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The Cinematic Representation of the Traumatic Experience in Youth

(In Contemporary Documentary Film)

Master's Thesis



Fig.1. Film Still from *When the Earth Seems to be Light*

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I want to thank all the people who have supported and motivated me throughout my research.

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Abstract

The thesis is entitled: **‘The Cinematic Representation of the Traumatic Experience in Youth in Contemporary Documentary Film’**.

What is traumatic experience and how can it be visually represented by the documentary film? What kind of cinematic techniques are used by the contemporary documentary filmmakers to visually represent the abnormal nature of the traumatic experience? Throughout my research I orientate on the contemporary documentary films that unite documentary and fictional cinematic techniques in order to represent the non-linear, abnormal, fragmented nature of the traumatic experience in youth.

Through the analysis of three case study films the thesis aims to show how the hybridization of documentary and non-documentary cinematic techniques in contemporary documentary film medium contribute in the authentic cinematic representation of traumatic experience.

Key words: Hybrid, Documentary, Fiction, Trauma, Cinematic Narrative, Time, Non-Linear, Authentic, Indirect.

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1. Introduction

In this thesis I aim to open up the discussion around the question of what does it mean for the contemporary documentary film to depict traumatic experience of young people who somehow bear witness of traumatic history but for whom it can only account imperfectly? I am going to analyze how, by which cinematic techniques, contemporary film directors represent traumatic experience of youth. What are the limitations of documentary film medium in relation to representation of trauma and how do filmmakers overcome these challenges?

The word trauma comes from the ancient Greek meaning *wound*, namely a physical wound. Although, there is no clear modern definition of trauma, after the works of Sigmund Freud, it is definitely no longer associated with the bodily defect but more with the psychological disorder. Wound on human's mind, not necessarily onto its body. Throughout the three chapters I argue that the juxtaposition of fictional and documentary cinematic techniques in contemporary documentary enables film to represent the disturbing, fragmented, abnormal nature of trauma. While there is a lot of theory about the visual representation of trauma in documentary film there is relatively less reflection in theory on the cinematic representation of traumatic experience in youth. This is why my research comes out of youth film.

I will use theories of film scholar Bill Nichols and literary theorist Cathy Caruth to dissect the cinematic means of the three case study films each of them discussed in three chapters. Nichols texts will grant me the inside of documentary cinematic techniques while Caruth's theories will help me decode the meaning of the documentary and fictional scenes in relation to trauma.

The name Bill Nichols is familiar to everyone involved in documentary film studies. His book *Introduction to Documentary* is a handbook of documentary film students and amateur filmmakers. In this thesis I will refer to Nichols's analysis of documentary film modes in order to understand the specific documentary cinematic techniques used in my case studies.

On the other hand, I chose Caruth's works and her understanding of Freud's texts on trauma over the original works of Freud because Caruth's analysis of trauma is interdisciplinary

compared to Freud, Jacques Lacan, or other trauma theorists who have primarily psychoanalytical view point. After the publication of her full length trauma study *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* in 1996 Caruth was recognized as a leading pioneer of trauma theory in literary studies. Caruth's contribution is particularly complementary for my research because she analyses traumatic experience not only through literature and psychoanalysis but through film more importantly.

I am going to approach literary theory and film as two separate but complementary structures of thoughts about trauma. I am going to apply Caruth's theories, particularly her theory about the belatedness of trauma, to my case study films. Through the analysis of cinematic techniques I am going to argue that what Caruth does through conceptual thought in her theory of belatedness filmmakers do through the hybridization of documentary and non-documentary cinematic techniques. Namely Caruth says that trauma is always received in delay, it keeps coming back to a person even after the traumatic event as such is finished. (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience : trauma, narrative, and history*, 1996) Filmmakers manage to depict this disturbing nature of trauma through the juxtaposition of documentary (location shooting, non-actors, voice-over, evidentiary montage) and non-documentary (staged performances, professional actors, continuance montage) cinematic techniques.

In order to research this matter I suggest three different case study films shot in the period of 2005-2015. All of them are, more or less, hybrid documentaries that apply fictional scenes and therefore stand on the edge of fiction and documentary. In the first chapter I am going to analyze a Dutch short documentary *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl* (2005) that uses the documentary cinematic techniques as dominant but applies few of fictional techniques. The second chapter looks at the British autobiographical documentary *The Border Crossing* (2011) where the involvement of the filmmaker is much more vivid and the cinematic techniques much more complicated. I will finish my analysis with the Georgian documentary film *When the Earth Seems to be Light* (2015) the

subject of which, unlike my first case studies, is not an individual but the collective trauma of youth.

2. Chapter one- Representation of Individual Traumatic Experience

2.1 Representation of Trauma in *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl*

Ayla, the Tsunami Girl mise-en-scène is a fifteen-minute-long documentary film made by Wilma Ligthart in 2005 based on her own screenplay. The story centers on a young Dutch girl, Ayla, who survived the devastating 2004 Tsunami during her Christmas holidays in Sri Lanka. The massive tidal wave dragged her under to the point of near drowning, until a fruit vendor pulled her out of the water. In the film Ayla calmly tells her story, but we realize that she is still dealing with the trauma on a daily basis. Drawing soothes her, but walking along the North Sea is still a difficult experience for her.

In this chapter I will open up the discussion around the hybridization of contemporary documentary films in order to represent the abnormal nature of trauma through film. I have chosen *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl* as a starting point of my research because the cinematic techniques applied by Ligthart are dominantly of traditional documentary style with relatively less experimentation and fictional reenactment. Therefore, the analysis of this film will serve as a nice transition to the following case studies where the cinematic techniques are further complicated and mixed with the fictional narrative. What is more, starting by a relatively simple case (in terms of the cinematic techniques) demonstrates the diverse nature of contemporary hybrid documentaries, it shows how some filmmakers limit the usage of fictional scenes in the documentary while others choose to almost erase the line between these genres. The outcome of the cinematic experience differs according to the degree of hybridization. Furthermore, *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl*, is also the shortest film of my case studies that allows me to apply some theories on traumatic experience and its cinematic representation in order to have an idea of what kind of phenomenon filmmakers are dealing with.

At first I will start to dissect the cinematic means of the film through trauma theories by Cathy Caruth to introduce and discuss the notion of trauma in literary theory and later in the film. From here on I will move to the analysis of documentary and non-documentary cinematic techniques and their relation to Ayla's traumatic experience.

2.2 *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl* and the Trauma Theory of Cathy Caruth

The film opens with three cheerful youngsters cycling away to the beach accompanied by *If I Ain't Got You* by Alicia Keys. On the basis of this soundtrack it is difficult to imagine that the documentary film deals with the phenomenon of trauma. However, when the children reach the beach and all of them go close to the sea except Ayla—an eleven-year-old girl—we immediately start to feel that something detains her from going closer to the water. Our impression is derived firstly from the close up of Ayla's face, with her eyes staring at something, superimposed onto the image of the sea and, secondly, because Alicia Keys's song, that gave us somewhat joyful background of children cycling, is suddenly interchanged with the noise of the waves of the sea. From this moment on the film begins to represent the traumatic experience of a young girl who was a victim of the 2004 tsunami that struck her family's holiday destination in Sri Lanka.

As we watch Ayla's face juxtaposed with the image of the sea a voice-over commentary comes onto the picture. The voice is of Ayla's herself speaking of how afraid she has become of the sea after tsunami and how she used to swim in it before the happening. After this opening scene, that sets out the traumatic theme of the film, Lighthart shows us the scenes from everyday life routine of Ayla. We are suddenly taken to Ayla's playground near her house where she plays, rides a bike and lives her life like her siblings -who we can also spot playing next to Ayla. As the film develops, however, we realize that she is haunted by the disturbing dreams and fear of water caused by the Tsunami. This points at the invisible nature of trauma: —everything seems fine from the outside but there is a big wound inside the body.

From these opening scenes it is evident that Ligthart does not intend to literally represent the traumatic experience of Ayla. In fact she never reenacts how tsunami hit Sri Lanka and almost drowned Ayla. Moreover, there are no flashbacks in this film. Instead the director decides to follow the current everyday life of Ayla in her home country, The Netherlands, and depict how the traumatic experience has influenced it. Therefore, Ligthart is not interested in the traumatic happening as such but in its aftermath. The film is not about when and how the traumatic event happened but about how it was remembered, memorized by Ayla and how all these affect her life today.

Therefore, the story of Ayla's traumatic past begins from her present demonstrated in the opening scene when she goes to the sea, but not as close as her siblings, and her voice-over speaks that she is afraid of water now. The fact that trauma is a memory needs no explanation but what type of memory it becomes is a complicated question.

Cathy Caruth's research takes Sigmund Freud's works as starting point and, focuses on trauma theory and testimony. Her works are crucial for this thesis, because she critically reflects on trauma studies and argues that trauma is a socio-historical phenomenon. Therefore, the subject of trauma is relevant not only to psychological and psychic research but to art works as well, especially to visual art because to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event (Caruth, *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions: Locke, Wordsworth, Kant, Freud*, 1991). Just like Ayla is possessed and haunted by the image of the sea.

