

self-consciously performed for the camera. It is within and through performative methods that docusoaps and other forms of popular factual programming (see Chapter 10) constitute a significant recent revision of observationalism. Performance and observation interact to a heightened degree in contemporary gamedocs such as *Big Brother*, for example, in which an unrelieved observational gaze inspires and warrants a performative element. Observation is here extended to a form of provocation reminiscent of its operation in *cinéma vérité*. Where the makers of *Chronicle of a Summer* regularly gathered subjects together (typically over dinner) to draw out their responses, *Big Brother* routinely invites subjects into a 'diary room' for a focused session of questioning. In one way, the increasing prominence of performance within particular observational contexts tends to render moot, or at least mitigates, the early debate concerning the role of the camera in revealing or provoking essential, *unperformed*, 'truths' of human behaviour. In another way, however, an acknowledgement of the place of performance in contemporary documentary representation points to a reinvigoration of the debate concerning the possibility of filming people who, though openly aware of the camera's presence, display 'natural' or 'authentic' behaviour.

CHAPTER 6

The Camera I: Autobiographical Documentary

'I thought it was real'; 'I try to keep track of the days'; 'dear diary'. The styles and language of written autobiography are familiar to us. The expression of the self – through use of the first person 'I' – characterizes a written form which reflects and focuses various 'personal' or subjective issues and agendas. A move from written autobiography to filmed self-representation has extended the possibilities for the depiction of 'first person' topics and created new styles and forms available for such representation. In turn, new camera and sound technology has further contributed to the growth of the autobiographical mode. The camcorder diary, for example, is now a popular and expanding form of self-authored work which has impacted on the visual language of the autobiography, creating new visual styles that situate the viewer in an intimate relationship with the subject of the autobiography. Other issues beyond new camera technologies have impacted on the development of autobiographical film and video. The rise in various Western countries in the late 1960s and 1970s of social movements committed to promoting personal issues of sexuality, gender, 'race' and ethnicity have, by popularly expressing and thereby foregrounding these issues, contributed to the expression of self and identity in autobiographical forms of filmmaking.

The 'imaginative singularity' which we call our self (Smith, 1988: 101) is expressed in and through our thoughts and feelings. The intensely personal and individual subjective sense of self is not, however, inherent; we learn or develop such a sense of self as we grow and interact within society. In this way, our subjectivity,

rather than being inherently ours, 'a property that we own' (O'Sullivan, *et al.*, 1989: 232), is constructed from the numerous contending identities that are constituted by relations with others in particular social environments (Woodward, 1997: 39). These identities are expressed in various ways – 'student', 'woman', 'worker', 'mother', 'daughter', 'sister' and so on. As individuals interact in a community specific aspects of identity are privileged; in one context 'mother' may be emphasized, in another environment it may be 'worker' which is stressed. Thus, identity is not a unified category based on an unchanging, immutable or 'essential' identity. Rather, identity, in the singular, can be understood as a fluid and multiple condition composed of the sum of various identities which are defined through interaction with others whose identities are similarly changing.

Autobiographical texts attempt to represent, and thereby contribute to the construction of, an author's identity. One theorist of the autobiographical form, Paul Eakin (1992: 67), emphasizes the centrality of identity to the autobiographical project when he argues that both print and visual autobiographies take the 'constitution of identity ... [to be] the genre's characteristic, even defining goal'. Within the informing context of the construction of personal identity, this chapter examines self-authored film and video through reference to selected autobiographical works produced over the past 20 years. The works examined include *Sherman's March* (1985), by Ross McElwee, a film in which McElwee complicates the idea that the autobiographical text is a simple reflection of the authoring self by adopting a persona through which he 'performs' an identity. A different kind of work, Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory* (1991), a record of her Japanese American family and their experience of internment during the Second World War, connects personal memory and identity to social history within a form of experimental autobiography. Finally, questions of self-authorship, identity, and the visual grammar of camcorder autobiography are examined through reference to works in the video diary genre.

