

Breaking Narrative Cycles

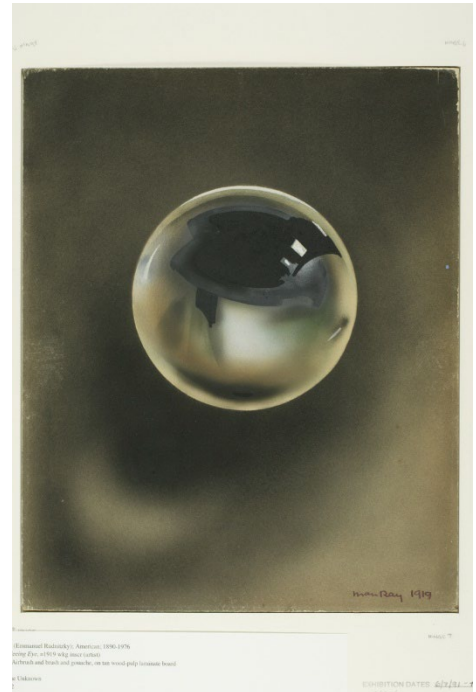
Can breaking traditional narrative structures be a driving power to allow reclamation of personal narratives, a break of transgenerational trauma and create a place for healing?



INTRODUCTION

Recently I have been surprisingly surrounded by circles, loops and cycles. Everywhere I looked I would see circles, performances I went to revolved around narrative loops, books I read would explore cycles of lives. Searching for a topic for my dissertation, I figured this couldn't be a simple coincidence. Thinking about my own practice, most of my recent work revolves around familial dynamics, transgenerational baggage and the cycles of trauma that are perpetuated through generations. My thoughts initiated there as I am exploring within my work innately how to break those transgenerational cycles, and rewrite our own

narratives independently from the generational cycles that affect us. Here we have it. Break narrative cycles and reclaim narratives. Theoretically, symbolically, and literally through performative works. I started being interested in the literal break of traditional narrative cycles in cinematic works, exploring the reasoning behind those non-traditional narratives. I am particularly



“The Eye That Sees Everything” Man Ray, 1919



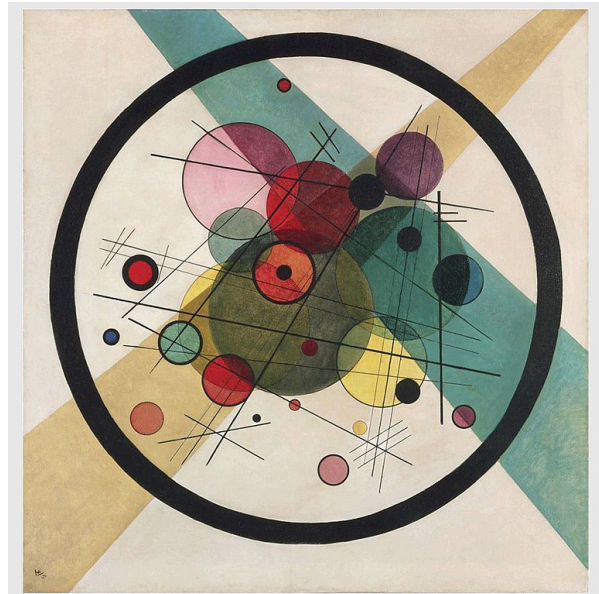
“The Dante Project” Contemporary Ballet, Wayne McGregor, Royal Opera House, 2023

intrigued by how fragmented narratives enable an in-depth exploration and reflection of a character's state of mind, emotional depth, human nature, and various themes revealed through the intentional disruption of narrative cycles. I grew more and more interested in the

construction and deconstruction of those cyclic narratives, specifically the act of reclaiming narratives and reframing narratives. However I wanted to be careful to not be too limited on transgenerational cycles, as it is a very precise topic. Thus I decided to explore the power and limitations of breaking narrative structures, might it be in reclaiming, healing or empowerment. Furthermore, I will link it to my own practice, and my exploration of transgenerational familial cycles. My Word and Image document will ultimately explore and debate the possibility that the breaking of those traditional narrative cycles in film and theatre performances, can allow a path for healing and breaking free from transgenerational baggage.



“Design for a Centotaph, for Sir Isaac Newton”
Étienne-Louis Boullée, 1784



“Circles in a Circle” Wassily Kandinsky, 1923

I will explore topics such as constructing and deconstructing traditional cyclic narratives, reclaiming narratives as a practice in performance, and breaking transgenerational cycles. I will do so by referencing two of my most recent works that revolve thematically and technically around those concepts: “Oddball” (work in progress – 2023/2024) through which I will explore the

reclamation of narratives, and “The House” (2023), through which I will more specifically explore the break of narrative cycles and transgenerational cycles. Those are two short films I have written, directed and produced in this past year. I will back up my argument by referencing cinematographic works of Chantal Akerman recent meta-documentaries by Kaouther Ben Hania (4 Daughters – 2023) and Mona Achache (Little Girl Blue – 2023). I will explore the possibilities and limitations of the power of reclaiming narrative by exploring Forum Theatre and the Theatre of the Oppressed by Augusto Boal. Through those references, I will explore how performance harbors a power to heal by breaking narrative cycles and the reclamation of narratives.



