

Memory Cages

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Abstract

Memory Cages was produced for my MA in Cinema Studies at La Trobe University and the accompanying thesis sought to locate the work theoretically amongst debates on women's autobiographical practice and the representation of memory and trauma.

The film is dominated conceptually and aesthetically by the cinematic traditions of the 1960's American avant-garde typified by practitioners such as Michael Snow, Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas and is an attempt to position "outside" (in a very public way) demons that reside "inside" and to represent and illustrate the emotional damage that childhood trauma inflicts internally on its victims.

In seeking to represent the unrepresentable of traumatic childhood memory, *Memory Cages* asks the audience to identify with and to bear witness to, a fragmented and limited internal insight.

Keywords: representing trauma, memory, autobiography, avant-garde, compartmentalisation, crisis cinema, fantasy, empathy.



Image 1 — Opening title of *Memory Cages*

When asked what *Memory Cages* is about I usually reply that it is an attempt to visually work through my traumatic memories. I want to be seen and heard, and for the unspeakable aspects of my trauma to be spoken. It is about survival and bringing "outside" into world processes that occur inside my head. Using the medium of film it illustrates the internal psychological survival mechanism of compartmentalisation. It is about history and family, it is about secrecy,

abandonment and pain. It doesn't have a happy ending. There is no resolution and no redemption, just the images of a woman so frustrated and confused she is left incapable of moving. However in the end the film can be viewed as a historical document, it is about the past, does not articulate a future and at its core it is about moving on, it is about transformation and integration.

This film was a long time in the making. The idea for the visuals and themes emerged very clearly one day approximately fourteen years ago. Still an undergraduate I had completed my first experimental film and was attracted to what the experimental avant-garde had to offer. I was searching for a way to communicate my feelings of entrapment and difficulties in moving past memories that continually flooded and crowded my mind. These issues were also beginning to play out in my body in terms of an immobilising disease.¹ The nature of the course I was enrolled in encouraged us to explore these issues in our work and exposed us to various forms and aesthetics such as painting, photography, film and video. The experimental film was attractive for a variety of reasons; it embraces aspects of the other mediums; in departing from portraying realism tends it to embody a particular type of truth and revelation, and the form also has a history of exploring work of a difficult personal nature.² The long gestation might also be read as a reflection of feeling of entrapment the film itself depicts.

There have been a number of times when a film or work of art has profoundly touched my life, creating a shift in the way that I contemplate my reality. I'm not describing work that has educated me or entertained me, but work where I can identify with the material in such a way as to believe that I am not the only person in the world experiencing that particular emotion at that particular moment in time. These works are inevitably profoundly personal pieces. They are works where the maker has put her/himself firmly in the frame in very direct and obvious ways. They are often difficult works to watch or experience but they have provided for me a sense of profound connectedness. They tend to operate beyond intellectual identification and to operate at a deeply emotional level. For example, *Savage Nights* (Cyril Collard, 1992) deals with the filmmaker's battle to come to terms with his HIV status, and the work of photographer Jo Spence who documented her battle with cancer. I identify with their suffering, their bravery and their ability to survive the knowing and public articulation of their innermost fears and vulnerabilities. Other work exploring similar territory includes Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim* (1990), Merilee Bennett's *A Song of Air* (1988), the Australian documentary by Tahir Cambis *Exile in Sarajevo*, (1997) and indigenous artist and filmmaker Tracey Moffatt's *Night Cries* (1990). It is these experiences that fuel my desire as a filmmaker.

The idea for this film emerged out of a specific need, and is the result of a diverse set of influences. I continue to have difficulties with contextualising the implied narcissism that is often associated with making work that is about oneself, but rather than operating from a framework of self-obsession, I would argue this work is an attempt at reconciliation. There are divergent and difficult selves on display here and the film attempts to accept and merge these understandings into a tolerant, diverse and accepting sense of self.

This also makes it vulnerable to a reading that positions it as an attempt to reconstitute a modernist version of the unified self. A reading that is justified, in part, by its modernist influences. However, although it is difficult to avoid this reading (nor do I necessarily deny it), to read the content of this film in this way would be to ignore the ways in which it also challenges the reading. This is most obvious in its use of the structural device of compartmentalisation that is designed to question the very notion of a unified self.

There is a general understanding within popular psychology that suggests that when children have experienced repeated and long-term trauma they demonstrate coping mechanisms defined as a process of compartmentalisation.³ During this process the child begins to separate and isolate different segments of her/his daily life. It is important that these separate segments do not interact as in some extreme cases they can lead to multiple personality disorder. For example, school life, home life and peer relationships are kept separate from each other and years may pass without reference made to the other. *Memory Cages* visually illustrates this process as it applies to an emotional landscape. It is, at one level, a literal interpretation of the process as described above, yet rather than focusing on the rituals of daily life it is applied to feelings and difficult, painful emotional states.

