# A Tale of Sound and Fury: Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation*

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Jonathan Caouette's 2003 documentary *Tarnation* was marketed and reviewed as a film about mental disability: a portrait of the filmmaker's mother, Renee, and her struggles with mental illness following years of family abuse, unnecessary shock treatments, and eventually a brain-damaging lithium overdose—but a *sensitive* portrait that, as one *New York Times* reviewer said, "never descends into the territory of voyeuristic freak show" (Salamon). Caouette himself asserts that it's "an activist film" about "my mother, an innocent bystander of the Texas mental health system of the 1970s" (2005). He adds that "it's an important story and I think it's giving people from all walks of life an insight into a world that people tend to brush under the carpet or pass extreme judgment on—rounding off mentally ill people to the nearest drug addict or just not wanting to be involved. It's a nice insight into the human condition" (2005).

But while reviewers and the filmmaker might have intended *Tarnation* to be read as an activist documentary about mental illness, intention is always dicey stuff. Indeed, some reviewers have noted how the thrust of the film is at least two-fold. In a second *New York Times* review, for example, A.O. Scott gave a fairly balanced summation when he said: "It tells a story about the costs of mental illness and denial, which is entwined with the story of a gay man's coming of age in suburban red-state America" ("Tracing" 2004). But other reviewers were more dubious; for example, David Edelstein of *Slate* asked if Caouette's film about his mother qualifies as "Exploitation? Debatable. … His empathy for her struggle is a counterweight to his vampiric urge to get her delusions on camera" (2004).

The film's ostensible subject about mental illness gets lost in most of its reviews, which couldn't resist mentioning—and thereby marketing, of course—two tantalizing facts about the film. The first is that Caouette edited the entire film on iMovie, which is an impressive feat indeed given the complexity of the imagery and the utter simplicity of the iMovie program. The second is the film's low budget. Like the marketing that underscored the low budget of *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez 1999), reviewers always remarked on the $218 budget for *Tarnation* (though its budget rose to $400,000 with royalties for music and video clips). Reviewers also frequently compared *Tarnation* to *Capturing the Friedmans* (Andrew Jarecki 2003), another documentary released the previous year that similarly exposes its dysfunctional family via twenty years of home movie footage. But unlike *Capturing the Friedmans* reviews, *Tarnation* reviews spent more time celebrating the director's technical feats than analyzing the documentary's ostensible subject of mental disability or even the family's story, which is fair since the film does too.

In this essay I argue that, while *Tarnation* nods to issues around mental illness with much sound and fury, it ultimately signifies nothing about mental disability. It more dominantly manifests a stylized portrait of the filmmaker himself. Ultimately, *Tarnation* employs his mother's mental illness and his dysfunctional Southern Gothic family as vehicles for Caouette's own self-promotion as filmmaking artiste.

But in order to build this case, we should first observe *Tarnation's* remarkable interplay of imagery and text, which is integral both to the film's artistry and to Caouette's self-promotion. The documentary's image track is comprised of an impressive, kaleidoscopic assemblage of home movies, family photos, answering machine messages, reenactments, and Caouette's own video diary. All of the film's footage is treated extensively with iMovie editing software and special effects: overlapping wipes, dissolves, saturation, split screens, multiple panes, graphics, and complex montages. Caouette even distressed most of the High-8 video footage to make it look like old Super-8, and he manipulated the old footage by turning "the brightness and contrast way up to give it the appearance of flickering saturation" (Caouette 2005). As a result of this high degree of manipulation, the imagery feels highly subjective—harrowing even—expressive of Caouette's personal take on growing up in a dysfunctional family and also suggestive of mental illness itself.

There is no voiceover narration to accompany this complex image track. Instead, intertitles, subtitles, and captions relate Caouette's story, and this distanced tone marks a stark contrast to the intensely personal and subjective imagery. Even the titles font is just a simple Helvetica, and while font colors of white, yellow, red, pink, or orange shift throughout the film, these color changes appear to be unmotivated, or at least they defy easy classification across the film.

