**Dys-membering *Traum A Dream***

"I am vacant by the stupification of my tongue"
Antonin Artaud (1988: 83)

Dirk de Bruyn

This paper tries to do too many things. It talks in different voices and perspectives at once around one topic: trauma. This text overpowers me. It slips between and through the personal, the practical and the theoretical yet in probability settles on none of these in the end. Since trauma itself is about splinters and fragments, this may be so much folly. Let us hope there is still a story , some kind of settlement. Then there exists the film *Traum A Dream*, which can be designated as activating object, with all lines of thought and action leading through it. *Traum A Dream* is a film that comes out of a life-long experimental animation practice; a body of work that has been evolving over 35 years. This is now more than half the time I have carried a trace of the trauma in my real and lived-in body, some of the personal events, which I reveal here.

This film was produced at a time when I was coming to terms in my personal life, remembering abuse from childhood. *Traum A Dream* emerged after an unsuccessful attempt to lay bare that abuse in a previous project, which co-incided with the conclusion of my CD-Rom Diary V 3.2 production. *Traum A Dream*, like Rachel Wilson's *Memory Cages*, 'attempt(s) to visually work through my traumatic memories' (Wilson, 2006). Though I would argue that my own emphasis is as much visceral as visual, articulated through a materialist aesthetic, located in relation to the film work of Peter Gidal, Kurt Kren, Marc Adrian and Robert Breer, amongst others. In this project, my interest in avant-garde film is as much about methodology or the mechanism of denial and erasure of trauma, as it is about framing and conveying its 'un-speakability.'

The CD-Rom was also a significant departure point into trauma, as it was during the making of Diary V 3.2, an interactive photo album of family life, that the nuclear family (the purported subject) was disintegrating.

It is worth noting that an interactive CD-Rom stores its information randomly at varied locations on a CD, DVD or Hard Drive known random access memory (RAM). This has an uncanny similarity to the way a person stores his/her memories of a shocking or traumatic event. For Kalshed, in trauma, dissociation

> 'allows the psyche to go on by dividing the unbearable experience and
> distributing it to different compartments of the mind and body,
> especially the unconscious aspects of the mind and body….
> Experience itself becomes discontinuous.'(Kalsched, 1996: 3)

**His(My)Story**

My trauma was sexual abuse, inflicted intermittently on an innocent childhood body, by an aunt and uncle. It occurred in the Netherlands when I was between 5 and 8 years old, in the years prior to my parents migrating to Australia in 1958.

It was not something I had consciously thought much about. It had been put safely away, hidden from further scrutiny by myself or by others.

These Dutch memories included eavesdropped conversations between my father and my paternal grandmother. Their arguments indicate to me now, that my father's reason to come to Australia in his 50s, was in part motivated to escape such dysfunctions in his family. This was a tragic realisation that, for me, transformed the meaning of my 1990 documentary film '*Conversations with my Mother'*. Our escape from a feared father in psychosis, during my initiating years as a 'New Australian', gained a welcome redemptive quality.

Life in Oz has brought its own family traumas, but as an adult I have learnt to be eternally grateful for the change of situation that migration had delivered. My revisiting and remembering was triggered by a series of personal crises that culminated in the mid-90s, in the failure of my first marriage. I have to ask myself (and others) how often are such crises the price paid for repressing the memories of childhood abuse? On the way out of that list of disasters, a script was written to tell the recently revealed abuse story, under the title of Dysmember (see Appendix A).

Lizzette Atkins, a long-term friend and successful film producer had taken this project through the funding hoops being very positive about it and its subject matter. 'When Dirk sent me the script for his film, *Dysmember*, my first thought was that animation was a great medium in which to explore this deeply sensitive material. I was immediately struck by the visceral nature of the piece and the depth of feeling contained in his personal account of child abuse and the ongoing trauma he has suffered. *Dys-member* captures acutely, the profound sense of loss and innocence experienced by the child.' (Atkins, 2008)

**Remembering to Forget**

A recurring memory or image replays in *Dysmember* of my uncle standing at a gate. It dominates the early part of the script. It is a 'memory' that I had carried with me since childhood and that somehow had covered over visceral memories of transgressive events. It is as if by keeping this image in mind, it put the lid on those things I 'needed' to forget in order to move forward. This was done by a child and it was done in a childish way. It was a way of keeping such memories safe and locked away. Perhaps this is what Freud refers to as 'screen-memories' (Freud, 1899 pp. 308 -309), which place a veil over what needs to be forgotten.

For me there is a critical moment in the film *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) that I find illustrates this idea of 'remembering to forget'. The main character Leonard (Guy Pearce) has an affliction, in that he forgets everything 15 minutes after it has happened. He has no long-term memory. The decisive moment in the film is when he sabotages his own memory. Leonard has methods of inscribing things that must not be forgotten, onto his body. He takes instant polaroids of significant situations, objects and people, the polaroids inscribed with texts, so to 'remember' and situate these recordings. Late in the film he decides to lie to himself, by inscribing a lie beneath the photo of the character, who has been looking in parallel, for the murderer of his wife. Leonard inscribes that he himself is the killer. This choice can be read as Leonard 'remembering to forget'.

