theory of “re-parenting oneself”. While witnessing my painful childhood memories without judgement, I was providing the emotional safety that my father figures failed to provide for me when I was a child.

### **Anima and Animus Depictions in Films**

*“...Filmmaking, at least in the hands of its acknowledged masters, is a form of active imagination drawing its imagery from the anxieties generated by current concerns. Filmwatching has become a contemporary ritual that is only apparently a leisure.”*

*John Beebe, The Anima in Film (2019, p. 3)*

While the Anima of a man appears in films as a singular character, usually portrayed by a luminous actress whose dramatic drive is the desire for emotional connection, (e.g. Garbo, Monroe, Dietrich) the representation of the Animus has a multiplicity of characters who represent the Thinking Function and the Collective Conscious. A good example of this is the fairy tale *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*—who are all animus manifestations, psychologically speaking. *Notorious*, (1949) by Alfred Hitchcock, also provides an illuminating

example of cinematic representation of the Animus. In this case, presented through a lens of *Fatherhood vs Citizenship*. The protagonist of the story is Alice Huberman, (Ingrid Bergman) the daughter of a Nazi spy who was sentenced to 20 years in prison. Alice is recruited by government agent T. R. Devlin (Cary Grant) to infiltrate a group of Germans who have relocated to South America. The multiple Animus figures that Alice encounters, range from affectionate, yet distrustful, to scary and downright dangerous. They constantly remind her that she must prove her worth as an American, causing her to repress her feelings and creativity. In the opening sequence, for example, when Alice walks out of the courtroom, she's harassed by a flock of male news reporters who inquire about her father's sentence: the perfect image of what Jung means by the Animus. The way in which the Animus "attacks" the woman, is often symbolized by a crowd of men surrounding the female protagonist.

In *Holy Smoke* (1999), Jane Campion presents Ruth (Kate Winslet), a young woman who has been raised in a patriarchal culture (embodiment of the negative masculine). Ruth has become devoted to an Indian Guru, and her family fears that she has become involved in a "cult." When Ruth is lured back to Australia after her parents hire an American Counsellor to 'deprogram' her mind from the Guru's influence, Ruth attempts to leave. However, she is encircled by the men in her family who quite literally block her, thus entrapping her in the negative aspect of the dominating and suffocating masculine. This scene is indicative of the effects of the Animus as an intrusion on the female identity.

This multiplicity of masculine characters resonated with my own life experiences, as well with the concept of my thesis film. Although completely coincidental, this was an encouraging sign that my instincts regarding the plural nature of my Father archetype, was in alignment with other depictions of Animus figures across the history of cinema.

## **Integrating the Animus, Challenges and Achievements**

One of the ways suggested by Jungian theory to integrate a positive Animus in the psyche of a woman is building the Imago of her own archetype through a process of reflection. The Imago is the unconscious idealized mental image of someone, especially a parent, which influences a person's behavior. Building the personal Imago would be achieved by identifying the recurrent qualities found across multiple relationships with the opposite sex, from parent to teachers, to co-workers to romantic partners. The commonalities found in the relationship with men would be representative of the woman's soul. Not the soul in metaphysical terms, but rather as the inner force that she brings into the world. Once this Imago is defined, one establishes a dialogue with it through what Jung called "active imagination."



*Image 3: Screenshot of Father Figures*

As a filmmaker, I had the advantage of not only reflecting on my own Imago, but also making it visible to myself and to others. By using my family's archives as well as the footage that I had recorded without a particular purpose in mind, I examined my relationship with my father figures in hopes to unveil my personal Imago. What I discovered after finishing the film,

was that my Animus wasn't necessarily a villain that had possessed me with a controlling, "know it all" attitude, but rather a deeply wounded psychological complex that required to be heard and accepted. By accepting my father figures in their full, flawed humanity, I was also accepting a part of myself that I could no longer deny.

