
Questions of Intimacy and Distance in Three Films by Sarah Polley

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Introduction: An Unorthodox Journey

A celebrated child actress in Canadian television, Sarah Polley had already made a number of short films - *Don't Think Twice* (1999), *The Best Day of My Life* (1999), *I Shout Love* (2001), *All I Want for Christmas* (2002) and *The Harp* (2004), an episode from the television mini-series *The Shields Stories* – before she shot to fame as a director with her first feature, *Away from Her* (Canada/UK/USA, 2006), starring Julie Christie, Gordon Pinsent, and Michael Murphy.¹ While the film earned its director considerable praise, it also provoked great wonder: how could an actress since childhood, now still only in her late twenties, manage to tackle the issue of old age and dementia, an unusually grave subject matter as it is, let alone for a first film, and prove herself so precociously accomplished and mature? Polley's 'star rebirth' behind the camera is indeed remarkable.²

¹ For a biography of Polley, see <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sarah-polley/?sessionid=>; <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001631/bio>; the chapter 'Actors/Auteurs: Don McKellar and Sarah Polley' in David Pike's *Canadian Cinema since the 1980s: At the heart of the World* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2012, pp. 134-138; Soraya Roberts, 'The Evolution of Sarah Polley', <https://hazlitt.net/longreads/evolution-sarah-polley>, 3 November 2017; and Jon C. Hopwood, 'Sara Polley: Mini-bio', <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001631/bio>. For a filmography see http://femfilm.ca/director_search.php?director=sarah-polley&lang=e.

² See Brian D. Johnson, 'A Star is Reborn, Behind the Camera: Directing Her First Movie, the Ever-precocious Sarah Polley Finds Magic in Age-old love', *Maclean's*, 11 September 2006, p. 67.

Her second feature, *Take This Waltz* (Canada/Sp/Jap, 2011), starring Michele Williams, Seth Rogan and Luke Kirby, met with less success, but her third, *Stories We Tell* (Can, 2012), was again hailed by critics for both its poignancy and craftsmanship, and earned numerous awards at home and abroad. An *IndieWire* review typified the chorus of praise, saying that the film “marks the finest of Polley’s filmmaking skills by blending intimacy and intrigue to remarkable effect”.³ Beyond the eulogistic appraisal of her work, what is striking, however, is how different her three feature films seem at first sight, in terms of both subject-matter and genre. What could be the links between a staid drama about old age, a bitter-sweet romantic comedy about young hipsters, and an essay film documenting the director’s own family? This article offers some insights into what unites Polley’s feature films. As the director herself realised when completing her third film, there is a consistent thread running through the work. While the most obvious common features are thematic, the films also display an ongoing concern for experimenting with narrative structures and for conveying emotions and personal perspectives through the subjectification of filmic space. Last, I examine to what extent her status as an actress-turned-director may account for the originality of her work.

Born in 1979, the young Sarah Polley started her film career at an early age (in Phillip Borsos’s *One Magic Christmas*, Can/USA, 1985) before being given a major role in Terry Gilliam’s *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (UK/W. Germ, 1988). Following her lead role in the CBC/PBC series *Ramona* (1988) she became “Canada’s sweetheart”⁴ as the star of the highly popular television series *Road to Avonlea* (CBC/Disney, 1990-1996), a period sitcom based on the stories by Lucy Maud Montgomery. Leaving home as a self-sufficient 14 year-old, and eventually turning her back on the apparent Disneyfication of Canadian children’s television, in her later teens Polley became a political activist, notably in support of the Ontario New Democratic Party in the mid-1990s. Her return to the screen in Egoyan’s *The Sweet Hereafter* (Can, 1997) was hailed as her successful coming-of-age as an actress. Polley had succeeded in making “the rare change from successful child actor to successful adult actor”.⁵

However, despite being dubbed the ‘It-Girl’ of 1999 by the entertainment media after her part in Audrey Wells’ *Guinevere* (USA, 1999)⁶, and in spite of forays into mainstream or genre cinema — Doug Liman’s *Go* (USA, 1999), Zack Snyder’s *Dawn of the Dead* (USA/Can/Jap/Fr, 2004), and Vincenzo Natali’s *Splice* (Can/Fr/USA, 2009) — Polley firmly refused to conform to the expectations of the industry and famously backed out of Cameron Crowe’s *Almost Famous* (USA, 2000), which had been set to make her a major star in the United States. The actress explained that she did not want to lead a life of fame, preferring to stay in Canada and take on roles in independent productions, working with directors including Don McKellar, David Cronenberg, Michael

³ Eric Kohn, ‘How Sarah Polley’s *Stories We Tell* Explores Multiple Versions of the Truth’, *IndieWIRE*, 7 May 2013, <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/05/how-sarah-polleys-stories-we-tell-explores-multiple-versions-of-the-truth-38676/>.

⁴ Roberts, ‘The Evolution of Sarah Polley’.

⁵ Andrew McIntosh, ‘Sarah Polley’, <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sarah-polley/?sessionid=>, 15 October 2012.

⁶ Leah McLaren, ‘From TV Starlet to Director, Via a Road Less Travelled’, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/from-tv-starlet-to-director-via-a-road-less-travelled/article731696/>, 7 September 2006, updated 24 April 2018.

