

Stories We Tell

(2012, Polley, Canada)

Component 2 - Global filmmaking perspectives (AL)

Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area: Critical Debates Filmmakers' Theories

Rationale for study

- Critical Acclaim: *Stories We Tell* won the 2013 New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Non-Fiction Film and the 2013 Los Angeles Film Critics Association Award for Best Documentary. The film was awarded the Allan King Documentary award at the 2012 Toronto Film Critics Association Awards.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- The film's opening moments examine the premise but reveal a lot about its construction too (0:00 – 06:31)
- Section exploring truth and storytelling (1:15:02 – 1:25:25)

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Uses cinematography techniques from numerous different modes of documentary. The conventions of the talking heads in medium shot to medium close up from the participatory interview are featured, moments of fly-on-the-wall filming reflect the observational

documentary style and there are performed scenes like in drama documentaries. The overall effect of this range of filming techniques contributes to the reflexive documentary style, a film that does not simply explore the relationship between the director and the subject(s), but rather the director and the audience.

- The analysis of *Stories We Tell* on the *Filmslie* website (<http://filmslie.com/stories-we-tell-review-sarah-polleys-documentary/>) offers excellent detail on the cinematography used for each 'dimension' of this film.
- Repeated use of extreme close ups in the real footage of Diane in which she is at once scrutinised but never fully revealed. This reflects the film as a whole.

Mise-en-Scène

- Authentic reconstruction of period through location choices, costume and styling to mislead the spectator.
- Inclusion of the technology of filmmaking i.e. lighting rigs, mixing desks and cameras to create the impression of transparency in how the film is constructed.
- Use of artefacts e.g. playbills and articles about Diane's roles in theatre contribute to the sense of authenticity.

Editing

- Narrative structure relies on the gradual reveal as new information is drip fed.
- Non-Linear structure creates enigma. The editing takes the audience step by step into the past.
- Mixing of interviews, real footage and constructed images occurs from the offset encouraging the spectator to accept the style and immerse themselves in the narrative.

Sound

- Music used to create humour at times e.g. silent film section of *Harry*.
- Music by Abraham Lass throughout the film is taken from *Play Me a Movie: Piano Music to Accompany Silent Movie Scenes*

this contributes to the sense of stories being told, a 'truth' being constructed.

- Shots without dialogue of all the 'storytellers' in the final moments – use of silence to allow contemplation (1:31:20)

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

- Representation of women and promiscuity – refreshing lack of blame around Diane's infidelity from a lot of the central contributors.
- A consideration of the 'father' exploring the importance of genetics and nurture.
- Representation of truth. One of the key themes of the film is how many different versions of the truth can be held within just one family.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Hand-held documentary camerawork creates realism.
- Home movie aesthetic is created through the use of Super 8, a format the film's producer Anita Lee said is loaded as, "*it already comes with this notion of nostalgia and the past. It's a medium of a certain time. We associate Super 8 with home movies lost in basements.*"
- This is Sarah Polley's seventh film and producer Anita Lee suggests common themes running through Polley's work, auteur traits. "*Her signature is to look at relationships deeply and honestly in a microscopic way, and the emotional waves these relationships have on the people around them. A deep exploration of intimate relationships at different stages was at the core of I Shout Love, Away from Her and Take This Waltz, and now Stories We Tell takes this territory to a new level.*"

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- Prevalence of 'reality' television and mockumentaries in contemporary culture may influence the spectator to be less believing of this film's mode of storytelling.

Institutional

- The film was produced by the National Film Board of Canada, an organisation hugely

supportive of the documentary genre since John Grierson's involvement in 1938, through World War 2 propaganda and news reels to 1980s vignettes of Canadian culture. In 2009 the board collaborated with the Canadian Film Centre on a theatrical documentary development programme which led to the production of *Stories We Tell*. The choice of making this project with the National Film Board of Canada was deliberate because Polley wanted the freedom to experiment.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Critical Debates - The Impact of Digital Technology

Starting points

- 40% of the film is from the family's old Super 8 movies and Super 8 cameras (Canon 1014 AZ, Canon 1014XLS, Nikon R8) are used in the reconstructions to help create the illusion of archive footage. This technique was time consuming as considering it took three days to process the film. This could be a starting point for discussing the challenges of working in that format.
- The digital camera, the Sony CineAlta HDW-F900R is used for the contemporary interviews and the crispness of the image anchors those moments in the present.
- As the documentary uses digital and film cameras and the sequences filmed on digital are actually the more static aspects of the film it could be argued that in terms of flexibility and practicality the choice of digital or film had minimal impact.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Filmmakers' Theories

Starting points

- *Stories We Tell* arguably uses the interactive mode like the works of Nick Broomfield and Michael Moore so exploring similarities between their work and this film is a useful activity.
- Bill Nichols' *Introduction to Documentary* offers useful content on the subgenres of documentary and the theories behind these.
- Explore the role of Sarah Polley as a mediator between the subjects of her documentary and the spectator. Like Moore and Broomfield, she guides the audience response not just through editing decisions but her role in the interviews.