Developing the thesis not only helped me in restoring and expanding my "feminine" side, it helped to integrate positive masculine traits such as the principle of logic and structure. The physical process of filmmaking—navigating the technical difficulties and logistic constraints of making a film amid a pandemic, was in itself a determining factor in healing my Animus. It helped me bridge logic and creative thought, fostered my capacity for problem-solving, and allowed me to find a solid emotional center to finalize the film. Throughout this film, the Logos and Eros Principles worked together for a common cause, externally materialized by the film itself and internally symbolized as the "happy marriage" of feminine and masculine within my own psyche.

Keeping this balance between Eros and Logos, or, to use a more scientific term, the right and the left side of the brain; will always be a lifetime endeavour for me. I do not consider myself "healed" by any means, but rather aware of my own psychological dynamics. I also did not intend to "diagnose" myself. I merely found a deep resonance between Jungian theory and my own reality, which propelled me to explore it creatively. I'd like to believe that in the process, I unlocked the door to a more personal type of filmmaking.

## Writing Letters as a Kind of Metabolizing

Letters carry a part of the human soul across time and space. A part of our being is offered in the letter and into the hands of the receiver as a “proxy” of our presence. As a child, I was not conscious of this highly intellectualized idea when I wrote the letters to my father. I did, however, instinctively sensed that this form of communication would make up for the physical separation that we were enduring at the time. It was a profound moment for me when I discovered that my father had kept all the letters that I had sent him throughout my life. But it was also deeply destabilizing.

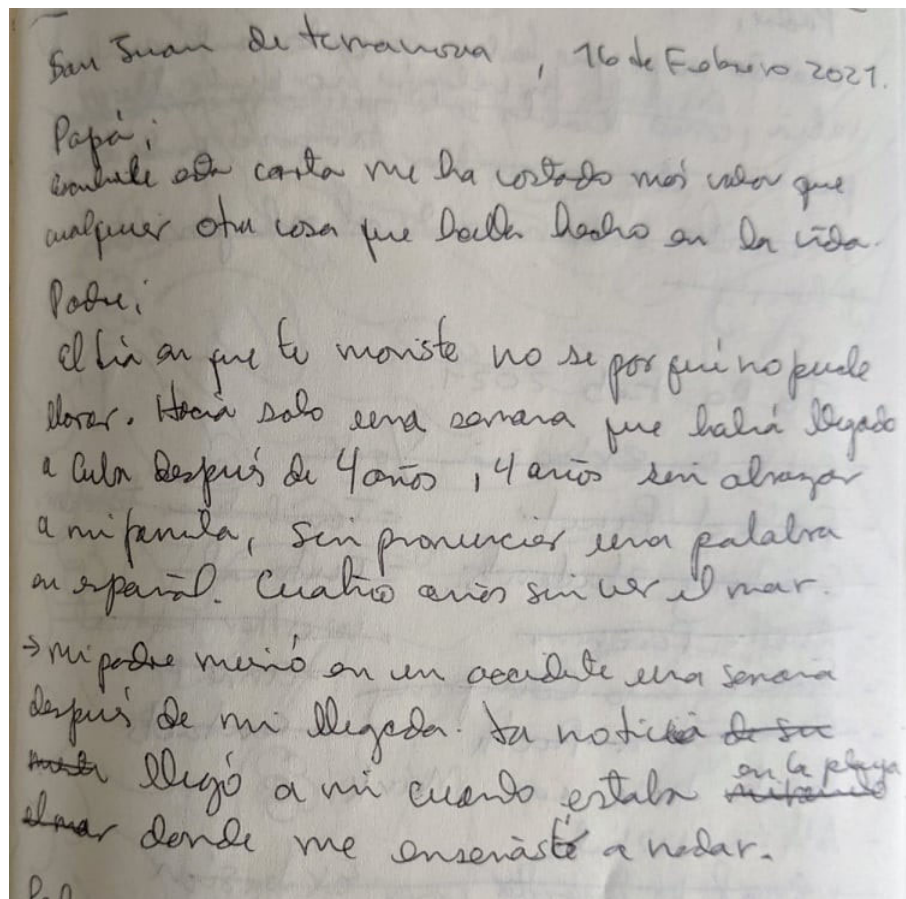


Image 4: Manuscript of my Final Letter to my Father.

