

Who She Was When She Wasn't

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Undergraduate Honors Thesis

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March 30, 2015

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Part 1.....	5
Part 2.....	8
Part 3.....	13
Conclusion.....	18
Bibliography.....	19

Abstract

In 2014, my Gramma passed away due to a stroke. After she had her stroke but before she died, she was very confused and discussed her experience with others. I originally intended to try to make a film about what life must have been like for her after her stroke, but, in the process, discovered my own story about what it is like to watch a family member lose the function of their brain. Inspired by Jeff Scher, Sarah Polley and Tom Shadyac these filmmakers helped define the aesthetic seen in my film, *Who She Was When She Wasn't*. Through family film footage and rotoscope animation paired with my personal narration and a phone interview with my Gramma's doctor, I create a film that expresses the feelings of mourning a loved one who's brain changes before they pass away.

Introduction

“She had a stroke,” I heard my mom swallow her panic in an attempt to sound calm. I was used to getting calls about my Gramma’s health, usually reporting seizures, which she had experienced several times over the last few years. I had heard of a stroke before, but I did not know what that meant for my Gramma or how it differed from a seizure. According to the American Stroke Association:

A stroke occurs when a blood vessel that carries oxygen and nutrients to the brain is either blocked by a clot or bursts (or ruptures). When that happens, part of the brain cannot get the blood (and oxygen) it needs, so it and brain cells die.
 (“About”)

While I could easily find these clinical definitions, nothing prepared me for what it was like to see my Gramma in the aftermath of her massive stroke. I was devastated and mourning her loss, while also oddly hopeful that since her physical body was still here, that maybe “she” would come back. There is something eerie about being with a person whose brain is not fully functioning. It calls into question a person’s spirit, the true nature of the self. It challenged my assumptions about what “being alive” is, about what reasonable outcome I should be hoping for my Gramma. I wanted her to recover fully, and short of that, I was not sure how or what to feel. To tackle these feelings I decided to make a very personal film project. My goal was to recreate the feeling of mourning and loss resulting from having someone dear to me suffer a stroke and ultimately pass away. It is this battle of letting go of someone while they are still alive, and of losing a family member, that inspired my piece. First, I will give the background of my Gramma’s story and health complications. Second, I will explain the influences from films and readings. Third, I will break down my film aesthetically and describe my particular choices.

Background

Elizabeth Brubaker was born on August 31, 1941. She moved around growing up, living in Florida, Illinois, Nevada, and Missouri. She attended the University of Illinois and was a member of Pi Beta Phi sorority. After two years of undergraduate study, she was accepted into The Tobe Coburn School for Fashion in New York City. After graduation, she had several opportunities to pursue a career in fashion buying, but instead chose to marry my grandfather, Richard Fendell and move to St. Louis to begin her life as wife, mother, and homemaker. Her creativity never diminished, it was just expressed in ways that existed outside of the fashion world. She loved to throw extravagant parties, decorate her home, garden, and of course, wear the latest designer fashions. She had a keen eye for quality, not quantity, which explains why each item in her closet and home was purchased and placed with thought and care.

In 1988 her husband, Ricky, passed away at 48 years old. My Gramma's world would never be the same; she was devastated and her nightly cocktail habit turned into two, three, four and more. During my childhood, when I was too young to notice the effects of her drinking, my parents often worried about, and commented on, her alcohol consumption. Her life drastically changed, a second time, in 2001 when she suffered a seizure related to alcohol withdrawal. She went to a rehab facility for 30 days in the Summer of 2001. I was 8 years old. I remember wondering when she was going to come home. I had previously spent many Summer days at her house. If the weather was bad, we would stay inside and she would make white bean soup, brownies with icing, and we would play Scrabble. If the weather was nice, we would sit outside and paint pictures of her garden.

