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Reviews

Ontological narrativity and the performativity of the *Stories We Tell*

Stories We Tell. Written and directed by Sarah Polley. Produced by Anita Lee. Edited by Michael Munn. National Film Board of Canada, 2012. 1 hours 48 minutes, colour, English. DVD: Mongrel Media, 2013
Reviewed by Andrea Doucet, Brock University, Canada

Stories We Tell, an autobiographical documentary written and directed by Canadian actress and Academy Award-nominated director Sarah Polley, premiered at the Venice Film Festival, garnered rave reviews in most international newspapers and was awarded several major film awards. At least five stories unfold within and around this film. There is, first, a backstory to how the film was instigated. A second story is about the search for untold truths about Sarah Polley's mother, Diane, who died when Sarah was 11, leaving behind hidden clues about a secret affair and the possibility that the man Sarah called Dad for 27 years was not her biological father. A third story is about the making of the film itself while a fourth focuses on processes of storytelling and listening and how these are linked with the making and remaking of family histories and relationships. And, finally, there is a larger theoretical, epistemological, and ontological narrative that frames the film and touches upon questions about what stories are, who they belong to, how they change in the telling, how listeners and audiences matter, and what stories *do* within families. In the end, what begins as a family narrative ends up dancing at the edges of large epistemological and ontological questions about truth, subjectivity, narrative, ontological narrativity, and the performativity of stories.

The impetus for this film is tied up with Sarah Polley's public persona. Raised in a Toronto theatrical family, Canadian audiences are well acquainted with Polley, who was a child actor in a highly popular television series, *Avonlea* (1990–1996). As a writer and director, her best-known films are *Away from Her* (2007), based on a short story by Nobel Prize-winning author Alice Munro and nominated for two Academy Awards, as well as *Take this Waltz* (2011) that starred Michelle Williams, Seth Rogan, and Sarah Silverman. Polley's name recognition helps to explain why she felt compelled to pen a blog post on the Canadian National Film Board website on the eve of the movie's opening:

'Here is the story of how this film came to be, and why I hope people will write about the film itself and not only the story it is based on'. As she explained, she was propelled into telling the story herself, much earlier than she had planned to:

In 2007 ... I received a phone call from a friend warning me that a journalist had found out a piece of information about my life that I had kept a secret for a year. I got in touch with the journalist and begged him not to print the story. It was a story that I had kept secret from many people in my life including my father. It took some time and many tears to convince the journalist not to print the story within the week, but I left that conversation convinced that it was not a secret I could keep for long, and that if I wanted the people in my life and outside my life to know the story in my own words, I would have to take action. (Polley 2012)

And so began the process of storytelling by Sarah Polley and a cast of Story Tellers that she introduces at the beginning of the movie: her father (Michael), her two brothers (John and Mark), and her two sisters (Susy and Joanna). Polley speaks both on and off camera as she interviews these family members and a few of Diane's



Pictured: Sarah Polley. Scene from *Stories We Tell*. Directed by Sarah Polley. Produced by Anita Lee. Photograph taken from the production © 2012 National Film Board of Canada. All rights reserved.

close friends and theatre colleagues. Filmed snippets from these interviews provide for a sometimes sad and sometimes funny interweaving of stories and revelations about Diane's ordinary and extraordinary life. Much of the movie is shot in Super 8 film format in order to invoke the look of home movies from the 1970s. As explained by the movie's producer, Anita Lee, Super 8 cameras are 'a medium of a certain time. We associate Super 8 with home movies lost in basements, and we literally searched through people's basements for the right Super 8 camera' (Mongrel Media 2012). Interview footage is combined with Polley's actual home movies and reconstructed scenes filmed with professional actors that are so authentic looking that it is difficult to know what is staged and what is historical artefact.

As a daughter, Polley was initially caught up in the idea of finding some truth about her mother and her two fathers. She asks her family members to talk about their mother 'in as much detail as possible' and 'from the beginning'; she asks Diane's friends and her two fathers to tell their story of Diane: 'Can you describe the whole story in your own words?' Polley, as a film director, found herself in a film project where she had to let go of form and script, something that she admitted caused her some discomfort. She explains: 'With this film, I was slowly discovering what I was doing as I was making it. With each interview and each shoot, I was putting together what I ultimately wanted to do' (Kermode 2013). The making of the film evolved in an iterative way so that she conducted interviews and shot the film for several months, edited for several months, and then repeated the same process again. In this process, it became clear that the accounts and memories she had begun to collect were not fixed ones, but were being made and remade over time; she saw that there were a multiplicity of narratives that unfolded in their telling and re-telling. Once Polley realised this, the construction of the film itself became another story within the film. Polley noted, 'Because it's a film about storytelling, and how we tell stories and why we tell stories, I thought it was really important to include the process of making this film itself in the film' (National Public Radio 2013).