***Sherman's March*, performance and autobiography**

Documentary has traditionally presented itself as work capable of objectively reporting the world. The documentary emphasis on

objectivity has aligned documentary with other soberly objective methods, particularly those of science and journalism which have typically been applied to the exploration, explanation and documentation of others – the poor, the disadvantaged, the politically disenfranchised, or the 'exotic' (Ruby, 1978: 7–8). Autobiographical documentary constitutes a profound rewriting of such approaches. The assertion of subjective and personal points of view and the representation of one's self, family and culture, forces a significant revision of an objective, externalizing, documentary practice.

Prior to the relatively recent expansion of the autobiographical mode in its various film and video formats, certain strands of personal and autobiographical non-fictional filmmaking existed alongside the canonical works of an objective documentary tradition. Home movies, and their documentations of family and individual concerns, have long been a repository of personal and subjective filmmaking. The rise of *cinéma vérité* in the early 1960s offered another form for the expression of subjectivity. As pointed out in the previous chapter, Jean Rouch's *cinéma vérité* techniques deployed the camera as a way of provoking personal and private revelations from the film's subjects. Rouch's *cinéma vérité* was not, however, an autobiographical cinema – Rouch's subjects, not Rouch himself, revealed their intimacies on film. Working with many of the interactive positions established by Rouch, Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* extends Rouch's *cinéma vérité* into the realm of the autobiographical.¹

Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* carries the lengthy subtitle *A Meditation on the Possibility of Romantic Love in the South during an Era of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation*. Together, title and subtitle encapsulate strands of a narrative which simultaneously records McElwee's travels through the South in the steps of the Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman, his anxieties and fears of nuclear war, and his romantic relationships with a number of women he meets on his journey. Each of these strands is amplified through a variety of references into major themes within the film. Sherman and his military career, for example, feature in numerous direct and indirect ways. McElwee visits Civil War battlefields and fortifications and reads from Sherman's journals, identifying with various aspects of Sherman's experiences. McElwee notes that Sherman liked to paint portraits of women and he recognizes that his film is a portrait of a number of women. Further, McElwee directly evokes Sherman's presence by identifying with Sherman's

physical appearance and many of his character traits, pointing out that, like Sherman, he is an insomniac prone to bouts of melancholy. In one scene, McElwee becomes Sherman's Southern alter ego by dressing in the uniform of an officer in the Confederate Army to attend a costume ball.

References to Sherman's career and visits to various Civil War battlefields open the theme of warfare which is broadened in a number of allusions to nuclear conflict. McElwee encounters armed survivalists readying themselves for a nuclear war with the Soviet Union, antinuclear protesters and people hoarding food in preparation for impending nuclear attack. On a number of occasions throughout the film McElwee recounts a childhood nightmare of nuclear holocaust inspired by witnessing the detonation of a hydrogen bomb while on holiday with his parents in Hawaii. As he states in the film, the nightmare is a reflection of his emotional condition, an indicator that his 'love life' is not going well.

The 'possibility of romantic love' is established immediately after the film opens as McElwee explains in voice-over that his current girlfriend, Anne, has left for a former boyfriend. Returning to his family home in Charlotte, North Carolina, and from there heading south tracing Sherman's march to the sea, McElwee encounters a childhood friend, Mary, who is modelling in a local fashion show; Pat, an aspiring actress, whom he follows to Atlanta; Claudia, who is planning to live in the mountains with other survivalists; Winnie, a linguist working on her PhD on an island off the coast of Georgia; Jackie, an old girlfriend who is active in the movement against nuclear weapons; Deedee, an administrator at a girl's school introduced to him by his friend Charleen; Joy, a nightclub singer; Karen, a friend from high school, now a lawyer and Pam, his music teacher in Boston. Though seeking 'romantic love' McElwee's attempts to understand the women he meets typically end in his frustration at his inability to maintain a lasting relationship.

McElwee's failures in this regard are reflected in his reference to his 'psychosexual despair' and his allusions to his damaged masculinity. At a Highland games gathering he comments wistfully on the virility and strength of the men participating, characteristics which he seemingly lacks (Arthur, 1993: 129). The actor Burt Reynolds, his 'old nemesis', appears as a figure of masculinity whom McElwee is restrained from approaching. Sherman's military successes stand in opposition to McElwee's indecision and apprehension and romantic failures. Interestingly, these comments

on his masculinity, at once comic and pathetic, serve, ultimately, to subvert, rather than assert and validate patriarchal male identity. Although McElwee's film raises the issue of the relationship between the camera and male power, McElwee's masculinity is displayed as vulnerable, insecure, and far from confident in ways which thus mitigate the assertiveness of the male gaze. Against Sherman's heroism, McElwee's mock-heroism is bathed in masochism, the result of unreciprocated affections (Fischer, 1998: 338). A telling scene in this regard shows McElwee sleeping alone in a tree house on an island off the Georgia coast, attacked by 'bloodsucking cone-nose' insects while nearby Winnie sleeps with another man.

