The Silences: Process, Structure and the Development of a Personal Essay Documentary

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Introduction

The Silences (Nash, 2015) is a feature-length personal essay documentary about the tangled bonds, secret histories and unspoken traumas of family life that stretches from New Zealand to the Australian suburbs. It is an exploration of early childhood and the 'silences' of the past that resonate in the present. It is a film about family secrets and the ties of love, loss and kinship between a mother and daughter. The literary tradition of the family memoir is well established and, according to Jonathan Letham, 'One can easily argue that works of literature, which have focused the memory of the individual in subjective ways, are sufficient in number and quality to compose a genre in its own.'[1] In the cinema the essay documentary, whose origins lie in the literary essay, is both well established and a genre in its own, but essay films are not necessarily subjective individual works of memory. Michael Revov argues the subjective was in fact shunned in documentary cinema until the 1970s when a 'new subjectivity' emerged out of the social movements of the time, giving rise to 'work by women and men of diverse cultural backgrounds in which the representation of the historical world is inextricably bound up with self-inscription.'[2]

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[1] Jonathan Lethem *The Vintage Book of Amnesia* (Vintage Books, 2000), as quoted in Memory Studies '16 / Interdisciplinary Conference on Memory and the Past 'Call for Papers' September 2-3, 2016 Istanbul http://www.dakamconferences.org/#!memory/oy7tf viewed July 18, 2016.

[2] Michael Renov, 'New subjectivities: Documentary and Self-Representation in the Post-Verite Age,' in *Feminism and Documentary* ed. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.88.

This article explores the creative development of a personal essay family memoir. I have taken *The Silences* as a case study because it investigates the gaps and silences in my own family history and because, when constructing it, I decided to put ideas about creativity that I had been researching into practice. In 2013 I wrote an article called *Unknown Spaces and Uncertainty in Film Development.*[3] In this article I advocated a discovery-driven creative development process as opposed to a market-driven one. I argued that many creative writers and artists advocate an uncertain exploration of the unknown when developing new work. Yet this approach is at odds with the risk-averse film development agencies and their quest for formulas and certainty in an uncertain marketplace. In developing *The Silences* I chose to work outside the conventional film funding systems and engage in a long, slow, discovery-driven process. I wanted to investigate the repressed narratives of mental illness and abandonment in my family, explore the power of subjectivity in challenging fixed notions of history and test my argument that it is within the 'interplay of discipline and spontaneity, of the known and the unknown, of logic and intuition, that creativity lies'.[4] It was an experiment, made possible during early development by a 14-week Filmmaker Residency at Zürich University of the Arts in 2012.

In unfolding my process, I share the challenge of a story that resisted a linear chronological structure and instead required a non-linear elliptical structure in order to break chronology and create subtext, mystery and suspense. I argue that searching for the key that might unlock the story meant experimenting with form and cinematic language; 'writing' with images, as well as words, in order to find new ways to speak into the silences lying hidden within history. Adrian Martin argues that 'Film and TV profoundly complicate the literary genre of the family memoir. Because film demands things to be seen, that can be recorded…'[5] How do filmmakers represent the past if the gaps and silences in history have been buried so deeply they leave little trace behind?

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[3] Margot Nash, 'Unknown spaces and uncertainty in film development,' *Journal of Screenwriting* 4: 2, (2013), 149–162.
[4] Ibid, 160.
[5] Adrian Martin, 'Call Her Mum: Margot Nash's *The Silences*,' *The Lifted Brow* 28 April 2016, http://theliftedbrow.com/post/143500197415/call-her-mum-margot-nashs-the-silences-by

Questioning

> *What is the past? If it happened, does it still live anywhere? Is it gone after it happens? Does anything keep it? Was memory stored in the underspace?*
>
> Sophie Laguna[6]

How can I speak about the past? I could talk for hours about what happened, but how can I 'speak' so my story might dislodge discarded memories still crouching in dark cupboards, in silences that threaten to explode and in half-heard whispers as family stories skip like stones across the truth. For what is truth to a child? And how does a child remember, so that later, when it is old, these spectral traces might rise up and help make sense of the chaos? And if they do, how can we trust them? Can you trust my story? Does it matter if you don't? I am sure it will be my truth, or a good attempt at it, but will it dislodge your truth and loosen your tongue? Or will you shut the door again and be sensible and get on with your life?

