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Impossible subjects? In search of the maternal subject in *Stories We Tell* (Polley 2012) and *The Arbor* (Barnard 2010)

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Impossible subjects? In search of the maternal subject in *Stories We Tell* (Polley 2012) and *The Arbor* (Barnard 2010)

In 1977 Adrienne Rich wrote, ‘It is hard to write about my own mother. Whatever I do write, it is my own story I am telling’. Two years later, Michelle’s Citron’s film *Daughter Rite*, struggled with the same problem. It was, she later wrote, a daughter’s film, ‘incapable of imagining the mother’s story’. The difficulty of imagining and conceptualising a specifically maternal subject, is an issue that has continued to preoccupy feminist scholarship, becoming in the past ten years once more an urgent political and theoretical topic. At the same time a number of female filmmakers have returned to the issues raised by Citron’s film, using techniques which, like hers, also ask us to question the relationship between narrative, memory, and the various forms through which their claims to truth are made. Here I discuss two: *Stories We Tell* (Polley, 2012) and *The Arbor* (Barnard 2010). Both concern quests to recover the mother as subject, very different from the nurturing and devouring figure of Citron’s film. Both manipulate and question footage that claims a direct, indexical relation to ‘truth’; both construct a story which employs techniques of narrative fiction, yet operate through processes which challenge the authority of such narratives. In this article I explore the two films, to ask how far they succeed in bringing the maternal subject into view, and in so doing successfully challenge conventional notions of what a subject is and can be.

Keywords: maternal subject; women’s filmmaking; feminist documentary; memory; motherhood; subjectivity

In October 1980 Jane Feuer reviewed Michelle Citron’s now classic experimental documentary, *Daughter Rite* (1978), for *Jump Cut*. The film’s multiple voices, she writes, express ‘with visual and verbal force the schizophrenia every woman I know feels toward her mother: total hatred amidst total love’. The mother the film depicts, she continues, is ‘devouring and yet nurturing’, but the daughters whose voices we hear ‘speak not one neurotic woman who got messed up by her mother but rather the common experience of many daughters and many mothers’. She concludes: ‘Every woman who has a mother ought to see this film’. (1980: 12-13).

The assumptions here - that daughter and mother are quite separate, and opposed, identities, that the daughter cannot also be a mother, that the female subject who is urged into action and self-reflection achieves subjectivity as a daughter, and by virtue of this separation – are assumptions shared by the film and by the 1970s feminism from which it emerges. Ann Snitow, for
example, looking back on the 1970s, writes: ‘I remember that this emotional throwing off of the mother’s life felt like the only way to begin…. We used to agree in [consciousness raising] meetings that motherhood was the great divide: Before it, you could pretend you were just like everyone else; afterward, you were a species apart – invisible and despised’ (1990: 32). Linda Williams and B. Ruby Rich, reviewing Daughter Rite for Film Quarterly, were far more theoretically aware than Feuer, citing Chodorow’s (1978) re-worked account of the Freudian Oedipal drama, with its account of over-identifying mothers and daughters, in explanation of the daughter’s difficulty in separating from her mother ‘to claim her own life’ (1981: 17). Their article is acutely conscious of what they call the film’s ‘generational imperialism’. This is, they write a ‘daughter’s film’², product of ‘a decade of [feminist] daughters’ (ibid.: 21): it is her judgements, dreams, fears and desires that we see and hear. But what differentiates Citron’s film from the cinema verité documentaries that preceded it, with their assumptions of a ‘truth’ to be reached via record and testimonial, and through ‘acceptance of the film’s subjects as real persons’ (ibid.: 18), write Williams and Rich, is the film’s formal experimentation. Its mix of manipulated home-movie footage, fictionalised ‘documentary’ sequences, and audio track diary which records both experiences and dreams, serves to disrupt and question ideas of ‘truth’ and transparency usually identified with the forms employed (home movie, documentary and diary), offering us instead ‘a multiple approach to the truths of mothers and daughters’ (ibid.: 21). Whilst this remains, then, a film that is driven by the daughter’s anger at the mother’s patriarchal complicity (Williams and Rich acknowledge the absence of that ‘other film, … the mother’s film, … which no daughter could ever make’ [ibid., original italics]), its formal disruptions ‘inevitably’ induce us also to question the position of the daughter - the narrator-filmmaker - herself.

Despite its greater theoretical sophistication, and despite the efforts of Williams and Rich to find in Citron’s film ‘a more sympathetic understanding of the mother’ (ibid.: 20), this assessment seems to me no less problematic than that of Feuer. Whilst the film’s formal strategies may serve to question ideas of narrative truth and interrogate the position of its narrator-filmmaker, for Citron’s film and for Williams and Rich, ‘the mother’s film’ – that is, the mother’s generation of her own meanings as a subject - remains irretrievably ‘other’. Indeed, since all mothers are also daughters, and no daughter can make such a film, it is logically impossible. Despite the references to Chodorow’s suggestion of a female self-in-relation, it is the daughter’s separation from the mother that generates her ability to speak; as a subject, she cannot also speak as a mother.

