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## Jonathan Caouette

First saw Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2004) at Upstate Films in New York (since 1972, a stalwart independent theater committed to a broad-ranging film exhibition program) during its initial run. I never remember what got me to the theater—I was teaching at Bard College at the time, and someone there must have mentioned *Tarnation* or perhaps I read a review. But like so many others I was immediately carried into the film and astonished by its energy. It seemed to me one of those rare theatrical features that has both the chutzpah of an avant-garde work and the ability to compete with the best commercial films to engage audiences (other recent instances include Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* [1998] and Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There* [2007], though this mini-tradition goes back at least as far as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [Robert Wiene, 1920]). *Tarnation*, perhaps the first feature edited in the style of *Movie*, is a fantasmagoria of recycled imagery from film and television, including clips from fiction films and videos of his family that Caouette made as a child, family text, family photographs, and early digital special effects—organized into a series of music videos that together create a bildungsroman of how this troubled child came to be a skilled and committed filmmaker.

*Tarnation* is a personal documentary, part of the tradition nurtured in Amherst, Massachusetts, by Ed Pincus, Alfred Guzzetti, Ross McElwee, and Robb Moss, but it is far more visceral than any of the films by those filmmakers. Indeed, *Tarnation* is the horror film of personal documentary: Caouette's childhood, as depicted in the film, was often harrowing and his approach to filmmaking owes much to the revival of the horror film in the 1970s. When I hosted *Tarnation* and Caouette at Hamilton College in 2006, I was initially concerned to see him returning to the projection booth for the first time and over during the opening moments of the film to raise the sound level—but I soon saw the wisdom of this: when Renee Leblanc, Caouette's mother, begins receiving shock treatments, we are jolted—the way effective horror films jolt us—by the impact of this brutal “therapy” on both Leblanc and on Caouette's childhood.

By the time *Tarnation* is over, one cannot help but wonder how Caouette survived his upbringing and how he could be as patient as he seems to have been with the bizarre grandparents who raised him and so loyal and committed to a mother whose mental illness kept her away from him for much

of his youth. After the Hamilton screening, when Caouette appeared at the front of Bradford Auditorium to take questions, it was nearly as surprising as *Tarnation* itself to see how unpretentious, gentle, and serene, how *sane*, Caouette seems to have turned out.

There are several “occupational hazards” to making personal documentary. One of these was quickly evident to many of us who saw and admired *Tarnation*: if a film painstakingly reviews the filmmaker's entire life up until the time when he finishes the film, what comes next? This question resulted in the two-part structure of the interview that follows. In the late fall of 2006 I interviewed Caouette about his evolution as a filmmaker and about the production of *Tarnation*, but I didn't finish the interview then, since I wanted to see what in fact would come next for him.

For a time, it seemed as if Caouette's filmmaking career was in hiatus, but in 2010 his surreal short, *All Flowers in Time*, premiered at the New York Film Festival, and in 2012, he completed *Walk Away Renee*, which began as a road movie focused on Caouette's moving his mother from an assisted-living facility in Houston where she has been seriously mis-medicated, first to a facility in the Hudson Valley, and ultimately to his home in Queens. When Renee's meds get lost early in the trip north, *Walk Away Renee* turns into a suspense thriller. As the new, personal feature developed, it expanded, revisiting Caouette's youth, contextualizing the road trip and re-contextualizing *Tarnation* in important ways. *Walk Away Renee* has the youthful energy of *Tarnation* and the earlier film's dynamic style, but through his remarkable patience with his mother's mental illness (and the other demands of family life), Caouette has been able to produce a deeply adult film, one that models loyalty and familial love in a way that few other films have.

I interviewed Caouette again, about his life and career since *Tarnation*, at his home in Queens in April of 2012; we expanded and refined the entire interview online in the months that followed, though I present it here in two parts.

### Fall 2006

*MacDonald*: Your consciousness of cinema seems to have developed unusually early. This is clear in *Tarnation*.

*Caouette*: A lot of people say that they don't remember their childhood, but I have very specific and strong visual memories of being 3 years old. Of course, there's always the risk of false memories and who knows what can happen along the way that can make people believe that they remember their lives that far back, when they don't. But I really *do* remember and I don't know why that is, because my life wasn't particularly traumatic prior to my being 4. I remember how things were before the “trauma” happened. I use quotes

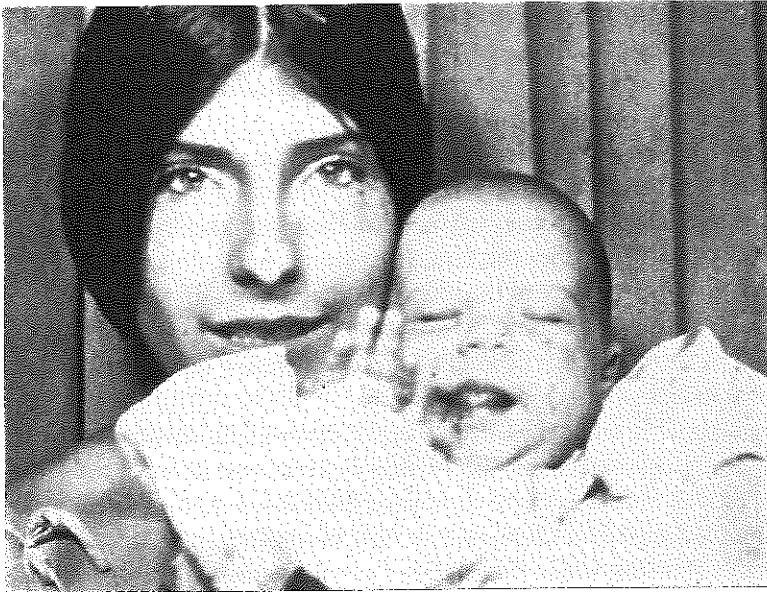


FIGURE 29 Renee Leblanc and baby Jonathan, in Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2003).  
Source: Courtesy Jonathan Caouette.

because it's all in retrospect now, and as a child I didn't really think of what happened to me as traumatic (figure 29).

When you grow up in an atmosphere where you're a wild child raised by wolves, you learn that what to you is just normal is socially unacceptable to some people. The "trauma" that did happen to me as a kid happened on such a consistent basis that I guess if I were hard-wired differently, it could have pushed me in a completely different direction. For whatever reason, my experiences made me want to create and to make movies. That was my saving grace.

About the time I turned 5, just after I got out of the foster home system—I was in at least *four* foster homes—I already knew, just *knew*, that I had to be a part of what was happening on television and in the movies. Of course, it was a very nebulous, abstract idea at that point.

