

STILL PROCESSING

Sophy Romvari

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

January 2020

© Sophy Romvari, 2020

ABSTRACT

Part narrative family drama and part personal essay film, *Still Processing* is an intimate, candid exploration of trauma and grief through sound and image. The film concerns a box of my own father's artistic family photos unearthed from storage and unseen for decades, which awaken an enormous amount of emotion in me as I struggle to deal with the loss of two brothers. With clarity and conviction, I attempt to document my experience with real-life tragedy and my efforts, years later, to understand the repercussions and begin the difficult process of healing.

This hybrid film combines elements of both the documentary and narrative filmmaking techniques. Utilizing a highly stylized formal approach documenting the process of heightened emotion and vulnerability with a cinéma vérité immediacy. In the film, I receive materials from my family, including portraits and home video footage, that had long been kept from me, owing to the reluctance of my parents to relive the pain caused by the death of two of my brothers within the last ten years.

I captured my first glimpses of these photos and videos and my reaction to seeing them, and using a variety of film techniques drawn from the world of documentary and process cinema, reveal the process of inspecting and absorbing them alone and with my only surviving brother, Ben. The audience shares in my discovery

and participates in the therapeutic process of what Susan Sontag called the “portrait chronicle” of a family “bearing witness to its connectedness¹.”

In this support paper, I describe the strenuous, burdensome process of making this film from conception to execution, beginning with the complex negotiation to earn my parents’ blessings to take on this project: I needed their permission to look through the family photographs they had kept from me for so long. I detail my background in personal filmmaking and my discovery of my interest in the hybrid mode, and outline my academic interest in the theory of photography and narrative art as it relates to both the private and public spheres, in particular its intersection with the family unit, memory, and shared histories and trauma. The film in part represents an effort to explore the capacity of art and filmmaking to help with grief and loss, and in this paper, I summarize some of the academic texts that helped illuminate these possibilities to me.

¹ Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. 1973

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisor committee, Brenda Longfellow and Phil Hoffman, without whom I would not have had the courage to complete this film. Their kindness, patience and honesty have made all the difference throughout this long and complicated journey. I would also like to thank John Greyson for his unyielding support, inside and outside of the classroom — please get some sleep. Kuowei Lee, beyond the technical and bureaucratic support you offer every student that comes through this program, you were also a friendly ear always willing to listen. Thank you.

To my countless friends who offered emotional and technical support throughout this process, I cannot name or thank you all — I leaned on you immensely, and I know that without your support my self-doubt may have overcome me. This of course includes my exceptional MFA cohort. Devan Scott, not only a collaborator but a dear friend, I would not have wanted to make this film alongside anyone else.

It cannot go without saying that this project would not have been possible without the support of my parents, George and Ildiko. I know how big and scary it was to put your trust in me to make this film with the sensitivity it deserves, so I thank you for putting that in me. I'm so grateful to have the opportunity to venture through this portion of our collective healing together. To my brother Ben, thank you, I love you. My brothers David and Jonathan, I wish you could see the beauty that remains.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
LIST OF IMAGES.....	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
BACKGROUND & RESEARCH.....	6
A history of my personal filmmaking.....	6
The study of trauma within Cinema.....	12
Critiques of personal filmmaking:.....	16
On photography and memory.....	18
ETHICAL CONVERSATIONS.....	24
FORMAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	29
The authentic documentary.....	29
Subtitles.....	32
Formal Influences.....	33
PROCESS OF CREATION.....	37
CONCLUSION.....	44
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	48
FILMOGRAPHY.....	49

LIST OF IMAGES

Image 1. Screenshot from <i>Still Processing</i>	20
Image 2. Screenshot from <i>Still Processing</i>	23
Image 3. Letter from Mom & Dad, November 2019.....	24
Image 4. Screenshot from <i>I Cannot Tell You How I Feel</i> (2017), Su Friedrich.....	35
Image 5. Screenshot from <i>I Cannot Tell You How I Feel</i> (2017), Su Friedrich.....	36
Image 6. Dark room test shot for <i>Still Processing</i>	40
Image 7. York University, test shot for <i>Still Processing</i>	40
Image 8. York University, test shot for <i>Still Processing</i>	41
Image 9. Screenshot from <i>Still Processing</i>	43
Image 10. <i>Photograph of my brother David</i> , taken by George Romvari.....	45
Image 11. <i>Photograph of my brother Jonathan</i> , taken by George Romvari.....	46

INTRODUCTION

*“If we can keep our stories at the right distance,
it is much easier for us to drop into this moment,
into the people we are right now, and let ourselves
become a bit freer to dance into our lives”*

- Joe Lambert

Still Processing is a short, autobiographical documentary film that explores the idea of documenting the process of grief through the reflection of past memories. The concept for this film in essence is quite simple: a document of myself looking at old family photographs and videos. This is not foreign territory within the genre of experimental and personal essay films — human beings have a well-established fascination with our origins, and family archives can ground us indelibly in space and in time.

For each of us, the family album is often a repository of self-reflection and private satisfactions, providing opportunities to relish with pride joyful memories and cherished times. As John Berger has said, the photograph “is a memento of a life being lived,” (Berger, 1972, p.56) and indeed “relieves us of the burden of memory,” fixing an event in permanence. (Or rather, semi-permanent, dependent on the survival of the photograph over time.) In any case, these mementos are generally treasured with fondness. But in the case of my family, our relationship to such images is rather more complicated.

My father studied cinematography in Hungary in his youth, following the vocation of his own father, who was an award-winning Production Designer working in film and television in Europe and in Hollywood throughout the middle of the century. I'd always known my father to have an exceptional eye for photography who excelled in particular at photographing the human form. As a consequence, my childhood was documented extensively and with an unusual degree of artistic merit. When he immigrated to Canada in 1989 with my mother and my three elder brothers, my father was financially unable to continue practicing cinematography professionally; instead, he continued to practice his craft as many artists do, using his children as subjects.

The result is an exhaustive private archive of artistic family portraits — beautiful, unusual, highly striking photographs of my siblings and me. Curiously, however, this rich trove of creative material remained hidden from me throughout my adolescence and my adult life. Prior to the moment when I opened the box in which they'd been stored for countless years — a moment I deliberately elected to capture on film and which is now included in my thesis project *Still Processing* — I had never before seen these photos. Indeed, many of them had never even been developed, and had been languishing in old canisters, unenjoyed and unwitnessed, since they were originally taken.

These photographs had been abandoned and hidden away as long as they had for a reason. Seeing them was simply too painful, and they were buried so that the pain could be kept aside. Keeping the photographs from me was an act of self-preservation

for my parents — self-preservation and, perhaps, an act of protection toward me. They wished to force the past to stay in the past.

My family has endured an exceptional amount of tragedy in my lifetime: David, one of my three older brothers, passed away in 2010, at the age of 24, when I was 20 years old. Only a few years later, my oldest brother, Jonathan, passed away as well, under similarly difficult circumstances. This fact of course complicates the archive that my father had so diligently compiled throughout our childhood. No longer merely a document of our lives, they now serve to emphasize tragedy. As Berger famously noted, every photograph, “because it stops the flow of life, is always flirting with death” (Berger, 1985, p.122).

I first conceived of this project in 2015, as I began to recognize the therapeutic value of personal filmmaking. This lesson was hard-won. Years earlier, when I was working to complete my undergraduate degree in film at Capilano University in Vancouver, I directed a number of short films. These were not films I had written or was much invested in personally; they typically depicted middle-age white men experiencing some kind of amusing crisis. I felt I'd developed significant technical skills and an understanding of film form and filmmaking practice over the course of the program. Still, I was almost entirely dissatisfied by the kinds of stories I had been positioned to tell.