That this difficulty was central to what Marianne Hirsch (1989) calls the ‘feminist family romance’ of the 1970s has been well documented. Hirsch cites Adrienne Rich’s 1977 confession in Of Woman Born: ‘It is hard to write about my own mother. Whatever I do write, it is my own story I am telling, my version of the past’ (1977: 221). Rich terms anger such as that found in Citron’s film ‘matrophobia’: ‘a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers’ bondage, to become individuated and free’. The mother, she writes, ‘stands for the victim in ourselves’, and because we ‘seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers’, we forcefully separate ourselves (ibid.: 236). What ensues, she concludes, is ‘the loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter’ (ibid.: 237). For Rich, this estrangement can be resolved, by the ‘repossession by women of our bodies’, and the acceptance that we are, ‘none of us, “either” mothers or daughters; … we are both’ (ibid.: 285, 253). It is notable, however, that, as we see in the quotations above, it is as daughter that she feels herself most confidently to be a writing subject. And despite her insistence that the contradictions between (female) body and mind, mother and daughter, can be resolved, the problem she expresses – that of envisaging, and speaking as, a maternal subject – is one that has continued to occupy feminist theory. “The mother” after all’, as Lisa Baraitser writes over thirty years later, ‘is the impossible subject, par excellence’ (2009: 4).
In 1989, then, Marianne Hirsch traced the problem of maternal subjectivity and the mother-daughter relationship within feminist theory and nineteenth and twentieth century women’s writing. More recently, Steph Lawler (2000) has explored it in her ethnographic study of the narratives through which a group of mothers made sense of their own difficult relationship to selfhood; Alison Stone (2012) has examined the incompatibility between ‘maternal body relations’ and ‘having the status of a meaning-making self’ (2012: 11) via psychoanalytic theory and feminist philosophy; and Lisa Baraitser (2009) has sought to identify a specifically maternal subjectivity that might be ‘both singular and multiple, disturbing notions of unity and the bounded self’ (2009: 22). It is a problem, suggests Patrice DiQuinzio (1999), that is at once conceptual, political, cultural, and social, and it is rooted in our understanding of subjectivity. For, as long as our understanding of subjectivity is premised on individualism, motherhood, which is embodied and relational, must remain outside it. Women, that is, ‘can be subjects of agency and entitlement only to the extent that they are not mothers, and [...] mothers as such cannot be subjects of individualist agency and entitlement’ (1999: 13). The position of (the good) mother becomes instead that of producer and guarantor of the subjectivity of the child. She is, writes Stone, ‘a bodily figure … the figure whom one must leave behind, and hence … the background to the selfhood of others but not herself a self or … a subject’ (2012: 11).

Cinematic quests

It is not surprising, then, that the multiple mothers of Citron’s film remain both curiously singular (‘a bodily figure ... the figure whom one must leave behind’) and voiceless3. Over thirty years after the release of Citron’s film, however, the question of maternal subjectivity is once more an urgent and contested subject of feminist exploration. The first issues of the interdisciplinary journal Studies in the Maternal, launched in 2009, emphasise both its political urgency and its theoretical complexity. Writing in the first issue, Imogen Tyler argues that ‘the current backlash against women’s rights centres on the maternal body’. ‘Young working class mothers’, she writes, ‘are still routinely demonised in political discourse’, and ‘working mothers are routinely castigated for failing their children’ (2009: 1). Yet, as she also argues, ‘[t]heoretical and creative work on the maternal’ is not only ‘central to the future of radical feminist politics: it is a site of knowledge which can really challenge predominant understandings of what a subject is and can be’ (ibid.: 4). As an editorial for the journal’s second volume puts it, if the issue of maternal embodied subjectivity ‘troubles’ existing disciplinary knowledge(s), it can also become ‘a way of thinking “besides” or “otherwise” to inherited and prescribed modes of thought’. Above all, write the editors, it can ‘unsettle or queer’ those models of subjectivity grounded in individualism that underpin our political, cultural, and philosophical systems (Baraitser, Pollock, and Spigel 2010: 1).

It is in this context that a number of female filmmakers have returned to the issues raised by Daughter Rite, using techniques which, like those of Citron’s film, also ask us to question the relationship between narrative, memory, and the various forms – documentary, fiction, home-movies, photographs – through which their claims to truth are made. In the two films I shall discuss here, Stories We Tell (Polley, 2012) and The Arbor (Barnard 2010), however, the maternal subject who is lost is not the fixed and universal figure - selfless, nurturing, and hence devouring - that we find in Citron’s film, but one who is far more complex: the mother who claims autonomy and a voice. The absent mothers4 of both films – Diane Polley in Stories We Tell and Andrea Dunbar in The Arbor – are, indeed, examples of the ‘bad’ mother of Tyler’s description. Diane Polley, we learn, was refused custody of her first two children because she claimed independence and sexual autonomy. In the
judge’s words, ‘she has allowed her desire for a career to overtop her domestic duties. She is unrepentant. Her association with her lover is physical’. Andrea Dunbar was an unmarried teenage mother, a drinker, and a writer. She was emphatically not the mother of the British social realist tradition within which her subject matter as writer seemed to place her. This ‘stolid and immobile’ figure of ‘our mam’ (Lovell 1990: 364), the warm, selfless centre of the ‘respectable’ working-class family, was, as Terry Lovell argues, more often the background for stories than their protagonist, part of the ‘setting’ (Hoggart 1958) for the narrative journey of the male protagonist. Dunbar was its antithesis: the young, unmarried, jobless mother whose failure to adequately nurture her children and produce in them the ‘good, well-managed self’ constitutes a threat to the social order (Lawler 2000: 2). That she was also a writer might have given her the status of ‘genius’ to reviewers, but it was a genius that was, and remains, irredeemably other. A ‘slumdog prodigy’ (Cox 2010), with ‘black teeth’ (Kelly 1987: 25), she was ‘born to write and die’ (Gardner 1998), her life ‘short [and] reckless’ (Miller 2017), ‘short [and] troubled’ (Pollard 2019). In what follows I shall explore these two quests to discover the mother as subject, and examine whether they do indeed, as Tyler suggests they might, ‘really challenge predominant understandings of what a subject is and can be’.