Winterbottom, Hal Hartley, Wim Wenders, and Isabel Coixet. In the late 1980s, Polley thus became emblematic of a new generation of Anglo-Canadian actors “*who, for the first time, managed to retain their local identity while also crossing over to establish a solid presence in Hollywood*”.⁷

Although the actress graduated from the Canadian Film Centre’s directing programme in 2001, her film-making debut in 2006 came as a remarkable *coup*. *Away From Her* was acclaimed both in Canada and the United States, receiving an impressive number of awards and being hailed as the potential harbinger of a revival in English-Canadian cinema. After years of dismal returns at the box office and scant international attention, Canuck film finally had a success story at home and abroad, at least by the national industry’s admittedly modest commercial standards. *Away From Her* is that rarest of creatures, an English-Canadian film that has impressed both public and critics. This quiet, moving drama grossed \$4.5 million in Canada and the U.S., marking the first time an English-Canuck film had done any business in the U.S. in years.⁸ In a country where film distribution is largely controlled by US networks — Canada is considered to be part of the US studios’ domestic market — and where Canadian films represent only around 2% of the gross box office, Polley’s success is no mean feat.⁹

Adapted from Alice Munro’s short story ‘The Bear Came over the Mountain’, *Away from Her* depicts how the relationship between an elderly couple married for 44 years is affected by the wife’s early-onset Alzheimer’s disease, and her decision to move to a care residence where she forms a new romantic attachment that utterly confounds and distresses her husband (although he cannot help wondering whether Fiona is not punishing him for his past infidelities as well as welcoming the bliss of forgetting painful memories.) *Away from Her* in this sense comes as a very unexpected first feature from a well-known 28-year-old actress — a first-time film without the autobiographical dimension which is often present when actors venture behind the camera, and hence without the actress herself at its centre (as is also the case in her second film). Polley’s intended first feature film was apparently based on an original script about a 12-year-old actress starring in a television series, a subject close to Polley’s own experience. One can only speculate about an aborted piece of work such as this, but it may have been fortunate that the project never came to fruition, leading Polley to explore more indirect narrative approaches.

Although dealing with characters closer to her in age, Polley’s second feature, *Take This Waltz*, also marked a surprising turning away from the sedate art film towards something verging on popular cinema. The film is not, however, a conventional romantic comedy either. Although seemingly toying with the conventions of the ‘chick flick’ — where the heroine is perhaps torn between a dependable but dull husband and a more exciting handsome stranger who turns out to be her neighbour — the film does not offer an easily likeable heroine, and adopts an unduly slow rhythm hardly suitable for comedy. Sarah Polley explained she wanted to create a film “*about the*

⁷ Pike, *Canadian Cinema since the 1980s: At the Heart of the World*, p. 107.

⁸ Brendan Kelly, ‘Featured Player: Canuck Film Finds Homegrown Hero’, *Variety*, vol. 407 no. 8, 16 July 2007, p. 14.

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema_of_Canada#cite_note-adm_gross_uis-4

concept of emptiness and about life having a gap in it”¹⁰, hardly the typical pitch for a romcom. In this respect, *Take This Waltz* appears as the counterpart of *Away from Her*, probing the difficulties and disappointments in long-term intimate relationships. At the time of its release, Polley repeatedly denied that the story had any autobiographical bearing, the failure of her own marriage notwithstanding.¹¹

It was not until her next film, *Stories We Tell*, which dealt directly with her own family history, that the underlying pattern connecting her work became apparent to her: “*I didn’t know why I was writing it, and then I think it was halfway through making this film that I kind of got it and I went, ‘I think this is the film I’ve been making over and over again.’ [...] And not just Take This Waltz but every short film I’ve made and Away from Her – it’s always about a long-term relationship, an infidelity and in many ways how the man kind of absorbs that. [...] I think a lot of filmmakers make the same film over and over again without knowing it.*”¹² Although extremely different in genre and tone, Polley’s feature films consistently probe themes close to her heart - as a woman, a lover, a daughter, a Canadian, and an artist. In this respect, if her features were definitely not conceived as vehicles for herself as an actress, they fit what seems to be a characteristic of actors who turn directors in order to foster subjects to which they feel close.

Polley is also a powerful exegete of her work and she has readily commented on what triggered her choices. She wrote the preface to the 2007 edition of Alice Munro’s short story, explaining how, when she first read it, she had “*a relationship with this story that was as powerful and as transformative as any [she had] had with another human being*”¹³, revealing how it related to the context of her life at the time with her grandmother moving to a retirement home and with her romantic life “*in tatters*”. She wrote a blog on the National Film Board of Canada website detailing how she learned about her biological father, leading her to work for five years on *Stories We Tell*.¹⁴ In particular, Polley then surmised that all her films were somehow reflections on the story of her parents. Themes of dissatisfaction within marriage and infidelity thus echo throughout her work from the short films onward, as in *The Harp*, where the heroine’s father, played by Polley’s own father Michael, is abandoned by his wife.

But just as the story of her parents is refracted in her work, so too there are many other meaningful processes at work, both thematically and aesthetically, that account for her achievement as a film-maker. In keeping with the actress’s concern for preserving her Anglo-Canadian identity,

¹⁰ Peter Knegt, ‘Sarah Polley Talks *Take This Waltz*: ‘I wanted to make a film about the concept of emptiness’, *IndieWIRE*, 29 June 2012, <https://www.indiewire.com/2012/06/sarah-polley-talks-take-this-waltz-i-wanted-to-make-a-film-about-the-concept-of-emptiness-46268/>.

¹¹ Johanna Schneller, ‘Sarah Polley Swears This Film Is Not about Her,’ *Tiff*, 10 September 2011, updated May 3, 2018, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/config/config_section/config_section_life/config_section_celebritynews/sarah-polley-swears-this-film-is-not-about-her/article593829/?page=all#dashboard/follows/.

¹² Polley in Cassandra Szklarski, ‘Polley Mines Family Secrets for Genre-blurring Doc *Stories We Tell*, Interview with Sarah Polley, *Edmonton Journal*, 8 October 2012.

¹³ Alice Munro, *Away From Her*, New York: Vintage Contemporaries edition, 2007, viii.

¹⁴ ‘*Stories We Tell*: A Post by Sarah Polley’, <https://blog.nfb.ca/blog/2012/08/29/stories-we-tell-a-post-by-sarah-poley/>, 29 August 2012.