The first movie I remember seeing in a theater was *Benji* [1974]. A movie that I remember as a bit traumatizing was *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* [1977]: I'll never forget how I felt when the kid is getting sucked away by that orange light in the door; that imagery still haunts me. Obviously, it had to do with my separation from my mother.

When I was 11 years old, I begged my grandfather to buy me a Super-8 camera from a pawn shop. Even though it was well into the 1980s, you could still get Super-8 film from the electronics department at Target.

When I was first making movies, it was mostly about emulating horror films, my favorite genre. I was always into horror, especially films like *The*

*Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1974], *The Exorcist* [1973], and the horror films that were on late night TV in the early 1980s when I was growing up: the original *Stepford Wives* [1975] and *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* [1971]. Those films always seemed to be shot on this wonderful, creepy film stock that isn't used anymore, film stock that gave the films an almost documentary feel, while at the same time being over-lit. And the acting was way over the top.

*MacDonald*: That was a powerful, regenerative moment for horror film.

*Caouette*: It really was, because nobody had quite gotten the formula yet: "formula" is a horrible word when it comes to art or cinema. Everything is just a doppelganger of everything else right now.

*MacDonald*: Also, there was a new level of violence in horror films. One of the great film-going experiences of my life happened at *Dawn of the Dead* [1978]; the audience I was with was completely freaked out by the shocks in the film and we spontaneously became zombies as we left the theater and took over the street.

*Caouette*: Oh, those Romero films are wonderful; I just got the boxed set. I love *Dawn of the Dead*, which I saw for the first time at midnight on a double bill with *The Warriors* [1979, directed by Walter Hill] at one of the old General Cinemas in Houston. My grandfather and I didn't get home until four in the morning! I loved the whole shopping mall idea in *Dawn*. That was when zombies still moved slowly; now they *run* after you. Nobody has the attention span for zombies anymore.

The first film I made was an imitation of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. You can actually see bits of that film in *Tarnation*: there's a scene where you see a small figure wearing a mask that's turned inside out—I was a would-be Leatherface—and my mother is the Sally Hardesty character.

Around that time I also made *The Ankle Slasher*; the working title was "The Techniques and Sciences of Eva." It was about a girl who could morph into two or three people at the same time and also occasionally into inanimate objects: you wouldn't be able to tell her apart from other objects in the room. Looking back, it's kind of an interesting idea, and maybe also an insight into some disassociative symptoms I experienced at some point—"disassociation" is the key word for all of my upbringing I think, because I tended to disassociate myself from what I really knew. Even at a young age, I think I may have had enough insight to realize that something was a little off kilter in my family and that my life was substantially different from most kids' lives.

Sorry, I keep having to remind myself that interviews are not therapy sessions! You can shut me up when I start ranting. I'm just thinking that when you have a sordid upbringing and you don't really have a strong family foundation—that is, people to set boundaries for you, people to explain things to you, to tell you what's going on in the world—you develop a very abstract version of the world around you.

During the period when I was beginning to make movies, I was enrolled in the Big Brother program in Houston and was lucky enough to be matched up with long time film critic, Jeff Millar. With his illustrator-partner Bill Hinds, Jeff still has a syndicated comic strip called "Tank McNamara." I was Jeff's Little Brother from when I was 11 until I was 15 and have maintained a friendship with him and his family ever since. Jeff was a wonderfully encouraging person. Instead of our going on the typical outings to baseball and football games that most Big Brothers would take their Little Brothers to, I would tag along with Jeff to the first-run screenings that he would review.

When Jeff wasn't around, I'd be at the local Landmark Theater (the River Oaks). I think I must have made friends with most of the people that worked at their snack bar; they let me sneak into films. River Oaks had an amazing repertory calendar, sometimes different films every day, from *Blue Velvet* [1986] to *Au Revoir les enfants* [1987], from the early Merchant Ivory films to John Waters, Peter Greenaway, Jim Jarmusch, Gus Van Sant. At home I was watching Beta and VHS bootlegs of films by Paul Morrissey, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Derek Jarman, John Cassavetes, and enjoying *Repo Man* [1984, directed by Alex Cox], *Andy Warhol's Bad* [1977, Jed Johnson], *The Brother from Another Planet* [1984, John Sayles], *The Garden* [1990, Derek Jarman], *Home of the Brave* [1986, Laurie Anderson]. . . too many to name.

I know this will interest you: when I was about 12, I went to the library and got the John Waters *Trash Trio* book [New York: Vintage, 1988]. I still have it. In the back of *Trash Trio* is "Flamingos Forever," the script for the would-be sequel to *Pink Flamingos* [1972]. For a 12-year-old to be into John Waters would probably not be as amazing now—though it's still *inappropriate*. I think, "Yeegads, I would *never* let my kids watch *Pink Flamingos!*" On the other hand, there's so much information available, how could they *not* see it?

*MacDonald*: Last semester, I pushed one of my classes at Hamilton College to do an "underground" midnight screening of *Pink Flamingos*. The students had heard of the film, but none of them had actually seen it. The film shook them up.

*Caouette*: It stands the test of time!

*MacDonald*: In some ways it's *more* powerful now than it was then.

*Caouette*: You're right. Now, everybody is into looking so pretty and perfect, and everybody in that movie is just god-awful and hideous—and there's the whole dancing asshole thing!

*MacDonald*: Yes, unbelievable!

Anyway, so you're 12, finding your way into John Waters. . .

*Caouette*: Yes, I was friends with this teenage drag queen named Kip who did a dead-on impersonation of Divine; he was about three hundred pounds and even sort of looked like Divine. And there was a twenty-something woman friend of mine, named Varna, who kind of looked like Mink Stole.

I was always hanging out with people who were much older than me—again, this goes back to my unstructured upbringing. I didn't know if these people could act, but I told them, "You're going to be Mink Stole and you're gonna be Divine!"

So I was getting ready to do this film, and Jeff gave me a bit of seedling money for Super-8 film stock. Super-8 was already archaic; people were getting the big VHS video cameras, but somehow I had already realized that film looks better than videotape and I wanted to make things on film. When I would sit in a theater with my grandfather, I loved the snap you hear when the reel changes; I was fixated on film.

A couple weeks before I was ready to shoot *Flamingos Forever*, I wrote to John Waters to ask his permission. I don't know how I found his address; he might have been listed in the Baltimore directory. I was too afraid to do the phone call myself; my friend Joan made the phone call, but John wasn't there. We sent him a handwritten letter asking permission, and a couple of weeks later he wrote back explaining that the lawyers would never go for it (he didn't know how old I was or anything), and he said, "You should make a film with your own script one day and I'm sure it will be great."