The film is divided into three sections or scenes approximately three minutes long, each utilising the same room to illustrate the housing or entrapment of each distinct set of emotions. The different emotions are represented via the use of colour. Scene one (see image 2) is magenta moving through to purple representing a state that I define as unrequited love, the second is green (see image 3), representing feelings of jealousy, envy and sibling rivalry and scene three is red (see image 4) representing anger and frustration. Within each scene are objects that are commonly linked to notions of memory such as photographs and childhood treasures.

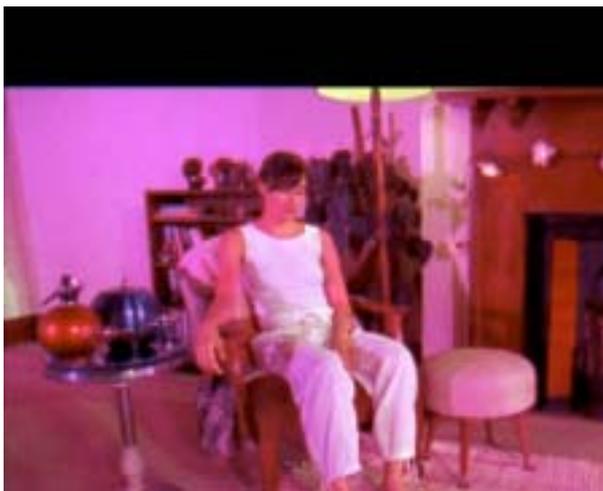


Image 2 — End of scene 1 *Memory Cages*

[CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE](#) (mov format – size 8.8MB)



Image 3 — Mid Scene 2 *Memory Cages*

[CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE](#) (mov format – size 5.8MB)



Image 4 — End of Scene 3 *Memory Cages*

[CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE](#) (mov format – size 8.6MB)

My autobiographical presence exists within the *mise-en-scene* and most directly in the narration: it is my voice, I am speaking. Virtually all of the objects in the frame belong to me. I art-directed the film and the photographs portray my family and myself, spanning four generations. The emotional states I describe and recreate are ones that I have experienced and the events are an amalgamation of various incidents that have merged to create a sensibility for each scene.

Contemporary autobiography is explicitly intertwined in the complex and fluid notions of memory and trauma. When writing about autobiography, Susanna Egan, describes it as a genre of crisis. By quoting Jean Starobinski and Anthony Paul Kerby Egan suggests there would be little motivation for producing autobiography if there had not been some sort of crisis, conflict, tension or radical change in the life of the autobiographer.⁴ But rather than these crises existing in the past and autobiography functioning as an exercise in revision and reflection, Egan's focus is on the "phenomenon of writing engendered by a crisis that is not yet resolved".⁵

Egan describes this crisis, as existing both within the text and as a result of it. For example "the genre itself creates the crisis, as with variations on documentary film or in drama, where the genre in which people have chosen to work reifies the human encounter".⁶ Other forms of crisis can be read to form some thematic categories within autobiographical investigation such as diaspora, the holocaust or terminal illness. These genres of life and death can result in intensely creative experiences for the participants and "significantly, because the crisis in each case is current and continuing, it seems to emphasize memory rather less than future possibility, narratives of identity rather less than the presence of a survivor".⁷ However I believe *Memory Cages* also aims to provide an audience with a narrative of survival by representing a call for attention, and desires an end to isolation so to enable a meaningful return to narrative memory by asking the audience to bear witness.

Memory can be seen to operate in a number of ways throughout *Memory Cages*. It is the memory of a film that has influenced my aesthetic choices and use of technology, its major theme is the nature of traumatic memories, and there are specific instances where the culturally accepted form of memory appears through the inclusion of family photographs and artefacts. Theories of memory can be seen to operate within the very structure of the film. The pigeonholes (see image 1) that introduce each scene are a literal interpretation of the compartmentalisation process, but are also linked to ancient concepts of memory. During the Renaissance "Giulio Camillo built what he called a memory theatre, an amphitheatre where all the memory of the world was inscribed through a variety of little boxes, niches, images, figures and ornaments".⁸ The use of the single room in *Memory Cages* represents a theatre of memory that is filled with my figures and ornaments. The room also operates as a box, trap or confined space where walls act as metaphoric barriers to intruding memories and consequences.