“Asteroid City” (2023) Wes Anderson

TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE STRUCTURES

To understand what I mean by discussing the break of narrative cycles, it is essential to understand the structures of narratives in traditional films. In his chapter about Narratives and Narration, Michael Ryan explains that usually classic structure of a screenplay is divided into three acts: exposition (first act), conflict and stress (second act), and heroic resolution with a redemptive ending (third act). The classic mainstream narrative is easy to follow and the actions follow one another in a consistent way (Ryan, 2020).

“A man gets a job looking after a hotel resort in winter. He goes mad. He tries to kill his wife and son. He dies in the snow at the end. By distributing the time of the narrative evenly over these four major events, Stanley Kubrick constructs a well-formed narrative in The Shining.”

(Ryan, 2020, p.110)



“The Shining” (1980), Stanley Kubrick – Demonstration of classic narrative structure, in three acts

This summarizes quite well how a traditional narrative structure is constructed. My interest lies in the breaking of those norms, the effects it creates and the reasoning behind the fragmented narratives. Michael Ryan explores this topic and continues by stating that a lack of narrative

continuity is sometimes a better way of making a point, describing a different dimension of life, or psychological state. He states that a fragmented narrative gives a better, more accurate portrait of the world depicted. (Ryan, 2020, p.124)

I am interested in exploring how a fragmented narrative requires a different method of narration, for example all the technical elements of filmmaking, from camera movement and shot composition to color and art direction. I am most particularly interested in the creative process of film making, from acting (or re-acting), editing and restructuring. In this word and image document, I will examine two categories of films that deconstruct traditional narrative structures. The first category includes “Two Years at Sea” (2011) by Ben Rivers and the work of Chantal Akerman where both show a true technical break from traditional narrative structures, and the true meaning of the film lies in the way the film is constructed.



“Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles” (1975) Chantal Akerman

The second category contains two meta-documentaries (“4 Daughters” (2023) by Kaouther Ben Hania and “Little Girl Blue” (2023) by Mona Achache). Through their making process and their nature, both those films break the traditional narration techniques and narrative structures of documentaries. We assist in those films, a blending between the past and present, with processes of re-enactment and acts of reclamation. Having this theoretic knowledge with us now, we can start approaching those aspects in my own work and within my research, to understand the power and limitations of breaking narrative structures.



“Little Girl Blue” (2023) Mona Achache – Marion Cotillard (main actress) and Mona Achache recreating cathartic scenes from the past and breaking traditional narrative and narration structures

RECLAIMING NARRATIVES

Oddball is a short film I wrote, co-directed, and produced during this term. It is a work in progress and I will start the editing process in the following weeks. It is very much inspired by the Slow Cinema movement, allowing the image to take over the traditional narrative. It aims to be a poetic and cinematographic portrait of our subject, Clare. Clare is a woman in her 60s, she is finishing up her Ph.D. and thesis that she spent the past 5 years researching and writing in Dhaka, Bangladesh, researching about child labor in the factories in the slums of Dhaka. When we shot the film, Clare had just gotten back from Dhaka and was settling back in her London home. We were very much interested in exploring this person, especially at that pivotal moment of her life, in between two cycles of life, and the rediscovery of habits, places and identity. This film is a quite and deep reflection, about her, for her. It is a portrait, but mostly an encounter, a confluence between us artists and Clare. It is the ambiguous portrait that represents the intersection between our perspectives of Clare and her own narrative of herself.

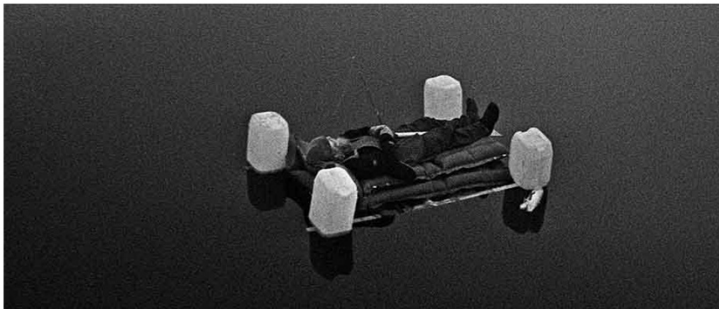


“Oddball” (2023) – Ophélie Verhaeghe and Selma Stocker (Own Film)

In reference to the breaking of traditional narrative cycles and its effects, I found it crucial to research and reference Ben Rivers' 2011, "Two Years at Sea". It is an interesting example of how to break down the structure of narrative cycles and rework them through the lens. "Two Years at Sea" is a "contemplative, observational movie where image (and soundtrack) takes precedence over conventional narrative." (Rose, 2012) Ben Rivers and his cinematography, methodology, process of filming, and creation of non-traditional narratives, is one of our main inspirations for our film Oddball.

"Rivers' work could perhaps be seen as the flipside to literature: when you read a book, you're given a plot and you conjure the images in your imagination; with a film such as Two Years At Sea, it's the other way round. Its carefully composed images capture a poetic beauty that's rich with meaning and mystery."

(Rose, 2012)



"Two Years at Sea" (2011) Ben Rivers

This philosophy of film and narrative building inspired us in the creation of “Oddball”. We chose to shape our narrative, and film-making by the experience, the person, our encounter, rather than bringing a structured scenario and a driven narrative to the project. Our technical process consisted of filming actions and places led by Clare’s habits, envies and our discussions, and from there build a meaningful short-film. Our three days encounter allowed us to collect images, discussions and for us to build through the editing process a poetic film not directed by a linear narrative but rather by the emotion, our encounter, and Clare’s voice. Through this methodology and film-making process we broke down the traditional structures of narrative building.



