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FINDING MY VOICE THROUGH PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH: A CRITICAL LOOK AT MY FILM SHATTERED REFLECTION

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This paper presents the author's exploration of memory and autoethnography in her film "Shattered Reflection." The author, an artistic researcher, delves into her personal experiences, lineage, and ancestral memories to answer research questions related to memory and its depiction in film. The paper reflects on the complexities of the author's identity and how this influences her approach to research. The paper focuses on using the self as a tool for answering research questions through remembering and autoethnography. The author explores topics such as accessing memory without archives, using film to depict fragmented memories, and uncovering invisible memory through visuals and sound. The paper also mentions the author's limited budget and her guerrilla filmmaking approach. The film is presented as part of a larger book project and is analyzed in the context of practice-based research.

I am an artistic researcher, academic, author and filmmaker who has always had a passion for storytelling. I like to wear all four hats simultaneously and I approach my work with a strong desire for understanding and authenticity when conducting research. In my search for legitimacy, I focus on the complexity of who I am to raise questions about how historical, personal and familial experiences can frame a research question and be utilised for practice-based research. In this paper, I consider how one can use the self to answer a research question through the act of remembering and autoethnography. I then find my own voice by analysing my film *Shattered Reflection* as a research method through four questions:

1. How does one trace and access memory that has no archive?
2. How does one use the self to trace the memory of things that we have not personally experienced but that exist somewhere in our collective or familial past?
3. How can one use the film medium to depict the fragmentation and inconsistency of the act of remembering?
4. How can we use visuals and sound to uncover invisible memory?

Considering Memory and How We Can 'Remember' through Structures

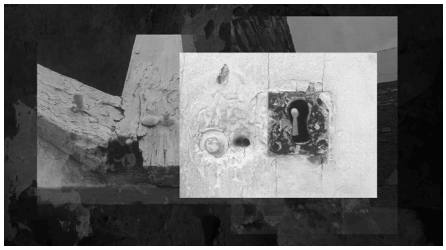


Figure 1: As I visit various locations I become increasingly conscious of the structures of each one. The memories they house are not obvious so I am reliant on a close examination of the cracks, splinters, chips and creases within structures. Somewhere beneath the layers lies the brick, the plaster or the coat of paint that witnessed the events I am trying to "remember." Structures become my eyewitness to the past.

I started to examine my past and how it influences my view of the world. I have always been interested in war and forced migration and I have written a lot about the representation of communities during times of conflict. This has been the centre and focus of all my research. I reached the point where I had to consider my own genetic complexity in relation to this ongoing interest. Both my parents were born in countries that no longer exist and migrated to South Africa, not by choice but because of political developments in Europe after World War II. Perhaps my continuing frustration at the unnecessary violence of war has something to do with transgenerational trauma around the forced migration associated with war and combat.

Being born in South Africa adds a further layer because the colonial and apartheid past makes me sceptical of all forms of power relations. My point of view is inevitably dictated by my social, political and personal experience of the past as a South African, and this has become central to how I approach my research. My sounding board is the field of memory studies because of its universality. Henry Roediger and James Wertsch (2008, 18) note that "because memory studies span so many disciplines, the methods used are quite diverse." My aim is therefore to find a method appropriate to my investigation that also enriches the methodology of enquiry. My focus is on the form and content of film and the act of remembering. How can I use a camera and the film medium to discover the invisible memories housed within space and place? How can I use how we navigate our surroundings to engage with their "memories" as a sounding board for interaction, critical reflection and deliberation? How can I use a camera to locate and access memories housed within sites for practice, research and story content?

Focusing on Autoethnography

My questions keep turning the camera and its gaze back to myself. I realise that to find any understanding of and authenticity in my project of enquiry I have to place myself

at the centre of the research question. I decide to treat myself as a lab rat by using a camera and film to access memories relating to my lineage. The aim is to establish a more critical understanding of who I am and how that influences my perception of the world. It is therefore inevitable that my research centres on autoethnography. I find autoethnography a solid method because it is not rigid and does not imagine or shape itself according to constraints of structure and form that one often finds with traditional research. Autoethnography "challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act" (Ellis et al. 2011). While conventional practice-based research approaches "concentrate on an analysis of the process, design and production of the practice itself, autoethnography allows for this but also for the journey of the researcher during the research process to emerge" (Charleson 2019, 16).