The year after I graduated, I wrote a script for a short film called *Nine Behind*. It was a narrative short that dealt expressly with my experience of having lived estranged

from extended family in Hungary. I am the only first generation Canadian in my immediate family, and had hardly any contact with my extended family growing up. I cast an actress to play myself, and I explored my feelings openly and candidly in a fictional phone conversation I wrote for this “character” and her grandfather abroad. I knew I could relate to what was happening on screen in *Nine Behind* because it drew directly from my life and experience. But what I discovered when I screened *Nine Behind* for audiences was a revelation: others could relate to the film too, because they saw a version of their own experiences as well.

When we watch a movie, we are always to some extent looking to see our own experiences represented on screen. For years I have found myself clinging to anything that seemed to explore things my family has gone through, from depictions of struggles with mental health to more specific dramatizations of people grieving lost siblings. What compelled me to make *Still Processing* was above all this deep-seated desire to see the story of my family’s trauma represented in sound and image — to witness at last what I had always been seeking in other movies. No one, I eventually realized, was capable of making a film about my experience but myself.

Over the last five years, I have dedicated myself to the practice of making short films about trauma and my own hardships and anxieties. I’ve continued to find this work nourishing and healing — but it has not been without its challenges. Processing trauma through art involves reliving that trauma, sometimes to what feels like excess: there are no places to hide when you’re intent to confront something that troubles you head-on,

and it can be tremendously difficult to grapple so intensively with the things you'd prefer not to think about at all.

When I decided to make *Still Processing*, I was aware that it would be the most challenging project I'd ever embarked on. I also knew that it might yield the most therapeutic outcome. This, at bottom, is what I wanted to answer with this film: Can making a personal film aid in the processing of trauma?

A more long term consideration in the creation of this film is related to a future teaching possibility. I have long since had a desire to find an applicable crossover between the realms of progressive social work and filmmaking. Part of the ethical dilemma of making such a visceral and emotionally raw film comes from the risk of retraumatization. I wanted to put myself in a position where I would be able to test the outcome of going through such a process in order to find the flaws and challenges of such an endeavour. The realm of art therapy is in continual evolution, and I see myself as an active research participant via the creation of *Still Processing*.

BACKGROUND & RESEARCH

*“Make visible what, without you,
might perhaps never have been seen.”*

- Robert Bresson

A history of my personal filmmaking

It is common among artists to look back on several projects and to notice unintentional recurring themes. Sometimes these themes are inescapable throughout a filmmaker's body of work. Steven Spielberg's entire filmography surrounds the theme of paternal abandonment. Even as one of the most popular directors in the history of modern Hollywood, Spielberg has personal themes that recur in his work, born out of a formative experience in his own life. I believe it's virtually impossible for an artist's own experiences not to manifest in their work in some capacity, whether intentionally or subconsciously. These specific lived experiences undoubtedly create the most universal works. It is also when this personal element is imbued consciously and with care that I begin to feel a sense of fulfillment and true authorship as a filmmaker.

Over the course of the last five years I have made several short films that deal expressly with various personal experiences. The aforementioned *Nine Behind* was my first attempt to engage directly with my own life as the basis for a drama. I intended to explore the pain I felt having been denied through circumstance an opportunity to establish bonds with my extended family in Hungary. My parents left the country before I was born for reasons both fraught and complicated; they have not once returned since,

and had always discouraged me from attempting to contact anyone there. But I had for many years longed in particular for a connection with my grandfather, who had a lifelong career in film as an acclaimed Production Designer. When I discovered my passion for filmmaking, unknowingly following in his footsteps, it was too late to share this affinity with him in person — he had already passed away.

Nine Behind represented an effort to imagine a catharsis I was never able to feel on my own in reality. I fabricated a conversation with my grandfather — the phone call I never had the opportunity to have, based on the questions I had always wanted to ask him. In the film, the audience sees only the perspective of my surrogate, listening to her side of the call and the pain she's unmistakably enduring. She has idealized the notion of a conventionally intimate family — the platonic ideal of a big holiday celebration, everyone gathered to savour a traditional Christmas dinner. The film was shot in Hungarian — my own native tongue, which I haven't been able to speak since infancy. I left the grandfather's words unheard to allow the audience to imagine them, imparting their own sense of longing and of loss.

Nine Behind was also my first attempt to begin reckoning with the loss my immediate family has experienced. I've struggled for years to try and separate the experience of loss my parents have endured from my own. This film gave me a glimpse into the complicated ethics of telling a story that is intrinsically entangled with the story of another person: how can you claim your own trauma, and speak your own truth, without interfering with the healing, with the truth, of the other people it may involve? In

the end, *Nine Behind* started me on a journey I never could have imagined — more than half a decade immersed in isolation, grief, and catharsis, culminating in *Still Processing*.

A year before his death, my eldest brother, Jonathan, went missing. I started to accept that we may never hear from him again, or find out what happened to him. One afternoon during this period, I went to see a documentary called *In Transit*, about people who travel cross-country on Amtrak trains. In the background of several shots you can see various people going about their business, and for one uncanny moment, I thought: *What if one of those unnamed people is my brother?* The idea of coming almost through sheer desperation to will yourself to see someone you know you couldn't be seeing was stuck in my mind. And so I followed *Nine Behind* with a second personal film, *It's Him*, about exactly this scenario.

A young woman goes to a cinema to watch *In Transit* with her friend. During the film, she notices a person in the background of a shot, so she takes a photograph of the screen. Throughout the film she becomes transfixed with this image, but when she confronts her father about it, it's clear he has lost hope. I tried to explore the profoundly different experience between sibling and parent in a situation such as this. I wanted her character to embody a sense of naive optimism, which was ultimately just denial — something I was experiencing myself. At the end of the film, she gets on a train to go find her brother. Shortly after making this film, my brother's body was found. I will forever have this time capsule of the exact emotions I was feeling previous to this discovery, and for that I am eternally grateful.

It's Him deals with subject matter that is extremely personal in nature, clearly. But in my reluctance to address these themes too explicitly, I decided to disengage from the material somewhat, distancing the audience from the facts by omitting information and having professional actors stand in for the people in my life. Again, I hoped to allow an audience to impart their own experiences, rather than simply react to the things I had felt and experienced at the time. In retrospect, I may have been too withholding, out of a vague concern that speaking my truth too plainly would seem too stark or frank. It's this sense of vagueness that I wanted to avoid years later in *Still Processing*.

In 2016, shortly after moving to Toronto, I spent the holidays alone, recovering from a difficult breakup. To help deal with the loneliness and process the emotions I was feeling overwhelmingly, I made a film, *Let Your Heart Be Light*, about a young woman living in a half-empty apartment after extricating herself from an abusive relationship — an exact replica of what I was going through, making it my most overtly autobiographical film yet. This time I starred in the film myself opposite a friend and local actress; I played a consoling friend, and the actress played me. *Let Your Heart Be Light* was a point of transition and growth for me as a filmmaker, and brought me one step closer to truly and productively engaging with my life and experience as the basis for a film.

My next film, shot in the fall of 2017, was *Pumpkin Movie*. My approach this time was to expand the frame of my study of personal experience: Rather than once again mining my own life and past, I broadened my scope to express the collective catharsis

of multiple women, each of whom had their own experiences to share and stories to tell. The film takes place on Halloween, as two friends living across the country from one another carve pumpkins and share anecdotes over Skype. As they cut into the orange flesh of their jack-o-lanterns, they describe the negative experiences each of them has had with men over the course of the previous year.

I starred in *Pumpkin Movie* as myself, opposite Leah, my real-life best friend. We both petitioned women we knew for their own stories of predatory, abusive, or otherwise creepy male behaviour, and during the shoot we proceeded to recount these stories to each other as if they were our own. Although the tone is light and somewhat comic, the stories themselves range from frustrating to disturbing, and the picture they combine to form about the abuse women must suffer constantly from men is emphatic. At the end of the film, as the credits roll, we reveal the names of the women who contributed their stories — a haunting final image that underlines how universal these sentiments are.