My Gramma was different when she came back from rehab. Previously, she relished buying nice things and was very fussy about aesthetics. Afterwards, she started frequenting garage sales and buying random gifts that never seemed quite right. She began painting her furniture and walls in what she called a “shabby chic” style and rearranged everything in her house. The “new” Gramma had some new interests, but she was still just as sweet as she had always been. Our family eventually accepted the new behaviors and interests—after all, *she* had not changed, just her actions changed.

Her life would take another dramatic turn in 2010, when she broke her leg in a hotel room while she was visiting my uncle in Phoenix. She was alone when it happened, and the circumstances will forever remain a mystery. She completely shattered her femur, yet had no memory of how it happened. In the Spring of that year, she broke the rod that was holding her femur together, and again, could not remember how it happened. Her best guess was that she over worked herself in the garden when she was raking leaves.

She went on to recover from her surgeries to repair her leg but never quite felt steady. She often expressed a fear of falling. In the Spring of 2013, she suffered a seizure, the first that was witnessed by anyone since her withdrawal seizure in 2001. And then in the Summer, she had another seizure. We later attributed her previous “falls” to seizures. At this point, we were also suspicious that she had begun drinking again and was having withdrawals. In the Winter of that year, my Gramma had another seizure after my parents confronted her about drinking again.

One month later, on January 7th, 2014, my uncle found my Gramma on the floor of her house after suffering from a massive stroke. Doctors suspected she could have been lying there for 18 hours. She was paralyzed on the right side of her body and for the first

day could only repeat “8-2-2” (the first three digits of her phone number) whenever she was asked a question. The doctors could not predict what type of recovery, if any, was possible. She ultimately regained movement in her right arm and could carry on what seemed like coherent conversations, but always with a few mixed up details. On March 28th, she had another stroke and fell into a coma. On March 31st she passed away.

Research

My original desire to make a piece about my Gramma was inspired by her own need to tell her story. My mom would tell me over the phone that my Gramma was progressing in the hospital and, around February, she seemed to be able to understand what had happened to her and where she was; however, my parents would need to remind her almost daily that she was at Missouri Baptist Hospital and that she had a stroke. She would sit back and take a deep breath, in utter disbelief and ask, “really?” She told my mom how strange everything felt to her, that she wasn’t sure what was real and what was a dream. Each time she was reminded that she had a stroke and was in the hospital she would remark, “I could write a book.” On one occasion she even offered a title: “Who I was When I Wasn’t.” I was fascinated that she felt compelled towards storytelling, and upset that I was not in town to ask her about it and record her experience. I thought about how I could represent the dream-states she described, and instantly, Jeff Scher’s rotoscoped works jumped into my head. The first piece I saw was *L’eau Life*. Scher uses old film footage and rotoscopes over the images on paper using a projector and water color paint. Rotoscoping is “an animation technique in which live actors are filmed and the sequence footage is used by digital designers and animators to create realistically moving cartoon characters by tracing over live action footage, frame by frame” (Clayton 59). It has been studied as a technique that produces an “uncanny” feeling where the audience is unsettled by something not human that moves in a human way, “similar to viewing an ‘animated corpse’” (Clayton 59). This aspect of rotoscoping blends nicely with a piece about someone on the path towards death. Rotoscoping also allows the “materiality of the original character... [to be pervaded by] the animated version”

(Clayton 59). This aspect is what led me to represent my Gramma with a material that reminded me of her: blue and white paint. The major benefit to rotoscoping is that:

By creating a deliberate tension between the real and the represented, what this digital technique seems to make possible is a form of animation that questions the relationship between notions of truth, verisimilitude and reality. (Walden)

The uncanny nature of rotoscoping that makes the viewer question the boundaries of reality is exactly what drew me to it for my film. Its ability to transform a subject and take the viewer to uncharted territories is very attractive. I was excited by the freedom rotoscoping gives the animator to experiment since the action is so defined. In an interview Scher did for the BBC, he explains “to animate is to give something life” (“Animator”). This is interesting considering my animated piece is about someone’s death. The animated sections, however, are there to rescue her from the real world and create life in my mind. While I scratch the first scenes away, the film ends with a rotoscoped image of my Gramma and me, representing the memories that will live on forever. Scher also states:

The thing music has always had that filmmaker’s envy is the ability to take you away emotionally, how a certain note can have a certain emotional chord, response. So I’m kind of trying to create a language of pictures that has emotional equivalents. (“Animator”)

This is so apparent in the flow of Scher’s work. The constant moving images that swell with the music transport the viewer to a certain time or place. I wanted to preserve this flow in order to attempt a similar emotional response.

Although my Gramma’s story gave me the initial idea for an animated piece, what propelled me to make it was how little I knew about strokes when my Gramma had one. I would hear my friends all the time talk about how their grandparents had them, or knew someone who did, but I never understood what that meant. I was so torn up about how

jolting it was to have to have seen my Gramma, think she was back to normal, and be brutally reminded that she was no longer able to communicate the way she once was. I wanted to create a piece that would describe that process, so others who were going through similar situations would be able to relate. My light bulb moment happened in my animation class when we read Paul Wells, “Theory of Animation.” The first aspect that caught my eye was when he described the difference between narrative and experimental animation. He explained that experimental films “are largely personal, subjective, original responses, which are the works of artists seeking to use animated form in an innovative way” (Wells 45). My original idea for my Gramma was experimental but it was not personal. I knew I should step into the vulnerability, and direct the piece more about myself and my point of view. I drew inspiration from two filmmakers: Sarah Polley and Tom Shadyac. In Polley’s film, *Stories We Tell*, she gives an inside look to her family’s hidden secrets. I loved the vulnerability in her work; it also opened my eyes to the fact that an audience can be interested in such a personal story—I do not need to cater something for a viewer. In an interview with actress Katie Holmes, Polley says, “there’s something about the kind of nostalgia and the visceral response that you have with Super 8 footage if you grew up in the ’70s and ’80s. It just triggers so much in me” (“Sarah”). I had the same feeling about home film footage as Polley. It seemed like the perfect medium to transport the viewer and open them up emotionally from the beginning. Family film footage is usually used “in order to bring in a personal and evocative touch” and has “considerable power to evoke an emotional response in audiences” (Pymm 140). It is a great tool for establishing ethos with the viewer, because almost everyone has similar images of their families’ pasts that they have seen. Typical footage will show

“family members hamming it up for the camera” much like how many of the shots of my Gramma include the flappy-wristed wave, which was a signature during the late 60s (Pymm 141). Most importantly, they act as “a moving memory from a semi-mythologized past” (Pymm 141). This touches on my point of feeling disconnected with my Gramma. My relationship was based around frameworks such as these home movie clips; trips and events that occurred before I was born, that I have viewed so many times they have become a part of my memory that I wish I had experienced.

In Shadyac’s film, *I Am*, he starts off his documentary by providing a framework and context by narrating his own story in a conversational tone. I found this refreshing, and wanted to embrace making a personal piece by doing the same thing. Tom Shadyac also happens to be one of my professors. Similar to how he used his own story to contextualize his documentary, he encourages his students to figure out who they are and what their life story is. While I was at home struggling with ways to tell the story from my Gramma’s point of view, Shadyac’s film stood out in my head. He was able to gain trust from the viewers by being honest about his own struggles with post-concussion syndrome. I started to brainstorm what my story was in relation to my Gramma’s trauma.

