**Not Reconciled**

**Author:** Jill Daniels
**Format:**Experimental Documentary
**Duration:**40'

**Supporting Research Statement**

**Research Questions**

*Not Reconciled* (40 minutes) examines the integral relationship of the flow of time in place straddling the boundary of fiction and documentary through the use of fictionalized characters, the ghosts of republican and nationalist fighters, who provide a framing structure for the recounting of the history of a town, Belchite in Northern Spain and a 3-week battle that took place there during the Spanish civil war.  Belchite is emblematic of the Spanish civil war, since it was deliberately left in ruins by Franco to symbolize his victory. The film reflects on the continuing presence of the war through the filming of inhabitants of the rebuilt town, and the ruins.

Spain was chosen because of my personal history and intimate connection with the country and my interest in the Spanish civil war and its violent aftermath. Spain is a country still in transition. Paul Gready states: “To come to terms with the past…means reactivating the movement of time. Transition involves moving on while claiming ownership of the full temporal range, forgetting as well as remembering.” (Gready 2003: 2) There was no Truth Commission at the end of the Francoist era as there had been in other countries, no purge of the army or police and no assessment of the crimes of the regime.

The prosperous market town of Belchite, severely damaged in the war, has been left untouched for 70 years, to crumble to dust. Paul Willemen notes: “A ruin is a historical sign that has escaped from history. It is history constantly overcome by nature and only as such does it become an object of contemplation because history itself cannot be contemplated” (Willemen 1993: 58) In*Not Reconciled*this contemplation is represented by static shots of the ruins, collapsed passages, glassless windows, open doorways, walls newly spray-painted with Anarchist circled ‘A’s’, the faint traces of painted shop signs, dead animals and human artefacts, a small plastic comb or the remains of a leather shoe.

Fictionalized ghosts are created through voice-overs, based partly on published texts of the history of the town and partly on diaries of the protagonists in the civil war, left and right, and on scripted dialogue. The two central ghosts represent young republican fighters, Rosa and Carlos, killed in the civil war and buried in mass graves who are waiting to be found. Other voices of fighters act as a backdrop. This methodology addresses the desire to accurately represent the history of the town and the events that took place during the civil war, and to provide, a visual representation of decay that elides with the expressive force of the narrative.

The film examines the metaphorical nature of silence and absence in a place where history tells us that once there was the opposite, the chaos and roar of guns and bombs. In this language the absence of war in the present, is expressed through static shots, long shots and observation without participation. In a long static shot in a bar in the new town, (built next to the ruins using forced labour), we observe a barman seemingly unaware of the camera, lost in his own interior world, unmoving, locked out of events around him. In another, 5-minute static shot of the ruins, the camera observes a ruined church while the fictionalised voices give their subjective accounts of the battle that took place there. Tourists walk to and fro looking at the empty space, and a man photographs a woman. As the camera zooms slowly in they stand side by side their hands raised looking into the space beyond us. This silence and stillness draws our attention to the interior world of all human beings, a world essentially unknowable to others. The mosaic of shots and sequences is underlined by the impressionistic sound track created by David Chapman, that appears and disappears, conveying wind “whistling its warnings of events past or yet to come.” (McLaughlin 2011: 96).

Begonia Aretxaga in an examination of her own experience of life under the Francoist regime asserts that life in Spain, consisted of a permanent state of terror, that was “transformed into presence, absence and ghostliness” (Aretxaga 2005: 128-9).   This analysis is underlined in filmed interviews with witnesses to the war who are reluctant to discuss their experiences of that period. Cahal McLaughlin states: “To write ‘interview’ may misrepresent the stylized approach that Daniels takes, which seems to come upon people as they sit on public benches and ask direct questions […] ‘Do you remember the war?’ and ‘Are you left or right?’ Their silences, shifting, standing up and walking away, or their distraction by a passing vehicle are as important to her project as the information they provide. Because what Daniels seems to be exploring, is the fear of opening up traumatic memories of violence perpetrated by neighbours on a massive scale in a contemporary context of uneasy peace.” (ibid 2011: 95-6.) These ‘interviews’ combining with the voices of the ghosts provide the dialectic between past and present; between fiction and actuality. The objective of this methodology is to develop to a new approach to film practice, to contribute to the advancement of knowledge on the cinematic representation of place, memory, identity and history and politics in experimental documentary films.