In his own synopsis of the film McElwee draws attention to a different set of concerns which overlay the themes outlined here:

It is a non-fiction documentary story in which I shape narratively the documentary footage I've gathered during a serendipitous journey through the South. My film is a story in so far as it adheres to the autobiographically narrative line of a return home followed by a mutedly comic quest in which, repeatedly, boy meets girl, boy chases girl, boy loses girl. It is documentary in so far as all the people, places and situations appearing in the film are all unscripted and unplanned. (quoted in Schwartz, 1986: 13)

McElwee's description highlights the border area of fact and fiction, story and documentary, which the film occupies. The references here to story and romantic quest centring on a comic male figure (shades of a character in a Woody Allen film) are placed against statements concerning the film's status as a documentary. As the narrative progresses the film moves away from a documentary style into openly performative moments in which McElwee adopts a specific persona, thereby pointing to autobiography as an act in which the author 'performs the self'.

Sherman's March opens with a piece of traditional expositional filmmaking. Across a map of the southern states of the United States an animated arrow crawls south and then northeast, tracing the route of Sherman's Union Army as a voice-over (which, in a nod to McElwee's cinematic predecessors, is spoken by Richard Leacock, a founder of direct cinema) provides a commentary on the army's march through the Southern states. At the end of the segment McElwee's voice is heard off-camera asking 'want to do [the narration] once more?'. The admission of McElwee's

authorial presence within the self-reflexive disruption of established expository conventions suggests a film that is willing to expose its own methods by way of enhancing its self-revelations.

In the following scene McElwee walks back and forth across the space of a New York loft apartment as he recounts in voice-over his recent past – his trip from Boston to visit his old girlfriend, Anne, who has since returned to her former boyfriend, and his plans to make a documentary on Sherman's military campaign. McElwee is here taking the viewer into his confidence, explaining the situations that led to his decision to make a documentary on Sherman, introducing us not to the documentary, but to his current predicament and his thoughts on making the Sherman film. Through this method *Sherman's March* is positioned as what has since become a popular documentary form – a film about the making of the film. Such works promise to take us 'behind the scenes', a method which, as with its use in rockumentary, suggests access to aspects of identity normally reserved from the prying camera. McElwee reinforces this suggestion through an interactive form and provocative method which resembles Rouch's *cinéma vérité*. Indeed, McElwee like Rouch conceives of the camera as a catalyst, one which 'sparks a response from people I'm filming. It takes me places I wouldn't ordinarily go, not just geographically, but emotionally and psychologically with the people I'm filming and with myself' (quoted in Lucia, 1993: 37). According to McElwee, 'You're after something with the camera. You're often not even sure what it is moment to moment' (quoted in Lucia, 1993: 34). Beyond a certain similarity of method, however, Rouch's *cinéma vérité* and McElwee's film are different in many ways, not the least in the level of self-revelation achieved in the varying approaches to the subjects. Whereas Rouch is able to draw out Marceline's wartime experiences, for example, the depths of the subjective feelings of the women are revealed, ironically, in the fact that they elude McElwee's attempts to represent them.

Though McElwee may use the catalytic potential of the camera in a way suggested by his sister ('to meet women'), the women he encounters are, interestingly, only partially realized in the film. McElwee somewhat voyeuristically films women in intimate moments such as dressing and applying makeup, but their intimate selves remain beyond his attempts to document them. Jackie sits in a boat with her back to McElwee and refuses to discuss her pain over their relationship; Winnie, too, backs away from

disclosing her feelings as to why she left McElwee. Other friends and lovers merely depart, without explanation. During a tense personal exchange with McElwee, Karen asks him to switch the camera off, a request that suggests that her most honest feelings and expressions are made off-camera. This is an especially difficult moment, not only because McElwee ignores Karen's request and continues to film. McElwee recognizes that, as he suggests in the film, 'filming has become the only way I can relate to women'. In these terms, to stop filming Karen at this moment would mean he could not relate to her (though to continue filming as he does, he is faced with Karen's silent disapproval).