I was devastated, but I totally respected his wishes. I ended up using the film stock to make other films, including *The Ankle Slasher*. It's strange how life works: though I couldn't have imagined anything like this at that time, only a few years later I would have the absolute pleasure and honor of actually hanging out with John Waters and Paul Morrissey!

I saw the films of Morrissey and John Waters as license for exploring my own family members, who had always seemed like real-life beautiful characters to me: my grandmother, a southern Ruth Gordon with a few drops of Edith Massey; my mother, a kind of Edie Sedgwick stirred together with the beautiful wackiness of Andrea Feldman. I created these inner mythologies as a way to make sense of my surroundings.

The second camera I got was a dinosaur VHS loaner (from Bill Hinds through Jeff) with the VCR suitcase for the tape that came with it and the attached umbilical cord. I used it periodically as my early interest in horror began to metamorphose into other genres. This was the period where I was staging performances of Southern Gothic battered women, disheveled drug-addicted female folk singers, and down-and-out street kids. I would recite various monologues to the camera in my attic bedroom, and I began to follow my grandparents around the house and film my mother whenever she would visit.

All of this was my "film school."

*MacDonald*: As far as I can tell, you've always been a performer, but at some point you knew you were making a larger film about your life, and I'm wondering when that was.

*Caouette*: I was probably cognizant that I was working on something about my life when I was about 14.

You know, I wasn't filming myself or my family as often or as much as people might think. I wasn't obsessive about keeping the camera on all the time or filming things on a day-to-day basis. There *were* periods here and there when there *was* an element of obsession surrounding my filming, but not so many of those. *Tarnation* was created out of only 180 hours of footage, mixed with photos and audio-cassette-tape sound.

When I was 16, something really started brewing. I did a makeshift edit of a lot of what I had done up to that point, and called the result *Sugar Water*. I was always looking at what I'd already done, and I guess at 21 or 22 I began to want to make use of all this stuff; I wanted to *do* something with it, but I didn't know what. When I was 28, I began to write a screenplay that had various working titles: one was "Tarnation"; another was "The Day I Disappeared"; and the third was "Lucid." I wanted to place my footage within the context of this fictitious screenplay that had to do with me and David and my mother all living together in New York. At the time, I could never have imagined that my mother would actually come to live with us!

This screenplay was like a *Twilight Zone* episode. I thought I could utilize my footage in a safe way that didn't need to allude to the fact that these characters were real, as flashbacks and flash-forwards in a story that had to do with parallel universes and different layers of reality, blah blah blah—a very vague script, although I think if it had been tweaked a little, it could have turned into something. I sat with the screenplay and the three titles for awhile, and in the end decided that the screenplay and the footage were two different entities. I put the screenplay away and started thinking more seriously about the footage as its own thing.

Then, jumping ahead again, David's Aunt Vicky bought us an iMac, the bubble-looking computer, which had iMovie, this little editing program that you could use to make movies. Very exciting. I began to obsessively digitize everything I'd shot on Super-8 and on VHS and Betamax, maybe a hundred and forty hours of stuff, including photographs that I'd recorded on Hi8 video. I digitized the audio diaries that I'd kept as a kid when I was in the psychiatric hospital after smoking those joints laced with formaldehyde, and left-over answering machine tapes of people leaving messages—everything I could find. My first masters.

Around this time, I acted in an NYU thesis film that was loosely based on the Malcolm McDowell character in *If. . .* [1969, directed by Lindsay Anderson]. In the film my character is bludgeoned on the head, and on the day that we shot that sequence, I'm in this purple velvet suit covered in blood in an abandoned asbestos-ridden psychiatric hospital. This abandoned hospital was a perfect place to make a movie and I decided that

I wanted to make my own movie in between the takes of the movie that I had agreed to act in. I had secretly called my friends over to the set, and I shot tons of footage of us doing little performances in the electro-shock therapy room and the morgue, covered in blood. David was a big participant in some of the morgue scenes.

I took this hospital footage and coupled it with some childhood stuff, a few photographs, and some footage of my son, Joshua, who is jumping on the bed in front of a little Willie Nelson poster, and I guess the result was really the first version of *Tarnation*.

Gosh, there is so much more to this story—but I'll save the long version for a book. I also made a 30-minute film called *The Hospital* that had something to do with a schizophrenic who has died in a psychiatric facility; his soul is in purgatory and he's slowly realizing that he's dead—sort of *Jacob's Ladder-y* [1990, directed by Adrian Lyne]. Joshua plays me. The soundtrack was by John Denver and Bread. That was the first thing I actually cut on iMovie. Parts of these projects are included in the denouement of *Tarnation*.

*MacDonald*: When did you have a son?

*Caouette*: I had Josh when I was 22 years old. He's 11 now. He lives in San Antonio with his mom, Joan. We have a very good relationship and I'm looking forward to the day, which I think is going to be sooner rather than later because David and I are getting into a position where we might be able to get a bigger place, when they can move here and all of us can be together. It could be a little odd, but I think it's do-able. I'm trying to encourage Joan, who wants to be a comedy sketch writer, to get to New York. She's very talented. Josh is an unbelievably bright kid. He was born right around the time my grandmother died. . .

*MacDonald*: That's the baby we see with your grandmother in *Tarnation*?

*Caouette*: Yes, he was just a little button back then.

*MacDonald*: So what happened next?

*Caouette*: I began thinking to myself, if I want to tell the story of our lives, what song would I choose to accompany my visuals? I decided I wanted the film to start off as a kind of cheesy wedding video, which is basically what iMovie was designed for.

*MacDonald*: The "Once upon a time" story at the beginning of *Tarnation*?

*Caouette*: Yes, "Once upon a time in a small Texas town. . ." This was well before my mother overdosed on lithium, and before what I was working on was called "Tarnation."

*MacDonald*: That section of the film is beautifully done. Very few filmmakers handle the pacing of visual text as well as you do.

*Caouette*: Thank you! That was one of my biggest worries. I wanted to make sure that things happened fast, but not so fast that you wouldn't get it. I wanted to make sure that certain words or phrases, even though they're childlike words and phrases, appeared at certain particularly beautiful moments in

the song; it all had to be in syncopation. It's one of my favorite moments in the film. I stuck in a Nick Drake cover by Scott Appel called "Bird Flew By," a great, great song.

