

RHODA

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Abstract

Rhoda is a personal documentary film. For a year and a half I interviewed my mother multiple times about her past: we talked about her meeting my father, about love and the decision to marry. We talked about motherhood and how the Feminist movement and the societal changes that took place at that time affected her personally.

As she tells her life story of the past, the film interweaves with present day verité style scenes of her preparing a Passover dinner for our extended family. As my mother toils away at a long list of food to prepare, my father relaxes in front of the television. After 56 years of marriage the couple maintains the patriarchal values of the 1950's. My father was and still is head of the household. His career and his needs came before my mother's. She was expected to be the primary care giver and manage the household—and we see her performing these roles.

Suddenly, in the process of making the film, my father and her husband passed away. The interviews then turn to the present as the camera becomes a witness to my mother's narrative of losing her life partner and establishing a new life living on her own terms—for the first time—at the age of 76.

Rhoda is a personal essay documentary about my mother. However, the film is also a historical testimony of women who came of age in the late 1950's and the evolution of the female experience of the past half-century.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mother, Rhoda Wise, for agreeing to participate in this film and for so generously sharing her life with honesty, grace and eloquence to me and to the viewers of this film.

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I thank Phil Hoffman and in particular the exercises in his production class which became the seed from which this film was born. Although I was sceptical at first, I

am forever grateful to him for introducing me to *Process Cinema*, which has been my guiding light and instrument in helping me find my voice as an independent filmmaker.

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To my siblings, my sisters Lauree Wise and Heidi Galler, my brother, Jonathan Wise, and their children for allowing me to film our family celebrations, for helping me gather family photos for the film, and for their ongoing encouragement and support.

Dedication

To my father, Ralph Wise, who always encouraged me to be strong, take chances and who supported me to get an education.

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Background of Film Subject

“Some women get erased a little at a time, some all at once. Some reappear. Every woman who appears wrestles with the forces that would have her disappear. She struggles with the forces that would tell her story for her, or write her out of the story, the genealogy, the rights of man, the rule of law. The ability to tell your own story, in words or images, is already a victory, already a revolt.”

- Rebecca Solnit¹

Rhoda is a personal documentary film about my mother’s life story. The film concludes a trilogy of documentary films I directed that explore the theme of choices around motherhood. I co-directed the film *Voices of Choice (1986)* where women and men, in separate groups discuss their personal experiences and choices related to abortion. In *Chinese Daughters (2003)*, I focused on the experiences of Chinese ten-year old girls who, because of China’s one child policy, were abandoned by their mothers and were subsequently adopted into Canadian families. *Rhoda* is the first personal documentary film I have made

In the mid-eighties I became involved in the Feminist documentary community in Canada when I participated in The National Film Board of Canada’s Studio D—the women’s studio- six-month training program for Canadian emerging female filmmakers. The program was lead by Feminist documentary filmmakers Kathleen Shannon and Bonnie Sherr Klein-*Not A Love Story (1981)*.

¹ Rebecca Solnit, “Men Explain Things to Me”, p.78

Over the past 20 years I worked with Canadian women documentary filmmakers including Donna Reed, *The Goddess Remembered* (1989), Justine Pimlott, Maya Gallus-*Punch Like A Girl* (2003) Ric Bienstok, Shelly Saywell and Barri Cohen. I am currently the cinematographer on a documentary film called *The Female Gaze*, about female movie directors, directed by Maya Gallus. This project has a particular resonance with me.

I initially became interested in Feminist studies in the 1980's at McGill University where I studied women's studies and film studies. I studied psychoanalytic and semiotic theories² about the representation of women in mainstream American culture. In particular I was interested in Laura Mulvey's analyses of the 'Male Gaze'—a condition of the male dominated Hollywood industry where films are created by men for a male spectator.

