

**SPACES OF SELF AND MADNESS: AUTOBIOGRAPHY,  
AUTOFICTION, AND ANIMATION IN SIGNE BAUMANE'S *ROCKS  
IN MY POCKETS* AND *MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH MARRIAGE*  
*LOS ESPACIOS DEL YO Y LA LOCURA: AUTOBIOGRAFÍA,  
AUTOFICCIÓN Y ANIMACIÓN EN «ROCKS IN MY POCKETS» Y  
«MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH MARRIAGE» DE SIGNE BAUMANE***

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**ABSTRACT**

This article analyses the two feature-length films by Signe Baumane, *Rocks in My Pockets* (2014) and *My Love Affair with Marriage* (2022). For this purpose, this article discusses theories of autofiction and its representation in different forms and media and pays particular attention to the potential of animation to represent fictionalized selves. Drawing on genre and gender theories, as well as the study of memory and self, this article shows how Baumane dissects the constructedness of female and feminine selves and criticizes the oppressive nature of the individual and collective discourses around mental health and womanhood.

**Keywords:** Signe Baumane, autofiction, animation, gender, mental health

**RESUMEN**

Este artículo analiza los dos largometrajes de Signe Baumane, *Rocks in My Pockets* (2014) y *My Love Affair with Marriage* (2022). Para ello, este artículo examina las teorías de la autoficción y su representación en diferentes formas y medios, y presta especial atención al potencial de la animación para representar un yo ficcionalizado. Basándose en las teorías de género cinematográficos y de roles de género, así como en el estudio de la memoria y del yo, este artículo muestra cómo Baumane disecciona la construcción del yo femenino y critica la naturaleza opresiva de los discursos individuales y colectivos en torno a la salud mental y la feminidad.

**Palabras clave:** Signe Baumane, autoficción, animación, género, salud mental

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## 1. Introduction

Autobiography, autofiction, and the discourses around mental health, patriarchy and womanhood are core to Signe Baumane's feature animated films *Rocks in My Pockets* (2014) and *My Love Affair with Marriage* (2022). Baumane, a Latvian author currently residing in the United States, is the director of numerous short animated films and the above mentioned feature-length animated films. Her filmic production centres heavily on the lives of women and explores sexual relationships, sexuality, motherhood, bodily transformations, the violence inflicted to female bodies, and the constant threat that women face coming from insidious patriarchal oppression. The style of her animations often verges on the surrealist, and even nightmarish, and she repeatedly employs a documentary tone towards the study and representation of the bodies and lives of women. And, alongside the grotesque imagery and critical examination of gender constructions, Baumane also uses a humour that is often unsettling.

Baumane's feature films draw on her own experiences and those of her family, and become autobiographical and autofictional experiments. *Rocks in My Pockets* narrates the history of five women in her family, including herself, from the 1920s until the present time of the film, and their issues with mental health disorders, such as depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and suicide. Through the interrogation of what happened to previous generations of women, Baumane embarks on an exercise of introspection and explores family secrets, social constructs, the lives and rights and wrongs of women, genetics, as well as how to escape the seemingly unavoidable burden of mental disorder. *My Love Affair with Marriage* is a musical film through which Baumane initially wanted to explore her second marriage to a gender-bending man (as defined by the director herself in interviews, see Browoska, 2022). The director shared through her blog the story of how she married her second husband after only three weeks, which had a highly positive reception (Aguilar, 2023), but the film goes beyond this relationship to engage with what it means to grow up as a woman, the centrality of marriage, and what romantic love really is. In addition, the individual stories of Baumane and her family are depicted within the larger history of Latvia and Soviet rule and are inevitably intersected with collective discourses around the global ideologies of patriarchy.

This article provides a formal and textual analysis of *Rocks in My Pockets* and *My Love Affair with Marriage* in order to show how Baumane discloses through new lenses and imbues new meaning to the seemingly inescapable fates of history, genetics, and womanhood. For

this purpose, this work will first discuss autofiction in contemporary narratives in different formats and media, as well as the role of memory in autofiction and the boundaries and intersections of autobiography and autofiction in animation to explore how the truths of autofiction are narrated through a medium that lends itself to abstraction and surrealism in what could be termed animatic autofiction. This article will then focus on the analysis of Bauman's two films and their discourses on self, constructedness, and gender, and on how individual and collective memories work towards, and sometimes against, the foundation of intimate spaces from which to narrate the self.

## **2. Autofiction: the self through different media and formats**

Autofiction was proposed by Serge Dubrovsky on the cover of his novel *Fils* (1977) as a genre that deals with "Fiction, of strictly real events and facts", which suggested a way of dealing with Philippe Lejeune's theory on the autobiographical pact (1975), through which readers of an autobiographical text readily accept the identification of author, narrator, and character and its veracity. From the mid-seventies onwards, there has been a proliferation of narratives of self and the genre of autofiction has gained prominent popularity worldwide.

