

# Oedipus unleashed: Jonathan Caouette's experimental documentaries. Confluences and turbulences

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► **To cite this version:**

Jocelyn Dupont. Oedipus unleashed: Jonathan Caouette's experimental documentaries. Confluences and turbulences. Confluence(s), SAES, Jun 2016, Lyon, France. hal-02445365

**HAL Id: hal-02445365**

**<https://hal-univ-perp.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02445365>**

Submitted on 20 Jan 2020

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## SAES Conference

**Œdipe déchaîné : Jonathan Caouette, turbulences et confluences**

### **Oedipus unleashed: Jonathan Caouette's experimental documentaries. Confluences and turbulences**

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In this paper I wish to examine independent American filmmaker Jonathan Caouette's lifelong love story with his mother Renée LeBlanc through an analysis of Caouette's two experimental autobiographical documentaries, *Tarnation* (2003) and *Walk Away Renée* (2012). In these two highly idiosyncratic and unsettling films, hovering between documentary, home movie and experimental autobiography, Caouette unleashes a myriad of visual strategies that drag the spectator along in his febrile and never-ending love story with his psychotic mother. To do so, Caouette relies on a near-infinite supply of home video material and self-made footage, saturating the viewers with iconic elements and building up an iconic vortex set into motion by boundless filial love and countless psychotic bouts. In this presentation, I intend to study Caouette's precarious stance as both the director of Renée 50-year long psychotic performance and her spellbound son, hopelessly in love with his iconic mother.

#### **1. Jonathan Caouette – a borderline documentary filmmaker?**

Let me begin with some brief introductory remarks about Jonathan Caouette's biography and career. Caouette was born in 1973 and, from the age of 6, he grew up in Texas under his grandparents' care. He never attended college nor film school but from a very early age was given a video camera that he used to videotape himself, his family and his close friends. He settled in New York City in his early twenties and became a member of the gay and queer scene, scrapping a living together and meeting his husband, David. In 2003, with the help filmmaker Gus Van Sant, he released *Tarnation*, a feature-length autobiographical documentary which premiered in Cannes and in Sundance and gained critical recognition. Since then, Caouette has directed three films, one documentary about a music festival (*All Tomorrow's Parties* in 2009), one experimental gory short film starring Julie Delpy (*All Flowers in*

*Time*, 2010) and a second autobiographical documentary, *Walk Away, Renée*, released in 2011. In this paper, I will be mostly focusing on *Tarnation* but will also say a few words about its sequel.

***Tarnation*** (2003) and ***Walk Away, Renée*** (2011) both belong the margins of the documentary film. It may even be problematic to tag them as documentaries insofar as the term tends to connote a disciplined and generally non-experimental format, in which transparency and sobriety are the two guiding principles. This is far from being the case in Caouette's case. His films are neither sober nor transparent. Quite the opposite, actually. In each case we are dealing with a firework display of images and a seemingly unstoppable iconic and aural flow. If anything, the figure of the **vortex** could stand as their main operative principle. As in Ezra Pound's poetry<sup>1</sup>, Jonathan Caouette creates a deluge of images from a frenzy of time warps, zigzags, echoes, contradictory pulls, associations and contradictions. Watching his films, in particular *Tarnation*, is like being caught in the middle of powerful whirlwind, fuelled by psychotic blasts. One cannot help being dazzled by the "formal hysteria that governs the film as a whole"<sup>2</sup>.

This process of constant saturation and merging was made possible by the use of a video editing software program (iMovies) which Caouette explored in the editing of this film, using as his source material years of amateur video footage shot by himself from his teens to his later years. It may even be argued that *Tarnation* may stand as one of the very few instances of a feature film – albeit non fiction – that could claim its place within the category of *art brut* as defined by Dubuffet. There is undoubtedly something quite *raw* in it.