Like the other subjects of his film, McElwee himself is only partially revealed in *Sherman's March*. In one way 'Ross McElwee' disappears within the character of Sherman; McElwee identifies with Sherman to the point that he interprets his insomnia and melancholy in terms of Sherman's, not his own, character. In another way 'Ross McElwee' remains hidden behind a particular comic persona that he constructs for himself in the film. Aspects of this persona are established within what he calls the 'almost literary voice-over' through which he chooses to present certain information about himself. McElwee stated that:

...the Ross McElwee who's presented in the film is not a completely rendered Ross McElwee. I don't say everything about myself that I could be saying. I don't tell you everything that's on my mind. I'm creating a deadpan persona. Perhaps I create a heightened sense of depression, heightened in an attempt to attain some sort of comic level. I'm creating a persona for the film that's based upon who I am, but it isn't exactly me. (quoted in MacDonald, 1992: 282)

By adopting and enacting a persona, McElwee pushes his film towards the realm of performative documentary, those works constructed around a performance by the filmmaker (Bruzzi, 2000: 154). In such works the filmmaker's performance becomes the focus of attention replacing, to a degree, the ostensible topic being represented. An early example of this approach is Michael Rubbo's witty film *Waiting for Fidel* (1974). Rubbo originally conceived of the film as a portrait of Fidel Castro; however, through his inability to make contact with Castro, the film reflexively focuses on Rubbo and his numerous attempts to interview the Cuban leader. In the United Kingdom the performative mode has been adopted by Nick Broomfield (*Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam*, 1995, *Kurt and*

Courtney, 1998, *Biggie and Tupac*, 2002, and others) and in the United States by Michael Moore (*Roger and Me*, 1989, *Bowling for Columbine*, 2002, and other works).

McElwee's performance, and the distinction between the 'two Ross McElwees', subtly subverts the assumption that autobiography provides direct access to the author's 'real' identity, while at the same time it points to the complexity and mutability of individual subjectivity that refuses reduction to a singular unified identity. The purposive and self-conscious reflection on self enacted within McElwee's performance also draws attention to the fact that while autobiographical films appear 'natural' and spontaneous they are often very carefully constructed works produced for specific public consumption (Dovey, 2000: 41, 45). McElwee's performance, like Dylan's in *Don't Look Back*, and like the 'virtual' performances (Nichols, 1991: 122) of subjects in docusoaps and contemporary 'gamedocs' such as *Big Brother* (discussed in Chapter 10), points to the centrality of self-conscious performance within a documentary tradition that stretches back to Flaherty's 'stagings'.

History and Memory: experimental autobiography

The cinéma vérité approach adopted by McElwee in *Sherman's March* is transcended in 'post-vérité' works of 'new autobiography' (Renov, 1989 and 1999c), among them Rea Tajiri's innovative autobiographical portrait *History and Memory*. Formally, Tajiri's video is a hybrid of documentary and experimental elements, and its autobiographical focus is informed by the recent historical concerns with identity mentioned at the opening of this chapter. From the 1970s onwards a number of groups within society have demanded the right to speak on their own behalf. The women's movement and the gay rights movement, for example, have brought a range of 'personal' issues – including gender, sexuality, 'race' and ethnicity – to widespread attention. In turn, these issues have been politicized within the struggle by women, gays and people of colour to express freely and publicly aspects of identity. The resultant so-called identity politics (which have been rallied under the slogan 'the personal is political') have revised existing political structures and been expressed in new forms of political and media representation. In many cases the forms of visual representation constructed around the issues emerging from this context have, as

in the case of Tajiri's work, drawn on both documentary and avant-garde cinemas.