Exploring

A creative exploration of the gaps and silences in my family history meant questioning the known, tracing elusive shadows back through the fragile archives, sifting the detritus that survived culling and downsizing as old age approached, and valuing the memories however unreliable (for they also tell a story).

> *What does the past tell us? In and of itself it tells us nothing. We have to be listening first before it says a word, and even then listening means telling and retelling.*
>
> Margaret Atwood[7]

In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* Walter Benjamin suggests:

> where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions […] A historical materialist recognizes the sign of a

[6] Sophie Laguna, *The Eye of the* Sheep (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014).
[7] Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction,' *American Historical Review* 103, no. 5 (1998), 15.

> Messianic cessation of happening, or put differently, a revolutionary chance to fight for the oppressed past.[8]

Feminist documentary filmmakers have excavated the oppressed past telling and retelling history to include rather than exclude women. They have 'shown the unshown' by portraying the lives of ordinary women.[9] At times personal and self-referential, these films have spoken 'the lives and desires of the many who have lived outside "the boundaries of cultural knowledge,"' and in so doing have 'challenged the "symptomatic silence of the empowered" where self reference was shunned'.[10] Feminist filmmaker and academic Michelle Citron argues that autobiography bears witness to the untidy and contradictory nature of our lives and, in so doing, 'risks exposing that which culture wants silenced'.[11] Could this silencing of 'other' narratives so at odds with the desires and needs of power stem not just from a profound lack of interest on the part of those who hold power, but also from a deep-seated fear (and hatred) of the unknown and the uncertain?

Embarking on a discovery-driven process meant embracing what Keats called 'Negative Capability', that is, when one 'is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.' [12] It means what Susan Dermody calls the ability to 'brood' which is an 'inward process and a feminine term of thought.' [13] If you are 'brooding' she suggests:

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[8] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in *Illuminations*, ed Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, (London: Fontana Press, 1973), p.263.
[9] Julia Lesage, *The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film*, reprinted in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism,* ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), referenced in introduction to 'Innovative (Auto)biographies' in *Feminism and Documentary* ed. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.269.
[10] Renov, 'New Subjectivities,' p.94.
[11] Citron, M. 'Fleeing from Documentary: Autobiographical Film/Video and the "Ethics of Responsibility"' in *Feminism and Documentary* ed. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp.271, 273.
[12] John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats,* ed. Maurice Buxton Forman, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p.72.
[13] Susan Dermody, 'The Pressure of the Unconscious upon the Image: the subjective voice in documentary,' in *Fields of Vision: essays in film studies, visual anthropology and photography*, ed Leslie Devereaux and Roger Hillman (Berkely: University of California Press, 1995), p.292.

> you are sitting with something, suspending thought, and letting something not really in your grasp come to its time. […] Writing is a brooding process, a suspended thinking towards, and it often eludes the active will.[14]

Taking time to solve problems means giving space for the unconscious to do its work. For the brain wrestles with seemingly unsolvable problems when we are asleep or half awake. Faced with implacable rigidity it will crawl away and hide or return with a vengeance to disturb us with dreams and accidents and slips of the tongue. How can we embrace this uncertain space, which is so unconditional in its demands?

> The alchemical space where ideas are dismembered and allowed to ferment is full of putrescence, darkness and fear. It is a space that those who engage in creative practice know well, for it is a space where the repressed return—where our most forbidden and destructive desires are given space to break-down and re-form—where new connections and patterns are discovered. It is from this dark place that new ideas emerge fully formed and enter the light of day.[15]

Surfacing from this 'dark place' requires the ability to grasp ideas before they fade, to value them and work critically with them, to question, listen, edit, restructure and if necessary abandon. This is the dance.

Writing

> *Only writing is stronger than the mother.*
>
> Marguerite Duras[16]

The Silences is a film about an 'ordinary woman' who took her secrets to the grave, but who left behind clues, whose 'grief lay unspoken in the silences in the house where it festered and became bitter and cold,'[17] who 'couldn't think about her life.'[18] It is a film about my mother. It was

[14] Dermody, 'The Pressure of the Unconscious,' p.293.
[15] Nash, 'Unknown Spaces,' 160.
[16] Marguerite Duras, 'Entretien avec Bernard Pivot' *Apostrophes, Antenne 2*: 28 September 1984.
[17] Margot Nash, *The Silences*, 'Narration' (2014).
[18] Diana Nash, *The Silences*, soundtrack (Oral history interview 6 July 2011).

constructed in the editing room over a two-and-a-half year period without a written script as map or guide. It was 'written' with images and words, which cross-referenced and informed each other. The first-person narration, which I wrote and performed, was written and rewritten, recorded and rerecorded, as the film was structured and restructured. While it is not unusual for a documentary to be constructed in the editing room, few filmmakers have the luxury of embarking on a long, slow, discovery-driven process like this without a script. Based on his track record of delivering distinctive films on modest budgets and taking into account the exigencies of working with Indigenous people from remote areas, Dutch/Australian filmmaker Rolf de Heer has managed to finance some films on the basis of slim treatments, but he is the exception not the rule.[19] Investors want a script that promises certainty before committing funds.

