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Without a Scratch

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts Integrated Media Arts, Hunter College
The City University of New York

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Thesis Sponsor:

May 14, 2019

Date

Reiko Tahara

Signature

May 14, 2019

Date

Stuart Ewen

Signature of Second Reader

DEDICATION:

Without a Scratch is dedicated to my mother who used to drop little hints about wanting me to go to grad school but didn't see me get here. The film is also dedicated to Tasha Connolly for exploring this world with me and constantly creating fascinating change in our lives.

1. ABSTRACT:

Without a Scratch is a short form personal essay film that explores the themes of fear, loss, love, hope and renewal as it relates to my brain tumor diagnosis spanning from the initial symptoms through my recovery.

In July of 2017 I was diagnosed with a craniopharyngioma (pituitary tumor) and had endoscopic transsphenoidal brain surgery. The four months leading up to this diagnosis were fraught with major anxiety. I was extremely sick, developed blindness in my left eye and online searches told me my symptoms were consistent with a brain tumor. I had experience with brain tumors seven years prior when my mother developed lung cancer that metastasized to her brain. She underwent neurosurgery but died two months later. Her condition was very different from mine but the fear I felt during my mother's disease was resurrected in me with the same crippling intensity. I met my partner, Tasha, a few months before Mom's remission ended. She became my rock even though our relationship was still relatively new. I was gaining the affection and support of Tasha while losing the love and devotion of my mother. When my symptoms

started, Tasha became my primary support, stepping into the same role I took for my mother.

I can attest, having been both caretaker and patient, that honest representations of these portrayals in western media are quite rare. Illness and death are not themes typical of a culture that is spoon-fed happy endings from a very early age. The film is an experiment to recreate the experience I went through in aural/visual form, recognizing both caretaker and patient's perspectives. My hope is that this film will resonate with a wide variety of audiences that have been personally affected by some of the issues I touch on in this piece.

2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

Without a Scratch is a self-reflexive, experimental short documentary that unfolds in a nonlinear, semi-chronological fashion, taking the viewer on the journey of my experience with the pituitary tumor. The larger story that encompasses my mother's tumor and the relationship with my partner is discovered slowly so that by the end of the work, the interconnectedness and complexity of healing is revealed.

One of my aims is that *Without A Scratch* will foster openness and discussion concerning the hard topics of life, particularly illness and death. We live in a culture that holds youth and positivity in high regard to the point of blindness (Oliver and Raney 992). Posting positive affirmations on social media will yield much greater activity than deliberating political, controversial or difficult subjects (Zarella). The pressure to constantly be positive creates internal chasms, forcing us to hide our vulnerability and pain (Christakis and Shaky). I am not sure what I would have done without my support

network during my health crisis and my mother's death. These connections allowed me to process both difficult junctures honestly and openly. I intend for *Without A Scratch* to foster hope and connection in viewers who have experienced illness and death or who are afraid of the moment when they will inevitably come into contact with this universal experience.

The main themes I touch on in the film are:

1. Memories of Mom
2. Symptoms
3. Fear / confusion / not being believed
4. MRI test
5. My partner, Tasha's experience
6. Surgery
7. Post Op
8. Recovery

It is important that this film is accessible to a wide range of viewers and that they are able to empathize with my predicament. It is my intent to have the viewer viscerally relate to the subject matter on the screen. *Without a Scratch* utilizes metaphorical imagery, first person narration (both conversational and poetic), home movies and archival footage among other devices to portray my disorientation, panic and internal conflict. This film is intensely personal, intimate and detailed. My hope is that from those compelling specifics, the story will take on a universal understanding.

The aesthetic decisions I developed for *Without a Scratch* positions the viewer in an apprehensive state to reflect the uneasiness I was feeling at the time. The audience

is drawn in by a collection of images that reenact the emotions and moods of my life as well as visual representations of my physical dilemma (partial blindness, dizziness, malaise, domestic comfort, intimate moments with Tasha...etc.). The cinematography plays with focus, depth of field; scale (extreme close up to wide and vice versa) and film speed so that the audience will empathize with my disorientation. Thoughts race into our heads with incredible speed when we are panicked and I show this by rapidly cutting disjointed images.

