

**Memory, subjectivity and maternal histories in *Un Ora Sola Ti Vorrei, Histoire d'un Secret* and *On the Border* (2012)**

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Writing about one's own creative work is like unpeeling the layers of an onion – particularly when that work is highly autobiographical. Just when you think you've taken off the dry, papery outer skin and reached the softer tissue underneath, you find that it is still too tough and you must remove more to get to the core. When you finally reach the edible bits, your eyes start to sting and you would rather stop peeling. It is difficult to return to analysing my film *On the Border* (Thynne, 2012) which explores my relation to my Finnish mother's history, both because of its subject matter – my mother died in 2009 and suffered from mental health issues for over forty years – and because of my discomfort at some of the ways in which I represented her life. Discomfort and dissatisfaction is a common experience for filmmakers in watching their work – what one has made rarely lives up to the original vision one had for a project – but in this case the discomfort has, I think, more specific causes which this essay seeks to address. While all documentary narratives inevitably involve elisions, silences and diversions, in the autobiographical mode the filmmaker is maybe the least aware of these because of her closeness to the subject matter and the subjects portrayed. In devising a structure for family biography, however self-reflexive, certain stories get omitted, despite oneself, and for reasons one can hardly acknowledge. In this chapter, I explore how certain elisions occurred in this experimental biographical film which aimed precisely to highlight the processes of projection with which representing one's own family – and especially one's own mother – must inevitably be imbued. In the process, and in retrospect, I

was able to evoke some of the traumatic experiences suffered by my mother and her family more clearly than others and in this chapter I reflect on the reasons for certain omissions. I draw on Marianne Hirsch's analysis of feminist authors' difficulties in representing the mother as a subject rather than an object, not least because of their own struggles for control over their own lives, bodies and 'plots' (Hirsch, 1989). My film is one of several works by film-makers from the last few years which remediate the home movie and/or the family album to explore hidden maternal histories, including *Un Ora Sola Ti Vorrei/For One More Hour with You* (Alina Marazzi, 2005), *Histoire d'un Secret/History of a Secret* (Mariana Otero, 2003) and *Stories We Tell* (Sarah Polley, 2012).<sup>1</sup> These explorations – informed by both mourning and nostalgia – are an impossible attempt, something which is acknowledged to a greater or lesser degree, to recover the mother's identity and thus also constitute the filmmakers' own.<sup>2</sup> I discuss how the legacies of the respective mothers' traumatic pasts are played out and interpolated in their daughters' representations, and how their handling of this topic provides insight into my own.

My film, *On the Border*, is also a meditation on my mother's life in relation to mine and to that of her mother and father, her siblings and my father. Like the above films, the narrative is motivated by a desire to understand one's own identity as constituted through the damaged or interrupted relationship with the mother. I am roughly the same age as these two filmmakers and so our accounts of our mothers' lives are similarly inflected by a sharp sense of what might have been. Unlike their mothers, however, my mother lived until she was eighty-one and I was fifty. Her life was not cut short, like Marazzi's mother's, by her 'madness' but this instead

remained a debilitating condition, which she and the family lived with for almost forty years from her first breakdown. Coincidentally too, my film links the two different maternal afflictions depicted in Marazzi's and Otero's film in that my mother was both mentally ill for much of my life and also experienced an unwanted pregnancy. Watching these two films since I finished my own, and through audience responses, I have become aware of how *On the Border* in its evocation of my mother's life avoids a deeper exploration of the possible link between unchosen motherhood and mental instability and I began to speculate further on the reasons for this, which are connected with my own particular and different experience of being a daughter to that of a survivor of trauma.

In both *Un Ora Sola Ti Vorrei* and *Histoire d' un secret* the film-maker daughters investigate the lives of their respective mothers, who both died young, Marazzi's from suicide following mental illness and Otero's from complications after a self-induced abortion. Both filmmakers were children when their mothers died – Marazzi was seven and Otero was five – and both have no memories of their mothers. Both films are focussed specifically on their and their families' relationships to their mothers and do not overtly place their stories in the wider context of women's inequality. Yet, both evoke the conflicts experienced by these women in the 1960s and early 1970s as they struggled to come to terms with their destinies as mothers at the moment of feminist awakening which they were just too late to benefit from but which has enabled their daughters to represent their mothers' lives in a new light, to tell stories which reveal just how constrained those lives were despite relative privilege and education.<sup>3</sup>

In *Un Ora Sola Ti Vorrei*, Marazzi seeks for clues about her mother, Liseli's, life in the very rich archive of family movies shot by her grandfather from the 1920s to the 1980s. As a wealthy publisher, Ulrico Hoepli was an early adopter of a 16mm camera and charted his family's life from his own courtship and wedding, his family holidays through to his daughter's, Liseli's, marriage and life with her own young family. Marazzi remediates this compelling, vivid footage in her own film, montaging moments from her grandmother's and mother's lives. Ulrico's footage is re-appropriated in various ways to become Liseli's story and to enact Marazzi's own nostalgic desire for her mother. Such nostalgic desire drives the excavation of memory in many other texts written by second wave feminists, as Susannah Radstone has noted, including in such works as *The Other Country* (Duffy, 1990) and *Poppy* (Modjeska, 1990). In *Poppy*, Radstone argues, the daughter confronts her longing for the mythical, powerful, mysterious mother – a quest that 'finally delivers [...] a working through of nostalgia' (Radstone 1995: 179).<sup>4</sup> What Radstone means here is that these two texts ultimately recognize that this archaic-, pre-Oedipal mother is a myth and interrogate what Jane Gallop (1985) describes as the 'feminine nostalgia' – a remembering of the pre-Oedipal from the side of the Oedipal where the daughter regrets what she does not have (the 'phallus', 'fantasies of plenitude'), the obverse of the boy's fear of losing the phallus as he perceives the mother to have lost hers (the 'castration anxiety'). In a similar way to *Poppy*, Marazzi produces, from the *objet trouvés* of her mother's life, a film text which both recognizes this nostalgia as well as performing its interrogation through re-editing the footage of Liseli shot by her father and juxtaposing it with the written evidence of her life.

