

Interview with Samara Chadwick



Samara Chadwick © Michael Chadwick

By Tara Karajica
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Born in 1982 in Saint John, Canada, Samara Chadwick has spent more than fifteen years working in the field of documentary filmmaking throughout Europe and North and South America, as a filmmaker, editor, and festival programmer. She holds a BA in Communication Studies and Liberal Arts from Concordia University in Montréal, an MA in Cultural Studies from the Freie Universität Berlin, and a PhD from Universidade Federal Fluminense, Università degli Studi di Bergamo and Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle. She has programmed films and conferences for HotDocs in Toronto, the 2ANNAS Film Festival in Rīga, the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro (MAM), and the Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art / 7th Berlin Biennale. In 2015-2016, she curated the Market Conference, Talent Lab and Kino VR programs of the Montreal International Documentary Festival (RIDM). Since 2017, she has been Senior Programmer for the Points North Institute and the Camden International Film Festival.

She talks to Tara Karajica about her first documentary, 1999, a subtle and intimate film that delves into the memories of a community to examine the wave of suicides that swept through her high school in Moncton in the late 1990s. The result is a film that unavoidably centres on suicide and grief, but also on love, memory and adolescence.

At the beginning of the film, one of your classmates asks you why you should bother remembering. So, why should you? How did 1999 come about?

Samara Chadwick: It's such a good question, and there are so many valid answers. From a wider perspective, I was interested in recent research on memory: the neurology of the ways we remember, the selectivity of the stories we retain and retell about our lives. I was curious how a moment, a trauma, that was massively collective – it affected everyone in the community – was rendered deeply individual and deeply isolating by the fact that silence was imposed. No one at the time spoke about how it had affected them, no one had really used words to describe the way their memories existed within them.

I saw the film, and the process of remembering that it invoked, as a proposal to break that silence, first and foremost. The taboo around suicide certainly contributes to its trauma – and, I believe, to its appeal. People carried so much guilt, sadness, and also anger and betrayal, within them. Speaking about these realities helped that weight dissipate. It also helps paint a much deeper and rawer portrait of the repercussions of suicide and self-harm, which often have a somewhat glamorous hue when portrayed on our cinema screens. It was important for me not to describe the deaths at all, but to describe the other memories that surround them and anchor our grief into our lives.

Was it hard to find people who were willing to revisit these painful episodes of their teen years?

S.C.: It would have been very hard if I had begun making this film without listening. Luckily, I had a beautiful team of producers, mostly women, who allocated a lot of time for me to be attentive and to work on positioning myself within this film. My very first development period was spent at a series of dinners that I cooked myself – and at times together with

these same exceptional producers – to which I invited people of the Acadian community – classmates of mine and friends – to come together and discuss, off camera, what it meant to them that I was making this film. I received a lot of feedback, in the form of concerns, expectations, fears, that helped me to structure how I was approaching this film.

I worked with about 50 people in total, including dozens of crucial people off-camera, to understand the scope of the story. The exercise of these meals helped to bring forward my own biases within the story, as well as to highlight which people had stories they profoundly wanted to share. Ultimately, the people that were on camera also understood the responsibility that they carried. They each had their own personal reasons for wanting to share their story with a wider public.

I noticed that the people who had left Moncton, our hometown, were not as willing to be filmed, and so I learned through them to build the story around their absence, as well as the many inherent absences in a story like this. I also learned through the people at the suppers that I needed to acknowledge myself as the person at the helm of this film, as the filter through which all these stories had passed. This is the reason we shot all interviews “through me” – with my head in *dirty frame* as people speak to me: this was a very directly visual way of asserting myself, subjectively, as the conduit into this film. I wanted to be clear that I was subjective and flawed as the narrator, and that the film was only one possible version among thousands of the traumatic events that affected so many.

Making this film has led me to be more intuitive and to trust my instincts. I think this is a key quality for documentarians: to know themselves and to articulate their impulses and, perhaps most importantly, to be attentive and also affectionate while filming.