Pumpkin Movie was my first true documentary-fiction hybrid, and it enjoyed considerable success on the international festival circuit. Released at the height of the #MeToo movement — a coincidence, actually, as the film was shot just as the initial accusations against Harvey Weinstein were being publicized — the film became a part of that cultural conversation, which festivals seized upon. What I found most of all was that people are eager to hear the truth and to see authenticity on screen. They want to hear real stories, and the more personal a film can be, the more an audience is willing

to embrace it. *Pumpkin Movie* was a gratifying experience, and drove me even more to be formally ambitious in the documentary mode.

Following this, I made a rather urgent short documentary called *Norman Norman*, which reflected upon the impending death of my longtime friend and childhood dog, the titular Norman. In this film, I shot images of my aged dog, and contrasted them with audio which depicts me in the throes of preemptive grief, trying to find ways to keep him around longer. I got Norman when I was 11, and he lived until I was 28 years old, in some ways he had outlived two of my brothers -- so his passing signaled a definitive moment of transition in my life. I wanted to capture this particular anxiety as it was unfolding, as I had with my previous films, as a means to process my immediate feelings, and furthermore have a chance to reflect on them in the future.

Almost every conversation I had with other filmmakers and critics during this period had to do with the idea of truth in cinema — an idea I quickly became obsessed with. I realized that matters of truth were inextricable from my filmmaking process; I became fixated on directness and candor, and wanted to explore these concepts even further than I had already. I feel the most satisfaction as an artist when I am able to tell the truth of my experiences, without recourse to obscuring myself with metaphor or hiding behind exaggeration. This aspect — the intensity of the candor, the frankness, the clarity and conviction — was what seemed to excite people most about my films, so it seemed only natural that I should follow it to its logical extreme.

The study of trauma within Cinema

During my third semester I enrolled in a self-directed study, supervised by Brenda Longfellow, in which I created my own syllabus. The following is the course description that I wrote:

“The purpose of this course is to view and analyze various contexts in which trauma has been represented in cinema with a focus on documentary and hybrid fiction. Through this process, the student will gain a deeper understanding of how one might frame their personal experiences with trauma in a cinematic form. Each film viewing will be accompanied in depth by a critical breakdown as well as an ongoing document of how this process continues to shape the pre-production for her own thesis film.”

Throughout this course I watched roughly 20 films that I felt might pertain to the study of personal filmmaking, or had depictions of trauma within them. I found this process to be enlightening and inspiring, particularly to discover the elements that I *didn't* want to bring into my own work. I came to the conclusion that I have no interest in metaphor. For this project, I'm only interested in the verbatim and literal. I noticed that many of the films I studied used some element of distancing or analogy to depict their subjects, but I wanted to try and remove any kind of barriers if possible.

This became a tangled venture for me as I tried to navigate expressing such a personal story, while also providing the necessary context for an outside viewer. I was torn between the vital processing that I wanted to gain from the experience, versus the desire to create something accessible and valuable to others, outside of my family.

I found moments in many of the films only worked as a personal document and were isolating to the audience, and in contrast many times there was too much of an exhaustive effort to bring the audience into the world of the experienced trauma which lead to feelings of exploitation. I found this to be particularly true in the popular tear jerker documentary, Kurt Kuenne's *Dear Zachary (2008)*. Not made by the victims of the traumatic events depicted, but rather an attempt to honour their stories made by a friend and filmmaker. I often felt the film veered too closely toward entertainment over catharsis. For the purposes of my own project, I wanted to adamantly avoid this tactic while still creating something accessible. Above all, I wanted to create something that could be relatable to those who have experienced complicated grief and are looking for possible paths of resolution or healing

One theme that I did find particularly haunting and relevant from these examples of cinema was the value in having art, specifically filmmaking, as a device for survival and catharsis. These were stories that needed to be captured and told, and that urgency was clear in many of the films. In particular, and often used as an example when referencing the genre of personal filmmaking, is Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation (2003)*. He does an excellent job of expressing the necessity of creation in order to cope with his chaotic surroundings. What makes this exceptionally clear is the fact that he began filming at the age of nine years old, barely cognizant of the intentions he had buried within him. He needed to make this film, to share this story; and I share a similar burden and relief in making *Still Processing*.

Interestingly, the film's reception when it was released theatrically in 2005 suggests potential problems for my own process: "The chief complaint critics leveled against the movie involved Caouette's apparent narcissism," Christopher Orr described in *The Atlantic* at the time. "It's true that the director's handsome features take up more than their share of screen time in a film that is ostensibly about his mother." (Orr, *The Atlantic*, 2005). To what extent is it possible to make a movie about one's own lived experience, starring oneself, without courting accusations of self-involvement? That was a risk inherent in the project I was setting out to make, and one of which *Tarnation* made me acutely aware.

Chantal Akerman has an entire career of personal, cathartic, poetic and absolutely beautiful cinema behind her. She is an easy source of inspiration for any filmmaker, but particularly to women who find a kinship in her desire to express their own lived experiences. I've watched a number of her films in the past, and always felt drawn toward her slow and detail oriented formal techniques, but I was blown away by her final film, *No Home Movie* (2015), made shortly before she took her own life.

It's difficult to watch this film objectively without considering the tragic circumstances that surround it. It reads as part love letter, and part suicide note. "The film is deceptively radical," Andrea Picard notes in her essay on the film in *Cinema Scope* magazine, "on the surface appearing like a first-person diary-doc shot ... but below simmers a wealth of emotion, which is unleashed via violent passages of an undetermined wind-whipped landscape in an arid land..." (Picard, 2015, p. 64). The

film, Picard continues, “is full of tenderness... but violence and rupture lurk in every scene as Akerman seeks to extract her mother’s harrowing story before that knowledge is forever irretrievable.”

This sense of impending loss that looms over the film is compounded by the dark nature of the experiences to which it is revealed Akerman’s mother was a witness. “A Polish Jew who survived Auschwitz and fled to Belgium, Natalia Akerman suffered from chronic anxiety all her life,” Picard writes. This affliction “fuelled much of her daughter’s creative output and helped shape Akerman’s thematic preoccupations with gender, sex, cultural identity, existential ennui, solitude, and mania” (Picard, 2015, p. 64). As a document of one person dealing so openly and intensively with her own trauma and the trauma of her parents, *No Home Movie* was indispensable to determining the way forward for my film.

In the framing of my own film, I had to consider the ways in which I wanted to contextualize my family’s trauma since it would be integral to the understanding of the narrative. Although I was focused on documenting my process of grieving and remembering, I spent a lot of time deciding how to depict the surrounding events which gave weight to the process itself. In *No Home Movie*, it seems the passing of Akerman herself, gives the film an entirely different meaning in terms of the way it addresses grief. This gave me a significant understanding of how the surrounding circumstances of a filmmaker's life can become part of the film, whether intended or not.

Critiques of personal filmmaking:

My evolution as a filmmaker over the last half-decade has brought me closer and closer to an artistic model that privileges true self-expression above artifice and fictional constructs. I've been making films about my own experiences, and these movies increasingly approach these experiences in a direct manner, without recourse to conventional distancing techniques or methods of distorting or fictionalizing reality.

The work that I am most drawn to is that which depicts lived experiences that feel true and authentic, whether fictionalized or within the realm of documentary. I continue to carry the belief that work is inherently more relatable if it's born out of some version of reality. Part of my research and reflection in making *Still Processing* was contemplating how to navigate a film that dealt with foregrounding my experience so directly, with such vulnerability, especially if it were to be shared with others. To make myself the subject of the film was a considerable risk, but something I felt was paramount to the entire thesis of the film itself; the film needed to be as personal as possible.