It was an artistic choice not to score the film, but sound design plays an essential part of conveying my internal conflict. There isn't a playlist for my brain tumor experience. Diegetic and non-diegetic sounds are central in my attempt to create an uneasy atmosphere to the audience. Besides sound design, my personal narration is sprinkled throughout, guiding the viewers, particularly in relation to memories of my mother. Tasha's voice is also an important, grounding role in the piece as well. She gives a perspective outside of mine that adds to the reality and gravity of the situation.

In terms of story structure, not everything is revealed all at once. I think it is important to have the audience guessing about what is actually happening in the way I was guessing about what was happening to me at the time. I want there to be an apprehension of not knowing what is coming next.

I experiment with metaphorical situations. For instance, during the surgery portion of the film, I shot in an auto body garage and captured men working underneath the hood of a car. In the recovery portion towards the end of the film, I focus on tree leaves that are part green and part brown, representing the fragility between life and death.

There is also repetition of particular shots and sounds that convey premonition, fear and/or cycles of life. I use the sound of an MRI machine with quick flashes of my personal MRI images, before it is revealed that I've been diagnosed with a craniopharyngioma. Subways pull into a station at the same time, letting out a deluge of people during rush hour, representing my internal confusion before diagnosis. It also conveys the forward and backward movement of time and space in relation to the memory of my mother. The last people to walk out of frame before the station is empty are a father and young daughter. He is holding her hand. They represent the parent/child bond.

It was vital for me to show the tender interconnectedness of my personal relationships to my healthcare experience. Therefore, I utilized home movie images of both my mother (from the 1980's) as well as showing day to day tender and comical interactions with Tasha, including trying to stay warm at a train station by practicing kick boxing routines.

Before entering the IMA program, my previous work included two feature length documentaries using traditional methods including talking heads, b-roll, cinema vérité, animation...etc. Previous works did not use narration due to the risk of an omnipresent, "Voice of God" dynamic often employed in this style of storytelling (Wolfe 149). It is important in my films that the audience finds their way, through the subject matter, instinctively. My work typically addresses themes of social activism through personal stories. I hoped to challenge myself and expand my technical vocabulary in graduate school. Therefore, I was interested in exploring experimental self-reflexive filmmaking. The impetus for this piece began in the class, Social and Historical Roots of Culture,

taught by Distinguished Professor Stuart Ewen. The piece, entitled *May 22, 2012*, chronicled the last moments of my mother's life. This work was a definite shift, aesthetically. I used my voice as narration and played with poetic and metaphorical images.

I made *May 22, 2012*, in part, because I wanted to process the loss of my mother. What I didn't expect was how much people would relate to the piece. So far it has screened in seven festivals and the reaction has been extremely positive. People frequently come up to me after screenings wanting to tell me similar stories. Since I come from a working-class background, it is important to me that my pieces are accessible to a diverse audience.

Once I decided I wanted to create my thesis around my recent pituitary surgery, I knew I wanted it to be in a similar style to *May 22, 2012* because there needed to be a strong vulnerability in the storytelling. Obviously, *Without a Scratch* is more technically intricate, but is similar in detail, intimacy and vulnerability.

During my second year in the Integrated Media Arts (IMA) program, I hit my head on a stand-up desk while acting in one of my cohort's experimental films. The next day I woke up with a migraine that lasted twelve hours. I did a quick online search of the symptoms I was experiencing. When I saw the words "brain tumor" pop on the screen, I felt a jolt of panic as the trauma of my mother's death came rushing back, hitting me with the force of a car accident.

My mother's brain tumor was vastly divergent from mine. Hers was metastatic and she died less than two months after the tumor was surgically removed. Mine was benign and I underwent minimally invasive surgery. Benign doesn't necessarily mean

harmless, though. For the rest of my life I will have to take hormone medication and be tested for recurrence. In addition, my lifespan is shortened and chances of acquiring diabetes and heart disease are common (Zacharia 1076).