It is also quite efficient on a poetic level, as the many audiovisual effects create so many "potent formal metaphors for cognitive fragmentation, disorientation, and dissociation"<sup>3</sup> (Arthur, 49). The result is a highly defamiliarizing viewing experience, governed by instability, excess and exposure, yet one that allows simultaneously to glimpse the author's inner turbulences, as though consciousness could be laid bare and *revealed* in such a kaleidoscopic manner.

Caouette's films are a constant performance, an *acting out* of two troubled psyches caught on tape, spanning 20 years of mental illness between mother and son, and the love story that goes with it.

## SHOW EXTRACT 1

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Pollock, *Lire les Cantos d'Ezra Pound*. 11-13.

<sup>2</sup> « l'hystérie formelle qui agite l'entièreté du film » (Foloppe 90)

<sup>3</sup> Paul Arthur, « Feel the Pain » in *Film Comment*, Sep/Oct. 2004

## *Walk Away Renée* – 17'30 – 18'30

### 2. Filmic autobiography and the necessity of pathology

As the title of this paper suggest, my contention is that *Tarnation* and *Walk Away, Renée* are two autobiographical experimental non-fiction films that rest on the exacerbation of the Freudian Oedipal complex fuelled by a psychotic or near-psychotic flux. These two movies also constitute – and I shall be returning to that point in my final part – Caouette's filmic self-portrait and a love letter to his mother.

It must be stressed that before being a filmmaker, Jonathan Caouette is his mother's son above all. She, Renée le Blanc<sup>4</sup> (the French root of the name being of Cajun origin) is the central subject of his two autobiographical documentary films, or rather, she is their main object, an object of utter fascination, as well as a seriously dysfunctional one.

Renée Leblanc suffered a mental collapse in her early teens, caused, according to the biographical interpretation we are provided with, by both an overexposure of her image – in a Lolita-like fashion, Renée had become a young teenage model who even featured in a TV commercial – coupled with psychiatric mistreatment, as she received intensive ECT in the same period, following a domestic accident that left her temporarily paralyzed. Her condition, diagnosed as acute bipolar disorder bordering on paranoid schizophrenia, seems permanent. Renée, stabilized through medication (the loss of which was to become the critical point in *Walk Away, Renée*) has spent most of her life in and out of psychiatric institutions. Her mental balance, is, to say the least, very precarious.

And it is through the filmic orchestration of this tenderly anomalous woman, an object of unbounded filial love that Caouette comes up with a highly singular audiovisual memoir of a hypersensitive and experimental kind.

The question is, however, at whom this undertaking of subjective construction is aimed. Are we dealing with the portrait of the mother as a young bright star fallen from the sky – just as, in real life, Renée fell from the roof of her house – or, rather, with that of her deranged son as an illuminated video artist? Such blurring of identities through the dissemination of pathology between mother and son calls to mind Louis Wolfson's book about his mother's last days, a pathographic literary memoir first published in 1984 and re-published in a revised version 4 years ago, which conflated mother and son under the aegis of pathology, a text brilliantly analyzed by Pascal Antolin in a recent article. The two stories about diseased mothers whose troubled sons embark on an idiosyncratic autobiographical account of their illnesses both rely on unconventional syntax and distorted

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<sup>4</sup> Apparently the name of her second husband, with whom she had another boy

language (verbal in the case of Wolfson, cinematographic for Caouette). The main nuance being that, in Jonathan Caouette's case, it is not the son, but the mother, who is suffering from paranoid schizophrenia.

Yet her offspring could not be left unaffected. As the son of such an idiosyncratically unstable mother figure and in the absence of a stable father figure, Caouette is compelled to introduce himself as *anomalous* from the onset of his movie. He suffers, we are told, from depersonalization disorder (also known as DPD<sup>5</sup>) which occurred at the age of 12 following the involuntary intake of PCP, a potent hallucinogenic drug. This psychiatric condition includes "persistent or recurrent feelings of detachment from one's mental or bodily processes or from one's surroundings" according to the *DSM IV*, a state of *reverie* that can also evolve into anxiety attacks, panic attacks, phobias and depression.