Sarah in “1999”

There are so many taboos and such discomfort around the subject matter of suicide, and so it was clear to me from the start that the film I was making needed to feel comfortable, safe, and sincere. There were guidelines I set out based on my sense of comfort: to spend as much time as possible with people off-camera, to subject myself to the same process and questioning I was asking of them, to never push anyone to reveal or discuss something they didn’t want to share, and to have a small, gentle crew that was consistent and committed to the project.

In that sense, *1999* can be perceived as a collective healing journey you and your subjects embarked upon together, right? But, even so, how different the accounts and memories were?

S.C.: Precisely! The different accounts were a starting point for me. I began the film in a kitchen late one night, with an old friend from high school, as we finally spoke about how we experienced our adolescence. I was fascinated by the fact that he, someone who has been in so many of the same classes and spaces as me, had such a radically different account of that time. It’s as though our lives were parallel but in parallel universes. I was interested in the stories each of us had decided to keep from that time – and the details we unconsciously forgot.

These incomplete versions of events seemed so much richer to me than an objective description of fact: each person’s version of the story said so much about themselves, their personalities, and ultimately, in small and nuanced ways, the adults they have since become. The healing came by breaking the silence and breaking open the isolation we had each felt within our own story: by hearing many other people’s accounts, by sharing our own, we found a kind of release, a permission to grieve, a sense of community and belonging that had been compromised so long ago.

***1999* asserts its subjective point of view from the start and it does not investigate a phenomenon, nor does it aim to describe, blame or identify causes. Actually, it doesn’t ask your fellow students to rationalise or speculate on the reasons behind the deaths of your classmates. You never say how many killed themselves or why. Can you elaborate on that?**

S.C.: The idea of making an “investigative” film was deeply repulsive to me from the start. Our instincts to accuse, to ascribe guilt, to identify heroes and villains, is a deep cultural bias. It also stems from the same cultural bias that finds

suicide so unimaginable that it would rather pretend it doesn't exist, or, failing that, find a simple overarching culprit. We all experienced the horror of that way of thinking in 1999, when we were being diagnosed back and forth, a group of suicidal teenagers who were either under a curse, or under the influence of death metal music, or drugs, or bullying. There was a long list of silly rationalisations, but because we knew the different kids who died, we knew they didn't apply. None of these deceased friends fit the descriptions we were being told – they each had deep life stories and complexities and also hidden worlds that none of us could know. The thing with suicide is that the only person who knows the reason dies with the act. It was important for me to respect that – not their decision, per se, but their privacy. And their families' privacy. Once I decided I was not going to describe any of the deaths or name any of the names – except one – the film became so much more fascinating and also a lot easier to make for both me and the whole community.

But audiences demand closure...

S.C.: Yes, we never know how many people died. This reflects our own reality: I still don't know. No one I spoke to had a clear number of deaths. As I say in the film, some people said five, others said twenty-five children took their lives. The feeling in the school was of horror, disorientation. This is the main feeling I wanted to get across: none of us could keep track. And so the audience is invited to experience the story from our perspective, within the story. They are not granted the solace of that objective standpoint, because none of us were granted that.

One of the guidelines that I set for myself was that the audience will never know more than what we, as students, knew at the time. There's nothing more, there's no more information revealed than our experience. And, as a result, I feel the audience's inherent curiosity to find out the numbers, to explain, keeps the tension in the film alive. *1999* has a little bit of a thriller feeling, because people are inherently driven to try to explain, but the fact that their curiosity is never gratified keeps them attentive and on edge. A teenager I showed the film to at the very beginning pointed this out, saying: "because I was trying to figure it out I was really paying attention to all the details and it really brought me into the story and into the feeling of what it must have felt like for you, at the time." What's so impressive is that this message seems to come across clearly in the film. When I meet people and mention my film their first question is almost always: "how many and why?" But in Q&As after the film, no one has asked me "why?" – the questions I have answered are all so diverse, so nuanced, and so personal.