In the five months prior to diagnosis, I didn't know what was going on with my body. I was experiencing severe, concussive-like symptoms but the neurologist brushed them off as menopause. I tried acupuncture and Qui Gong. I even adjusted my diet but nothing changed. Fear had rendered me emotionally paralyzed and increased my blood pressure by thirty points. Friends and family thought I might be insane. I finally asked my primary doctor for a blood test, which revealed that most of the hormones produced in my pituitary were non-functioning. This finding led to more tests and finally, a proper diagnosis.

My diagnosis awakened a peculiar spiritual bond with my mother. Stress was added to my personal situation because I couldn't help but view this scenario through the lens of my mother's illness and death. Our brains are wired to learn from and react to past experiences. (Andreasen 230). It is undeniable, though, that we both shared a curiously similar encounter. My mother and I were exceedingly close. She was my best friend and although it has been almost seven years since her passing, I still miss her every single day. My piece explores how the healthcare "patient" should be seen as more than an isolated individual with a diagnosis, revealing a complex web of experience.

There were a variety of influences in making *Without a Scratch*. These particular films are not in the category of research. They are more in the realm of inspiration. I watched Marlon Rigg's *Tongues Untied* (1989) when I was a senior in High School. It

left a big impact on me mainly for its political content, in relation to racism and homophobia. I find myself revisiting it for this project, not on the basis of politics but for its personal storytelling. He lays himself, his friends and his community bare in the film. How does one tell a story that's so close to home? To produce something remarkably personal Riggs had to allow himself complete creative freedom while holding on to the "emotional impulse" that sparked the story, originally (Anbian 6). My approach to filmmaking became experimentally exploratory in *Without a Scratch*. I usually approach filmmaking cautiously, always shooting for safety and making sure I have enough conventional coverage shots. In contrast, for this piece, I let myself be less restricted by practicing idiosyncratic cinematography and editing. I will go into more detail about these changes in the "Production Process" section of this paper.

Jorge Furtado's *Isle of Flowers* (1989) also indirectly influenced me during the production of this piece. It was first recommended to me during the initial stages of production. The film tracks the life of a tomato and in doing so, reveals society's patriarchal unequal distribution of wealth. The narrator discusses how the "highly developed telencephalon" and pincer movement gave humans the possibility of making many improvements on their planet, which included the growing of tomatoes. While we hear this narration, we see a variety of images including, an apple, Adam and Eve, the Egyptian pyramids, men in battle... culminating in a video of the hydrogen bomb that quickly cuts to a hand plucking a tomato off of a vine. The narrator is telling us one story and the visuals are showing us a completely different one. I recalled some of Furtado's imagery when creating the beginning of the surgery scene in *Without a Scratch*. Tasha is explaining how helpless she feels watching me walk down the hospital corridor,

headed to surgery. We see an extreme close up of my hands guiding a Matchbox tow truck, with a smaller car in tow, out of frame. The cars harken back to a playful time in my childhood while the narration is telling us a very real and intense moment from my adult life. Throughout *Isle of Flowers*, Furtado maintains an immense amount of visual information by rapidly cutting images with the narration. Similarly, I played with tempo when editing the symptoms segment. I flash a series of images on screen that relate to the ailments I am typing on the computer. For example, after I type in the symptom “hot flash”, there is quick cut of a steaming teakettle.

It would have been difficult to cut the subway sequence of *Without a Scratch* and not think of Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Vertov’s film conveyed the rhythm of people working and living in a new industrial world by utilizing an array of camera techniques and editing cadence that was completely innovative at the time (Petric 293). The film also brings awareness to the camera and operator within the film (Ruby 7). Vertov wanted his audience to be actively involved in his pieces. He was against the Hollywood system of passive entertainment (Vertov, *Kino-eye* 13).