As a child, I struggled to make sense of my father's behavior, resisting the idea of seeing him as "a bad guy". After I grew up, my only way to make sense of his violence, was assuming that he was indeed, a selfish man with no regard for the devastation that his alcoholism was causing our family. This assumption, however detrimental to his moral fabric, at least brought an explanation as to my father's attitude, and thus, for me, it gave a sense of control over the situation. This rather precarious coping mechanism completely collapsed the day I walked into my father's house, after his death. Not only did I discover that his alcoholism was partially a consequence of having been tortured in jail, (something that he had kept secret his entire life), but I also found out that he actually loved me. My letters, carefully folded inside a little box, were a palpable proof that he cared. "Perhaps Dad wasn't a monster after all", I thought. And with this thought came a wave of relief immediately followed by utter confusion. Everything I knew about him dissolved. The idea of reformulating his entire identity seemed like an unsurmountable task. I knew that writing a final letter to him would help me make sense of things, but I simply didn't have the energy to start.

It took me exactly 6 years before I finally tried to write such a letter. The pandemic was in full swing, which brought me an opportunity "to slow down" and put my thoughts to paper. This writing process was deeply therapeutic. The physicality of using my hands and putting my body into writing, allowed me to access a part of my unconscious that started to bring things together. When I started writing, a kind of unformulated love was suddenly translated into language. I captured it, established a relationship with it, and finally I could see my father in a different light. Translating emotion into language definitely shifted my degree of understanding of my father's circumstances and brought my relationship with him back into balance.

## FORMAL CONSIDERATIONS

### Superimpositions

*“The fantastic in the cinema is possible only because of the irresistible realism of the photographic image. It is the image that can bring us face to face with the unreal, that can introduce the unreal into the world of the visible.”*

*Andre Bazin, Life and Dead of Superimpositions (1946, p. 1)*

In early cinema, superimpositions were used to evoke ghosts, fairies, and other fantastic creatures. However, the history of superimpositions starts before the invention of cinema, when Spirit Photography emerged in the 1860s as a new genre of spirit manifestation. This movement was based on the capacity of photography to document the spirits that were among us yet were undetected by the human eye. By virtue of the medium of photography, spiritual believers had the opportunity to receive a post-mortem portrait of their loved ones. It soon became apparent that this “extraordinary” phenomenon could be explained as a simple photographic trick. Experts in photography pointed to multiple exposures and other superimposition techniques that were commonly used in photography. However, spirit photography kept its entertaining and spectacular quality, which stage magicians commercialized during magic lantern shows. Constantly navigating between religion and spectacle, fiction and realism, spiritualism’s visual culture became a common way to render on the screen the occurrence of memories, dreams, and visions.

I readily engaged in the process of “active imagination” suggested by Jungian Theory as a means to determine the nature of my personal Animus. The idea of making a highly internal concept visible, seemed to correspond with the ability of superimposition to bring intangible concepts into the visible world. Very early on in the MFA program, during John Greyson’s

Production class, I had started to experiment with overlays in Adobe Premier Pro. Although the current technology is obviously vastly different from those employed in analog photography and early cinema tricks, the idea of super imposing two separate images in order to create a new one remained fundamentally the same. As I played with different settings and effects in Adobe Premier, my enthusiasm for overlays grew stronger. Not only was it a very expressive way to convey meaning, but it was also a simple, inexpensive way create “visual effects”.

For example, in the opening image of *Father Figures*, we see an entire city submerged in water. This image was the result of many visual experiments I tried out while editing the film. It was important for me to start the movie with an establishing shot of a mental landscape. This metaphorical “Atlantis”, referred to a moment of my life that is now irreversibly lost: a time in which my relationship with my father was harmonious and untouched. The simple beauty of the water concept was accomplished with the rather simple effect of overlaying two images. On the other hand, it would have been extremely demanding on my budget, if I were to recreate this flooded city using CGI.