Polley evinces a sustained interest in showcasing Canadian culture. Although most Canadian film production, including Polley's, is still partly funded by government agencies, she has been a vocal critic of the change in policy occurring in the early 2000s that was geared towards promoting more commercial films. While the Canadian film industry is struggling not to be utterly engulfed by U.S. mainstream films that benefit from larger marketing budgets and monopolise distribution networks, many English-Canadian films are indistinguishable from those made in America. Polley clearly objects to making "just cheap versions of American genre films" and instead prefers to anchor her films within a distinctive Canadian cultural context in order to deal with universal themes.¹⁵

Her 2004 short film *The Harp* is an adaptation of a story by Canadian author Carol Shields; as mentioned, *Away from Her* is based on a short story by Canadian writer and Nobel literature laureate Alice Munro, set in her native Ontario — whose snowy landscapes are captured in the film for their stark beauty and symbolic value. The film includes other references to iconic Canadian authors and artists: Grant reads from Michael Ondaatje's 1982 poem 'The Cinnamon Peeler', which offers a number of structural echoes with the main narrative, as the poem is structured along two main time periods, a hypothetical future and an actual past. The nurse Kristy is heard reading to a resident a passage from Alistair MacLeod's historical novel *No Great Mischiefs* (1999), set in Cape Breton Island (which Margot, the heroine of *Take This Waltz*, visits at the beginning of the film) and Northern Ontario. The film also makes use of songs by Canadian singer Neil Young; on the night before Fiona leaves home, the couple is filmed dancing to the tune of 'Harvest Moon' (1992), its celebration of long-lasting love offering a cruelly moving comment on the scene. In turn, Young's 'Helpless' (1993) accompanies the end credits, adding to the feeling of nostalgic longing and loss.

Take This Waltz indeed borrows its title from a Leonard Cohen song that plays over a montage sequence in which the camera keeps whirling around the new couple in their apartment, and their relationships evolve from passionate love-making to listless TV watching, in a sexed-up re-writing of Welles' famous montage sequence in *Citizen Kane* (USA, 1941) depicting the stultifying succession of breakfasts between Kane and his wife. Another reference to a classic film can be found when Margot insists on playfully distracting Lou while he is on the phone and the conversation lingers with no evident narrative motivation other than perhaps a playful re-writing of Hitchcock's *Notorious* (USA, 1946). Polley, who has been an outspoken supporter of the national film industry, also refers to one of the most acclaimed films in Canadian film history when, to celebrate their wedding anniversary, Margot and Lou go to see Claude Jutra's *Mon Oncle Antoine* (1971).

As for *Stories We Tell*, its title comes from a passage in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* which are the first words we hear in the film, even before we see Polley's father reading them: "When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else."¹⁶ This

¹⁵ Katherine Monk, 'Actor Concerned about National Film Scene', <https://newspaperarchive.com/winnipeg-free-press-apr-29-2005-p-59/>, 29 April 2005.

obviously led to Polley's sustained involvement in the adaptation of *Alias Grace* for CBC/Netflix (2017) as writer, showrunner and executive producer. *Alias Grace* has in fact been a long-standing labour of love for Polley. She tried to acquire the rights to the novel when the book came out in 1996 but had to wait more than 20 years to finally bring her project to fruition, although, contrary to what she had first considered when she eventually obtained the rights in 2012, she eventually chose not to direct it herself.¹⁷ In many ways, *Alias Grace* epitomises a major characteristic of Polley's work, the portrayal of women through competing narratives.

Portraits of Women: Elusive Truths and Competing Narratives

Polley's adaptation of *Alias Grace* opens on the heroine's narration: "*I think of all the things that have been written about me [...] that I am of a sullen disposition with a quarrelsome temper, that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?*"¹⁸ Atwood's novel has become a modern classic of post-modern fiction, depicting a heroine from multiple perspectives, from her own unreliable narration to the various contradictory accounts provided by other textual sources. Grace Marks may or may not be guilty of the murder of which she has been convicted, she may or may not be telling the truth; she remains an enigma and the object of competing narratives. The elusive, multi-faceted depiction of *Alias Grace's* heroine epitomises the portrayals of women in Polley's films. Her main female characters remain ambiguous and impenetrable, the subject of a series of often contradictory discourses, and of speculation and projection on the part of others.

In *Away from Her*, Grant goes on scrutinising Fiona to try and figure out if she still recognises him, or whether she is playing "*a charade*" to "*punish*" him for his past infidelities. When just before leaving Fiona asks Grant how she looks, he answers: "*Direct and vague ... sweet and ironic*", echoing Grace's enumeration of contradictory adjectives. Her response may even be more telling, as she asks candidly "*Is that how I look?*", conveying her own sense of a dissolving identity. Fiona becomes a stranger not only to her husband but also to herself. During the dinner party with friends, she cannot remember the word for 'wine', stumbling over "*ween*" or "*wain*" before explaining: "*The thing is ... half the time I wander around looking for something which I know is very pertinent. I can't remember what it is. Once the idea is gone, everything is gone. I just wander around trying to figure out what it was that was so important earlier. I think I may be beginning to disappear.*" The scene is intercut with Fiona skiing alone, then stopping and looking utterly lost, gazing around at the snow-covered landscape which symbolises so well the blank page that her mind has become.

¹⁶ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*, London: Virago, new ed., 2001, pp. 345-6.

¹⁷ Roberts, 'The Evolution of Sarah Polley'.

¹⁸ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 25.

In *Take This Waltz* Margot is unable to grasp why she feels so empty and fretful; she is constantly on the move, as suggested by the recurrent close-ups of her feet, and is frantically afraid of connections in airports, or rather of missing connecting flights. The whole film is about her indecisiveness, her fear of being “*in between things*”. And, just as *Stories We Tell* starts with Polley’s own quest to know more about her late mother Diane, who died when Sarah was 11, the film draws the moving portrait of a mother who was an actress, determined to live life to its fullest, but also trapped in the societal roles ascribed to her as a wife and mother. We soon learn, as her husband Michael himself admits, that she was dissatisfied with her marriage and had affairs, but would not leave her family again after a first divorce in which she lost the custody of her two eldest children, a case that hit the headlines since it was allegedly the first time in Canada that a father won full custody – Diane being deemed unfit to be a good mother.