Self-involvement is the most common accusation levelled against filmmakers who make their work about themselves and their own lives. It's an unavoidable part of directing the camera's gaze inward; critics and detractors, faced with an artist interested in exploring themselves rather than others, often find fault with the subject, which of course is the artist themselves. "When a filmmaker makes a film with herself as a subject, she is already divided as both the subject matter of the film and the subject making the film," writes Alisa Lebow in her book *The Cinema of Me: The Self and*

Subjectivity in First Person Documentary. “The two senses of the word are immediately in play — the matter and the maker — thus the two ways of being objectified as both subject and object.” But first-person film, says Lebow, is naturally shaped by “collective expressions,” and it is by this process of commingling that “the cinema of ‘me’” can be transformed into “the cinema of ‘we’” (Lebow, 2015, p. 16).

In contrast to my own opinion, the preconceptions about first-person documentaries tend toward the negative and unproductively cruel. There is an “all-too-readily accepted impression of first person films,” Lebow notes, as “self-absorbed, myopic, ego-driven” projects “that only a mother could love,” perilously loaded with “stultifying seriousness.” (Lebow, 2015, p. 16). But far from falling prey to these obviously exaggerated criticisms, the successful first-person documentary thrives in the complex and under-represented area of deep self-analysis, excavating the mind and the self-as-subject in ways that can be hugely edifying (and indeed, intriguing) not merely to the mothers of the subject-filmmakers, but to everyone. In making something about yourself that is honest, you will inevitably make something relatable to others.

Personal filmmaking of the kind I have been undertaking with *Still Processing* raises questions not only about art and cinema but about philosophy and ontology — what Lebow describes as the “central ontological question” that is “at the centre of the project of self-representation” (Lebow, 2015, p.17) by nature. In the making of this film, I had to ask myself not only whether my own trauma and experiences were a sufficiently compelling subject for a *film*, but, more profoundly, whether I properly understood the

“me” that I was making a film about in the first place. “What is this self that is being represented and is the desire to represent this self (in language, through images) a formative one, constituting rather than re-presenting this self?” Lebow asks. “Do we become ourselves and come to know ourselves in the process of self-representation?” (Lebow, 2015, p. 19).

In other words, am I discovering something about myself and my trauma through this process? What I learned in the research phase for this film is in part that first-person documentary filmmaking is incredibly interesting, and that it has dimensions I had not considered that make the form even more compelling. It becomes beyond grammatical and categorical definition when the subject and self become so entangled. I wanted to see what it would feel like to watch myself in the act of processing. It is firstly in this act of vulnerability that I felt the transformation of self in front of the camera, but then secondarily in watching myself in the completed film as subject.

On photography and memory

In the summer of 2018, before I had received permission from parents to set to work on the archival materials and begin production on *Still Processing*, and as I was about to embark on my research trip to Hungary and meet my extended family for the first time, my father, noting my interest in the power of images and the nature of truth, recommended I find a copy of Susan Sontag’s *On Photography*, explaining that it would help me in my work. I had no idea at the time how right he would be. *On Photography* radically changed my perception of photographs as they pertain to families, tragedies,

memory, and of course death — given the nature of my work in progress at the time, all uncannily relevant and remarkably eye-opening. Sontag's subject, as she writes with modesty, is "some of the problems, aesthetic and moral, posed by the omnipresence of photographed images" (Sontag, 1973, p. 1). As it turned out, those problems were at the time to me of the utmost concern.

Sontag writes extensively about the capacity of photographs to "bear witness" to events that are fundamentally ephemeral. By their endurance, Sontag argues, pictures of times past, people lost, and events long over give us a false sense that what's done never really ended, reasserting their persistence against all evidence of their conclusion in reality. "As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of a space in which they are insecure," Sontag argues. Even more saliently (and devastatingly) for me, she writes that "people robbed of their past seem to make the most fervent picture takers." Clearly, the photographs I would come to acquire of my family gave me that "imaginary possession." But was I also taking my own pictures — the movie itself — to get back the past I was robbed of?

It seemed obvious to me even from the outset of this undertaking that the value of the images in my father's archive was inextricably tied for me to the death of my brothers and the memories of them that the photos preserved. The photos were a testament to the lives they lived and the lives they were ultimately denied. Having these photos was not only a rare memento — on a deeper level, the photos seemed to assert the lives of my brothers against the fact of their death. Technology had preserved them,

or at least some part of them; the photos had indeed helped me to “take possession of space in which [I am] insecure.” (Sontag, 1973, 10)



Image 1. Screenshot from *Still Processing*

“Photography is the inventory of mortality,” (Sontag, 1973, 70) Sontag writes. “Photographs show people being so irrefutably *there* and at a specific age in their lives; group together people and things which a moment later have already disbanded, changed, continued along the course of their independent destinies.” When those destinies end in tragedy — as they did for my two brothers — even the most benign photograph of the life before that destiny was realized can “invest a moment with posthumous irony” (Sontag, 1973, 72). Because every moment fixed in space by a photograph has instantly passed, every photography is by nature a record of death. Sontag states it powerfully: “Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives

heading toward their own destruction and this link between photography and death haunts all photos of people” (Sontag, 1973, 73).

Marianne Hirsch, in her book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, touches on Sontag’s ideas about photography and death, and expands upon the ideas as well. She observes that “the indexical nature of the photo, its status as relic,” at once “intensifies its status as harbinger of death and, at the same time and concomitantly, its capacity to signify life” (Hirsch, 1997, p. 19). In other words, because the photograph has a direct relation to the subject depicted, it simultaneously underlines the mortality of the photographed and emphatically reasserts their claim on life. They were there once, alive and breathing: the photograph proves it, forever and inarguably. At the same time, the photograph is only ever *there* — it always points to the past, and as such, to death.

The photographs I retrieved from my father are not the same as memories of my brothers. They aren’t substitutes for memories, either. They did bring me back to a time I had perhaps forgotten — but it’s in the nature of photography to evoke while at the same time counteract the process of reminiscence. As Roland Barthes says in his famed book *Camera Lucida*, “not only is the photograph never, in essence a memory,” it in fact “actually blocks memory,” and “quickly becomes a counter memory” (Barthes, 1988, p. 91). Trauma has done a number on my memory as it is: I find I often struggle to picture clearly those times. But the photographs are not an aid to remembering so much as a

unique source of mental images and “replacement” memory. This is something I emphasized in *Still Processing*.

“Photography’s relation to loss and death is not to mediate the process of individual and collective memory,” Hirsch writes elsewhere in *Family Frames*, “but to bring back in the form of ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability” (Hirsch, 1997, p. 20). As much as I had seemed to gain in the acquisition of these long-lost photographs and videos of my brothers — and seeing these photos was enormously helpful and important to me personally — Hirsch is right that photographs cannot help but emphasize the “immutable and irreversible pastness” (Hirsch, 1997, p. 21) of these moments and these memories, and cannot help but remind me that my brothers are gone, that there is nothing I can do to change that. Photographs may be therapeutic, I learned. But what’s gone is always irretrievable.

During the filming of *Still Processing* I naturally came across the conclusion that I found the photographs to be quite devastating to look at, while the home video footage was a somewhat light hearted drive down memory lane. This is where the expressed difference between the still image and the moving image became clear to me. Although the photographs are proof of lives having been present, they are cursed with the knowingness of mortality. The moving image has the capacity to trick us in a much more convincing manner, that life is still present, the bodies are still moving. I laughed much more readily looking at my brothers and I dance and play together, in motion -- then

gazing at the candid yet more tonally serious images of us imprinted on black and white photo paper.



