



The Camera as a Container: Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation*

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Abstract: This essay examines Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* as a creative enterprise that opens up new ideas about documentary film and insights into working with new media. It considers how the making of this film worked as a prosthetic aspect to the filmmaker's identity and stability. In examining the interplay of sound, image, and written text, I note how *Tarnation* develops an artistic meditation on a number of important topics: the representation of trauma, the abstract and formal means of expressing the fragility of survival, the damage to memory and to identity that family dysfunction causes, the technical demands of creating narratives of broken and contested lives. The material in the film and its mode of composition from the perspective of psychoanalytic studies of mourning, gay performance and identity, gender dysphoria and its relation to loss, and artistic projects as acts of healing are also considered.

Keywords: container, fragmentation, gay identity, mental illness, mind-object, mourning, performance, transgender

Introduction

Jonathan Caouette's 2003 film *Tarnation* is both a powerful, formally inventive piece of filmmaking and a mesmerizing clinical artifact. In this essay I examine some of the formal and narrative strategies used in this film in order to illuminate three interdependent projects the filmmaker pursues. *Tarnation* is a *Bildungsroman*, the story of the filmmaker's growth through harrowing conditions of family madness, childhood neglect, and abuse. It is also the narrative of Jonathan's mother, Renee LeBlanc, who, after a brief rise to visibility and glamour, takes a long, grisly fall into madness. In addition, the film is an account of family dysfunction over three generations. I discuss the film in an overarching manner that emphasizes the ways in which it displays and narrates intergenerational transmissions of trauma, transmissions that affect identity, gender, sexuality, and creativity.

The story of the film's genesis and its public history are well known. Caouette, in his late 20s, living as an actor in New York City, put together a documentary about his mother, his grandparents, and his own development,

growing up in Tarnation, Texas. Using the iMovie program on his boyfriend's Mac, he made a film drawing on still photos (current and historic), video self-recordings from age 11 (Figure 1), home videos, his early efforts to make films as a teenager, audio and written texts, and contemporary interviews. The film was assembled with very little money and, after a long and demanding editing process, the final version was submitted to and screened at the Sundance Film Festival. Significant media attention and commercial success ensued. The economic modesty of the production is part of its mystique and part of what interests me in regard to the clinical impact and importance of this creative effort. It is a film literally made from the most prosaic domestic apparatus, from the shards of lives, the detritus of culture, and disturbed family reminiscence. These disparate forms are wound into a highly creative production that goes well beyond evocative pastiche. The story is always simultaneously about catastrophe and, against all odds and mysteriously, always about survival. The unfolding account of the period when Renee and Jonathan's lives overlap and explode is as much a meditation about what can scaffold fragile lives, as it is an account of the contagiousness of madness and dysfunction.

There has been significant popular and critical interest in this film for quite different reasons. First, the film was made from an enormous cache of personal photographic material collected and filmed by Jonathan and others



*Figure 1. Jonathan
at 11.*

in his life. From the evidence, family life was extremely camera dependent. More than the usual collection of home movies that has guided a number of interesting experimental films (Michelle Citron's *Daughter Right* and the work of Sue Friedrich come to mind), this visual archive is not solely a remnant from the past illuminating the present. The visual material seems integral to the way Jonathan and this family have constituted themselves. For all of them, the camera seems to be a crucial part of the family's creation of selves and family myth. Jonathan and his family seem almost to live on camera. Managing the apparatus of cinema—videocams, recording devices, and cameras (still and moving)—has been a deep part of Jonathan's repertoire from childhood on. He was frequently the camera's object as well as its governing intelligence. Second, the film presents a chilling documentation of his mother's mental illness, its location within her family and her own psyche. Jonathan braids into this material, a memoir of his chaotic history. Each of these stories partakes of hope and despair. Third, there is the matter of the use of iMovie to construct and edit the film. The resulting film combines a powerful pyrotechnical reach, with formal inventiveness, and a searing emotional narrative. Both in the use of personal footage and of new technologies, Caouette's film opens almost a new genre: part intervention, part autobiography, part confession, part indie film, part documentary, and an altogether low-budget work. It is a film whose shape, style, and ambience are deeply inflected through the presence of the computer as a medium of its construction.