The film quotes from newspaper coverage of the case: under the headline ‘Wife’s adultery costs her children’ the text runs “*She has allowed her desire for a career to overstep her domestic duties. She is unrepentant. Her association with her lover is physical.*” But testimonies about Polley’s mother are often contradictory; in the case of some “*she really lacked guile*”, in others “*she was a woman of secrets*”. Her portrayal fails to cohere but appears as diffracted through the various fragmented perspectives provided by the testimony of others, and moreover diverse audio-visual materials. Diane remains an unfinished puzzle, like Grace and the quilts she makes, or the patchwork tapestry that hangs on the wall near Fiona’s bedroom in Meadowlake, where its supervisor Madeleine Montpelier proudly comments on the residents’ activity during Grant’s first visit: “*They always have a puzzle on the go*”.

Just like a puzzle, what defines Polley’s films is their concern for precluding any closure for her characters. Like a patchwork, they do not conceal their seams, which can equally be construed as signs of rupture or of continuity. While each of her films provides an anatomy of close relationships, her approach to delving into the intimacies of her main characters is based on shifting perspectives, with their relationships conveyed through spatial relations and the subjectification of filmic space. Polley once explained that the turning point in her career was her role in *The Sweet Hereafter*, by her fellow Canadian director Atom Egoyan, when for the first time she realised that film-making could be a serious and interesting matter.¹⁹ Although she does not follow the “*Freudian narrative dynamic*” of the “*family romance*” associated with Egoyan’s films²⁰, nor his obsessive concern for the impact of media technology, what Polley shares with her mentor, who was executive producer on her first feature film, is a similar preoccupation with the tension between intimacy and distance: her films probe into her characters’ emotions while preserving restraint through narrative gaps, inconclusiveness, and the foregrounding of indirect representation.

In *Away from Her*, an example is provided by one of the scenes added to Munro’s original story. As Grant is led to reconsider his personal knowledge of his marriage, he explains to the young punkish girl who first mistakes him for one of the residents of the facility that he has actually come to visit his wife but does not want to disturb her since she is busy looking after a man to whom she has

¹⁹ Polley in McLaren, ‘From TV Starlet to Director’.

²⁰ Pike, *Canadian Cinema since the 1980s*, p. 206.

become attached. Grant's choice of words — "*Just learned to give her some space*" — is revealing of the adjustments that their relationship has to undergo; negotiating space, finding the right distance, is precisely one of the most salient figurations explored by the film. As early as in the opening sequence, Grant's temporary deviation from the parallel tracks as the couple are cross-country skiing has often been commended as a striking and effective metaphor summing up the couple's history, his past unfaithfulness, and his constant return to Fiona.²¹ What critics have failed to note, however, is that the divergent route is shot from an altogether different angle, perpendicular to the tracks, whereas the parallel tracks are filmed directly in line with them. Within an overall realistic aesthetic, the axial disruption introduces a significant gap between the shots, heralding other gaps conveyed by visual tricks, all evoking Fiona's failing memories as well as the time-shifts that the film operates. And most important, it underscores how crucial is the notion of perspective.

Indeed, shifting perspectives are what define Polley's approach to adapting Munro's story. The film retains the complex interweaving of different layers of time, although it starts by inserting the story's ending at the very beginning, with short fragments of Grant's visit to Marian that will recur throughout, in a way reminiscent of Losey's *The Go-Between* (UK, 1971). The scenes, whose meaning can only be construed in retrospect, are clearly disorienting at a first viewing, also reflecting one of the main themes of the film: mental confusion and the emotional disarray which it entails. The film complexifies the question of point of view, however. Although written in the third person, Munro's short story is told from Grant's perspective in free indirect discourse that follows his thoughts and reminiscences. In the film, Grant remains the main focaliser of the narrative, but in contrast to the story, Fiona is not only given a voice of her own, she is also the focalising agent of certain scenes.

For example the film adds a scene of dialogue between Grant and Kristy, who resents his presumption in claiming to know what she must think. The scene, which is set outdoors, is then followed by a brief shot of the couple shot from one of the windows on the upper floor of the residence, where Fiona is looking out. The inclusion of her perspective, although it remains mute, suggests that a single perspective cannot prevail. Shifting perspectives are thus conveyed by shifts of viewpoint and of focus, as when Grant visits Fiona after Aubrey's departure. She is lying on her bed, turning her back to the wall which frames the scene. When Grant enters and sits in the background, he is filmed in sharp focus, looking at Fiona who occupies the unfocused foreground; but the focus then shifts back to Fiona after she has been filmed caressing the portraits that Aubrey has drawn of her and that are hanging on the wall. While the whole scene is witnessed by Grant, the shift in perspective also includes the expression of Fiona's mourning and yearning – for a new start; for her former self, as Audrey's portraits depict a woman who looks forever young – or even amazement at who this beautiful woman can be; but her longing remains her own, unvoiced and precluding any simple deciphering.

²¹ See for example Katrin Berndt and Jennifer Henke, 'Love, Age, and Loyalty in Alice Munro's 'The Bear Came over the Mountain' and Sara Polley's *Away from Her*', in Sally Chivers and Ulla Kriebner, eds., *Care Home Stories: Aging, Disability, and Long-Term Residential Care*, *Aging Studies*, vol. XIV, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017, pp. 203-226.

