

Theme: Murder

Martha Swetsoff, co-produced with Jane Gillooly

54 minutes, color, video, 1998

New Day Films

Description

The film begins with an image of a page partly typed in typewriter, words describing a fantasy of death written by the director's father as a young man. As a blue-tinted traveling shot of an empty garden walkway unrolls, the director's voice announces that her father, who ran a Boston art gallery, was murdered two decades later. Images of an abandoned elementary school alternate with photos of herself and brother as children, as she recalls getting the news. "I didn't know it then," she says, "but I'd started on a journey of my own, looking for my father, searching for some wisdom, hoping for larger understanding of who we are and why we do what we do."

Her uncle describes getting the news of the brutal murder, and gasping and stepping back; the camera reels in an institutional, hospital-like hallway and elevator. She describes letters from Greece that arrived later, which made her aware he had a house there; the camera pans in an aleatory way across a Greek town hillside, as she describes the shock of that news.

She returns to the shock of finding out her father was dead, with grainy images of cubbies and doors of classrooms followed by a traveling shot to a closing door; she had taken refuge in a bathroom to digest the news alone. Her brother also describes the loss, followed by a photographic image of him with his mouth open. Her mother then took them to the estate home of her fiancé, where they wandered through the formal garden whose images connect the film.

"For 20 years, I've tried to find the language to tell the story," she says, and inserts images of a film made when she was 19. This film, called "The Garden", contains the key arbor images that register the director's journey of seeking. She and her mother recall walking through that garden, and she recalls her confusion at experiencing that garden as an exile and its beauty as a betrayal of her own emotions. Plucked guitar music, traveling shots from a car of autumn foliage, and color closeups of spectacularly beautiful flowers accompany these memories. Interpolated are jerky black and white images of her father.

The director interviews artists and writers involved in her father's gallery scene. They describe him as alien for being Jewish, artistic, and not born to wealth. They do not, here, mention that he was bisexual. The filmmaker uses family photographs of her grandfather and her father to recap immigration and growing up poor.

Her father had bled to death after bludgeoning, and had begged fruitlessly for help from passersby, as newspaper headlines in closeup attest. Her uncle describes the horror of finding blood everywhere inside the house and on the front sidewalk. A 30 year old merchant seaman from Greece had, it turned out, been her father's roommate, although his family had not known that. The camera roams an abandoned house, probing ceaselessly but without result, as tinkling, evocative, wistful electronic music suffuses the soundtrack. The camera roams the front of buildings, presumably the fronts that her father passed as he begged for help.

Over pictures of her early youth, her mother recalls that she said that if they hadn't left him, her daddy he wouldn't have been murdered, and that her mother had no response but her brother did. He said that dad had left every night anyway, something that was a revelation to her. Her mother says that she had tried to keep it from her. Images of the garden--a walkway down which the (unseen) camera holder walks--echo in the scene.

Over old family photos, the filmmaker says that the pictures her father took of his children were proof that he even existed. Her brother recalls his father through his father's professional, gallery work, and she, facing the camera in a confessional mode, recalls the romantic aura of the gallery for her. She recalls her father taking her to the movies, in one case dragging her and her brother out of *The Russians are Coming*, the *Russians are Coming* (image of film poster) to *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (film clip), demonstrating that her father did not indulge childish tastes.

"Over footage of typed pages", the filmmaker says, "I had built an illogical connection between living a creative life, and coming to a violent end." She meditates upon the image of a baby hand putting pebbles into adult hand. Her brother says that he also feels the loss of someone to tell me who I am, from whence I came. The camera focuses on a map of DNA, and a microscope, while the filmmaker notes that DNA does not encode experience. I wish I could find out where I began and my father ended, she says; her father's face merges with his son's.

Over images of the garden again, she recalls the silence around her father's mysterious leavetakings. She returns to the closed doors of the street upon which he died, ignored by the neighbors. Her mother says, "It's a brutal image and I'm sorry you have it." She describes a cycle of remembering--despair--anger--depression--numbness, which kept her enchained. She decided, she says, to seek out others who were survivors of this situation, and visited scriptwriter James Ellroy, whose mother was murdered when he was 11. Rather prosaically, he says it gave him a spark point for all intellectual pursuits, and that he has exploited the fact for benefit in his own life.

At the Smithsonian, she finds love letters, journal entries, and photographs of men in her father's correspondence. She investigates her father's homosexuality. Her brother recalls discovering this reality at 13, when a friend of his father's told him. Interviews with her father's friends now reveal that they know much about his homosexuality, although it was always kept officially silent. She finds a passionate letter from Greece, that suggests relationships, not merely sexual encounters. She is buoyed by the idea that he might not have been as lonely as he appeared.

She includes an audiotaped interview, over plain text, in which an ex-lover of his reveals his relationship.

She grapples with her father's choices. It was dangerous to admit you were gay, you would be bashed, an artist tells her. Her mother tells her that he carried within him the seeds of his own destruction. Her brother tells her that he led a risky life. But a lifestyle didn't kill my father, a person did, she says. The closeup extravagant flowers return, along with images of the filmmaker as a young child. She recalls her flailing search for blame--her mother, her father, herself, the neighbors, the police.