So the idea was to start things off with the kind of video you would see at a bar mitzvah, a historical anniversary kind of thing, which would then start to become dark. Bits of story would come in and you would realize, "Hey, I'm not watching a cheesy wedding video!" As you know, things get darker as I go through my mother's shock treatments, her marriage to my father, me being born, our horrible trip to Chicago. . .

The original version of the film, which is two-and-a-half-hours long, segues all the way into my mother's second marriage and my half-brother, David. Later in the editing process, a lot of people, and I myself, agreed that the story of my son and of my half-brothers had to become sub-plots in the film or just quiet references. I don't really have a strong relationship with my two half-brothers. David lives in San Diego with his wife and kids; Jason, who I've only met once in my life, is from my father's second marriage. (I think my father has been married many times; in fact he was married to Jason's mother *while* he was married to my mother!). In any case, it became clear that these relationships were going to distract from what the story eventually became.

So I did that first sequence. Then I went a little further with it and created a 35-minute piece that I felt really satisfied with; it was called "Lucid." I took it around and showed it to my grandfather and my mother, and to old friends down in Houston. It was nice to get feedback. I also showed it to Jeff, whose reaction was: "I'd like to see more!" And I thought, "Yeah, so would I!"

I had moved to New York in 1997 and by this time had done various acting jobs. I'd gone to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, an egregiously expensive thing to be paying for—it was like a grueling psychotherapy session. All in all, not a good experience. I ended up doing a lot of work in rock musicals. I was in a really cool, off-off-Broadway version of *Hair*, hailed in the *Village Voice* as the best *Hair* since the original. James Rado came in and supervised and it was a lot of fun. I was also an understudy for the Frank N. Furter role in *The Rocky Horror Show* in Europe for a couple of years, and I did some commercials, nothing major. I was living hand-to-mouth in New York, barely surviving and getting very, very fatigued.

Then I got a job as a sort of glorified doorman at a place called Mikimoto America on Fifth Avenue, a very subservient job where I had to stand and stare at Trump Tower for eight hours a day. The most torturous thing about it was that there was a clock right in front of me, so I *literally* watched the clock—talk about time slowing down! I took the job because it paid quite a ridiculous amount of money for what it was, and I needed to pay the rent. I'd recently stopped auditioning and was about to throw in the towel—not with life, but with living in New York.

One day I go to a local bodega and pick up a copy of *Backstage*. I didn't realize until I got home that it was the previous week's issue, and I was especially frustrated to learn that John Cameron Mitchell had been holding auditions for "The Sex Film Project." The stipulation for the audition was that you had to create a video and send it in, along with your head shot and resume. It looked like the auditions had already passed and I was devastated; I'd seen an early club version of *Hedwig and the Angry Itch* and the movie [2001], and really liked what John was doing.

I thought, "Maybe I'll just go down and see what's happening." I dug up an old head shot that I thought might get me in the door—it no longer looked like me but I'd held onto it. And I wrote what John now calls my Cry-for-Help letter (ha ha), something to the effect of "Dear John, I saw your ad in *Backstage* and I know a week has passed, and I've never done this under any other circumstance, ever, and I would never, but . . ." I didn't approach him like a groupie or anything like that, though it probably could have been perceived that way. There was something urgently psychic about the writing of this letter. Instead of saying, "Hey, can I still come and audition for you?" I began, "There is a reason that I need to meet you; I don't know what that reason is yet, and it doesn't necessarily have to do with your film."

I immediately set my video camera up, did an interview with myself, and integrated it with this montage of different pop cultural references I was into and with a monologue I did when I was 11. I threw in an older monologue from Eric Bogosian that I'd used in my video, *The Fan*, and I included footage of my boyfriend David and me being intimate together. I stayed up all night, editing all of this together to a Le Tigre song and a Joni Mitchell song—altogether it was about fifteen minutes. The next morning I went to John's house. I told him I was an actor and a filmmaker making a film called "Tarnation," and said, "I'm hand-delivering this video. Would it be okay if I actually sat down and watched it with you? I'm really tired."

I wanted to see his reaction to the video because there was some pretty crazy stuff in there. I'm sure it was awkward for him, but I think he liked it. The next day I left for Texas—I don't remember why, something I was going to help my grandfather with. While I was in Texas, John and I corresponded by email: he wanted me to be involved on some level, but he didn't yet know how; he asked me to come to the final call-back when I returned from Texas.

When I got back, I began going to these improvisational workshops with John; it was the coolest, most wonderful audition process I've ever gone through. And John ended up calling me back to audition four or five times. Now, looking back, I don't think he really wanted to cast me; maybe he thought I was a little too complicated: he knew I had a plethora of baggage—we had talked about it and it was probably evident in the auditions. He might have wanted to use me as a stimulus for the other people around me: there

were always two other people in the room interacting and when those two would go, two new people would come in, but I would stay. John and I became good friends as a result of the process.

Not long after the auditions, I called my mother. She hadn't called in about three days, and for my mother not to call me in three days was the equivalent of not hearing from a normal loved one for weeks—she usually called every day. Finally, after five days or so, my grandfather picked up the phone in her apartment. He had just gotten over a major car accident and was having major cognitive problems. He told me, "Your mother's here, yes, and I'm not sure what's wrong with her; she's been laying down here for two days with a blank expression on her face and she's not talking to me."

I asked him to put the phone up to her ear, and I remember screaming into the phone, hoping that she would respond, but my grandfather came back on and said, "She's not responding." I ended up calling 911 in Houston. Apparently a first set of ambulance drivers arrived, and my grandfather opened the door and said, "Oh, she doesn't need any help; she's just sick and has a cold, so you guys can go away, I don't know who called the ambulance." My grandfather must have looked savvy enough to turn them away.

I called them again, and said, "Please, could you just go into the house; there's something strange going on. Get on the phone with me once you're there." So when the second ambulance driver called, his exact words were, "Is she always like this? I mean she's just lying here and rolling around on the floor. We tried to get her to sit her up and she collapsed. She's defecated all over herself; does she do this a lot?"

I must have had seventeen heart attacks that night. There's nothing like feeling that disempowered, being on the other side of the world with insane things happening. I thought it might be a stroke. A day later I found out that she had taken too much lithium. It wasn't a suicide attempt; she'd run out of one medication, never filled the prescription for whatever reason, and felt she could over-compensate by popping an extra lithium or two a day. The crazy thing about that medication is that if it goes one notch above the therapeutic level, it can become toxic.

As you know, all this is re-enacted in *Tarnation*.