In her work Caruth underlines that traumatic event happens so fast and unexpectedly that the person does not acknowledge what has happened and therefore traumatic experience becomes a different type of memory. The dreams and flashbacks of this unusual memory translate in symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder.¹ Caruth states that because of the belatedness of trauma "the traumatized person carries an impossible history within them, or they themselves become the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess." (Lifton, Robert, Caruth, Cathy, 1991).

According to Caruth traumatic experience is not the immediate response to the tragic happening but the process from the actual event to its belated come back into a victim's mind. Therefore trauma is experienced in delay as demonstrated by the opening scenes of *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl* when Ayla feels terrified by the sea even though a year has passed after tsunami.

Later in the film Lighthart shows a scene of Ayla sleeping uneasily at night in her bed. The hand-held camera slowly moves up from the shaking head of Ayla to the dream catcher¹ and we start to hear the noise of the waves from nowhere. The scene, with the non-diegetic sound of waves, depicts the circumstance that Ayla still suffers from the repeated dreams of her drowning.

The fact that traumatic experience is the literal and repeated encounter of past and present was registered in the works of Freud. Caruth uses Freud's theory as her starting point to talk about trauma. In the beginning of his masterpiece *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) Sigmund Freud writes about his astonishment when encountered with the veterans of World War I. His surprise was due to the repeated dreams of battlefields and horrifying death scenes that haunted war veterans: "Dreams occurring in traumatic neurosis have the same characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright." (Freud, 2001)

These dreams could not be understood in the framework of unconscious drives and wishes. That means they could not be caused from the pleasure drive. They were "the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits." (Lifton, Robert, Caruth, Cathy, 1991)

Based on the above said trauma has a huge impact on how people experience time in the sense that it takes a person back to the traumatic event regardless of the will of the person, so the present becomes constantly mixed with the past. Therefore, after the traumatic event time is no longer perceived as a progressive spatio-linear phenomenon but as a highly subjective and fragmented experience that varies from victim to victim. Concluding from Caruth and Freud, trauma is a

specific (some may say unusual) experience of time and space that no longer fits into the common perception of time as a spatio-linear, progressive phenomenon.

This is exactly why traumatic experience has become one of the most popular themes of art (especially literature and film) since the aftermath of World War I and World War II. Cinema, like trauma itself, is a concrete depiction of time and space. If the tool for trauma is the human mind the tool of the films are the cinematic techniques thanks to which filmmakers represent the alternated vision of time and space after the devastating traumatic experience. (Probably best represented in atemporal cinema).²

Indeed postwar period literally fed literature and film artists with the idea to reflect on the devastating results of war and to reflect on it in a new way. With World War I, on the one hand, and with Freud's registration of the unconscious in theory on the other, the artists were given a highly fertile material to work on. New generation of critical thinkers were born first in literature and later in film. The contribution of modernist writers after 1920 in depicting time as a fragmented, non-progressive phenomenon gave a good base for the contemporary and future filmmakers. Writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce rejected the traditions of realist-historical linear narration of time used by writers like Walter Scott and focused on the inner thought of characters. The characters of modernist writers are individuals living in the aftermath of World War I like the main protagonist of Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). The novel depicts one day of a high-class woman Clarissa Dalloway as she is preparing for a party she will host that evening. With the interior perspective the narration travels in and out of Clarissa's mind to construct the image of her personality with all of her inner battles. This technique of the inner monologue introduced by modernists is called the stream of consciousness technique. What it implies is well demonstrated in the passage where Clarissa goes out to buy flowers for her party, but different thoughts about war, her life and personal choices occupy her mind. Woolf's depiction of Clarissa's thought is highly visual, one can say it is cinematic, as if images not thoughts come to her mind. The reason why I mention the stream of consciousness technique is that it is highly

complementary to Caruth's and documentary film's methodological approach to trauma. One can argue that the stream of consciousness is the preliminary version of Caruth's theory of belatedness and the filmmakers montage technique of putting images of past, like archival footage, next to present day life scenes.

Therefore, in the context of post-war period modernists started to depict time and space as something temporal and highly subjective through conceptual thoughts (Same way Caruth applied her theory of belatedness to the aftermath of Holocaust). But how could it be translated into documentary film?

In spite of the fact that records of battlefields were made immediately after World War I and World War II it was not until 1955 by Alan Resnais *Night and Fog* that modernist type of depiction, reaching past through present, was adapted in film. Resnais is an important director for my research not only because he was a pioneer in reflecting on trauma in documentary, but because he is the film director Caruth chooses to analyze in relation to her trauma theories. Resnais did not only adapt modernist techniques of depicting time as a non-spatio phenomenon, he went a step ahead and marked the impossibility to go back in time and properly reflect on trauma in the same way as on a regular memory.

Night and Fog is a 30-minute documentary on the Nazi camps directed by Alan Resnais with a voice-over commentary written by Mauthausen survivor Jean Cayrol.

Things about the past begin in the present as Resnais shows a static shot of a field and slowly takes us to the fence at Auschwitz. Resnais uses archival footage images, but frames these images within the images of the present. This juxtaposition exposes the relation between the present and the past-memory. The shift from color footage to black and white archival material masterly marks the shift from the present to the past but at the same time shows that no matter how hard we try to penetrate into the past it is impossible to fully grasp the meaning out of the traumatic experience.

In terms of cinematic means Resnais does not necessarily go beyond the traditional documentary cinematic techniques.³ On the contrary, one can say that his style of shooting is close

to very basic. Resnais cinematic techniques can be counted down to three. He only uses color (or the lack of it), the soundtrack and the chilling voice-over commentary written by Cayrol but narrated by Resnais. The only other thing in the film is the panning shots of the territory around Auschwitz.

In *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl* Ligthart also has a modernist approach: to approach past from the present. However, unlike Resnais documentary Ligthart's film has a bodily presence of Ayla that gives the story a personal twist. So, what type of cinematic techniques does Ligthart use in the context of bodily presence of the victim and does she succeed to cinematically represent time as non-linear, fragmented phenomenon as experienced after trauma?

2.3 Documentary and Non-Documentary Cinematic Means in *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl*

There are a few cinematic means that Wilma Ligthart uses in her documentary film *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl* and these techniques sometimes go beyond the traditional documentary genre. However, the dominant practice of her filming is still in the framework of the documentary genre: the basic panning shots, location shooting, voice-over commentary, two interviews with Ayla's siblings and the usage of her photos from Sri Lanka as archival footage. On top of this Ligthart completely extinguishes herself from the film. Not once we see or hear her.

This documentary film technique of following things as they happen or making it seem to record things as they genuinely are is referred in the works of Bill Nichols as the observational mode. The main reason why Ligthart applies the observational film mode is that this practice simply aims to record life in its natural flow. The essence of this mode is "less is more".

Indeed instead of reenacting the traumatic event Ligthart decides to follow Ayla into the places where she would go even if there was no camera and let her do things as she usually does like playing around her house with her siblings and drawing in her garden.

Film historians trace the roots of the observational sub-genre to the early 1960s, when portable cameras with tape recorders were introduced. This gave filmmakers the option to carry their

equipment to a wider range of locations to record events wherever they took place. All works within the observational sub-genre try to record things that would happen anyway regardless of the presence of the camera. That is why filmmakers mostly vanish from their films and do not interfere in the scenes. We often do not even hear their voice, as in Lighthart's film. One can argue that the observational film mode is the closest cinematic practice to depicting the factual world.⁴It is highly indexical and aims to show life as it actually is with or without camera. Nichols uses the term "fly on the wall" to characterize this mode. (Nichols, 2001) However, observational mode is a contradictory phenomenon. Scenes that may seem as unplanned, spontaneous happenings in front of the camera may just be staged and performed (as they mostly are).

In the middle of the film where Ayla goes to her playground she decides to reach for her photo album full of her images in Sri Lanka. She grabs the album, puts it on the table, that appears to be in the middle of the garden. She opens the album, stops at one photo where she stands together with her family and few of the local people from Sri Lanka. As she examines this album, and we see the close-up of the photo, her voice-over commentary comes onto the scene explaining who these people are, after what she begins to remember how tsunami hit the hotel.



Fig.2 Film Still from *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl*

This is the example of the initially planned scene that would not take place if the filmmaker had not intended so. Though observational documentary mode seems to serve as a fly on the wall it definitely involves mediation. Nichols says that through observational mode the filmmaker

gathers the necessary raw materials and then “fashions a mediation, perspective, or argument from them” (Nichols, 2001).⁵

Does not this “mediation” contradict the filmmakers desire to show the world as it is? The answer to this question is: yes it does and yes, that is the way it should be. The reason why I claim that mediation prevails, and should prevail, in documentary is that, in one way or another, any film is a product of a concrete filmmaker, therefore it is a shot from a particular view point of the world not the representation of the world as such. However, this mediation does not alter the fact that the story takes place in the factual world and it is an inseparable part of our lived history. This is also what Caruth says when she speaks that traumatized people carry an impossible history within them, or they become the symptoms of history themselves. (Caruth, *Trauma, Explorations in Memory*, 1995).