“Woman (...) stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.”³

I also studied Feminist documentary filmmakers of the 1970's who conceived of their work as a response to mainstream cinema's depiction of women and as an

² Theorists include Laura Mulvey: *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, John Berger: *Ways of Seeing* and Molly Haskell: *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*

³ Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 1999. P. 833-44.

instrument for social change. Examples of films made by the early Feminist documentary filmmakers include *Growing Female* by Julia Reichert, *Three Lives* by Kate Millet's, *Joyce at 34*, by Joyce Chopra, *Woman to Woman* by Donna Deitch and *Chris and Bernie* by Deborah Schaffer and Bonnie Friedman. These films portrayed the varied worlds of women's lives.

Julia Lesage, author of the article *The Political Aesthetics of the Documentary* (1978) wrote:

“One of the self-appointed tasks of contemporary Feminist art is to articulate, expand, and comment on women's own subcultural codification of the connotations of those visual elements and icons familiar to them in their private sphere.”

There are many parallels in the style and content of the Feminist documentary films and my thesis film *Rhoda*. Feminist documentary films explored subjects particular to the female experience including domestic life, marriage, motherhood and career. Their films challenged the portrayal of women's domestic world in mainstream culture which was mostly absent or seen as a place to leave behind so the hero can achieve his goals.

In contrast to the tradition of documentary films made by men, the relationship between the subject and filmmaker was often collaborative. Many Feminist documentaries were biographical or autobiographical which allowed the filmmakers to identify more personally with their subjects and the content.

Frequently, both the subject and filmmaker's thoughts were told directly to the camera/filmmaker.⁴

Rhoda is the story of women's experience of living through the societal changes of the 1970's. The film, elaborates on this narrative. It brings us up to the present day situation of women of that time, fifty years after the women's movement was born. The film also shows how women of my mother's generation still struggle with many of the same issues of gender, and male supremacy, documented by the early Feminist filmmakers.

⁴ Julia Lesage, *The Political Aesthetics Of The Feminist Documentary Film*, 1978. p.13.

Influences

In the making of this film, I followed the tradition of filmmakers who address larger themes by making very personal films about their own lives.

Flying: and Confessions of a Free Woman (2008) a PBS TV series directed by Jennifer Fox, had an important influence on both my approach to filmmaking and my choice of subject matter. This is a personal six-part documentary series where Fox travels to 17 countries in search of the identity of ‘the contemporary woman’. Fox films the series herself and shares her own story of being a 40-year-old childless woman with many of the women she meets in her travels. Like the Feminist filmmakers of the 1970’s, Fox presents an accurate depiction of women of her time. The series solidified my decision to make an intimate film that addresses themes that are important to women of my generation.

In the series Fox used a technique she created called ‘Passing the Camera’ — where the camera is passed around between subjects and filmmaker. Fox explains that she used this technique because wanted to dissolve the empowered role of the filmmaker, creating a more equal and informal conversation. Her goal was to mirror the way women speak normally when they are alone together.⁵

⁵ Cathleen Rountree, *Praise Free Women and Pass the Camera: Jennifer Fox on 'Flying'* International Documentary Association Documentary Magazine.

I experimented with this technique in some of my research interviews, however, when I shifted the focus of this film to my mother's story, I discovered that this technique was not appropriate for this film. For one thing, the technology would have been too much of a distraction and a challenge for my mother, as she is from a generation that is not comfortable with technology. But also, the dynamic of my film is my asking my mother questions about her life. It was not really a conversation that goes both ways, as was the case in Fox's series.

Another important influence was the interview style of Canadian documentary filmmaker Alan Zweig. Prior to starting the York graduate program, I was cinematographer on two of his films *When Jews Were Funny* and *15 Reasons to Live*. Zweig uses a non-traditional interview technique where the audience hears him asking questions but we don't actually see him in the film. Like Fox, his films are more of a conversation than an interview. I adapted this conversational approach for *Rhoda* because I liked how it allowed for a sense of intimacy and informality between subject and filmmaker. My mother could answer questions without worrying about giving context to my questions in her answer, which can make someone self-conscious and distracted. Like Zweig and Fox's films, *Rhoda* is akin to a long conversation between my mother and me. When the audience hears my questions it understands that I too am part of the film and these are questions I wanted to ask my mother.