Caouette's choice to use these intertitles instead of voiceover to narrate his imagery is an interesting one, precisely because the "objective" narrational tone connoted by intertitles so disjunctively mismatches the remarkably dynamic, subjective imagery. Perhaps this choice nods to the cultural silence imposed upon mental disability, still largely unspoken and shamed in American social discourse. And perhaps voiceover would have been too overwhelmingly personal in such an already personal film, so the intertitles attempt to locate the film more squarely in the documentary category. Without them, it might feel so subjective that it would qualify closer to the avant-garde or underground films of Jack Smith or George Kuchar that, in fact, heavily inspired Caouette's style.

His choice to use third-person narration for these intertitles is particularly striking. The text is clearly Caouette himself narrating his own story, but he presents this narration in third-person printed intertitles—as if it were told by someone else. One possible justification for this third-person narration is Caouette's own teenage experience with depersonalization disorder, which he explains in a relatively early and heavily treated scene. As the image track divides into a quartered split-screen, boyhood images of Caouette appear in rapid succession, at first playing carefreely and the images are relatively unmanipulated; but then the images, still quarter-screened but suddenly saturated and flickering, show him in gothic horror-style makeup, tearing at his hair and scratching at himself with (artificial) blood streaks on his body and the mirror. The nondiegetic music, Lisa Germano's haunting song "Extraterrestrial," sings about "crazy emotions … so unfamiliar" and repeats the refrain "the sun came out and it didn't go away," while intertitles describe the drug-induced origins of his depersonalization disorder and scrolling text describes its symptoms: "Persistent or recurring episodes of feeling detached from, and as if one is an outside observer of, one's mental processes or body (feeling like one is in a dream)." A rapid-fire montage alternates between shots of a deranged-looking Caouette and shots of his mother, before the image track holds on a twelve-second freeze-frame of Caouette in a creepy direct address to the camera, underlit and overexposed. After a slow fade out, the film then cuts abruptly to unsettling extreme-closeups his grandmother, Rosemary, rambling nonsensically in full Texas accent.

Rosemary's strong Southern accent is important here and throughout *Tarnation* because Caouette's troubling self-portrait trades heavily upon the "Southerness" of his family. A well worn stereotype in literature and film, "Southern" and "dysfunctional" are almost always presented as synonymous. This begins with the film's title: the word "tarnation" is never defined by the film itself, and it's funny that northern and international reviewers (professional and lay viewers both) reported that they had no idea what the word meant and had to look it up. It is defined by the OED as "a variant of damnation" or as a euphemism for hell, used primarily in the southern and southeastern United States. As a noun, it refers to the act of damning or being damned; as an interjection, it expresses anger or annoyance. Of course, there are multiple hellish, damning institutions in the film at which Caouette justifiably expresses his anger: the mental health system, the foster care system, and the family, chief among them.

But it's not the mental health system so much as the eccentricities of Caouette's Southern family that receive special—even spectacular—attention. The tone here echoes the slack-jawed, head-shaking astonishment that we are encouraged to express at the eccentric family in the Maysles Brothers' 1975 documentary *Grey Gardens*, but the difference between these two families is precisely that of region and class. The living conditions in *Grey Gardens* are presented as all the more shocking because Edith and Little Edie are aristocrats, cousins of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy living in a dilapidated estate on Long Island, New York. But *Tarnation* ties the shocking family conditions in which Caouette grew up to stereotypical Southern roots. Menacing wide-angle closeups show his toothless grandmother Rosemary, often smoking and coughing, swearing in a strong Texas twang, or bizarrely laughing. The first images of his grandmother immediately follow the depersonalization montage described above, and this editing choice infers a causal relationship between them. Caouette describes these first shots of Rosemary as "humorous" and designed to "lighten the feel of the film here… until you realize that this truly wacked out, loving, sweet woman is raising this child, which can make you feel a little awkward" (2005). In some of these scenes with Rosemary, you could almost hear the *Deliverance* "Dueling Banjos" playing. The soundtrack avoids such an obvious cliché, however, and instead chooses either campy 1970s songs or, most often, underground alternative songs that conjure New York more than Texas.