I shot inside the 168th Street subway station from various angles and speeds, shooting movement of both the cars and people entering/exiting the frame. My intent was to create a rhythm, although disjointed, to reflect the hectic and frightened atmosphere in my mind similar to the rhythms of Vertov’s editing style. There is a scene in *Without a Scratch* where Tasha is filming me and complaining about how heavy the C-100 Canon Camera is. I agree. This discussion on camera about the camera that is recording me is a direct influence of *Man with a Movie Camera*’s self-reflexivity. I have analogous feelings to Vertov in relation to active audience participation. *Without a Scratch* will

hopefully make audiences think about their relationship to illness and death but in a way that is compassionate and relatable to their worldview. I am not spoon-feeding viewers information. I am revealing extremely personal information about myself in the hopes that intimate specifics will create opportunities for viewers to relate the story to their personal experiences. In his Theory of Interval, Vertov discusses how he wants the audience to make the connections between the film language they are watching and its relation to the scene. He wrote of *Man with a Movie Camera*, "...the film's goal was not to conceal cinematic rhetoric but to acquaint the viewers with the grammar of cinema's expressive means". (Vertov, *Constructivism* 139).

There are many factors in my decision to create a self-reflexive film in such a vulnerable fashion. These decisions include a need to expand my techniques as a filmmaker and stimulate conversation with others who may be grappling with illness and death. Graduate school has afforded me the opportunity to study influential filmmakers and explore new stylistic choices.

3. RESEARCH ANALYSIS

The main areas of research I've focused on are documentaries about brain injury narrated in the first person, projects that create uneasiness in the viewer, the use of media to explore family memories and, finally, literature that combines themes at both the micro and macro level of a given situation.

I watched films that address head injuries including Michael O'Reilly's *Glass Jaw* (1991) and Sophie Robinson's *My Beautiful Broken Brain* (2014). *Glass Jaw* is extremely experimental in nature. It was filmed on a Fisher-Price Pixel Vision camera

and uses a great deal of metaphor in exploring pain, surgery and recovery of a violent head injury and subsequent brain surgery. In *My Beautiful Broken Brain*, the protagonist Lotje Sodderland (co-director) began iPhone video recordings of herself just a few days after intracerebral hemorrhage (stroke) and subsequent emergency brain surgery on her parietal and temporal lobes. Large parts of the film consist of material filmed by her. These films, although vastly different in aesthetics, utilize approaches that I was interested in using for *Without A Scratch*, including metaphorical images and first-person narration.

I knew I wanted the audience to feel trepidation early in my film, particularly, during the symptom scene as well as the nightmare sequence. Alan Berliner's *Wide Awake* (2006) and David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) both provoke anxiety in the viewer. Alan Berliner's film utilizes audio and montage video footage from various sources to create the cacophony in his head during bouts of insomnia. The only narrative piece I studied was *Mulholland Drive*. Lynch creates a sense of agitation by playing with film speed and sound design. The film gives off an air of danger as the two protagonists enter a bar while a rickety camera follows behind them, accelerating into fast motion. Lynch also incorporates animal growls and eerie sounds into background music during a rather generic scene that wouldn't normally call for such devices and is successful in creating apprehension that lasts into the following scene.

It was important for me to investigate how other filmmakers used personal media to conjure memories onscreen since I was going to use home movies, photographs and images of my mother's obituary. Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige* (1991), Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* (1988) and Sarah Polley's

Stories We Tell (2012) are great examples of experimental films that examine personal memory in relation to a parent. Tajiri and Polley capture their memories using personal photographs and home movies among other devices. Tajiri also utilizes mainstream propaganda outlets including Hollywood films, newsreels and government shorts. Polley captures memories of her mother, who died of cancer when Polley was eleven years old, using authentic 8mm footage of her family intermixed with re-enactments filmed in the same style as the actual home movies. In her essay, "The Politics of Video Memory: Electronic Erasures and Inscriptions", Marita Sturken writes about Tajiri's *History and Memory* among other works. She accurately summarizes what most filmmakers contend with when creating images of memory onscreen when she writes, "...memory is not seen as a depository of images to be excavated, but rather as an amorphous, ever changing field of images. This memory is not about retrieval as much as it is about retelling and reconstruction. It is about acknowledging the impossibility of knowing what really happened, and a search for a means of telling". (Sturken 12)

Accessibility for the audience is important to me and there are a few moments in *Without a Scratch* where I try to lighten the mood, particularly in Tasha's segment. Mahdi Fleifel's *A World Not Ours* (2012) takes on intense subject matter including the bleakness of a Palestinian refugee camp where he and his family once lived. His amusing voice over and jovial jazz music make the film obtainable to a general audience. Humor helps us relate to one another and can also mitigate tension (Kurtz and Algoe 50). Although some of their techniques are esoteric, Berliner, Tajiri, Polley and Fleifel all utilize playfulness in their unconventionality so that their films are

attainable to most viewers. They've also all created highly personal and vulnerable films.