I want the journey to be included so that my research and my practice and their outcomes are all taking place simultaneously. I want to wear all four hats at the same time so that I can experience a personal, emotional and intimate encounter with my research question. My approach is to speak to a theme through personal experience. This is not the conventional way to approach research, but those of you who know me a little will be familiar with the fact that I have not always approached my work according to dominant codes, conventions and expectations.

As I continue to witness the destruction of war and how it always leads to mass migration and displacement, I decide that this will constitute the core of my enquiry. As I look at the past and its memory through the architecture, buildings, monuments and memorials within my city of Johannesburg. I start to consider how their memory can emerge as a character within a story. The remnants of apartheid are still deeply entrenched in the architecture of our cities and homes. If walking through Johannesburg can jolt us into thinking about the historical, political and colonial past, then might we find memory in other features and structures in the landscape and cityscape? My starting point is memory and how we remember, but I want to consider how we might use a camera to uncover the ethereal, obscure and concealed memories that are housed within the chasms, the fissures and the ruptures. How can we move from conventional storytelling methods to find character and narrative content in location, landscape, architecture, buildings, streets, forests and nature?

I use the lacerations, grazes and bruises within structures to try and uncover memory, but I can also examine the outlines, contours and layout of a place to find out more about the past. In the film, I comment that "borders are the invisible lines that separate people, define them and keep them confined within their demarcated areas." My comment refers directly and critically to the politicians and administrators who draw those borders and lines. They are usually far removed from the traumas attendant on the circumstances that endowed them with authority. My film aims to move out of the rooms where decisions are made and to explore the effects of these decisions on actual people – through a focus on space and place.

Research through Practice

In order to achieve this, I look at key historical moments and discuss them through the real-life experiences of my great-grandparents, my grandparents, my parents and myself. The aim is to look at recorded history through the personal stories and memories of people who actually experienced them. History can give us the narrative of events through facts, but according to Winston Churchill "history is the story of the victors." Historical facts are inherently problematic because they are always one-sided and most certainly structured from the perspective of the conquerors. My method is to move beyond the frameworks that shape official history and examine

historical incidents through personal encounters. My research question considers how emotions and personal experiences tend to be universal in times of war, whichever side of the fence you are on.

My film *Shattered Reflection* is part of a larger book project *Uncovering Memory: Filming in South Africa, Germany, Poland and Bosnia/Herzegovina* (Sakota, 2023). The book is an interdisciplinary work that proposes innovative ways to approach pedagogy using sites of tormenting memories as the backdrop for practice-based research. In this paper I am discussing the film as a separate entity, but it is important to note that it is part of a much larger project that provides more detailed reading and interpretation concerning memory in relation to politics, history, culture and personal experience. Constraints of space also prevent me from discussing the film in its entirety. I offer a brief analysis of the film, placing it in the context of practice-based research.



Figure 2: The official poster for my film *Shattered Reflection*. The film traces my journey as I engage with fragments of memory across three generations. The visuals focus on objects of memory which are my pieces, shards and snippets of evidence of the past. The reflection of the sky in the river in the poster replicates my experiences as I look at the shattered reflection of my life.

Using Challenges and Limitations to Shape My Film

My budget is very limited and I rely on guerilla filmmaking as a method. This means that I film by myself with no pre-scripted narrative, no crew or additional equipment. The images are shot on location without reconnaissance, rehearsal or permits. As a filmmaker I make use of the resources that are available in terms of lighting, sound and narrative content. There is some archival footage, but apart from the S-VHS footage that was filmed in 1997 when I visited my father's village after the war that broke up the former Yugoslavia, the remainder of the film is shot using an iPhone-X with a small Rhode microphone attached to it.