*Un Ora Sola Ti Vorrei* is narrated in the first person by Liseli's voice performed, and in some parts written, by Marazzi. In other places, Liseli's own words from her poignant, lucid letters and diaries provide a counterpoint to the lush, idealized portrait of the family, especially of Liseli and her mother, performed at festivities and holidays for Ulrico's camera. Liseli's diaries reveal her lack of self-worth, and, in adolescence, note comments from 'them' that she 'talks nonsense' and is 'boring'. Throughout we are conscious of Marazzi as the viewer and editor of the home movie footage as much, or even more than, of her grandfather as cameraperson or rather of the tension between the camera's gaze and the voice of the women depicted. Marazzi constructs the film from the start as being addressed to her by her mother and as being a vehicle through which her mother can have a voice, both through the reading of her actual diaries and through scripted narration, told from Liseli's point of view. The film opens with an old recording of the actual Liseli and Antonio, Marazzi's father, who jokingly perform scolding parents with whiny voices for their children and then Liseli starts singing the love song 'Un Ora Sola Ti Vorrei' ('For One More Hour with You') which became the film's title. Through its imaginative re-visiting of Liseli's presence in the family archive, the film then acts to provide the longed for 'one more hour with you' with the dead mother over the course of its running time. Over the first medium shot of Liseli as a young woman lying in a field from the home movie footage we then hear her scripted voice, performed by Marazzi, saying that because no one has said anything about her for thirty years she will tell her daughter about her life. Thus, Marazzi explicitly reclaims Liseli's lost voice, which actually only persists on an old vinyl disc of the kind one might record at

a fairground, and reanimates it through her own to re-frame her grandfather's home movies as her mother's story.

Kaja Silverman, in interrogating feminist film theory's emphasis on visual representation, has explored the female voice in cinema - a topic, which remains under-investigated. She analyses the way in which Julia Kristeva's conflicted concept of the chora<sup>5</sup> tends to reinforce the theoretical and cinematic connection between motherhood and muteness, because the chora associates the mother with the disempowering interiority of the pre-Oedipal and the pre-linguistic where the maternal voice is equated with "'pure" sonorousness' (Silverman, 1988: 100). Noting the contradictory theorizations of femininity and the maternal in both Kristeva and Freud, Silverman instead emphasizes the submerged recognition in some of their work that the daughter's passion for the mother is situated *within* the Oedipus complex, therefore enabling the mother to be seen as both a speaking subject and object of the daughter's desire. Placing the relationship of mother and daughter within signification, and not outside it in a pre-Oedipal domain beyond symbolic structuration, allows the sexuality it implies to be within psychic 'reality' (ibid., 124). Marazzi's feminist project enacts this desire for the mother not only through her representation of her story in the edited home movies but by performing her mother-as-speaking-subject. Her film pieces together the fragments of her mother's presence she finds in the family archives – not only the cine-film but her words as they appear in the diaries, letters and the disc recording – to create the mirror for herself which has been missing for most of her life. She devises a strategy of 'détournement'<sup>6</sup> using her mother's words, her scripted voice and montage to affirm the significance of her maternal legacy. Through juxtaposing her mother's accounts

of her distressing experience both as a daughter and as a mother with her grandfather's footage she destabilizes the original aim and role of the home movies to display the family as the nexus of a contented, bourgeois lifestyle and instead uses them to rediscover the mother whose life and death have been hidden from her. The home movie archive, it seems, had not been shared with Marazzi after her mother's death although all this material had, she explains, been kept for her (Perdoto, 2001). She says she had not had the courage to look at it until her late thirties and so had not seen what an astonishing record it provides of her mother's life from beginning to end, allowing 'a moment of an encounter with this, this face, which I hadn't really seen [...] even to see her on the day she was born'. She describes 'how I wanted to transmit the strong feeling of nostalgia that I had looking at that image for the first time' (ibid., 2001 my translation).

The archive is exceptional in that it includes the scenes of both Liseli's and Alina Marazzi's very first days in 1938 and 1964 respectively and other moments which echo across the generations, caught on Ulrico's ever-present camera. The decorum of the shot of Marazzi's grandmother with her new born, both well wrapped up, contrasts though with that of Liseli who is shown sitting up in bed trying to get her new baby to take the breast. Liseli is clearly uncomfortable with the presence of the camera at this intimate and difficult moment. Her father's intrusion on the scene also suggests, at the very least, a lack of care on his part – he has not asked her, it seems, if she is willing to be filmed. She speaks to the cameraman as he backs away from her but, as the film is presumably silent, we do not hear her words. The proprietorial gaze of her father is evident in the very many shots he took of his beautiful daughter from a young age – especially discomfiting is one where the

camera tilts up her prepubescent body from a low angle as she stands in a short cotton beach dress (having panned over from her recumbent mother who also looks startled at finding herself being filmed).<sup>7</sup>

Michelle Citron painstakingly analysed the home movies from her father's collection to detect behavioural signs of the abuse she had later remembered being subjected to by her grandfather. Eventually a clip arrests her attention, where, aged six, she grabs her younger sister and kisses her long and hard on the mouth. She reproduces this sequence as stills in her book *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (Citron, 1999: 23). She interprets this moment as an acting out of the sexual aggression she was suffering herself at the hands of her grandfather. Marazzi does not find any single clue about the cause of her mother's breakdown but her selection of footage reveals the tensions and power relations in the family which contributed to Liseli's fragility. Yet, while the film provides these hints as to Liseli's malaise it is mainly motivated by a more affirmative desire to know her mother and by a sense of discovery of a woman she can hardly remember.