“Oddball” (2023) – Ophélie Verhaeghe and Selma Stocker (Own Film)

It felt very important for us that Clare had the opportunity to have a power, a control, and a chance of reclaiming the narrative as she perceives it while filming. This film is an exploration of Clare as an individual, an encounter filled with the poetics of spaces and mechanical actions.

Through the editing, we are going to infuse meaning and construct our non-traditional narrative after deconstructing the traditional norms of narrative building. As will be demonstrated in this essay, in this exploration of Clare, we also explored the act of reclaiming narratives and building meaning through the fragmentation of traditional narrative cycles.



“Oddball” (2023) – Ophélie Verhaeghe and Selma Stocker (Own Film)

Through the shooting days, we experienced first-hand, how Film-making and acting can provoke an act of reclamation for the subject. The breaking of narrative structure, thus the process of filming allowed Clare to reclaim her storyline, and voice it. Narrative reclamation was a recurrent topic of discussion while shooting the film. Quite intuitively she expressed her refusal to fit into a box or be a projection of our imagination, she wanted to be truly herself and be able to express her own narrative. We discussed cycles and the perpetration of narratives, specifically in the optic of unconventional women in history and literature. A book she discussed and wanted to include in the film is "The Awakening" by Kate Chopin. She was telling us about the representation

of women, and the categorizations of women throughout literature, film, and narratives, and how we should be aware of it and be able to break those cycles of narratives, as a new generation.



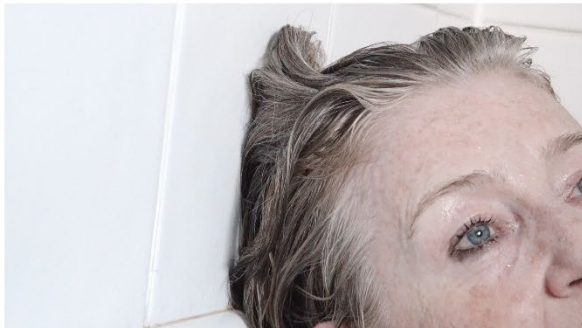
“Oddball” (2023) – Ophélie Verhaeghe and Selma Stocker (Own Film)

“I was reading the final passage of the Awakening, where Edna walks into the sea, to drown. You know, it’s a profound feminist novel but even for Kate Chopin, the only ending she can think of for her heroine, is suicide. Because Edna wants to live outside the convention of marriage and she was looking for love outside marriage. It is like so many of those 19th century heroines who want to live outside of their conventional role (Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina), the only way out for them or the only way out that the author can imagine for them, is suicide. So, I guess, the important thing is nowadays we can take strong women like Edna, and re-write a narrative for them, breaking those traditional oppressive narrative cycles.”

(Oddball, 2023)

In our film, we have a scene that is a foil to “The Awakening’s” ending (where Edna, the main character walks into the sea, to drown herself). It was unintentional at first, and then Clare brought meaning to it, and this is where our discussion about reclaiming narratives and breaking cycles of imposed narratives on women started. Through film-making we explored the possibility

of breaking those narrative cycles, reclaim women's storylines and the ability of transforming those tragic endings. In the foil scene with "The Awakening", Clare lies in a bath (often symbol of death and suicide), yet she transforms the meaning, reclaims the narrative. She brings to it a new meaning of empowerment, relief and ownership, through her acting, our capture of the scene (and later on in the construction of the edit). Thematically, there is a strong parallel between Edna's story and Clare's. Clare could be considered as an "unconventional" woman in the classic societal eye, she has no children, is not married, and pursued her Ph.D. independently, as a single woman in Dhaka, where everything is centered around the family, strongly, without caring what anyone is saying. I believe that for her it was important to acknowledge this and to show us and the audience, that she can dictate her narrative, and reclaim her own image through the means of the making of this film and by acting this scene out. Through this process here, we can see how the breaking of traditional narrative cycles, and the filming process it provokes, has allowed our subject Clare to reclaim her voice and find power to dictate her narrative.



"Oddball" (2023) – Ophélie Verhaeghe and Selma Stocker (Own Film)

This act of reclamation of narrative through acting (or re-acting) is strongly connected to my second reference, the new film/documentary by Tunisian director Kaouther Ben Hania called “Les Filles d’Olfa” (2023) or “4 Daughters” in English. Her new film is a meta-documentary that explores a familial tragedy. It is the story of Olfa, a mother, and her four daughters. The two eldest daughters have disappeared, “they have been eaten by the wolf” (Ben Hania, 2023) meaning they left the familial home to fight in Syria for the Islamic State. What interested Kaouther Ben Hania lied already in the past so through the making of this unconventional documentary she created that cathartic laboratory to reconquer the past and try to understand it. To tell their story in a way that can translate the complexity and the kaleidoscopic aspect of their story, she brought two actresses to play the roles of the two missing daughters, one actress to be a foil to Olfa and one male actor who would play all the roles of the fleeing male apparitions in the family’s life.