Another aspect of *Tarnation* that is of particular interest to me is the formal strategies through which Caouette induces in his audience the experience of madness both as it may erupt intrapsychically and as it could flood into a child from the outside world. The viewer is plunged into a visual and auditory world of fragmentation, incoherence, and contradictory narrative fragments and images (Figures 2 and 3). There is drama and melodrama. There is a kind of visual hysteria of proliferating images of familiar and unfamiliar figures. Grotesque and everyday shape-shifting takes place without warning or explanation. The sound track, with its evocative music and its layering of voices, stories, overheard dialogue, phone messages, and personal narrative often seems hallucinatory. The provenance of many images and sounds in this film remains unclear. The film works by enactment and by representation. And enactment, in the contemporary psychoanalytic sense, is always, partially, a communication. We experience this film as spectators, voyeurs, simultaneously engaged and removed. But we sit also in the place of a child burdened with overstimulation and with family dysfunction and incomprehensibility.

The visual material seems integral to the way Jonathan and his family have constituted themselves. For all of them the camera seems to be a crucial part of the family's creation of selves and family myth.



Figure 2. The viewer is plunged into a visual and auditory world of fragmentation, incoherence, and contradictory narrative fragments and images.

As spectators we feel some of the demands of survival (psychic and literal), which required of Caouette tremendous feats of invention.

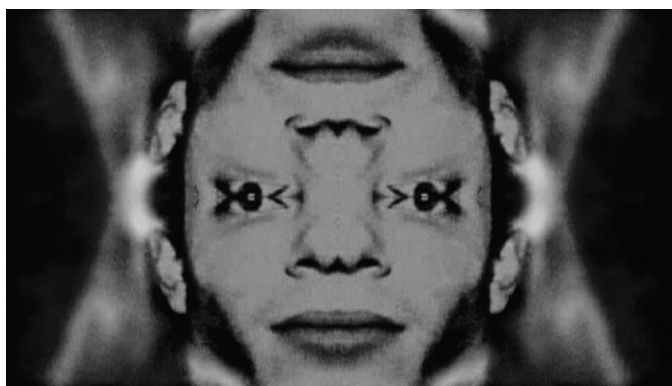


Figure 3. Again the viewer enters the world of fragmentation and incoherence.

Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma

In its interplay of sound, image, and written text, *Tarnation* works out an artistic meditation on a number of interesting and im-

portant topics: the representation of trauma; the abstract and formal means of expressing the fragility of survival; the damage to memory and to identity that family turmoil delivers; the technical demands of creating narratives of broken and contested lives; and the powerful effect of cultural forms to shore up and constitute identity itself.

In this film there is a constant interplay between image and sound, between scenes both found and constructed, and a set of narratives, some in

text, some on the sound track, and some in voice-over. Written or spoken texts contradict and at the same time underwrite the physical and visual evidence that Caouette shapes into this 86-minute riveting production. We see identities made and broken in relation to powerful forms of prohibition. Here the ironclad oppression comes not from conventions of the state, the police, the law, but also from medicine and psychiatry where diagnosis and treatment become a terrible procrustean bed in which Renee is bound and broken. We see what the interventions of drugs, ECT (electroconvulsive therapy), and diagnosis do to manage and produce forms of madness and psychic collapse. We see bodies that bear the imprint of both trauma and the resistance to trauma and to cultural repression. Flamboyance and defeat interweave in the self-presentations of Renee and Jonathan. We do not always know, as must have been true for the people in this film, what is a real voice, what is imagined, or what comes from the television and the movies. Culture and psyche swim in an undifferentiated soup. The presence of the camera often seems to provoke highly stereotypic and conventional reactions in its subjects. Yet, the camera, as abiding presence, as witness, and almost as another interlocutor, also serves as a resistance to cultural normativity, both as it relates to sex and sanity.

In this film and in this family's life, we observe a long multigenerational attempt to tell (and resist telling) a story. In this context, the camera might be said to function as a kind of antipsychiatry device and a force against disintegration. The camera acts as a humanizing agent but also as an indictment, sometimes of the family, sometimes of the mental health industry. The visual record both installs and contests the institutional diagnoses and psychiatric conclusions. The mismatches of sound and visuals, the strange background, half-heard, garbled voices on the television, create the experience in the viewer of a vision of the domestic or personal world as it might appear after shock therapy. Nothing is fully integrated and many strands of speech, sound, music, and visual detail remain in chaotic fragmentation. The filmmaker brings us into what he imagines and conjures up as his mother's mental state, a task he performs for both cinematic and his own psychic ends. He saddles the viewer with what has been his project growing up: make sense of this sad and fatally muddled story, find this mother, and, most of all, find her mind, through imaginative exploration and fantasy.