For example, Lighthart’s interference in *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl* does not necessarily change the off camera life of Ayla, but it definitely constructs the representation of Ayla’s life on screen. This kind of mediation, although it is interference, helps film makers deliver much more information to the audience than it is available by just observing. So, the real challenge for the documentary filmmakers is not the question of mediated reality (cinematic reality is always a mediated one) but the question of authenticity. How can the documentary filmmakers mediate between the camera and the subject in such way to achieve the authentic representation of traumatic experience?

In *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl* Lighthart obviously chooses the minimalistic type of mediation possible in the documentary film because the dominant style of filming is the observational documentary mode. In almost every scene it is evident that she wants to highlight the indexicality, the factual truth of Ayla’s story. This is why she refers to Ayla’s photo album. She uses photos as the material records of Ayla’s story. If we add the quality of a photograph that Roland Barthes calls *ça a été* or “having-been-there” (Barthes, 1981) we see that with these photos Lighthart authenticates the existence of Ayla’s past. Another reason why the filmmaker uses photos is because photographs maintain the distance from the event. So, they mark the end of a happening.

Ayla looks at her album from her peaceful garden in the Netherlands, she is far from what is depicted in the pictures. This also takes us back to Caruth's theory of belatedness of trauma: "trauma is fully evident only in connection with another place and another time" (Lifton, Robert, Caruth, Cathy, 1991).

However, Lighthart does use some of the fictional cinematic techniques next to this documentary style of filming. By the end of the film, with a low-angled hand-held camera Lighthart reveals how Ayla is drawing pictures of her and tsunami. This way Lighthart shows how Ayla tries to work through trauma. Caruth says that trauma is a lack in knowledge, in the sense that traumatic event happens so fast that the person never has a chance to know exactly what happened (Caruth, Trauma, Explorations in Memory, 1995). Therefore the belatedness of trauma is a sort of attempt of a person to grasp the meaning of traumatic event that initially he/she could not follow. In this case Ayla's drawings represent her attempt to fill the absent memory and try to work through it.

The scene starts with Ayla drawing and we see her drawings, but as Ayla speaks of how she was saved from drowning Lighthart starts to use her drawings as animation. Namely we see the picture where Ayla drew herself and her mom in the boat. As she recalls how they sailed through tsunami we see characters on the drawing move. Drawn boat, water, Ayla and her mom start to move within the picture and we see a little animation of how Ayla was saved and went from the hotel that tsunami hit to the safe place. The animation is accompanied by Ayla's voice-over commentary and a non-diegetic melancholic music.

To conclude it is righteous to say that most of the cinematic techniques applied to *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl* are basic documentary means: location shooting, voice-over commentary, archival photos, social actors (Ayla and her family) and evidentiary montage.

However, Lighthart does include animation and some avant-garde cinematic techniques (like when we saw in the scene of Ayla having nightmares). The film succeeds to achieve the authentic

representation of Ayla's post-traumatic life but not her traumatic experience as such (the disturbing, repeating nature of trauma). Although the film attempts to represent time as fragmented, non-linear phenomenon, overall *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl* is still a linear narrative documentary with almost no interaction. The reason why the film does not achieve the cinematic experience of fragmented, non-progressive time (characteristic to trauma) can be the lack of fictional, experimental scenes next to the traditional documentary mode. The hybridization of documentary and non-documentary cinematic techniques is still weak in this film in order to represent the experience of time as non-linear, fragmented phenomenon after traumatic event.

From this minimal type of hybridization that touches the subject of trauma and reflects on it, but does not necessarily result in the non-linear cinematic narrative, I proceed to the next case study film, *The Border Crossing* (2011), that is a hybrid in the fullest sense of both its cinematic techniques and cinematic experience.

3. Chapter Two- Traumatic Experience in Autobiographical Documentary

3.1 The Representation of Memory and Trauma in Autobiographical Documentary

The first chapter of this thesis outlined how the Dutch filmmaker Wilma Ligthart represented the traumatic experience of a teenage girl through the observational documentary mode in her film *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl* (2005). However, would it not be terribly interesting if Ayla herself could not only tell her story but film her story as well? Would she use similar techniques as the filmmaker Ligthart in order to represent her trauma? How would she try to reenact her own trauma after several years if given the opportunity?

This chapter explores the film by award winning filmmaker Jill Daniels *The Border Crossing* (2011). This film differs in essential ways from the case study film discussed in the previous chapter. *The Border Crossing* is an autobiographical documentary and is entirely made by Jill Daniels- who was a victim of traumatic experience and later became the chronicler of her own trauma as a filmmaker. Like Ayla, she experienced a traumatic event at a very young age. She was a victim of a rape while she was hitchhiking in the Basque country. However, after several years she decided to go back in time to that unpleasant moment and reflect on her experience by making a documentary film about it.

If the dominant documentary practice in the first chapter was the observational mode this chapter addresses a totally different practice of documentary film making, namely- a performative mode. The sub-genre of performative documentary is a hybrid mode in its nature, because it engages with the subjective truth, a personal approach to the story. This is why it is so complementary to autobiography. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part approaches the film from the documentary genre framework and shows how Daniels makes use of essential performative documentary techniques such as fragmentation, subjective discourse, emotional and expressive narration. The second part depicts how Daniels achieves the representation of her traumatic past through the hybridization of fictional and documentary cinematic techniques. I will show in detail how she uses reflexive-expository styles of narration together with the performative

style of filming and, how she represents the shift from the present to the past and vice versa by placing fictional and real life scenes next to each other.

3.2 A performative documentary mode style in *The Border Crossing*

The Border Crossing is a 40 minute long documentary film written and directed by the award winning filmmaker Jill Daniels. Aside from her work as a director she is a Senior Lecturer in film and video practice at the University of East London's school of Arts and Digital Industries. The latter means that she has a subtle knowledge of video art that gives her a profound technical and theoretical base for making her films. Moreover, the title of her PhD dissertation is *The Cinematic Representation of Place, Memory and Identity: Experiments in Documentary Film, 1950-2010*. This was a practice-theory PhD with two practice films: *Not Reconciled* (2009),-a 41 minute documentary set in the ruined town of Spain and *The Border Crossing* (2011) set in the Basque country.

Therefore, Jill Daniels is a director who is fully aware of academic work about memory and trauma. As a matter of fact, she quotes Caruth, Freud, Walker, Benjamin and many other authors engaged with memory-trauma studies in her PhD and the book she has edited *Truth, Dare or Promise: Art and Documentary Revisited* (2013), which I will refer to in this chapter.

The Border Crossing is a short documentary film set in the Basque country featuring both sides of the Spanish/French border, where a girl around sixteen wanders through the streets. The entire film represents the reenactment of Daniels traumatic experience when she was raped while hitchhiking 40 years ago. Daniels hired a young actress (Sian Paddock), who took part in her earlier documentary *Small Town Girl* (2007), to represent young Daniels years ago as she traveled to the Basque country. The documentary film uses a mixture of different styles and modes of representation. Daniels voiceover accompanies the film as she remembers her past journey crossing the borders of Spain and France. However, the film features more than only her story. Interweaved are stories of two other women whose lives were also shaped by the traumatic events

that happened in the Basque country. One is Aitziber, a Basque nationalist tortured by the Spanish Guardia Civil and another woman called Maria, a photographer whose niece died while Maria was driving.

The film opens with a quotation of famous French writer Victor Hugo: “Everyone who has visited the Basque country longs to return; It is a blessed land.” However, by the end of the film it becomes clear how ironical Hugo’s sentence is in relation to the complex, chaotic and violent Basque country portrayed in Daniels’s film.

In her essay “The Border Crossing: the Cinematic Representation of Memory in the Autobiographical Documentary,” Daniels gives a clear argument about her particular intentions with this film. She writes that she located her own traumatic experience in the centre of this film to “explore the cinematic representation of traumatic memory and identity” (Daniels, 2012). In order to observe the cinematic possibilities to represent traumatic experience and contested identity she used cinematic means that took her beyond the limit of the traditional documentary mode and caused her to employ the conventional means of fictional film. This is mainly why she sometimes uses the term experimental documentary in relation to her film.

When speaking of *The Border Crossing* Daniels says that using a fictional or performative style was crucial because of the indirect nature of trauma itself. As I have mentioned above, Daniels is familiar with trauma theorists like Freud and Caruth who both state that trauma is “not fully assimilated as it occurs” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience : trauma, narrative, and history*, 1996) It is this incomprehensibility that haunts the person and cannot be altered through the direct recall.⁶

Caruth goes back to Freud to support her argument and say that due to the non-assimilation of the original event the best way to reach traumatic experience is via an indirect approach. Caruth goes a step further and gives a cinematic example of a non-direct narration in Alan Resnais’ film *Hiroshima ,mon amour* (1959) where through the fictional story of love the traumatic experience of Hiroshima’s nuclear tragedy is revealed. Caruth comments: “the interest of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*

lies in how it explores the possibility of a faithful history in the very indirectness of its telling” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience : trauma, narrative, and history*, 1996).

Daniels says that her strategy of filming is very similar to Resnais’s approach. Resnais did not tell the story of the bombing of Hiroshima directly, but located the story of two lovers in the very site of the historical tragedy in order to “convey the historical specificity” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience : trauma, narrative, and history*, 1996).