In 2003 I received script development funding from the then New South Wales Film and Television Office[20] to write a fictional feature film screenplay called *My Mother Eve*. It was inspired by my conflicted relationship with my mother and also by my life as a young actress in Melbourne in the 1970s. It was a big budget period drama and while I had directed two feature dramas, which had been critically acclaimed, they were independent art house films and raising the money for the new film proved difficult. I also had a full-time job at the university and it was hard to find time to focus on a project of this size. I tried to put it aside, but the story wouldn't leave me alone. I began to wonder if it could be reimagined as a low-budget compilation documentary. I had a background as a film editor and digital editing software was now making it possible to edit on a laptop at home without having to pay for expensive facilities, but I wasn't sure if I had enough materials to make a film. There were no home movies although there was a wealth of family photographs, as my father had been a keen photographer and my mother had kept a number of photograph albums of her early life. I also had some documentary video footage I had shot over a seven-year period on various small cameras, a three hour oral history I had recorded with my sister while researching a chapter for a book on memory and suburbia,[21] an audio cassette I had recorded with my mother in the 1980s and a large plastic bag full of my parent's letters, which my sister kept somewhere in the back of a cupboard. I also had

[19] *The Tracker* (De Heer, 2002) was financed on the basis of a 10 page treatment.
[20] The New South Wales Film and Television Office is now known as Screen NSW.
[21] Margot Nash 'The First House and The Hop Farm' in *Locating suburbia: memory, place creativity*, ed Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton (UTS e Press, 2013), pp.31—50, http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/books/locating-suburbia.

family photographs that I had taken and a few taken by professional photographers.

Fig 1. *The Silences* Ethel and Margot (detail) from *Our mums and us* series. 1976. Photograph: Ponch Hawkes.

Then I remembered my films and how I had drawn on my childhood experiences to create images to tell other kinds of stories; how I had, at times, based fictional characters on family members and literally recreated images from my childhood. This was the turning point, when I realised I might have a film after all, for these images and sounds (which were of a high quality) could now be repurposed as archival material to help tell a repressed family story that had been sitting under the surface of the original films all along.

Perhaps constructing these images had been a way to keep the past alive, drawing me back into memory so I could chew over its repetitions and desires.

> *We are our stories. We tell them to stay alive or keep alive those who only live now in the telling.*
>
> Niall Williams[22]

In 2012 I successfully applied for a 14-week Filmmaker Residency at Zürich University of the Arts. The residency offered a clear space to work on a creative project without the pressure to produce a completed work at the end. I embraced it as an opportunity to put my ideas about creative uncertainty into practice and step into the unknown. Gathering everything I thought I might need, I made digital scans of key family photographs, digitized most of my films, packed books and articles and set off to the other side of the world without a script as map or guide. Once there I immersed myself in the materials, drawing inspiration from literature, cinema, film theory, memory studies and psychoanalytic theory.

Fig 2. *The Silences* Ethel, Margot and Bill Nash c 1961
(Nash family collection)

[22] Niall Williams, *History of the Rain* (New York: Blooomsbury, 2014), p.3.

I was inspired by Australian avant garde filmmaker Corinne Cantrill's 1986 *In This Life's Body*, which is constructed almost entirely from family photographs and traces the life of the filmmaker as she faces a cancer diagnosis; Canadian filmmaker Claire Poirier's 1997 personal essay documentary *Tu as crié Let Me Go*, about her search for answers after her daughter's violent murder; and Australian filmmaker and academic Jeni Thornley's 1978 personal essay documentary *Maidens*, which traces the historical narrative of her maternal family and juxtaposes this with her embrace of feminism. I taught myself Final Cut ProX editing software, drew a deep breath and jumped in.