Image 5: Screenshot of *Father Figures*.

Another instance where superimpositions enhanced the film's narrative is in the scene where I walk on the beach with my dad when I was a child. Because this particular moment wasn't documented through moving images at the time, I created a re-enactment performed by my brother and my niece. This "emotional equivalent" scene is superimposed with actual still photographs of my father and me at the beach, which gives truthfulness to the story. After all, this film was, however experimental, still a documentary. Furthermore, this re-enactment scene overlaid on top of real-life photos isn't merely a re-telling of the past but also supports the film's expressionistic tone and visual style.

In his essay "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form", Sergei Eisenstein explains how represented phenomena depict a system of structuration between its elements and the phenomena itself. In other words, when a succession of images is structured by an emotional referent, the result is affective moving images. Using Eisenstein's ideas as a point of departure, I regarded superimposition as a version of this concept. The main difference being that rather than juxtaposing two images side by side, they would show up on screen simultaneously. A Kuleshov Effect with a twist. Going back to Sergei Eisenstein and the Montage Theory, I find it interesting how I managed to create my most experimental film so far, using the most essential and basic film techniques that were born at the beginning of the 20th century.

## Analog Film Visual Style

*“Outbreaks of nostalgia often follow revolutions.”*

*Svetlana Boym, The Future of Nostalgia (2001, p. 9)*

In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, professor, media artist, playwright, and novelist Svetlana Boym make a statement that resonates with *Father Figures*, both in form and concept. She notes it as it follows:

*The word “nostalgia” comes from two Greek roots: nóstos (“return home”) and álgos (“longing”). I would define it as a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own phantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life.*

Because I regarded my father’s old camera as an important image for *Father Figures*, I instinctively moved towards choosing a celluloid visual style for the film. I gave a lot of thought to this decision before making this choice because I was acutely aware of the phenomenon of “analogue nostalgia” that had become increasingly widespread in contemporary media—a phenomenon that relied on romanticizing imagery from the past. From vinyl records, sepia tones to Instagram film filters, popular culture seemed to be looking at the past as having a sense of durability, less obsolescence, less disposability. Theorist Jussi Parikka notes that retro-cultures “seem to be as natural as part of the digital-culture landscape as high-definition screen technology and super-fast broadband” (2012, p. 3). Science fiction writer Bruce Sterling proclaimed in 1995 that we live in “the golden age of dead media” (2008, p. 80). I carefully considered whether or not I was joining the “analogue nostalgia” bandwagon, but came to realize that my story was an authentic look into the past. My father’s analog imagery inspired a

cinematic sense of nostalgic longing that seemed natural and spontaneous for the story I was telling.

Months before, while I was planning to shoot my previous thesis project *Felicidades Mama*, I had invested a considerable amount of money in digital gear. My plan at the time was to film the documentary on my phone, using a gimbal and a few external microphones. As this thesis project became a casualty of the pandemic, it made sense to use such gear regardless of the film I ended up making. This would also allow me to use the digital footage I had already recorded for any project in particular. I edited a few versions of the documentary in this manner, but something felt fundamentally inadequate about the digital visual style. My father's Russian camera kept showing up in the story as a constant reminder that embracing the celluloid aesthetic was not an arbitrary visual approach but rather a vital aspect of a story rooted in the past. Once I accepted this idea, the tone of the story found its force, and in the process, I discovered that by combining my digital footage with a 35mm filter, I was in effect creating a subtextual collaboration with my Dad.

*Father Figures* was not shot on film, but it gave me the opportunity to honour the genre of process cinema by adopting a celluloid visual aesthetic. Perhaps I would never have been able to create a project like this if I had not attended Professor Hoffman's class. Learning the methodology of allowing process to drive a filmmaking experience, and at the same time being able to manipulate actual filmstrips was one of my biggest references in the conception of *Father Figures*.