This musical contrast is one of the film's many juxtapositions of Texas and New York City, all of which create a grotesque environment for Texas and present big-city New York as the clear, right, and true way out of Caouette's horrific Texas family life. As his intertitles put it, again in third-person: "Jonathan figured out a way to get the hell out of there." *Tarnation* mentions New York by name at least nine times in its short 85-minute running time, almost always in the intertitle text or captions—so viewers can't miss it. At one point as he sits on a couch sullenly smoking, there's even a subtitle that reinforces his spoken and clearly audible statement, "And I'm supposed to be in New York." Caouette's New York is presented as the halcyon escape from horrific Texas, and this cliché surely sits well with the film's marketing plan and target audiences of the Californian and northeastern-U.S. experimental documentary set. As Southern Gothic author Flannery O'Connor once remarked, "Anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it *is* grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic" (1960).

In fact, this Southern Gothic theme structures the shock value of Caouette's entire film. Southern Gothic style in American literature, of course, recasts traditional Gothic heroes and monsters as American Southerners. As in the traditional Gothic, the house, domestic environment, or other location is a place of great threat, harboring evils and family dysfunction that affect and even dominate the life of the protagonist. The characters are off-kilter and frequently imprisoned in some way, and often an "innocent" character may or may not be "broken" by their influence. In most Southern Gothic stories, an important character is set apart from the established social pattern by a disability or an odd and often-negative way of seeing the world. This character often ends up being a hero because their difference allows them to see new ways of doing things that ultimately help to bring people out of the "dark." *Tarnation* follows this Southern Gothic pattern to the letter, so much that a character-by-character plot analysis would prove superfluous here. Exacerbated by tropes of documentary realism and by an intentionally disturbing experimental style, *Tarnation* fulfills stereotypes of grotesque, backward, and above all crazy Southern families something fierce.

In doing so, *Tarnation* creates precisely what disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has described as a "freak show" in *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997); but in creating freaks of both Southerness and mental illness, Caouette's film offers none of the subversive possibilities that Garland-Thomson finds for "extraordinary bodies" in the freak show genre. The film's spectacular visual form and its emphasis on Caouette's Southern Gothic family keep viewers too distracted and, frankly, too shocked, to learn to empathize with mental illness—let alone to learn about or actively correct the broken mental health system. Of course, historically, freak shows are often designed to be mere spectacles for commercial consumption that deny identification between starer and staree. These foster what Garland-Thomson calls "bad staring," which trades on the viewer's "unethical passivity … discomfort, shock, or fear" (*Staring* 186). Viewers mock or recoil from the difference they see as abnormal and "freakish" and willfully forget it, thankful that "that's not me."

But Garland-Thomson notes that *how* we stare and—equally important, how we are *stared at*—can be a positive, educational exchange. With appropriate nods to Martin Buber's "I and Thou" dyad and to Emmanuel Levinas' face-to-face encounter, Garland-Thomson argues that the act of staring at the disabled body actually has great "generative potential" to unsettle common misunderstandings, to generate knowledge, and to facilitate mutual recognition. The stare, she notes, is not the same as The Gaze, since the starer is not invested with unidirectional power so much as, what she calls, "profligate interest, stunned wonder, and obsessive ocularity"

(*Staring* 13). And, when the staring is mutually agreed upon, the disabled staree is not in the position of a disempowered object of the gaze—a freak—so much as an educator who models one's own difference as ordinary rather than spectacular. "When people with stareable bodies enter the public eye," Garland-Thomson writes, "when they no longer hide themselves or allow themselves to be hidden, the visual landscape enlarges. Their public presence can expand the range of bodies we expect to see.… These encounters work to broaden collective expectations of who can and should be seen in the public sphere" (*Staring* 9). *Good* staring, then, compels the starer to transform one's initial "profligate interest" and "stunned wonder" into sympathy, then into identification with the staree, and then—the most important step—into political action. Good staring can inspire our activism, "move us to volunteer our time or petition [lawmakers to action,] rather than [our] recoiling and forgetting" (*Staring* 186).

*Tarnation* claims to be such an "activist film" with the goal of raising awareness about mental illness. It seems to situate Renee's mental illness as a willing staree, designed to educate viewers about mental illness. And indeed, reviewers talked about such a "visceral" film (Ebert) "striking nerves at Sundance" (Salamon); similarly, undergraduate and graduate students in my own Film Studies classes have all declared how "disturbing" and "freakish" the film is. These reactions are significant in their tone of recoil, in their *lack* of action, in their "thank God that's not me" response. However, our reactions to *Tarnation* remain mired in "bad staring"—all shock and unethical passivity—for a reason: despite all the fanfare, what does *Tarnation* really teach us about mental illness? Ultimately, not much.