I combine conversational and poetic narration in *Without A Scratch* in an attempt to keep the film short (poetic) and make it relatable to a general audience (conversational). Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* and Toni Morrison's "The Site of Memory" were foundational during my writing process. These short stories and essays combine a prose poem style that brings large concepts into frame while still holding on to personal details revealing an intimate exploration of both inner and outer dynamics.

4. THESIS PRODUCTION PROCESS

Twenty-eight days after surgery I was back in the IMA program. I chose a lighter load with only two classes, one of them being Advanced Studio taught by Associate Professor Shanti Thakur. This class helped me formulate what my thesis has become. It also eased me into pre-production and production, mainly by giving me the freedom to create images that I felt represented emotions of my reality. Advanced Studio also guided me in formulating the unique story structure of the film.

I started this process thinking I would be the predominant narrator. I wrote several pages of dialogue but once into the edit I felt the need for more balance between showing and telling so the audience would react to my experiences in a visual and aural way.

I wanted this project to be very personal, so initially worked on production alone. I recorded the majority of images in the film of myself (laying on the bed, typing on

keyboard, playing with Matchbox cars, looking into the mirror, sitting in the bathtub, kissing the cat...etc.). Later on, I recruited friends in our cohort to shoot very specific sequences that were impossible for me to independently record, including post-surgery and standing over my mother's grave. I love the art of cinematography but rarely get to experiment with it. When I am hired to shoot something, it usually involves talking heads or very specific b-roll. I find I am in rushed situations even when shooting my own pieces. *Without a Scratch* has been different for me in that I storyboarded sequences, took extra set up time for shots and made room for experimentation. A good example of this is the garage scene. Right after I got out of surgery, I noticed all of these wounds on my body besides the surgery itself (vice scabs on my head, scars on my stomach, back and arms). I remember thinking almost immediately I felt like I had been worked on like a car in a garage. I knew, early on, that I wanted the brain surgery scene to be represented in an auto body shop. I storyboarded shots I envisioned, including men's hands inside the hood of the car, wheels being taken off, close ups of wrenches and oily hands with dirt under fingernails manipulating the insides of a vehicle. It was absolutely the most satisfying segment to create because I was able to see it come to fruition from all stages of production.

Editing was a challenge. I learned how to edit on a flatbed at Hunter College as an undergraduate in the mid 1990's and when I graduated, I was mostly employed as a producer or cameraperson. Therefore, for the past twenty years I've been collaborating with editors but rarely editing myself. It was the one area of thesis I was dreading. I thought I'd be too slow or not grasp what I needed to actually complete the story on my own. Thankfully this wasn't the case and I actually enjoyed the process. It's interesting

to see this film take shape in ways I hadn't anticipated. For instance, I initially didn't want to use home movies for the segment Tasha narrates. I thought the images would look unprofessional due to their low resolution. However, when other ideas weren't working, I thought I would give it a try in the edit. It felt natural to assemble, probably because I experienced those memories with Tasha and intuitively knew how to place them in her monologue. The whole segment felt like it clicked and has consistently received positive feedback from friends/colleagues that I have asked to review the scene.

My emotional state was the main obstacle in making this film. Unfortunately, my illness is on-going. I have a tendency toward hypochondria and anxiety, which doesn't make my predicament easier. I sometimes would freeze weeks on end, in particular right before a brain MRI, which I have to re-take every six months. I also see a neuro-endocrinologist every three months. It has been difficult to make a story about something that isn't over. When I handed in the first pass to my thesis advisor she advised me to let the audience in on how dangerous this particular tumor is. I had only mentioned it as "benign" in the cut. I researched some of the common comorbidities and superimposing the words, "shortened life span" in the piece makes me think deeper, not only about the film, but how I want to live the rest of my life on this planet.