**Context**

Many experimental documentary films examine the same terrain as Not Reconciled. Some are video essays for projection in cinemas, or within the framework of Fine Art and projected in art galleries and other public spaces. My practice is primarily intended for a festival audience, conferences and for the internet. It builds on the essay film work of Chris Marker, the pioneering documentaries of Dziga Vertov, films by Amos Gitai, Agnès Varda’s early documentaries, the recent essay film by independent filmmakers Anthea Kennedy and Ian Wiblin, *Stella Polare*(2008) and the films of José Luis Guerín, as well as Ursula Biemann, amongst others. In Biemann’s film, *Performing The Border* (1999), she takes as her starting point the physical border of Mexico/USA that acts as a construction to articulate the disproportionate power between the two countries. The border acts as a metaphor for this power. In the second film for my PhD, *The Border Crossing* (2011), the border acts as a site of contestation, as a metaphor of trauma and violence in history and the present.

I have built on the work of Marguerite Duras, in the use of offscreen voices to create narrative, most usefully in her film*India Song* (1975). I am also building on the films of Alain Resnais, in his exploration of place and identity, in *Muriel* and *Hiroshima Mon Amour*where he elides documentary with fiction in a detailed cinematic representation of places similarly scarred by trauma. I am now utilising autobiography, that as Jim Lane puts it in his book, *Autobiographical Documentary in America*:  “Autobiographical documentaries use reflexivity not to eradicate the real as much as to complicate referential claims.” (Lane 2002: 5) They allow for an extension of the possibilities for documentary cinema to represent realities. I have built on the work of Michelle Citron in her seminal fictionalised autobiographical film *Daughter Rite*(1980) and Rea Tajiri’s film on memory,*History and Memory*(1991). The theoretical context is influenced by the work of the filmmaker and theorist David MacDougall; the documentary theorist Michael Renov; the film theorist Janet Walker and her work on memory and trauma in films and the philosopher and theorist Walter Benjamin and his work on history and violence.

*Not Reconciled* expands the research of several of my documentary films produced in the last ten years that explore place, memory and identity. It was produced as a component of the practice element of a PhD I am currently undertaking at the University of East London in the department of Arts and Digital Industries. The overall research is to examine and analyse the cinematic representation of place, memory and identity in experiments in documentary film (my own and those of others). Two films *Not Reconciled*and *The Border Crossing* (2011) have been produced for the practice component of the research. *The Border Crossing*(47 minutes) explores autobiography and subjectivity within traumatic memory, place and identity. It elides fiction and documentary, through an examination of a landscape of disparate towns and cities in the Basque country and the border between France and Spain while the voices of myself in the present, and a young woman representing my younger self, wanders through the landscape.  Itrepresents this entire area as a site of contestation, rural and urban, and the iconography of violence and the nationalist striving for independence, found throughout the area, is thematic in the film. I am currently researching a new autobiographical film, developing from the knowledge gained in producing the practice element of the PhD. It isa longitudinal film study exploring subjectivities within my own family.

**References**:

Aretxaga, Begona. (2005) *States of Terror*. Centre for Basque Studies, University of Nevada.

Biemann, Ursula (1999) *Performing the Border*. US.

Citron, Michelle. *Daughter Rite* (1980). US.

Duras, Marguerite (1975)*India Song*. France.

Gready, Paul (ed) (2003) ‘Introduction’ in *Political Transition*London: Pluto Books.

Kennedy, Anthea/Wiblin, Ian. (2008) *Stella Polare*. UK.

Lane, Jim. (2002) *The Autobiographical Documentary in America*. University of Wisconsin Press.

McLaughlin, Cahal. (2011). ‘*Not Reconciled*, a film by Jill Daniels, High Ground Films, UK (40 mins, 2009)’ in*Journal of Media Practice* Vol. 12. Issue. 01.