One may be somewhat startled at the directness of the diagnosis the filmmaker is keen to impose on himself, as though a pathological condition was deemed imperious in order for him to legitimate himself in his family environment, as if Caouette's own life story could not go without a pathological certification of some sort.

In my opinion, this pathology entails a necessary questioning about its *aetiology*, that is to say its cause, its root, its point of origin. And as far as Caouette's personality is concerned, one may certainly be tempted to consider the PCP incident as well as the depersonalization syndrome it entailed as a screen hiding a more psychodynamic condition, a Freudian fixation on the mother figure in a rather acute case of Oedipal complex.

Caouette's unbounded love for his mother is made blatant from the very beginning of his first film, and remains explicit until the very last shots of *Walk Away, Renée*. It will be no surprise to anyone to learn that Jonathan grew up without a father. Actually, he hardly grew up without any parents at all, being moved from one foster family to another, until at least, when he was in his early teens, Renée's parents agree to officially adopt him. Now at this point let me also remind you that according to what we learn in the films, it is Renée's parents, Adolph and Rosemary Davies, who decided to send her to psychiatric therapy. As a result, not only did they give birth to their daughter, they also created her illness.

The absence of a real – or even a symbolic – father figure as well as the coexistence of the three generations under the same roof (that is, when Renée was not staying in a psychiatric institution) has had a dual effect: first, it left a gap in the symbolic organization of the family unit. Then, it blurred

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<sup>5</sup> Depersonalization-derealization syndrome

the lines and divides between children of the first and second generation, meaning that, in a way, in Adolph and Rosemary's house, both Jonathan and his mother could be placed on the same level as children, all the more so since Renée seems particularly fond of acting childishly, even regressively, as is made obvious by the many scenes in both movies in which we see her nursing dolls, singing songs or just giggling happily.

On such a dysfunctional family structure did Caouette's video autobiographical project structure itself, with plenty of room for confessions, tears, screams and cross-dressing performances. Year after year, the Oedipal pull and the pressure of looming psychosis could find a safety valve in the endless video recordings and home movies compiled by Jonathan, hours and hours of footage that ultimately would be transformed and possibly sublimated, by the editing and the creation of an autobiographical film. Yet any autobiography should be read as some form of retaliation, as French psychoanalyst Jean-François Chiantaretto explains:

In a sense, the autobiographical text always deserves to be regarded as some kind of text of *retaliation (texte de rétorsion)*, opposing both an act of writing to a non-historical one that signifies an original exclusion and a fantasy of self-generation that the writer opposes to the reality of his generation

*Considéré de la sorte, le texte autobiographique s'avèrerait toujours en quelque façon un texte de rétorsion opposant un acte d'écriture à un acte a-historique marquant une originelle exclusion, un fantasme d'auto-engendrement à la réalité de l'engendrement. (Chiantaretto 249)*

As Paul Arthur observes in his analysis of *Tarnation*, "a murmur of Oedipal defiance and even revenge" (50) can be felt in this idiosyncratic video memoir, this self-portrait of the good son as a borderline psychotic artist.

### 3. Be a son!

I would like to finish this paper with a rapid illustration of the Oedipal tensions at the heart of Caouette's home movies that are also, as I have just said, self-portraits in their own ways. In a short yet luminous essay about Cinematographic self-portraits published in 2008, French art historian Marie-Françoise Grange writes the following words:

*The self-portrait is in itself an impossible exercise in which the artist measures up to the experience of desire. It is that **original image**, from which one can ultimately grasp and understand that impossible achievement which ceaselessly drives the artist to try again.*

L'autoportrait est en soi un exercice impossible qui conduit à se mesurer à l'expérience du désir. Il est cette **image originelle**, celle d'où se saisit, d'où peut se comprendre l'impossible aboutissement qui, sans cesse, pousse à de nouvelles tentatives. (Grange 68)

In the vortex of *Tarnation*, can one find an image that could possibly stand as *the* self-portrait, the one image that could fulfill a fantasmatic original function while encapsulating simultaneously "the experience of desire"?