Marazzi's montage re-imagines the home movies so as to underline the links between grandmother, mother and herself as daughter. In one especially telling sequence a medium close-up of Liseli turning to look at the camera is intercut with Liseli's mother looking into the camera, and then turning away (Figure 1). Slowed down, this sequence is accompanied by a slow, ethereal piece of music, which only appears at these moments of gazing. The intercutting creates an intimate circuit of gazes between grandmother, mother (Liseli) and daughter (Marazzi, the film-maker) – a glimpse of a desired bond which is not in the individual shots taken by the



grandfather, who is the actual object of the women's returned gazes, but which emerges from their juxtaposition with each other, with the music and through their reframing as part of Liseli's real and imagined narrative of her own life. In this imaginary circle of looks, Marazzi becomes a participant and reconstitutes a missing mother's gaze which is startlingly present in the montage of the women's looks where they apparently turn to bestow their attention on the film-maker/viewer. A fantasized re-union takes place to overcome the loss experienced by Marazzi after the death of her mother. From the opening sequence at her uncle's wedding, her mother's frequent look towards Ulrico's camera becomes re-readable through its framing by her scripted voice as a look her daughter longs for - the missing gaze is re-discovered as affirmation of the daughter. Liseli's separation from her own mother, geographically and emotionally, is also presented in the film. Following her husband to his new job in the US, she is separated from any familial support. Isolated with her young children, drained by the demands of endless cooking of different meals and sleeplessness, she begins to break down. On the sound track, Marazzi reads a plaintive letter by Liseli to her mother expressing her own longing to be cuddled by her.

In a conversation with Gianfilippo Perdotto on the DVD, recorded before the film was finished, Marazzi speaks of a sense of shock and revelation at the discovery of the uncannily similar person she finds in her grandfather's archive – not least because of the silence about her mother which has prevailed since her death (Perdotto, 2001). Behind the recovery of Liseli through the grandfather's archive is another story which the film does not tell but which is implicit in the opening where Marazzi

attributes to her dead mother the words 'no one spoke of me for thirty years'. Of course, silence may be the product of grief but what is also implied here is a silence attributable to the shame felt by Liseli's family about her mental illness, especially at a time when it was even more stigmatized than it is today. The lack of understanding and sympathy from Liseli's father, Ulrico Hoepli, is made clear in one of her mother's letters written in a mental institution which Marazzi chooses to include: 'My father can't accept certain things, because that would be cutting his own throat' and she also notes how 'very nasty things about my parents come to life during my hour with my psychiatrists, I feel very resentful towards them, the least they can do is pay the bill'. The film is also completely silent on the reactions of Marazzi's father to Liseli's illness although we hear a heart-rending letter towards the end of the film where she asks him to take her away from the institution.<sup>8</sup>

Mariana Otero's film *Histoire D'un secret/History of a Secret* addresses more directly the issue of her family's shame and guilt in relation to both her mother's, the painter Clotilde Vautier's, death and the failure of her family to even admit to her young daughters that she had died. The film gradually reveals, through a series of encounters with her aunt, with her ancient grandmother, and finally her father, the hiding of her mother's death and the details of how she died – from a botched abortion she was obliged to carry out herself because of the repressive abortion laws in France at the time in 1968. Her father confesses to being haunted by guilt both because of Clotilde's pregnancy and because he failed to get her a safe abortion or persuade her to have the child. The film's performance of memory interestingly compares Mariana's inability to acknowledge her mother's death until she was almost an adult with her older sister, Isabel's, painful awareness of the denial going

on in the family and consequent sense of abandonment. Throughout the film some of the conflicted feelings that the familial denial of Clotilde's fate entails are visible in the consternation in Mariana's face as she listens to her father, bent over the kitchen table, almost whisper his account of her mother's dying days as the complications from the attempted abortion worsened.

In this case, what remains of the mother are not home movies or even photographs but her extraordinary paintings, including large female nudes, whose exposed and fleshly bodies appear to evoke the body of Mariana's mother. Her sister recounts how in a prescient moment of sleep walking she imagined a golden cord coming from the belly of one of the painted nudes with an arrow at the end that she thought was going to kill them. The film concludes with the mounting of an exhibition of Clotilde's work in which both sisters and their father are involved, suggesting resolution and a final conscious recognition of their mother.