Selfhood, through self-portrayals, and through the exhibition and circulation of selves in different media, has become a definitory element of our contemporary zeitgeist. From the extremely positive self-marketing to the self-exposure of negative affects (Berryman and Kavka, 2018), others' lives and intimate spaces captivate audiences. The allure of the private may account, in part, for the increasing interest in autofiction, defined very succinctly by Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor (2022, p. 1) as "texts that have something to do with the self and with fiction". Marc Farrant (2022) locates the rise of autofiction at the beginning of the twenty-first century and argues that there is, indeed, a relationship, albeit sometimes paradoxical, between autofiction and neoliberal selves. However, as Alison Gibbons (2017, pp. 117-118) warns, those that link the success of autofiction and life writing to a heightened individualism in which the self is commodified, should recognise "the particularities of self-construction in contemporary life writing" and how the entanglements of emotion within particular histories may reveal situated, subjective truths. Moreover, the intimacies of autofiction and autobiography are inevitably entangled with larger collective histories: Hywel Dix (2023), for example, insists on the connection of autofiction to cultural memory and reminds us that the individual narrations of self speak from, about, and to the cultural, social, political and historical contexts from which they emerge.

The link between self, memory, and the collective is particularly clamorous for the stories and histories narrated by women and, even more, in the case of those narratives that dwell on traumatic events and memories and on the internalisation of the violence inflicted in patriarchal societies. The literary works of Annie Ernaux, Sheila Heti, Maggie Nelson and Rachel Cusk, among others, delve into what it means to be a woman and question the expectations around femininity and the pressures that surround marriage and motherhood. The personal accounts of their pasts and the construction of female identities do not allow readers to forget how they are embedded in the systems and ideologies from which they transpire and introduce perhaps subtle but firm criticism of continuous methods of oppression. In film, directors such as Sarah Polley with *Stories We Tell* (2012) have framed the lives of women and family life through visual autofiction, to use de Bloois's term (2007), which investigates genealogies and what remains unsaid across different generations. Polley, according to Magali Uhl (2018), creates a sense of intimacy through the juxtaposition of multiple memories and a certain filmic metadiscursivity. For de Bloois (2007, par. 7), visual autofiction is characterised by the intensive use of “metonymy”, “meta-commentar[y]”, and the “proliferation of artistic selves, genre and media” that eventually reveal the author as a “palimpsest”.

This constructedness of layered authorship and selves is also found in autobiographical and autofictional comics, such as those published by Lynda Barry, Alison Bechdel, Marjane Satrapi, and Art Spiegelman. Their narratives exemplify what Charles Hatfield calls “ironic authentication” of the author/self and allow for “transgressions” and “metalepsis” as well as experimental and symbolic representations of memory (2005, p. 443). In her study of autofiction and trauma in graphic novels, Olga Michael (2018, p. 107) explains that “the fragmentation, reconfiguration and recapturing of past experiences in autofictional writings centralises authorial presence. It is the author's take on the past that structures both the narrating and the narrated ‘I’ [...]”, adding that “in comics, the split between the authorial, the narrating and the narrated ‘I’ is performed in exaggeration because of the visuality of the medium”. In addition, Michael (2018, p. 112) references Charles Hatfield (2005), who proposes that “comics, with their hybrid, visual-verbal nature, pose an immediate and obvious challenge to the idea of ‘nonfiction’”. Autofictional comics may thus grant yet another layer that can further address the blurriness of self and fiction and may also provide a link to what animated films can do with the genre.

Beyond literary works and real-image features, animation can provide new understandings to the definitions and forms of autofiction and visual autofiction. The very hybrid nature of animation, which for Cholodenko (1991, p. 14) lies on the theorisation of animation “as both a kind of film [...] and as an idea, concept or process”, may be fitting with the inherent hybridity of autofiction and its merging of fact and fiction. In addition, Jordi Sánchez Navarro (2020, p. 11) argues that animation is “characterised by a certain hyperconsciousness” (italics in original) that allows for greater creative and exploratory paths than industry real-life image films. Animated films, Sánchez Navarro (ibid.) continues to explain (following from Pau Well’s theory), promote complex juxtapositions and associations with strategies such as “metamorphosis, synecdoche or allegory”. Deborah Levitt, relying on Alan Cholodenko’s theories, further reminds us (2018, p. 64) that “animation has a unique ability to comment on conventional codes of figuration and representation, as well as to reflect upon the existential, perceptual coordinates they conventionally represent”. Animation allows a heightened level of abstraction that can bring to the fore complex realities and processes of thinking. This abstraction is tied by scholars such as Lamarre to “what Félix Guattari calls the abstract machine, which encompasses modes of social, economic, bodily, technical, and aesthetic operations that frame emergent structures of meaning and action” (Johnston, 2020, p. 16). As Johnston (2020, p. 18) reminds us, form and abstraction are politically charged and, thus, in combination with the forms of autobiography and autofiction, animation, with varying levels of abstraction, becomes a powerful aesthetic discourse.