Image 2. Screenshot from *Still Processing*

It is in the mixing of the two mediums and the contextualizing them within the film *Still Processing* that I feel I was able to communicate the act of processing such memories. I wanted this film to be somewhat of a retroactive collaboration between the work of my father, and myself, in hopes of binding the two together to form something therapeutic for our entire family, or what remains.

ETHICAL CONVERSATIONS

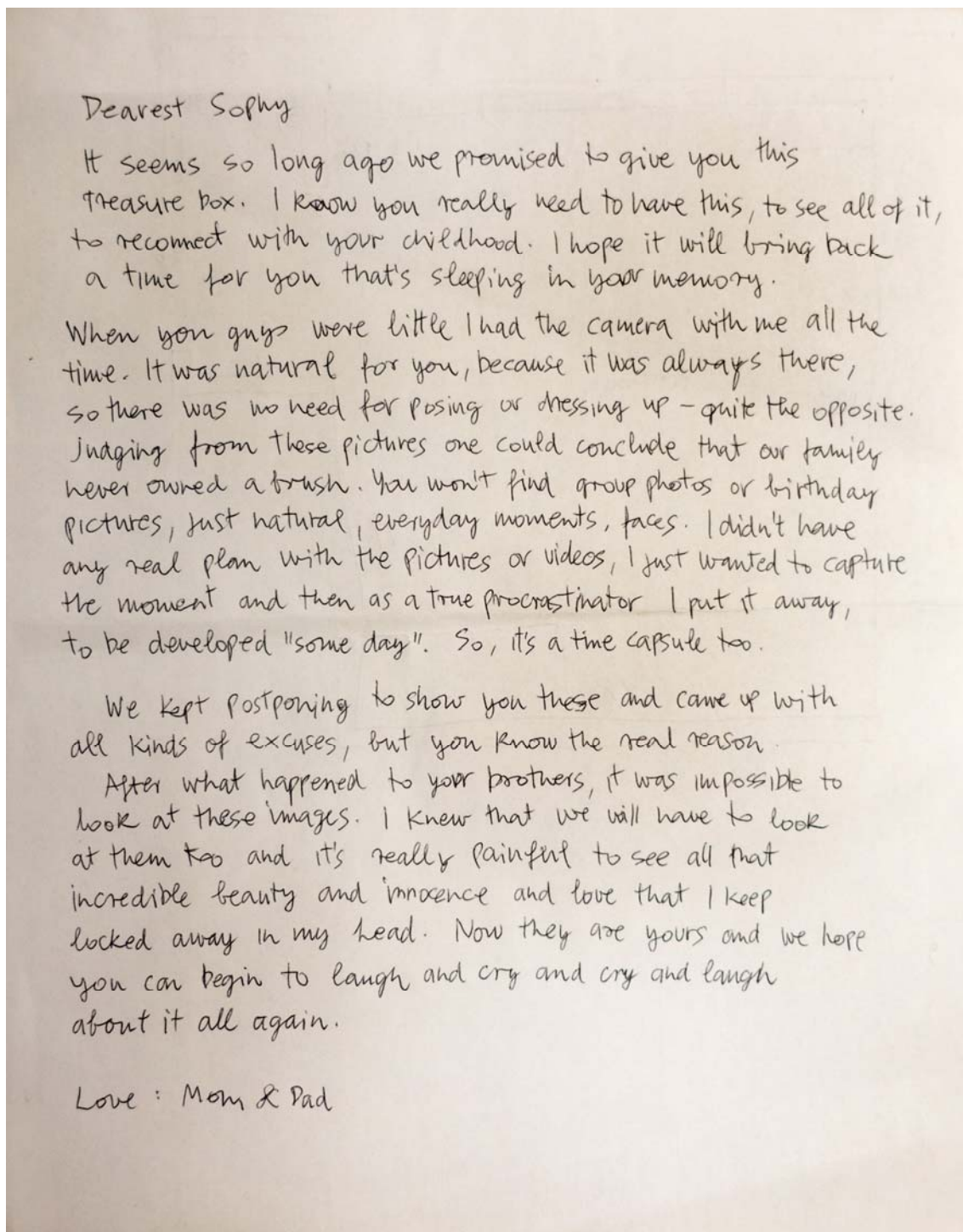


Image 3. Letter from Mom & Dad, November 2019

This letter comes from my father, after almost three arduous years of conversations regarding this film and why I felt the impulse to make it. The ethical concerns regarding the making of this film were complex, and took a lot of patience to navigate. The big question I had to ask myself was “whose story is this to tell?” This is a common concern, particularly within the documentary genre, and one that I care deeply about addressing with care and morality. I included this letter verbatim and almost unabridged in the film for the sake of transparency and integrity. I wanted to make it clear that the materials presented in the film were only released to me — and by extension, to the audience watching the film — after considerable debate and with great reluctance.

A big part of what I had to confront, outside of just the desire to make this film, is the difference between the grief of a parent and a sibling. I lost my brothers, my parents lost two children. Undoubtedly, those experiences are not remotely the same but they are both exceptionally painful for different reasons. I also learned that the two cannot be separated. This of course complicated my desire to want to explore my own grief in the form of cinematic expression, when my parents felt a strong impulse to keep these painful facts hidden away, understandably. Throughout the entire process of making this film, I have tried to balance both of our desires. There have been moments that I had to really interrogate my reasons for taking on this project, especially at the cost of creating tension between my parents and I, whom I have always been very close to.

“We don’t want us, our life and your brother’s life and death to be a topic of a movie – documentary or otherwise. We don’t want “our story to be told”. We don’t want to unearth our family history”... What you are describing as “healing through the creative process” would end up to be further damaging and causing more trauma for us. Part of the trauma on top of the loss and grief is an overwhelming feeling of failure and shame. These are not the kinds of things people want to share.”

- Oct, 2017

This is a short section of a letter of a much different tone, written to me almost two years ago. Of course, this was a very difficult letter to receive and one that really made me question what I was doing with this project. The last thing I intended to do was to cause further trauma for my parents; in fact it has always been my goal to help them see the possibility of healing and goodness that remains. All the while, I understood the sentiment and why my desire to delve into this personal territory was a step into vulnerability that they needed a lot of time to process. I needed their expressed permission to make this film. Not just because they were the keepers of the physical materials I needed to practically put the work together, but also because my entire thesis revolves around the act of healing, not further damage. So I waited.

In the summer of 2018 I went to visit Budapest for the first time on a research grant that I received from the Canada Arts Council. I wanted to understand where my parents came from, and who had been left behind. A few months before I took on this trip, my maternal grandmother passed away, whom I was planning to visit. I visited her apartment, where my mom had also spent her entire childhood. During my visit, my mom asked me to collect her childhood photographs, something that she had long desired to have. I believe it was in this moment that my mom began to understand my

longing to hold and see the photos from my own childhood. Slowly, my parents began to open up the discussion of allowing me to make *Still Processing* after this trip.

I wrote out a detailed scene by scene breakdown to walk my parents through what would be in the film, and the ways that the film would avoid going into gratuitous details. I reiterated my formal ideas and how they would artistically express the process of grief. I spoke about my desire to have a retroactive collaboration with my father's art, and how I thought our two methods of creating could make something quite beautiful and healing. They began to warm up to the idea, and understood my intentions in a whole new light. In March 2018 they gave me their full consent to move forward with the project. My father put together a package of photographs and videos. I received these materials sealed and resolved to not open them until I began principal photography in November of 2018.