In what is one of the most detailed and illuminating analyses of the film, Agnès Berthin-Scaillet concludes rather oddly, perhaps, by highlighting the shortcomings of the adaptation, deploring the fact that, for her, *“there is no explicit exploration of the inner self of the characters, so that the diegesis remains on the surface of the short story in terms of characterization. [...] Sarah Polley obliterates what belongs to the realm of dreams, and assumes the form of a revival of past images, as well as the way in which Fiona as a character in Alice Munro’s text is part and parcel of Grant’s memories, mostly seen through the filter (the screen) of his mind.”*²² This assertion seems strangely reductive and inaccurate. Fiona, for instance, is the one who brings up Grant’s affairs with his students while they drive to Meadowlake. The dialogue is intercut with shots mimicking the grainy texture of older films, showing a number of bare toes in colourful sandals followed by a group of young female students heedfully attending a class. As with Fiona’s recollection of the anecdote told to her at a dinner party by Veronica (one of Grant’s students), however, the status of these inserts remains ambiguous, as they could equally refer to Grant’s memories triggered by his wife’s speech, or to her own representation of her husband’s past experience.

If the film eschews any explicit voicing of the characters’ thoughts, it adds meaning through the subjectification of space, with both the metaphoric use of images and the expressive quality of cinematographic techniques intent on rendering the complex emotional subtext that defines the characters. But the choice of editing and shifting perspectives also underscore ambiguity, deflecting any definitive and univocal interpretation. Many of the prominent stylistic devices that punctuate the film thus evoke Fiona’s slow disappearance as the consequence of the inexorable degeneration of her mind, but they equally render Grant’s grieving. Slow-motion and dissolves are used repeatedly to convey the slow process of fading away and the feeling of loss, as when Fiona walks away in the long bright corridor at Meadowlake or in the scene where Grant watches residents and their relatives as they leave the dining room one after another. Likewise, one of the prevailing stylistic devices involves the recourse to fades to white, recalling the surrounding snow as well as the blanks of Fiona’s mind, but also heralding Grant’s final letting go of his wife.

Although the storyline of *Take This Waltz* is far more straightforward, the film also offers an interesting variation on the tension between intimacy and distance. One of the scenes that attracted much media attention shows Margot and other women chatting in the communal shower after their water aerobics session. With its mixture of long-shots and facial close-ups the scene frankly exposes a wide variety of women’s bodies, from young to mature, from slender to pudgy and saggy. Polley found it important to tackle the question of nudity forthrightly, but she was wary of the pitfalls of a mainstream tendency to instrumentalise the female body: *“Generally, when I’ve done nudity, it’s very controlled, it’s very specific about what you’re going to see, and it’s usually looking really sexy.”* Instead she was determined to display female nudity in a way that was both frank and as natural as possible, neither glamourising nor demeaning it.²³ Polley also declared that she made sure the

²² Agnès Berthin-Scaillet, ‘A Reading of *Away from Her*, Sarah Polley’s adaptation of Alice Munro’s Short Story ‘The Bear Came Over the Mountain’, *Journal of the Short Story in English*, no. 55, Autumn 2010, <https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1120>.

²³ Schneller, ‘Sarah Polley Swears This Film Is Not about Her’.

actresses agreed to the scene before they signed on to the film and told them the day before shooting that they could back out if they felt too uncomfortable with it — which none did.²⁴

The bold directness of the scene, however, is strangely counterbalanced later on by the deliberate artificiality of the love-making scene with Margot and Daniel, a montage sequence accompanied by the title song. Not only are the bodies filmed in the very controlled and glamourised way to which Polley objected, but the scene stands out like a video clip, in contrast with the slow pacing that characterises most of the film. Likewise, the ride on the spinning cars of the Scrambler at the Centreville Theme Park, accompanied by the Buggles song 'Video Killed the Radio Star', is emblematic of a curious tension between the use of stylistic devices to immerse the viewer in emotion and on the other hand to expose their artificiality. The intermittent flashes of colourful lights and the blurring effect of rapid camera movements create a heady feeling of being suspended in time and space but this is deflated when the song stops jarringly and a stark, crude light replaces the whirling chaos of light and colour.

The scene is representative of the whole film, aiming at expressing self-absorption, with the paradoxical distortions it entails. *Take This Waltz* is first and foremost conceived as a fantasy, although it refuses any happy ending and proves to be bitter-sweet. Like a fantasy, the plot is based on implausible chance encounters, and characters' motivations remain elusive. Instead, they are depicted merging in the glowing light and vibrant hues of their environment so that Margot's longing seems to originate from a surrounding space that is suffused with desire. The film was shot in the summer, and in a DVD extra cinematographer Luc Montpellier explains they wanted to convey the texture of sweltering heat by selecting images that included elements of wetness, and, in the case of interiors, by using a great deal of natural light from the external environment.

Polley wanted her home town Toronto to play a central part in her film and to convey the personal emotional bond she had with it, showing the city through "*romantic goggles*"²⁵; in a bonus DVD feature, Polley confesses: "*I know that I romanticise it. I find it a sexy place.*" Just after the opening scene, Margot goes on a business trip to Nova Scotia to re-write the official tourist pamphlet for the Fortress of Louisbourg. As she takes part in a guided tour of the Fortress, employees in 18th-Century costume are re-enacting scenes from the past. These, portraying a wedding ceremony and the flogging of an adulterer, herald the very themes that the film will tackle in modern-day Toronto; they may even be read as a socio-historical comment on the evolution of attitudes towards matrimony and its breach, but more importantly, they aim at historical accuracy through very contrived reconstructions, just as the film intends to convey intimacy and emotional authenticity by flaunting its own artificiality.

²⁴ See Johanna Schneller: '*Take This Waltz* filmmaker Sarah Polley Says Acting Less a Priority Now', <https://www.ctvnews.ca/entertainment/take-this-waltz-filmmaker-sarah-polley-says-acting-less-a-priority-now-1.857696>, 28 June 2012, updated 29 June 2012.

²⁵ Knecht, 'Sarah Polley Talks *Take This Waltz*'.

