

***Memory, Place and Autobiography:
Experiments in Documentary Filmmaking,*
by Jill Daniels. Cambridge Scholars
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I very much enjoyed reading this book, but I should make a couple of “declarations of interest” at the outset. Daniels uses an aspect of my own work (*A Whited Sepulchre*, 2009) in her discussion of the “multiplicity of voices” in autobiographical documentary (69–73), and, as implied by this, we share a background as independent filmmakers with an interest in both autobiographical documentary and in Practice Research in the Academy. So, perhaps unsurprisingly, I found it a completely fascinating and thought-provoking read. Taken as a whole, the book gives both an intimate portrait of a particular filmmaker’s struggle to make work, and a very clear picture of the contexts (personal, industrial and intellectual) in which that work was produced.

After a lucid and useful introduction, Chapter One provides an admirably honest history of Daniels’ own childhood and adolescence, including accounts of some occasionally traumatic experiences that haunt many of her films which she describes later in the book—these accounts all delivered in a spare, direct and clipped style:

I had suffered trauma, known what it was to be rich and experienced hardship. I had “slept” with many different men, abused drugs and alcohol and knew when to lie and how to keep a secret. I trusted hardly anyone. I really loved films. (22)

This autobiographical material provides an indispensable grounding for the writing that follows. This is also true of the two next chapters, which outline the traditions of British independent filmmaking over the last fifty years or so, and the ways in which Daniels has negotiated these traditions in her own work. The reader has a constant sense of a situated voice (and a life lived) in many complicated and contested fields. My hunch is that, for many of us as well as for Daniels, this focus on, and exploration of, our personal trajectories is an essential component of all practice research work—whether made explicit in accompanying text or not. It is something that I certainly suggest as an important technique to many of my PhD students in the early stages of their research.

The first section of the book, “Becoming an Independent Filmmaker”, concludes—after describing her early career—with a chapter on “Mediating the ‘I’”, which makes very clear how self-reflexivity lies at the heart of (her and others’) autobiographical documentary practice. The following three sections, which focus on place, memory and filmmaking strategies, are similarly sub-divided into themed chapters. Most of the chapters in the book explore a core idea, for instance Place as Allegory and Metaphor, or Mediating Memory, and

are all relatively short (between ten and twenty pages). Many of them are written with a similar structure: they provide a theoretical framework for the theme of the chapter early on but at their heart is an analysis of sequences or techniques from her films, often supported by analysis of relevant work by other filmmakers. This means that the book remains firmly embedded in the lived experience of the making of her films, at the same time as reaching out to other perspectives, and situating the work intellectually and theoretically—particularly in the field of documentary studies.

I'll give a few examples here of how I see this working in the book, starting with a thematic strand that appears early on, but also threads throughout the book: how her work has been part of UK independent film culture. She writes about this very concretely and practically, describing, for instance, the development of the Independent Filmmakers Association as an organising force, how her own professional work began at the tail end of its influence, her struggles to finance her films and her consequent use of an “early incarnation of crowd-funding” (57). She then goes on to outline the later absorption of independent film culture into the Academy. The book, consequently, is, in part, a valuable history of independent filmmaking from one person's activist perspective.

As part of this endeavour, she also describes her participation in the aesthetic traditions of independent film culture, from her time at the Royal College of Art in the late 1970s, including a fascinating analysis of the (mis-)use of the Brechtian theory of alienation (55). So, as well as the more concrete and material history, we are given a sense of the evolution of aesthetics in independent filmmaking. I found this especially valuable in her analysis of the documentary form, in the way she describes how she has made use of it. Her concern, shared by many others in the field of experimental documentary, is how to explore techniques that expand “the filmic discourse beyond the provision of “evidence”” (97), explaining how her films are “not intended to provide ‘evidence’ but to afford spectatorial reflection on the hypothetical and the uncertain” (163). This is particularly urgent for Daniels because of how much of her filmmaking is taken up with the exploration of the representation of trauma, or in her words, with how to “deploy filmmaking strategies that engage the spectator's imagination to evoke the traumatic experience” (132).

Daniels illustrates what she means very specifically in her account of her film *The Border Crossing* (2011), which is set in the Basque country—the site of a traumatic experience from her teenage years which the film explores. She discusses how she has used “indirect forms of enactment” and “a complex layering of voice-overs” to convey “the fragility of remembering and forgetting and the non-assimilation of traumatic experience” (172). At the same time, she stresses the importance of the “direct indexical link to the site of the trauma” because the film “mediates an actual experience not a fictional one; it is an experimental documentary not a fiction film” (172). I think this is an insightful distinction, a thoughtful deployment and defence of the indexical, which often has had a bad press in contemporary documentary studies.

This rigorous attention to the practical and theoretical specifics of Daniels' filmmaking is evident throughout the book. To give a final example that struck me forcefully, she spends a couple of paragraphs describing and analysing one shot from her film *Not Reconciled* (2009), featuring a “girl in a red dress” (100–1), explaining how the shot came about as a “chance event” while she was filming a crowd scene in a Spanish town. She uses the shot, cut with another one in the same location, together with non-diegetic music, to signify “a revolutionary fervour that was destroyed by the effects of war” (101)—another example of an indexical moment used to stimulate spectatorial reflection. The paragraphs about this sequence are

illustrated with a still from the film, but the way they were written encouraged me to return to viewing the film itself. Most of Daniels' films discussed in the book are available on Vimeo or elsewhere (and very usefully cited, with their web addresses in the bibliography), but on a number of occasions when reading her analyses I began to look forward to a time when publishing technologies allow us to move effortlessly between text and film, to cite moving film clips as easily as we do textual references. The experience of reading books such as this one will be greatly enhanced when this is more commonplace.

Apart from missing this longed for ability to jump easily from text to moving image, my only other concern or misgiving with the book is a slight feeling that on occasions it ranges wide at the expense of going deep, a feeling which is exaggerated by the text being presented in relatively short chapters. The book contains illuminating discussions of a large number of topics, for instance, documentary realism, the representation of trauma or the socio-cultural and economic history of UK independent film, all of which could have been explored in more depth. This is a minor quibble, as the way in which the topics are each treated contributes effectively to her overall argument about the development of her work.

I want to finish by stressing how useful and stimulating I found this book. I think that anyone involved in the field of filmmaking as research—perhaps, particularly those embarking on a PhD—will also find it very valuable as a kind of textbook, as it is a precise and nuanced account of a research experience, and so, by implication, also a methodological guide. On a more personal note, I am in the early stages of developing a film about my father and his war time experiences. As I was reading Daniels' book I often found myself applying many aspects of it to my own struggles with my filmmaking. For instance, I found her discussions of the mediation of memories and of self-reflexivity and the indexical, both challenging and particularly helpful.

References

The Border Crossing. Directed by Jill Daniels, 2011, vimeo.com/93590375.

Daniels, Jill. *Memory, Place and Autobiography: Experiments in Documentary Filmmaking*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019.

Not Reconciled. Directed by Jill Daniels, 2009, screenworks.org.uk/archive/volume-3/not-reconciled.

A Whited Sepulchre. Directed by Tony Dowmunt, 2009, <https://youtu.be/HFEfgcGet9o>.

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