Memory, trauma and crisis are the main thematic concerns within *Memory Cages* and it is possible to read it as a literal interpretation of the disruption to memory traces that childhood trauma can cause. Trauma is represented via the structure of the film and, through that structure, can be seen as an attempt to vicariously traumatise an audience. As represented within the film, memory is blended with fantasy and is alluded to rather than referred to directly. The ongoing traumatic crisis is apparent through the lack of obvious resolution and the segmented subjectivity.

When examining how cultural constructions of trauma are applied to theories of representation (and consequently cinema) a number of dilemmas emerge and it is often argued that trauma is "unrepresentable in the realist mode".⁹ When it does appear it tends to interrupt or intrude into the linear narrative and features "fragmented editing and the use of extreme camera angles" designed to provide viewers with the sense of disorientation and moral ambiguity.¹⁰ Janet Walker suggests that women's experimental autobiographical documentary practice "represents the vanguard of the trauma form"¹¹ as it has been "'probing the limits' of the filmic — and videographic — representation of traumatic past events of a personal and public nature for at least two decades".¹² According to Walker, the "insights offered via contemporary psychological literature on

trauma and memory" and by autobiographical filmmakers, provides both disciplines space to "engage in articulating the complexities of the relationships among personal memory, historical representation, and meaning".¹³ Traumatic memory is a contentious site of investigation and, as Walker points out, the debates are most prolific in the area of recovered memories related to child sexual abuse.¹⁴

Frustrated by the denials of "documented physical events" such as the Holocaust and childhood sexual abuse predominantly within the so-called false memory and Post-traumatic stress disorder debates, Walker identifies a "trauma paradox". The paradox is that the act of articulating and consequently representation of trauma requires its transformation into narrative memory so that the story can be verbalized and communicated ... but this can lead to the loss of both the precision and the force that characterizes or in fact defines traumatic recall in and of itself.¹⁵ One vexed question then remains. If trauma memory is stored differently in the mind than is ordinary narrative memory, as trauma theorists claim, then the question of how trauma memory is transformed into narrative memory remains largely repressed within the theory.¹⁶

However Walker points out "external trauma itself can produce modifications in remembered detail that cultural conventions invalidate in determinations of truth".¹⁷ That is, "traumatic events can and do produce the very amnesias and mistakes in memory that are generally considered to undermine the legitimacy of a retrospective report about a remembered incident".¹⁸

Susannah Radstone suggests that a reworking of the complex role of fantasy within the articulation of memory is another way in which this trauma paradox could be addressed. According to Radstone, debate in this area tends to dismiss the inner role of fantasy; "in short, what trauma theory excises in its return to the early Freud, is psychoanalysis' later insistence on the agency of the unconscious in the formation of memories".¹⁹

Fantasy appears most obviously within *Memory Cages* with my choice to engage a performer to represent my emotional experiences rather than appearing in the film myself. Natalie Cursio is a professional dancer and the fact that she has a lithe and flexible body contrasts markedly with myself, as for the last 15 years I have suffered from a form of arthritis in my spine. I deliberately cast a dancer for her ability to express emotions via her body without the use of dialogue. I believe this illustrates another aspect of survival of childhood trauma, a pronounced mind/body split that is also often defined as a form of compartmentalisation.

Fantasy also operates within the narration, which has been left vague and elusive. There are no specific instances of trauma that I reference in the scenes, rather it is a combination of experiences intermingled with fragments of memories that result in the portrayal of selected emotional states. This can be seen to illustrate some of the notions explored within the theory of trauma where trauma tends to emerge in relation to other traumatic experiences. One of the aspects said to define trauma is the period of latency that provides the temporal space for links to fantasy. There are specific memories that I associate

with the emotional states I describe but I feel I can only allude to them rather than reveal them directly.

This in turn can be read as yet another dilemma facing filmmakers seeking to truthfully represent their trauma. This reluctance to fully reveal the exact nature of my specific trauma can be seen as another example of how these traumatic memories have proven to be unrepresentable for me. The trauma to which I allude is shameful and taboo, it has attracted the warnings of family members to leave well enough alone, and I doubt I will ever show this film to my immediate family.²⁰ *Memory Cages* as a representation of trauma has the potential to create further trauma. Not only is it a battle to try to integrate these memories and experiences into the narrative of my life but also any attempt to do so artistically and creatively could further perpetuate the trauma that such silencing has exerted in my life. *Memory Cages* is a film that addresses trauma, but it is not the trauma itself. It is an attempt to represent internal events.