Considering the indirect route Polley took in expressing her personal concerns through her feature films, and the tension they display between intimacy and distance, it may be no accident that her most personal film should combine the objectivity of documentary with an elaborately self-reflexive practice. In *Stories We Tell*, what starts as a tribute to her mother turns out to be a journey of self-discovery, documenting how Polley came to learn that her father Michael was not in fact her biological father, but that her conception was due to her mother's affair with Harry Gulkin — whom Sarah meets almost by accident. Not only does the search for her origins also mark her staging herself as director, but Polley turns her investigation into her family history into a quest for the appropriate form for the representation of such a story. As the portrayal of Polley's mother remains fragmentary and inconclusive and it becomes clear the truth will remain elusive, the question that Polley's film raises is not so much about knowing what the real story is or was, as about who is telling the story, or, in other words, how narratives are constructed through different individual perspectives.

Polyphony and Self-Reflexive Cinema

Polley's film may at first appear like a traditional autobiographical documentary, using home movies alternating with numerous talking-head interviews of the people involved in the story as participants or witnesses. However, she also carefully interweaves re-enactments of key events which she films with the same jerky cranked-up rhythm as the other home footage, thus blurring the line between fact and fiction. Viewers may well have wondered how so many key scenes had been so conveniently recorded, and the film eventually makes it clear that they have in fact been staged, as their preparation and filming are being recorded, thus questioning the 'authenticity' traditionally ascribed to the documentary genre. From the start, *Stories We Tell* exhibits the cogs and wheels that are supposed to remain hidden: when Sarah's siblings are first introduced, mikes and sound booms are visible in the frame; Sarah herself is filmed guiding her father to a sound studio where she sets him up and makes him repeat his lines. These self-reflexive devices are emphasised at the end of the film, when she is filmed while filming, pointing the camera at her cameraman — and ultimately at us, her viewers.

Turning a personal quest for identity into a documentation of the film's own construction has become a fairly common trope in contemporary autobiographical documentaries — for example, to name but two examples, in the work of Ross McElwee and Alan Berliner. What is far more original in Polley's case is that, unlike most other personal film accounts, these self-reflexive devices are not used to place the film-maker's subjectivity centre stage. Far from using herself as focal point, she re-directs self-expression about her own quest for identity, questioning how narratives are shaped, and more specifically filmic versions. As her father Michael Polley asks her in the film, "*Is that why you describe it as a search for the vagaries of truth and the unreliability of memory, rather than a search for a father?*" Early on, in a response to her father Michael's remark "*I hope you'll explain to me sometime what all this is that you're trying to do*", Polley jokingly tells him: "*We've told you it's a documentary, but it's actually ... It's an interrogation process*".

In like vein she deliberately includes the questions that informed the film's project, which is made explicit in a number of emails that she writes to Harry and reads in voice-over: *"I'm just extremely uncomfortable at being involved in the telling of this story unless it includes the whole picture, which is to say my experience of it, your experience of it, as well as my family's. [...] I've been thinking a lot about your desire to tell this story and my own desire to document this experience through film. As I begin this process, I don't know what form my project will take. I don't know if it's a personal record for myself, or something to be made into a piece for others to see at some point. I don't know how long it would take or if it would ever get finished, and I wouldn't even pretend at this point to know how to tell it, beyond beginning to explore it through interviews with everyone involved, so that everyone's point of view, no matter how contradictory, is included."*

The film is thus based on a polyphonic structure which accommodates the different perspectives of all the various people involved. The first request she makes of participants when conducting the interviews is to *"tell the whole story from beginning to end in [their] own words"*. Even more significantly, most of the voice-over comes from the narrative written by her father Michael, and which we see him recording in studio sessions which punctuate the film. The film is thus conceived as a truly collaborative process, a *"multi-narrator cinematic personal essay"*.²⁶ As a result *"There is a joint parentage to what we see on the screen. The actor, as is so often said and as Sarah Polley herself has insisted, doesn't create his or her separate work of art, the 'performance'. The actor collaborates with the filmmaker to produce their joint work of art. Here Michael Polley and Harry Gulkin and Diane Polley all interact to produce Sarah Polley and Sarah Polley's movie."*²⁷

It would be wrong, however, to restrict the collaborative dimension of the film to Polley's parents, since this masks some important differences. The only person who objects to her multi-voiced, inconclusive project is Harry. He claims there is only *one* possible truth, and that he is the only person who can tell it. When Sarah asks him: *"So what do you think of the concept of me making a documentary where we're sort of giving it equal weight to everyone's version of the story?"*, Harry answers: *"I don't like it. [...] In terms of the basic questions – can one ever get the truth? Only the direct witnesses, one or two [...] The reality is essentially the story with Diane, I'm sorry to say, is only mine to tell; I think that's a fact."*

He even wants to publish his own version of the story, causing Polley much distress. In this respect the reactions of Polley's 'two' fathers offer an interesting contrast. Both are equally involved in writing their own version of family history, but whereas Harry is seeking to wrest control of the narrative, Michael — while wondering about his daughter's project — accepts her use of his narrative as she thinks fit, and making it her own by having control of the final cut: *"You may decide you want to keep this letter to yourself or to share it. It's yours, and yours the choice."* It may be no accident that Harry used to be a film producer while Michael is a former actor. As Harry's sister explains in one of the interviews, *"When he considers this documentary, being Harry, being a*

²⁶ Nick McCarthy, 'Review: *Stories We Tell*', <https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/stories-we-tell>, 18 March 2013.

²⁷ Norman N. Holland, 'Sarah Polley, *Stories We Tell*', <http://www.asharperfocust.com/Stories.html>, n.d.

producer, I'm sure that's a bit of trepidation about this film because he doesn't have control of everything. ... He doesn't like it."

In *Stories We Tell*, Polley films herself endorsing her role as director: she is heard conducting the interviews, she is filmed sitting behind the mixing board, asking her dad to repeat lines, and giving directions to the actress who plays her mother. She even includes Michael's recrimination about one of her student projects, when she forced him to step down and submerge himself in a swimming pool while fully dressed and with an open umbrella over his head, calling her first forays behind the camera "*a brutal piece of directing*". Michael also points out the responsibility she will have in the editing process, and the pitfalls of selecting scenes without imposing her own personal, univocal, version. Polley's editorial strategy for accommodating the plurality of perspectives involved is made explicit when she explains to Harry: "*What if the main focuses in the documentary are the discrepancies in the stories?*" (my emphasis).