## Water Symbolism

*“Water has been traditionally connected with life, birth and re-birth, creation and creativity, but also with death and oblivion. The water surface often serves as a kind of a mirror.”*

*Viola Parente-Čapková, Narcissuses, Medusas, Ophelias... Water Imagery and Femininity In The Texts By Two Decadent Women Writers (2006, p. 1)*

Water, a universal symbol of primordial creation, came to life in my film although I did not consciously intend to use it as a visual leitmotif. It was during the Graduate Symposium last November that this detail was pointed out to me by some of my fellow students and professors. From the opening image of an “Atlantis”—a submerged city, until towards the end where icebergs float in the ocean; every “chapter” of the film contains either images or sounds of water, oceans, rivers, or rain.

However unintentional, this motif is coherent with the psychological process of making a film rooted in Depth Psychology. Being born on an island, and currently living on an island, some of my fondest memories revolve around bodies of water. Water is also a symbol of cleansing, but most importantly, water is the universal symbol of the unconscious mind, femininity, and irrationality. Oceans, for example, are often associated with chaos as they are boundless and ungovernable. Some others water related symbolism also include:

- **River:** symbol of purification; dwelling place of gods, goddesses, water-spirits, and nymphs.
- **Tears:** represent realization and embracement. They also represent acceptance of the reality and the expression the “inexplicable”.
- **Rain:** fertility and rebirth, responsible for keeping the life cycle alive.

- **Icebergs:** The tip of the iceberg that extends above the water represents the conscious mind. Beneath the water is the much larger bulk of the iceberg, which represents the unconscious.

Water is not only a spiritual symbol in the film but also as a recurring motif I started to be aware that I could also use it for narrative purposes. The idea eventually contributed to solving some structural questions that I had encountered during the editing. One of them was around minute 15:00, during my second last letter to my father, when I ask him to stop contacting me. In a previous cut, we saw the image of a little girl's face peeking through a half-open door over the sound of a domestic fight. This scene was placed immediately after the hanging of the puppy that has the highest dramatic intensity in the story. Placed side by side, these two scenes created a highly jarring effect. At this point, the structure of the film had been established as alternating between memories and letters, so I could not push the letter sequence to a later point in the story. After altering sound levels with no positive results, I decided to substitute the sounds of the domestic fight with sounds of crashing waves on the ocean. The internal rhythm of the montage immediately balanced out, and the letter sequence acquired a subtle dramatic tension that served the story more effectively. Encouraged by this effect, I proceeded to lay an aerial view of the ocean over the little girl at the door. The result was not only visually intriguing, but it also stood as a powerful metaphor of the inner chaos that the little girl (me) was experiencing at that point.

## Voice-Over

Similar to the decision of employing letters in my film, the use of voice-over in *Father Figures* was determined by my intention to integrate into my consciousness the Logos Principle, The Word, traditionally associated with the masculine. I also regarded writing as a form of metabolizing my emotions. The wellspring of consciousness has been associated with the word since ancient times. In every corner of the planet, once words and stories were formulated and passed through generations, a new way of knowing has sprung. Writing the voice-over of this particular film allowed me to encounter my father figures in a loving light. Furthermore, deciding to use my actual voice to express those memories and feelings also gave the soundtrack a “masculine” quality of providing meaning and structure to the somewhat enigmatic images on the screen.

The use of voice-over in this film follows a tradition of essay films which tend to be self-reflective or self-referential. It is also consistent with the nature of psychoanalytical practice. By voicing my earliest memories, I accessed past experiences that brought me to the place that I am today. In the same way that a patient relies on a therapist to verbalize their thoughts and emotions, I tried to create a trusting relationship with the viewer in order to unlock a deeper understanding of myself.

At some point during the editing, I considered reading the letters that I had sent to my father in my adult voice. I also recorded a version in which my niece, who interprets my role in the film, also reads the letters. In both instances, the result had the effect of oversaturating the soundscape, and moments of silence had completely disappeared. That led to the decision to keep the content of the letters as pure text, not only to honour the written word in which they had been conceived, but also to create pauses in the soundtrack that allowed the film to “breathe”.