In conversation on a panel with Alinsa Marazzi, Otero contrasted the structure of her film with Marazzi's, noting how her focus was 'how the secret [of how her mother had died] had arisen, how it was lived with and how to disclose it' (Otero, 2014) as the title of the film suggests. She, like Marazzi, was trying to 'give life' to a mother whom she had scarcely known and who had disappeared, a mother who, like Liseli, left hidden but remarkable evidence of her creativity, this time in painting as opposed to words. Otero also comments that the more she was told about her mother the less she could see. Like Marazzi, she knew very little about her mother before making the film and conceived it as 'a jig saw, to give the spectator the experience of a secret as in "what is the girl searching for?", scenes don't follow on from each other and in the editing I kept very little [...] that words could never reveal

exactly who she was, that she was behind the image' (ibid). There are few, barely glimpsed, photos of her mother in the film since Otero decided she only wanted her to be seen through her paintings, even omitting some super 8 footage of her painting surrounded by children. Both women see their films as a process of 'giving birth' to their mother, a mother who had hardly been in their lives, the making of the film thus being a kind of role reversal by the time that both she and Marazzi made their films. Both were thirty and therefore already older than their mothers had been when they died. Marazzi, having looked at footage of her mother as a newborn baby was forced to 'change from the position of being a weeping daughter who had lost her mum and felt nostalgic [...] to take the role of an adult woman looking after that baby [...] and to think of her story not only as that of my mother but of many different women' (Marazzi, 2014).

The representation of loss and its impact on the two film-makers described here highlights the similarities but also some of the key differences for me of my own attempt to evoke my mother's history. I employ a partly investigative structure like Otero, but not to discover a woman I never knew or to assume an adult position in relation to her since I had in many ways already been in that role from the age of twelve. My presentation of my mother's life was inevitably inflected by a sense of my own lost childhood, given the adult role I had taken on so young, as much as by a sense of the life she had lost through mental illness. My mother's condition prevented her from being fully present as a mother, and this circumstance possibly also meant it was a particular challenge for me to directly explore, in the way that Otero does, what it means to 'live with a secret'. My own film could instead be seen

as *symptomatic* of living with a secret in that my mother's long hidden story of her first child was a topic which haunts but barely surfaces in my documentary.

Like Marazzi's film, mine is filled with nostalgia, but this time not only for a dead mother but for my mother as she was before she broke down, in effect a mother who could be my mother, rather than I hers. Marazzi's grandfather kept a chest of celluloid memories and his daughter's diaries and letters which were hidden from her daughter; my mother kept the records of her life stuffed in a bureau full of things I thought I knew about – such as invitations to school prize-givings, our school reports, old passports, many of which I considered junk but which she hoarded faithfully through the years as the markers which gave her life a narrative, in addition to a huge stash of letters mostly in Finnish and written by her mother. And then there were things which I thought of historical interest, such as ration books and the baby weight cards which noted my and my sister's steady, healthy growth as infants. The bureau was so tightly stuffed I realized, when I started to unpack it after her death, that there were other items that I had never seen and she had never spoken of – notably letters written personally to her from the front by my grandfather between 1939 and 1941, kept together in an old brown envelope labelled simply 'Isä' ('Father') in red pencil. There were however no diaries or other writings by my mother except letters she had written to me which I had stored at the old family home and a kind of journal where she had written a few poems and friends from college had written greetings.

The film draws on letters from the bureau and on family photographs, interviews with my mother, uncle and aunt, present day footage of Helsinki and other places where the family lived during and after the war such as Ylöjärvi, near Tampere.

I began to make the film after my mother was admitted to a mental hospital in 2007. She was diagnosed as 'schizophrenic' when I was twelve and had been hospitalized a few times. She had, however, largely managed to keep out of hospital since my father died in 1980. This time I knew it was unlikely she would ever be able to come home again. In fact, she only left the hospital to go into a care home. Visiting her empty flat, I began to film there – the living room containing the furniture from my childhood home, the knick-knacks adorning the tables and mantelpieces – as well as going through the photos and letters some of which were very familiar, others of which I had never seen. It was a strangely alienated activity, I now think, since I was spending time filming when I might have been with her at either the hospital or the care home. But then maybe I was trying to recover something of her, and of myself, I felt I had lost long ago, long before her last decline and then death in 2009. Filming was also a way of not confronting her imminent demise.

I had made a short film earlier with her called *The House* (1995). It follows our journey into Karelia, a province between Russia and Finland, to the seaside town of Zelenegorsk, fifty kilometres from St. Petersburg, to find the house where she was born and had lived until she was twelve years old. At that time, the town was called Terijöki and was part of Finland. Just before the Soviets attacked Finland in 1939, my mother was evacuated with my grandmother, Tyyni, her sister, Laila, and brother, Jorma. My grandfather, Paavo, a career soldier, stayed behind in Terijöki with his

battalion to await the Russian advance. He survived the so-called Winter War of 1939–40 but was killed in September 1941 after the war re-started and the Finns, now 'co-belligerent' with the Germans, attacked the Soviet Union. My family never returned to their home as this part of Karelia was finally ceded to the USSR as part of the price of peace in 1945.

When I started making *On the Border*, my mother was no longer willing to be filmed. Nor did I want to film her sitting in her dark little room at the care home, largely confined to one of those winged armchairs which are a feature of such places. She said to me she'd already told me everything when we made *The House* and that her life was not important. Such words sparked the pain for me of not being able to accept this resignation, of feeling she, and maybe more specifically I, must be rescued from this abjection. Finally, she did consent to an interview which I recorded as audio only and from which I have used clips in the film. I also included a few video clips from *The House* where she is seen and her voice is heard on the sound track.

The start of the film is prompted by a realization of the poignant echoes between a recent and previous loss of a home. Over a panning shot, I describe my mother being taken away from her apartment, interrupted, she says, as she was looking at her photographs. This forced removal, due to her being sectioned, evoked in my mind an earlier forced evacuation from her childhood home as the war was about to begin, which I question her about on the sound track. This assumed echo triggers the film's reflections and recounting of memories of the war by my mother, my aunt and uncle. Implicit in the film is the question of how far its dislocations and losses – of a home, of a father – were the cause of my mother's later breakdowns. The first words

we hear from her over a shot through the window of rain falling are her oblique account of being evacuated from her childhood home at the start of the war: 'The trains stopped running. [...] He managed to send the beds later and the sewing machine and the radio.'