In his book *The Secret Language of Film* French screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière claims 'In the early days, cinema wrote before it knew how to write, before it even knew it was writing.' [23] However,

> [a]n authentically new language did not emerge until filmmakers started to break the film up into successive scenes, until the birth of montage, of editing. […] In the heat of its own implementation, this seemingly simple technique generated a vocabulary and grammar of unbelievable diversity. No other medium can boast such a process.[24]

Carriere gives a simple example. A man looks out of a window followed by a shot of a woman and a man embracing on the street below. This juxtaposition of shots tells us that this is what the man is seeing, but this was not immediately apparent in the early days of cinema where a man with a stick, called The Explicator, would point at the screen and tell the audience what was happening. If the shot of the lovers is followed by the man's angry face, could this be his wife with another man? If instead we cut to him crying could this be a memory of him with his wife, who has just died? These simple juxtapositions of images utilise the secret language of film, offering audiences opportunities to become active, making spatial connections and participating in the 'writing' of the film through testing their opinions in the gaps between the frames.

I started to work with the materials I had gathered, searching for openings where Carriere's 'secret language' might lead me in different directions to those I might have imagined writing a script. There is a short

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[23] Jean Claude Carrière *The Secret Language of Film,* trans. Jeremy Leggart (New York: Pantheon, 1994) p.22.
[24] Carrière *The Secret Language*, pp.8,9.

trailer for *The Silences*, which can be viewed on Vimeo,[25] where a woman picks up a postcard from the detritus she has discovered in her mother's kitchen drawer and gazes at it. This is followed by an image of a little girl on a tricycle in a dreamlike wasteland. The two images are from different films, yet cinema's 'secret language' connects them and the little girl becomes what the character is 'seeing' in her mind's eye. Is this her memory or is it an imagination: a dreamlike metaphor for what she experienced in the past?

I found myself excited by new visual connections that were starting to emerge in the editing room and by the 'voice' that was emerging as I wrote the narration and constructed visual sequences. I started weaving still photographs, actuality footage and archival clips from films where I had drawn on my childhood memories to create images, but I soon realised there were other images in the films; less obvious images that had an unconscious element that could now be reclaimed and reimagined. During the process of editing I went back through my films again and again, often at the urging of others, listening and searching my own creative history for moments that could be understood in new ways and reused in the service of the new story. It was surprising how many I found. I wanted to evoke the experiences of early childhood and had constructed a number of images from a child's point of view. I had even created a character called 'The Child' in my short experimental film *Shadow Panic* (Nash 1989). In creating this character I believed she was a facet of myself, but as I began to use images of her in *The Silences* I slowly realised she had also been standing in for another little girl. Back in 1989 my unconscious had created a character that may well have been based on my childhood memories, but she didn't look anything like me. This little girl was a tragic family secret, rarely discussed when I was growing up. Her story and the story of my father's mental illness were the two secrets I wanted to 'speak' in *The Silences*.

[25] https://vimeo.com/108751599

Fig 3. *The Silences*: Elizabeth Cook as The Child from *Shadow Panic* (Nash, 1989). Photograph: Corrie Ancone.

In my feature drama *Vacant Possession* (Nash 1994) I made the character of the father a paranoid scientist like my own father was. I recreated scenes from my childhood and constructed images that spoke to the fear I had experienced as a child when my father was ill. Using these images, intercut with family photographs, I constructed a sequence for the new film that seemed to fall out, almost fully formed. I called it 'The Nightmare'.

Fig 4. *The Silences*: John Stanton as The Father from *Vacant Possession* (Nash, 1994). Photograph: Corrie Ancone.

Working quickly and intuitively it was as if the films were 'speaking' to each other. For example, I suddenly noticed that I had used the same earrings in two different films. In *The Silences* we see a close shot of a woman's hand (from *Vacant Possession*) picking up an earring from a jewellery box and there is a seamless transition to a shot where The Mother in *Shadow Panic* puts the same earring on. It was surprising how easily these two films could be edited together even though they were shot by different cinematographers and were made five years apart. I cannot

imagine finding connections like this sitting at the computer writing a script. These cinematic connections were tremendously exciting to discover and I constructed a number of sequences during this early anarchic phase that have barely changed over the years. They have been polished and moved around, but they became solid building blocks that I continued to work with.