As a filmmaker I like to view all film as simply film and I prefer to blur the boundary between factual and fictional filmmaking. The theoretical debates concerning the authenticity of documentary film have been exhaustive, from the first thinkers such as John Grierson (Hardy 1966) and Robert Flaherty (Griffith 1972), right through to Brian Winston (1995), Stella Bruzzi (2000) and Bill Nichols (2001). My concern is not with critiquing or finding a definition for documentary, but rather with thinking about how we can use a camera, considering the limitations imposed by frame, story and filmmaking, to engage more actively with the past.

The title *Shattered Reflection* refers to what is left when one experiences a traumatic event. The life you once knew is now shattered and the only evidence of what existed before lies in pieces on the floor. The world can never be what it once was and the only access to the memory of that life is through reflection on the broken and shattered bits that remain. As I interact with these memories through my camera I am looking at the reflection of those fragments, but as I look at them, I notice they are also looking back at me.

I exist at the centre of the film by looking at memories that form part of my collective or genealogical experience but that I haven't always experienced myself. I embrace my position in the clouded haze and no man's land I constantly seem to find myself in, where fact and fiction are constantly overlapping. It is obvious that in my search for memory and what is remembered, there will be a lot that is forgotten. The first two parts of the film focus on traumatic events caused by war through memories that were narrated to me. I use the actual buildings, cities, villages, places in nature and other sites that my parents inhabited as my vehicles of memory.

The only understanding of the event available is through the memory inhabited by the site itself. This leads to the question of how one engages with a setting and how its design and construction can be used as a conscious provocation. How does the architecture of a site generate memory and how is the past manifested in the architecture of memory?

As I have very few family photographs or documents, I decide that to access certain memories I have to go back to the core or origin of the event. This is how I start to engage with memory and the act of remembering. As I navigate each locale the memories start to emerge. I am in the present as my phone camera records my experience in actual time but in my head I am in the past 'remembering' and playing out scenes and experiences that are locked somewhere deep inside of me.

As I journey into the past by going back to the actual locations or milieux de mémoire I start to engage with memory. I must embrace the fact that there will be moments when I have to rely on fiction to connect certain dots. Autoethnography allows this flexibility because I will never find the truth or even a 'universal truth,' but rather my own personal understanding of the historic events or moments through the stories and memories.



Figure 3: The city space and architectural structures are my source of evidence and access point to memories of the past. I use visuals of the different places where events occurred, together with audio, to activate the memory and make what is unnoticed or concealed, recognised and apparent.

Finding My Voice through Practice-Based Research

Shattered Reflection is a collage of three encounters that are threaded together by the theme of death, forced migration and separation. The film reflects three different moments in time (World War II, the time after the war and the present). Memories come to us randomly and the act of remembering is as sporadic, abstract and irregular as memories themselves. The nature of how we remember is echoed in both the mood and tone of the film. According to Pierre Nora (1997),

> memory is alive, always carried by the living and in this respect, memory is in a permanent state of evolution. It is open to the influence of remembering and of amnesia, the unconsciousness of repeated distortions, vulnerable to all kinds of controls and manipulation, susceptible to long inactivity or sudden rekindling.

This uncertainty is reflected in the film's visuals, its narrative, the nature of the edit and the soundscape. The story moves between different plot points where time is random.

1. How does one trace and access memory that has no archive?

Nora (1989) has written extensively on memory in relation to places and spaces. He makes a distinction between places of memory, which he identifies as *milieux de mémoire*, and the sites or objects of memory, which he identifies as *lieux de mémoire*. For Nora (1989, 7) *milieux de mémoire* are the true sites or environments of memory because they are the actual places where events have taken place. In contrast, *lieux de mémoire* are created as representations of memory because it is not always possible to access the original place of memory. They are artificial sites that have been created to remember because the place or world of the memory no longer exists.

I need to go back to the source of memory or the *milieux de mémoire* and revisit the memory of the past through buildings, landscapes and city spaces. I cannot anticipate how I will react in each location, and this is part of the beauty of practice-based research. I also do not have a script so I am completely reliant on my interaction with and experience of each place to mould, structure and shape my narrative. As I walk through, I think about the memories. As I look around, I realise that the buildings, streets, trees and streams are my eyewitnesses, that somewhere behind their façades lie the layers that witnessed the memories I am trying to remember. They are no longer static objects: they are firm and solid but they are also alive with memory.