Autobiography and autofiction promote discussions on the truths they portray and the memories they collect. Dwelling on memory’s impossibility to objectively recall the past, these genres playfully question the boundaries between fact/life and fiction and bring into light the creative efforts that autobiography and autofiction, as well as the constructions of memories, imply. The connections and parallelisms of autofiction and memory are, in fact, key to the understanding of the genre. Arnaud Schmitt (2022, p. 92) includes the “fallibility of memory” among his identification of the traits of autofiction (alongside metafictional elements, the use of retrospection and projection, and shifts in the use of tenses). Similarly, in opposition to the linearity ascribed to autobiography, Hywel Dix (2023, p. 17) explains that “autofiction is a term that refers precisely to those fictions of memory in which a linear timeframe is disrupted in the face of the subjective experience of both time and recollection”. The constructed selves and pasts in autofictional accounts cannot thus be perceived as a

stable thread, but rather as a juxtaposition of events that aim to explore the identities and meanings of a life.

Animation, in its frame-by-frame production, gives us a “constructed” world in contrast to the “profilmic world” of live action films (Husbands and Ruddell, 2019, p. 6; italics in original). Lilly Husbands and Caroline Ruddell (2019, pp. 8-10) further connect this constructedness to the way animation provides viewers with “the illusion of life” through movement and to animation’s inherent “capacity for depicting metamorphoses”, thus defining animation as “a constant state of becoming”. In a similar manner, in her study of memory and animation, Victoria Grace Walden (2019, pp. 81-82) also defines memory “as always in a state of becoming”, and further emphasises its “fragmentary” nature and deems it “incomplete, inaccurate, messy and subjective” within individual and collective histories. For Walden (2019, pp. 82-83), animation becomes a particularly apt medium to reflect the workings of memory through three key aspects: first, “the creativity and imagination that inform” both memory and animation; second, the way animation “foregrounds embodiment”; third, animation’s emphasis on “subjective reality”.

The connections between autofiction and memory in animation may be even more acute when the memories which are portrayed are, in fact, traumatic. Trauma narratives aim to speak about the unspeakable by recurring to fragmentation, ellipsis, repetitions, and non-linearity in often experimental forms that frequently work to piece together a shattered, wounded self. Shirley Jordan (2013, p. 79) speaks of the relationship between autofiction and trauma, and those narratives that revolve around “unresolved pain”, wounds, fractures and fragments. There are numerous examples of animated films that portray painful memories and complicated forms of remembrance. From *Grave of the Fireflies* (Takahata, 1988) to *Persepolis* (Satrapi and Winshluss, 2007), *Waltz with Bashir* (Folman, 2008), *Flee* (Rasmussen, 2021), and *Aurora’s Sunrise* (Sahakyan, 2022), animation has brought to the screen individual, social, and national traumas through both documentary and fictionalised accounts. Bauman’s *Rocks in My Pockets* largely follows the animated autobiographical documentary tradition through an “autoethnographic effort” to unearth a family history of psychiatric disorders and disabilities (Greenberg, 2022, p. 75) and *My Love Affair with Marriage*, while including at times a documentarised narrative, becomes a fictionalised exploration of the repressive, and often traumatic, discourses of patriarchy. As the following sections explore, Bauman places at the forefront of animated films female protagonists that question the modes of being in the world, play with the power of metamorphosis, and seek to work through the pain of traumatic memories and constant oppression.



### 3. Unlocking family histories and connected selves in *Rocks in My Pockets*

Signe Baumane's first film, *Rocks in My Pockets*, traces the director's family history over almost a hundred years with a narrative that navigates between past and present. Baumane, who is also the writer, producer and animator of the film, is one of the main protagonists, the narrator and focaliser, and the voice of her own story and history. The beginning of the film shows Baumane as one of the protagonists, with the voiceover of her authorial narrative, pushing a rock, in reference to the Sisyphus figure, against the weight of family history and depression. With an almost comedic effect, *Rocks in My Pockets* continues with Baumane trying to answer the question of how to kill oneself, drawing back to the image of her grandmother, Anna, on the river, dressed up and ready to drown but with no heavy weight to carry her down. From here, the film looks at the lives of women in Baumane's family who have been said to experience different mental breakdowns and/or killed themselves in an attempt to comprehend their own behaviour and pain. In this sense, *Rocks in My Pockets* may be closer to autobiography. Indeed, Slava Greenberg labels *Rocks in My Pockets* as an "autobiography in animation" and an "outstanding documentary about people with disability" (2022, p. 72). However, the use of animation to narrate this series of wounds, secrets, and diagnoses brings Baumane's story closer to autofiction. Arnaud Schmitt argues (2022, p. 9) that autofiction could, and should, be regarded as a form of "hyperbolic" autobiography and, through the animated style and narrative of the film, Baumane lays bare the fictionality of her creations that further question the reality in which the creator and the discourses of the film are embedded.