“Les Filles d’Olfa” (2023) Kaouther Ben Hania – Recomposing a family with actresses – exploring the past

Kaouther Ben Hania created a recomposed family through the tools of cinema, asking the real characters to re-enact scenes of their lives. She additionally asked Olfa and the daughters to direct the actors in order to reconvene memories in a cinematographic way and to summon the past (Unifrance, Ben Hania, 2023). Through the breaking of the traditional narration method and narratives used for documentaries, Ben Hania creates a reflection on the nature of memory, its meaning and allows an understanding of the why and how of their tragic unfolding.



“Les Filles d’Olfa” (2023) Kaouther Ben Hania

Already in the thematic of the film, we can observe how it intimately connects to my exploration, of breaking narrative cycles (in the cinematographic way, but also in the transgenerational familial way). Kaouther Ben Hania explains that at first her film might seem at first sight about radicalization, but the meaning is far more profound. It is an exploration of the why, to show the unrevealed and dive into education, the dynamics of the family, violence from mother to daughter from generations to generations. This film is intimately about motherhood, what we transmit to our children, cycles of love but also trauma, and what it means to be a teenager.

In Ben Hania's film-making process the action of re-enacting has created a powerful tool for healing and reclaiming narratives for the family (France24, Ben Hania, 2023). My interest lies strongly in the filmmaking process, and the act of re-enacting and reclaiming our narrative, similar to what Clare did in through our filming process.

The movie is about remembering trauma, remembering violent moments, expressing, exteriorizing and processing tragedy and trauma. In many interviews, Ben Hania testifies what the filming process has done to the actress, explaining that the filming process and re-enacting revolved around the expressing of painful truths. "It is therapeutic telling your own memory. This movie gave the daughters the opportunity to share things they previously haven't with their mother since they felt protected and cared for in a truly safe place. They thanked me for giving them a voice." (Oscars, Ben Hania, 2023) The pattern repeats, the making of the film allowed the daughters to reclaim their voice within the family, allowed them to express the unsaid.

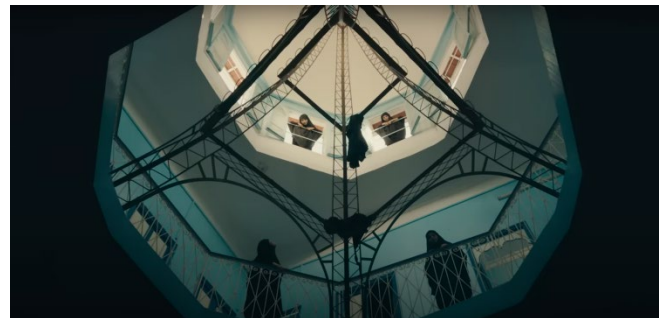


"Les Filles d'Olfa" (2023) Kaouther Ben Hania

One scene in particular shows the power of re-enactment and how the film-making allowed the subject to reclaim their narrative. Eya the third daughter, recreates a scene where she speaks with her step-father who had abused her in the past. In this scene, she tells him all the things she has wanted to say. It got so intense that the actor had to leave set, where Eya insisted and reassured everyone around her, saying that she had already told this story a hundred times, to hundreds of psychiatrists. She explains that she was over it but that she needed this scene to be in the movie, she needed to tell the story to the audience, to put a term to it and reclaim her narrative.



“Les Filles d’Olfa” (2023) Kaouther Ben Hania



Linking to my exploration of breaking narrative cycles and transgenerational trauma cycles within the family, Kaouther Ben Hania tells us that in the family, they say and hope that the “malediction” of trauma transmission from mother to daughters in the family will be broken with the two younger daughters, holders of hope, as now they are conscious of it. The director adds that the film also participated in it, through its introspective travelling allowing the girls to understand the architecture of their familial dynamics and bringing them a new relationship to love and questioning. (France24, Ben Hania, 2023) This for me happened through the telling, the exteriorization of their story, through the breaking of traditional narrative structures. It gave them a voice, a new power over their narrative, and their ending allowed them to refuse to follow the patterns and cycles of trauma that have been perpetuated.

POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS of NARRATIVE RECLAMATION

I am interested in debating whether breaking traditional narrative cycles and reclaiming narratives can bring healing and break patterns of trauma. Two interesting practices that have been backed up by studies and psychiatrists are the Forum Theatre developed by Augusto Boal and “psychodrama” developed by Jacob Moreno. Forum Theatre (Or Theatre of the Oppressed) is an interactive theatre form invented in the early 1970s by Augusto Boal. “Boal’s aim was to help audience members identify their “internal oppressions” in order to begin to overcome them.” (Involve, 2018). Forum Theatre uses theatre to achieve social aims, often in socially excluded or disempowered groups. It is a form of theatre that encourages audience interaction and explores different options for dealing with a problem or issue. (Boal, 2008).