I continued to document aspects of my mom's recovery. There was a lot I *didn't* film: my mother lying in bed in the hospital, completely aphasic and that kind of stuff. I was also taking care of my grandad. I ended up calling Adult Protective Services to make sure he was safe and had services set up. And once I knew my mom was going to recover, I moved her back into my grandfather's house and remained with them for months.

*MacDonald*: Was the pumpkin scene in *Tarnation* filmed during the recovery?

*Caouette*: The pumpkin scene is actually not a result of my mother's post lithium overdose. That was filmed during an earlier time when my mother

had been off the lithium and was being re-acclimated to it. But I used the scene to express what my mom's changes were like.

There are a number of little cheats in *Tarnation*, cheats with time, to help the film make sense cinematically. I don't want to give all of them away, but here's one more example: I had filmed my son when he was 4 years old and used that footage as a stand-in for me during the foster home sequence.

I decided to take my mother back to New York. Even though she had accidentally overdosed on lithium, I was scared that she would do it again. I set her up here in my apartment, and David and I continued to take care of her.

During all of this, I'd continued to work on the film. I was telling stories derived from my life and my mother's life, and I thought maybe my mother's overdose and recovery could be a good ending to these stories. I was getting more ambitious about making the film.

Soon after getting back from Texas, I met the new roommate of a dear friend of mine who lived just around the corner. His name was David and he had come from UC-Santa Cruz to be an intern at the Mix Film Festival, a gay and lesbian experimental film festival that was to take place at Anthology Film Archives. By this time, I had about 45 minutes of my film, pretty much in the form you see it in *Tarnation*. The new-neighbor David came over and I showed him what I had. He told me he was working with a guy by the name of Stephen Winter and said, "You should finish this; there's a deadline for submissions for Mix in about three and a half weeks." When I'd shown John Cameron Mitchell my audition tape, John had said, "You should meet my friend Stephen; he's a great guy. He's the programmer for the Mix Film Festival. Maybe you should submit this to him." The chances of John *and* this new roommate of a friend around the corner from me in a city of a gazillion people, *both* saying the same thing to me felt beyond the realm of the coincidental.

I started feverishly piecing the film together. The process of editing on the iMovie 1 program—having the computer crash over and over and over again and having to rebuild sections of the film from scratch—was exhausting. I was using an iMac bubble 1999–2000 computer, without any education—I didn't even know that external hard-drives existed. I'd build a sequence of 10- to 15-minutes—this would take me about 48 hours—and sometimes those sequences would crumble right before my eyes. In time I became savvy about what the computer's threshold was and could stop before that happened and export that chunk digitally to a Hi8 tape. Later I created transitions between all the 15-minute intervals, then re-exported all those chunks and intervals onto two VHS tapes.

During the course of this editing hell, I was in touch with Stephen Winter, begging him to give me extra time—the official deadline had passed. "I can't show you anything yet and I can't even explain what's going on, but please

give me a few more days." I ended up rushing to the Mix Festival office with two VHS tapes just before the doors closed. The initial cut was 2½ hours.

Stephen called me around midnight that night to say, "I just got through the first tape; I'm going to take a break to go smoke a couple of cigarettes"—he was being very personal, very emotional; he sounded out of breath. Then he calls me back around 3:00 in the morning and leaves a message on my machine: he's completed the second tape and thinks the film is amazing and wants to centerpiece it for the Festival. He also told me there was no way that they were going to be able to centerpiece a 2½-hour film by an unknown filmmaker. The next day we negotiated a two-hour limit, including opening and closing credits.

Stephen notified Brian Cates who had worked with Todd Haynes on one of my favorite films of all time, *Safe* [1995], and Brian came over to watch *Tarnation* with me, and gave me some great notes, as did Stephen. Over the course of two weeks I cut the film down to two hours.

Here's another of the beyond-serendipitous events that were happening during this incredible moment. In the original cut there was a scene where a friend of mine is shaving another friend's head and talking about *Grey Gardens* [1975]. When I taped that conversation I hadn't seen *Grey Gardens*, but by the time I was making *Tarnation*, I knew the Maysles Brothers film and even had the feeling that what I was working on might in some weird, indirect way be compared to *Grey Gardens*. I decided to utilize that scene in the Mix cut because I thought it was an interesting, if indirect point of reference.

At some point during those weeks, another friend was going to perform at a party, and I agreed to let her use some fantasmagoric visual sequences from my film as a backdrop. The night of the party I got into a cab and this cab driver is talkative. He's like, "What do you do?" and I say, "I'm a filmmaker, maybe more of a video artist," and told him about my movie; and he says, "I was in a movie." "Oh, what movie?" And he says, "It's called *Grey Gardens*." It was Jerry, the gardener in *Grey Gardens*, driving the cab!

A few days before the Mix Festival premiere, I FedExed a copy of the VHS tape to John who was in Portland, Oregon, tweaking his screenplay for *Short Bus* [2006]. I wanted to see what he thought—maybe he'd be interested in giving the film a quote. Apparently he passed the tape on to Gus Van Sant who was living just around the corner from him and a few days after that, Stephen Winter came over with the news that John and Gus wanted to come on as producers to endorse the film. And Stephen wanted to come on as a producer too to utilize his contacts to help shepherd the film into the world. Stephen helped me find Micky Cattrell, a wonderful publicist (in *My Own Private Idaho* [1991, directed by Gus Van Sant] Micky's the john who makes River Phoenix scrub his house down!). Stephen was also integral in helping me get the film into Sundance.

For Sundance, we were encouraged to tighten the film even further, and we got it down to about 88 minutes.

The ending was changed between the Mix Festival version and the Sundance version. For the current ending I use my grandfather's story about an angel touching people underneath the nose to have them forget their previous lives before their life in this world. I come downstairs, cover my mother with a blanket, and touch her on that spot beneath her nose.

In the Mix Festival ending, I used the scene of my grandfather and me having a heated argument; my mother is in the background. It's where my granddad yells, "Take the camera away! Take the camera away!" as he's reaching into his pocket for a pen. About two weeks after we had that argument, I asked my grandfather and my mom to dress in the same clothes, and I dressed the table in exactly the same way I had filmed it before. I re-shot that moment, this time asking my grandfather to reach into his pocket and pull out the gun that you see earlier in the film, point the gun at me and pull the trigger. He does. The camera drops and the film goes into my point of view as I'm dying: I'm in this white, heavenly looking place that has a weird sort of *Eraserhead* [1977, directed by David Lynch] feeling. I'm naked and David approaches me, wearing angel wings, and puts his finger under *my* nose. In that ending *I'm* the one to forget everything.