When I first attempted to tell my Gramma’s story, I read, *My Stroke of Insight* by Jill Bolte Taylor. The book helped me understand what it must have been like for her to lose control over her brain. Taylor gives an hour-by-hour account of what it felt like to experience a stroke. This, at first, seemed like a gold mine: something I could base my project on; however, it was ultimately what helped me decide to go another direction. I realized, along with a nudge from Tom Shadyac, that I had not personally suffered from a stroke, and that it is not my story to tell—I can only convey what I know. While I

ultimately decided not to use Taylor's book as a framework for my film, reading the book was not a wasteful effort: there were certain aspects from the stroke experience that stuck with me. For example, Taylor describes feeling like "the composition of my being as that of a fluid rather than that of a solid" (Taylor 57). It was very important to me to make sure the rotoscoping looked fluid; I animated the piece on twos so that when I held each frame for 4 frames, it would still have a fluidity to it reminiscent of real time.

Aesthetic

The overall look for my film had to “feel” like my Gramma. Since it is primarily about my memories of her and my own thoughts, I wanted it to represent my associations I have with my Gramma. I noticed that the digital look of the rotoscoped lines I was drawing in Photoshop did not seem to represent my Gramma accurately. In Wells’ article, he explains, “experimental film concentrates on its very materiality, i.e. the forms in which it is being made, and the colours, shapes and textures which are being used in the creation of the piece” (Wells 45). Instantly, paint texture came to mind. As mentioned in the background section above, I would go over to my Gramma’s house to paint in her backyard, and she also painted everything in her house after she came home from rehab: it is a texture that spans my associations with both areas of her life. Her house was filled with blue and white pottery, frames and wallpaper. It was necessary for me to continue this line of coloring into images that represent my memories of her. Earlier I described the aesthetic of rotoscoping in terms of how it creates the character or subject being drawn. I also chose to rotoscope the footage because it has a very human quality to it in terms of the animator—it reminds the viewer that a human being created something. Each frame is widely different, even though the subject does not move much, simply because of human error when drawing free-hand. My drawing style came through to accurately take a physical image of my Gramma and turn her into my personal memory of her. I will now break down each section of my film.

I begin the film with the focusing of a slide projector. The slide aesthetic is reminiscent of my Gramma’s era. The slides also pair well with narration, enabling me to provide context and background for the audience. All of the footage of my Gramma is

from Super 8mm film my Grandpa took in the 1960s. I went through all of the films to pull the clips, and created stills to use for the slides. I chose to use footage from before I was born because of the distance I have always felt from my Gramma. Although we spent a lot of time together, we never had a deep conversation about life or a chance for her to share her wisdom and perspective. She was also my first close family member to pass, and with that came a lot of guilt for not asking her more questions and learning more about her story. Much of my knowledge of her comes from stories I have been told, not from personal experiences with her. I chose to represent this with a narration that set up the story I am telling, with photos taken before I was born. I created the slide effect in After Effects. I pulled stills from home footage reels, and then created black matte to make them look like slides. I made them flip up and replace each other, which is convincing when paired with the slide projector sound effect. I also added a wiggle and light change to the frame in order to create the projected quality.

The middle section contains rotoscoping. This represents the feelings I had when I visited my Gramma. These feelings were the primary motivation for making this particular film. When I found out she had a stroke, I had no idea what that meant for her life from that point on. I would visit her in the hospital, and she was able to look at me and respond to my first few phrases as if she was coherent. Quickly though, it would become apparent that she couldn't find the right words, or was unaware of what was really going on around her. It was very difficult to visit her, because I would get excited that she seemed back to "normal" then would be reminded swiftly that my Gramma, as I knew her, was gone.