Another major challenge was reliving difficult memories of my mother's illness. It has been seven years since she's passed and dredging up those intense recollections of her lung cancer / brain tumor / brain surgery / premature death has been rough on my soul. On the brighter side, *Without a Scratch* has helped me deal with mourning and angst by facing and processing trauma. Wonderful memories of closeness with my

mother washed over me when I played with my Matchbox cars during production of the opening scene and when I edited home movies of us together.

The biggest lesson I learned from making *Without a Scratch* was to trust my instincts and embrace vulnerability. It is also near impossible to create a thesis on one's one. I have always cherished collaboration in relation to filmmaking, but I thought that this project would be more of a solo undertaking. I quickly learned that friends, colleagues and family always contribute to artistic endeavors.

I started conceptualizing *Without a Scratch* while in recovery. I've gained a unique perspective by analyzing an event that is ongoing, that causes permanent alterations to my body, and that is intimately linked to loving relationships in my life. This process made me push my craft and myself in ways I hadn't before with writing, cinematography and editing.

5. AUDIENCE AND EXHIBITION

Over the past year I have seen *May 22, 2012* accepted into a variety of mainstream festivals and screenings. Therefore, it is my intention to apply *Without A Scratch* to these same festivals since both films touch on similar themes. I also plan to apply the film to experimental, documentary and health-themed festivals.

My feature film, *Hunting in Wartime*, belongs to New Day Films, which is an institutional cooperative distribution company that primarily collects social documentaries. I plan to submit the finalized version of *Without A Scratch*, which will hopefully be added to New Day's collection and be promoted under several of their sub-categories including Physical Health, Mental Health, Psychology, Disabilities and

Women's Studies. Women Make Movies, the fiscal sponsor on many of my films over the past fifteen years, could also be a potential distributor as well. They are also a social documentary distribution company. Possible categories under Women Make Movies topics include Women Behind the Lens, Health and Politics, Public Health. Both of these company distribute institutionally so that the film will not only be available in schools but also public libraries, free of charge.

Another disparate avenue I may take for this piece is to have it readily available and free of charge on my website or YouTube so people/groups/communities who have lost a loved one or are dealing with an illness can watch it without a lot of hassle.

Gentrification Express: Breaking Down the BQX, a recent call-to-action short film I directed with cohort member, Amanda Katz, is being used for community organizing and is available free of charge on YouTube. It was a conscious decision to self-distribute the film so that it was easily accessible to the general public and community organizers.

I also plan on having screenings with audience members from various backgrounds, ethnicities, classes and educational levels to see if this film is truly accessible to a general audience. Are the metaphors in the film too opaque for a person that hasn't studied filmic language? I may need to re-edit certain parts of *Without A Scratch* if my intentions aren't been understood.

The response *Without a Scratch* receives at festivals and screenings will have a factor in deciding where the film eventually lives. It might be wise for me to seek out a distribution consulting organization (i.e. Film Spout, now Picture Motion) that can help

target specific audiences and brainstorm the best non-theatrical venues to approach. This type of consultation is expensive and would require fundraising.

I don't expect any legal issues impacting *Without a Scratch*. All images and sounds that weren't exclusively recorded for this film were either purchased with licenses or in the public domain.

I created *Without a Scratch* as a short, self reflexive experimental film in the hopes of both challenging myself as a filmmaker and producing a piece that honestly represents illness and death. The film has a unique vulnerability because I had to confront the painful memories of my mother's demise and continue to contend with a life-altering illness. These factors also pushed me to experiment and challenge myself to create an intimate piece that touches on the themes of fear, loss, love, and renewal. Hopefully it will foster hope, connection and discussion in the viewer. I will ensure this film is accessible to a wide variety of people in its distribution either through social, institutional distribution companies (Women Make Movies/New Day Films) or self-distribution that targets specific communities.

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