In the United States, the avant-gardist New American Cinema, a term used to refer to experiments undertaken in the 1960s by a group of loosely aligned filmmakers, explored new forms in the representation of selfhood. Exemplary of the new connections, the personal films of Stan Brakhage and the diary films of Jonas Mekas, central practitioners of the New American Cinema, combined formal experimentation with autobiographical documentations in ways which influenced and informed filmmakers throughout the 1970s in America and elsewhere. Recent autobiographical documentaries have also drawn on avant-gardist traditions to reveal varieties of ethnic and women's experiences. Laura Marks (1994) uses the term 'hybrid cinema', a form concerned with the histories of minority social groups, to refer to such work. Hybrid cinema is constituted within a mixture of documentary, fiction and experimental genres which, Marks argues, characterizes the film production of cultures and peoples in the process of creating identities (1994: 245).² In her analysis of the newer forms of documentary representation Julia Lesage (1999: 311) argues that what she calls feminist experimental autobiographical films and videotapes concentrate on the lives of women of colour in works which reformulate relations between 'women's mind, body, emotions and history – especially family history'.

The emphasis in the accounts of both Marks and Lesage on the expressive and evocative documentation of (changing) identities as a central component of recent visual autobiography is extended in the 'memory work' undertaken in *History and Memory*. Annette Kuhn in her book *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (1995: 4) argues that memory work has the potential to integrate public and private spheres thereby incorporating and linking history and memory:

... as far as memory ... is concerned, private and public turned out in practice less readily separable than conventional wisdom would have us believe ... [I]f the memories are one individual's, their associations extend beyond the personal. They spread into an extended network of meanings that bring together the personal with the familial, the cultural, the economic, social and the historical. Memory work makes it possible to explore connections between 'public' historical events, structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and 'personal memory'.

Rea Tajiri explores the connections outlined by Kuhn within a work which integrates documentary and avant-gardist traditions of filmmaking, the personal and the familial, individual and communal concerns, by counterposing memory and history and the dense layers of textual articulation in which both are encoded. The tape mixes a variety of sources – including reconstructed scenes, written text, photographs, extracts from feature fictional films, wartime government documentaries, and home movies – to construct a history of the experiences of Tajiri's Japanese American family during the Second World War. The family story narrated through the diverse sources is one of displacement, internment and resettlement, which begins in 1942 with the family's removal from their home in California and their internment in Poston, Arizona. Despite the fact that her father was serving in the US Army, Tajiri's family, together with 110 000 persons of Japanese descent, was interned for the duration of the war on the basis of government fears that Japanese Americans posed a threat to the United States fighting a Pacific war with Japan.³

It is the experience of displacement and internment that motivates Tajiri's attempt to understand her family's past and her own place in that history. Tajiri comments on this process in voice-over:

I began searching for a history, my own history, because I had known all along that the stories I heard were not true and parts had been left out. I remember having this feeling when I was growing up, that I was haunted by something, that I was living within a family full of ghosts. There was this place that they knew about. I had never been there, yet I had a memory of it. I could remember a time of great sadness before I was born. We had been moved, uprooted. We had lived with a lot of pain. I had no idea where these memories came from, yet I knew the place.

In a complex and highly structured way, *History and Memory* draws on differing forms of 'evidence' to re-create history and to retrieve the memory of the past Tajiri knows only as a haunting absence. The history of the era is recorded in film sources which include Department of War Information films and clips from newsreels. Such 'official' versions of history are extended in popular representations of the period such as John Sturges's 1954 fictional film *Bad Day at Blackrock*.

Against the well-documented popular and official records of the era, Tajiri relies on fragments and shards of memory to construct a counterhistory of displacement and internment suffered by a

generation of Japanese Americans. In the absence of a photographic and filmic record of life under internment (the US government banned the unauthorized use of cameras in the camps) the objects and drawings produced by her mother and grandparents in the camp are recycled in Tajiri's work as unique records of her family's experiences during this time. Standing in contrast to the images of official and popular history, memory is encoded in the printed words which appear on the screen. The tape opens with an evocation of a scene that was not documented visually and hence which only exists in memory and the words used to describe it. The tape begins with a scrolling text that describes a scene viewed from above:

... slowly, very, very slowly the ground comes closer as the tops of trees disappear. The tops of the heads of a man and woman become visible as they move them back and forth in an animated fashion. The black hair on the heads catch and reflect light from the street lamps. The light from the street lamps has created a path for them to walk and argue.