Discontinuity is thus foregrounded by the highlighting of the hybrid nature of the film, which uses a variety of audio-visual materials and filmic practices, intermingling found footage with re-enacted scenes and 'talking head' interviews. In *Away from Her* the editing underscores the fragmentation of the timeline, with its abrupt discontinuities and recurring fades to white conveying the characters' disarray as much as the viewers' disorientation. *Take This Waltz*, although more straightforward, is punctuated by black screens whose length exceeds a simple punctuation mark associating two shots; instead they acquire a value of their own, the interstice between two images being as important as the images themselves, marking what Deleuze calls "*a so-called irrational cut which belongs neither to one nor the other, and sets out to be valid for itself*".²⁸

Making the Seams Visible

Polley's films are thus characterised by what Marie Danniell-Grognier has dubbed 'seamed editing' ("*montage couture*")²⁹ – whereby, in contrast with the seamless or invisible editing characteristic of classical cinema, we are witness to a type of montage where the joins between heterogeneous materials remain apparent, or when strong stylistic marks highlight discontinuities and abrupt cuts. But 'seams' may equally be the signs of connection or separation. In *Stories We Tell* the variegated elements eventually cohere as a polyphonic ensemble artfully structured by rhymes and echoes. Recurring images are thus probed over and over, adding new layers of meaning with fresh revelations and perspectives, as with the opening shot of the film which shows a snowy landscape from a train window and whose symbolic abstract meaning (the track of life?) acquires a disturbing significance when it recurs to illustrate Diane's journey on her way to the abortion clinic before she changes her mind. Another recurring image shows Diane on the phone, filmed behind a half-closed door, first from the perspective of one of the sons, recalling his mother in constant bursts of activity,

²⁸ Gilles Deleuze *Cinema 2: the Time Image* (1985), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 206.

²⁹ Marie Danniell-Grognier, *Formes et manifestations de la subjectivité dans le cinéma documentaire personnel américain*, University of Poitiers PhD thesis, 2008.

then to illustrate the possible secrets she may have before finally revealing she is calling Harry to announce her pregnancy.

Rather than imposing a chain of causal links, Polley's films are then structured by a pattern of convergences and divergences that convey the nature of connections within intimate relationships. As early as *Away from Her*, Polley uses visual motifs and echoes that simultaneously highlight similarities and contrasts. One case in point is the shot of Fiona and Grant lying together in bed that concludes the opening credits after a number of scenes evoking their daily routine. The same framing (medium close-up) and the same angle (high vertical) are repeated throughout with striking variations: on the morning before Fiona leaves for Meadowlake, she is filmed moving out of the frame, while the camera still lingers on the bed, stressing the empty space she once occupied; when the couple say goodbye at Meadowlake, the shot is repeated but with the action inverted as Grant is the one who leaves the frame; and when Grant is filmed with Marian in a final and ironic mirror image of the first.

Images of dancing provides another compelling structural motif. The couple is filmed dancing on their last night together in their home to Young's 'Harvest Moon', the lyrics of which thematise the union between dancing and enduring love. The theme is later echoed and contrasted when Grant reads to Fiona from Auden's 'Death's Echo' (1936) just after Marian's phone-call to invite him to a dance and before Grant and Marian are filmed dancing together. Fiona's and Grant's embrace is evoked one more time at the very end, but, this time, however, with an inversion of movement. Although the couple is filmed occupying the same space on screen, in contrast to the first dance scene where they were whirling in front of a static camera, here the dancing movement is taken over by a camera that circles around them. Here again, the echoes subtly convey both the continuities and the radical changes in the couple's relationship.

Similarities and contrasts are also artfully interwoven in the numerous editing procedures that are one of the film's most remarkable stylistic characteristics. The repeated dissolves are combined with match-cuts and transitions via sound bridges, underpinning the ambiguity of the links. These involve the numerous matches on dialogue, together with linked actions (the lighting of a cigarette by Marian followed by nurse Kristy smoking outdoors), and links between objects across time and space (the cut from Marian's bunch of flowers to the flowers Fiona arranges in a vase, from the table at Marian's to the one at the Andersons'; the cut which links a woman drinking a glass of wine - later revealed to be Grant's student lover Veronica - and a bottle of wine being shared by Fiona and friends). They all underline continuity (on the level of narrative level) and discontinuity (in terms of diegesis); repetition with variation is thus one of the main strategies to prevent any fixed meaning from being ascribed to the narrative.

Instead, the films conclude with open endings that underscore the elusiveness of any definitive truth and interpretation, most specifically where the main characters are concerned. Both *Away from Her* and *Take This Waltz* may seem at first sight to come full circle, since the closing shots echo the opening sequences. But these apparent repetitions come with a difference. In *Away from Her* the final sequence indeed opens on the very same shot of parallel tracks in the snow that occurred at the beginning of the film, but instead of moving forwards the camera is now tracking out. In a form of chiasm, it is followed by the same pan across the lake that revealed young Fiona's face

smiling at the camera. The shot — the grainy texture of which clearly suggests that it belongs to another narrative layer, evoking a home movie, an actual memory, or a reconstructed one (in all cases a mental figuration) — was first introduced before the parallel tracks but at the end, after smiling to the camera, Fiona turns her head away, as though to preserve her own inner self from any appropriation, offering instead elusiveness and a final farewell which is underscored by a final fade to white.