The structure that emerged from this phase was, however, problematic and proved to be a major challenge. The first 'rough cut', produced in Zurich, was overly influenced by the pattern of telling history as events following one after another: this happens and then that happens, rather than cause and effect. I had researched my ancestors looking for patterns, but the film had sections that were starting to feel like the television series '*Who do you think you are'*. Showing this early 'rough cut' to colleagues and family on my return, and hearing their comments, I could clearly see the dead hand of chronology, but didn't know how to fix it. Searching my family history had been fascinating, but my colleagues had no interest in great Uncle Frank who had sailed the seven seas or my ancestor Thomas Watson who erected a number of statues of Captain Cook around Sydney. It also became apparent that the narratives of men, in particular my father's experiences during World War 2, were dominating the fragile traces of the maternal narrative during the same period. Here was a silence, a gap in the records that gave pause for thought. Here was Benjamin's 'configuration pregnant with tensions' where the untidy and contradictory story of my mother's life during World War 2 had been repressed and had fallen outside 'the boundaries of cultural knowledge.'[26] Here was the heart of the story lying hidden in the silences. I remembered the plastic bag, which contained letters my father had written to my mother during World War 2. I resolved to ask my sister for them and read them.

I kept working on the film and showed it to other colleagues at key moments for feedback. A number of people commented on how absent I was from the story, even though my voice narrated the film in the first person. They wanted to know how the story had affected me and why I wanted to tell it. I had chosen to make a personal, subjective essay documentary, but I was giving away very little of myself. Had I internalised the narrative of the 'empowered where 'self-reference was shunned'? Would I be shunned if I spoke? How much could I tell and still feel safe? How hard it is to break the patterns of silence that sustain power,

[26] Renov, 'New Subjectivities,' pp.84, 94.

to challenge the narratives of history and speak the mess that lies beneath. Renov argues that the subjective is 'the filter through which the Real enters discourse as well as a kind of experiential compass guiding the work towards its goal as embodied knowledge.'[27] I needed to speak the subjective mess if I wanted the Real to enter. I also needed to find a new structure. My intuition had delivered, but it had not offered up a coherent structure, nor had it alerted me to how much I had internalised the narratives of power. I needed to move into a more analytical phase in order to balance the free fall into the unknown I had allowed myself. I now wanted to find the balance between discipline and spontaneity, the known and the unknown, passion and reason where, I had argued, creativity lies.

Although screenwriting is my field, up until this point I had ignored the classic three act structural paradigm. I realized I had to go back and lay it across the film as a template and see if it could help. Clearly there was a first and a third act, but it was the pesky second act that was causing me grief. In his book *Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach*,[28] Paul Gulino argues that most feature length films are made up of eight sequences: two in the first act, four in the second and two in the third. I broke the film into eight sequences, which showed me exactly where the second act problems were, but it didn't help me to fix them. The film lacked suspense and while I had experimented with moving backwards and forwards in time, parts of the second act were still driven by the dead hand of chronology. I knew the film needed shaking up, but how?

I employed a script consultant who immediately suggested I straighten the whole thing out and tell the story chronologically. My heart sank. I had always wanted the audience to discover the secret of The Child when I did, which was when I was about five. Telling the story chronologically meant the audience would find out before I did. It would also mean letting go of some of the cinematic and thematic transitions I had had such pleasure in crafting. I knew I was attached and needed to let go of attachment, so I gave it a go. It was a disaster. The film became slow and plodding and devoid of any suspense or subtext. I went back to the drawing board, but rather than jumping in again I put the film aside and 'brooded'.

[27] Renov, 'New Subjectivities,' p.88.
[28] Paul Joseph Gulino, *Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach: the hidden structure of successful screenplays* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p.2.

Brooding and Photography

The film contains well over a hundred still photographs. The majority are family photographs. Each one had to be selected, digitised and in some cases Photoshopped in order to remove the marks of age and neglect that were threatening to overshadow the original image. Like housework, this cleaning process can take many hours and, as I worked, I found myself meditating on the nature of photography and 'brooding' about structure, history and death, for so often the photographs were of the dead. This close reworking of an historical artefact draws the eye to the minutiae, which are so often missed, particularly as some of the photographs were very small. Digital technology allows for high-resolution copies to be made, capable of being projected onto a large cinema screen. So, while revealing details hidden for years, they can also reveal the hand of the filmmaker if the work is not skilled enough. I worked on some of the photographs many times until I was satisfied. New worlds opened up and time stopped still. But how much should be cleaned off in order to be able to see the photograph clearly and how much should be left so they still retained the patina of history? At times I cleaned the photographs up too much and had to discard them. Although photographs are usually only on screen for a short period of time, I began experimenting with allowing some to remain for extended periods of time, allowing the audience to brood. I also began using the editing software to move across the photographs, to create motion and draw the eye to details.