The text continues, informing the viewer that the scene which has just been described is that witnessed by the spirit of Tajiri's grandfather who observes Tajiri's mother and father argue about their daughter's unexplained nightmares twenty years after the bombing of Pearl Harbour. Past and present interact in this evocation of three generations of the family. It is a scene which can only exist in memory, and one which is, since Tajiri was too young to remember it herself, reconstructed from hearsay. The scene brings into focus many of the central elements of the tape: family, memory, (reconstructed) recollections, images whose referents can only exist in memory or in the form of reconstructions. Soon after the opening scene Tajiri recounts another 'memory' which she knows only through other people's recollections:

I don't know where this comes from, but I just had this fragment, this picture that's always in my mind. My mother, she's standing at a faucet, and it's really hot outside. And she's filling this canteen and the water's really cold and it feels really good. And outside the sun is just so hot, it's just beating down. And there's this dust that gets everywhere and they're always sweeping the floors.

The image is that of the mother in the Poston internment camp. Tajiri's 'fragment' is accompanied by a brief visual image – not an

image of Tajiri's mother, but an image (since no original exists) of Tajiri re-enacting her mother filling a canteen at the dusty and dry internment camp. In the search for the meaning of this powerful and provocative 'ever-absent image' (as it is described in the voice-over), Tajiri will reconstruct her family's memories and in the process find herself and her identity as a member of a family which is aligned with a wider Japanese-American community whose members also share the experiences of displacement and internment.

Tajiri's determination to reconstruct her family's history is intensified by her mother's wilful forgetting of her painful past. All that her mother remembers of the period of wartime internment is 'why she forgot to remember'. Tajiri cleverly evokes the 'image' of a suppressed memory when she states, in references to the internees: 'There are things that only people who were there saw', a statement which is accompanied by a blank screen. In her attempt to re-create her mother's experiences Tajiri supplements scraps of memory by visiting the camp at Poston in which her mother was forcibly interned. As a record of this visit, Tajiri intercuts her own photographs of the disused and decaying barracks in Poston with clips from the film *Bad Day at Black Rock*, a story of the search for clues to the murder of a Japanese-American man named Kimoko. Tajiri deploys the search for Kimoko in Sturges's film as a metaphor for the missing histories of her family and the other Japanese Americans held in Poston and other such camps. Tajiri comments in voice-over: 'Kimoko's disappearance from Black Rock was like our disappearance from history... Somehow, I could identify with this search, this search for an ever-absent image and the desire to create an image where there are so few.'

Tajiri's desire to find an image of this particular past is extended through the inclusion of an extract from the Hollywood internment drama, *Come See the Paradise* (A. Parker, 1990). The clip is screened against stills and propagandistic footage from the war period as Tajiri's nephew reads his openly critical newspaper review of the film. In the juxtaposition of word and image the Hollywood film is situated as another work that is incapable of adequately representing the missing history of the Japanese-American experience during the war. The notion of disappearance and absence suggested by the images from *Bad Day at Black Rock* and *Come See the Paradise* is extended in the fact that the family home was removed during the war – 'requisitioned' for use by the US Navy – an ignominious event that compounded the family's sense

of dislocation. The disappearance of the house, and with it, aspects of the family's memories, functions as a metonym for the erasure of the history of Japanese-American experiences during the Second World War.

At the end of the video, as Tajiri surveys the arid land around the Poston camp, she states in voice-over:

I've been carrying around this picture with me for years. It's the one memory I have of my mother speaking of camp while I grew up. I overhear her describing to my sister this simple action: her hands filling a canteen out in the middle of the desert. For years I've been living with this picture without the story, feeling a lot of pain, not knowing how they fit together. But now I've found I could connect the picture to the story. I could forgive my mother her loss of memory, and could make this image for her.

In her search for the record of her family and that of the Japanese-American community, Tajiri retrieves and reconstructs once lost memories, and in the process comes to understand her past and the collective past of generations of Japanese Americans. As the voice-over highlights, the tape becomes a gift for her mother and to herself in which the pain of a neglected past is assuaged. The video is also a documentation of Tajiri's realization of her sense of self in her identity as daughter and *sansei* (third-generation Japanese-American). In this way, Tajiri's tape is a document not of a fixed identity, but of an identity in process – Tajiri's cumulative and progressive working toward an understanding of the familial and collective past and 'who she is' in relation to this past. In documenting this process the tape also documents the basis of autobiography – the *desire* to record identity. Alexandra Juhasz explains this formulation by noting that, 'The point is not that by shooting a video you lock yourself, your identity, into one place, but rather that you work on it, that you are self-consciously aware that there needs to be an identity there' (1999: 208).