Your film draws on the individual recollections of members of a community and their personal photos, diaries and videos from that period. The moments when they search through their own archives and share their findings among themselves or with you are very emotional and result in everyone opening up. In a way, they reconnect with their "adolescent selves" and, unavoidably, with the tragedy associated with that period of their lives. Can you comment on that?

S.C.: Thanks for picking up on this! I only realised in the edit suite, with the film's magical editor, Terra Jean Long, that all the people in the film, including myself, were embodying our teenage selves. Perhaps because we were speaking Chiac, and often we were sitting in our bedrooms, surrounded by photos and texts from high school. Or it was perhaps because so many of these memories were being spoken aloud for the first time, they were preserved in the language and logic of our teenage years. Terra knew immediately how magical this was.



Samara Chadwick and Pablo Alvarez Mesa in the school Mathieu-Martin

And so one of the main surgeries we did in the edit was to preserve those adolescent selves. Half of the interviews I had filmed were with what we called "adults" – teachers, parents, psychologists, grief counsellors – people who were adults in 1999. During early rough-cut screenings, as soon as one of these adults came on to the screen, it was clear that, despite their vulnerability and beauty, they also carried a certain authority. The audience wanted them to be an authority, and that projection completely deflated the magical adolescent liminality present in the interviews with the "kids," the people my age. It was like the two generations could not coexist. When they were presented together, both of them became banal. The adults became too dogmatic and rigid in their attempts to decipher – they almost had too many words, too many emotions. And then the kids also became, in contrast, too naïve, and the enchantment of their experience was compromised. And so, we cut all the adults out. It was a really difficult decision, because there were some life-changing

interviews we had to cut, but the film is a very special one as a result. Most people who watch it experience an intense rush of their own high school memories, and an affectionate return to their own adolescent selves. I love that.

In that regard, memories and stories are refracted and articulated in different ways. By intertwining the contemporary interviews with grainy video footage shot by yourself and some of your classmates during your time at Mathieu-Martin, you invite your audience to make active sense of fragmented truths and memories. This editing and what you have just mentioned gives your film a certain flow and, I'd say, a unique power. You chose your film to be light rather than dark. So, in spite of its heavy subject matter, 1999 is a visually buoyant film. You also chose to make your film articulate grief and acknowledge the lost lives of your classmates through a prismatic aesthetic. Can you comment on that?

S.C.: I wanted the form of the film to reflect the content, and from the beginning I was interested in transparencies, in images that are abstracted, that don't tell you precisely what to see. I love that each person catches slightly different details within the film, much as I and my classmates have very different memories of the same events. The transparencies also allow the flow from one story to another like long fades in which visual elements from one story are still present in the next. It was a really fun way of working with footage that was already distorted by the archive.

The idea for the prism came when my sister discovered an actual prism from our childhood while we were going through our old boxes in dad's barn. I filmed her with the prism then, and we use this motif throughout the film. Terra and I wanted to create a palpable ghostly presence in certain scenes, and this is where we embedded the prism: in places that are haunted, where ghosts exist.

As Sarah, one of the main people in the film said after our hometown screening, the film is actually like a prism itself. A prism, she said, allows light to pass through and many perspectives emerge, like white light being refracted. It acknowledges the complexity and coexistence of these different narratives, different colours and perspectives.

Can you talk about the music and the haunting covers of popular songs of the 90s performed by Chiac artists as a way of paying homage to (the music of) that era but also evoking the distinctive cultural identity of its setting?