This is followed, still with the sound of the rain, by a slow pan over a family photograph of my mother, grandmother, grandfather and my mother's siblings, Laila and Jorma (Figure 2). Over this photograph my voice comments: 'It's 1941 and my grandfather is about to go back to war to reclaim Karelia lost to the Soviet Union in 1940'; another unidentified female narrator voice says: 'The past has its own future, a future not known on that day in 1941.' We cannot only read the photograph through the death and disruption which was to follow, but it is nonetheless in some ways anticipated by the formal pose which the family performs as a statement of unity and order in the face of the imminent threat to it. Copies of the photograph are owned and prominently displayed in the albums of both my aunt Laila and my uncle Jorma. Jorma also made an album of the few remaining photos of the family just before and during the war, including this one, and gave a copy to my mother. The photo has a key role in the construction of the family story as one of the last moments of being together before my grandfather is killed and my grandmother left to find a way of bringing up three children, having married at seventeen and never worked. In using it in this way in a film about my mother's life, I appear to confirm this family story about the significance of the war and its role in creating the biggest loss of all their lives – the loss of the home my grandfather had constructed in Terijöki, followed by his own death fighting a couple of years later. Because of the forced evacuation and split within the family this entailed, as well as the subsequent



surrender of Karelia to the USSR, the place became enshrined in memory as almost paradisaal. My grandmother started doing paintings of her memories of Terijöki which show it always filled with flowers. My earlier film, *The House*, reproduces this strong family nostalgia by taking my mother on a journey back to Terijöki in 1994, a journey that became more possible, as it did for many Karelians, after the end of the Cold War. In *The House*, I intercut my grandmother's paintings with the actual location, the dilapidated post-Soviet outpost that the place had become with its peeling pre-revolutionary villas and beach ruined by a defensive stone barricade in the sea.

In *On the Border* I include a sequence of snatched conversation where I discuss with my grandmother (through my mother as partial translator) why she had not taken up the chance to emigrate after the war, when her husband had been killed and Finland was on its' knees. At the end of this exchange, we see a large canvas she painted of the seaside in summer at Terijöki, pictured as a perspectiveless overview, with the beach huts encircling sunbathers on a golden beach and swimmers in a vivid blue sea (Figure 3). Granny points out their beach cabin. The painting draws not only on her personal memory but also relies on the iconic, and often reproduced, photographs of this famous beach and pre-war haven.<sup>9</sup> Both my grandmother and my aunt, the sculptor Laila Pullinen, were able to mediate their memories of their lost home through their art. My grandmother achieved this partly through the encouragement of my aunt when she started painting at the age of seventy-three; my aunt's monumental work in bronze and stone is full of allusions to Karelia.<sup>10</sup>

In my original statement, which accompanied the film on its publication, I asserted that its aim was to discover a creative means to 'evoke the inter-subjectivity of all

biography as it is thrown into relief by this particular story' (Thynne 2012). I suggested that my methods in the film were influenced by Melanie Klein's concept of 'projective identification' (Klein, 1964) in which aspects not acknowledged in the self are attributed to the other and 'incorporation' in which aspects of the other are taken into or encrypted into the self. So, for instance, I juxtapose the narration of my mother's life with some of my own disturbing memories of her from childhood where I recall waking up and seeing her blank face looming over me, driven by some deep fear (or maybe repressed memory) to check that I am still alive – a recollection which resonates with a line translated by my uncle from my grandmother's biography where she writes of watching her children sleep by the door of their house in Terijöki, ready to get out if the Russian invasion begins. In describing the narration I noted that:

Lea's story is filtered through different layers of memory, associations and imaginings. Echoes across the generations are suggested through third person narration in a new voice where we are not sure who is speaking – is it the mother or the daughter? Which mother? Which daughter? – suggesting both projection but also common experience: travel, escape, friendship and separation. The third person narration also evokes the difficulties mother and daughter experience in giving each other recognition or being able to see or listen to one another because of their own pressing needs and desires.

(Thynne, 2012)

In describing my methods, I proposed that the 'fragmented narrative of the film is intended to suggest how when I evoke my mother's traumas and losses I am also, or actually, evoking my own sense of abandonment as a young girl when I became my

mother's carer' (ibid). Reviewing the film in the light of its' reception I can see now that this description of it is true in more ways than I had imagined at the time. I can see that the emphasis of the film on the war and its losses was to some extent another rehearsal of the dominant family story despite, or even because of, my awareness of its limitations, and that the projections were not only my projections of my own melancholy onto my mother but also that there was another kind of projection and identification with my grandfather, whom I had never met. Could it be that on some level I identified with and wished to be like the men in the family? - like my uncle whose voice, in fluent English, we hear most of the time (apart from mine) in his clear responses to my questions?<sup>11</sup>

My uncle's account of going with my grandmother to see if their father's body had been returned from the front is painful but still coherent. I try to interweave this with my mother's more disturbing reminiscences of seeing her father as a ghost while in the care home, thus at least allowing a glimpse of how traumas might be spoken of less transparently. My mother's incoherent and apparently 'irrational' perspective was, I felt, hard to represent in a way that would make it accessible to an audience and so her voice, although present in short clips in recollections of the war, becomes marginalized in the film's discourse. It was also difficult to make her 'readable' in another sense, since the decades of strong anti-psychotic drugs had made her a heavy smoker and towards the end of her life her voice was extraordinarily deep and husky so that she, in fact, sounded to many like a man.