The film is a documentary of Renee LeBlanc's life but more acutely it is an account of the filmmaker's efforts to find and know her, a journey in which the sanity of mother and child are always at stake. Jonathan Caouette's heartbreaking "testimonial" to his mother, Renee LeBlanc's brief flashing presence as a young visible beauty and model and her long terrible fall into madness might be seen as a form of repetition compulsion. The filmmaker's life project and his creative project has been to try to make sense of madness

in ways that take him close to illness, through it, and into reverie and reconstruction. But at many points in the unfolding of the boy's life, the question of survival is unsettled and terrifyingly uncertain. The trajectory of Renee Le Blanc's life is sadly all too clear-cut. Because the filmmaker and his family kept and then used visual material from the time of Renee's childhood, we see before our eyes the evidence of a lovely girl destroyed physically, emotionally, and finally mentally (Figure 4).

The film braids several competing narratives to account for Renee's terrible decline. The historical material and footage of Renee, pictured in the 1950s during her brief modeling career, yields up some images that evoke another precocious child object, Jon Benet Ramsay, leading us to wonder perhaps about the costs of precocious beauty. The voiceover narrative says simply: "At about 11 or 12 Renee became sad." The simplified syntax makes it appear as though a child is repeating the pared down edited story told him about what happened to his mother. By 15 and 16 years of age, Renee has had a staggering number of ECT treatments and many hospitalizations. Over the next thirty years, uneducated and therefore uninformed parents, poisonous medicine, poverty, and a consequently inadequate or criminal mental health apparatus, combined with Renee's own fragility, come together to work a devastating destruction of a human spirit, mind, and body.

There is a tiny shard of sun and normalcy when Renee marries and has a baby, but quite quickly things fall apart inside her and out. Miracle and catastrophe follow one another in short order. As the visual formats of moving and kaleidoscoping images show, there is chaos, splitting and fragmenting of icons, sounds, visuals, words, and texts.

Figure 4. We see before our eyes the evidence of a lovely girl destroyed physically, emotionally, and finally mentally.



Later in the film, there is a retelling of this impassively spoken but visually tortured story. To think psychoanalytically here, I want to draw on one of Freud's most inspired conceptual inventions *nachträglichkeit* or as the French at times translate this: *après coup* or *afterwardsness*. This is Freud at his most nonlinear, as he charts the dynamic way a discovery of some piece of ancient history changes not only the past but also the present. A recovered memory reconstructs timelines, along with psyches. Renee gives her own account of a history of abuse and assault by her parents. When we hear Renee's story, the sparsely described detail appearing much earlier in the film gains a number of new readings. A fall from a roof, a head injury, a breakdown, now look potentially different: a suicide attempt, the destruction of self and sanity in the wake of parental damage. All these different accounts of what happened to Renee remain in unresolved tension.

The stance of the filmmaker is often enigmatic. What can be believed? Renee's self-report has been undermined alongside her sanity. No point of view functions as an anchor, beyond the early and painful images of Jonathan's heartbreaking sorrow at the news of yet another of his mother's collapses. The filmmaker, very skillfully, amid a film of ordered chaos, carries us along through these two terrible intertwined, interdependent lives. "I love my mother," he says. The opening frame of the film is in the present, 2002, when a phone call from Texas to New York gives news of a further catastrophe for Renee and we see Jonathan break down. By the end of the film, we know that these phone calls, this helpless love, these grief-stricken tears, have repeated over decades. The viewer has another moment of *nachträglichkeit* as the first scene of the film is recast as an endlessly repeating struggle to repair and save Renee.

Bildungsroman

Overlapping the story of Renee's dissolving life is Caouette's own autobiography, also drawn from and assembled with video and photo and interview (Figure 5). The accounting of Jonathan and Renee's lives, offered as a set of facts or lists, is presented in text across the visual screen. His clinical "facts" line up alongside hers in an eerie parallel. The medical and psychiatric terminology, the stark descriptions of both mother's and son's breakdowns, call out antiphonally to each other. We read the dates of the breakdowns, the number of hospitalizations, the times in foster care, and the year when Jonathan smokes LSD laced with pot and is again hospitalized. The build up of psychological and mental health terminology: depersonalization, dissociation, lithium overdose, are all counterpoised to the wildly careening images and soundtrack. It often feels as though the viewer is trying to read and assimilate

a clinical case, or a psychiatric report, while barraged with maddening images, melting faces, and visual chaos.