The indexicality and some of the archival footage of the outcome of the nuclear explosion at Hiroshima in 1945, which he used at the beginning of the film, gave Resnais an indexical link to reality while maintaining the fictional narration of the film. Daniels uses the same strategy in her film. She places an actress, who plays young Daniels, in the site of the Basque country. This gives her an indexical connection to the actual place, where the traumatic event happened, while she continues to tell her story indirectly by reenacting the past.

Daniels uses the term ‘performative’ to characterize her film many times in her essay. I will return to the definition and detail analysis of the term below as the subject of Daniels film goes around performative style. She admits that in *The Border Crossing* past is mostly reached through the indirect forms of “mediated representation, performativity and enaction” (Daniels, 2012). From the very first minutes of the film Daniels voiceover introduces the actress Sian who was hired to represent young Daniels as she wandered the street along the French/Spanish border. By introducing Sian, as a younger version of herself, Daniels creates a theatrical, fictional *mise-en-scène*. Her voice-over and the actual site of the Basque country, however, add an indexical value or sense of authenticity to the fictional representation of trauma. This juxtaposition of the two poles is not a simple case of putting two styles next to each other. The indexical and fictional parts of the film function as a dialogue. They do inflect each other and by doing so represent the dual nature of trauma that is half indexical and half mediated reality.

As mentioned above, traumatic experience is received in delay, because of a failure to experience the event as it occurred. Daniels herself says that it took her ages to achieve the

emotional distance to be able to reflect on her own trauma. However, throughout the film it is evident that even now, 40 years later, she is still not ready to let her past go. That is why through the fictional journeys of Sian Daniels revisits her traumatic past in the Basque country, not only to reenact her past cinematically but to understand what happened then and how the event relates to today. She is reaching the past from the present. In her film Daniels tries to answer the question of: What does it mean to suffer due to a contested identity? What does it mean to carry the traumatic past within yourself?⁷

This quest of Daniels' is no surprise to the filmmakers and scholars engaged with the performative subgenre of documentary film. Speaking of the performative mode Bill Nichols notes that it "raises questions about what is knowledge?" Nichols asks whether knowledge is best described as being abstract, objective, -disembodied,- and based on generalizations or as concrete, embodied, and- based on personal experience? (Nichols, 2001) The performative mode prioritizes the latter. This is perfectly emphasized by Daniels in *The Border Crossing*. By reenacting herself as a teenager and interviewing two other Basque women Daniels provides the embodied knowledge that gives the spectators an entry to understanding the more general issue of traumatic experience and contested identity. By doing so, Daniels also addresses the subjective and complicated character of knowledge itself and the fact that it is almost impossible to grasp the meaning of the traumatic experience. Because performative documentaries "stress the emotional complexity of experience from the perspective of the filmmaker him or herself" (Nichols, 2001) it is no surprise that autobiographical works such as *The Border Crossing* come into the picture.

Films like Ngozi Onwurah's *The Body Beautiful* (1991), Marlon Fuente's *Bontoc Eulogy* (1995), Marlon Rigg's *Tongues Untied* (1989) reenact the past and retell the filmmakers' personal stories in a similar way to Daniels' film. Rigg, for example, uses enacted scenes that address personal stakes involved in the black, -gay community,- Onwurah's film depicts a staged sexual encounter between her own mother and a handsome young man. These films, just like *The Border Crossing*, freely combine the actual and imagined events in the same film. In these films the

personal, embodied, lived stories of the characters serve as a window to the wider world. Although *The Border Crossing* includes the practices of participatory documentary mode⁸ such as interviews with Aitziber and Maria that are accompanied by archival still images, it not only points us to the factual world and history that we share, but addresses us emotionally and expressively with the very personal, subjective stories of the characters as well as the filmmaker.⁹

Reenactments, staged performances, and poetic recitations in *Tongues Untied* serve to depict the complexities of racial and sexual relations in the gay community and the complex social status of a black, gay man such as the filmmaker Rigg himself. In *The Border Crossing* the same techniques are used to address the complex nature of trauma and contested identities that Daniels experienced herself.

In the reenacted part of the film actress Sian, (in the role of a young Daniels) wanders the streets of the Basque country. The voiceover narration by Daniels informs the spectator that she is somewhere in the Spanish/French border lands. However, nowhere in the film can we tell the exact location of young Daniels. There is not a single scene where we can exactly determine where she is located: Is she near France, or- near Spain? Not a single street, or a hotel is mentioned by name in the film. Daniels hides this information in order to address the tangled nature of traumatic memory and her inability to remember clearly. She uses the term “dark shadows” to characterize her memory of the traumatic experience. As we watch Sian walking in the streets taking one car or another, the voice-over tells us, that no matter how hard she tries to penetrate her memory these shadows of her past remain dark. She says she remembers fragments, such as a border guard laughing, the river along the road, smoking cigarettes and the beige color of the car. Soon the scene changes from Sian’s wandering in the streets to the photographs of Daniels when she was young, with Spanish nationals. Daniels’ voice-over speaks of how she went from one place to another trying to fit in, but she does not specify where she went and at what time.

Daniels often places scenes that have no logical connection next to each other. For example, she puts the scenes of Maria’s every day routine, like preparing lunch, after the scenes of her

reenacted past depicted by Sian's journey. The film gives the impression that it consists of two separate juxtaposed documentaries with different styles. Moreover, she features places, events and people that have hardly any connection to her story. In one scene we see strangers walking by, some buildings and unfamiliar places while Daniels' voice-over speaks of how she thinks of her existence as being fictional. There is no spatial, logical narration in *The Border Crossing*. On the contrary, spectators cannot predict what the next scene will be, whether it is the reenactment of Daniels past or the actual life of the Basque people. This kind of experimentation with the form of narration and freedom of relating random things in the film is reminiscent of the avant-garde film makers (like Andy Warhol, Luis Bunuel) and contributes to the creation of a non-linear cinematic narrative.

In his book *Introduction to Documentary* Nichols also speaks of the connection between performative documentaries and earlier avant-garde practice in 1920s.

Nichols states: "Performative documentary approaches the domain of experimental or avant-garde cinema but gives, finally, less emphasis to the self-contained quality of the film or video than to its expressive dimension in relation to representations that refer us back to the historical world for their ultimate meaning" (Nichols, 2001). Nichols gives the example of Resnais *Night and Fog* to illustrate how performative documentaries imply a historical world but go beyond history in its emotional weight, meaning that history is felt in a personal, emotional way because of the bodily presence of people on screen and the voice-over of a Holocaust victim. In his film Resnais uses a voice-over and the archival footage of the Holocaust that leads us to the expository type of documentary mode.⁹ However, the personal quality of the commentary in which Resnais lets Jean Cayrol, who is a survivor of Auschwitz, do the voice-over causes the haunting of the past to move from just representing history to representing memory.

What Resnais did with the help of Cayrol, Daniels does by the means of interviews with the Basque women, Maria and Aitzilber. Like Resnais, Daniels also inspires us to acknowledge the impossibility to fully grasp the meaning of traumatic experience. If Resnais achieves this by

visible evidence of Holocaust victims' belongings and bodies, Daniels puts more emphasis on her voice-over commentary that says that her memories are unclear to her. The style of the performative mode is more dominant in Daniels film, because she literally reenacts her past with the help of a young actress. She not only relies on the archival photographs to represent the lived experience of trauma victims. She uses the bodily presence of Sian, Aitzilber and Maria to intensify the subjective, personal representation of memory.

Although Daniels' style and approach to filmmaking contains certain modernist and avant-garde qualities her film differs from modernist and avant-garde film in other aspects. One can argue that *The Border Crossing* is an exponent of 1980s and '90s feminist counter-cinema, which is characterized by fragmented ordering, repeated imagery and an unusual style of filmic narration, also known as a non-narrative style. Such feminist cinema combines modernist, avant-garde and realist narration but gives them another, very socio-political, context. Walker, who coined the term "trauma cinema," claims that feminist films are most capable of communicating trauma's effects: "contemporary women's experimental autobiographical documentary practice represents the vanguard of the trauma cinema form" (Walker, 2001). Walker has a point, because these films use fragmentation, flashbacks and non-spatial modes of narration all of which complement the non-realist, disturbing nature of traumatic experience.

It is opportune at this point to return to Caruth's theory of belatedness, which asserts that, not all the aspects of memory are accessible in recalling traumatic experience. Moreover, after a delayed recognition of trauma, the remembrance is a mixture of truth and fantasy. This circumstance is represented in *The Border Crossing* by Daniels reenactment juxtaposed with her own voice-over. Elsaesser notes that as a result of Caruth's belatedness theory "trauma suspends the categories of true or false, being in some sense performative" (Elsaesser, 2001).

Feminist autobiographical films like *Confessions of a Chameleon* (1986) by Lynn Hershman are closely related to *The Border Crossing*. First of all because of the performative style applied in Hershman's film, where she intimately talks about her diary, recalls her childhood and an early

marriage. Such self-reflexive, but at the same time, performative approach creates an unusual *mise-en-scène* that develops meaning through its structure as well as its content, which imply the performative style but go beyond it.