These two films are not alone in the recent work of women filmmakers in enacting a search for an absent female subject through the narrated memories of others (Carol Morley’s Dreams of a Life [2011] also does this), or in embodying the quest by a daughter for a mother’s history and subjectivity (Sophie Turkiewicz’s Once My Mother [2013] performs a similar quest). The two are also in one crucial way very different. Polley’s story is explicitly autobiographical: she is both daughter and filmmaker. Barnard’s is not: as filmmaker she is outside the mother-daughter story that she tells. But both films are complex acts of retrieval, searches for a mother who actively claimed subjectivity and agency which simultaneously question the capacity of their own, indeed any, narrative to recover its object. Both, like Citron’s film, are multi-layered, at once employing and disrupting the conventions of documentary filmmaking; both, like hers, use, manipulate and question footage that claims a direct, indexical relation to ‘truth’ (in the case of Polley’s film it is home-movie footage; in that of Barnard it is television news footage); both construct a story which withholds key revelations, in the manner of narrative fiction, and yet operates through processes of repetition, circularity, and the disruption of temporal order which challenge the authority of such narratives.

Both films, indeed, are self-conscious examples of the ‘memory text’ as Annette Kuhn defines it. Kuhn distinguishes between the staging and questioning of memory in such texts and the assumptions of transparency and wholeness in the traditional autobiographical narrative. In the latter, she writes, ‘narration, narrator and protagonist are indivisibly one’ (2000: 180); both truth and the organising presence of a continuous and indivisible subjectivity are claimed and actively performed. In the memory text, however, neither time nor subjectivity is continuous or sequential. What we find instead are ‘vignettes, anecdotes, fragments, “snapshots”, flashes’ (ibid.: 190). Remembered events are ‘pulled out of a linear time-frame’, to produce a sense of synchrony, temporal disturbance, or timelessness. These texts invest in place rather than time, emotion and loss rather than truth and wholeness; their organisation of time becomes cyclical, not sequential (ibid: 189-94). They challenge those models of both narrative and subjectivity ‘grounded in individualism’ within which, as I have argued, the mother cannot be a subject but at best the producer and guarantor of the subjectivities of others, and at worst, a ‘site of social abjection’ (Baraitser, Pollock, and Spigel 2010: 1).

Stories We Tell
Polley’s film, she reflects towards its close, has two aims. One is to ‘interrogate’ (her term) ‘memory and the way we tell the stories of our lives’; the second is to ‘try[..] to form her ... to put her together in the wreckage’. It is the first of these on which reviewers concentrated, emphasising the film’s formal complexity. The film, they suggest, ‘is less about unearthing the actualities of the past and more about deconstructing these memories and subjective viewpoints’ (Gamble 2013); it is only ‘ostensibly about her mother, ... pushing us to consider not just the meaning of stories but how the way we tell the story can change its impact’ (O’Malley 2013). It ‘pivots on the irreducible fact of narrative unreliability’ (Stevens 2013). It is the second of these aims, however, which is my focus here. It is this quest (‘to try to form her’) which renders Polley the filmmaker uncertain – ‘Every time I feel I have my footing, I lose it’ reflects her voiceover – but towards which she feels compelled, despite her sense of its inevitable failure: her mother, she says, ‘slip[s] away from us, over and over again, just as we begin to see her face’.

Like Citron, Polley begins her quest at the age of 28, and as in Citron’s film, the memories of her mother are rendered through home-movie footage, in this case filmed on super 8. Indeed, one scene in particular seems to pay homage to the earlier film. Very early in Daughter Rite, as the filmmaker-narrator tells us of her parents’ separation, we see home-movie footage, repeated and slowed, of a mother and two daughters on a pedal-driven swan boat in the Public Gardens of Boston; the daughters wave at the camera. Stories We Tell includes a similar scene. As Michael Polley begins his account of Diane’s temporary move to Montreal, we see similar footage of Diane and their two children on a swan pedal-boat in a public park. Diane smiles, and a child waves at the camera. ‘She hated living in Toronto’ says Diane’s son Johnny in voiceover, in one of the many disjunctures between image and sound that also characterise Citron’s film.

Fig. 1 Swan Boat Daughter Rite

Fig. 2 Swan Boat Stories We Tell

Writing later of her own manipulation, as filmmaker, of the home-movie footage originally shot by her father, Citron comments on her usurpation of his role. She desired, she suggests, both to ‘ascend to a kind of power’, the power to make and control meaning that he possessed, and ‘to stand outside the scene – in the space of safety behind the glass wall of the lens’ (1999: 6). Slowing down and repeating his footage, then, she seeks to expose the ‘real’ family relations that are obscured in a viewing at normal speed. This ‘shadow film’ which is hidden in the father’s images of ‘an ideal selective past’ reveals, she writes, the reality of the mother’s invasion of her daughter’s boundaries, and of the daughter’s rage (ibid.: 18-19).