The poignant 1941 photo of the family shortly before my grandfathers' death in battle, the family story about the lost home, as well as my own fascination with a

country that was both so familiar and yet in many ways inaccessible linguistically and culturally, all helped to determine aspects of *On the Border's* structure. Although the film was supposed to be about my mother, I was drawn too to my soldier grandfather's, Paavo's, story. I was aware when planning the shoot that this story could provide a narrative spine which contrasted with the more fragmented representation of my mother's life – and a narrative is clearly what I was attracted to even while I experimented with a more associative and fragmented form. The larger narrative that Paavo's story represents, of the small, but fiercely independent country standing up to the Russian bear also appealed on a less conscious level (even though the film acknowledges both the limits of the nationalist rhetoric underpinning it and, worse, the Nazi alliance that it ultimately entailed). The middle section of the film is thus taken up with my journey into the swamps of Russian Eastern Karelia to find the spot where Paavo fought his final battle in September 1941. His last days are well documented too in the official war journal of his battalion which I located in the Helsinki war archives with the help of my cousin Jean Ramsay, and from which I used extracts spoken over the sequence of our journey retracing his steps into the wilderness. The official journal made me realize that he had died on the Russian side of the 1939 border, engaged in an advance action in the Finnish invasion of this territory as part of laying claim to a 'greater Finland'.<sup>12</sup> Earlier in the film there is a sequence showing me visiting the Salpa-line ('Bolt line') Museum with my uncle. The museum commemorates the defensive line of stone barriers and bunkers built during the 'Interim Peace' (1940–41). The line was intended to protect Finland's Eastern border after the loss of the isthmus of Karelia and, although the Russians did not reach that far, it was strategically important in

the peace negotiations at the end of the war. A serendipitous shot shows me seated, operating the controls of a large cannon at the museum (Figure 4). Interestingly this is filmed by my soldier uncle, Lieutenant Colonel Jorma Pullinen. Noting the identification with my grandfather exemplified by this shot, Katie Grant prompted me to read these military sequences not only as a form of identification with my grandfather but as a metaphor for how I cross the border of my mother's space in order to establish my own boundaries (Grant, 2013). By this, I assume she meant the ways in which I hunt through her home, her things and her life in the film in order to find something that might help to secure my own sense of self, just as my grandfather advanced into Soviet territory in 1941 to help secure the Finnish border. I argued in the original statement that accompanied the film (Thynne, 2012) that the multi-vocal narration is intended to suggest aspects of projection and encryption – i.e. the blurring of boundaries between the lives of mother, grandmother and daughter and the nostalgic desire for reunion and recognition of each by the other. I tried to suggest this, for example, through the voice of the unidentified female narrator whose voice is neither mine nor my mother's but a third person intended to stand for all of us. The common experience of the three generations is evoked for instance by the woman narrator saying over a fast motion shot of clouds from a window in my mother's flat, '[t]he phone no longer rings every day. She misses her mother's voice at the end of the line. Even though most calls were a plea for something. Even though in those calls she felt she didn't exist' (43.16).

There is another way, though, in which I establish my own boundaries in the film, as opposed to blurring them, which is perhaps the most discomfiting perspective I have developed on its processes since it was made. I mentioned that I was surprised to

find an envelope of letters written specifically by my grandfather to his eldest daughter, my mother, from the front. She was eleven years old when the war started and thirteen when he was killed. Maybe the loss of a father at an early age, whose letters from the front she had kept at the bottom of her desk for seventy years but never mentioned, was no more significant in her life than another event that is mentioned in passing in the film but which I never speak to her directly about – giving up her first child in an unmarried mother's home in Nottingham in 1952. I mention this only in a few lines of narration, which I place over a photograph of her applying lipstick in a mirror in an office in Helsinki (taken before she came to England):

It's Christmas Eve. She's scrubbing floors in the English doctor's house and wishing she was in Finland. She has the child adopted and never tells anyone. And then suddenly one morning twenty years later she announces that she has a son. (Thynne, 2012)

This abrupt revelation in the film mirrors the abruptness of its revelation in real life. But the film then tells us no more specifics about this event, i.e. that my mother conceived the child in Finland with a married man, felt unable to tell her family and decided to come to England (as she had already planned) and take up a job as a maid. In this way one of the possibly most painful events of her life is largely absent. My father never mentioned this conversation again in front of us so I don't know what further discussion there was between them about it, if any. The silence about the topic echoes the silence that persisted in my family, like Otero's and Marazzi's. Although later I did talk to my mother about what had happened, she didn't express any feelings about it directly. What she did do after my father had died was to try

and trace her son through adoption agencies. She wanted me to help her do this but I refused, not least because I felt if she had a son he might be shocked to see her in the state she was in and because I thought he could have traced her himself if he knew he was adopted. Maybe the skirting around this issue in the film is also due to a selfish concern of mine that this child from the past might re-surface and intrude upon an already uncertain present where I felt weighed down by my mother's poor health and erratic behaviour and where I had carried so much responsibility for her for so long. Maybe it was also hard for me to bear the thought that my mother might be still concerned about a child she had scarcely known when I had felt not mothered enough myself. This elision in the film speaks too of the difficulty of representing the mother as a subject, that is, from her perspective as opposed to that of the child, as Marianne Hirsch writes: 'The adult woman who is a mother, in particular, continues to exist only in relation to her child, never as a subject in her own right. And in her maternal function, she remains an object, always distanced, always idealized, or denigrated, always mystified, always represented through the small child's point of view' (Hirsch 1989: 167). My own feminism may also have made it more difficult for me to delve too deeply into this aspect of my mother's story since, as Hirsch, goes on: 'Feminism has set an extremely high value on control, control of women's bodies, of their legal status, their salaries, their choice of life and plot. Nothing challenges a very hard earned and still enormously fragile sense of control more than the vulnerabilities and dependencies of maternity' (Ibid: 165). My mother's confinement to an unmarried mother's home certainly piqued me as both oppressive and also symbolized for me the loss of control which continued in the relationship with my father, by whom she also became pregnant before