In this practice, a short play is shown to the audience in which the protagonist faces some sort of oppression or challenge that he or she is unable to overcome. Following the performance, audience members are invited and welcome to the stage to offer various interpretations and



“Forum Theatre” (1978) Augusto Boal

alternative options for the protagonist's actions and reactions. This re-enaction can be used to uncover and analyze alternatives and options in any circumstance - past, present or future. Through a sort of theatrical debate in which ideas and experiences are rehearsed and shared, the actors explore the outcomes of those shared decisions and experimentations with the audience, bringing to the spect/actors a sense of empowerment and solidarity. (Boal)

A Study written by Karina Deniele Ramdath explores The Use of Forum Theatre as Therapy with At-risk Immigrant and Refugee Youth. This study has allowed me to assess the possibilities and limitations that breaking narrative cycles and reclaiming narratives can bring to trauma healing. The recognition of Forum Theatre's power has spread internationally, and facilitators in North America have adapted Boal's techniques from a revolutionary context to one that explored identity, notions of resilience and healing (Schutzman, 1994). According to Freire, through this practice, the spect-actors "are no longer willing to be mere objects, responding to changes occurring around them" (Freire, 1993, p.33). Through Forum Theatre, the subjects can transform their inner and external world. The audience, who are also the actors and witnesses (spect-actors) accept and rise up to the challenge proposed by the performance, and generate a momentum that alters the oppressive systems that impact them, and eventually put an end to their struggle (Boal, 2008). By gaining control over representation and narratives, forum theater allows a shift of power between performers and audience members, creating a cathartic metamorphosis of both identity and reality (Houston, 2001 ; Ramdath, 2016)



"Forum Theatre" (1978) Augusto Boal

Evidently Forum Theatre is a practice that allows empowerment and forms of relief, however it can be argued that by itself, Forum Theatre is not enough to allow people to heal from trauma. Proponents of Boal's practice stated that Boal often claimed that Forum Theatre is not therapy (Ramdath, 2016). Ramdath later on states, based on her own field research:

“Every time I worked with groups using forum theatre, it was clear that forum theatre was not therapy and they should have trained counselors and/or therapists available to address any conflicts, trauma, or emotional need that actors and community members identify as a need for therapy.”

(Ramdath, 2016, p.7)

The study in general states that it is essential to have therapists and that the subjects follow therapy to truly overcome trauma, but that forum theatre allows them to find their voice, and find power over the trauma or structures that have previously oppressed them.

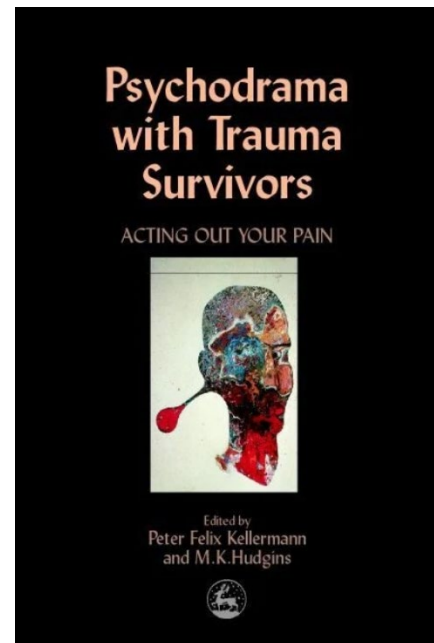


“Forum Theatre” (1978) Augusto Boal

A practice that reflects this idea of re-enacting and using theatre as therapy is “psycho-drama”. It was developed in 1920 by Jacob Moreno, and it has provenly allowed intense emotional exploration where cognitively beneficial “retraumatization occurs” (Ramdath, 2016). In this structured form of therapy, which is imperatively driven by professional psychiatrists and therapists, a person dramatizes and acts out a personal problem or conflict. This usually happens in front of a group of other therapy participants, whom, similarly as in Forum Theatre, usually take part in the drama, though each performance focuses on a single person’s concerns. (Villines,

2022) A 2021 study of 14 randomized controlled trials (Psychodrama Group Therapy for Social Issues: A Systematic Review of Controlled Clinical Trials, led by López-González, M. Angeles), and one semi-randomized controlled trial that included 642 people, demonstrated that this practice allowed relief and healing from various mental health symptoms including: helping a person work through trauma, managing grief and providing a safe outlet for painful emotions. (Giacomucci, 2022 ; López-González, 2021)

From my research and studies, I conclude that the act of re-enacting and narrative control can be liberating, but to be truly healing and have a deep impact on trauma understanding it is essential to be followed by professional therapists, as shown within Four Daughters, Forum Theatre and Psychodrama therapy. Those practices of reclaiming and breaking cycles of narratives are profoundly revealing, liberating, and therapeutic but with such heavy trauma, it makes sense that performance, film making or storytelling are not simply enough. They are a link in the chain



Psychodrama with Trauma Survivors – Acting Out Your Pain, Peter Felix Kellerman and M. K. Hudgens

of healing and it is essential for traumatic experiences to heal, to be surrounded by professionals. However, we can testify that through narrative reclamation and performance, the subjects find power over their story, with their voice and their narrative.

BREAKING TRANSGENERATIONAL CYCLES

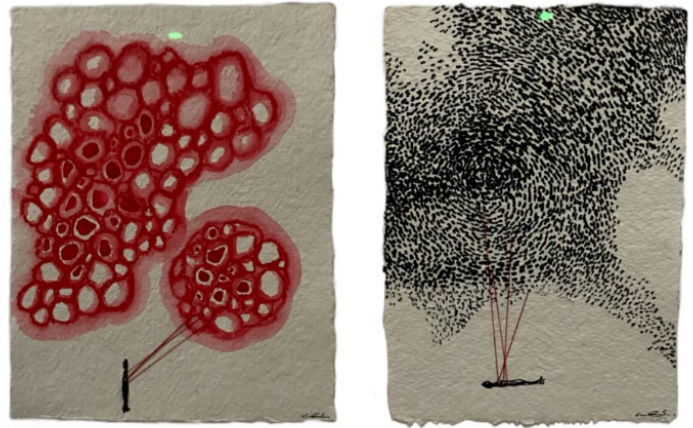
This brings me to the second part of my research (which I have already vaguely explored throughout the analysis of Kaouther Ben Hania's work), more focused on the break of traditional narrative cycles and its effects on transgenerational cycles of trauma (specifically in the familial context). To explore those topics I will reference my short film "The House" (2023) which revolves around those themes, as well as the cinematographic works of Mona Achache and Chantal Akerman, in which both directors explore themes of transgenerational cycles of trauma and motherhood, in very cathartic ways.