I would like to end on a positive note by concluding as Maureen Turim also does, that what traumatic cinema can ultimately provide is a vehicle for the eventual incorporation, by an audience, of the narrative of survival and therefore "act to mitigate traumatized isolation and create empathy with the sufferings of others in the present".²¹ Turim says:

Ironically one of the effects of trauma is to distance the self not only from one's memory, but also from the experience of others, and from collective formation. In many ways then the works that attempt to represent trauma become a call for attention, for an end to isolation, and for a meaningful return of historical memory.²²

As a personal art film *Memory Cages* engages with memory, trauma and fantasy. The autobiographical urge is displayed through my dialogue and included visually via the family photographs and personal artefacts that appear on screen. Trauma cinema reveals the instability of memory by challenging the categories of true and false, documentary and fiction, fantasy and memory.²³ With Kaplan, I also believe that trauma can only be approached and known by its telling, and cinema is especially appropriate for realising "the visual aural and non-linear fragmented" experience of trauma.²⁴ Trauma films offer spectators (and the filmmakers) the possibility of narrative integration of both individual and collective trauma, by creating empathy for the suffering of others. *Memory Cages* aims to provide an audience with a narrative of survival by representing a call for attention, and desires an end to isolation so to enable a meaningful return to historical memory by asking the audience to bear witness.

This I would argue is the definitive aim of any filmmaker working with traumatic material of this nature.



Director in discussion for scene 2 with performer Natalie Cursio.

Notes

¹ See Susanna Egan, *Mirror Talk-Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*, Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1999, p. 6-7 for a reading of how illness and suffering in relation to the body are often central in the autobiographical process.

² See P. Adams Sitney, "Autobiography in Avant-Garde Film", *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, New York: New York U P, 1978, p. 172-183.

³ See Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal*. Rev. edition, New York: Harper Collins, 1992. This book is used extensively in the treatment of survivors of childhood sexual abuse and has been at the centre of debates surrounding false memory particularly in the United States. In conversations with academic psychologists this work is considered ill informed and unable to stand up to empirical evidential procedures. It however remains a text distributed throughout the Centres Against Sexual Abuse (CASA) and widely prescribed reading in many social work courses.

⁴ Susanna Egan, *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*, Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1999, p.4.

⁵ Egan, *Mirror Talk*, p. 5.

⁶ Egan, *Mirror Talk*, p.5.

⁷ Egan, *Mirror Talk*, p.5.

⁸ Bernadette Flynn, "Memory Fragments as Scene Makers", *Screening the Past*, (9th Jan 2002), p.2. Available Online:
www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr1201/bffr13a.html
 Site accessed 16 September 2002.

⁹ Janet Walker, "Trauma Cinema: False Memories and True Experience", *Screen*, 42, Summer 2001, p. 215.

¹⁰ Walker, "Trauma Cinema", p. 215.

¹¹ Walker, "Trauma Cinema", p. 215.

¹² Walker, "Trauma Cinema", p.215.

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- ¹³ Walker, "Trauma Cinema", p. 212.
- ¹⁴ Walker, "Trauma Cinema", p. 211.
- ¹⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative, and History*, Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1996, p. 153.
- ¹⁶ Peter Thomas, "Victimage and Violence: *Memento* and Trauma Theory", *Screen*, 44:2, Summer 2003, p. 201.
- ¹⁷ Thomas, "Victimage and Violence", p. 202.
- ¹⁸ Walker, *Trauma Cinema*, p. 4.
- ¹⁹ Susannah Radstone, "Screening Trauma: *Forest Gump*, Film and Memory", S. Radstone Ed., *Memory and Methodology*, New York: Berg, 2000, p. 89.
- ²⁰ This is also the case for Australian filmmaker Corinne Cantrill, who has requested that her autobiographical film *In This Life's Body* (Corinne Cantrill 1984) not be screened in New South Wales so as not to upset her remaining family members and was initially only screened at screenings personally given by the Cantrills. Corinne Cantrill, "Notes on *In This Life's Body* by Corinne Cantrill", *Cantrills Filmnotes*, pp. 45-46, October 1984, p. 54-71.
- ²¹ Susanna Radstone, "Trauma and Screen Studies: Opening the Debate", *Screen*, 42:2, Summer 2001, p. 192.
- ²² Maureen Turim, "The Trauma of History: Flashbacks Upon Flashbacks", *Screen* 42:2, Summer 2001, p.210.
- ²³ Radstone, "Trauma and Screen", p. 192.
- ²⁴ E. Ann Kaplan, "Melodrama, Cinema and Trauma", *Screen*, 42:2, Summer 2001, p. 204.