Regarding the language of the film, I first considered recording the narration in English because it would reduce the amount of text on the screen. I worried that if done otherwise, the experimental nature of the film's visual style would demand a greater effort to follow the narrative and to read the subtitles simultaneously. After careful consideration however, I decided to record the voice-over in Spanish. Telling the story in my mother tongue not only gives more cultural and emotional authenticity to the film, but it is also coherent with the manner in which I communicated with my father figures as a child.

### **Found Footage**

When I first decided to use found footage, it was for purely pragmatic reasons. The protocols for working on film sets during Covid hadn't been formulated at that point, so it was unclear whether or not I would be able to shoot new footage for my film. By this time however, I had already embraced the idea of using some of my randomly-shot footage as well as my family archives, and it only made sense to continue using such pre-existing material. I then turned to the internet for further inspiration.



Image 6: Screenshot of *27 Thoughts About my Dad*, by Mike Hoolboom.

During my Process Cinema Class, my classmates shared different websites that provided copyright-free footage. I started collecting images intuitively, without any particular theme in mind. My goal was to follow the same process I had previously used to record my personal footage, by letting the images speak to me without prior analysis. To my surprise, most of the images that I collected were flowers. While this was rather unexpected, given that I was tackling rather painful memories, I continued to include these images in the montage without ascribing any predisposed meaning to them. In retrospect, I regard this as a manifestation of the Eros Principle, a form of life energy that I tried to summon in *Father Figures*, as well as a sign of a healing process that I experienced during the making of the film. Beside the flower theme, I also gathered other abstract imagery, mainly of lights, textures and colorful liquid moving across the screen. I used this found footage as superimpositions, overlaid on top of my father's photographs, to create a dialogue between rational and irrational, past and present, moving

images and still photographs. Ultimately, I drew on my father's artistic expression and used it as a point of departure to find my own voice in this film.

## Film References

While film references that I previously mentioned in this paper are fiction films, (e.g. *Notorious*, *Holy Smoke*), I also researched and screened a number of experimental films that influenced my aesthetic choices. One of them was *27 Thoughts About My Dad*, by Mike Hoolboom, which shares a theme of fatherhood as well as some of its formal elements with *Father Figures*. He reveals memories about his dad in a series of 27 vignettes. He also blends family footage and found footage to create a post-mortem portrait of his late father. Hoolboom frequently uses superimpositions and digital manipulation in his work, reminding me of *Spirit Photography* in its pursuit to make visible what is by nature intangible.

Other films that inspired me include *Embracing*, by Naomi Kawase (1992), *Sink or Swim*, by Su Frederick (1990) and *The Beaches of Agnès*, by Agnès Varda (2018). While *Embracing* and *Sink or Swim* had a thematic rather than visual overlap with *Father Figures*, *The Beaches of Agnès*, had a more direct influence on my emotional approach to autobiographical stories. The fragmented nature of the film, her use of pre-existing footage as well as of “staged events” in order to portray painful moments of her life, inspired me to dive into my own vulnerability by making use of whatever visual resources I had at hand.

Throughout my research phase, I watched many other experimental films that used formal aspects in a much bolder manner than I did with *Father Figures*. Although I did not draw inspiration from any of them in particular during the making of *Father Figures*, such films were

nonetheless engaging and insightful. It was especially interesting to see how experimental film has developed and evolved throughout cinema history.

## CONCLUSIONS

*“In truth, fatherhood, or “male-ness” is a very assertive, forefront kind of energy. Father symbols almost always represent dominance, assertion, provision, strength and bravery. But in a family setting, this is often overlooked because the father is expressing these bold behaviors on the battlefield, in the workplace, in the grain fields. In truth, the father fulfills his role – but far too often that function is performed outside the home, thus unseen. Furthermore, because many paternal acts take place outside the home and are unseen by the family, his sacrifices are frequently and sadly undervalued.”*