As Anne Ancelin Schutzenberger states in her book «The Ancestor Syndrome»: "We feel a duty to "pay debts" to our ancestors whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not, and to repeat the "interrupted tasks" as long as they are not "closed" [...] Everyone's life is a novel. You and I live in an invisible spider's web, of which we are also one of the architects." (Schutzenberger, 2014)



Invisible Loyalties, (Boszormenyi-Nagy)

In this paragraph I aim to define the meaning and theory behind transgenerational trauma. Transgenerational Trauma is the concept, applied by therapists, that everything that affects us—body, soul, and mind—comes from our ancestors, our lineage. (Maillard and Eersel, 2002). It's the notion that we carry inside us (physically and



Navigating the Unknown (2020) Chiharu Shiota, König Gallery Exhibition, London (Shiota)

mentally) the pain, secrets, and experiences our family has carried through every generation. These are unfulfilled tasks, an unresolved grief following a traumatic loss, from which you are unable to separate yourself, and they are transmitted on to subsequent generations, manifested in their bodies, lives, and traumas. Bluma Zeigarnick (one of Kurt Lewin's student), presented in her doctoral thesis, "Psychology of the Gestalt" in 1928, the so-called "Zeigarnick effect" in psychology, or the "interrupted tasks" that are sometimes repeated in one's life. Transgenerational therapy was created and developed by Anne Ancelin Schützenberger in the 1970s, and other psychoanalysts including Didier Dumas, Iván Boszormenyi-Nagy, and Françoise Dolto, later on theorized it (Eersel and Maillard, 2002).



"Bodies of Water" (2023) Ophélie Verhaeghe (own work), working on visual manipulation and construction, projections for performance surrounding themes of motherhood and transgenerational transmission

Transgenerational trauma has been a recurrent theme in my practice for four years now. I have, repeatedly, explored my mother/daughter relationship and this heavy feeling that has followed me throughout my life, this trauma that doesn't feel mine. Those works include among other projects "Bodies of Water" (2023) with my projection and visual work and my short film "The House". My work has always been a way for me to introspect, a way to reach understanding, and, subconsciously, of healing. Transgenerational trauma was even the topic of my first dissertation. Three years ago I was exploring how performance through the body would be a place for resilience and exteriorization, while now I am more interested in exploring how to break those cycles of trauma, through narrative reclamation and breaking narrative cycles and structure, specifically in film and theatre. The means has changed, but the intent stays the same.



"Bodies of Water" (2023) Ophélie Verhaeghe (own work) projection work around motherhood, cycles of life and transgenerational transmission

A Kinesitherapist once told me that in my mother/daughter lineage, there was a blockage over 7 generations, an unsaid trauma that has been shared again and again and has not yet been broken nor resolved. I believe that through my artistic practice, I have been finding a way to investigate this trauma, try to understand it, and find ways of relief, by putting it in the world. In a way I am breaking this cycle of unsaid words and miscommunication.

THE HOUSE (2023)

“The House” (2023) is probably the best example of how unconsciously at first and then very much consciously I explored those mother/daughter relationships. “The House” is a film that is initially inspired by the “Poetics of the Space” by Gaston Bachelard. It explores poetically Transgenerational Relationships that exist through our houses, the intimate connections our houses build, and how we are all subconsciously connected through the house. The house is this receptacle of our common memory, keeping us alive through its walls.



“The House” (2023) Ophélie Verhaeghe (own work) – Storyboards and Still

The House shaped itself around the transgenerational cycles and the interconnection of all those feminine existences within the walls. For me, “The House” (2023) stands for the depths of my inner self and subconscious, where I am working on conscientizing, understanding and healing from this transgenerational baggage. “The House’s narrative symbolizes all the women who came before me and who will come after me, and the intimate transgenerational connection which brings us all together. The short film assembles though its non-linear narrative fragments of existences, in a timeless way. It reunites all the characters in the house’s intimacy showing scenes of questioning, fear, love. The film depicts in an unconventional fragmented narrative, the relationships between various women’s existences (past, present and future).



“The House” (2023) Ophélie Verhaeghe (own work)

I have created a break in traditional narrative structure by not basing me on the classical three act scenario, but rather creating poetically multiple storylines, in different rooms, with different characters and actions, and through the editing process, bringing them together. Light, colors and composition were essentials to then bring all those scenes together within one cyclic storyline. I also created a fragmentation in the traditional narrative structure by refusing any dialogue or spoken dialogue, and rather letting the audience to be led by the poetics of the image and symbolism.