Figure 5. Overlapping the story of Renee's dissolving life is Caouette's own autobiography, also drawn from and assembled with video, photo, and interview.



The flatness of the text, its unremarkable everydayness, cannot be metabolized in the context of the visual material and the stories. It is this gap, the unbridgeable chasm between clinical recital of symptom and treatment on the one hand, and chronically traumatic and failing lives on the other hand, that begins to work its way into this viewer. There is an absolute incommensurability of bleak life facts and mental health documentation poised against the madness and breakdown of Renee and the deep threats to Jonathan's sanity and safety. Words are spoken or words are placed over a filmed scene or image but none of the symbolic representation seems to be able to contain what is happening on the screen. If there is containment, it comes through the filmmaker's palpable ordeal of creative work, and, I would propose, from the prosthetics of performance and cultural appropriation over several generations. The testimonials of gender, enacted scenes of girls/women in distress, telling their stories, whatever their florid and exciting excesses, are all ways that Jonathan undertook intuitively as some form of survival. These narratives are doing intrapsychic, internal, structural work.

The filmmaker's own story is captured in a set of arresting images/scenes, one, in particular, self-recorded when he was 11. This scene appears after a sequence of confused and confusing narrative taking the story from Jonathan's babyhood through a period in which the family (all generations) is in free fall and when Renee's efforts to bolt for freedom collapse. The child is in foster care and only back in his family several years later. Renee has a series of ECT treatments that alter her irrevocably. As the camera records splitting images, sputtering electrical storms, visual meltdowns and muddle, the text on the surface of the film says simply that Renee receded from Jonathan's memory. Throughout this section, the soundtrack plays the mournful ballad "Wichita Lineman," a song about loss, about holding on in the face of abandonment, a song about electricity.

In the monologue that follows this scene, Jonathan becomes engaged in an increasingly wild and disturbing performance. We can see how much Renee and her fate had entered Jonathan's conscious and unconscious func-

tioning. This is the deepest moment of transgendering in the film, a scene in which the boy performs his mother's story as a "testimonial," the term he uses to describe what he is doing. He has a scarf; he sweeps his hair away from his brow. He acts anxious and overwhelmed, speaking in the cadence of his mother, or perhaps retelling stories about his mother told by his grandmother, or speech styles absorbed from TV dramas or soap operas. We cannot really fully know the historic anchor of the ideas that swirl through his monologue, but it is a story of a "young girl" named Hilary with a vicious abusive husband, and a little baby girl she cannot protect (see Figure 7). The boy narrator gives many dates. We can piece together that the "girl" he is enacting is about his mother's age when Jonathan was 2 and that the baby girl stands in for the baby Jonathan. As the scene continues the boy's acting shifts into something more deeply felt, less performed—Jonathan seems to become lost in the performance. He is really crying, really recounting a tale of torment and danger. And yet, just as one wonders where this could go, the performer turns the table and now testifies to the murder of the abusive spouse. The "testimonial" concludes in vengeance. At this point, the screen goes blank and a woman's face appears—ghost-like—and a voice says sweetly, "Wake up, wake up."

This big set piece opens up some fascinating questions. We can see transgendering as reality and performance, bewigged testimonial as a made up woman recounting her own devastation. Jonathan plays Renee, or rather a version of Renee. He is 11, the age she was at the beginning of her fall (from rooftops and life). It is a riveting performance, increasingly "authentic" in emotional terms. Jonathan tells, witnesses, remembers, repeats, and works through a traumatic tale. The 11-year-old onscreen is witnessing more than he can metabolize and yet somehow is creating material that much later can enter a new and transformed account of Jonathan and Renee's lives. At 11 the son has the glimmering sense of Renee as victim. He enacts her and later this enactment is transformed. He becomes her caretaker, the transformation foreshadowed in the unexpected moment in the monologue when the young boy in character becomes the avenger. This scene, so filled with the tropes and conventions of melodrama, TV serials and soap-operas, shows just how palpable culture as constitutive of identity can be. Amid the narcissism, the performative zeal, the hysteria of Jonathan's performance as "Hilary... Linda Lou," we can also notice how much these bits of narrative stereotype and cultural convention, the detritus of popular culture, can shore up fragile psyches. This is interpellation and psychic containment.