*Tarnation* actually screened that way at the Mix Festival, which was cool and weird but also just awful—I'm so glad that's not the ending of the film now.

## Spring 2012

*MacDonald*: When we talked before, the big question for me was, what does somebody do when their first film is their whole life? I know *Tarnation* doesn't cover your *whole* life. . . .

*Caouette*: It doesn't, and it's funny, a journalist asked me the same exact thing the other day, and I didn't know what to say then either. I've just kept going in whatever way I can. Since we last talked, I did *All Flowers in Time* in 2010; I worked on *All Tomorrow's Parties* [2009], a feature-length concert film—kind of a big anarchic collaborative project about the All Tomorrow's Parties concerts; and I've just finished *Walk Away Renee*, another film about my mother and me.

Two major things happened almost immediately after I finished *Tarnation*. I began to receive loads of scripts and even some flat-out offers to direct "ready-to-go" film projects—all of which I eventually turned down or opted out of either due to unusual circumstances surrounding the projects or because I found that the production infrastructure didn't seem like a fit. I was feeling a sense of paralysis.

Coupled with the what-am-I-gonna-do-after-*Tarnation* feeling came enormous life-changing circumstances. I don't want to delve too much into the details, but I ended up becoming a more or less full-time caretaker for both my grandfather—my grandparents raised me so my grandfather was essentially my father—and for my mother who has schizoaffective disorder.

My boyfriend David was and still is helping me maintain this very unusual scenario, but my entire universe became dedicated to making sure that my mother and grandfather were safe and taken care of and could find some peace and that we could have a bit of normal family life together. It's devastating to see the people you love in institutional settings, even when those settings are "nice." I kept my grandfather with me as long as I could, until his aging issues became too overwhelming to handle even with David's help. I had to place him in a nursing home in Texas, where he passed in 2008. Just after all of this, my 16-year-old-going-on-30 son Josh moved in with me.

So from 2008 on, I was juggling the responsibility of continuing to look after my mother while being a full-time dad!

*MacDonald:* I saw *All Flowers in Time* at the New York Film Festival. A strange, surreal film. Your grandfather is in it.

*Caouette:* *All Flowers in Time* evolved out of another project. A friend who was commissioned to work on "One Dream Rush," a project for 42 Below Vodka, was asking 42 filmmakers that he admired to make 42-second films, based on dreams. He asked me and an amazing group of other filmmakers—James Franco, Harmony Korine, David Lynch, Abel Ferrara, Jonas Mekas, Kenneth Anger, Mike Figgis, Charles Burnett. I was geeked to be part of a project that included those people, humbled and grateful and all of that, so I asked Chloe Sevigny to come to my apartment and we made our 42-second film in one day.

"One Dream Rush" premiered in Beijing and also showed at Cannes. I don't know what became of the series; I don't even know if the website is still up. There was also an installation, which I never saw, something along the lines of 42 LTV screens with all the 42-second films looping and a big vodka bottle in front.

As I was working on my contribution to "One Dream Rush," it occurred to me that some of what I was doing with Chloë was similar to things I had asked my grandfather to do years before for footage I still had. A plethora of my footage, including some that I remembered as being experimental and interesting, had been residing on an external hard drive for years, and being the mildly obsessive person I am, the notion that this footage was just "collecting dust" made me want to do something with it.

I decided to see if these two things—what I'd shot with my grandfather and what I shot with Chloë—somehow complemented each other and could be constructed to feel like a dream-illogical world. Basically, I just mashed the

new stuff and the old stuff together and created an elongated version of that surreal 42-second film.

I don't really know where the imagery itself came from—psychically, I mean. I think a lot of it is derived from my own childhood fear of the dark. As you can tell, *All Flowers in Time* is a nod to David Lynch, Brian DePalma, William Friedkin, and Alfred Hitchcock. After it was shown at the New York Film Festival, it went to Sundance, and was at the Short Film Corner in Cannes. It was an experiment that could maybe have been part of something bigger.

*MacDonald:* How did you become involved with *All Tomorrow's Parties*?

*Caouette:* The All Tomorrow's Parties festivals had been going on for about ten years and I was asked to work on a documentary. My first inkling was that films about music festivals are a dime a dozen. One of my early ideas was to do something different, a sort of post-punk *Nashville* where we focused in on maybe six different characters and used the festivals as the backdrop for their stories. I don't know if this would have worked, but it would have been more interesting than what we ended up with.

We did some shooting and encouraged people who had been at the festivals to contribute their own footage as well. Ultimately, the process became so collaborative that I decided I had to opt out of saying that I was *the* director, and in the end, I only took a co-directing credit. As I worked on the film, I felt that it was becoming less a documentary than an electronic press kit for the festival. The people who were paying for the film wanted their own pick of bands, because a lot of the bands were on their label. And there was just so much footage. I took a stab at editing, then just withdrew from the project—there were too many cooks in the kitchen. I was a gun for hire and eventually had to accept that. That was my first and last concert doc I think.

You know, every project I've worked on since *Tarnation* has been a completely different set of circumstances with different personalities and entities to work with and work around: challenging and in the end not so satisfying. I don't know whether sometime down the road this recent work will seem part of some vast tapestry, or will just be a series of things I regret having done.

I don't feel that *Tarnation* was all that exceptional—though I've been told it is. I *do* think it was unprecedented in some ways, and it's the one project I do feel satisfied with. After *Tarnation* came out, I would joke that someday I was going to make *Reintarnation*, but never did I see myself actually doing another personal film.

*MacDonald:* How did the idea of making *Walk Away Renee* evolve?

*Caouette:* The genesis was back in 2004 when I was doing press for *Tarnation*. I met a gentleman by the name of Pierre-Paul Puljiz on the rooftop of the Noga Hilton in Cannes. He had interviewed me for *Tarnation*, and we'd forged a friendship. We worked on a very small project together for French TV and talked about doing something more ambitious one day. At one point, we began working on a project that involved heartfelt stories having to do with

emotionally disturbed children. We worked on the project for a number of months, but it turned out that there were unusual legalities involved, as well as some creative control challenges, so he and I opted out. Having already invested time and money in that project, we began to talk about a new project.

During this whole period, I'd been attending film festivals promoting my films and serving on various juries for films in competition. There was an inspiring film festival in Warsaw. I'd been invited as a jury member and had an opportunity to sit through some really amazing, very slow-burn cinema-verite films: *Le Quattro Volte* [2010, Michelangelo Frammartino], *Mama* [2012, Andres Muschietti], *I Travel Because I Have to, I Come Back Because I Love You* [2009, Karim Ainouz, Marcelo Gomez], among them. I was mesmerized by these films. And conversations with Gus Van Sant turned me on to Béla Tarr. I became attracted to idea of slow cinema and wanted to think about a project that could work with that rhythm, as opposed to the frenetic pace of *Tarnation*.