Evolution of the Film Concept

I grew up during the Feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. I came to be a mother at the late age of 40, while my mother married at 19 (in 1959) and had four children by the time she was 27. In *Rhoda*, I wanted to understand the different choices and experiences women of my generation faced around career, love and child bearing, in comparison to those of my mother's generation, who came of age in the 1950s.

One important distinction that I became more aware of is the trend for women of my generation to start having children in their mid-to-late 30s and early 40s, or to not have children at all. This trend, which continues with younger women today, is very different from my mother's generation's experience of women marrying and having children much younger, and a strong social pressure for women to follow this more traditional path. For the first time in recorded Canadian history there are now more women over 40 having children than there are teens.⁶ A similar trend is also happening in Europe.⁷ In other words, my landscape of choices around career, marriage and motherhood is very different from that of my mother's generation.

⁶ Meagan Campbell, *Forget Teen pregnancies. Older Moms Are The New Normal*. Maclean's Magazine Aug. 30, 2016.

⁷ James Gallagher, *Over 40s 'Have More Babies' Than Under 20s*. BBC News July 13, 2016.

My original idea for this film was to tell the stories of older mothers like myself, women who had their children in their late 30s and early 40s. I wanted to understand their perceptions of motherhood in relation to the broader social changes that took place in both my mother's lifetimes and mine.

Before coming to York University, I had been working for many years in television on documentaries and documentary series, as well as a producer of commissioned videos for individuals and organizations. I was also teaching cinematography and production part time at various universities and colleges in Toronto and in Cuba. The thesis film *Rhoda*, was the first time I made a personal film implicating my own family into the story. It is also the first film I have initiated on my own, that was not a story brought to me by a producer.

I chose to make this as my thesis at York because I wanted to have creative freedom within the confines of a structured environment and with ongoing support to ensure the successful completion of the project. I had not been a student at a university since I was an undergraduate (30 years prior), and I felt the program also would help me refine my teaching skills to be able to teach film production at the university level.

I began the process of making this film by interviewing women friends and friends of friends of women of my generation. I interviewed ten women and asked them

about their memories of their own mothers, their impressions of motherhood growing up, and how their perceptions may have changed since they became mothers themselves.

I understand that the group I interviewed represents a limited spectrum of backgrounds and experiences. As adults, the women were all educated middle class, but they had diverse childhood experiences. Two of the women came from working class, immigrant families where both parents worked. Two of the women came from divorced households and were raised solely by their mothers who worked full time. The other women grew up in middle class or upper middle class households where their mothers were housewives.

Even though the women had very different domestic childhood experiences, they all spoke of memories of their mothers being stressed and overwhelmed with the day-to-day duties of raising children. They described their mothers as unfulfilled, and often depressed. The women who lived with their fathers said there was a general lack of gender equality in the home with regards to the division of labour. Most of the women said that despite their mother's emotional and personal hardships, they saw that their mothers loved their children and would sacrifice anything for the welfare of the children.

Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*, was one of the early Feminists to write about the experiences of women of the middle and upper middle class who were experiencing the impact of the Feminist movement of the 1970s.

She wrote:

“Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question— ‘Is this all?’”⁸

This feeling was reiterated in an interview I conducted with novelist Kathryn

Kuitenbrauer:

“I recall my mother would lock us outside of the house on some days and make us play in the back yard in the winter while inside she would spend hours doing crossword puzzles. Looking back now, I realize she was probably depressed.”