The letter I began this section with was written by my father with the intention of it being included in the final film. He understood fully the artistic intent of showing his written words within the film, and he had total authority over the details he wanted to share. I'm moved now to think about the personal progress we made as a family in the making of this project, enough so that I was able to include such a personal contribution in his own voice. The song at the end of *Still Processing* is a cover song performed by my brother Ben — its inclusion was a suggestion also made by my father. It took several years, but I'm so proud to say that this film was made with absolute ethical and

moral responsibility. This is not to say there were not complications and challenges that I had to face, but the outcome feels incredibly powerful and healing.

My ethical considerations outside of my own family are related to my desire to teach first person documentary methods for trauma healing, as I mentioned in my introduction. Having grown up in a family setting that dealt with various social services and mental health practitioners, I am always considering ways in which these experiences could be improved upon. I came into filmmaking as a means for processing my trauma in a very organic matter, but I believe in its power and possibilities for others as well. I have been in conversation with Dr Jay Children's Grief Centre here in Toronto about the potentially sharing my film, as well as future collaborations and workshop possibilities. *Still Processing* can now act as an example of grief and trauma processing through filmmaking, and one that I am open to speaking on the challenges and benefits of.

FORMAL CONSIDERATIONS

The authentic documentary

I have described the evolution of my short filmmaking process in the past several years, and the ways in which the films became more and more expressly personal and documentary-like in style and function. I found myself falling into documentary not by choice but rather by what might be described as necessity. I simply felt drawn to the concept of documenting reactions and situations rather than crafting them out of thin air. I found when trying to fictionalize aspects of my life, it felt unnecessary — an abstraction that was ultimately less engaging as a piece of storytelling. I became fascinated with the idea of filming “reality” in a cinematic aesthetic but without excessive technical intervention and fictional filmmaking methods.

This form and practice was also partly born out of my desire to begin “acting” in my films, or rather, playing myself. As my father mentions in his letter, I grew up with a camera constantly in my face from a very young age. He never asked us to look at the camera, to smile, or to pose in any particularly unnatural positions. I believe this is what has led me to feeling inherently comfortable in front of the camera simply being myself. When I thought about scripting lines for myself in previous films, I felt I did not have the technical talent or skill to perform them. I did however find myself able to react and be present in front of the camera to a degree that felt believable and honest. This process was really tested in my shorts *Let Your Heart Be Light*, and in particular *Pumpkin Movie*.

There was a stage in my development where I had considered hiring an actor to play myself in *Still Processing*. This concept was short lived, as even upon applying to the York program in 2016 it was suggested in my application interview that I should be playing myself, as I had in previous films. This of course would later become integral to the process of healing and grief processing that came out of the making of this film. I believe it was the right choice to play the part myself, and doubt I would have found such an incredible cathartic outcome had I hired someone to step in for me.

The question of authenticity in front of the camera is something that I have invested a lot of time researching and questioning. A film that I took particular inspiration from in terms of addressing this concept is *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960) by anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch, along with sociologist and film critic Edgar Morin. This film functions as somewhat of a social experiment while also maintaining a rigorous formal aesthetic. It is said to be one of the primary examples of *cinéma vérité* — a term coined by Morin and used in the film — which, according to the *New Yorker's* Richard Brody, “poses — and, what’s more, responds to — questions of cinematic form and moral engagement that underlie the very genre, the very idea of nonfiction film” (Brody, 2013, para 1). I feel as though I came into this process naturally through my own filmmaking, but there is of course an extensive history of previous attempts to achieve such a product.

Chronicle of a Summer interrogates the concept of obtaining truth within cinema while knowing that it is ultimately unattainable. The filmmakers interview several non

actors about personal experiences in their lives and they attempt to recount these moments on camera without “acting” — at the end of the film, these filmed interviews are screened to an audience with the intention of analyzing the levels of authenticity. Unsurprisingly, the reactions vary depending on the audience members, proving that cinematic truth is somewhat subjective and highly dependant on the viewer. This information helped me understand certain aspects of how I would document and depict my experience truthfully during the filming of *Still Processing*.

Documentary as a genre is built around constructs that make the audience feel as though they are learning, being told the truth, and that the subjects involved are real. When dissected further, documentary is merely another genre of fiction filmmaking which simply utilizes a different set of constructs to tell stories. Part of what makes documentaries “feel” real is the use of these signifiers or constructs that audience members have been trained to perceive as more authentic than fiction. For example, using low fi camera quality, subjects addressing the camera directly, using title cards to introduce subjects, and using non-actors or “real people.” When broken down into its elements, documentary filmmaking still uses many of the same tools as fictional narrative films do. Manipulation through editing, added music for emotional effect, and general use of juxtaposition and montage are all present in most documentaries.

Keeping this in mind, I wanted to try and utilize tools from both genres of filmmaking, while not necessarily adhering to one set of constructs specifically. This approach is commonly referred to as hybrid-fiction, or hybrid-documentary, and I believe

my work lands somewhere in the middle. In *Still Processing*, I wanted to treat my character as a subject, and not simply as a documentation of self. One way to achieve this is through not addressing the camera directly, and composing shots in a way that imply a more fictional framework. Instead, I placed my first person reactions in the subtitles, rather than breaking the fourth wall as a subject.

Subtitles

The decision to use subtitles was not made lightly. During the conception of *Still Processing*, I made active choices to omit particular information in the narrative of the film. This decision was made partially in order to quell the fears my parents had of this film being an exposure of my family's most difficult moments. I wanted also for myself to focus on the documentation of processing grief, rather than the particulars of the grief. When it came time to put the film together, I felt a gap in the contextualization of the narrative story I was telling, and emotional experience I was having on screen. So began the debate of how to best fill those gaps for viewers that did not exist in my own head.

There was a stage during production where I considered a pure voiceover might be necessary. I had originally conceived the possibility of having a director's commentary that ran over the entire film, which was comprised of a conversation between my therapist and I watching the film together. This ultimately felt like too much of a forceful remove from the intended purpose of the film, so I moved onto other possibilities. It was near the end of my editing process, where I was feeling stuck and

burdened by the lack of context that my father offered to write the letter I mentioned previously. This letter proved to be an exceptional tool for providing grounded and personal context to the narrative of the film.

I felt the choice to do voiceover throughout the film may be the obvious one, which does not necessarily mean it wouldn't work, but instinctively it felt too intrusive of a mechanism for such a somber film. I wanted to utilize a tool that could add depth and meaning behind these images without overpowering them entirely. That's when I came up with the concept of the subtitles: neutral, nondescript, and easy to digest. I wanted the subtitles to function as a translation of thought, rather than direct storytelling. It became part of expanding upon my process. I used it as a way to let the audience into the moments that I was experiencing on a personal and interior level.

I will admit the wording of the subtitles was one of the more challenging aspects of putting this film together. It's the one element of the film I still feel could be a work-in-progress. I struggled to find a balance between poeticizing the context, and wanting to coldly state the facts. I'm certain they are the correct path for imbuing the necessary context, but I continue to wonder if I should have said less, or could have said more.

Formal Influences

During my research period which I covered previously, I watched a number of films which informed the conceptualizing of *Still Processing*. Less so than many of my other films, I did not film many particular films that spoke directly to the cinematic

language that I wanted to use in telling this story. That being said, there were a number of films that played perhaps a more cerebral, indirect role in influencing my formal choices.

It seems interesting to me that many of the experimental, diaristic, process cinema, and first person documentaries that I felt related to this project also happen to be directed by women. I mentioned Akerman above as an inspiration and formal reference in her often austere and steady images she produces. Other examples include filmmakers such as Chick Strand (*Soft Fiction*, 1979), Camille Billops (*Suzanne*, 1982), Joyce Chopra (*Joyce at 34*, 1971), of course also Agnes Varda, and many more. In many cases these women worked in more visually experimental modes than I'm currently exploring, but their work was nonetheless formative and insightful, particularly to see how the form has changed in recent cinema history.