3.3 The Hybridization of Cinematic Techniques in *The Border Crossing*

As mentioned above when watching *The Border Crossing* it may seem as if it consists of two separate films that are juxtaposed: one that tells a story of a traumatized girl through the reenactment and another that directly depicts the stories of women through interviews. The first one is the fictional, imagined, reenacted story that has indexical roots while another one represents the traditional documentary approach addressing the factual world, history and memory through interviews and archival footage. In the end the cinematic representation of traumatic memory and contested identity is achieved through hybridization of these two separate styles, with the combination of two different narratives. Documentary realism of interviews is combined with the performativity in the reenactment of Daniels younger self.

In her essay on the film Daniels says that she uses this combination in order to show that “there are broader possibilities for autobiographical filmmaking” (Daniels, 2012) that is not limited to only one type of narration. What is more, suggesting only the reenactment of her past would mean the complete performativity that leaves no place for actuality. Daniels, on the other hand, does not want to lose the connection to realism which is why she uses the non-fictional narration as well. In her writing she quotes Stella Bruzzi(2006) to intensify her argument of using a performative style together with the realist approach.

Bruzzi states: “the performative documentary uses performance within a non-fiction context to draw attention to the impossibilities of authentic documentary representation” (Daniels, 2012).

The Border Crossing features four voices: the voice of Daniels, Sian’s, (whose voice interacts with Daniels’ voiceover and those of Aitziber and Maria. In the fictional part of the film, the voice of Daniels almost never synchronized with the scenes of Sian walking in the streets. What we hear from Daniels is not complementary to what we see. For example, when Daniels

voiceover speaks: “ I remember it was dark and my mind’s eye sees border guards” what we see are some streets in the daylight. Like so, what Daniels says does not usually match to what we see on the screen. By doing so Daniels leaves space for the spectators’ imagination, but more importantly she maintains the distance from her past by avoiding directly showing what she remembers.

Daniels herself is never shown in the film. We only hear her voiceover and the close-ups of actress Sian. However, Daniels herself remains behind the camera, as if she does not want to be seen. In fact, we do not know what she does, how she lives and how she feels about herself today. It is true that she reenacts her past from the present, she is revisiting the Basque country to remember the past, but at the same time, she does not reveal herself to the camera, as opposed to other characters like Aitziber or Maria, who we both see and who tell their past stories from their present state. Aitziber, a Basque national who speaks of her traumatic past and how she was tortured by the Spanish police, says that in spite of the fact that she has moved on, the past will always live with her. Maria, is a Spanish photographer whose niece died while Maria was driving. She says that she regrets what happened, but at the same time she continues to live her life and work as a photographer. While we see that both these women have moved on and are able to live their lives regardless their pain, we never see Daniels herself in such a way.

Here again, Daniels suggests the contrast between memories. She says: “A memory sometimes may appear as fixed, resembling an image of a frozen moment in time. Other memories appear fragmented and unreliable” (Daniels, 2012).

The first fixed and frozen type of memory is showcased by two Basque women who are able to reach their memories as “fixed images of time”, which is also emphasized by their authentic photographs and the fact that in their speech they address particular moments of their life and tell us what happened step by step, in detail.

The second type of memory is seen in Daniels herself. Daniels memories appear as fragmented and ambiguous. Though she speaks of a man driving a car in the dark, we never actually see or

hear what happened in reality, nor does she reenact the traumatic event. She does not even speak about the event clearly. It seems as if she wants it to remain ambiguous and hidden. As I have said above, unlike other characters, she clearly wants to maintain the distance from her past. That is why she decides not to tell her story as Maria or Aitizbar do, but to reenact it through fiction. She places her memory in the fictional world to alienate her traumatic experience. Moreover, by not representing the sexual attack she avoids fetishizing the event. Daniels quotes Janet Staiger to bolster her decision to not depict her traumatic experience directly. Staiger says that it is impossible to represent trauma in a traditional linear narrative, because it leads inevitably to a fetishizing the event. Therefore, only the anti-narrative, modernist, avant-garde style of narration is suitable for particularly violent traumatic experiences such as Daniels.’

Many theorists have viewed the autobiographical documentaries as problematic because of juxtaposing non-fiction narration with a subjective discourse. Engaged with such a contrast in documentary genre film makers always run the risk of mystifying the content of the film and confusing the spectators who might not be able to recognize the distinction between the non-fictional and reenacted parts of the story. That is why Daniels, like many other film makers engaged with the autobiographical documentary film, uses the reflexive approach. The central aspect of reflexivity is to question the documentary film structure as well as the role of the film maker. The reflexive mode helps the filmmaker to demystify the filmic process and draw the spectators’ attention to the fact that they are watching a film. The reflexive mode is a very self-conscious and self-questioning mode that helps achieve what Bertold Brecht described as the “alienation effect.” This effect makes the audience very aware that they are watching a film shot by a person. For Daniels: “the exploration of subjectivity and reflexivity in documentary films may provide additional rich possibilities for the cultural exploration of the social world than is allowed solely through documentary realism” (Daniels, 2012). Therefore, reflexivity is very important for Daniels. However, Daniels does not use self-reflexivity to question the authenticity

of her traumatic experience or the concept of documentary filmmaking, on the contrary, reflexivity here is used in order to underline the difficulty of accessing such traumatic memories.

What is more, it highlights the fact that *The Border Crossing* is a filmic construct. The film engages with reflexivity in various moments during the film. During the sequential shots of the girl (Sian), for instance, black screen interrupts the film as Daniels' voice-over remarks : " I lose sight of myself at this point." This technique draws the spectators' attention away from the fictional world to a reflection on its representation. The film continues with the sequential shots of the girl but in a different location which creates a non-specified temporality. An unspecified time and place in the reenacted scenes is contrasted with the specific moments from the past in Maria's and Aitziber's speech. Aitziber tells her story, in close up, in a detailed narrative of her imprisonment and sexual torture at the hands of the Spanish State. Maria, on the other hand, is represented in a different way. We do not only see her in close up as she tells her story, but follow her in her home, where she prepares lunch. We also see her working as a photographer. When introducing Maria Daniels says: "I have met Maria, she is my age. If I'd stayed all those years ago her story might have been mine." In the film it seems that Daniels has some kind of admiration or sympathy for Maria. Perhaps because regardless her traumatic experience she is able to live her life.

If performativity and subjectivity result in the metaphorical representation of the past and the present, interviews with the two Basque nationals provide the direct connection to the factual world. At one point this combination of fictional and factual may appear to be a contradiction, however the fact that traumatic memories cannot be reduced neither to being the dream nor to objective history makes Daniels' hybrid film highly complementary to the representation of traumatic experience.

Throughout the analysis of *The Border Crossing* it becomes clear that there are much more broader possibilities for documentary film makers to represent traumatic experience than simple observational or participatory documentary styles can offer. The application of fictional narrative

and reflexivity in *The Border Crossing* complements the very nature of traumatic memory that may return as a dream but it is definitely attached to the factual world.

This hybrid nature of documentary film contributes to create a non-linear cinematic narrative that is so complementary to Caruth's theory of trauma's belated come-back.

In *The Border Crossing* Daniels had an artistic freedom to apply all the cinematic techniques to her film because (a)- she was the filmmaker and- (b) it was the story of her own traumatic experience. However, how can a filmmaker interfere in a story of collective traumatic experience and build a non-linear cinematic narrative out of it? To answer this question I turn to my next case study film that is about the collective traumatic experience and its cinematic representation.

4. Chapter Three- The Representation of Collective Traumatic Experience

4.1 The Representation of Post-Traumatic Memories *When the Earth Seems to be Light*

In this chapter, I will analyze the film that not only has a different structure from the previous case studies, but also addresses and represents a different type of traumatic experience. Unlike the first two films, *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl* and *The Border Crossing*, both of which depict the stories of people who have directly experienced the traumatic event, *When the Earth Seems to be Light* (როცა დედამიწა მსუბუქია, 2015) addresses young people who suffer from their traumatic past in an indirect way. In other words the film represents traumatic memories that cannot be characterized as directly lived experiences of a traumatic event as in the case of Ayla or Daniels's. Rather, the trauma is inherited from the previous generation (i.e. parents, grandparents) that underwent a cultural trauma caused by the political repression during the Soviet regime. In this chapter I will concentrate on the cinematic representation of young people who suffer from what trauma theorists call "cultural" or "collective" trauma of the second or third generation.

When the Earth Seems to be Light had its debut at the IDFA 2015 (International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam) in the program of IDFA Competition for First Appearance where it won the major price. I discovered this work at the IDFA and was immediately drawn to it for two main reasons. First of all, the story of the film came very close to me personally, because I also belong to the post-soviet generation in Georgia and I am closely familiar with the problems the young skaters are talking about in the film. Secondly, the film perfectly answered my interest in researching the cinematic representation of post-traumatic experience among young people.