In his book *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes discusses the idea of the 'punctum' in photography.

> It is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me. […] this wound this prick this mark […] also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely these marks, these wounds are so many *points*.[29]

[29] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), pp.26, 27.

'Punctum' from the Latin also means: sting, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. For Barthes 'A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'.[30]

Fig 5. Original photograph Ethel and Diana Nash 1946 (Nash family collection).

I initially overlooked this fragile photograph of my mother holding my newly born sister Diana because of its poor quality, but one day I picked it up and looked at it again. There was something so translucent and wounded in it that it reached out and touched me, so I Photoshopped the distracting marks out, but deliberately left many of the marks still on it. My mother had always said that she had prepared to die when she went into hospital to have my sister, but as soon as they put Diana in her arms it gave her a reason to live. The *punctum* in this photograph is the curve, the touch of the baby's soft cheek against my mother's re-connecting her to life.

[30] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.27.

Fig 6. *The Silences* Ethel and Diana Nash 1946 Photoshopped (Nash family collection).

In her article 'A Journey Through Memory', Annette Kuhn claims 'Images are just as much productions of meanings as words, even if the 'language' is different':[31]

> photographs may 'speak' silence, absence and contradiction as much as, indeed more than, presence, truth or authenticity; and … while in the production of memory they might often repress this knowledge, photographs can also be used as a means of questioning identities and memories and generating new ones.[32]

This studio portrait of my father in his New Zealand air force uniform, taken just before he went to WW2, is literally punctuated and speckled with wounds. I spent hours Photoshopping it, cleaning away the mould and

[31] Annette Kuhn, 'A Journey Through Memory,' in *Memory and Methodology*, ed Susannah Radstone (Oxford ; New York : Berg, 2000), p.182.
[32] Kuhn A 'Journey Through Memory,' p.184.

decay, reconstructing what I could and meditating on my father's war story and his illness.

Fig 7. Original photograph Bill Nash c 1941 (Nash family collection).

Fig 8. *The Silences* Bill Nash c 1942 Photoshopped (Nash family collection).

The *punctum* in this photograph is the outline around my father's lips, which looks like make up. I have the same cupids bow mouth he had and at first I thought I must have drawn on the photograph in pencil as a child as I often did things like this, but it doesn't rub off. Perhaps it was make up, but it is more likely to be the childish outline of my pen or pencil, tracing my father's lips, making my connection to him indelible, tracing my lineage back through what my mother called the Nash mouth.

These two photographs of my parents, taken before I was born, testify to the performative nature of photography; testify to the 'face' or mask that is put on for the camera as if by smiling or putting on a uniform a record might be left that erases the shock of the Real.

> Although the photograph registers the 'real' which is in front of the camera, the Real which punctuates the picture (the punctum) is always seen through the screen of the

> Imaginary…In many ways the *punctum* is like the trauma of the Lacanian Real.[33]

Like Barthes' personal narrative in *Camera Lucida* where he 'searches for a particular essence or uniqueness in a photograph of his recently deceased mother,'[34] *The Silences* is a mourning project which engages with the loss associated with the (Lacanian) 'mirror phase whilst exploring the disappearance of the subject of the gaze.'[35]

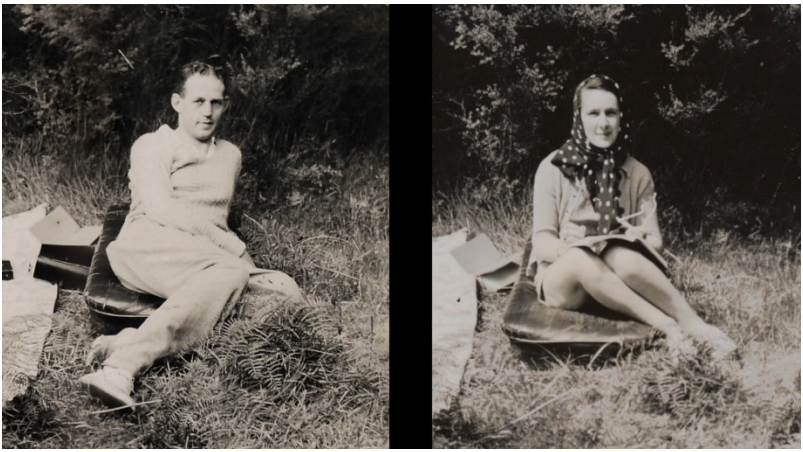

Fig 9. *The Silences* (screen shot) my parents: Bill and Ethel Nash c 1937 (Nash family collection).