Although *Still Processing* was not shot on film, I believe the making of it borrows from the genre of process cinema, in its very essence. The methodology of allowing process to drive a filmmaking experience was paramount in the creation of this film. Working sans conventional script allowed me to work *through* my process, rather than simply executing a plan. In that sense, I certainly feel the need to acknowledge the inspiration I drew from this alternate, improvisational and interactive mode of filmmaking that has such a rich history.

One filmmaker who I found particularly formally inspiring were the films of Su Friedrich, of which I'm happy to report there are quite a few to pick from. During my Self Directed Study, I viewed a more recent work of hers, *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel* (2017) which I found incredibly moving. An aside, one of my short films, *Norman Norman*, was chosen to screen as the opening short for this film at the *Sarasota Film Festival*. I found this interesting, as I believe it indicated that someone else found a comparable strand between our works. Both of our films deal with the theme of preemptive grief and the acceptance of death.



Image 4. Screenshot from *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel* (2017), Su Friedrich

I found thematic parallels in many of her films, as well as aesthetic choices that would later help inform my own. In particular, her creative use of subtitles surely was one of the key inspirations for my own inclusion of them in *Still Processing*. I also find

her filmmaking to be very direct and vulnerable in a way that I felt was lacking in many of the other films that I had reviewed in my research phase. She is bold in her formalism, and upfront about ugly truths, not only about herself but her family as well. I consider this to be a crucial element to authentic first person documentary filmmaking, particularly when the filmmaker becomes the subject at hand.



Image 5. Screenshot from *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel* (2017), Su Friedrich

PROCESS OF CREATION

"I've been working on this film for three years."

- Subtitle from *Still Processing*

Instead of a script, I wrote a simple scene by scene breakdown which would loosely guide me through the shoot. It was written as follows:

****This film is intended to be a mid length short film,
about 25-30 minutes filmed in a somewhat abstract nature.
There is very little dialogue or interactions between two people,
mostly just reactions of the main character.
The emphasis is on the process, rather than the outcome.
All dialogue scenes will be real, first time interactions without script or prompt.
This script is meant to be an outline of the structure of the proposed film.***

INT. SUBWAY - DAY

Sophy sits on the subway with the unlabeled box seated beside her.

INT. YORK UNIVERSITY - MORNING

*With the box under her arm, Sophy walks down a long hallway.
She enters into an empty and begins to go through the contents of the box.
She is visibly moved.*

INT. SUBWAY - DAY

*Sophy goes home after going through the entire box of photographs.
We see out the window of the subway, lights passing by.*

INT. SOPHY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Sophy sits in bed in the dark, memories begin to overcome her.

INT. YORK UNIVERSITY - MORNING

Sophy and her brother Ben sit together and watch home video footage of themselves and their brothers David and Jonathan.

INT. YORK UNIVERSITY - EVENING

Sophy enters a darkroom for film processing, lit only by a red light.

She has picked out a few film negatives she wishes to process.

She submerges the photos into the chemicals, one by one.

In some cases, the photos become over exposed and disappear.

She hangs each one up on a string to dry as she processes.

She listens to music while she works.

INT. YORK UNIVERSITY - AFTERNOON

Large print versions of some of the photos Sophy processes hang on the wall in an empty white room. Sophy sits on a stool in the foreground, a photograph of her, as a child hangs on the wall directly behind her.

The same image contrast is repeated for her brothers Ben, David and Jonathan, except David and Jonathan will not be physically present.

INT. YORK UNIVERSITY - EVENING

A slideshow of photographs plays to song played by Ben.

Aesthetically, I worked closely with my cinematographer, Devan Scott, to develop the overall look of the film. I have been working with Devan since shooting my first personal film, *Nine Behind*, so we have developed an extremely collaborative and communicative working relationship in the last 5 years. I often work with very small

crew, just 3-5 people outside of myself. The crew for *Still Processing* was the smallest I have worked with: just Devan and myself. I wanted to have the space to be as vulnerable and safe as I needed to be while shooting, so that limitation really pushed us to work closely with one another during the ten days of shooting.

Most of the film was shot on the campus of York University. I wanted to use the austere, institutional aesthetic of the campus as a sharp contrast with the soft, beautiful black & white look of my father's photographs. This decision helped instill a sense of time having passed, shifting between analog photography to digital filmmaking. Although the campus itself is not particularly pleasing to the naked eye, Devan and I managed to find unique and interesting colours and angles that I think represents the space in a much more dramatic and almost futuristic light.

During pre-production, Devan and I took several test shots around campus to evaluate the various lighting scenarios we would be working with, as we opted to only use natural or practical lighting sources throughout principal photography.