In the following I will approach the question how post traumatic memories are cinematically represented in the film *When the Earth Seems to be Light* through the dual notions of 'fictional reenactment' and the 'participatory' mode of documentary film. Following upon my previous discussion of personal trauma, I will also address the subject of cultural or collective trauma and post-memory. I intend to explore and show how the filmmakers of *When the Earth Seems to be Light* make the best of the specific techniques of the participatory mode, such as interviews, the

staging of dialogues and the use of archival footage, in order to represent the post traumatic experience of the Georgian youth who suffer from their country's communist past. However, as I have argued before, seldom does one encounter a 'pure' instance of a particular documentary mode. Here, as well, several documentary modes co-exist and during my discussion of *When the Earth Seems to be Light* I will have reason to return to those other styles of filming, such as the observational and performative modes, which were introduced in the previous chapters of my thesis. I will conclude with a critical comparison between these three different case study films according to their purposes, plot and cinematic means and show how non-traditional documentary means used in these films complement the cinematic representation of traumatic experience.

4.2 The Representation of the Post-Soviet Youth in *When the Earth Seems to be Light*

When the Earth Seems to be Light is a recent Georgian documentary of 76 minutes directed by David Meskhi, Salome Machaidze and Tamuna Karumidze. The film is about young Georgian skaters who feel trapped between the remnants of the old soviet regime, the emergence of new political forces and the continuing influence of the church within the Georgian society. In order to escape this conflictual reality, they have created their own world of skateboarding. This is their way to escape the reality full of "no acknowledgement and all things old" as they not once mention in the film. The portraits of the skateboarders are based on a photography series by David Meskhi, who is one of the co-directors of the film. The documentary film depicts the stories of young Georgian skaters, musicians and artists trying to find their freedom, even if it is just a romantic notion of free existence when skating. Their thoughts about everyday life in Georgia, God, love, and their desires for future are revealed in the interviews. The impression of their daily life is intercut with archival footage of the recent political demonstrations in Georgia, caused by the clash between soviet and modern view points in the society. Such as peace demonstrations by young people to fight for the rights of homosexual youth in Georgia that was raided by the Priests and the representatives of Orthodox church.

Georgia is officially an independent and democratic republic, the experience of freedom and independence is more true on paper than in the everyday life of Georgian people. *When the Earth Seems to be Light* gives justice to young people who are caught between two worlds:-the old part, that is dominated by the stereotypes and lifestyle choices of the soviet era, and the new one which is ruled by confused politicians, who don't know whether to go forward and abandon old stereotypes or stay in transitional state, and the strong institution of the orthodox church.

The fact that Georgia is not fully ready to let go of its soviet past is perfectly represented by the simple fact that certain hobbies of young people, like skateboarding, need to happen in strictly underground manner in contrast to Western cultures. Skateboarding is not illegal, but because of the different stereotypes of people, who mainly complain of such “crazy” hobbies of new generation, it is more of a subculture than an open practice of youngsters. When Salome Machaidze, for instance, speaks about how the idea of the film came to her, she comments that looking at her husband's (co-director David Meskhi) photos she thought: “It was weird and crazy because the kids looked like they were in LA, but I knew they weren't, and it felt like something was not adding up. I thought it would make a good film because these boys are going through something unique, a conflict of cultures. The skating scene is key to the documentary as it exposes the paradox of today's Georgia. Numerous parallel worlds exist in Georgia simultaneously, without ever mixing with each other, My feeling is that Georgia today is like the US in the Sixties — skating is completely underground” (Fedorova, 2015). In spite of the fact that skateboarding is not illegal in Georgia, the practice still has a touch of illegality, because, occasionally skateboarders might reveal violence, in the sense that they might try to break down their tools, when they do not succeed to skateboard the way they want, or they might go into other people's pools when they are not in. Both of such scenes are represented in Georgian film. First when Sandro(skateboarder) breaks his desk, because he did not manage jump over a stone and secondly in the scene when we see skateboarders in a random house in Batumi, tanning under the sun next to someone's pool.

Skateboarding, that is how the film starts. Seemingly lost in the middle of nowhere, a teenage gang of boys is shown skating. The place seems strange and abandoned because we see a rather large concrete construction, that seems like an unfinished stadium, in the middle of deserted district, where there is no trace of industry or potential development of this building. The location of the opening scene is the original place where David Meskhi used to take photographs of skaters prior to making the documentary film. When asked about this location Tamuna Karumidze notes: “It’s an unfinished hippodrome. They wanted to build it for the horse races and then the money ran out and they left it like this. It’s been there for years in the same condition. Actually it’s very symbolic of the whole country: things get started and then stay in this weird unfinished, transitional state” (Fedorova, 2015). A hand-held camera follows a group of six or seven teenage boys as they try to skate on this strange hippodrome building. The scenes of skating are intercut with the large landscape shots from above. The depiction of landscapes in this film is very similar to Daniel’s shots of the Basque country, where she showed certain places and spaces but not once identified the particular for the audience. By representing different unfinished or half-finished soviet buildings in unfamiliar places the Georgian directors, like Daniels, underline the impossibility of locating in any precise manner the spacio-temporal coordinates of the traumatic experience.

From the very first minutes of the film it is evident that the boys are familiar with the camera. They are not shy or reluctant to skate and appear to act any way they choose. The fact that David Meskhi used to take the skaters to these unusual places and photograph them, seems to have served as an ice-breaker for boys and allowed them to get used to the camera and behave natural fashion without paying too much attention to the presence of the camera.

When asked why he took the boys to such strange places David Meskhi replied: “When I first started photographing them I wanted, in a way, to create the same images as LA – but for Georgia — probably to some extent to convince myself that I wasn’t living in such a bad place, to show that these things exist in Georgia as well. The skaters quite often hated me because I was taking

them from their usual spots to places where they couldn't really skate — for the sake of this unique look” (Fedorova, 2015).

This look is definitely unique because the abandoned constructions underline not only the disturbance within the post-soviet architectural landscape but also in the everyday lives of young people, who must negotiate between the soviet stereotypes of the past and their desire to live a fully independent life. It seems that youngsters seek a semblance of that non-existing freedom in the abandoned buildings, such as the hippodrome represented in the opening scene.

It is easy to spot the participant-observation style of this film from the very first scene. As I noted the boys are already familiar with the camera. What is more, the directors acted like researchers who go into the field, participate in the lives of others and then reflect on the acquired experience.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the first scene is staged in part, because it is not set in the actual location where boys usually go skating. But according to the directors, the boys were not told what to do or say and, therefore it is safe to argue that, apart from the location in the first scene, the film has a documentary character and does not contain a fictional account of the events as in the case of Daniels film. After the three minute scene of just boys skating, together or individually, the directors start to practice the most characteristic technique of the participatory documentary mode: namely, -the interview.

The fact that the directors got to know the boys prior to shooting is evident through the conversation, because the directors speak to the boys with the specific colloquial language that is only characteristic of young teenage boys in Georgia. This aspect gets lost in translation and can only be noticed by native speakers. The directors speak to the boys in their own non-literary, very casual language. For example, when asking one of the boys questions the director refers to him as “Sandrik” and not “Sandro” which is his full name. Russian words such as “просто”(simply), “обычно”(usually) are often used that show how Russian words still persist in Georgian colloquial language. In this way directors show that they are close enough to the boys to refer them in the same way as their friends would do.

Such examples represent what Bill Nichols calls “going native” while speaking of participatory documentary mode.

However, Nichols correctly notes that both maintaining distance as getting close to the community is crucial for those filmmakers who practice a participatory mode of documentary. In fact this distance is what distinguishes the participatory mode from the observational documentary as represented, for instance, in my first case study film *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl*. At first sight, it may seem practically impossible to differentiate the approach of the filmmakers in *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl* and *When the Earth Seems to be Light*. In both films the directors explore and observe the protagonists in the course of their daily lives. However, a huge difference can be detected. While we never hear, see, or feel the film maker’s presence in *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl*, we are perfectly aware of the directors’ interference in *When the Earth Seems to be Light*. We can not only hear the directors as they ask questions but the film makers’ touch is strongly present throughout the film by means of the shaky camera shots and the active intercommunication with the boys.

As Nichols noted, in the participatory mode we “expect to witness the historical world as represented by someone who actively engages with, rather than unobtrusively observes.”¹¹ Participatory mode makes the audience aware that the story they see is represented by a person who holds the camera and records others who do not. It shows how the situation alters because of the film makers presence. For example, the scene in the hippodrome: The youngsters would never go there unless being taken by the directors, this specific situation was created only because of the film makers interference. Therefore, one might propose that the foundation of the scene is fictional, yet it is surmounted with the real, spontaneous behavior of the boys.

In sum, participatory documentary is very social in its nature. Therefore, filmmakers need to practice more control of what and how they represent things, in order to make their point clear to the society that is engaged with the film. If it is hard to say what is precisely shown in some scenes of *The Border Crossing*, nowhere in *When the Earth Seems to be Light* does the audience

feel the same confusion. The scenes are carefully selected, shot and filmed in order to help the audience see how young artists live and feel in Georgia today.

Indeed, the difference between these two films is only logical because *The Border Crossing* and *When the Earth Seems to be Light* represent different types of traumatic experience. If Daniels presents the subjective, directly lived experience of a traumatic event, Machaidze, Meskhi and Karumidze reflect on the post-traumatic state of a second or third generation. Therefore, the film style of Daniels resembles the subjective, unstable nature of individual traumatic memories, which widely vary from person to person, while Machaidze, Meskhi and Karumidze are able to develop a more or less clear plot and structure in their film, because the youngsters' cultural post-traumatic experience is based on a same set of conditions : post-soviet reconstruction. In other words, *When the Earth Seems to be Light* is actually a film on post-memory rather than just memory. In order to give the audience the context of Georgia's post-soviet life the directors use the archival footage throughout the film.