> '*I search their faces. What can photographs tell us about the heart, about desire, about longing?*'
>
> Margot Nash, *The Silences*[36]

Then I read the letters, or some of them. My mother's letters sent to her father while she was travelling in Europe and India as a young woman told the story of the dashing British army officer, stationed in India during the Raj, who had broken her heart. We had grown up on this romantic story,

[33] Anne Marsh, *The Dark Room: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 2003), pp.94, 95.
[34] Ibid, p.95.
[35] Ibid, p.95.
[36] Nash, *The Silences,* 'Narration' (2014).

but then we found a draft of a letter she had written to him that exploded the myths of grandeur she had perpetuated. It carried the 'shock of the Real' as did my father's letters to my mother, sent from London not long after I was born, which told another side of the narrative I had grown up with about my birth.

> *'His letters had an emotional intelligence my mother couldn't respond to at the time, yet she kept these letters. Perhaps she went back and read them again when she was older. He threw hers away.'*
>
> Margot Nash, *The Silences* [37]

Restructuring

In 2014 I went to the Screenwriting Research Network conference in Wisconsin where the American Screenwriter, Larry Gross, gave a Keynote address called *The Watergate Theory of Screenwriting*. The title was inspired by the 1970s Watergate scandal that brought down President Nixon and refers to the key questions that were asked at the time: 'What did the president know and when did he know it?' Translated into screenwriting: 'what do the characters know—about narrative context, about themselves, and about each other, and when do they know it?' [38] Gross argues 'cinematic language works as a question of information, a confidence game played with and for the audience…deploying information.' [39] He used Kurosawa's 1952 film *Ikiru* (To Live) as a case study. In the opening sequence we see an x-ray showing the cancer that will eventually take the protagonist's, Mr. Watanabe's, life, but when we meet Mr. Watanabe, he is unaware that he is terminally ill. This knowledge that we, the audience, hold but he doesn't draws us in, engaging us and creating suspense. But Kurosawa also 'wants to demonstrate that his interests are located elsewhere. He and his team are also saying that the story of the man's death isn't the whole story.' [40]

I went back to the structure of the film and decided to experiment with letting the audience in on the secret of my father's mental illness in the opening sequence. Up until this point the audience had discovered his

[37] Nash, *The Silences,* 'Narration' (2014).
[38] Larry Gross, 'The Watergate Theory of Screenwriting,' in *Journal of Screenwriting*, Volume 5, Number 3, 1 September 2014, 313.
[39] Ibid, 314.
[40] Ibid, 317.

illness when my mother did, after they were married. This new structure meant the audience knew what was in store for her before she even met my father. This strategy gave the audience privileged knowledge, foreshadowed future events and created suspense. It opened up a space for audiences to become active, to wonder what might happen. But it wasn't the whole story. I still wanted the second secret of The Child to be a surprise so I went back to my original plan of the audience finding out when I did around the age of five. In the finished film there is an elision in the chronology at the end of the first act that is thematically linked to the history of mental illness in my father's family. A hand breaks the surface of a rock pool and the narration says: 'Of course as children we knew nothing of all this.' At this point the film jumps forward in time to tell the story of our relocation to Australia from New Zealand in 1950 and the entire narrative of WW2 is skipped over. Later this narrative is told in detail through moving backwards in time. At this point, unfolding the story prises open a 'silence' where the mess of life had been repressed and, in so doing, answers crucial questions for the audience.

Australian screenwriter Laura Jones talks about searching for the key that might unlock the story. [41] For me the structural decision to disclose the secret of my father's mental illness in the opening of the film unlocked the story, for it foregrounded *theme* rather than chronology as a structuring device. Once this convention was in place the foundations of the film were set and the film could move forwards and backwards thematically, rather than being a slave to the dead hand of chronology with its dull 'this happened and then that happened'.

Later, when I had to break the film into eight chapters for the DVD menus, I thought the chapters would easily align to the eight major sequences, but the exercise proved much more difficult. Exact entry and exit points were necessary and there was a limit of one image and one or two words to describe each chapter. This exercise in brevity revealed the spine or structure of the film as well as its 'bones'.

[41] Laura Jones, e-mail message to author March 24, 2009, Sydney.