Writer Karen Connelly whose parents were divorced said in her interview:

“Now that I am a mother I don't know how my mother did it without going completely out of her mind. And I do understand why women were taking tranquilizers and drinking in the afternoon. Having a nervous breakdown. That is a word from my childhood. My mother used to say that—I'm going to have a nervous breakdown. But she never did. I mean I am sure she did in her own way. She must have often contained her nervous breakdown somehow. Because there were just too many children to consider leaving the house to consider going to the psyche ward. But she must have gone out of her mind sometimes. I mean there were five of us. And sometimes more. And no help.”

⁸ Betty Friedan, *The feminine Mystique* 1963 taken from *Public Women Public Words A Documentary History of American Feminism*.

It is important to remember that the focus of my questions was on the reflections and impressions of the daughters' experiences of their mothers. I was not speaking to the mothers themselves and how they experienced those years. I do not know if their mothers would have similar stories to tell. But that was exactly the point I was initially interested in exploring: I wanted to hear the perceptions female children had of their mothers. I wanted to explore the unconscious or conscious messages being communicated to my generation of girls around motherhood and family. I wanted to explore whether and how those perceptions impacted our life choices.

After completing these initial interviews, the direction of my thesis film shifted focus. I was inspired by a 'continuous frame' assignment I did for Professor Phil Hoffman's production course. I interviewed my own mother about her memories and choices around marriage and motherhood. This interview, to my surprise, was so evocative and so compelling that I decided to place my mother centre stage in my film. The focus of the film shifted from the story of my generation told by multiple women, to the story of my mother's generation as told by her unique story.

Before making this film, I did not consider my mother's story to be that interesting. On the surface, my mother was not particularly unique among women of her time and economic class. She followed the norms of getting married and

having children at a young age. She was both financially and emotionally dependent on my father who was the sole breadwinner and the primary decision-maker in our household. My mother was not rebellious in any way. When I interviewed her for the class exercise, I did not initially see how her story was of any interest.

Yet, when I showed the interview material to my Professor, Phil Hoffman, he pointed out that although I had done many interviews as a professional documentary filmmaker, I was failing to recognize an underlying dynamic taking place in this interview. I was not an objective interviewer. I was a daughter, interviewing her own mother. When I understood this difference I was inspired to make a personal film focussed on my mother's story. It would address the same themes I was interested in. And I saw that the fact that my mother's story was not unique for her generation, and that she was not rebellious, was the story I needed to tell. I also was inspired to make a personal film, an approach that would be a departure from my previous documentary work. I saw how this film would offer me an opportunity to develop creatively as a filmmaker.

Film Style and Approach

The film has three elements:

1. Interviews with my mother.

Over an 18-month period I interviewed my mother on several occasions. The interviews were purposely shot using natural light. I wanted the feeling of the film to be intimate and natural feeling, and since I was by myself I needed to keep the shooting process simple.

2. Verité observational scene where the camera is like a ‘fly on the wall’, following the action without too much intervention.

In the first part of the film there is verité footage shot over one day while my mother was preparing her annual Passover Seder meal for our family. The other sections were shot during my visits with mother.

3. Home movies and photos.

The photos in the film were drawn from slides taken by my father while we were growing up. The 16mm home movies were discovered this year in my uncle’s storage locker and were shot by my grandfather between the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Filming My Own Family

I decided from the start that I would direct, shoot and record the sound by myself.

I have a background in cinematography and directing so I knew that technically this was not beyond my abilities. Although there were some limitations to this approach, there were also many benefits. Filming by myself gave me flexibility to shoot as often as I needed to on various occasions. It was important my mother feel natural in front of the camera. With the absence of a crew there was nothing out of the ordinary for her to see me with my camera by my side while I filmed.

As we filmed it became clear that this simplified approach was working. My mother was completely herself when I filmed. In fact, she would often comment during the filming process or afterwards that she didn't think about the fact that I was recording her. A few times, after a filming session, she mentioned that she hoped she had not said too much, particularly when she spoke about my father and their relationship.