The fact that *When the Earth Seems to be Light* represents the collective, cultural traumatic experience of young people living in the post-soviet republic is easy to comprehend from the very beginning of the film. If in *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl* or *The Border Crossings* the spectators follow one person, whether we are talking about Ayla, Daniels, Aitziber or Maria (each of them having different traumatic stories), *When the Earth Seems to be Light* follows seven young skaters simultaneously whose lives are shaped by the same traumatic past. The boys are introduced to the audience in the very first scene, not only with skating scenes but more importantly, with the interviews. Salome Machaidze asks the same questions to the boys, one by one, who all have different answers. Machaidze asks the boys to say few things about each other, to let her know who is who and what kind of person he is. When one of the skaters, Sandro (Sandrik for friends), is asked to tell the director who is the blonde skater, he answers: "That guy is from France, he is cool, but a little fragile for Georgia."

What Sandro means by the words “fragile for Georgia” is explained by the very next scene that takes us from the abandoned hippodrome where skaters try to create their little world of freedom to the actual world of political events. The peaceful place of skating is replaced by the scene of the street fight between former and new forces of Georgian politicians, the occurrence that has become part of everyday life in post-soviet Georgia.

The void between the old and the young generation becomes even wider in the third scene where we see the skaters in one of the boys house watching the news about Georgian orthodox church fighting the peaceful LBGT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) Parade. The news reflected on how the LBGT walk was disbanded by the orthodox priests and the church community who physically attacked not only LBGT community but also their supporters. The archival footage on TV quotes one of the leaders of the Georgian orthodox community stating: “Everyone has to realize that Tbilisi is not Amsterdam’s red light district”.¹² The scene represents a central paradox in the lives of post-soviet generation: while they do not accept or understand why the previous generation thinks that people with a different sexual orientation are either ill or possessed by the devil, they still have to live within this society. Their everyday life is marked by a struggle for their freedom and independence from the norms and beliefs of their elders. This is why Sandro said that probably Georgia is too harsh for the French boy.¹³

To reject social diversity and child’s freedom of choice was typical of those generations who lived under the soviet regime. My parents, for instance, often told me that it was very common for parents to interfere in their children’s lives and plan their future. What is more, sexuality formed a taboo topic of conversation, and gay, lesbian or other forms of sexual orientation were simply not acknowledged. In fact there is a famous joke in Georgia about the communist past saying: “Sex did not exist in soviet times, we all come from cabbages.” People who still live with these soviet-era stereotypes and beliefs try to impose their life style onto the young generation who clearly wants to take other, more liberal, Western orientation.

This contradiction is depicted in most of the film scenes. For example, in the middle of the film, the directors take us back to the hippodrome where one of the skaters Mirian, who has very long hair, is asked to say what he hates the most in Georgia and he replies: “When they bug me about my hair and stare at me because of it, they cannot deal with being different.”

In another scene another boy, Maxime, says: “Sometimes it is so tiring when someone invades your reality, if I could protect my reality I would have no problems here.” Privacy is the thing that most Georgian young people do not have. Most Georgian people live with their parents until their late thirties or even later. This issue is also touched in the film, when the directors interview Maxime, who is the only skater living alone. He is undergoing hard times with his family, because he decided to drop the school and live as he wants, not as his family tells him to live. The directors film him as he visits his family and has arguments with his mom who tries to persuade him to go back to school. While speaking it becomes clear that his mom wants him to get the certificate, because she believes that it is the foundation of his future, while Maxime's generation simply has lost belief in the degrees, because even after studying hard young people have trouble landing a simple job in Georgia.¹⁴ Maxime asks his mom: “Why are you forcing me to go to school, did anyone force you to study?” And his mom replies: “Me? I did not even know the possibility not to go to school.” This is the key sentence for the soviet generation, where people, as Maxime's mom correctly says, did not even know what the possibility of choice meant. People used to live in a hierarchical, repressive society where independence was not encouraged. The problem is that these kind of soviet generation beliefs are forced on the youngsters, who, unlike their parent, are aware of the notions like independence, freedom and want to practice them in their lives. Reflecting on such everyday struggles of youngsters juxtaposed with the chaotic political situation of Georgia, the directors represent the constant post-traumatic experience of young people who have to live with such post-soviet melancholia on daily basis. Here, the temporal structure of belatedness which is characteristic of the traumatic experience assumes a double nature: not only does a certain traumatic event return to haunt a particular individual but it is society as a whole

that forces this event to come back in the present. If in the case of an individual experience (e.g. Ayla or Daniels) the trauma keeps coming back to a person regardless of that person's own will, in a collective form of traumatic experience the event returns precisely because of its collective character.

Speaking of the traumatic memories of the Holocaust survivors' children or grandchildren Marianne Hirsch uses the term post-memory. She starts her discussion with the fact that second and third generation artists have produced art works, films and novels about the holocaust experience, based on their families' traumatic past that has had impact on them as well (Hirsch, 2012).

Hirsch notes that this depiction of a parental past has to be seen as a syndrome of postness or belatedness to go back to Caruth. Such experience of the following generation has also been termed as the "absent memory" (Ellen Fine). Meaning the individuals who have not experienced traumatic event on their own, but according to Hirsch, this does not exclude being traumatized. In her book *The Generation of Postmemory* Hirsch argues that the massive, collective traumatic memories such as the Holocaust (or soviet repressions in our case) can be and are transmitted from one generation to the next. The film *When the Earth seems to be Light* complements Hirsch's discussions as it depicts young skaters who live with and in such absent memories and try to break out from it. The title of the film is very self explanatory- to this young people skating is the only time when the earth seems to be lighter, free of the daily post soviet dogmatic forces that are still dominant in Georgia.

Hirsch says: "the descendants of victim survivors connect so deeply to the previous generation's remembrances of the past that they identify that connection as a form of memory" (Hirsch, 2012). The connection is even more intense in young skaters' case, because the traumatic event has not yet finished. The world they live in is not only full of soviet residue stereotypes but the actual places where they skate are still soviet buildings. The directors highlight the soviet architecture to show that youngsters cannot even physically escape from their soviet past. They

have to find their place in this post soviet context, or leave the country as Maxime says in the film. However, this kind of post memory is very contradictory in nature, as Hirsch says, because this post generation(Eva Hoffman) also “acknowledges that their received memory is distinct from the contemporary witnesses.”

This is represented in the scene of Maxime’s interview at his parents’ house. When Maxime speaks with the director, Salome Machaidze, who is the same age as Maxime’s parents, he tells the latter that for him soviet history is a distant event: it was never as functional to him as it was to Machaidze who actually lived under the communist regime. In the background of this scene, a talk show keeps playing on television (of course it was specially selected to play). The television shows archival footage of the Georgian TV show *The Red Zone* where a famous Georgian writer reflects on the soviet past and Georgia’s contemporary state. While Maxime walks in his house, plays with his younger brother, and argues with his mother, we can hear and see in the background what the talk show speaks about. “We are still living in a permanent soviet union and we are not allowing ourselves to leave this state, the younger generation cannot identify themselves”: guest of the talk show declares, who is the well-known Georgian writer Lasha Bughadze. While we listen to Bughadze in the talk show, Maxime’s voiceover exclaims: “It is impossible to live here”.

Here the directors put the archival footage in the background of Maxime’s everyday routine in his house. As a result the viewer cannot determine that the talk show was recorded and aired a year before the scene in Maxime’s house. By taking this liberty, the directors create a dialogue between the past and the present so that the viewers might identify the connection and link it to the post-traumatic experience of Maxime’s generation.

In the next scene we see archival footage from the former soviet union television: soviet cartoons and news footage juxtaposed with Sandro, Mirian and other young boys driving in another half-abandoned soviet mension. By very quick editing the directors put several scenes next to each other, scenes of the former CCCP TV and the contemporary soviet buildings in

Georgia, followed by the street fights between contemporary Georgian politicians. The mixture of these fictional and non-fictional scenes result in a rather fragmented cinematic experience.

At the end of the film, we return to the site of the Hippodrome. This time the directors pose more abstract questions to the youngsters. Questions like: What is love? What is death? Some of them are answered while others are left unanswered by the boys.

In such scenes, we encounter the style of filmmaking that Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin termed *cinéma-verité* after soviet filmmaker, Dziga Vertov's notion of "kinopravda". The idea of this 'film truth' emphasizes that what is depicted is a genuine, spontaneous truth of the encounter between the filmmaker and the filmed subject(who is not an actor). The film truth is not the absolute truth, but the truth that emerges from the encounter between two communicators.

More importantly, it is a film truth that would not even exist were it not for the presence of the camera. Nichols claims that in the participatory mode of documentary personal interviews usually address broad social issues. While the directors interview the young skaters they simultaneously address the post-soviet melancholia of their generation in general. This is clear because they juxtapose the scenes of the archival footage of the communist past and Georgia's current post-soviet struggles together with the interviews.

