

## Stories of a Distant Mother: Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell*

Yasukawa Yuka (Filmmaker)

Actor and director Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* is a semi-documentary film about the secrets that surround her birth. Sarah's mother, Diane, was a stage actress who died of cancer while Sarah was still young, leaving behind a mystery for her children. Unlike either of her parents, Sarah had red hair. When she was young her elder brother would joke, "Don't you have a different father?" and everyone, including Sarah, would laugh because they thought it wasn't true. But it became clear that it was the truth.

Sarah Polley's presence within this film is remarkably thin. Even when she interviews the people who knew Diane, Sarah neither supports or resists what they say, but simply works to elicit the truth as they see it. The film does not touch on what Sarah herself thought of her mother.

*Stories We Tell* begins as a documentary searching for the truth about Sarah's parentage, but gradually the storytelling itself becomes the subject of the film. As a director, Sarah's interest is drawn to how the events are recounted and the film completely avoids becoming a "self-documentary."

The film I made recently, *Dressing UP* (2012), also narrates the protagonist's investigation of the mystery of her own parentage, but unlike *Stories We Tell* that film was wholly fictional. It does have in common with *Stories We Tell* the fact that the protagonist's mother is already dead. In *Dressing UP*, in her quest to know the mysterious past of her mother while she was alive the protagonist ends up committing the same acts as her mother.

I relied on the imaginative power of fiction to show a daughter in pursuit of her mother. I think use of that imaginative power is

one of the tasks given to fiction. But in putting both herself and her mother in front of the camera, Sarah Polley uses the methods of documentary to establish a decisive distance between them both, a distance greater even than death. And perhaps as a result of her continual searching she arrives at a cinematic response in her attentiveness to the film's mode of narration.

Diane's husband, Michael, who after her death raised Sarah as a single father, reminisces about Diane. "One of her great strengths, I think, was her vitality, her constant determination to live life to its fullest. I don't have anything like that in my character whatsoever."

"People in pictures are not aware that they are being pictured" — I once found that phrase in a novel and thought it made sense. At the beginning of *Stories We Tell*, Michael quotes from Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*: "When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it." People in the middle of a whirlwind don't think that someday someone will remember this and turn it into a story. They're simply desperately focused on what's going on right in front of them. With the appearance of the internet and social networking, don't many of us who have become completely inured to seeing ourselves from the outside feel envy toward Diane, who lives out her life in the middle of a picture (a whirlwind)? I am a little envious. Though it's a hard life, I suppose. (Translated by Michael Raine)

### ■ Screenings

*Stories We Tell* [IC] ..... 10/11 10:00– [A6] | 10/14 12:45– [A6]