After my father passed away my mother spoke more freely about my father and their relationship. I interviewed her three times after he passed away and each time she seemed freer to speak with honesty. Over that year, she talked about gaining new insight into herself and her marriage to my father. She also commented that the filming process gave her an opportunity to process these changes. Overall, she told me she very much enjoyed the filming experience.

My siblings, children and partner did not mind being on camera, but they resented that I was shooting during almost all of our family visits that year. Often they would ask me to put the camera down and come join them and eat.

When I am shooting and or/directing a documentary film, I am engaged with the people in the room, but I am not a participant of the scenes I am filming. I listen to what is being said but with the purpose of building a narrative rather than responding to the interaction. I am looking at them but I am thinking about my shots and how they will cut together. I am focussed on their faces but I am looking at my camera exposures, the lens focus and the audio levels. I enjoyed the position of observer when filming scenes with my family, but it was different from filming other films. I am part the family being filmed, but I am not with them in front of the camera. I am part of their story but I am recording it from outside of the camera frame.

It is interesting for me to contemplate what different kind of video footage would have been recorded if I had brought a cinematographer with me to shoot the Passover family meal. What would that camera have recorded that I didn't see? I would have been in the Passover meal engaging with my family. How might we have behaved with an outsider documenting us?

In the weeks prior to my father passing away I was in Montreal a few times but I did not film at all. I also did not film during the ‘Shiva’—the seven-day mourning period after his death. From the perspective of a director, I missed important moments of my mother caring for my father while he was sick, but as her daughter I felt uncomfortable shooting during that time. For me, it was important to be connected to what was happening with my father and my family members. The camera would have distanced me from that important family experience. My family members were not comfortable for that level of intimacy to be exposed on film. I understood that they would have seen it as disrespectful and exploitive if I had filmed those moments.

When I am in the edit suite, I like to consider how the subjects of the film will react to the film. I find that if they are represented with honesty and empathy, the subjects are usually comfortable with the results. I don’t think my approach to the filming and editing process for *Rhoda* was very different from other documentary films I have made. Throughout the filming of *Rhoda*, my family was completely trusting of me as a filmmaker. Part of this may have been due to an assumption on their part that a student film may not be screened for the public. Their trust came with a heightened responsibility to be sensitive to their privacy.

I waited to show this film to my mother until I was done editing the film. She was extremely moved and pleased with the final film. I have not yet had the opportunity to show the film to anyone else in my family.

After my father passed away and I began the editing process, I realized I had not filmed my father at all except for the day of the Passover meal. The decision was not entirely conscious. I was focussed on my mother and her story – a voice we had not heard while growing up. This was probably a rare moment where someone was focussed on her story and she had an opportunity to speak, uninterrupted.

I also realize that my father did not express an interest in talking with me on camera. I was in their home many times with my camera and he never once asked me to sit with him and record him. When I did point the camera his way, he did not tell me to turn the camera off, but he did not offer to speak. My father had been sick with cancer for a few years but he refused to talk about the prospect of his dying to anyone and we all held onto the belief he would survive the cancer. If I had realized then how sick he was, I would have put more effort to record his side of the story as well.

Home Movie or a Film?

“You get to something universal by being very specific [...] I think you have to start at home.”⁹

Sue Friedrich, filmmaker

During the process of making this film I often thought about the difference between making a home movie or a slide show for my family and making a film that is intended for a general public audience. Catherine Russell, in her article *Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self* wrote that:

“Autobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the film- or video-maker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes”.¹⁰

The theme of the women’s movement ‘the personal is political’ translated into a genre of personal filmmaking in the 1970s adopted by Feminist filmmakers that challenged the language and the subject matter of mainstream Hollywood cinema. New forms of cinema, or ‘docu-fiction’, combined fiction and autobiography. American choreographer and filmmaker, Yvonne Rainer, examined how the female body was being viewed and objectified by the camera lens and combined fictional and autobiographical elements in her films *Lives of Performers*, (1972), *Film About a Woman Who* (1974) and *Kristina Talking*