Baumane, as she narrates throughout the film, is interested in searching for the origin of a pain she cannot understand and thus she looks into the genesis of trauma and mental illness. Her quest in the film is presented as an inquiry into the truths of her family and, ultimately, of her own self. In an interview with Colette de Castro (2014), Signe Baumane explains that, for her, being bipolar meant she "can go from extreme acts of craziness and flamboyance to sudden deep depression". In one of the final sequences of *Rocks in My Pockets*, Baumane speaks of her pain as "a little needle [that] pokes me through the inside" (1:20:10) while she falls down through a black sky and descends into emptiness. This sequence comes after the film has presented the history of the other women in her family: despite having traversed space and time in the film in her search for comprehensibility, Baumane still portrays herself against the darkness of the present. But, as will be shown,

*Rocks in My Pockets* becomes a conscious act of retrieving the memory of these female relatives and further connections in the present.

The silence around some of the women in Bauman's family started with her grandmother, Anna, and her shameful affair with a married man which then led to an unhappy marriage and a descent into alienation and sickness, both severely aggravated through decades of being removed from the world due to her husband's jealousy and the hardships brought by occupation, war, and motherhood. Bauman's questions about her grandmother's cause of death are met with ambiguity. The grandmother's children refer to "a weak heart", "exhaustion", and a mistake with her dose of heart medicine (40:00), which, as Bauman explains, was diazepam, following the general medical prescription given in the Soviet Union at the time. But nobody mentions the possibility of suicide despite rather conclusive evidence. Bauman thus takes on the role of a practitioner/investigator who looks for symptoms and presents her arguments concerning her grandmother's suicide by recurringly showing her grandmother in the water in two alleged previous suicide attempts. Nevertheless, these attempts are acknowledged as temporary losses of judgement, which Bauman refutes by showing the images of a heart engulfed and later crushed by pills, thereby confirming the suspicion of Anna's overdose. This image of the heart and the pills will later find a parallel in Bauman's initial lack of a diagnosis; this time, however, it will be her head, rather than her heart, the one that is crushed by pills that are swallowed by her brain. In fact, when the film exposes the interior anatomy of her brain, Bauman places her grandmother at the centre, embedded in her own incomprehensible pain and still being a haunting presence.

The story of her grandmother and her death is represented as something to be kept under lock (38:05-38:15). The image and memory of Anna therefore becomes an example of the transmission of transgenerational trauma, theorised by Marianne Hirsch as well as Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. Hirsch (2008, p. 106) uses the term "postmemory" to define the "relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before — to the experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up". Abraham and Torok developed the concept of the "crypt" to speak of a similar process. Following psychoanalytic theory, the crypt is a repository of transgenerational trauma in which a shameful event is transmitted into the psyche of family descendants. For Abraham and Torok (2005, p. xxxv), "the crypt is enclosed within the self, but as a foreign place, prohibited, excluded". The animatic style of *Rocks in My Pockets* allows Bauman to expose



the crypt that is Anna's suicide within her psyche, and, together with her clinical approach, it allows her to work through her wounds and traumatic memories.

The shameful memory of Anna's death is further paired with her idea of freeing herself from the chains and pains of child-rearing by contemplating the possibility of killing her offspring. Bauman depicts her grandmother as a woman who longs for a sense of freedom that can only be redeemed with death. Beyond a potential diagnosis of clinical depression, *Rocks in My Pockets* alludes to the traumatic effect of the insidious oppression of women and shows how the depiction of women constrained within domestic spaces is inseparable from the collective discourses of patriarchy. Anna's longed freedom from marriage and motherhood is reiterated in her granddaughter Miranda, whose suicide attempt is depicted yet again as a struggle to liberate herself from domestic life and the shadow of the unmet short promises of youth. She is diagnosed with postpartum depression, which removes the shame of mental illness by justifying suicide as caused by a hormonal affliction, a physiological reaction rather than what was seen as a failing self. Miranda will eventually jump out of a window, guided by voices that lead her into a "dream fulfilled". Begoña Méndez (2020, pp. 55-56), in her study of women's internalisation of stereotypes and the ensuing hatred for oneself and others, reports how for some artistic women trapped within patriarchal societies suicide becomes "the great explosion, the definitive scream" that can relieve their pain and, somehow, cathartically free them. From a more philosophical perspective, Simon Critchley (2015, p. 29) defends the idea of conceiving suicide as a free act that should not be judged morally and argues that if suicide is justified "by uncontrollable behavioural factors like depression, we remove [the suicidal person's] freedom". *Rocks in My Pockets* grants Anna and Miranda such freedom and their radical acts of liberation stand against their forced domesticity.