My archive comprises the places and surroundings my parents inhabited. These become my objects of memory. As I walk through the various buildings, streets and locations I record what I see. The photographs, images and sounds as well as the film itself form part of my memory box.

2. How does one use the self to trace the memory of things that we have not personally experienced but that exist somewhere in our collective or familial past?

The train features at numerous points in the film. It plays a prominent role in my story. I see the train as the perpetual perpetrator because it has transported victims, dictators, leaders, soldiers and refugees throughout narratives of war. My interaction with the past forces me to confront my memories and experiences of the torment of the historical past as well as my personal interaction with traumatic memory. As I walk with my camera I consider the footprints of those who walked before me. I consider the fate of those who challenged societal structures and as I acknowledge their fate I realise I too am haunted by their experiences and stories.

Marianne Hirsch (2012, 5–6) uses the term "postmemory" to mean an "uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture." For Hirsch, "postmemory is not a movement, method, or idea," but rather "a *structure* [original emphasis] of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience. It is a *consequence* [original emphasis] of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove' (6). In other words, postmemory is looking at the past across generations. Hirsch's research focuses on the trauma of the Shoah as seen through family archives and photographs, but her approach is relevant to how the second generation can look at history through the experiences of their parents.

The film is shaped by different narrative styles. Part 1: Departure takes the shape of a poem and remembers May 1945. I narrate the poem because in essence I am trying to remember the actual moment during WW II when my great-grandparents, grandparents and my mother had to leave their home because it was getting too dangerous to stay. The Soviets were already taking over the city. In this section, I am writing about their memories but through my own emotional experience of the space and what I imagine it must have felt like, not only for them but also for everyone else who is displaced by war.

My reference to the man who takes his last breath is my great-grandfather, who dies from a heart attack in May, 1945. My uncles – who at that time were only 14 and 16 years old – bury him in the park opposite the apartment. I return with the map they drew and walk through, trying to find the spot where they buried him so long ago. My inclusion of my great-grandfather's burial in the park reminds me of the universality of this act during war. How many times in history have we seen parks and stadiums being converted into makeshift gravesites, sometimes only to be bulldozed afterwards, thereby eradicating the memory and evidence of the violence that came before.

3. How can one use the film medium to depict the fragmentation and inconsistency of the act of remembering?

Part 2: Fragmented Harmony is structured around the masked interview. Here I take snippets from both my parents who explain what life was like just after the war. This part of the film remembers a time of peace when people were rebuilding their lives. The world is trying to find peace and normality despite having experienced the traumas and horrors of war. I refer to this time as fragmented harmony because the traumas of the past remain forever embedded deep within us. The memories will always linger in our minds. The audio is also interspersed with comments taken from one of the workshops discussed in my book. Again, I present numerous voices

to remind us how human suffering is constant, inevitable and universal in war.

In this part of the film I move in and out of various moments in time that shaped my existence: the town of Weißenfels in Germany where my mother was relocated after WW II, my father's village Kozice in Bosnia/Herzegovina, left in ruins after the war that broke up the former Yugoslavia, the Berlin Wall that divided Europe into East and West. The film then moves to my mother's voice narrating a happier memory as a child growing up after the war. She talks about swimming with her father across the river to an island to pick apples. Her voice is distinctly different at this moment in the film as she narrates the story. Here I use visual re-enactment as I go back to the river in Weißenfels and film my interpretation of how they collected the apples. Again, the narrative is sporadic because the montage of the visuals and phrases is as random as the memory itself.



Figure 4: As I walk through Berlin I am always conscious of where The Wall once stood. As I stand on the edge I contemplate how people's lives were shaped and affected, depending on which side of the wall they were standing.

There is no tangible evidence of the events I am remembering within each locale and I am reliant upon finding my evidence and eyewitness within the fabric of the architecture, setting and environment. The walls, the floors, the cobble and the streets are both a source of memory and a gallery of spectators who watch me as I am trying to reveal the memories locked somewhere in the fabric of their being.