⁹ Scott MacDonald, “Daddy Dearest: Su Friedrich Talks about Filmmaking, Family, and Feminism”, *The Independent* (December 1990), p.29

¹⁰ Catherine Russell, *Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self* (Excerpt from: *Experimental Ethnography*, Duke University Press 1999)

Pictures (1976). Michelle Citron interwove home movies and documentary interviews in her film *Daughter's Rite* to explore the larger theme of mother-daughter relations. Chantal Akerman—*News from Home* (1976) made experimental personal films that investigated family history, trauma, and memory.¹¹

In Canada, Richard Hancox, influenced by the New American cinema, created poetic experimental documentaries exploring memory and autobiography in his films *Home for Christmas* (1978) and *Moose Jaw* (1992). Hancox taught at Sheridan College in Ontario in the 1970's and was an important influence on Canadian experimental filmmakers including Richard Kerr, Michael Hoolboom and Philip Hoffman.

In 1978 The Art Gallery of Ontario held a ground breaking symposium on Autobiographical Art and hosted a six-week films series of autobiographical photography, video and film featuring the films of David Rimmer, *West Coast Portrait* (1967), Bruce Elder, *She is Away* (1975) and Clay Borris, *Rose House*, (1977).¹²

¹¹ Ricahrd, Stam, Richard Porton Leo Goldsmith, *Keywords in Subversive Film/Media Aesthetics.*, P.134

¹² Loren Ruth Lerner, *Canadian Film and Video: A Bibliography and Guide to the Literature*, Volume 1; Volume 7, p. 92

In the 1980's and 1990's queer culture adopted the autobiographical experimental film style and dealt with themes of displacement, immigration, exile, and transnationality. The films often involved an encounter with the filmmakers parent or grandparent who embody a particular cultural history of displacement or tradition. Film- and video-makers associated with the "new autobiography" include Richard Fung, Marlon Riggs, Su Friedrich, Rea Tajiri, Deborah Hoffman, Vanylyn Green, Margaret Stratton, Lynn Hershmann, Mark Massi, Hara Kazuo, Tony Buba, Mona Hatoum.¹³

Philip Hoffman said he started using family snapshots in his work to understand how the past lives in the present.¹⁴ In *Rhoda* I used our family films and photos, and my mother's memories to understand who I am today. In particular, I wanted to understand my own identity with respect to feminism, career and motherhood.

Meditation and yoga teacher, Michael Stone said:

'To remember is to come back to what is actually in the present experience... You can only experience the past in the present moment.'¹⁵

¹³ Catherine Russell, *Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self*, 1999, Excerpt from: *Experimental Ethnography*.

¹⁴ Phil Hoffman, quoted from film by Jenn E. Norton, Governor General's Award.

¹⁵ Michael Stone, quoted from Stone, M. (2012). *Redefining The Present Moment. 5 Min Dharm Talk*.

I believe that through this filmmaking experience, my mother and I have created a new narrative of our shared past and memories. I also believe our narrative is representative of the stories of other women of both her and my generations.

16mm Films and Home Movies

“Home movies (....) are as much reconstructions as excavations of the past.”¹⁶

Richard Fung

As a child, my father would have slide show of family photos at family gatherings. For my thesis I went through boxes of these family slides that were stored in my parents' house. I scanned them into a digital format for the film. I also discovered, after my father died, a box of 16mm films from the 1950s and 1960s that my grandfather had shot. Most of the films were of my father and his family as children. I found a few shots of my parents when they were dating, and one of my parents at their engagement party. I played these few minutes of film over and over again on my computer. I enlarged them, slowed down the image, and froze each individual frame. They seemed very much in love. It was such a contrast to how I see them today—aging and tired of each other after 56 years of marriage. I showed the film of my parents kissing to my mother. She had no memory of the film or of that moment I saw on film. I explained I thought it was her engagement party based on the people who were in the film-both her family and my father's family members were in the scene and they appeared to be celebrating my parents. I found it interesting she had no memory of that time. I was also surprised she did not share the same excitement I experienced when I saw the film of her and my father.