In creating this middle section of my film, I began with home videos, which represent the stories and idea of my Gramma as told to me from others. I then isolate her from her surroundings as I make sense of the fact that she is no longer fully present in her body. This is why I chose to use narration from an interview I conducted with her neurosurgeon while she detaches from the video footage. During the interview, I asked him to describe what she was like when she came into the hospital. The juxtaposition of an auditory account of her physical state, along with the detachment of my physical Gramma to the rotoscoped version of her in my memory perfectly represents the way I felt visiting her in the hospital. I also chose to add the song, “Whiskey River” by Willie Nelson. This is the song my Gramma “jokingly” requested to have played at her funeral (ironic considering alcohol is what ultimately led to her death). As the song warps into an elevated, echo-filled space, so too does my Gramma. As previously mentioned, the rotoscoping section takes her from a physical representation to my mental “idea” of my Gramma. I also wanted to have several rotoscoped sections to show how seeing someone in her state does not get any easier. I would get tricked each time into thinking she had overcome her stupor and would be my Gramma (as I remembered her) again. I have the home video to rotoscoping sections repeat to represent continually visiting her in the hospital. To transition from each hospital visit, I originally considered having her outline dissolve, or jump out like a firework; however, those are all actions that are motivated by her. Since this scene represents my memory of her, I instead wanted something that read as my perspective. The scratches perfectly represented the turmoil I felt inside as I mourned for my Gramma pre-stroke. As she disappears under the scratches, it represents my attempt to release my hold on to the idea of who my Gramma was before her stroke.

To achieve this effect, I selected clips of my Gramma where she was alone, or the focus of certain scenes. I then exported these short clips as image sequences, so that each frame was saved as a photo file. I brought these into Photoshop, and traced my Gramma out of every other photo. Once this was finished, I was able to go back and add canvas and paint texture I had created to replace the digital, computerized feeling of the rotoscope with something more appropriate for my Gramma's memory.

The last section represents my mourning process. Getting to hear and share stories about my Gramma during her funeral greatly helped me process her loss. I wanted to transition from the stories of her—ones I had heard from my family and desperately tried to cling to—to my personal memories with her. She joined my family when we vacationed in Florida and she and I always shared a room; she helped me look for seashells and took walks with me. Whenever we go to Florida, I am reminded of my time spent with her there. I used images of the two of us in Florida because those are my fondest memories with her. I paired this with narration again at the end, as a way for me to take control and give closure to my memories and thoughts about her. In the beginning my film is a representation of distance and guilt. At the end there is still sadness, but a sadness that is understood and accepted. I go through the story of my Gramma as her life ended by including my role in it. I describe what happened when I was with her, as opposed to the idealized story of who my Gramma was as a person before her stroke. The combination of my fond memories of my Gramma while growing up, with my voice describing how she passed away, is a method of accepting she is passing in my own mind. I wanted to end with a rotoscoped image of us in Florida; it represents me holding on to my personal memories of her. I removed the two of us from the setting, to the two

of us existing forever in my mind. This image does not get scratched out because I still hold on to memories like these. I achieved the look of this section the same way as the first. I found photographs of my Gramma and me at the beach in my family photo albums and cropped them to go along with the slide aesthetic. I then have our outlines morph into the pulse line from a hospital monitor. This mirrors the hidden scratches that hold the pulse line shape during the rotoscoped scenes. I wanted to visually represent her death alongside my narration. This scene is kept quiet, without music, to give the viewer a chance to reflect.

Conclusion

The passing of a family member affects everyone differently, but the experience is inevitable and shared by all. There can be an extra layer of confusion when the grief is complicated by feelings of regret or longing to have known the person better. Hearing stories about my Gramma made me sad that I never asked her about certain topics while she was alive. The combination of this, along with the confusion of having someone's brain malfunction while his or her body is still alive, is what compelled me to tell the story. There is a connectedness to the world that arises from sharing stories, and ultimately, this film is a search for fellow understanding and connectedness. I was able to utilize rotoscoping and home film footage to their best abilities. Rotoscoping can create uncanny feelings about a subject, as well as create an emotional fluidity. Family film footage creates empathy from the viewer as they become full of feelings of nostalgia and experience emotional connections to a time they have never lived. My goal was to create a piece about the complicated feelings behind losing a grandparent due to a malfunction of the brain. By embracing the vulnerability of personal storytelling, and the transformative tools of experimental animation, the story of the loss of my Gramma has come to life.

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