It would certainly be easy to fetishize the scenes of Jonathan's childhood and his adolescence as symptoms, to objectify symptoms and acting out and chaotic uncertainty. I am struck, however, by the work of containing and holding that is occurring. Cultural formations and bits and pieces of received

identities are used to suture up a fragile self. If this film conveys the relentlessness of fragmentation, it equally presents us with the relentless work of story making, narrative, “testimonial.”

This powerful performance made me think of the work of Susan Coates (1992) on gender dysphoria. One of her key insights is that transgending in the young boys she studied seemed linked to the boy’s experience of the endangered state of his mother. Identification becomes a mode of holding

Identification becomes a mode of holding and containing, propping up the dissolving experience of the parent whose depression or absence in some way is keenly felt but unrepresentable as loss.

and containing, propping up the dissolving experience of the parent whose depression or absence in some way is keenly felt but unrepresentable as loss. When Jonathan gets lost performing Renee’s story we might think, along the lines Coates proposes, that he is getting lost in order to find his mother and that performing Renee is an incorpora-

tive move in order to preserve her. Coates developed these ideas about gender dysphoria into a consideration of intergenerational transmission of trauma, becoming intrigued with the complex way family secrets and the psychic material of one generation are unconsciously passed from one family member to another. In this “testimonial” we see one such passing.

Gender Melancholy

The idea that gender performance is involved in the management of loss and longing has been developed most acutely by Judith Butler, in the concept of gender melancholy. Butler’s focus is intrapsychic; Coates’s focus is more intersubjective but both theorists point to the expression of gender identity as a process of managing traumatic loss and foreclosures on love and connection. Jonathan is not a transgendered adult but drag performance flickers in and out of his childhood and adolescence, both in his performances in the films he constructs and in his daily self-presentation.

Much narrative and visual/acoustic preoccupation in the film involves nostalgia and the romance of loss. The evocative mournful music playing behind the opening credits includes the words “I don’t need a razor blade, I need your grace.” Images of Renee young and of Renee dancing recur throughout the film and are echoed later in Renee’s dance on the beach. The soundtrack plays “It’s All Over Now Baby Blue” during the footage surrounding the death of Jonathan’s grandmother, a figure of great ambiguity throughout this film. She is shown in bed holding a baby. Is it Jonathan? Is this a constructed image or a real piece of memorabilia? We never exactly know. In so many ways the film demonstrates the tenacity and the fragility of memory. Things are held and lost inexplicably in this film. Perhaps that is its central theme.

There are also a series of Caouette's own home-made films crafted with a trio of wacky gay friends wonderfully named Spook, Stacy, and Bam Bam. These friendships and the creative work they inspired began when the filmmaker was 13. This latter material tells a coming-out story, the very particular saga of being a gay teenager in Texas in the 1980s. It is an interesting and unusual story because it is about community as much as about individuality. The saving and containing capacity of gay underground culture is quite clearly privileged here. I was struck with the degree to which school and subculture facilitated Jonathan's growth as an artist as he segues from making some wonderfully named private home movies to an entrée into the experience, exposure, and world of art film. The visual material, the videos of the boys posturing, mugging, sleeping, and embracing are interwoven with Jonathan's earliest films, also shot in video. There is the beauty and rambunctiousness of boy love and boy life, the rather typical boy preoccupations with grossness, blood, gore, and vampires. Jonathan enters the gay art club scene disguised as a Goth girl. Coming out as a teenager in Texas cannot have been easy. It is not easy in large metropolitan cities, but there are visions of delight, mateship (an Australian term used by Henry Stack Sullivan), and exuberance. Caouette gives us a kind of "thick description" of gay adolescent culture/subculture. The rituals and routines of these young men play out amid the usual montages, split screens, dissolving, and terrifying images that catalog the deep trouble that continues and deepens in Jonathan's own life.