Tajiri, Rea. (1991) *History and Memory*. US.

Resnais, Alain (1962) *Muriel*. France.

\_\_\_\_\_\_(1959) *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. France.

Willemen, Paul (1993) Gitai – ‘The Nomadic Image’, in *The Films of Amos Gitai*. Ed. Paul Willemen. BFI

My **methods** derive from experimental fiction films, Fine Art, independent experimental documentary-making and video essay.

**Outcomes**

This research is experimental in nature. It expands the language of experimental documentary films away from the constraints and limitations of the industrial TV documentary and to embed film theory dialectically into the work. It embraces the language of philosophy, poetry, visual and aural art to expand and extend the boundaries of cinematic language into new terrain. It aims to create a fruitful dialogue with other practitioners in this field through conferences, screenings and written articles.

**Impact**

The film is self-funded.

Film Festivals and Screenings:

Bruxelles (Online) Fiction & Documentary Festival, in competition. Awarded best direction.

(Online) Festival de Cine de Granada, Spain, in competition. Awarded special jury mention.

Iasi International Film Festival, Iasi, Romania.

DokBazaar, Documentary Film Festival, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Athens International Film Festival, Ohio, USA.

London Filmmakers Convention, London, UK.

Portobello Film Festival, London, UK.

Conference presentation and screening: 2010. ‘Gender & Memory’ at Birkbeck college, University of London. A paper and presentation screening of the film.

A clip is on my website [www.jilldanielsfilms.com](http://jmpscreenworks.com/www.jilldanielsfilms.com), on YouTube, IMDB and the University of East London website. It is on Vimeo and Cinema Without Frontiers websites.

Review: McLaughlin, Cahal. (2011). ‘Not Reconciled, a film by Jill Daniels, High Ground Films, UK (40 mins, 2009)’ in *Journal of Media Practice* Vol. 12. Issue. 01.

**Peer Reviews**

*All reviews refer to original research statements which have been edited in response to what follows*

**Review 1: Accept**

Film: This is a thoughtful and complex film on the question of survivor memory in a landscape of residues. Locating the investigation in the village of Belchite in the Aragon region of northern Spain, the film’s binaries inform and challenge each other - past and present, the dead and the living, ruins and ‘new town’, and, centrally, remembering and forgetting.

Daniels’ approach to this particular site of memory is to interweave fact and fiction in exploring how those surviving the brutal and intimate violence that occurred during the Spanish civil war/revolution might negotiate their divided past in a shared present. This film is a personal exploration of the idea and role of memory in a divided society. How we remember and, indeed, if we remember, are addressed.

The film has two main elements – an imagined conversation between the ghosts of two of the Republican dead, Carlos and Rosa; and interviews with local residents who were children at the time of the war. To write ‘interview’ may misrepresent the stylised approach that Daniels takes, which seems to be to come upon people as they sit on public benches and ask direct questions in her gentle, halting Spanish, e.g. ‘Do you remember the war?’ and, ‘Are you left or right?’. Their silences, shifting, standing up and walking away, or their distraction by a passing vehicle are as important to her project as the information they provide. Because what Daniels seems to be exploring is the fear of opening up traumatic memories of violence perpetrated by neighbours on a massive scale in a contemporary context of uneasy peace.

The scripted conversation between two young enthusiasts, caught up in the liberatory atmosphere of the time and then brutally killed for their involvement, are voiced over carefully framed images of the decaying buildings of Belchite, a village whose ruins have been left as testament to the violence. Intercut are the older people, in the ‘new’ village, built at the end of the war and located close by, reluctant in their memories and political commitments. A sound track by David Chapman runs under, emerging at key points, evoking a wind quietly howling across a plain, whistling its warnings of events past or yet to come.

Daniels visual representations of decay – dusty windows, open doorways and collapsed passages - include contemporary visitors/tourists wandering about the ruins, on whose walls are spray-painted anarchist circled ‘A’s, as they pose and take photographs of each other. The ‘new’ village has all the activity of a sleepy Spanish afternoon, with the bartender lazily watching older men play cards. Children stop on their bikes to play with the irrigation canal. Older women stand talking at a street corner.