As the film moves forward, it also becomes less about Polley's mother and two fathers and more about storytelling processes. If there is a central conflict in the film, it is between Polley and her biological father around the question of what a story is, what it does, and *who* it belongs to. At Polley's request, he begins to pen his account, writing a six-page draft about his

relationship with Diane that begins with the words, 'How we tell our story – or rather *how I tell our story*'. He informs Polley that 'the reality is essentially that the story with Diane ... it's only mine to tell. And I think that's a fact'. Sarah's response in an email is to write, 'I'm just extremely uncomfortable at being involved in the telling of the story unless it tells the whole story, that is your telling of the story, my telling of it, and my family's'.

This conflict between Sarah Polley and her father over the direction of the film and her approach to storytelling is also emblematic of wider debates in social theory, epistemology, and ontology about narratives and meaning-making as representational or performative (Mauthner 2012; Somers 1994; Thrift 2008; Winthereik and Verran 2012). For her biological father, there is a true story and it can be represented; indeed, at one point in the film, he looks into the camera and says that 'the crucial function of art is to tell the truth, to find the truth'. Polley's view coheres more closely with a performative approach to stories where 'it is through narratives and narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities' (Somers 1994, 606). Historical sociologist Margaret Somers also notes the ontological effects of this performativity:

Ontological narratives ... are the stories that social actors use to make sense of – indeed, to act in – their lives. Ontological narratives are used to define who we are; this in turn can be a precondition for knowing what to *do*. This 'doing' will in turn produce new narratives, and hence, new actions; the relationship between narrative and ontology is processual and mutually constitutive. (1994, 618)

In a similar way, Polley speaks to the effects of storytelling when she says in a *New York Times* interview, 'What fascinated me was the aftermath ... how the story was changing as a result of us telling it and how the relationships were changing as a result of us ... telling it' (Murphy 2013).

This performative approach to stories is also well illustrated in Margaret Atwood's novel *Alias Grace*, an historical fiction novel about a nineteenth-century maid convicted of murdering her employer and the many conflicting tales that unfold about what she did and who she was. Indeed, Polley's film opens with a powerful passage from this novel, which is read by her father, Michael:

When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all.

When you're telling it, to yourself or to someone else. (Atwood 1996, 33; emphasis added)

Interestingly, the connection between two outstanding Canadian artists, Sarah Polley and Margaret Atwood, continues beyond this film as Polley, after pursuing the film rights for 14 years, is currently working on directing an adaptation of Atwood's *Alias Grace*. While Polley has not yet revealed how she will approach the making of this film (Schmidlin 2013), Atwood's reflections on historical fiction and the writing of *Alias Grace* give some hints that link some of the epistemological and ontological issues that underpin *Stories We Tell* with *Alias Grace*. Atwood writes (2004, 216) about how 'the past no longer belongs to those who lived it' but to those 'who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today'.

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Extreme by design

directed by Ralph King Jr. and Michael Schwarz
2013, 57 minutes

Available from Bullfrog Films

Additional resources: www.extremebydesignmovie.com

Reviewed by Laura S. Lorenz, Brandeis University

Extreme by Design is a documentary film on the power of design thinking. Funded by individuals and family and community foundations, the approximately 1-hour film follows three multidisciplinary teams of Stanford University graduate students in business, engineering, and medicine as they work with each other (sometimes successfully, sometimes not) and with non-profit organizations in Asia to identify and solve real-world problems for the world's poor. The film focuses in particular on three students and their project teams throughout the graduate program's 8-month design and implementation process.

The film is slick, well-edited and well-produced and has an excellent soundtrack. This review focuses on the film's visuals, which in turn centre on three students, their background and motivations, their classroom and hands-on learning processes, and their actions at home and in the field. The three student leaders of focus are diverse: an American woman of Bangladeshi heritage interested in a career in finance, an African American male engineering student, and a White male former platoon leader who served in Iraq. The problems they seek to solve are similarly diverse: an intravenous medicine-delivery solution to help children suffering from diarrhoea, a C-pump bubble pack to help children breathe when suffering from acute respiratory infection (ARI), and a freshwater delivery solution in Indonesia.