



**THE BFI
MEDIA
CONFERENCE**

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**Women Documentary Directors:
The Stories We Tell
Maxine Crampton**

Stories We Tell (Polley, Canada, 2012)

The Arbor (Barnard, UK, 2010)

Sisters in Law (Ayisi and Longinotto,
Cameroon and UK, 2005)

Female Authorship

Longinotto is 'able to speak nearby her subjects rather than speak about them' Murray

- Respect for subjects
- Providing a voice
- Creating intimacy
- Exploring the idea of truth (poetic, subjective, unstable)

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a dark blue sweater, is holding a silver digital camera up to her eye as if filming. She is in a kitchen or dining area. In the background, there is a wooden cabinet with a cat resting on top. To the left, there is a framed picture on the wall and a teal candle in a holder. To the right, there is a white countertop with a brown plate. The overall lighting is warm and natural.

STORIES WE TELL

FROM
SARAH POLLEY
ACADEMY AWARD[®] NOMINATED FILMMAKER OF
'AWAY FROM HER'

'Stories We Tell explores the elusive nature of truth and memory, but at its core is a deeply personal film about how our narratives shape and define us as individuals and families, all interconnecting to paint a profound, funny and poignant picture of the larger human story.'

from the official website (1)

The elusive nature of
narratives, memory and
truth

Is subjectivity and 'unstable
truth' (Barnard) a feminine
concern?

'Memory is permeable, unreliable and personal.

And it is complicated because, in a family,
as Polley points out, everyone is "committed" to
their own version of the truth.

The film mixes Super 8 home-movie footage and
convincing reconstructions also shot in Super 8 – Diane is
played by Rebecca Jenkins (who knew her in life).

Sarah is surprised but not displeased the faux footage has
fooled audiences: "I had been wondering, in my own life,
what was real and what wasn't. I wanted people to have the
same question in their minds."

from The Guardian (2)

Setting up 0.00-4.15



'I wanted to emphasize the film as a construct. A lot of the film is about storytelling. For me, the arc of the film is about my father discovering himself through his writing, and I wanted to track that through showing him reading, I think there is something artificial and staged about making a documentary, and I didn't want to hide that. The narration is obviously edited a lot, but he wrote it.'

From Studio Daily (3)

The Arbor (Barnard, UK, 2010)



Compare with the opening of 'The Arbor' - bedroom on fire



“Her signature is to look at relationships deeply and honestly in a microscopic way, and the emotional waves these relationships have on the people around them.”

Anita Lee (Producer)(1)

Talking heads. Conventional footage, consisting mostly of the interviews. Static HD camera in focus.



‘The camera for the old footage is mostly hand-held, shaky and mobile; the shooting style is informal. The look is intentionally filtered, muddled, containing black strips and clarity imperfections to make it appear vintage and old—representing the past.’

From [filmslie.com](https://www.filmslie.com) (5)

Fictional home movies 9.05 - 12.53



Home movies of the family, mostly shot by Michael (we might assume), 'he spent more time gripping the camera than he did holding her' with his shooting style—the camera drifting away from the people and the action.

The end credits list the actors Rebecca Jenkins and Peter Evans as Diane and Michael Polley, which suggests at least some of the footage was re-enacted.

Self Reflective Theme/Meta-narrative



'The cinematic look for the meta-narrative is intentionally blurry and often out of focus. The scenes appear thick-grained, muddled and unclear. An important visual distinction from the home movies is the lack of old and vintage-like qualities. These sections epitomise the self-reflective and unifying themes of the entire documentary—a story about the nature of storytelling and narratives.'

From filmslie.com (5)

Blurry and out of focus



A blurry, low-angle shot of a person's head and shoulders against a light background. The person is wearing a dark shirt. The image is framed by a white border.

Dad, can you tell the whole story?





‘The meta-narrative composition explores levels of storytelling unified by the larger theme of storytelling itself.’

From filmslie.com (5)

Who is Sarah's father? 30.04 – 32.30



“Ambiguity gets interpreted and misinterpreted and people have to feel like there’s someone in a movie to either side with or despise, and my favorite documentary filmmaker, Allan King, used to say ‘It’s not just bad for movies to pick a hero and a villain or try to paint a portrait of good or evil; you’re actually doing active harm in the world by perpetrating that notion. Just indulging the idea that there is such a thing as good or bad people as opposed to a whole spectrum of ambiguity.’ So I feel very conscious about that when I make a film, that nobody’s a hero and nobody’s a villain. My experience of human beings is that... that we’re complicated people.”

Sarah as character 34.31-39.32



‘I’d always talked about it as a hybrid film, between documentary and experimental film. It was never going to be a straightforward documentary.’ Polley (3)

Diane 46.20 – 50.27



A Family of Actors 1.07.19- 1.11.19



The Idea of the Truth 1.21.37 - 1.23.24



What unites the approach of the three filmmakers?

‘It really helped to let the film guide itself and let the interviews take it in different directions.’

Polley (2)

Sisters in Law (Ayisi and Longinotto, Cameroon and UK, 2005)



‘A particular focus is on how Longinotto’s work is uniquely placed in its control of emotion, apparently combining a rallying cry against social oppression while still retaining an affective confessional intimacy.’ Murray (7)

Observational rather than reflexive or poetic and this allows a collaboration with her subjects.

Small team creates a tone of 'narrative intimacy and its emotional connection', 'the electrifying sense that we are present in the room, the subjects speak to each other for a long time, Longinotto's single camera moving between speaker and listener' (Mayer)

More subtle attention drawn to the idea of a construct through camera movement: whip pans, small visible adjustments to the handheld camera – personal response from the filmmaker – gentle.

Murray (7)

Female Authorship

Longinotto is 'able to speak nearby her subjects rather than speak about them' Murray (7)

- Respect for subjects
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“But if I have learned anything from making this film, it is that we can’t all be right and we can’t all be wrong. So we must be unintentionally distorting things to varying degrees in order to feed our own version of what we need the past and history to be, and in our way, we must all be telling the truth as well.” Polley (1)

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7. Murray, R. (2018). Speaking About or Speaking Nearby? Documentary Practice and Female Authorship in the films of Kim Longinotto. In Ulfsdotter, Backman Rogers, A. (2018). *Female Authorship and the Documentary Image*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.