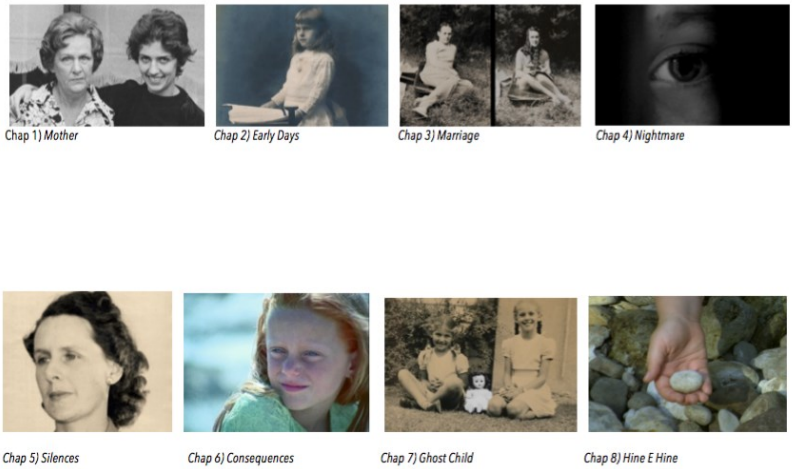

Fig 10. Chapter design for *The Silences* DVD and Bluray menus.

Of the eight images, five are still photographs, two are screen-shots from my previous films and the remaining one is a screen-shot from documentary footage I shot for the film. Of the five still photographs, the first is a detail from a larger photograph by a professional photographer and the other four are family photographs. Two of these have undergone a considerable amount of Photoshopping. The Chapter 2 image of my mother as a little girl, like the war picture of my father, had to be cleaned, as it was so old and damaged. The Chapter 7 image was a Photoshop experiment produced in Zurich during my free fall phase. I still have no idea how I did it.

Conclusion

The decision to repurpose images from my own cinema as auto-ethnography—images produced to tell different stories—resulted in a sub textural layer where the psychological context in which the earlier films were produced was rendered apparent, allowing the viewer to understand the relationship of creativity to experience. The decision to put a discovery-driven theory of creative development into practice created an initial space to free-fall, allowing new ideas and new connections to form. This process exercised a part of my brain that had been neglected in the above-ground world of knowledge and facts. It revealed things that could not have been

imagined, and written into a script, without physically engaging with the materials. But the tools of script analysis and structure were necessary to discover the film's unique shape, as was the time to 'brood' to open up spaces to question, listen, imagine and wait. What finally emerged was an elliptical, non-chronological thematic structure where the repressed narratives of abandonment and mental illness in my family history were excavated and finally allowed to speak. Here in the elusive interplay of discipline and spontaneity, the known and the unknown, logic and intuition, passion and reason, the real work of creativity occurred. Here, also, in this slow subjective space old memories were challenged and new memories were produced.

Postscript

The Silences was released in selected cinemas nationally in Australia in 2016. It has been nominated for an Australian Writer's Guild AWGIE Award for the screenplay, was a finalist in the 2016 Australian Directors Guild Awards Feature Documentary and the 2015 Australian Teachers of Media Awards Documentary Biography and in 2016 was awarded the Jury Prize for Best Feature at the Reel Sydney Festival of World Cinema. It has screened nationally and internationally at film festivals including the Melbourne International Film Festival, the New Zealand International Film Festival, the American Documentary Film Festival (Amdocs), Adelaide Film Festival, Canberra Film Festival and the Queensland Film Festival. In 2016 the Melbourne Cinémathèque screened *The Silences* as part of a retrospective of Margot Nash's work called *Between Past and Present: the films of Margot Nash*. *The Silences* is distributed by Ronin Films www.roninfilms.com See: www.margotnash.com for further information.

Margot Nash is a practising filmmaker and a Senior Lecturer in the School of Communications at the University of Technology Sydney where she teaches screenwriting. Her research areas are the theory and practice of screenwriting, subtext and the gaps and silences in history. Her film credits include the experimental shorts *We Aim To Please* (1976 co-filmmaker) and *Shadow Panic* (1989), the feature documentary *For Love Or Money* (1983 co-filmmaker) and the feature dramas *Vacant Possession* (1994) and *Call Me Mum* (2005). In 2012 she was the Filmmaker in Residence at

Zürich University of the Arts where she began developing *The Silences*. See: http://www.margotnash.com