The section covering the teenage Jonathan puts in play a number of intriguing themes in relation to sexuality, loss, and the intoxicating danger of madness. The voiceover floats an interconnecting meditation on sexuality, on being gay as a sensibility not a sexual life. Preoccupations with Goth violence, vampires, monsters, and horror are interwoven with reminiscences about Renee. The unbidden sentence, "I love my mother," weaves among tales of wild excess (drugs, cutting, and weeping) and dramatic scenes scripted and unscripted of gay romances and melodrama. Race, gender, extraterrestrial, other worldly creatures flow across the scene. This is a coming-out narrative, perhaps; a story of sex and loss and how they interweave, certainly. And as in many moments in the film, intensely difficult scenes in which Jonathan seems on the edge of joining Renee in madness and catastrophic collapse are played against a romantic soft-pop soundtrack. I thought of Artaud (1958) as the theorist of extreme pressure against form, the celebrator of madness and deep expression. What is so striking in *Tarnation* is that these apocalyptic visions are linked to the sweetest MTV voices producing ballads and nostalgia.

Later in the film Jonathan's boyfriend, David, dances along a New York shore line. Renee is present—she is on a visit to New York. In that scene she is carried emotionally by these two young men, both as mother and as child. By this time she is a beaten down, dowdy, middle-aged wreck, but she also

dances at the water's edge, following David's leaping and turning form (Figure 6). It is a beautiful shot but not reducible finally to kitsch or obvious sentimentality, because of the tremendous multiple losses that underwrite this scene.

Figure 6. Renee also dances at the water's edge, following David's leaping and turning form.



Bassin (2000) has written about nostalgia in an interesting way. She deconstructs the term, makes it a displacement, often a working of the imaginary, melancholically unmourned maternal objects. Nostalgia in her view is always about imperfectly grieved maternal loss.

Film as Clinical Artifact

A psychoanalytic reading of film draws on a number of distinct methodological strategies (Gabbard 1997). What interested me in thinking about this film was not solely an analytic consideration of character or narrative, but rather the use of film in personal, family, and intrapsychic life as an aspect of psychic regulation, of containment, and certainly of reparation. I want to consider both the formation of the film and the process of archiving and filming that threaded through this family's life as a kind of clinical artifact. What I mean by clinical artifact is not simply that the film details a history of encounters with the mental health system, with madness, with family dysfunction, or with gay identity. Rather, I am interested in the way that the projects of filming as lifelong habits have functioned in Jonathan's stability and sanity. The video and the still photos are one source of memory, one stabilizing way of recording and fixing some experience in a tumultuous set of circumstances decades long, in which rival stories, great ruptures, and catastrophes are the norm.

There is a period in the film when Jonathan is growing, moving through terrifying foster homes and into his own self-narrating stages, when he finds relative safety with his grandparents, yet it is clear that Renee is disappearing as an explicit representation for her son. The film charts this process through melting image, splitting and duplicating faces, strange fogs and hallucinogenic formations, tumbling through the screen. Shards of still photos, brief shots of Renee and of the grandparents dot this kaleidoscopic landscape. One is amazed at Jonathan's survival but the camera, the fact of film, the audience, the camera's gaze seem to me to be decidedly part of this survival.

What interests me in regard to the camera's gaze in *Tarnation* is less the position of the viewer than the regulating function that the camera deploys. Jonathan uses and is used by forms of cinema that carry ideology, normativity, and patriarchy. Renee and Jonathan are surely objects of patriarchal regulation. If one thinks of the particular fate of the young beautiful Renee, of the fetishized ideas of star and stardom, ideas Renee herself gets caught in, we might see that the camera, like the ECT machine, devours this girl. Her beauty is eaten and destroyed by this complex of patriarchal machinery with its particular attunement to female beauty. Moth-like Renee and Jonathan return again and again to the camera's gaze and embrace, hoping each time both to triumph and to be recognized.

But there is another possibility: that we see the regulatory function of the camera under certain circumstances as a container, as mind object, as organizer of story and gesture and self-characterization (Figure 7). We might also see Jonathan's use of the camera (in childhood and as the adult filmmaker) as subversive, as an attempt to repeat and undo the trauma to Renee, both in being seen by cameras in her youth and by the ensuing traumatic attacks in her life. Much of Mulvey's (1989) theoretical critiques centered on her construction of the camera as patriarchal and heterosexual, as gendered and sexualized and as an apparatus of seeing/controlling/defining. In thinking of Jonathan's use of camera in this film and in his early life as subversive, I mean here more than simply the capacity of a filmmaker to subvert what may appear to be built into the apparatus of movie making.