“The House” (2023) Ophélie Verhaeghe (own work)

The actual process of creating a narrative and breaking the traditional structure of narrative cycles, by bringing all those fragments of existences together, all those stories, those intertwinements, I have found a way to express the hidden cycles of sufferance that have been lying in my subconscious and hindering my relationship with my mother’s lineage. It was a way for me to reclaim our narrative as daughters and mothers and break those cycles of misunderstanding, silence and miscommunication.

Looking back now that I have achieved this work, I really feel like there was a release. I would not say it has magically repaired my relationships on my mother’s side however there is an appeasement that has been created through this non-linear narrative construction.

LITTLE GIRL BLUE (2023) – MONA ACHACHE:

Similarly, to Kaouther Ben Hania, Mona Achache brought an actress (Marion Cotillard) to embody the character of her mother who had taken her own life in 2016, leaving her only boxes and boxes of memories, written notes, and photographs. In this film, Mona Achache creates more than a classical biographic portrait, she explores her mother's lineage, and the repetition of motives throughout the generations (the creative passion, the fascination, and strained mother/daughter relationships). (Bornet, 2023) More importantly, Mona Achache aims to explore and break the "curse" that follows the women of her family and that has haunted her grandmother, and her mother before her. She does that by breaking the codes of traditional narrative in film and documentary making. She aims to break the systematic sexual abuse that has haunted their lineage and been perpetuated almost as an initiation rite (Achache, FranceInter, 2023). This film relates intimately to my own thematics in "The House", with the explorational of transgenerational familial trauma and the aim to appease and put a term to the cycles of trauma that follow us. Mona Achache explains that this movie has been cathartic for her, allowing her to explore, understand, and explore the meanders of her mother's life. She states in an interview "faire vivre pour comprendre" (Achache, C à Vous, 2023) which literally means "bring to life to understand". Through the re-enactment of her mother's life, the summoning of the past, and the dive into her mother's souvenirs, she has been able to find a release and some understanding.



"Little Girl Blue" (2023) Mona Achache

Marion Cotillard stated that this was one of the most complicated things she had ever had to play and that the scenario was something she had never seen before. Instead of being driven by a linear narrative of her mother's life, Mona Achache reconstructed a narrative, through old photographs, voice recordings, and written notes (Cotillard, FranceInter, 2023). Within her film *Mona Achache* allowed the audience to assist the process of Marion Cotillard entering the role, the transformation, the artist's failures, progress, and ultimately the success of re-incarnating her mother. She created a reconstructed narrative, owning its imperfectness and showing the work of transformation and investigation, that allowed her to explore intimately her mother's story, thoughts, methodology, and traumas.



"Little Girl Blue" (2023) Mona Achache

These processes of narrative exploration allowed her to explore her own story, to heal for herself and for her children. (Achache, C à Vous, 2023) She expresses that through the making of the film she has found her anger transformed. It allowed her to find a way to explain to her children where they are from, without making them carry the pain and heaviness that has followed her whole life. She continues by stating that taboos are criminal because they do not allow to understand the past and the pain, however, filmmaking and investigation have allowed her to understand the mechanisms of this phantasm of the curse her mother carried, deconstruct it, and realize that there is not a curse, only a conditioning, a narrative that can be transformed and be able to put a term to all of this. (Achache, FranceInter, 2023)

Through this film, and through the act of re-enactment and the breaking of traditional narrative cycles, Mona Achache has created a film that has allowed her to reclaim her narrative, and emancipate herself and her children from the cycles of pain and trauma that have been perpetuated in her family. This film is again a good example on how the breaking of traditional narrative cycles, the methodology it provokes and the film-making process can create a break in transgenerational trauma.



"Little Girl Blue" (2023) Mona Achache

NO HOME (2015) - CHANTAL AKERMAN

Chantal Akerman's body of work in general has informed my practice, especially for her exploration of the mother, the unsaid and transgenerational trauma. One movie in particular that has influenced my work through its filming process, and its narrative construction is the documentary "No Home" (2015) which has informed and inspired us in the filming process of "Oddball". "No Home" is a portrait on Chantal Akerman's ageing mother, Nelly. She was a survivor who arrived in Belgium in 1938 fleeing Poland, pogroms, and abuses. (Akerman, 2015) It depicts very long and quiet and peaceful scenes of Akerman's mother's everyday in her Brussels' apartment, intersected with some brutal landscapes, and Skype discussions between Chantal Akerman and her mother. It was filmed right before Nelly's Akerman's passing, and one month's later, Chantal Akerman's suicide. We see her mother's slow decline, some fragments of conversation and some intimate discussions. We are witnesses of their love, their tenderness, and their silences.



"No Home (2015) Chantal Akerman

“No Home” reveals in discreet touches what Nelly Akerman subtly embodies of the great and terrible history, there, in the unfolding of her quite life within her Brussels’ flat. Chantal Akerman’s oeuvre is dedicated to her mother. She is omnipresent, physically, or not, in every frame of her body of work. (Kaufman, 2023) Nelly Akerman was a survivor from Auschwitz, Akerman explains that her mother was never able to talk about what she endured. One day after Chantal Akerman asked her about it, her mother told her she would go crazy if she did.

“We could speak around, or after, or before, but the real moment, never. Not directly.”