The lack of freedom for the women in Bauman's family is depicted in the film by drawing domestic spaces in which they are going to be surveyed by family and society. The recurrence of these domestic spaces could be linked to Laura Mulvey's (2011, p. 27) argument that "women have a particular consciousness of their collective irrelevance to traditional accounts of history, as well as their collective absence from its construction". In this sense, and following Mulvey's vindications on "feminist filmmaking," Bauman uses the representation of complex domestic spaces and intimate narratives that are entangled in time and space as a feminist deconstruction of linear time and to analyse the location of traumatic spaces in which national and individual histories conflate. Bauman presents a dislocation of female subjectivity in the domestic spaces recurrently allocated to women. Through the

genealogical exploration of the confinements of home, patriarchy, and the misdiagnosis, Baume seems to follow Lesage's (1978, p. 509) contention that "women's personal explorations establish a structure for social and psychological change and are filmed specifically to combat patriarchy." But the women in her family, including her own self, are carefully monitored in a manner that may prevent any form of resistance, particularly that which comes from an artistic take on the matter.

*Rocks in My Pockets* underlines questions of gaze, looking inwards, vigilance, emptiness, and seeing one's own history through the familiar eyes of others. Baumanne denounces the voyeuristic gaze of patriarchy with a mimetic and metaphoric use of eyes. She draws female characters with characteristically bulky eyes and even the houses they inhabit are equipped with vigilant eyes. Under this gaze, they become lifeless subjects staring at a void and those with a creative drive, those who can see the world through the eyes of an artist, such as Miranda, see it curtailed by the demands of marriage and motherhood. And those who try to look at the world through medication only see it reduced and fixed. It will be the work of Baumanne, as a feminist filmmaker and diegetic narrator, that grants visibility to these women. And it is also her goal to explore the traditionally overlooked symptoms of mental illness in women.

In order to explore the psychological and psychiatric problems within her own self and her family, Baumanne uses scientific discourses and sometimes a documentary-like approach — perhaps essayistic would be more accurate. Towards the end of the film, Baumanne presents herself as part of an assembly line of symptoms, as part of a repetitive production process against which she struggles, and which strains her. She experiences "dread, pain, obsessive thoughts, confusion, guilt, and self-destructive behaviour" (1:22:50). Each of these symptoms is symbolically depicted as a rock with a gear with razors on its edges — an image that had previously appeared as contained within herself (1:20:29) — that pierce her. Baumanne's interests indeed verge on the clinical: the film features images of brains, dismemberments, and dissections, which will be much prominent in *My Love Affair with Marriage*. In this regard, thematically and aesthetically, *Rocks in My Pockets* could be considered as an autofiction that draws, not only from the documentary tradition, but also from the tradition of pathographies.

The personal and intimate opening up of self and family within a history of mental breakdowns, and undiagnosed and misdiagnosed disorders thus recalls Graham J. Matthews's examination of illness narratives and autofiction. For Matthews (2018, p. 125), autofiction constitutes a "consolation" against illness within the frames of official diagnoses:

Autofictions are able to heighten emotional engagement while signalling the artfulness of their construction. They extend the work of medical humanists by depicting the subjective experience of illness as it reaches beyond the restrictions of legal, historical, medical and scientific definitions of truth. Their ambivalent status allows for moments of fabrication without degrading the significance or impact of the narrative. (2018, p. 141)

The subjective focalisation of Baumane, framed within the larger family history and the erroneous diagnoses by the Soviet and Latvian systems, acts as a compassionate turn towards her own history of pain and that of the other women in her family. And her autofictional stance works, together with art, as consolation and salvation from the history of mental illness and death in previous and coetaneous generations. This stance connects with the view that films could potentially be therapeutic when they allow creators to deal with their own traumatic stories and histories, as Kraemer's (2015) analysis of trauma in *Waltz with Bashir* contends. Nevertheless, Baumane (in Bobrowska, 2022) explained that her films should not be considered as therapy, but the act of narrating the self and her family's history, releasing her from the chains of silence and stigmatisation.

Baumane portrays herself in the film as somebody who wills herself free through art and writing. *Rocks in My Pockets* may become in itself an exercise of this freedom: art liberates her from the constraints and expectations of patriarchy. In the film, she declares (56:50) that the only "alternative[s] to art" for her are "the nuthouse", "suicide", or a "medication" that she knows will numb her. While the process of creation and research into her own family history may prove therapeutic to some extent, as Greenberg argues (2022, pp. 75-76), Baumane does seem to "come to terms with her mental disability" yet puts forward an "antipathologization" discourse by emphasising the overreliance on fitting into a list of symptoms in psychiatric manuals and the medicalised solutions to disorders such as schizophrenia.