Polley, too, manipulates the home-movie footage that she uses, but in a rather different way. Specific sequences recur throughout the film, in particular a scene in which Michael and Diane come together on the veranda of their house, he in swimming shorts, she in a sundress, and he puts his arm around her as they smile and look into the camera. It is a scene whose ostensible happiness, like that of the swan-boat ride, is often undercut by the words we hear. But Polley’s film does not ask us to interrogate these images for their hidden truths. Instead, it adds to them, mixing these sequences with staged footage also shot on super 8, and rapidly cutting between the two. These enacted sequences, too, are shot with a hand-held, often shaky camera, catching fragmentary glimpses of a subject who moves constantly out of shot. The effect is to render Diane elusive, constantly mobile: endlessly evading, or
resisting, the camera. In ‘Towards a Phenomenology of Non-Fictional Film Experience’, Vivian Sobchack, drawing on a model by Jean-Pierre Meunier, distinguishes between our mode of engagement with home-movies and that with the documentary and the fiction film. Whilst home movies, she argues, function to recall a person or event whose reality exists, or existed, for us off-screen, so that its images serve a generalised evocative or ‘keepsake’ function, documentary engages us both with our experience beyond the screen and with the specificity of its images, inviting ‘comprehension, not evocation’ (1999: 249). In fiction, however, it is the film’s specific images, and the narrative within which they are embedded, that is our focus. What I want to suggest here is that whereas Citron’s manipulation of her father’s home-movie footage invites us to find a truth beyond the footage (the unhappiness of her family, her mother’s attempts at control, her own anger) which is both evoked and effaced by its images, Polley’s rapid mixing of home-movie and fictional footage has a very different effect. Although the footage does evoke the sense of ‘irrevocable loss’ that Sobchack (ibid.: 248) associates with the home-movie, there is no ‘truth’ to be revealed here. Instead, we are engaged with the specificity of Diane as she appears to us on screen: elusive and fragmentary, but undeniably the subject of the narrative into which we are drawn.

An analysis of the film’s first three minutes reveals its complex play with memory, narrative, and subjectivity. It begins with a black screen and the sound of Abraham Lass’s ‘Tranquility’, one of the solo piano pieces ‘To Accompany Silent Films’ from Lass’s album of 1971, which are used throughout the film. What we then see is indeed silent: a blurred and grainy view filmed with a hand-held camera from the window of a train. We are looking forwards, moving through the snowy landscape, and as the camera pulls away the viewpoint is revealed to be that of a young woman. This is our introduction to Diane: we are not, as in Citron’s film, looking at but with her; she is not held in place but mobile, and it is her journey we are sharing. What follows is the first of many rapid montages: a collage of home-movie sequences some of which, like the opening sequence, are re-enactments, others taken from the Polley family archive. In some of them Diane is lover, in others partner, party-goer, or mother; in all of them she is glimpsed, not captured, never quite in focus and always moving out of frame. Over the music we hear Michael Polley’s voice:

‘When you're 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 are telling it, to yourself or to someone else.’

The final sequence in the montage is of Michael writing his story, the handwritten pages spread before him; but the screen tells us that the words we have just heard are from Margaret Atwood’s Alias Grace (1996). Over the shot of the film’s title we hear Michael’s voice again, but this time he is uncertain, asking for directions. It is Sarah, the daughter-filmmaker, who is in charge. The sequence that follows shows the two within a recording studio, as she directs him. He is to read ‘the whole of the thing that I wrote’. Immediately, however, the film cuts to other recording set-ups: this time it is Sarah’s siblings who are to speak. The final set-up is in black and white: now it is Diane herself who is being directed and recorded.

The film opens, then, with issues of memory and subjectivity. We are presented with footage that, in Citron’s words, seems to ‘signify … “authenticity”’ (1999: 17), but it is fragmented and contradictory, and its claims to actuality are undercut by the music, so evidently designed to accompany a silent movie, which reminds us that film is both constructed and performed. Michael’s
voice is authoritative, claiming ownership of the story we will hear. But his opening words echo Kuhn’s description of both memory and narrative as ‘always … secondary revision’ (2000: 186). And they are taken from a fictional first-person narrative, part of a novel which sets this female-authored discourse amidst excerpts from actual historical documents, pieces of nineteenth century English and American poetry, and fictional sections of free indirect discourse attributed to a male psychiatrist. The novel is, writes Joan Douglas Peters, a ‘structural polyphony’ in which ‘the “truth” of Grace’s personal story is never satisfactorily determined’ (2015: 300, 301). Within a similarly polyphonic opening to Polley’s film, Diane herself is both central and elusive. The hand-held camera follows her actions and, in the opening shots, her viewpoint, but she is a haunting presence, never quite captured by it. This is most evident in the final shot that I have described here, one that will be repeated within the film. In a sequence that rhymes with the others we have just seen – she is provided with a microphone and directed to face the camera - Diane nervously presents herself for filming, and we await her story as we do those of Polley’s siblings. But the sequence is grainy, filmed in black and white and without sound; it is, to use Kuhn’s words, ‘pulled out of a linear time-frame’, to produce a sense of temporal disturbance and impossible synchrony. Diane’s presence is also a haunting absence.