(Akerman, 2015)



“No Home (2015) Chantal Akerman

I find the study written by Brandon Kaufman in 2023, entitled “Missing Links: The Silences of Chantal Akerman” very revealing about the construction of her narratives and her process as an artist and filmmaker. In his study he explores how in comparison to other more loquacious forms of cinema, Akerman is uninterested in the seeking of patterns, the explaining of motivations and thoughts. Akerman’s work, like her own mother, withholds. (Kaufman, 2023)

"There is nothing to say, my mother said. And it is on this nothing that I work. My mother, I talked about her so much when talking about my films, and I worked for so many years for her, around her, in relation to her.

(Akerman, 2015)

For me it is very interesting to observe how Chantal approaches narrative building, in a very experimental way, infusing her narratives with silence and the unsaid, truly breaking down those traditional narrative structures. Akerman declares in a voiceover in “Histoires d’Amérique” (1989) that her own story is full of missing links, full of blanks. (Akerman, 1989) Akerman instantiates those silences, those blanks, in her films, with her camera and characters leaving so much unsaid. Brandon Kaufman in his study states that, the audience is asked to draw connections to join these links, to ask in the absence of information what caused such profound melancholy. It is not correct to say that the reticence and reserve of Akerman’s style is a form of repression. Rather, her style is born of what is missing. (Kaufman, 2023)



"No Home (2015) Chantal Akerman

It is evident that Chantal Akerman through her fragmented narratives, the silence she installs, and the blanks that haunt her films, explores her relationship with her mother and importantly the unsaid and the silence from her mother towards all the underlying trauma and the pain that has been lived by Nelly Akerman (and so many others) and shared to Chantal Akerman. My exploration revolves around the healing potential of performance and filmmaking, however in my interpretation, I don't believe Chantal Akerman intended to create as a way of healing and relief. It is rather more an expression of a painful consciousness. I interpret it as a way to show an open wound and to reveal all the silence and unsaid that haunts her, her mother, and her family. When we watch her films, there is an uneasiness through the stillness, the silences, and it is almost as if we can hear a scream of pain that comes deep through the quietness and missing links. The fragmented narratives she was constructing were a way of exteriorizing her pain, express this transgenerational trauma, showing her suffering, her mother's suffering, and its insidious power on her mind, which ultimately was too much for her.



"No Home" (2015) Chantal Akerman

CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation, I have explored how and if, filmmaking, and specifically the deconstruction of traditional narrative cycles can be therapeutic, allow the reclamation of narratives, and break transgenerational trauma. After assessing most of the work, the conclusion seems to be that indeed, filmmaking and alternative narrative building have a power that allows their subject and makers to reclaim their narratives, exteriorize their pain, gain power, and put a term (to a certain extent) to cycles of transgenerational trauma. It seems as if this practice creates a place of expression and resilience, as a step for healing.

However, I believe there are limitations to the healing power of filmmaking and narrative deconstruction. As shown in Chantal Akerman's body of work, her own sufferance coming from her mother's trauma in WWII, deportations, and killings of Jews, there is a wider aspect to transgenerational trauma. There are entire generations that are suffering from the past, and I have not had the chance yet to investigate this wider approach to transgenerational trauma. As shown through Akerman's work, film-making and narrative building can be a way to display this sufferance, but it might not be enough to heal and tackle the terrible pain that is perpetuated.



Salford, Shirley Baker, 1962, Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, Tate Britain Visit – entire generations being impacted by trauma. yesterday, today and tomorrow

“Nobody can “treat” a war, or abuse, rape, molestation, or any other horrendous event, for that matter; what has happened cannot be undone. But what can be dealt with are the imprints of the trauma on the body, mind, and soul.”

(van der Kolk, 2015).

As I discussed in this essay, with the exploration of Forum Theatre and Psychodrama, Performance and film are not alone enough for healing trauma. It is essential for people who are experiencing trauma (transgenerational or not) to have access to structures that can allow them to reach for help, heal, and have access to professionals who can support them. Film-making and Narrative control can maybe not by themselves break years and years of trauma, however through the making, and the creative process, it can bring a voice and allow people to go forth. Find hope, a newfound power, a path towards resilience. It is a place for introspection, questioning, understanding, and a reclaiming of their narrative and stories.



“Forum Theatre” (1978) Augusto Boal

There is something extremely current about this topic (we see it through the recent works of Kaouther Ben Hania and Mona Achache), that justifies the relevance and the importance of this discussion today. Especially with all the suffering, wars, and trauma that are perpetuated at the moment, I believe there is an acknowledgment that trauma has a very real and destructive impact on us humans and our psyche. As a result, it is crucial to confront our demons whether they stem from past generations or not.

In this investigation, we can conclude that even if it has its limitations, film-making and the breaking of traditional narrative cycles can allow a place for healing, and the reclamation of our narratives (as attested in “Les Filles d’Olf” and “Little Girl Blue”). I was fascinated to observe the power of re-enactment and the summoning of the past through acting, and the relieving power that came from the process of creation.

This essay held significance for me, as it has permitted me to deepen my research around mother and daughter relationships, as well as transgenerational cycles of love and trauma, and its presence in cinematographic works. I was interested in exploring how filmmakers deal with, explore, and create a path for healing from their transgenerational trauma. A big part of my practice over those past three years has been works of introspection, realization, and exteriorization. I believe strongly that performance, film, and writing allow you to rewrite, take control of your own consciousness, and traumas, and ultimately recreate your own narrative. I now go forth and continue to explore in my creative practice, breaking forms of traditional narrative cycles, and investigating our subconscious and familial dynamics.

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