Movie making is deeply implicated in Jonathan's gender play and performance. And this "play," I am suggesting, partially secures his sanity and psychic structure. Testifying before a camera that he (as a child) controls, works both sides of the street. There is mirroring and gazing. The camera's look, its gaze, and stare, scaffold a fragile and yet tenacious psychic formation, where self and other are inextricably engaged. Can we say that is the camera's capacity to deliver evenly hovering attention, the camera's capacity for receptivity (not necessarily gendered) that may have functioned to create a holding environment for Jonathan as child and as adult? As he puts together the film he is at various times boy, mother, girl, star, all multiply configured self-states "softly assembled" (Harris 2005), and the camera as a structuring figure in the scene is a kind of conduit of culture and intersubjective process that has a constituting and shaping force on all the characters. When Jonathan holds a camera and holds himself before a camera as he struggles to grow up and to preserve his family, he is operating a living camera, a mindful camera: one that holds subjects and objects in mind in ways both constructive and destructive.

The concept of a "mind object" appeared in some important clinical work on ego precocity (Corrigan and Gorden 1995). In that study, analysts worked

with a number of very different kinds of children (victims of abuse, of neglect, children reared in poverty) who could nonetheless be usefully characterized in their capacity and the necessity of holding themselves together without appropriate external containment. What do you do when no one holds you in mind? What to do when you must use your own mind as a self-container, when you as a child must make transitional spaces and structures in which you can try to grow and thrive? Jonathan Caouette would qualify as one such child. A number of things can be said clinically about this circumstance. One, it is not within the repertoire of every child. Certain children gravitate toward extreme forms of precocity, often becoming not only their own caretaker but also that of the parental figure(s). We might think of child actors who often become the economic and psychic center of families. Other children develop competences that may be social, interpersonal, or intellectual. A second clinical idea about such children is that this is a costly solution, leaving children with much inner emptiness, overextended, fragile and resilient simultaneously, prone, because of so much early responsibility, to feeling omnipotent, and alongside omnipotence, such children are often prey to profound areas of fragmentation and vulnerability. Finally, creativity and a rich internal fantasy life may be one saving component of such ego precocious, mind-object solutions.

Of course, it is complex to build a self through image and actually mirroring apparatus, but my clinical bet is that Jonathan's ability to live through the dysfunction in his mother's history and his own, and to retain love and memory of his mother and an ability to turn it into art and reparative love for her, are all outcomes that have been potentiated through the presence of filmmaking tools from early in his childhood.

There remains, of course, a clinical mystery at the heart of *Tarnation*. Who is saved and who is drowned and what is the difference between Renee's youth and adulthood and Jonathan's? They are clearly linked and not linked as mother and son (Figure 7). He holds her in mind as his parent, as his fragile child, and as damaged object (internal and external). Difference is both the surprise and the salvation of Jonathan's film and, I am speculating, part of the survival of Jonathan as filmmaker.

I would like these comments, which appear to be psychodynamic and psychoanalytic interpretations of the filmmaker, to be understood in a particular way. One of the singular aspects of this film is its use of filmed materials that emerged in the unfolding lives of two generations of Jonathan's family. Taking pictures, being filmed, filming, and talking on camera are as much the topic and engine of this film as its medium and its material. I am venturing a speculation about surviving trauma and some path to healing. There is so much evidence in this film of the drive or the capacity to make meaning, to use the tools at hand, however compromised, to tell the stories. Bruner (1990),



Figure 7. Renee and Jonathan are clearly linked and not linked as mother and son.

from the perspective of cognitive psychology, has studied the salutary effects of journaling in recovery from trauma.

One can wonder about the narcissism of so much mediation, so much life filtered through images and recordings. But *Tarnation* seems to me to be a story about, and an enactment of, the terrible struggle to survive deep narcissistic and intersubjective crises. We can admire and observe the deep creative intelligence in Jonathan's tactics of survival even while the struggle took the filmmaker to the edge of his own destruction, as he makes homage to the destruction of his mother. Performance, in this film, is deeply melancholic in Butler's (2004) sense of that term, carrying the signifiers of loss and damage, but it is much more solution than symptom.

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