Film scholar Gogi Gvakharia, who himself is a representative of contemporary soviet youth, often reflects on the contemporary post-soviet situation in Georgia. Particularly in his talk show *The Red Zone*. This talk show takes place in the Soviet Occupation Museum in Tbilisi, Georgia, and is dedicated mostly to the reflection on soviet and post-soviet times in Georgia. While speaking of post-soviet youth, in one of the series of the show, he says that the contemporary Georgian youth is a disappointed youth who clearly has not yet recovered from the soviet regime trauma. He gives the example of the Baltic countries and Latvian youth specifically to show how they overcame the soviet trauma through protest and activism, while Georgian youth somehow failed to do so (here I obviously mean the generation of the skaters parents).

Gvakharia gives the cinematic example of Juris Podnieks's documentary film *Is It Easy To Be Young?* (1986) which was the first realistic reflection of soviet youth in Latvia. The film is a documentary of numerous stories of young people, living in Soviet Latvia.

While showing scenes of Latvian soviet youth going to a rock concert for the first time, at the beginning of the hippie and punk movements, Gvakharia's voice-over comments: "In these Baltic countries the victory of independent youth became possible only because they had the experience of the protest, the independent protest more importantly. When you do not need a leader, you know how to fight on your own." Remembering the former situation of the Latvian soviet youth Gvakharia says that the contemporary Georgian youth is in a very similar state right now. *When the Earth Seems to be Light* definitely describes the situation that is similar to that of the soviet Latvian youth. It seems that what the Baltic countries have already passed through, is a road that is yet to be taken by the Georgian youth. They may want to get rid of their soviet context, but new political and religious forces push them back again. Things are clearly still in the "transitional state," as Karumidze said opinioned.

In one of the key scenes, of *When the Earth Seems to be Light*, we see skaters on a hill looking down upon the main plaza of Tbilisi which is called the "freedom square." It is the 26th of May, the celebration of the Georgian independence day. Skaters look down and watch how the Georgian government receives the military parade to celebrate the Independence day. It is a strange scene. The spectators see how the politicians, for this one day, stand together with the representatives of the orthodox church. It seems that everyone should cherish this day, but the youngsters above seem strangely far and skeptical while looking down at this ceremony. The scene gives the impression that the young people do not feel this freedom and independence therefore, skate away from this view. While we hear Georgian prime minister's speech about the united and independent Georgia we see the young boys skate away from hearing this. The next scenes show that the boys would rather go to the underground clubs, dance and drink than listen to Georgian politicians. This kind of places are where the boys temporarily convince themselves that they are far from their

soviet past and chaotic present. Unlike Latvian youth before who decided to protest and do activism against soviet forces, Georgian post-soviet youth chooses the romantic, fictional freedom of skating. The directors use the mix of different soundtracks to depict the chaotic, sort of in-between two worlds ,state of the boys. They use the mix of Georgian contemporary rap, old Russian pop and classical music in the film.

The film ends the way it started. We are back in the hippodrome where the directors watch the boys skating. With the shaky handheld camera scenes the directors let us know about their presence. By doing so, they simply say that though the boys continue living as they lived before the interference of the camera, now something has changed because their stories are being watched. As with the Latvian film before the audience is able to be aware of what a group of Georgian teenagers think and dream about after their post-traumatic experience. Like Lighthart and Daniels before Machaidze, Meskhi and Karumidze have made their contribution to the documentary film in representing traumatic experience with various cinematic means, which are on the edge of fiction and documentary.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion

In this thesis I have proposed that the hybridization of fictional and documentary cinematic means in contemporary documentary film results in the authentic cinematic representation of traumatic experience of youth. For my argument I have analyzed three case study films, all of them contemporary documentaries, through the trauma theories of Cathy Caruth. Namely I have taken Caruth theory of trauma's belated comeback and applied it to the case study films. I have shown that what Caruth does in conceptual thought, while speaking about trauma's belated response and its indirect nature, filmmakers represent by juxtaposing fictional and documentary cinematic techniques.

The hybridization of avant-garde and documentary cinematic techniques achieve the authentic cinematic representation of traumatic experience, because trauma is neither fully factual nor fully fictional in its nature. It is a mediated memory, the abnormal, non-linear experience of time that can be best represented indirectly.

I have explored different cinematic means of the three case study films and revealed that not all of them represent traumatic experience with a non-linear cinematic narrative. The first case study film *Ayla, the Tsunami Girl*, for example, is a linear documentary with a few fictional scenes that does not adjust a non-progressive cinematic narrative in order to represent trauma. Therefore the cinematic narrative does not resemble the fragmented experience of time and space as in the aftermath of trauma according to Caruth.

From this case study that does not result in non-linear cinematic narrative because of the few experimental cinematic techniques I go to the second case study that almost erases the border between fiction and documentary. The analysis of *The Border Crossing* shows how the hybridization of fictional and documentary cinematic techniques enable documentary film to represent traumatic experience in the same way Caruth characterizes it in her theories. The fictional techniques applied to the documentary genre complement the disturbing, indirect,

repeated nature of trauma. What is more, this hybridization of techniques create the fragmented, non-linear cinematic narrative that go very close to the way people experience time in the aftermath of trauma.

In the last case study I explored the film about the collective trauma and showed how filmmakers represent traumatic experience of more than one person. While there are many cinematic techniques available the hybrid documentaries that go beyond the documentary genre conventions go the closest to authentic representation of traumatic experience, because the hybrid nature of documentaries resemble the duality of traumatic experience that stands on the edge of what is real and fiction.

Through my research I have partially observed how the hybridization of documentary and non-documentary cinematic techniques complement the representation of trauma, however many questions remain in the air. For example, question of authenticity, how exactly does this hybridization create sense of authenticity in audience and how can such documentaries avoid representing trauma without fetishizing it?

5.2 Endnotes

¹Dream catcher is a Native American handmade object based on a willow hoop, on which is woven a loose web decorated with feathers. Hung above the bed, dream catcher is believed to protect children from nightmares.

²Here I refer to Todd McGowan's work *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*, 2011 in which McGowan speaks about the emergence of temporal aesthetics in cinema that arose in response to digitalization. McGowan claims that films that change the viewers' perception of time create a separate group of atemporal cinema. Films like *Memento*, 2000 by Christophe Nolan, *The Butterfly Effect*, 2004 by Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber. It is interesting that most of the representatives of atemporal cinema are fictional films about traumatic experience. Because of the fact that atemporal cinema is a complex set of films that cover mostly fiction I am going to restrict myself from referring to McGowan.

³By the traditional documentary genre I mean Grierson's coining of the term in relation to Robert Flaherty's *Moana* (1926) and the understanding of documentary genre as a record of the factual world. This includes the linear narrative of documentary films: we go from a starting point to the end, from A to B, with a path that is predetermined by the author. What is more, the director uses dominantly documentary cinematic techniques like interviews, location shooting, voice-over commentary and social actors.

⁴One of the styles of documentary filmmaking Cinéma vérité (direct cinema) invented by Jean Rouch came out as a result of introducing portable cameras in the late 60s. Carrying cameras anywhere filmmakers had a chance to unveil the truth in cinema. While it is somehow reminds us of the observational mode, Cinéma vérité is fundamentally different because it is more about the interaction between filmmaker, camera and the subject unlike the observational mode that is more like a fly on the wall.

⁵What Nichols claims here is very similar to John Grierson's definition of documentary genre in 20s as "creative treatment of actuality."

⁶Some theorist like Yale literary critic Shoshana Felman and psychoanalyst Dori Laub even speak of failure of witnessing the traumatic event. They use the term "crisis of witnessing" in order to argue that it is almost impossible to witness trauma, because of its shattering nature. For more see Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. (Routledge, 1991)

⁷In order to reflect on these issues Daniels not only represent herself but interview two Basque nationals who also suffer from contested identities.

⁸ The participatory mode is mainly characterized as the mode that actively addresses the actual world via interviews, archival footage etc. It is explored in detail in the third chapter of this thesis.

⁹ The expository documentary mode is concerned with directly addressing issues in the historical world, it may have a didactic tone.

¹⁰ While speaking of participatory documentary mode Bill Nichols compares its tools and methods to anthropology or sociology, where researchers live among the community in order to gain and then depict the information about them. See. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Indiana University Press, 2001) pp.115-120

¹¹ Ibid 116-117. Here Nichols also gives the example of the film *Chronicles of a Summer* (1960) by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin to underline the importance of the filmmakers interference. The film follows a Jewish deportee who tells her traumatic story, however, in the end the directors also appear on camera to reflect on what they have learnt.

¹²This might be ironic, because Amsterdam's red light district is usually much more peaceful and uneventful than any street in Georgia.

¹³Worth mentioning that when asked the French guy characterized Georgia as a country where everyone is free and equal. This is probably because he was not raised in the post-soviet republic and, unlike Georgian skaters, sees the country from the different frames.

¹⁴This is also touched by Mirian, when he says, why study, "I would get diplomas and then work as a taxi driver." Here he refers to the fact that the soviet practice of hiring someone you know, rather than someone who is qualified, still works.

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5.5. List of Figures

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Fig 3 Film Still from *The Border Crossing*
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