Fig. 3 Suzy presents herself for filming

Fig. 4 Joanna presents herself for filming

Fig. 5 Diane presents herself for filming

Throughout this opening it is clear that Sarah the filmmaker is in control, but she is also a presence both on-screen, as she directs Michael, and audibly just off-screen, as we hear her speak to her siblings as they prepare to be interviewed. Like Citron, she undercuts ‘the power of the Father’ (Citron 1999: 6) to control the narrative, but without herself claiming, as Citron does, to possess ‘the meaning that I knew lay just beneath the surface appearance’ (ibid.: 16). Both fathers in Polley’s film have also been producers of film. Both claim ownership of truth and narrative. Harry, the biological father Sarah discovers in the course of the film, does it most obviously. ‘You can certainly get very close to [the truth]’, he says, but only as long as the tellers are limited. And in this case, ‘The reality is, essentially, that the story with Diane, I regret to say, is only mine to tell, and I think that’s a fact’. The claims to narrative truth – ‘certainly… reality… essentially… fact’ – and to the authority of the narrator, Harry, as unified and knowing self, are insistent. Michael, the father Sarah grew up with, is more self-deprecating, and conscious that his story is also performance (‘I was being so real’, he protests when Sarah asks him to repeat a line), but for him, too, the self is whole and continuous – ‘this unique I/eye has always existed’, he says – and he, too, would prefer his story to be told unedited: that would be, he says, ‘as close to truth as you can get’.

Against these patriarchal claims to the authority of the autobiographical subject, the film offers a very different model of narrative and subjectivity. A fascinating review by Leah Anderst for Senses of Cinema calls it collaborative and choral: a ‘medley’ (2013), in the words of Polley’s sister Susy. I want, however, to suggest that there is something both more specific and more relational in the ‘memory text’ that emerges. Two sequences in particular make this explicit. The first is the film’s repeated use of Diane’s black-and-white audition tape. In its most extended use, this becomes a way of rendering Diane vividly present in the film at the same time as her unknowability is emphasised. As she performs a version of ‘Ain’t Misbehavin’, the footage is intercut with a newspaper account of
the court’s judgement on her failure as a mother, and her children’s very different assessments (they stress her pain at leaving her children). She herself seems to return our gaze, but as a performer conscious of her audience. In another use of the same footage, however, this returned gaze becomes both more complex and more theoretically suggestive. Here, near the beginning of the film, Sarah continues to organise her siblings for their interviews. We see her look through the studio camera, then stride purposefully across the room, script in hand. Her face fills the screen, blurred but gazing intently; she nods and smiles. We hear the sound of projected film, and it is Diane’s face, almost identically framed, that looks back at her, in a moment of mutual recognition made possible by the porosity of the film’s different layers and temporalities.

Figs. 6, 7, 8

It is, I would suggest, in the relationship glimpsed here, a relationship that is temporally impossible, that the film’s suggestion of another way of conceiving subjectivity is proposed. That her mother’s story is also Sarah’s becomes increasingly evident as she retraces Diane’s journey to Montreal and Harry, and we see in the film’s final family montages that Sarah too is a mother. It is a doubling that is also evident in the second of the sequences I want to point to here. Joanna, Sarah’s sister, is arguing, in contrast to the emphasis on ‘truth’ in the two patriarchal views we have just heard, that subjectivity is never whole and coherent and the past can not be accurately captured. ‘There's this misconception’, she says, that Diane ‘was something’, and that ‘there is a state of affairs or a thing that actually happened, and we have to reconstruct exactly what happened in the past’. As she speaks, we see Sarah directing the ‘home-movie’ reconstructions. Finally, she sits opposite ‘Diane’ (actor Rebecca Jenkins) and as ‘Diane’ talks, we see Sarah listen. Most obviously, these scenes alert the viewer to the constructedness of many of the film’s home-movie sequences, and to the fact that they are a product of Sarah’s imagination. But in the final shot, in which we seem to see both a relationship and a doubling, something else is suggested. All the daughters in the film, in fact, as Joanna tells us, have echoed their mother’s dilemmas and choices; all clearly see themselves in her.

In The Impossibility of Motherhood, Patrice DiQuinzio proposes a model of maternal subjectivity which might counter the emphasis on individualism in conventional accounts. It is a model, she writes, in which ‘the subject position mother’ is ‘partial, divided, fragmented, and even incoherent’, and accounts of it full of ‘inconsistencies and contradictions’ (1999: 244, 247). But she argues that this model, in which subject positions overlap and ‘reciprocity and mutuality’ (ibid.: 245) are emphasised, can provide a politically vital challenge to dominant accounts of subjectivity. Stories We Tell, I think, points toward such a model. The scene in which Sarah sits across the table sharing conversation with a young Diane is clearly a daughter’s fantasy – the mother, as the film makes clear, is always lost. But in the film’s suggestion of a relationship of mutual recognition between mother and daughter(s), in which both subjectivities and narrative journeys overlap, we can nevertheless see an alternative not only to those narratives in which, as Paul Ricoeur writes, ‘the hero…becomes who he is’ (1980: 186), so that both narrative as self-actualisation and the self as whole and continuous are reaffirmed, but also to the model of subjectivity that underpins them.