¹⁶ Richard Fung, *Remaking Home Movies*, from *Mining The Home Movie*, 2007 P.11

Experimental filmmaker Richard Fung, who used home movies in three of his films: *The Way to My Father's Village* (1988), *My Mother's Place* (1990), and *Sea in the Blood* (2000) wrote that "Films are not always what they seem; their familiarity can be deceptive."¹⁷ Fung was referring to his own experience of watching films of his childhood as an adult. The images he saw in the movies did not synchronize with his memories of the time.

I was trying to reconstruct the past with these 16mm frames of my parents. When I saw my mother's reaction to the home movies of herself with my father I understood that her memory of that moment was not necessarily what I saw in the images captured by the camera. I also understood that my need to play the films over and over again came out of my need to understand my parents as they are today, by reconstructing their past through our family photos and films.

¹⁷ Richard Fung, *Remaking Home Movies*, from *Mining The Home Movie*, 2007 P.11

Process Cinema

“The things that are throwaway within the commercial realm, I am very interested in. Scratches and soft focus and all those things that are issues in mainstream cinema are things that I can access that I can harness for expression.”¹⁸

Phil Hoffman, Experimental Filmmaker

The initial interview I filmed with my mother was done as a continuous frame exercise for my production class with filmmaker Phil Hoffman. In the middle of the interview my father interrupted us, and yelled at my mother that it was time to leave. My mother, who said she was enjoying the experience of being interviewed suddenly lost her focus after the abrupt interruption and quickly left with my father. Initially I was very disappointed with the interview footage from that day because I saw the interruption as an error and problematic. It broke the flow of my mother’s attention and mood and I did not complete my list of interview questions. I did not think the material was usable. When I reviewed the footage with my professor I realized that what I had captured with this interruption was the most poignant moments of the shoot. The moment of interruption revealed more about my parent’s relationship and my father’s domination of my mother than all of her words in the interview. Thematically, the moment embodied the themes I was exploring in my film of patriarchy of their generation.

¹⁸ Phil Hoffman quoted from film by Jenn E. Norton made for Canada Council Laureate.

This is the essence of what I have come to understand about process cinema. I began to see how the typical 'flaws' in a shoot may be seen as mistakes in 'mainstream' television but can be beautiful and poetic moments as well. This experience was pivotal to my own development as a filmmaker and my understanding of the techniques and craft of Process cinema. I plan to continue to practice and incorporate this approach in my work.

The Editing Process

Although I directed and shot the film by myself, I knew I would need a collaborator in the editing room. I knew that I would be challenged choosing which material was interesting especially because the material is so close to me and I had been working on my own until that point.

Deborah Palloway, the editor of the film, was an integral part of the editing process. She has an extensive background editing documentary films and she brought the necessary objective eye to my material. During the editing process, Deb took the time to talk about her approach to editing. She also gave me tutorials on how to properly set up the editing software for our project and how to log and organize my footage.

At the preliminary stages of editing this film, I was discouraged because I could not find the structure of the film and I was worried that we had no film. After a long day of editing my editor, Deb Palloway, who had lost her mother a year before, said to me, *“what a gift that you had this time to interview your mother and ask her questions. My mother is gone now and I never had a chance to ask her anything.”* It struck me that I did have a rare opportunity to spend hours with my mother and ask her questions. I also realized at that moment that I was distracted with worry about how the film would turn out: would audiences like the film? I knew that part of the creative process is to let go of the expectation and

that I needed to trust in the creative process. This is why I had initially decided to apply to the York film graduate program – so I could develop a personal, creative project on my own terms.