Like this "bad staring" pairing of mental illness with the South, *Tarnation* also pairs mental illness and homosexuality—though I would argue that this pairing is more inadvertent. Apart from the film's opening "I had a dream about my mother" reenactment by Caouette and his partner, David, we first hear about his homosexuality during young Caouette's audio recording of a deranged rant during his hospitalization for depersonalization disorder after smoking marijuana dipped in formaldehyde. We hear him nonsensically ranting "I've always been gay" over images of bloody, severed hands, slasher film chases, and violence—all his own imagery from what Caouette identifies as his "first attempts at [making] horror films" (2005). This initial pairing not only associates homosexuality with mental illness—and the medicalization of them both—but also with violence, drugs, and drug dealers. Immediately following this sequence, Caouette notes how he began to frequent of-age gay bars at this same age of thirteen. Again, I think it's unintentional, but the editorial pairing here slides to imply that his dysfunctional family and/or mental illness drove him to homosexuality; certainly, viewers hostile to homosexuality might readily jump to make these links, as might homosexual audiences hostile to age-old accusations of mental illness.

*Tarnation* was less prominently marketed as a gay film, though it did win multiple awards at LGBTQ film festivals and it premiered at MIX: The New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film and Video Festival in 2003. But although *Tarnation* runs the risk of pairing homosexuality with the film's (claimed, or at least marketed) primary theme of mental illness, I want to stress that Caouette depicts gay culture and especially his relationship with his partner, David, very warmly and that homosexuality is never condemned in the film. In fact, Caouette presents gay culture as a positive and even angelic escape from his dysfunctional family to sanity, almost on par with the trope of New York.

In a *New York Times* interview about *Tarnation*, Caouette said, "I don't know if it had to do with being gay or a Southern Jew or wanting to be an actor and filmmaker, but I've always had this keen sense of self" (quoted in Salamon). Ultimately, it is Caouette himself that

*Tarnation* works hardest to illustrate—an example of what A.O. Scott has dubbed the new "narci-cinema" or "*moi*cumentary" ("Enter Narci-Cinema" 2004). In and of itself, that's not a bad thing. Indeed, scholars like Michael Renov and Alisa Lebow have written about the film as an autobiographical text for Caouette. However, Caouette and Wellspring marketed the film not as an autobiography but as an activist documentary about mental illness. In this goal, the film falls short, positioning his mother more as freakish spectacle than as enlightening staree.

Of course, Caouette denies that he's exploiting his mother's illness in his film. Of the infamous long take in which he films his mother dancing maniacally with a pumpkin for almost four minutes of screen time, he says: "we were just having fun. Exploiting my mother? That's over-intellectualizing it. An *outsider* tries to exploit, but this was my world and what I grew up in and knew" (2005). But of course, *insiders* can exploit too, even unintentionally. The playful "fun" that Caouette claims for the pumpkin scene slips into freak show bad staring. This is not because Renee's behavior is a result of shock treatments, abuse, and a lithium overdose. It's because of how long Caouette lets this long take run, and especially because of how he pans over to compare the dolls to his mother and then to include the Christmas tree. Both camera movements function in a forced metaphorical way. These moments manifest something Caouette clearly thought about not as a son playfully filming his mother, as he claims, but as a filmmaker while he was shooting his subject with what some have even called his "vampiric" eye toward including bizarre footage of his mother in his forthcoming film already in the works.

In the end, I am moved by *Tarnation*, and I grant that it does provoke the viewer to see Caouette's mother's story and the truly damaging practices of our broken mental health system in a provocative and artistic way. But the focus of *Tarnation* veers away from Renee, or even how her mental illness affected her son, into the self-promotion of this talented young filmmaker.

In doing so, Caouette abandons his activist project and teaches us only freak-show bad-staring at mental illness, when his film really could have employed its artistry, its history, and its emotional power toward far more progressive ends.

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