The Arbor
Like Polley’s film, Clio Barnard’s *The Arbor* mixes archival footage, recorded interview material, reconstruction, and fiction, to produce what critics saw as a ‘bewildering debut documentary’ (Rapold 2011), whose ‘formal[…] inventive[ness]’ (Scheib 2010) ‘defies categorization’ (King 2011). Like *Stories We Tell*, too, it has twin aims: to recover Andrea Dunbar as at once playwright and problematic maternal figure, and to interrogate the ‘truth’ of memory and of those forms – documentary, social realist film and drama, news, personal testimony - that claim a privileged relationship to the real and to notions of a unified subjectivity. Its most noted technique is the use of lip synch, in which actors mime to audio recordings of interviews with Dunbar’s family and friends, especially her daughters Lorraine and Lisa. It is a technique borrowed from verbatim theatre, where it is used, as Beth Johnson notes, to ‘point to the authentic’ (2016: 286), as we can clearly see in Max Stafford-Clark’s introduction to *A State Affair* (Soans, 2000), the play that he commissioned in order to update the vision of Bradford’s Buttershaw Estate found in Dunbar’s plays, and which Barnard has cited as partial inspiration for her film (Wood 2011). Emphasising that ‘sound research and journalistic skills’ are fundamental to this technique, Stafford-Clark adds that what is above all necessary is ‘a belief that authenticity is inherently dramatic’ (2000). For Barnard, however, it is the technique’s capacity to point to the constructedness of its content that is crucial. ‘I want the technique to raise questions about the relationship between fiction and documentary’, she said in interview, ‘to acknowledge that documentaries, more often than not, have the same narrative structure as fiction. I want the audience to be aware that they are watching material that has been mediated’ (Falk 2011).

*The Arbor* opens with the distant voices of children playing, over a black screen on which we then see the words, ‘This is a true story, filmed with actors lip-synching to the voices of the people whose story it tells’. We begin, then, with notions of authenticity: not the ‘stories’ of Polley’s title but a singular and true ‘story’. This story is not, it seems, that of Andrea Dunbar, whose voice is not one of those lip-synched by actors, but of those around her, and particularly her daughters. What follows, however, seems to be the opening of a fiction film: a low-angle, stylized shot of tall clumps of grass, through which two dogs burst, to be shown then scavenging in the remains of an open fire. A wide-shot follows, symmetrically framed, of a grassy field with horse in the foreground, post-war council estate in the background, and the words ‘Bradford, England’ superimposed, before we have the first of the lip-synched sequences, with Lorraine Dunbar (Manjinder Virk) and then her younger sister, Lisa (Christine Bottomley). As Lisa approaches and enters a semi-derelict house, the angle is again low, the action slowly, the cinematic mode that of a suspense narrative. As we follow Lisa’s feet up the stairs, the figure we are following becomes that of Lorraine. Both young women look in on another figure, Andrea, before moving to their own room. When we follow Lorraine’s gaze, the figure is tossing in her bed; Lisa’s gaze sees her sitting up, writing. In both sequences, the figure on the bed comes only briefly into focus. As the two sisters alternate in telling the story of the fire that the child Lorraine lit in their bedroom, we see a fire superimposed onto the mattress behind them and the faces of the actors at the window, pleading for rescue. But the two accounts are different and the sisters face towards us in delivering their monologues, never connecting with each other.

**Fig. 9 Lorraine and Lisa**

It is an opening that is, in Stella Bruzzi’s words, ‘kaleidoscopic’ (2014a) or, as I described Polley’s film, polyphonic, merging documentary claims to authenticity with the stylization of art cinema and techniques of narrative fiction. At the end of this opening sequence, it is clear that this is not a singular story and that its subject is both fractured (Andrea as drunken and neglectful mother, Andrea as writer) and elusive: merely glimpsed in the gazes of her daughters. As the film develops, further elements are added to its ‘kaleidoscopic’ structure of cinematic and temporal disjunctures. As
well as the lip synched audio testimonies, we find scenes from Dunbar’s first play of 1980, performed on the street which gave it its title, Brafferton Arbor, before an audience of present-day residents. We find, too, a clip from Alan Clarke’s film of her second play, *Rita, Sue, and Bob Too!* (1987), archive footage of Dunbar from a BBC Arena documentary of 1980, and interviews with her and with her family from BBC’s *Look North* (1987) and Yorkshire TV’s *The Great North Show* (1989). Like Polley’s film, too, that of Barnard includes elements of fantasy, most notably the scene in which the child Lorraine (Parvani Lingiah) dances on the roof of her father’s car, dressed in a sari. And like Polley’s film it also employs the narrative techniques of fiction. In both films, the unfolding of the story hinges on a crucial overheard remark: in Polley’s film, the information that Diane Polley was unsure who had fathered the child she was expecting; and in Barnard’s, Dunbar’s devastating comment that she could not love Lorraine as she did her two other children. In both, too, a vital revelation is withheld until the film’s mid-point: in *Stories We Tell*, it is the fact of Diane’s first marriage; and in *The Arbor*, the information that Lorraine is currently in prison for the manslaughter of her two-year-old son, Harris.