Likewise, *Take This Waltz* opens and closes on the scene where Margot is baking cakes in her kitchen. She is introduced out of focus, then framed in close shots detailing her painted toes, her hands and her face in a glowing light; as she sits down on the floor by the oven, the blurry silhouette of a man enters the frame with his back to the camera before the scene ends on a black screen. The scene offers a perfect blending of warm domesticity and of desultory emptiness, stressing the indeterminacy of Margot's relationships with what surrounds her and with the man, who is later identified as her husband, Lou. At the end, the figure is replaced by Daniel, suggesting that Margot has returned to her initial state of dissatisfaction. However, the film adds a sort of coda - reprising the earlier scene on the Scrambler - but this time she is shown alone. Her face gradually shows the same radiant expression of fulfilment that in the first scene appeared to be derived from her shared experience, thus calling into question the validity of the past communion.

Stories We Tell equally eschews any totalising perspective. Polley's mother remains evasive as her portrayal is diffracted through fractured perceptions, with no clear resolution. Befittingly, in the final series of interviews with Polley's siblings, they all remain silent, simply mourning the loss of their mother without seeking to figure out who or what she was. What seem to be the final words, spoken by Polley's father Michael, are equally open: "*I will go on. I will go on.*" But after a long fade to black, the film also adds a brief coda, in which Polley confronts family friend Geoff Bowes with the challenges of understanding her familial history, and in which she tells him that a couple of her friends thought that he was her real father. This brief 'afterthought' reveals a final twist which sheds a new light — and playfully casts some lingering doubt — on what we have just been watching: Geoff admits that he and Polley's mother did in fact sleep together just the once.

Conclusion: The Performance of Authorship

Unlike many other actors turned directors, Polley has not directed herself in her feature films - and only indirectly even in *Stories We Tell*, where she took great care to accommodate a plurality of voices and perspectives. Unlike some famous actors, she does not indulge her star *persona*; ironically, the only reference she includes to her acting career is an extract from *Mr. Nobody* (Jaco Van Dormael, Belg. *et al*, 2009) where she plays a Neanderthal woman, a role which can hardly be seen as glamorous. Nonetheless, like many actors turned directors, she moved behind the camera to tell more personal stories, which, as she has explained, were all in some way related to the history of her parents. But her films are by no means self-indulgent. This deeply personal story is constantly deflected into an investigation into the nature of storytelling itself and into the capacity of any image-making processes to convey some kind of emotional truth.

David Pike rightly views Polley's career through the couplet 'Actors/Auteurs'.³⁰ Along with her commitment to acting in arthouse productions, her films are marked by an auteurist quality, with an ongoing concern for experimenting with narrative structure, a remarkable sense of imagery and stylistic effects, and an agenda committed to personal projects. Pike also points out, however, that she has successfully managed to combine "*the quality of margins*" with "*the appeal of the mainstream*": Polley responded to her early experience of the Americanisation of Canadian television, and the power of Hollywood, "*with a populist impulse of her own; her persona has always been earnest and approachable, and her films, if often challenging, are also down-to-earth and engaging.*"³¹ What sets Polley's films apart is their remarkable balance between probing into human emotions and their interest in distancing or reflexive effects. On the one hand, the films experiment with narrative structure through shifting perspectives and elaborate montage, even bending genres such as the romcom and the documentary. On the other hand, foregrounding stylistic effects or the medium itself is never an end in itself; rather, Polley relies on restraint, ambiguity and inconclusiveness to enhance an authentic emotional involvement with her narratives.

Polley is well aware how crucial are the performances by central characters. The fact that she was born into a show business family - her parents were former actors - may partly explain why, when talking about her work as director, among all the collaborative aspects a film involves she most often mentions her relationships with actors. As she said in an interview following her first feature, "*In a lot of ways, being an actor is the worst training you could possibly have for being a director. You've been in this environment your whole life, so you think you know it. But 90 per cent of everyone's job on a set, you soon find out, is to protect the actors from any pertinent information. It's not like you're being manipulative or secretive. But they have to go somewhere profound and do something quite emotional. You're not going to mention the weather is screwed and you have to condense three-day scenes into half a day and they better get it right or we're all going to hell.*"³²

In the case of *Away from Her*, while reading Munro's story she had in mind the British star Julie Christie, whom she had just met during the filming of *No Such Thing* (Hartley, USA/Ice, 2001). She spent more than a year trying to persuade Christie to accept the role, which she at first declined. Like Fiona wondering about Grant's assiduous visits, she eventually convinced her. For *Take This Waltz*, the collaboration with an actor came after she had written the script: Polley did not fully understand the main character she had created, and working with Michelle Williams helped her define Margot more fully. Casting Seth Rogen, who is better known as a comedian, she also let the actors improvise much of the intimate dialogue. Tellingly, cinematographer Luc Montpellier compares his collaboration with Polley, who gave him the drafts of the screenplay as she was writing it, to "*feeling like another actor*".

In *Stories We Tell*, participants often refer to themselves as 'performing', as when Sarah's brother Johnny playfully enquires about "*his frame*", whether it's "*a good angle*" for him, or when he jokingly apologises for breaking the fourth wall. Polley's father Michael, who likes mimicking

³⁰ Pike, *Canadian Cinema*, p. 134.

³¹ Pike, *Canadian Cinema*, p. 135.

³² Brian D. Johnson, 'A star is Reborn', p. 67.

famous actors and explains that he can "go on about these thespian matters for some hours", repeatedly uses stage and acting metaphors to make sense of his relationships with Diane or life in general, musing that "*Diane fell in love not with [him], but with the character [he] was playing on stage*", that they "*played out their final act together, though not knowing that it was just that*", that "*when you're lying about something, you overplay it*", or that "*you just can't keep the mask of Comedy at bay. It watches old Tragedy doing his bit, and the moment he lets his guard down, old Comedy turns up the corners of his mouth.*" And Polley's mother is introduced early on through black-and-white archive footage where she is performing a song as for a screen test, stressing how much acting was part of her life, how fiction and fact are equally integral to the very fabric of her life and to the texture of the film. In this respect, *Stories We Tell*, just as the director eventually turns the camera on herself, is also a meditation on acting.