Because of the time constraints around the release of *Tarnation*, many aspects of my story had needed to be cut out. My son is by no means a subplot in my life, but there was no place for him in *Tarnation*. Also, I felt that the dynamics between my mother and me hadn't been fully represented. So in early 2010, when my mother, who was in a difficult and lonely situation in an assisted living facility in Texas, was administered the wrong medication, I decided I wanted her here with me and thought: Wouldn't it be cool, just as an experiment, to shoot a real-time road movie with Renee? I was interested in exploring the mundane, the quiet, the solitude of a road trip to New York (figure 30).



FIGURE 30 On the road in Jonathan Caouette's *Walk Away Renee* (2013).

Source: Courtesy Jonathan Caouette.

The original idea was that we were just two regular people, one of them taking care of the other. I wanted to show my mother a good time and have her spend a few weeks at my apartment in NYC with me and Josh before I took her to the new assisted living facility upstate. I arranged for a crew of two guys to shoot the road trip sequences, then went down to Texas to move Renee, and we shot the six-day trip. The road movie was going to be all that there was of this film—virtually no back-story.

At one point, the road trip footage was going to be one of several extras for an opulent DVD that would be released for the ten-year anniversary of *Tarnation*—along with a series of self-contained episodes that hadn't been included in the original film, including one about Josh. But the road movie began to snowball into the idea of another feature.

During the time when we were editing the road movie, out of my fear of losing the unused footage I'd recorded years ago, I was digitizing most everything I'd ever shot: Super-8, VHS and Beta, Hi8, MiniDV, HD. This took months. (A sidebar of technological irony: digital editing has evolved so much since 2004 that while I was able to create *Tarnation* in just three and a half weeks on iMovie, it was now taking a year to do this the "right way" with a "real" editing program!)

In the end, I felt the road movie needed to be broken up with back story, and that I needed to take five steps backwards (in terms of re-presenting what we learn in *Tarnation*) in order to make ten leaps forward with the "companion piece to *Tarnation*" that was evolving. My biggest challenge was how to review the basic stories without repeating *Tarnation*. I did feel that I needed to re-adopt the same stylistic devices I'd developed for *Tarnation*: explanatory text on screen juxtaposed with montaged imagery cut to popular music, etcetera—this seemed a part of the past that was referenced in the back story. But I wanted to focus whatever I used now on my mother, not, as in so much of *Tarnation*, on myself. And the back-stories needed to be less drawn out than in *Tarnation* and then move past the year 2004 to hook us into the present of 2010.

My original slow-burn cinema-verite film idea was now just a memory.

The first editor I worked with on the film, Brian McAllister, and I decided to bring in a friend to help out with the story editing. The three of us decided that it would be a cool idea to tell the back-story of my mother in reverse—that would be different from *Tarnation*! I thought this was a wonderful idea—at least it sounded good on paper.

But as we developed this approach, I began to waver. I was still optimistic, but more and more, it seemed to me that we had painted ourselves into a structural corner. I should have pulled the emergency break. The film did get into Cannes with that original structure, but my mantra from now on is: Don't ever "finish" a film for the sake of rushing it into a film festival.

By the Cannes screening, I knew this original structure didn't work, and immediately after Cannes, working with Marc Vives—he edited *Putty Hill* [2010; Matthew Porterfield]—I reedited *Walk Away Renee*, making the film more linear, more chronological. The Cannes version included some fictional weirdness that I decided to get rid of. There's some fictional weirdness in the new version too, but it was heavier in the Cannes version. Marc was a dream to work with and had the patience and demeanor of an angel. He and I tackled the final version and brought it home, or at least as close to home as I think this film could go.

*MacDonald:* What's the fictional weirdness you're referring to?

*Caouette:* As I did in *Tarnation*, I wanted to include some moments that were obviously fictional, but were still conveying a truth. In *Tarnation*, the "fiction" was the re-enacted scenes that bookend the film and a few other more minor moments. With *Walk Away Renee*, I wanted to create a completely fictitious subplot. I thought, wouldn't it be interesting, perhaps even funny, if I began the film playing a fictitious version of myself who had hit rock bottom and was willing to take any strange job that he could (I'd had several fiction projects fizzle during that time). Suppose a cult had hired me to make a series of PSAs that involved people lip-syncing and dancing to songs, "outreach" videos to lure people into their sect? For this fictional subplot, I created a group who referred to themselves as the Cloudbusters (inspired by the Kate Bush song "Cloudbusting"). The Cloudbusters believed that they were from the 4th dimension and were desperately trying to get home. Wilhelm Reich, their demigod, had invented a machine called the Cloudbuster, a device that accumulated orgone energy from the clouds by producing rainstorms. The irony was going to be that this silly, surreal, over-the-top sect and their orgone therapy would contribute to the healing of my mother.

I'd planned on shooting a very ambitious version of this fictional story that involved about 200 cult members all living inside a former Episcopalian church, and I had asked Harmony Korine if he and his wife wanted to play the cult leaders. Harmony was interested and we had some exciting exchanges about it, but then the Cannes deadline constraints began to overshadow these plans. I ended up shooting a less ambitious version of this fictional plot, an echo of what I was originally going for. It was funny and strange, but only snippets ended up in the Cannes version.

About half way into the current version of *Walk Away Renee*, there's a moment from a TV show where Dr. Michio Kaku is talking about the possible existence of a Multiverse. This moment was going to be connected to the Cloudbusters' theory of the cosmos.

*MacDonald:* The story of your going from Houston to New York, and the whole struggle about what to do about your mother's meds, is intense. The trip seems to last...

*Caouette:* . . . forever! *Walk Away Renee* is a suspense thriller. It's also the story of an endless struggle with the most simple-minded bureaucracy—I'm dealing with similar bureaucracy now regarding my mom's apartment and her benefits from Social Security. It's always something.

*MacDonald:* Your phone conversations with Renee's doctors and the administrators at various facilities are reenactments, right?

*Caouette:* Are there aspects of those moments that seem like reenactments?

*MacDonald:* In the credits you list "replacements" for the voices of whoever was on the other end of the phone, so on that level it's clear that they're constructed conversations. But I'm just wondering whether when you get a phone call in the middle of the night, you have your camera ready to go and turn it on, or whether you generally just do what you do and then you come back and re-enact what went on.