More important, however, is the fact that the boundaries between these forms slip and slide. Testimonies contradict one another, and are voiced over fantasy images of events in which adult actors perform as children. Interspersed with the present-day residents of Brafferton Arbor who form the audience for Dunbar’s play are the actors who perform her family’s words - at one point, actor (Kathryn Pogson) and real-life counterpart, Dunbar’s sister Pamela, stand side by side. Andrea’s voice in interview merges seamlessly into that of Natalie Gavin, the actor who plays her protagonist in the re-staged *The Arbor*. Later, the face of Gavin, as she insists to a suspicious bus conductor that ‘I’m bleedin’ nearly fifteen’ becomes that of Lorraine/Virk, whose words, ‘You know, by the time I was fifteen…’, begin her own story of rape, addiction, and pregnancy. Shots of *The Arbor* of the 1980s, in Clarke’s film and the BBC Look North profile of Dunbar, are intercut with images of its present, in which the moving camera draws attention to the houses - still the same, though fewer are boarded up and new houses have been added - to the rubbish-strewn grass, and to the ‘abandoned and feral dogs’ described in Stafford-Clark’s account of the estate in 2000 (2000: 1). It is a temporal blurring that invites a political reading of the kind made by Johnson, who writes of the film’s exposure of a ‘destructive pattern of addiction [that] was clearly linked not only to the heart of the struggles of these troubled women but also … to the spaces and places of social exclusion that had such a direct impact on their lives’ (2016: 284). It is a reading that is in part endorsed by Barnard herself, who speaks of her hope that the film’s temporal span might allow ‘some understanding of the destructive effects of poverty, racism and addiction to emerge’ (Wood 2011).

To emphasise only this reading, however, is to ignore the dislocating effects of the rapid temporal shifts and slippage between cinematic modes and voices. It is also to ignore the film’s central, impossible quest: for Dunbar as a maternal and a writing subject. Like Polley’s this is a haunted film: Barnard, writes Adam Nayman in his review for *Cinema Scope*, ‘has produced a kind of ghost story’ (2011), and Johnson comments that the film is ‘haunted by Dunbar’s absence’ (2016: 283). Dunbar’s identity as both writer and mother is both a constant presence in the film – in the performances we see and the interviews we hear – and a haunting absence. In televised interviews, she is positioned constantly on the Arbor: a product of place - the boarded-up houses and broken-down estate against which she is filmed – not an authoring voice. The identity of writer is one with which she seems uncomfortable and which she appears to deny (‘You write what’s said. You don’t lie’), but we also witness her re-shaping of key scenes and we hear of her constant struggles to write. Her identity as writer is both cause of her neglect of her children and constantly interrupted by her identity as mother. As mother, she is equally elusive. She was, insists Lorraine, a bad mother, in an account that has echoes of the complicit mother of Citron’s *Daughter Rite*: ‘She didn’t give us cuddles
and she didn’t tell us she loved us and she didn’t give us kisses. ... and the sexual abuse ... I don’t know whether she didn’t believe it or she just didn’t want to believe it’. Above all, she did not want Lorraine (‘she said that she’d regretted having me’). But the Dunbar that we see in archive footage is solicitous and protective of her daughter. ‘I suppose sometimes you wish you hadn’t [had a child]’, she says, ‘but if they were taken away from you you’d soon miss them and want them back, even though you can’t do things you’d like to do’. The final image that we see of Dunbar is of her holding the child Lorraine, the gazes of both fixed on the view beyond the window of the train in which they are travelling.

As in Polley’s film, then, the maternal subject of Barnard’s film is a shifting and elusive figure: slipping in and out of focus in the archive footage, and doubled - by the character of ‘the Girl’ in the performance of The Arbor and by Lorraine herself, whose story replays that of Dunbar, and who would herself like to be a writer. Like Polley’s, this is a film of a daughter’s quest, and the second half focuses almost exclusively on Lorraine, as she tells her own story and investigates her mother through the archival material that we view with her. But there is a crucial difference. Whereas Polley positions herself as filmmaker inside the film, drawing attention to both her partiality and her control of the filmmaking process, in Barnard’s film, as Ruby Beesley comments in her review, whilst we are made constantly aware of her interventions as filmmaker, there is ‘no intention to reveal much of herself in the story’ (2010). Yet despite this greater distancing, there are moments when the filmmaker’s fantasy seems fully engaged with that of her characters – the image of the young Lorraine dancing, for example, has its origins in Lorraine’s thwarted dreams but is a construction wholly of the filmmaker’s vision. As with Stories We Tell, too, there are moments in the film when its impossible temporalities – what Bruzzi (2014b) calls its ‘multiplicity of presents’ – produce a blurring of subjectivities through which another way of imagining subjectivity becomes briefly possible. Two instances stand out. The first begins with Dunbar, interviewed in 1989, describing the tall grass in front of The Arbor in which as a child she used to hide ‘when my mum used to shout us’. She glances to her right and we see a close-up of the bright clumps of grass with which the film opened, with the legs of spectral children walking through them. Then Lorraine’s voice continues, ‘It was a red-hot sunny day and the grass was all overgrown, ... and my Auntie Pamela shouted ...’ Here, the memories of Andrea and Lorraine blur and the images conjured by both merge with those of the filmmaker, to become not repetition (of generational poverty, patterns of addiction, a cycle of deprivation) but shared vision.