Recalling an artist's comment that the police believed a homosexual death was unimportant, she visits the police, where two very different officers treat her with calm dignity, talking to her about the possibility of solving the crime, even after many years. The camera focuses in on the file, as she fantasizes in narration about leaving with the file, taking it home.

She finds a fantasy her father wrote about being murdered. The extravagant flowers return as an image. Probably someone he knew killed him; who took the pictures of him that we gaze upon? She pursues his Greek roommate, but discovers he has died five years earlier. The police interview continues; they suggest maybe the documentary will bring new publicity and information.

Her mother says that someday she will realize that her father is alive in her. Her brother, in interview, admits that sometimes he believes that his father is not dead. Over the image of the director walking down the garden path, her voiceover says, "No amount of anything can change the fact that dad is dead."

In the final images of the film, primarily those of the garden, the voiceover says that the filmmaker had expected a revelation, but that the answer had not emerged. The last image of the film is her father's typewriting on a page rolled into the typewriter: "Who knows the true story of anything?"

Style/Structure

Memory is a central issue in this film: not merely recovery of memory but reinterpretation of memory. The question is how to understand memories, which are the key to an understanding of self in the present; this is stated clearly by both the filmmaker and her brother. The journey is signified by the dreamlike walk through the arbor; the garden is a landscape of memory precisely because this was the place where the filmmaker and her family spent hours immediately following the news of the murder.

The film explores ever-deeper and more interior levels of understanding of the absent father through other people's memories and her own. The film progresses from the simple news of the murder through a recollection of the impact on the family through a portrayal of the father's professional career through the revelation of his homosexual activities (and through that the lifestyle of hidden homosexuality of the time), into the father's and the children's fantasies and the mother's insight that the father has been interiorized in the children. It thus goes from the outside facts to the inside experience. The film does not only strive to take the viewer on the filmmaker's journey, but also to communicate the sensations that drive her to do so. Through evocative images, tentative and meditative music and atmospheric footage (e.g. the elevator scene, the scenes in the school and empty house and the garden), the film attempts to communicate emotions: imbalance, shock, dislocation, emptiness.

Background on Director/Film

Theme: Murder is the filmmaker's first longform film. The film received funding from, among others, The Nathan Cummings Foundation, LEF Foundation, Kapor Family Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts. Martha Swetsoff had produced an earlier film, highlighted in this one, called *The Garden*, and made when she was 19 years old, on this same subject.

She graduated cum laude from Harvard and has a MS from the MIT Media laboratory. She has made several short films and videotapes as an independent director/producer which have been shown in the U.S. and abroad. She also has worked on a variety of socially engaged projects, including Leona's Sister Gerri, about the family story behind a widely-reproduced, horrifying photograph of a corpse of a woman who died after a botched abortion; Living at Risk, the story of a Nicaraguan family; and Robert Wilson's theater piece, the CIVIL WARS, as well as arts and science projects such as E.O. Wilson: Reflections on a Life in Science. An experimenter in new media, she was creative director for the CD-ROM magazine LAUNCH and a web-only art event by Yoko Ono. She has also played in a Boston punk band Bound and Gagged. Some of Theme: Murder's issues reappeared in her work for a three act play, premiering in Denver, The Laramie Project; her video projections showcased media frenzy around the hate murder of gay student in Laramie, Wyoming.

Production Context

This is a film that documents and performs the legacy of a period of cultural as well as political isolationism in the 1950s. The filmmaker describes herself and her family's lives as damaged by the social pressures that left a bisexual, Jewish, artistic man vulnerable to the death he endured. This work participated in a broader reassessment of the Cold War era, as a precursor to the era of civil rights and cultural pluralism. This work also built on public understanding of homosexuality as a cultural category with its own civil rights standing, such that the revelations of her father's friends serve as a historical reminder of the harsh terms of the recent past. Finally, the film was received as an intervention in the ongoing discussion of therapeutic approaches to grief.

Reception

When the film premiered at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts on October 23, 1998, the Boston Globe reviewer noted, Documentaries rarely come along that are this emotionally stirring and effectively crafted. The film received several awards, including Best Documentary, The New Festival (1999), Gold Apple Award Winner, NEMN; , Runner Up, Best Documentary, Boston Society of Film Critics (1998), Special Jury Prize, New England Film Festival. The film was endorsed by several victim and bereavement groups, including the Living After Murder Program and the OMEGA Homicide Bereavement Program.

Discussion

What does the filmmaker need to explain and understand about her father's death? How does her choice of images, objects and metaphors help her to do this? What difference is there between the movie she made at 19 and this one, so far as you can see it? How does this movie lead you to think about the father's sense of self? Is this movie one you would recommend to someone who has lost a loved one to violence? Why? Is this a movie you would recommend to an aspiring young filmmaker? Why?

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