By this I mean that the way the Leonard character attempts to regain some semblance of control, in order to resolve his recurrent crisis of forgetting, is by lying to himself. In this way he can liquidate what fragile support network he has. This resonates with the logic (or anti-logic) of self-mutilation that may be resorted to by victims of trauma. 'Traumatized people employ a variety of methods to regain control over their problems with affect regulation. Often these efforts are self-destructive and bizarre.' (Van der Kolk, 1996: 188)

Like 'countless' others, the *Dysmember* script was submitted to the AFC (Australian Film Commission- now Screen Australia) and registered two rejections, before I felt compelled to move back into my 35 year old 'do it yourself' practice to regain the initiative. This practice was about falling back on my own resources, to a way of working that required no outside funding. Such a method included the use of readily accessible and familiar techniques that could be imparted directly to the film's surface. With the benefit of distance, the script's flaws are now more apparent, though its concluding 'reveal' retains a visceral impact for me. Certainly the script could have articulated the imagery more clearly. A storyboard may have helped with this. The subtle play between text and voice that is evident in the script is at times awkward or cumbersome to read or unpack. The final dancing scene, given my journey since, now reads like a premature aftermath or resolution as, it seems, more water has gone under the bridge in my relationship to these events.

The point to be made here, is that for all 'submitting' artists, what is often tricky about these rejections, is that they arrive without explanation and out of context. So even that history of 'rejection' gets reconstructed, tailored to fit in with one's deeper more primal vulnerabilities at the time, and I had 'some'. There is a certain un-speakability and silence about these situations of AFC rejection, that in this case, was of course, itself entangled, layered into the subject at hand: 'remembering to forget trauma'. Such is the situation that precedes and sets up the making of *Traum A Dream*. It is not an unusual situation in everyday life.

Clearly *Traum A Dream* does not spell out its trauma as directly as *Dysmember* promised through its clearer identification of abuse. It remains in many ways more elusive and un-named, more 'inside' the trauma than 'outside' it. Yet this project marks a time in which I have a greater objectivity about the abuse inflicted on me than ever before. Perhaps the funding rejections acted on me as a form of repression and shifted the focus of my film making practice back into a more subjective and elusive immersive space, an emphasis back onto that moment at which meaning (or critical understanding) arrives, where something intuitive or bodily is revealed. I had become aware and always intuitively sensed that my experimental practice hovered and gravitated into that area prior to explicit meaning, as I have recently found in Merleau-Ponty, who situates so clearly in his grappling with that pre-reflective space of 'being-in-the-world'.

When I write 'compelled to move back into my own do-it-yourself practice', this to me is in accord and runs in parallel with moving back into my body and a body centred thinking: 'We must go back to the working actual body- not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 162)

**Everything At Once**

*Traum A Dream* is situated at that point where you can make 'it' whatever you want it to be. It is to be received with a pre-reflective 'hysterical' edge, that has been connected to punk and Artaud's theatre of cruelty, in my performance work. (McIntyre, 2008).
 As a way into the overwhelming nature of its direct experience, I am interested in thinking or viewing trauma, as not only unspeakable but un-containable; qualities that both punk and Artaud communicate to me. It may be worth asking: are these ideas of the unspeakable and the un-containable, just different sides of the same coin?

In trying to evidence aspects of *Traum A Dream's* continual 'working' on me and its impact on my performance practice, I have become re-interested in Charcot and his scientific performances of hysteria with patients from Paris's Salpetriere Mental Hospital in the late 1800's, as a kind of theatre of cruelty and also as precursor to later Fluxus art events. There is also an interest in reading Maya Deren innovative film 'Meshes in the Afternoon' (1943 USA 14 minutes) as a pre-feminist performative response to Charcot's neurological caging of the female body, enacted by him in such public events.

For me, situating *Traum A Dream* at that point, where meaning arises hones in ona vulnerability that resonates with an accusation of slipperiness levelled at Charcot's reading of 'Hysteria' by Didi-Huberman (2003 [ 1982]) and underlines hysteria's un-containability. There is something in these dialogues between Charcot and his patients that speaks to this tussle between the un-speakability and un-containability. Didi-Huberman names Charcot's causes of hysteria as 'a chaotic ragbag of causes, again. A dissemination of causality: circulus vitiosus. But is not this the very same causality, specific and strategic, as it were of hysterical causality?' (2003 [ 1982]: 72)  This seems to suggest that it is also the elusive check-list of Charcot's hysteria that is itself hysterically un-nameable. In support of such a reading Didi-Huberman further notes that 'time is stubborn in the cryptology of the symptom: it always bends a little, ravelling and unravelling, but, in a certain sense, it remains stubborn- very stubborn in hysteria (2003 [ 1982]: 26)  and he laments that 'if only hysteria could have been found, somewhere. But nothing was; because hysterics are everything at once' (2003 [ 1982]: 72).