4. How can we use visuals and sound to uncover invisible memory?

Part 3: Mosaic brings my own memories and experiences into the narrative. I consider how I have seen separation, segregation and mass displacement in my family and in my city Johannesburg. At this point in the narrative I bring to bear my understanding of how to find memory within the contexts of space and place. I start with a sequence of beautiful images taken from nature, snow falling softly in a landscape, different forests, images of trees and bark, water and swans. These are my natural locations of memory. I walk through them, captivated by their beauty and splendour but also harshly reminded of the atrocities they have witnessed – mass migration, executions and death.

I am not the first to turn to objects to uncover hidden memory. Dutch artist Armando reflects a similar approach in his exhibition *Guilty Landscapes*. His work is both "tentative and ambiguous" (Spaul and Wilbert 2017, 86), reflecting his experience as a young boy living near the Nazi concentration camp Amersfoort. For Armando, nature shares the perpetrator's guilt as it stands and watches. According to Martin Spaul and Chris Wilbert (2017, 86) Armando captures "the kind of guilt that attaches to landscape – now silent, flourishing and beautiful – that has witnessed terrible events in the past." For Ernst van Alphen (1997, 128), "the meaning is produced not by metaphors concerning the imperturbable perpetrator, but by the traces of the violence that occurred at that particular place." My attitude towards my objects of memory is a little more complex, somewhat ambivalent and tainted with uncertainty. Although I look at them with some defiance, I have to be cautious and amicable because they are my only existing eyewitnesses, bystanders but also observers of events. It is with this strange and complex relationship with my memory objects that I approach my journey.

As this section focuses on me, the images are taken from my entire journey as I incorporate images that 'remember' my generational past as well as images from the city of my birth, Johannesburg. At this point in the film, I ponder with each step I take how the city was once segregated. As I walk the streets, I remember those who came before me and consider their experience within each domain but from a different moment in time. I come back to the concept and image of the train because it plays such an important role. Johannesburg is a mining city and the train has always

been the central mechanism feeding the greed for gold above and below the ground. The train is a symbol of colonisation – we remember Rhodes's vision of a railway line linking Cape Town to Cairo – and a metaphor for apartheid as it transported labourers and workers from segregated areas into the city.

I walk around the city, searching for evidence by which to remember those who dared to transgress and move beyond the borders, boundaries and barricades. I remember people I have known as well as those whom I have never met who walked the same pathways.



Figure 5: Nature is my guilty landscape as she remains bold, beautiful, alluring and serene, yet my relationship with her is ambiguous, enticing, hesitant and uncertain. The edit throughout the film is layered with overlapping images as a visual reminder of the different threads of memory.

The beginning and the end of the film are framed by the image of waves gently making their way onto a beach. The close-up of the ebb and flow of the waves symbolises my own experience of traumatic memory and loss that, just like the waves, never goes away completely. At one moment grief overwhelms you, only to retreat again the next moment. The cycle never ends because although the feeling of grief subsides, it will always return, just like the ebb and flow of the sea. As I remember the events of my own life I realise I am not alone, that this story is universal because, as I say at the end of the film, "we each have a story, a reflection, a mosaic, a collage not only of ourselves but also of those who were before us."

Wrapping up

To conclude, throughout my journey I place myself and my experiences, interpretations and perceptions at the centre of my practice-based research. Historical, personal and familial experiences frame my research questions through the act of 'remembering' and autoethnography. This is a process that uses story to bring research to life (Charleson, 2019, 15), where the gaze is reflected back on the self, forcing one to engage with the world from a unique position. My evidence oscillates between actual memory and mediated recall of events that I have not directly experienced. My filmmaking method is simple and the camera and film medium become my voice and the instrument of my search to unveil invisible memory hidden within space and place. Personal contact and involvement, family lineage and political histories intersect to form an interwoven, multi-faceted and unstable understanding of the past. As I remove all four hats that examine, investigate, enquire and reflect I realise there are no answers, only questions that raise more questions.

To view the film online:
https://www.youtube.com/@uncoveringmemory
Click Part III: *Shattered Reflection*

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