Art begs Baumane to live. In an interview with Olga Bobrowska, Baumane stated that "For me to tell a story means to be alive. I do make films to connect with other people, it's not therapy, it's hard work, and I'm not doing it for myself. Telling stories is like breathing". Thus we can see that, on the one hand, animation for Baumane works towards connecting, through remembrance, with others, confirming, as Walden (2019, p. 88) puts it, that "[a]s

animations often involve assemblages of objects and people in their creation and within their representations, they also draw attention to the complex, collaborative dimensions of memory. We do not simply remember on our own; rather our relationships with the past are shaped by our encounters with people, things, places and ideas”. On the other hand, the animatic filmmaking process for Bauman aligns with Jonathan Sturgeon’s (2014) view of autofiction not as a genre that deals with the blurred boundaries of fact and fiction, but rather dwells on “the question of how to live or how to create” (quoted in Gibbons, 2017, p. 121). Moreover, animation, as Ülo Pikkov (2010, p. 5) reminds us, etymologically derives from the Latin *anima* meaning “‘breath of life’, ‘vital principle’ or ‘soul’”. It could be argued that, if animation aims to “endow [...] lifeless objects with life” (Pikkov, 2010, p. 36), the films of Signe Bauman imbue subjects who have been rendered lifeless by sickness and oppression with the lives they were often denied.

The ideas put forward in *Rocks in My Pockets* can be further connected to Deborah Levitt’s (2008, p. 59) argument that “there is no death in animation, because there is no being — no existence — to begin with. There are no necessary limiting features, no essential finitude — everything is shadowed by its possible metamorphosis, erasure, and resurrection”. Bauman uses constant metamorphoses in the film and those women who killed themselves are brought back to life, resurrected from the ashes of ostracism. In this sense, the effort of retracing the histories of Bauman’s female relatives can be further connected to Florian Klæger’s explanation of the disruptive power of autobiographical acts of remembrance:

Memory provides the matter of mimetic representation, but it is also its stumbling block and a gap that is bridged by autobiographical diegesis. In terms of the mimetic performance of identities imposed on the historical I, autobiography affords the opportunity for highlighting and interpreting disruptive practices: the narrating I can explain to what extent their behaviour conformed to and subverted cultural norms, encouraging readers to imitate their example of imperfect mimesis. (2019, p. 335)

*Rocks in My Pockets* uses round, paper mache human-like figures that appear monstrous throughout the story until the very end, when the animation endows them with comic-like, friendly eyes and grotesque, yet inviting, smiles. Bauman’s voice narrates how this is the result of her efforts to seek other people who can keep her afloat, which started with her mother forcing into her the habit of getting out and listening to others. The film also uses images of threads that can kill the protagonist but also of broken threads that represent neuronal connections and become a path for the narrator to follow and mend with

fragmented pieces. And, ultimately, the film advocates for the establishment of connections with others as a way to navigate pain and suicidal thoughts.

#### **4. The chemistry of autofiction: gender, infatuations, and self-discoveries in *My Love Affair with Marriage***

Whereas *Rocks in My Pockets* may be more autobiographical in both tone and form, *My Love Affair with Marriage* presents the character of Zelma as the young protagonist of a story in which Baumane aimed to explore her second marriage to a gender bending man and to debunk the idea of romantic love (Aguilar, 2023). The road towards surveying this relationship in the life of Zelma, which is the very last relationship portrayed the film, is a long and sometimes meandering one. The film is divided into three parts/acts –inception, formation, reconsideration — that follow a linear chronology from birth to that second marriage. However, this linearity is interrupted by the discourses of two forces: patriarchy and biology. The former is represented by the songs of three winged fantastic creatures, a chorus of Greek sirens, that advise Zelma on what is expected of her as a woman and convince her of the power of romantic love to solve everything that is wrong in life; the latter is represented by a neuron that dissects genetical information, the changes in Zelma's body as she grows up, and brain chemistry when she feels desire and love. *My Love Affair with Marriage* thus departs from the non-linear narrative of Baumane's previous film, but thematically and formally works as a companion piece that highlights the disruptions of life as a woman through the impositions and disturbances that are involved in the formation of a female subjectivity. The playfulness of the medium of animation with different filmic genres and the creation of alternative spaces of creation and self-discovery will reveal the spaces for rebellion.