In its mirroring dialogue between Charcot and 'Hysteria', it is as if science, in its pulling apart and dissecting, its opening up of the toy to see how it works, is in co-dependant accord with that state of hysteria, itself a pulled apart and dissected or fragmented psychic state. Could it be a way of being in the social, one that continually reflects back to others (including Charcot) their own point of view, like a broken record, amplifying any scrutiny, in a kind of biofeedback loop back to the scrutineer?

This impression of 'everything at once' that Didi-Hubermans identifies can recall the flashback as it operates in both trauma and cinema. Turim (2001) has noted that in cinema' flashbacks were often abrupt, fragmentary, and repetitive, marked by a modernism of technique' and function to break a settled narrative. Brewin's concept of situational accessible memory (SAM) (Brewin, 2001) offers a clear model in neurological terms of how trauma memories may be stored and accessed as flashbacks. SAM can be described as immersive, immediate and information rich.

It conveys no sense of time: it is 'everything at once.' This is the traumatic flashback. Its return to awareness is conditionally triggered by situations and events, in order for aspects of the 'experience' to be integrated into a retrievable cognitive field (settled narrative). Brewin refers to this retrievable memory as 'verbally accessible memory' or VAM, an emphasis that recalls Freud's championing of his 'talking cure'. Maya Deren's concept of the vertical and horizontal editing exhibit a correspondence to these two types of memory. (see Deren, 1946) Vertical editing, replaying an action from different points of view, also enables an 'everything at once', especially as applied to Peter Tscherkassky's graphic and layered cinema, evident in *Outer Space* (1999 Austria 10 minutes) for example. In Tscherkassky's films different points of view are layered one on top of the other to create a chaotic and intense visual field. Didi-Hubermans' 'everything at once' is also evident in the immersive 'everything is possible' quality of the internet's information overload that Kroker (A Kroker and Cook, 1988) reads as invoking a body centred panic-state as exhibited in such behaviours or conditions as overeating, body-building, anorexia and HIV.

**Out of the Fog**

It is the moment of emergence out of such an 'overwhelming' pre-reflective 'fog' suggested by such a dissociative 'everything at once', that *Trauma Dream* to situate itself. Its closing text attempts to articulate this emerging out of un-speakability.

And so he began
Against the double
Double talk talk
Against his will
His will
And so he began
He began
He began to remember
What he didn't want
What he didn't want to Remember
What had been taken?
Before
Before he knew
A secret from before
Before he knew
Before he knew himself.
    *Traum A Dream* (2003)

I have made reference previously (de Bruyn, 2005) to different elements used to construct this moving image work. These include its use of sound-bites from the Peter Pan flick Hook ('neverland makes you forget, never forget'), the metaphor of self-abuse offered by Michael Jackson's reconfiguring of his own body (evident in the music that opens the film butchered from a Jackson song) as a form of Kroker's panic bodies (A & M Kroker and Cook, 1989) and the Neil Postman quote about there being no secrets from the young, which relate to the disappearance of childhood.

There is an aspect or moment in the film that I would like to say something more about. It is a moment of expressed panic that may be described as hysterical.

It is a point in the film where I felt I came the closest to 'getting across' a sense of abuse as it seemed to be viscerally embedded in my body. It is very much sound based or sound driven. It has to do with the sound attached to a sequence of a pixilated burning effigy (of Guy Fawkes) about halfway during the video. The effigy was shot in the cold winter months of a northern Canada. The guttural moaning was also disturbing and cathartic to utter and record. I still feel an unsettling effect at this point when I view the work. To generate and record it for the video, I had to find a secluded spot at home.

As I started talking I started to shake myself. Shaking myself seemed to centre me in my body and helped me rise into an emotional state that facilitated the screaming. As I performed this for myself I realised that it also had to do with a body memory of being pinned down while I was interfered with.

Experience suggests that perhaps such panic-points are the shock that locate an event in the body where a trauma is laid down and from which it can be released. Such sites can indicate a trauma's point of arrival into it and it can also offer up a point of departure. And again, this is where a body-centered phenomenology offers some clarity: It's about the body.

And that's where I'll leave it hanging for now (the story, not the body), hoping I have indicated a few steps out of the fog (a fog, my fog). Like Hansel and Gretel's path out of the forest, I also hope that these steps have more in common with the stones they placed to reveal the way out of the dark forest rather than those breadcrumbs that were so quickly and easily eaten by the birds. And, of course, thank you for listening.

Dirk de Bruyn

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