S.C.: The film was conceived with the idea of having a soundtrack, like all of our favourite films during the nineties. I asked Acadian musicians to reinterpret classic music from the 1990s in Chiac, our local dialect. We initially had music by Pearl Jam, Pink Floyd, the Cranberries, Radiohead... But I had no idea how complicated the rights landscape was for music! In the end, the rights for just one song, partial use, were going to be more than my entire director's salary for four years of work! So, working with lawyers, music supervisors, musicians, and the excellent composer/artist Cyril Hahn, we found creative ways of navigating the landscape of rights. Cyril worked intensively with me for many weeks. He is a very technical composer, and very talented! I asked him to compose the music by sampling only sounds we had recorded within the school, from both the archive and our present-day shoots. He did a phenomenal job, creating a ghostly soundtrack that is not too overbearing and also feels deeply embedded in the spaces.

We were also able to record quite a few cover songs that were popular at our school in 1999, including "Jeremy" by Pearl Jam, which is sung so hauntingly in Chiac by Vivianne Roy (Laura Sauvage). We spent many nights together, her and I, as well as with Gabriel Malenfant (of the band Radio Radio), Joseph Edgar (of the hit local nineties band Zéro Degré Celsius) and Julie Doiron (who played in the 1990s band Eric's Trip), translating lyrics into Chiac, playing our favourite high school songs, singing and remembering together. All these musicians are supremely talented and all of them are Acadian, from Moncton. It was such a treat to work with them, and they brought such heart and love to all the songs. I still cry every time I hear Joseph and Viv sing "Behind the Garage".

Can you talk about the Acadian element and how speaking in Chiac helped your subjects voice their pain and memories and how the complexities of this language helped them navigate their comfort zones?

S.C.: I love this question very much. I worked with my dear editor, Terra Jean Long, to build this film as an elegy to Chiac. I love this language I grew up with, and find it to be so deeply evocative, so musical, so social, so political in its ability to bridge the binaries of language that are ever-present in Canada today. I also loved the unexpected relief in people as I suggested they speak Chiac on camera. Chiac is an off-camera language: people can easily switch to their "proper" French when being interviewed, and generally do so, unconsciously. Asking people to speak Chiac was therefore less of an overt request, and more of a process of welcoming them into a place of ease, where they could say exactly what they were thinking. As Vivianne Roy, the angel-voiced musician who sings both "Jeremy" by Pearl Jam as well as

"Behind the Garage" by Eric's Trip on the soundtrack said, "when you speak 'proper' French, you feel the need to say the 'proper' things. Speaking in Chiac allowed us to say what was true."

1999 is also a meditation on adolescence, that cusp between childhood and adulthood when the realisation of a choice between life, death, rebellion comes. But, the year 1999 was also a cusp, the end of the millennium, the year of Columbine, the Year 2000 Problem, a pre-9/11 and pre-social media period... A kind of turning point – something you don't mention directly in your film. Why?

S.C.: I'm so glad you noticed this! I always felt the number itself, 1999, feels like the edge of a cliff: about to plunge into the unknowns of the next millennium. Having toured the film across different countries, it was humbling to realise that 1999, wherever it was in the world, meant massive, significant change. And for people my age, to have that historical shift occurring at the same time we were shifting into adulthood was a very significant experience. In a way, the anxiety of adolescence coupled with the anxiety of the time and exacerbated our disorientation, our nostalgia for childhood, for how things were. After all, this is a film about suicide, and the people I knew who died that year never experienced the shattering events that continue to mark our adult lives: the concept of terrorism, of the digital world. The concept too, of school shootings which continues to affect hundreds and thousands of lives in North America.

Your film is the first Canadian project to be given support from Eurimages. What did it mean for your film?

S.C.: It meant so much. This is a small film with deep reverberations. It was a huge mark of support for it to receive this prestigious funding. To be granted this privilege among so many other filmmakers I admire was a very significant vote of confidence for me, as I set out to make this difficult and emotional film. It was a film that defied industry standards in many ways – it is not an investigation, it doesn't have a clear plot or main characters, it is in a language only a few thousand people in the world can understand. And yet, we were selected for this grant, and it helped me to continue to make the film I believed in, to spend more time with people, off-camera, as we opened up and explored our grief, to pay musicians for their labours of love, to have a very deliberate and meticulous editing process. I'm so grateful to Eurimages for their trust in this film! I sincerely believe that without their support, the film's integrity might have been shifted. I am very proud of this work, of its sincere and collaborative nature, of the love people have brought to such a difficult topic. I'm very glad for all the unconditional support we were able to receive.