The dominant element, the conversation between Carlos and Rosa, both recounts the past and reflects on it. Jo Labanyi, a writer on the cultural contexts of this period, is quoted at the film’s opening, ‘Ghosts are the victims of history, whose stories, those of the losers, have been excluded from the dominant narratives of the victors’. This film gives voice to those ghosts.

However, the experimental nature of the film makes it a complex text. Without knowing the history of this period, viewers might find some references difficult to grasp. Even my acquaintance with this history did not shield me from struggling to follow the impressionistic nature of some of the conversations, unsure sometimes who newly introduced characters actually are. Yet this wetted my appetite, rather than diminished it. On second viewing the film’s richness of texture in its formal qualities and in its curiosity about how memory works offered new readings that can be applied outside of the Spanish context. We tend to think of more recent examples when considering societies emerging out of political violence, such as the Balkans and Ireland, but this film helps us consider the much longer implications of intimate and internecine political violence.

Written Statement: The organisation and clarity of the writing make the arguments accessible and reveal an understanding of the theoretical background for the themes which the film addresses and also the practice context for the processes that the film employs.

I think that the references to some film-makers, e.g. Vertov and Varda, may require filmography references; although specific films are not named, maybe they should be.

**Review 2: Accept**

In Jill Daniels’ Not Reconciled ghosts speak, but the living do not. Ghosts abound in Daniels’ film – even the living are forever preserved as digital ghosts. While reminiscent of Resnais’ Hiroshima, Mon Amour and Night and Fog at times, Daniels gives the viewer a new representation of familiar themes. Daniels acknowledges that the “terrain” she explores has been covered in previous experimental documentary films, but her engaging fusion of these two modes of cinematic representation brings a new approach to cinematic explorations of the past and present. “Not Reconciled” thoughtfully explores the dialectic between past and present through a successful weaving together of documentary and fiction techniques. It is a portrait of places, absences and presences.

The successive static shots of the ruins have a wandering quality, as if the camera is searching for something – but all it finds are traces. The camera combs the vestiges of Belchite for any kind of meaning, artefact, or point of departure that will launch our consciousness into the past. We see shots of broken windows, collapsed rooms, and a discarded comb. These forgotten spaces and discarded things murmur and whisper and are infused with a past that Daniels’ camera excavates. Still, the filmmaker recognises that any resolution is only aesthetic. “Not Reconciled” values creating a state of mind rather than a historical place and time. The chorus of ghostly voices that haunt the images of present-day Belchite confuses the linear notion of past, present and future; instead, the effect creates a sense that all moments are present simultaneously.

The film’s “anti-interviews” fail at providing the viewer with information, but the interviewer’s inability to elicit responses from her subjects (to her laughable Spanish) creates something far more revealing: a stammering, an uncertainty, a distraction, and an avoidance. The film’s fictional “ghosts,” on the other hand, are significantly more verbose and willing to tell their story. Compounding these voices of the dead is the industrial noise that scrapes across the soundtrack, oscillating into the present out of the past, like an echo (“He doesn’t exist . . . he’s just an echo in your head,” we are told). The breakdown of the talking head interview and the use of fictionalised “ghosts” challenge the accepted role of the interview and narration in documentary film. Daniels self-reflexively examines the ability of cinema to re-contextualise and reconstruct “real life” experiences through this exchange of documentary and fictional modes of representation. It expands on the cinematic language of “documentary,” and, through its expressivity and reflexive engagement in fictional modes, achieves a truth and reveals and understanding of the past that might not have been otherwise possible.

Daniels’ scholarship is well-researched and articulate, and her practice affirms her theoretical context. She has a firm understanding of her field and her place within it. Her research questions are both challenging and vital to the exploration of the documentary form. They are successfully addressed and explored in her film in unique, understated ways. Her argument is well-presented, compelling and fulfilled by her filmmaking practice.

http://jmpscreenworks.com/?pid=daniels