*Caouette:* It's a mash-up. I don't want to say exactly what was mashed up but I can tell you that because of legalities and HIPAA laws you can't use the names and voices of the real doctors.

*MacDonald:* Your father, Steve Caouette, is a nice presence in *Tarnation*, but in *Walk Away Renee* you block out his face. Has he turned against your work?

*Caouette:* No, it's a personal thing. He's not as nice as I was coerced into making him out to be in *Tarnation*. I had to make some major sacrifices of the truth to have his likeness in *Tarnation* and other stuff happened after that that wasn't too great. I didn't want to bother interacting with him for *Walk Away Renee*.

*MacDonald:* Ultimately, of course, the journey you portray in *Walk Away Renee* is more than about you and your mother; it's really about what we do about people we love who are in trouble (figure 31).

*Caouette:* Yes! I think that some people don't understand how challenging it is to attain the kind of footage you see in *Tarnation* and *Walk Away Renee*. It's *hard* to be dealing with something emotionally while you're simultaneously filming and/or being filmed—and all the while trying to deflect the idea that you're part of some cheesy reality TV program. The most frustrating thing is that I'm trying feverishly to communicate a world, a feeling, but am not quite able to do it in *Walk Away Renee* the way I was able to do with *Tarnation*. Even in its umteenth version, the new film feels a little half-baked.

I hope at some point in the future I'll be able, again, to fully endorse *something* I do.

*MacDonald:* You know, Jonathan, whatever you think about your recent films, I think the thing you *can* say about yourself—and hardly *anybody* can honestly say this—is that through it all, you did the right things as a son, as a grandson, and as a father. *Tarnation* and especially *Walk Away Renee* model courage, persistence, and deep love for family and friends.

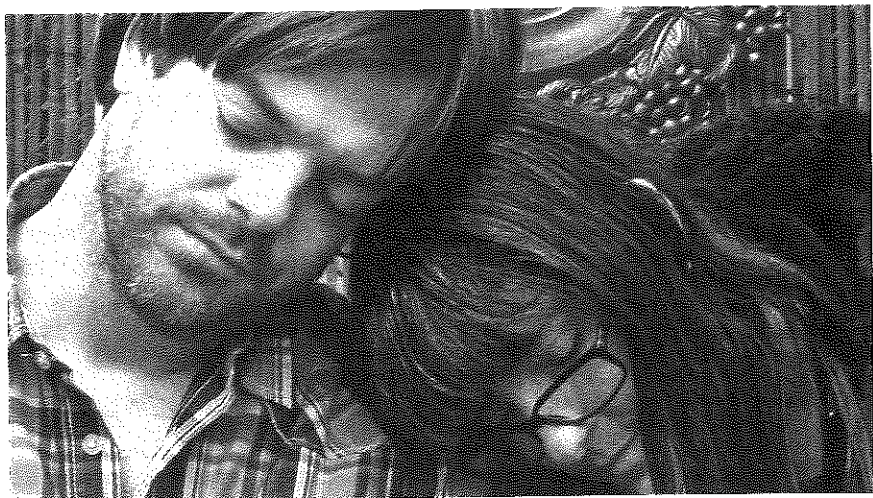


FIGURE 31 Jonathan Caouette and Renee Leblanc in *Caouette's Walk Away Renee* (2013).  
Source: Courtesy Jonathan Caouette.

*Caouette*: I've *tried*. You know, nobody in their right mind would ever make films like mine to get into the film industry or become famous. Those certainly weren't my reasons for making the films. I am very grateful that, as a result of making the films I've been able to make, I have a mild filmmaking career, but I don't long to be in the limelight. I'm uncomfortable with the whole process of marketing myself and my work. Even with all the excitement in 2004–2005 after *Tarnation* came out, I was relieved when it ended. At the same time, I can't wait to begin a new film!

As is obvious in the films, I don't come from money; I'm no trust fund kid. I don't have anything to sustain me beyond what I can come up with, and I've been helping to provide for other people most of my life. That's not a complaint or a cry for help; it's just the reality. My life circumstances and my hard-wiring have sent me in a particular direction, and I have to engage my circumstances the best that I can. Thank God for cinema because I swear I don't know where I would be had I not had a compulsive love for good movies.

## Paweł Wojtasik

"An artist," to quote food critic Anton Ego in Brad Bird's *Ratatouille* (2007), "can come from anywhere." Paweł Wojtasik, who spent his childhood in Poland, then moved to New York City by way of Tunisia, is evidence that an artist can also arrive on the scene at any point in life: Wojtasik emerged as an accomplished video artist during his late fifties, though his work, made in the aftermath of a mystic experience, often has a youthful glow. In fact, the power of his video pieces comes from the unusual combination of Wojtasik's "youthful" excitement at being able to make video and a disposition formed by decades of psychic struggle.

Roughly speaking, Wojtasik has produced two kinds of work: short pieces on highly unusual topics—sewage treatment (*Dark Sun Squeeze*, 2003), naked mole rats (*Naked*, 2005), pigs (*Pigs*, 2010), autopsy (*Nascentes Morimur*—"The moment we're born, we begin to die," 2009)—and large-scale installations on more overtly public issues, designed for gallery situations. For Wojtasik, making motion picture art is about facing fear—the fear of death, of pain, of loss—and the shorter pieces often confront the viewer's own fears, including the fear of seeing certain kinds of imagery on a motion picture screen. Wojtasik's mature films are shot in high-definition video, with a rigorously formal compositional sense; his imagery is as elegant as his topics are disconcerting, even repulsive. Nowhere is this more obvious than in *Pigs* (in several versions, but most recently 2010), which is the inverse of the convention in modern nature film of representing animals in such a way that whatever might repulse us is suppressed. In a sense, Wojtasik is a child of Stan Brakhage, especially that early strand in Brakhage's monumental tapestry dedicated to the confrontation of taboo. Indeed, *Nascentes Morimur* seems to be in conversation with Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1972).

Wojtasik's more publicly oriented work is contemplative in a somewhat different way. *The Aquarium* (2006) focuses on the way in which aquariums can contribute to the illusion that environmental damage to the world's oceans is of minor importance. The large-scale installations—*Below Sea Level* (2009), a 360-degree panoramic work created for MASS MoCA [Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art]; *At the Still Point* (2010), a five-screen work designed for Smack Mellon; and *Single Stream* (installed at the Museum of the Moving Image in 2013)—though less shocking than the shorter works, are contemplations of mortality and the human condition.