Can you talk about the situation of women in film? How is it in Canada? And, on the documentary scene?

S.C.: I sincerely feel there is a model of behaviour that is now becoming obsolete. When I first began working in the film world, it was much more densely populated with a certain archetype: people who took up a lot of space, and whose confidence was completely out of proportion to their contribution to the documentary field. Of course, many of these people were men, but it goes beyond gender: it is their world view that I find most upsetting. These are often people who have moved through the world without ever questioning themselves, and therefore operate without acknowledging realities other than their own. I find that these people's very presence in a space tends to flatten it, and their lack of humility and lack of curiosity is in my mind antithetical to the documentary practice, or at least it should be!

In the past years, there has been a distinct movement away from praising this type of person. In the spaces they have left open, so many new voices and approaches to documentary are emerging with such energy and power!

For this film, it was important – vital! – for me to work with exceptional and powerful young women from Terra the editor, to my producers Sarah Spring and Selin Murat at Parabola Films in Montréal, Aline Schmid at Beauvoir Films in Switzerland, to Kat Baulu at the National Film Board. I loved working with these women, and I loved how each had strong policies of transparency and models for true collaboration and respect in place. There was integrity and consistency throughout the process. Selin and Sarah even came to Moncton with me and cooked three meals a day for our small crew and anyone else that happened to be doing interviews with us that day!

There is a clear feminine element to the film: it is so clearly told through my perspective, and my perspective is female! And although many of the key people in the film are women, the few men are all such magical souls, and are all completely present. Everyone who contributed to the film had their own reasons for caring so much, and their love for the project and dedication is so palpable in the finished film.

You programme for the Camden International Film Festival that has, across all sections, half or more selections directed or co-directed by women, and is thus joining a growing push into gender parity in the film festival world. Can you comment on that?

S.C.: Women have always played key roles in documentary, though often behind the scenes. Editors are ultimately the sculptors of films, especially in documentary... They have key roles in the outcome of the film. There are so many women editors! To name but a few of my favourites: Françoise Collin, who edited the films of Jean Rouch and Jean-Luc Godard, Marie-Josèphe Yoyotte, who also edited for Rouch, as well as for François Truffaut, Jean Cocteau, and Eric Rohmer, and Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus, who edited nearly all of Werner Herzog's early films, everything from *Fitzcarraldo* to his sublime documentaries *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* and *Land of Silence and Darkness*.

There is something to be said about the historical invisibility of women filmmakers. Programming at parity is largely the work of making these efforts visible, of being aware of who was involved in a film's creation. It also allows the wider public to acknowledge, applaud, appreciate and make room at the cultural and cinematic table for the rich and varied contributions of women creators.

Presenting gender parity at this year's Camden International Film Festival was a natural and organic extension of the process of de-invisibilising certain types of labour while also making visible certain points of view that have historically been considered "neutral". No perspective is neutral! It is a mark of privilege to understand your perspective as such, because it undermines all the other experiences people have of the world.

For nearly a century, documentaries have allowed us to see the world, yes, but through the lens, mostly, of Western men. We should be excited at the idea that there are so many other vantage points to explore. As a culture, as audience members, as artists and collaborators in the industry – especially in the documentary industry! – we owe it to ourselves to imbue our industry with the attention and curiosity we invest in our films. It seems particularly paradoxical for an industry like ours to remain sequestered into the vantage points of the past: be it colonial, patriarchal, or otherwise outdated. As programmers and audiences, we can learn to embrace the many points of view that can be embodied by documentary, as well as the many audiences for whom documentaries can be made. Our ability to navigate these with openness can only be gratifying and emboldening.