The second instance has similarities with the mother-daughter encounter in Polley’s film, and involves mutual recognition as well as a shared subjectivity. Throughout Barnard’s film Lorraine/Virk has been seen viewing the archival material of her mother’s interviews, as well as her letters and plays. It has been Lorraine’s investigation of her mother – which is also an investigation of herself – that we have followed. She has been distanced and often judgemental. In one scene, however – a scene that is once again a product of the filmmaker’s fantasy – we see Lorraine/Virk on an empty stage, and Andrea watching her. Lorraine is reading her own words which close Soans’ A State Affair (2000), ‘Every day I feel hurt, pain, anger, hate’, and as the camera circles round the single figure in the audience, we see that it is the Andrea Dunbar of the 1980s, gazing intently at the stage. The scene’s impossible temporality – mother and daughter are both in their twenties; Lorraine speaks in the present her own words of ten years earlier which now (‘three different kids to three different men’) apply to her, too – renders Lorraine’s words less a judgement than a shared articulation. It is a moment of subjective ‘porosity’ (Brassey 2018) in which the filmmaker, too, is implicated. It is within her overarching vision that this moment of blurring/sharing can take place.

Figs. 10, 11, 12
Conclusion

Unlike *Stories We Tell*, Barnard’s film does not explicitly construct its narrative against those stories of self-actualisation in which the individual self, whole and continuous, is reaffirmed. But that is a masculine story, and *The Arbor* is constructed against an equally dominant cultural construction on which such a narrative depends. This is the figure of mother, and in particular the Northern working-class mother who is an aspect of place, of the ‘setting’ (Hoggart 1958) for the narrative journey of the male protagonist. The warm, selfless centre of home in her positive incarnation, she becomes a ‘site of social abjection’ when she rebels. We see this figure in the documentaries and news features that the film includes, and in the narrative of Stafford-Clark, for whom Dunbar and the Buttershaw Estate seem one. Like Polley’s film, that of Barnard offers a very different model of both narrative and subjectivity. Marked by inconsistencies and contradictions, these are stories in which subjectivity is not whole, singular, or achieved, but instead blurs and overlaps, with moments of exhilarating reciprocity.

In contrast to Citron’s *Daughter Rite*, both of these films centre on a mother who insists on her claims to autonomy and a voice, and is not the alternately nurturing and devouring mother of both psychoanalytic and popular imagination. Yet both are haunted by a maternal subjectivity they seek to but cannot quite grasp. Both contain moments when another way of imagining subjectivity, one which transcends both the individual and the filmmaker’s quest for her, tentatively emerges. But both, finally, no less than *Daughter Rite*, are daughters’ films. Both Sarah and Lorraine are themselves mothers, yet the narratives traced in the two films, the moments of mutual recognition and shared identity that they produce, position them as daughters. Their identity as mothers does not become the subject of narrative, however complex and fractured. It is as if, as Baraitser argues, maternal subjectivity is an identity forever being breached, so that it is experienced always as ‘interruption’ rather than narrative (2009: 67). If it *can* be narrated, it is perhaps only by a daughter whose quest for her mother as subject becomes also a quest for another way of conceiving her own narrative, and her own subjectivity, both as daughter and as mother.

8205 words
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The Arbor (dir. Clio Barnard, 2010)

Daughter Rite (dir. Michelle Citron, 1978)

Dreams of a Life (dir. Carol Morley, 2011)

Once My Mother (dir. Sophie Turkiewicz, 2013)

Stories We Tell (dir. Sarah Polley, 2012)
Notes

1 The term is taken from B. Ruby Rich’s introduction to the 2007 DVD of the film.

2 It is a criticism later echoed by Citron herself. ‘Daughter Rite is a story told exclusively from the daughter’s point of view’, she writes. ‘It is only the daughters who speak; everything we learn about the mother is filtered through their voices. At the time I made the film, I was incapable of imagining the mother’s story; I was still too angry at mine’ (1999: 59).

3 Although Williams and Rich claim (1981: 20) that it is the mother’s voice that closes the film, the words that she speaks, ‘Why do you have to say all this?’, function, paradoxically, to refuse speech. They are, moreover, doubly mediated: both a product of the daughter’s fantasy (‘I imagine my mother seeing this [and asking]’) and a quotation, from Deena Metzger’s ‘The Book of Hags’ (1976).

4 Both mothers (Diane Polley and Andrea Dunbar) die when their daughters are 11; both daughters are 29 when the film is made.

5 In this she does, however, fit within another ‘character-type’ of British social realism identified by Lovell: that of the feckless, irresponsible, usually unmarried mother, in whose disordered household ‘there is no … comfort, … the fire is unlit, the inhabitants come and go, and quarrel noisily’ (1990: 361).

6 We see the image, for example, when Michael reflects that ‘Like many marriages, perhaps most, this one had gone stale’, and again towards the end of the film when Sarah’s sister suggests: ‘I kind of think [Michael] was the one she really was in love with, and he just wasn’t an option’.

7 They all, says Joanne, ‘hightailed it’ from their marriages after hearing Diane’s story.

8 The phrase is that of Mary Jacobus, from an essay in which she asks how, as feminists, we can answer Virginia Woolf’s call to ‘think back through our mothers’. See Jacobus 1988: 103-5. For discussion of it in relation to 1970s feminist cinema see Thornham 2012: 189.

9 Though Johnson’s interesting reading of the film argues that this dislocation allows the film both to identify the bodies of women with place, suggesting that women, and particularly the deprived women of Bradford, are themselves ‘sites of social exclusion’ (2016: 285) and to give a voice, and hence subjectivity, to these women.

10 Anna Coatman comments on this: ‘It’s notable that in documentaries, news reports and photographs from the time, Dunbar always seems to be framed by a scuffed brick wall, or a dingy stairwell. Or else she’s drinking in a pub, or pushing a pram. This is not how other playwrights, artists or intellectuals tend to be shown’ (2018).