Image 6. Dark room test shot for *Still Processing*

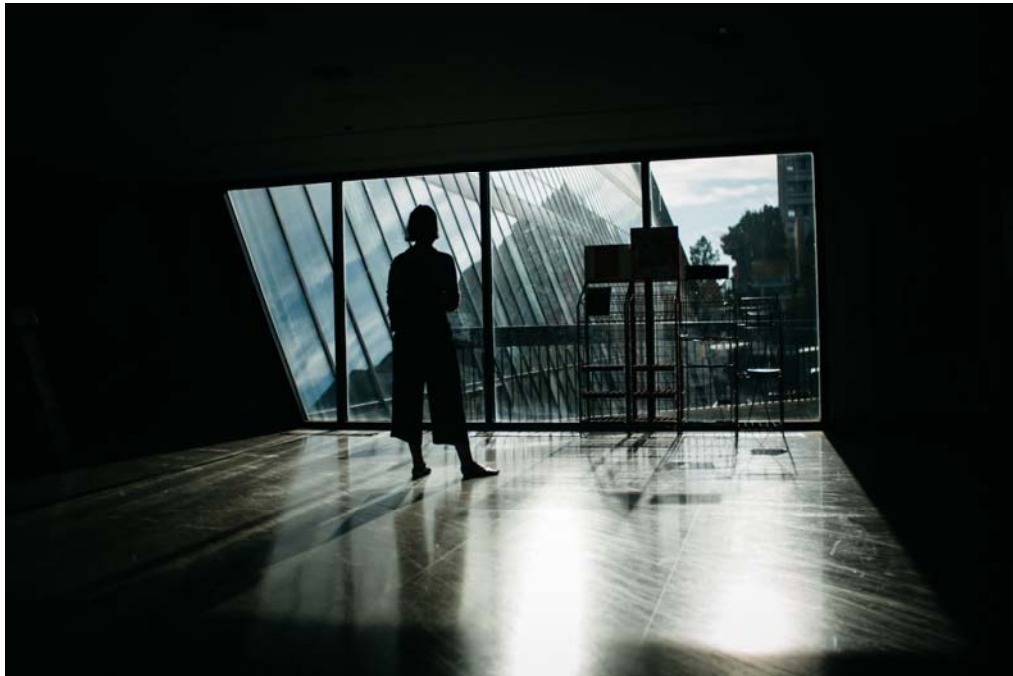


Image 7. York University, test shot for *Still Processing*

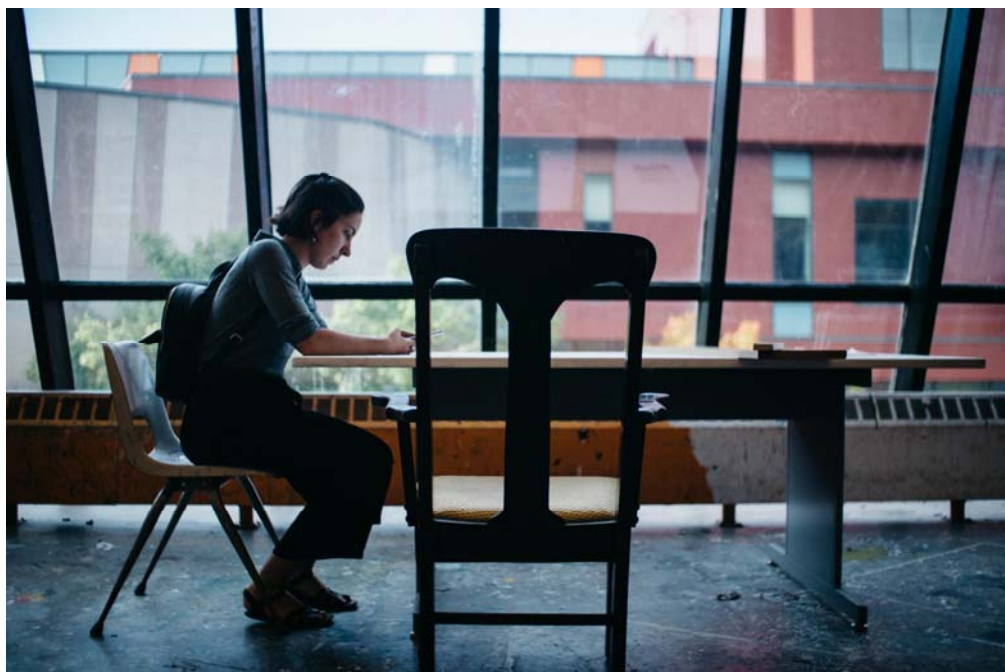


Image 8. York University, test shot for *Still Processing*

The shoot itself lasted about ten days. We wanted to give ourselves lots of space and time to try different things and also in order to not exhaust myself emotionally. We focused on one major scene per day, and would look at the dailies together at the end of each day. Although we were moving slowly, the shoot itself was extremely demanding as one might expect. Devan and I were moving equipment ourselves, setting up sound and anything else that needed to be done. That being said, I wouldn't have preferred another method for making this film. I was glad to have Devan there to help offer technical and moral support, and adding any more crew members would have taken away from the process.

To elaborate on this, Devan and I came up with a few ways in which to create the most safe spaces for me to feel vulnerable and open while shooting. During the longer takes, such as the unboxing of the photographs, Devan and I set up the multiple cameras, set them to record and he left the room entirely. This allowed me the time and space to react to the photos naturally, without the pressure of a live performance. We used a similar technique for the panic attack scene, in which I allowed my emotions to fully consume me. This unusual process allowed me the space to react naturally on camera, but also to actually take in the lived experience of those scenes.

After completing the shoot, I entered what I did not realize would be my longest and most difficult part of the process: editing. I took a very long break away from the footage, which I believe was healthy and productive. The shoot was finished in 2018 but I did not manage to put together a rough cut until the summer of 2019. It was extremely difficult to be objective with the footage, considering all of the personal aspects I was confronting. When I began the process, I imagined the length of the film to be closer to 30-40 minutes, when in reality I believe it functions much better at the final length of roughly 16 minutes. I had to work slowly, and it took me many months to be open to the process of getting outside feedback. I worked alone for most of the edit, until the last few months where I began to trust outside opinions which I believe was invaluable to the final outcome.



Image 9. Screenshot from *Still Processing*

CONCLUSION

It was clear to me from the very outset of this project what the title of my thesis film should be. *Still Processing*: a title with two meanings. I am literally processing the raw materials provided to me by father in dark rooms and photo labs, exposing pictures that have been sealed in cannisters for decades and revealing what's inside. And I am of course still processing — still dealing with, learning about, trying to understand and accept and be at peace with — the deaths of my two oldest brothers, still processing the extraordinary amount of grief and pain I have felt since they passed. The photographs I unearthed and exposed quite easily. The rest I will probably still be processing for years, if not the rest of my life.

In many ways, *Still Processing* represents a kind of culmination for me of work I have been doing for years now. Since 2016, when I cast off the rules of conventional filmmaking instilled in me in film school and made my short *Nine Behind*, I have been steadily working toward a more expressive, open, and especially personal mode of filmmaking, learning to directly transmit my own experiences in cinematic terms, first as narrative dramas, and eventually in documentary and hybrid documentary forms. *Still Processing* is the ultimate expression of this advancement toward an acutely personal and highly esoteric kind of filmmaking, synthesizing the lessons learned over the course of the last five years of my filmmaking career and taking the philosophy of first-person filmmaking even further than I thought possible.

My self-directed study of personal films by filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman, Jonathan Caouette, SSu Friedrich, and others, as well as my academic research into writers such as Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and Marianne Hirsch, helped me execute my vision of a personal cinema by clarifying my intentions and allowing me to better understand the power of images and the nature of truth in photography. And thanks most of all to the approval and participation of my parents — without whom making this movie would have been literally impossible — I feel I have done justice to the photos my father took of us as children, and honoured the memory of my brothers in a way that has been therapeutic for me and, I hope, helpful to my parents as well.



Image 10. *Photograph of my brother David, taken by George Romvari*



Image 11. *Photograph of my brother Jonathan, taken by George Romvari*

Ultimately, it is my hope that my progress in understanding the value of first person documentary films and the therapeutic value of the process I underwent in making *Still Processing* will have applications far beyond this one particular movie. I believe that cinema is uniquely capable of helping people process their trauma and their emotions, and I feel that with some guidance and instruction, other people who are hurting could use the language of film in similar ways to begin the process of healing. I am grateful for the opportunity to dedicate the last three years to a project that has surely changed my life in ways that I'm certain will continually be revealed to me.

To answer my thesis question: Can making a personal film aid in the processing of trauma? I believe this was proven to me in research, was reasserting with the making of this film, and will continue to be relevant in many future films. My ability to speak

openly about the trauma I faced in losing David and Jonathan now is exceptional. I feel proud of the vulnerability I exhibited in the making of this film, and the personal growth I went through over the last three years. I believe *Still Processing* has played a huge role in my grieving process, and is a representation of the family album that my family deserves.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1988.

Brody, Richard. "The Extraordinary Chronicle of a Summer." *The New Yorker*, 2013

Citron, Michelle. *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*. Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Lebow, Alisa. *The Cinema of Me: the Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*. London: Wallflower Press, 2012.

Mann, Sally. *Hold Still: a Memoir with Photographs*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2016

Picard, Andrea. "We Can't Go Home Again: Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie*." *Cinema Scope*. Issue 64, 2015

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. London: Penguin Classics, 2014.

Walker, Janet. *Trauma Cinema: Trauma Cinema - Documenting Incest and the Holocaust*. California: California University Press, 2005.

FILMOGRAPHY

The Arbor. Dir. Clio Barnard, 2010.

A Better Man. Dir. Attiya Khan & Lawrence Jackman, 2017.

Close-Up. Dir. Abbas Kiarostami, 1990.

Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father. Dir. Kurt Kuenne, 2008.

Family Viewing. Dir. Atom Egoyan, 1987.

God Straightens Legs. Dir. Joële Walinga, 2015.

I Cannot Tell You How I Feel. Dir. Su Friedrich, 2016.

Je, Tu, Il, Elle. Dir. Chantal Akerman, 1974.

Joyce at 34. Dir. Joyce Chopra, 1971.

Minding the Gap. Dir. Bing Liu, 2018.

No Home Movie. Dir. Chantal Akerman, 2015.

Soft Fiction. Dir. Strand Chick, 1979.

Strangers in Good Company. Dir. Cynthia Scott, 1990.

Streetscapes [Dialogue]. Dir. Heinz Emigholz. 2017.

Strong Island. Dir. Yance Ford, 2017.

Suzanne, Suzanne. Dir. Camille Billops, 1982.

Tarnation. Dir. Jonathan Caouette, 2003.

The Ties That Bind. Dir. Su Friedrich, 1985.

Women Reply. Dir. Agnès Varda, 1975.