By letting go of the outcome I found I was I was able to work more freely and intuitively with my material. After working with the editor on the film structure I continued to edit the film myself until its completion.

Conclusion

When I first began filming my mother I did not think her story was unique. I saw her story as typical of women of her generation and economic and social class. But, I thought her story could represent the general experiences of women of her era. I thought women who see this film would see themselves, or their mothers, in my mother's story. In the process of making the film, I did not expect to discover anything I did not know about my mother. My intention for this film was to validate her life story, and the stories of other women of her generation.

As I come to the completion of this film, I realize that there are things I discovered about my mother. My mother says at the beginning of the film that she loved being a mother, but that later, in the 1970s, she experienced societal pressure to have a career and a life beyond the home:

“Suddenly they changed the rules on me and we were expected to have meaningful careers. And I didn't start out that way.”

As a child, I was mostly critical of the traditional patriarchal arrangement in my parents' home. I did not understand the societal pressures my parents and their friends experienced and how that may have impacted their sense of self and their self-esteem. I had never considered how the Feminist movement had affected her personally. My mother eventually did go back to school in her early 40s and become a psychotherapist. In the film, she says she was initially terrified at the prospect of making this leap but that, in the end it, was the best thing she ever

did because that is when she really changed and grew as a person. As a child, I was not aware of her inner world and the struggles she faced. I was also not aware of her successes in her career, maybe because I was not living at home by the time she started work, but mostly because I do not think our family ever celebrated her career successes. The focus was always on my father and his career. I found it interesting – and probably not a coincidence – that I had trouble finding any photos of my mother’s graduation from graduate school, or photos of her at work or at her office. All of our family photos of her are with the family and children.

On the final interview for the film my mother said: “These hours and hours of interviews were like therapy for me.”

How have remembering all these aspects of her life, and recording them on video, with me as her witness, affected my mother? How did the experience of filming my mother impact me? When I started making the film, I did not think about how the making of the film could impact each of our lives. Growing up, I had heard and lived through most of the stories she tells in the film, however, this was the first time I really listened to her with the ears of an adult and with the ears of a storyteller, looking for subtext and meaning behind her words.

I showed my mother a rough cut of the final film, and (to my relief) she was extremely moved and very happy with the film. I believe that after so many years of living in the shadows of my father and everyone else in our family, the process of filming her story and the final film, was a validation and celebration of her life and the struggles she endured, mostly silently. It was also, possibly, the first time she had the opportunity to speak, uninterrupted.

In the last interview with my mother, I asked her what she thought this film was about and she said, 'I think at the beginning I think the film was about women who lived through the 1950's and 60's and what it was like to be a mother and woman at that time. But, the film has changed. I think thematically, the film is about a woman who goes through life changes... and her transformation.'

The changes my mother experiences during the film are a result of events that took place while we were filming. But she said the experience of participating in the film was also transformational. The filming experience gave her an opportunity to have her life story heard on camera. It validated her life experience and it changed her experience of these memories.

Rhoda was a collaborative effort between my mother and me and we are both transformed from the experience.

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Appendix

EQUIPMENT PACKAGE FOR THE FILM: end of your paper, not in the main body of the paper)

The package I shot with included:

- Canon C-100 camera with the Atamos Ninja Recorder (The Atamos Ninja Recorder gave me a less compressed image then the Canon C-100. See comparison of compression rates below.)
- Canon 24-10mm zoom lens
- Sachtler ACE tripod.
- Sennheiser wireless microphone
- Sennheiser ME66 directional microphone.

Canon C-100 compression rate natively is 8bit / 4:2:0 / AVCHD

Canon C-100 recorded with Atamos Ninja (exported from the camera with HDMI cable) the image quality bumps up to 10bit 4:2:2 PRORES codec.

Camera setting was Canon log (C-log) gamma profile as it preserves the most color and luminance data from the sensor. C-log takes quite a bit of color correction, which has not been done to date.