*My Love Affair with Marriage* incorporates elements from three key genres into the medium of animation: first, the film is a musical; second, it uses a documentary style through the character of the neuron, which narrates biological and physiological processes; third, it adopts an almost essayistic commentary on gender and social constructions around female identity, questioning as well normative relationships and the pervasive centrality of marriage. This hybridity will continuously draw attention to the blurred boundaries between the real and the fictional and allow for the experimental exploration of the construction and portrayal of self in autofiction. In turn, Baumane's animation and the emphasis on less realistic styles of representation parallel the artificial attempts of collective discourses to fabricate womanhood, femininity, and love and they connect with the tradition of female

filmmakers and theorist, such as Claire Johnston (1973) and Anne E. Kaplan (1983), who claim that subversive female filmmaking practices should depart from realism to precisely call into question the reality of women in a way that diverges from traditional discourses and that may unsettle viewers.

With regard to the use of the musical in *My Love Affair with Marriage*, Baumann explains that “animation and the musical are both very stylized forms of storytelling” and that music, particularly popular music, creates an aura around romance that invites women “to conform” (Brobowska, 2022). By choosing the three sirens as the lead singers for the musical features, Baumann underscores the seductive power of their voices. Nevertheless, the musical numbers in the film alternate between shaming Zelma for her curious and rebellious nature, expressing her fears of rejection and abandonment, and luring her into normative behaviour. The introduction of animated musical numbers in the film indeed reflects a heightened “constructedness”, which is typical of the genre (Smith, 2018, p. 89). Similarly, for Per Krogh Hansen (2010, p. 147), the musical genre “takes upon itself a declared artificiality”. The sirens are further animated in an increasingly surrealist style and their prescriptiveness and self-annihilating wishes should be thus read as artificial constructions.

Autofiction in *My Love Affair with Marriage* could be deemed a strategy of truth-telling against the lies women are forced to tell themselves and others so as to fit into societal and cultural ideologies around gender. In fact, Zelma identifies lying, from a very early age, with being “a good woman” (22:58). The opposition of the musical to the scientific and documentary tone of the scenes with the neuron works towards the deconstruction of internalised beliefs about feminine identities and heteropatriarchal ideologies. The nature of animation thus reveals a different way of understanding relationships and the world Zelma inhabits. In her study of animated documentary, Annabelle Honess Roe explains that

animation [...] shifts and broadens the limits of what and how we can show about reality by offering new or alternative ways of seeing the world. It can present the conventional subject matter of documentary (the ‘world out there’ of observable events) in non-conventional ways. It also has the potential to convey visually the ‘world in here’ of subjective, conscious experience — subject matters traditionally beyond the documentary purview. By releasing documentary from the strictures of a causal connection between filmic and profilmic, animation has the potential to bring things that are temporally, spatially and psychologically distant from the viewer into closer proximity. It can conflate history, transcend geography and give insight into the mental states of other people. (2013, p. 2)



*My Love Affair with Marriage* exploits that clinical eye that *Rocks in My Pockets* had already explored and takes it further by voicing that analytical view and combining it with detailed drawings of neuronal connections and ensuing bodily modifications. Yet *My Love Affair with Marriage*, through the repetitive, and often exhausting, use of the neuron as a diegetic narrator, cannot seem to unburden its story from a certain determinism, particularly when the struggle to understand romantic love from a more rational standpoint is housed within the traditionally irrational submission of women.

*My Love Affair with Marriage* is teeming with images of intimate spaces and the domestic: this is where Zelma is relegated to. She will find some spaces in which she can escape the discourses sung to her, but these will be secret nooks and crannies of the imagination where she can allow herself to be the creative and artistic being she longs to be. These are also the only places where she can sense some freedom, far from the maddening crowds that advise her to be ignorant, meek, orderly, and afraid of self-expression. In addition, the use of 2D animation in combination with 3D objects, locations, and backgrounds made mostly with paper mache parallels the blurring of boundaries between reality and the fictional and thus imbues the film with the very nature of autofiction, and further creates an almost uncanny, dissonant effect that, more often than not, denotes a nightmarish inner world and an oppressing external one. In this regard, Zelma's hiding will continue as she grows up and the domestic spaces she starts to transit and inhabit once her sexuality awakens soon turn into spaces of passive behaviour. She will move between these spaces and the symbolically charged dark corridors of the mind and of the society that entraps her. However, the act of both hiding her creative yearnings and being hidden away by patriarchal ideologies will provoke an animalistic shifting in Zelma. She will metamorphose into a furious feline when she fights and is frustrated with her relationships, a crying one when bodily shamed by her first husband, and into other animals together with her lovers.