marriage. In some ways the film is complicit with the shameful silence concerning my mother's treatment as an unmarried mother – a topic which writing this article makes me think should be the final film I make about her history.<sup>13</sup> At the same time what I think the film does achieve in the last section is to challenge the version of family life which the earlier part of *On the Border* had affirmed. In the first half of the film I may have taken the 1941 photograph of my mother and her family on the eve of renewed war at face value and accepted the dominant narrative it suggests of the defence of home and family as the cause and justification of conflict.

I think it is unlikely that my grandparents even had a camera of their own as of course many people in the 1920s and 1930s did not. The few photos that do exist show their family as a formal group posed for someone else's lens, either in the studio for their wedding photos and with their young children, or, like the 1941 photograph, assembled outdoors to pose for a commemorative moment. In the second half of the film, I cannot read my immediate family's photographs, of which there are also a much greater abundance given the greater access they had to photography, in the same way. Instead, my approach becomes more critical as I use very slow pans to highlight the gestures and relationships of figures in space and big close-ups on the image to highlight details. Video enables the still image to be deconstructed in this way and take on new meanings through movement across the frame and, of course, through juxtaposition with words and music.<sup>14</sup> In this way the moving image can in fact unpick the reification with which still photography has been associated. For instance, over an extremely slow tilt up a studio portrait of my father as a very handsome, clean shaven young man from the early 1950s, we hear a letter of his being read about how much he is missing my mother who has gone to



Finland for a holiday (the first time she returned after seven years in the UK). While there is undoubtedly affection in the letter, this is mainly expressed through my father's iteration of how dependent he was on the domestic service she was clearly providing at the time:

I do miss you sweetheart – I seem to live in complete shambles when you are not here. I get up late, the bed doesn't get made, laundry accumulates, milk becomes days old. I miss my train in the morning etc, etc. Still mother had been very good with the food and the washing. The stair carpet is away for cleaning. See you Saturday my beautiful blonde Balt ...

(Later I took the complete neglect of household duties which her illness entailed as at least partly her revenge!). The letter is preceded in the film by another letter where over a shot of her on deck he praises her appearance as she boarded the Russian ship to go to Finland and jokingly expresses anxiety about her flirting with the officers on board. Together these sequences evoke the suffocating gender expectations of conventional 1950s British marriage and how, to my eye, my mother had swapped one form of domestic servitude for another, not least it seems because of the constraints on a female sexuality which was not tied to reproduction, or possibly, to men's demands. The letters and my first-person narration, including of my father's violence towards my mother ('He used to hit her when there wasn't enough milk left for his tea'), deconstruct the happy family snapshots of summer in the garden and on holiday. However, my close scrutiny of both the words and images through my framing and editing also reveals unexpected moments which resist my critical feminist stance towards them. My mother looks defiant in her

wedding portrait standing proudly before the camera, and does not look as if she needs my father's hand at her elbow – noticed for the first time when I zoomed in – which he proffers as if to support her. In her bridal gown, she has maybe, in her own mind, triumphed, putting behind her, at least for now, the sorrows of the unmarried mothers' home (Figure 5). She certainly looks more in command of her destiny than her own mother in her wedding photo – married at seventeen, young, innocent-seeming and round-faced (Figure 6). On the sound track, I read a letter written by my mother to my father who was hospitalized at the time in 1970 after a brain tumour operation. My mother writes that she misses him and that she is icing a cake she has baked for him, which won't be 'a masterpiece' but it will taste better, she hopes, then 'a shop cake'. I find this detail poignant, like a kind of punctum, and it reminds me warmly of my mother's unfailing generosity, despite what I remember of all the friction and conflict between my parents. I edit the letter over their wedding picture against which it highlights a connection between them which is maybe more significant than the 'show' of the wedding portrait whose frame is made visible in a wide shot. The warmth of the letter, although it is addressed to my father, speaks to me of the warmth that she showed to me. All too often as in much of the film, I recall the difficulties and losses of her life and of my childhood. The letter reminds me of an intimacy and closeness that was there; it acts, like the love song which gives *Un Ora Solo Ti Vorrei* its title and which Liseli sings at the opening, to bridge the gap of time and loss and allows me to hear my mother finally in her own voice. Reading it in the film in my own voice I recover my mother's words before her breakdown, making her speak to and through me; I affirm my own identity as an adult woman and a woman film-maker through this recovery of her former self – the

mother that my camera also seeks through the deliberate and lengthy movements across and zooms within photographs of her as a young woman.

The comparison I have made here with *Un Ora Solo Ti Vorrei* and *Histoire D'Un Secret* throws into relief the different forces at play in my own project which is not only haunted like theirs by what my mother's life might have been, but also by experiencing what it had become through years of decline caused both by the heavy medication that was prescribed to women with her symptoms as well as her 'illness' itself. In making *On the Border*, I put my mother's story 'back into the world', just as Marazzi and Otero have done, where it can connect with so many other women's histories. Yet, I also realize how far I might still be from seeing through a mother's eyes.