The task is a daunting one, as both films offer themselves as totally saturated icono-texts, close to an audiovisual *deluge*. Moreover, neither *Tarnation* nor *Walk Away Renée* follow a clear linear pattern. Time in the movies and most of all, chronological layers and categories, become very difficult to measure. This, I believe, is an almost deliberate attempt by the author to twist the arrow of time into a vortex where, to quote TS Eliot, "all is always now". This is also in keeping with the nature of the filmic self-portrait:

*A flight forward, straight ahead, the self-portrait abolishes space, time and the layers that make up the worlds we believe we inhabit whereas, in truth, they inhabit us.*

Fuite en avant, vers l'avant, l'autoportrait est la traversée des espaces, des temps, des strates qui parcourent les mondes dans lesquels nous croyons habiter alors que ce sont eux qui nous habitent. (Grange 108)

Technically speaking, such an erasure of temporal landmarks is facilitated by the use of computer technology and digital effects, pushed to extremes in *Tarnation*. These also allow the filmmaker to challenge the very idea of internal family genealogy. As French critic Virginie Foloppe observes:

*Technological tools that favor the connections between the different takes, past and present, as well as the multiplicity of digital effect make a denial of differences between generations tangible, to which one must also add the dream-like impressions mentioned repeatedly by Caouette.*

Les progrès technologiques favorisant les liens entre les différentes captations, passées et présentes, tout comme la multiplicité des effets numériques, rendent perceptible **un déni de la différence des générations** auquel s'adjoint l'impression de rêve évoquée à plusieurs reprises par Jonathan Caouette. (Foloppe 89)

This being said, I believe I have found that very image – at least I feel ready to argue that the image in question may fulfill that fantasmatic function while also illustrating such process of denial. Allow me then to make my point by showing you one brief extract from *Tarnation*.

This is a rather painful scene as we are witnessing see the final days of Rosemary Davis', Renée's mother and Jonathan's grandmother, captured on video by her grandson.

## SHOW EXTRACT 2

### *(Tarnation - Rosemary & Baby)*

Watching these images, one cannot help being struck by the sudden apparition of a very young baby on screen, cradled against Rosemary's body.

Who, then, is Rosemary's baby? Well, the film will never tell. This is of course extremely problematic. Besides, it goes against the film's general economy, as so far it had been quite clear to the viewer that, in *Tarnation*, nothing was to be hidden, and that the film was to function primarily as "a public couch session" (Arthur 48).

What could then account for such reluctance to unveil the identity of this young child?

So, would you like to know who the baby is? Any guess?

### Show *Walk Away Renée* – 18'30-19'51

Indeed, quite a surprise.

Jonathan Caouette is also a father, and his son Joshua was 9 when *Tarnation* was made. And yet not a single word or hint about his identity is given to the viewer in Caouette's first film. In contrast, we cannot help being quite startled such an explicit introduction to Joshua in the opening minutes of *Walk Away Renée* as if it was the easiest and most natural<sup>6</sup> thing in the world. In the light of its return, that image's enigmatic status becomes an essential key to the whole structure made up by *Tarnation* and *Walk Away Renée*. Certainly, at least, it becomes the stepping stone between the two sides Caouette's diptych as well as a further link in the family's genealogy.

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<sup>6</sup> Also in sexual terms, which is not at all obvious when one has tried to follow Caouette's rather hectic (to say the least) homosexual experiences.

To return to *Tarnation* and the deafening silence that surrounds Joshua's apparition, I would argue that this image of an unidentified newborn cradled alongside Rosemary actually deserves to be read as both a repression – of his fatherhood and heterosexual past – and *the* aforementioned fantasmatic original image which constitutes Caouette's self-portrait.

The irony, being of course that in the course of two feature films which assail the reader with hundreds, if not thousands of portraits of Jonathan, his true self-portrait should not be him. Not so ironic, perhaps, if one remembers that a self-portrait is by definition but a failed encounter with oneself<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> « Tout autoportrait est cette rencontre ratée avec soi-même » (Grange 68)