The dichotomies in terms of gender that the film presents stand in opposition to the nature of the animation that Baumann creates, which seems to reject binaries in its blurring of textures, times, the human-like and the animalistic. Zelma will have a difficult time in realising her need to deconstruct the ideologies she has internalised for so long. It will not be until she falls in love and marries Bo after a very short affair that she finds herself replicating some warnings to Bo on his effeminate behaviour, very much like the sirens had done to her. By finally understanding Bo, her gender bending husband, and how she was replicating internalised gender biases, Zelma moves towards self-acceptance. It will be at this moment that she asks the three sirens to stop singing to her and she teaches them a new

song for this unlikely orchestra she will be conducting. This turn, together with the outlandish and exaggerated forms of the musical numbers by the sirens, may draw attention to the parodic and subversive potential of the film. In fact, Jessica Ford and Phoebe Macrossan (2019) explore some musical films and series produced within postfeminist media culture, in which “women’s bodies are a primary site of negotiation, debate, and contention”, and they examine how these bodies portray, through irony, parody, and pastiche, how “women are indoctrinated into a worldview that privileges heterosexual desirability and romantic coupling”. *My Love Affair with Marriage*, through the hyperbolic design of romantic discourse, shows this heterosexual coupling not only as an imposition, but as an attack that invades women’s spaces and lives. Zelma’s first marriage ends up being a relationship in which she is psychologically and physically abused, and she clings to art as she cuts the threads with her husband Sergei.

Zelma’s marriage to Bo is seen as a solution to the anxieties of both. When they move together to Canada for Bo’s work, Zelma is not permitted to work due to immigration laws. Staying within the confines of their house and seeing Bo transforming into somebody she suspects but whom she subconsciously recognises as feminine spark in Zelma a series of recriminations and she reproaches Bo his attempts to understand women. When Bo finally reveals to Zelma that he wishes to be a woman, Zelma starts to understand “the Other” and her own self (1:41:27). With this questioning and troubling gender, to recall Butler’s performative approach, the film will begin a process of defiance from a place of understanding and solidarity. The “desire for identity” as a woman, with its implications of fitting within the roles assigned by patriarchal discourses, are dismantled (Batkin, 2017, p. 91). Animation helps towards this goal because, as Jane Baktin (ibid.) continues to argue, “its artifice allows it to break rules, and [...] points to the ‘real’ and ‘not real’ in order to construct and define itself”.

In a final scene, the older Zelma travels back to embrace her younger self, disguised as a cat and fighting accusations of not being a girl. In an interview, Bauman explained that she is interested in capturing “humanism” and the “inequality between genders which breaks the intimacy — when one gender is made to believe they’re better than the other. I do believe that reaching through intimacy is like a magical ingredient to fulfil life — when you’re connected with other people in a meaningful way” (Bobrowska, 2022). In the film’s final sequence, Zelma has given a final embrace to Bo, but she no longer melts into him, as she has previously imagined with all past lovers. After seeing the both/and that Bo has dared to become, in opposition to the structures of the either/or, Zelma is able to reject the

dichotomies that her society dictated and step out into the world with a more conscious step. She may still be searching for another relationship, but she has finally understood that she can exert control over who she is and what she desires.

## 5. Conclusion

*Rocks in My Pockets* and *My Love Affair with Marriage* end in an analogous manner: with their protagonists, Signe and Zelma, metaphorically embracing former selves as represented by Signe's grandmother and Zelma's younger, rebellious self. Through these final images, Bauman's film asserts the autofictional desire to portray versions of herself in order to understand her psyche and behaviour and move towards a more compassionate relationship with her past and her present. Hence, both films emphasise the exposition of a vulnerable self under construction, confirming Margaretta Jolly's argument that "whereas autobiography was perceived as a 'transparent window to the past', in autofiction the window 'becomes a mirror and a scene of writing', and a shift emerges from the 'making' to the 'making up' of the autobiographical self (quoted in G. J. Matthews, pp. 86-87). The possibilities granted by the medium of animation accentuate the processes of constructedness of selves and for Bauman, as has been shown, this entails the opening up of bodies and psyches and the search for connections.

Art as well as meaningful human connections are shown to be the two key elements that can keep Bauman's female characters alive, animate, and both *Rocks in My Pockets* and *My Love Affair with Marriage* illustrate the nightmarish worlds which are created when these fundamental aspects of these women's lives are seized by the domestic desires of patriarchy. The repeated confinement of the female characters in the films to their houses and secret creative refuges render a disquieting inner world, a consequence of the external societal forces that completely annihilated them. Both films further make use of narratives that aim to understand the vulnerable psyches of women who could not escape such imprisonment and to give the contemporary protagonists a chance to understand hidden histories and seek those close, emotional bonds that allow them to survive.

The nature of animation bolsters a narrative that moves in between worlds, times, spaces, and selves. If, as Shirley Jordan (2013, p. 82) contends when analysing autofictional novels, "as a practice of the subject, autofiction exceeds the boundaries of discipline and media", the use of animated films to build the story of the autofictional self may further expand those boundaries. Animation allows Bauman to metaphorically offer these women the possibility of escaping their constraints and moreover allows viewers to explore in a playful manner

the border lines between fact and fiction in the construction of the fictional selves presented in the films. It is this use of animatic autofiction that allows Bauman to advance a groundbreaking affective form of exploring gender anxieties and mental health.

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