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss *Stories We Tell* in a forthcoming article, 'Unravelling Family Fictions' where I compare it with the pioneering feminist film by Michelle Cirton on mother-daughter relations, *Daughter Rite* (1979).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Renov, whose work spurred a resurgence of critical interest in first person film-making, describes the documentary practice that engages in the documentation of family members as 'domestic ethnography' and explores how such practice 'functions as a vehicle of self-examination, a means by which to construct self-knowledge through recourse to the familial other' (Renov 2004: 218). This recourse has a different dimension in the films by Marazzi and Otero in that the familial other has passed away long before the film-makers were adults and so their construction of the 'other' relies heavily on memory and fantasy.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Asibong (2014) produces a valuable analysis of the social context of Otero's film, where he notes how the climate of shameful secrecy around abortion in 1960s France meant that that 'thousands of women died in the name of the law' and that 'those deaths could not be properly felt or mourned'.

<sup>4</sup> The term 'nostalgia' here refers not so much to the desire to return home or to people and things one has known in the past but rather to the unconscious desire for a maternal figure who provides the 'environment' for the baby's earliest life.

<sup>5</sup> Kristeva, deriving the term 'chora' from Plato's *Timaeus* in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, describes it as follows: 'Discrete quantities of energy move through the

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body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such...these energy charges as well as 'psychical' marks, articulate what we call a *chora*: a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated...The *chora* is not yet a position that represents something for someone (i.e. it is not a sign); nor is it a *position* that represents someone for another position (i.e. it is not yet a signifier either); it is however, generated in order to attain this signifying position. Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm' (Kristeva, 1986: 93 -94).

<sup>6</sup> I am using the term 'détournement' to describe the way in which a work may be used by a new work to create a meaning which is antithetical to the original as proposed by Debord (1956) – here the use of Liseli's voice over and Marazzi's edit re-routes the footage shot by the paternal camera.

<sup>7</sup> The image of Marazzi as a child, although not taken as an 'art photograph' like Theodore Miller's, recalls the latter's use of his daughter, Lee Miller, as a nude model from an early age, an exploitation of his daughter which does not seem to be unconnected to the fact that his friend raped her aged seven. Antony Penrose, Lee's son, says of Theodore's photos of Lee: 'It's difficult to understand [...] His photos of her are quite creepy and definitely transgress the child-parent boundaries' (Parker, 2014). The exhibition *Lee Miller: A Woman's War*, Imperial War Museum, 15 October 2015 – 24 April 2016 highlighted the way in which Miller moved from being the object of men's photography as a child and then as a young model, both in fashion and in art photography for Man Ray, to being an accomplished photographer herself. In her later years, living in the Sussex countryside with her husband, Roland Penrose, Miller suffered from alcoholism and depression. Antony Penrose also notes that he knew nothing of her work when he was a child, only discovering, after her death in 1977, that 60,000 of her prints, negatives and articles for *Vogue* were hidden in the attic of the house. Penrose suggests that she suffered from post-traumatic stress after witnessing the horrors of war as a correspondent, especially the death camps. However, it is also possible that another family secret – her rape as a child, which Penrose only discovered and revealed to his father after Miller's death – would have contributed to her decline in later life, shrouded, like the experiences of the women in the films under discussion, in shameful secrecy.

<sup>8</sup> In an interview, Marazzi notes: 'My father behaved well. Like all the single people who have to be both parents' (Oliveri, 2009, my translation).

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Heikkilä (2004) which includes an aerial photograph of the beach with its famous semicircle of beach huts on p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> Laila Pullinen (1933-2015) was a leading Finnish sculptor and one of the few Finnish women artists to gain international recognition. In *On the Border*, she recalls the family's evacuation and leaving behind the clay figures that she and Jorma had made there. Her work is included in several major collections and sites in Finland, including her magnificent copper relief, 'Sun on the Fell' (1967) at Helsinki Airport and in the sculpture park she created, <https://nissbacka.com/>, which also features in the film.

<sup>11</sup> Michelle Citron, writing of her breakdown caused by the long repressed experience of sexual abuse, associates her role as a film director with her identification with the Father: 'Through film I donned the mantle of the Father,

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ambitious, successful, detached, controlling, all-seeing, but circumscribed too. By stepping out from behind the camera I moved into the more vulnerable position of the one looked at, scrutinized, seen. The one who feels.’ She suggests that through her book she reconnects with the child she was in the family movies: ‘[...] in the act of writing, the Michelle-who stands-behind the camera steps out from the shadows and joins the little girl who, long ago paraded up and down the sidewalk for Daddy’ (Citron, 1999: 104).

<sup>12</sup> I realized that my mother, the most sceptical member of the family in relation to the heroic version of my grandfather’s war exploits, had already told me that many men ‘had died for nothing’ in pursuit of the ‘greater Finland’ in an interview from 1994 which I include in the edit.

<sup>13</sup> An approach to making a film about my mother’s experiences of the unmarried mother’s home, the most invisible aspect of her life, is suggested to me by Alison Light’s history of her working-class family, *Common People*. This tells the story of a family not only without heirlooms but without the photographs, letters and other personal archives which most middle class families take for granted. Instead she constructs what I would call a ‘socio-biography’ where she locates the few traces in public records of her family in the wider histories of the locations, industries and institutions with which they were connected.

<sup>14</sup> Jo Spence’s (1986) work on using text to counterpoint the representation of family life in her own family album with details of what was actually happening to the family at the time has been an inspiration for work with family photography.

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