*Avia Benefica, The Symbolic Meaning of Fathers (2018, p. 2)*

As I write these conclusions, Father’s Day is being celebrated in both Cuba and Canada. Consequently, many memories have been stirred up about my late biological father. The holiday has prompted phone conversations with the rest of my father figures, as well as thoughts about father symbols and the symbolic meaning of fathers. While Mother’s Day in Cuba is romanticized and commercially exploited to near-absurd ends, the same enthusiasm is not at all expressed for Father’s Day. Perhaps this is because in Cuban society, Fathers are frequently absent, thus, women often take on the traditional paternal role as providers, as well as the nurtures. That being said, I can’t help but think that fathers in general, are often underappreciated and taken for granted. In her article “The Symbolic Meaning of Fathers,” spiritual healer Avia Benfica notes the following:

*Fathers are more background workers in the role of parenthood, whereas mothers are the forefront archetypes. Where mothers take on active roles of nurturing, healing, emotional support – fathers tend to take on more subtle roles of parental support. (...) Fathers are the solid presence holding up the family structure. They are the protectors of, hearth, home and family. They are the providers. Essentially, fathers are the rebar of the family foundation – hidden from sight much of the time, but absolutely essential to building wholeness. (2018, p. 1)*



*Image 7: My Father and I, circa 1990.*

It is worth noting that the author is speaking in generalized, archetypal terms. Of course, not all fathers are the same, as in some instances, fathers can be neglectful and even cruel to their children. Furthermore, in many societies, rather than being overlooked, the model of fatherhood is often measured against deities. Some of them include Jupiter, Cronus, Odin, Horus, Brahma, and of course, the Christian God, whose Son, Christ, is also represented in a fatherly light. All of

these deities express fatherly aspects by being all-seeing, all-knowing, wise, provider, sustainer with unquestioned authority.

As we witness a much-needed rise of the feminine in the western world, particularly because of the Feminist movement, the gay liberation movement and more recently the Me-Too movement, many aspects of the traditional male role have become increasingly dysfunctional and obsolete. This has given rise to claims of a contemporary “crisis of masculinity” with governments like the Chinese going as far as proposing a plan to emphasize the “spirit of yang” among its children. Male attributes are being encouraged by hiring more sports instructors and increasing physical education classes in elementary and secondary schools. To claim that there is a crisis in masculinity when men continue to be at the top of major economic, political and cultural institutions, is an exaggeration in my opinion. Rather, I believe there’s a gender crisis, as women too often struggle to embody their femininity, as in my case.

The social aspect of gender dynamics is complex and ever evolving. Instead of tackling it, I would like to dedicate my last thoughts on gender roles in psychological, archetypal terms. Since I have previously mentioned some essential symbols of the feminine principle in this paper, I cannot go without identifying the prime symbolism of the masculine, particularly of fatherhood. Some of them include:

- **Sky:** It is symbolic of expansiveness, logic, strategy, and mental acuity.
- **Sun:** Warmth, giving, consistency and intensity. It is ever-present, gives life, and illuminates the darkness.
- **Tree:** represents strong moral fiber, integrity, honesty, and unbending scruples.
- **Eagle:** Virility, clarity, focus, power, dependability, and virtue. Eagles are considered all-seeing and look down from the heavens with a protective gaze.

- **Lightning Bolt:** Father symbol of a creator and a destroyer in many cultures.

Although perhaps polarizing, these symbols and their meanings do not perpetuate gender stereotypes but rather cultivate the Divine Masculine Principle in men, women and gender non-conforming people. If I learned anything while making this film, it is that Logic, Support, Assertion, Protection, Stability and Structure should be fostered in oneself as much as Process, Intuition, Love, Heart, Transition, Healing, Balance, and Collaboration. These principles do not necessarily relate to the “battle of the sexes” but instead are concerned with psychic wholeness.

Fathers, beyond their domestic and social role, happen to be universal symbols of reliability. A reliability that must be found within ourselves, especially those of us who didn't have a dependable father figure when we were small. In many ways, making *Father Figures* provided me an invaluable opportunity for psychological and artistic growth. Interpersonal relationships morph with time, and I am certain that mine with my fathers will continue to change. I am fortunate to have captured this particular moment of integration and self-awareness through the preserving power of film.

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