Video Diaries: problematizing self-authorship

In contrast to the complexity of the interaction of image and identity operating within the independently produced gallery-exhibited videotape *History and Memory*, television has traditionally offered few spaces for autobiographical work (Dovey, 2000: 110). Recent changes

in technology, productive practices, and access to broadcasting have altered this situation to a degree, creating opportunities for an expansion of representations concerned with documenting aspects of self and identity. Specifically, increased access to television programming, coupled with the arrival in 1985 of cost-effective moving image technology in the form of the camcorder, have extended the intersection of image and identity on television through the broadcast of autobiographical work in the 'video diary' format.⁴

In the United States a number of such works have been broadcast within the Public Broadcasting Service series *POV* ('point of view'), a slot established for self-authored programmes which, as the title of the series suggests, are openly subjective. Works within this category are marked by the first person voice of the testimonial and the confessional modes in the form of the 'personal essay' documentary (Aufderheide, 2000: 215). First person video developed in the United States from a basis in social activism and investigation in which video was used as a tool to document social problems. *POV* was established to support work of this type, subsequently shifting its emphasis to the personal essay documentary, many of which examine pressing personal issues within the context of a focus on aspects of identity. *POV* documentaries have included *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (1993), a video diary by Mark Massi and Tom Joslin dealing with their last days in their fight with AIDS, Alan Berlinger's *Nobody's Business* (1996), a portrait of his father, the third in his trilogy of family history, and *A Healthy Baby Girl* (1997) by Judith Helfand, an autobiographical account of cancer.

POV extended its commitment to first person documentary through the *ECU* ('extreme close up') project, which, in turn, developed into the PBS video diary series *Right Here, Right Now* (2000). The series provided non-professional videomakers access to the equipment and services needed to produce and broadcast their diaries. Prior to the series, access in the United States had primarily been a practice associated with cable television, particularly in the form of community-produced programming broadcast on local cable stations (Engelman, 1990; Blau, 1992; Kellner, 1992; Aufderheide, 2000). In both the PBS series and the example of community programming, 'access' implies a situation in which people previously excluded from media production obtain the means of producing their own media which, in a further way, present a diversity of views to that otherwise available in the dominant media.⁵ In the case of *Right Here, Right Now* access to the relevant

technology enabled the production and broadcast of a number of video diary records of various significant experiences, including teenage motherhood, coping with hearing loss and the experience of growing up in two cultures. The rise of interest in first person work was exemplified in 1993 when the publicly funded Independent Television Service, established by Congress in 1989 to promote diversity in public broadcasting programming, noted that proposals to produce personal essays made up the largest single category of submissions received by the service at that time (Aufderheide, 2000: 216).

In the United Kingdom, the BBC's Community Programmes Unit has provided a space for the exhibition of autobiographical work, notably in the form of video diaries broadcast within the *Video Diaries* series. First broadcast on BBC2 in April and May of 1990, the series proved enormously popular and led to another camcorder-based series *Teenage Diaries* (1992). The *Video Diaries* format has been emulated in other countries, including Australia's *First Person* series of autobiographical works, which was first broadcast in 1996. Among the programmes broadcast under this banner are *Killing Time*, one man's account of his 17 years (half his life) spent in jail, and *Body and Soul*, a record produced by Bernice, a transsexual living in rural Australia. The first two series of Britain's *Video Diaries* (the second series of 10 programmes was broadcast in 1991 and 1992) included among other works, photographer Jo Spence's record of her life with leukaemia; soccer fans travelling to Italy to attend a World Cup match; the life of a prisoner convicted of armed robbery and South African exiles returning to their homeland. Subsequent series were equally diverse, including the diaries of an Antarctic adventurer, a disabled Member of Parliament and a young musician suffering from Asperger's syndrome.

In each case the representation of an identity is, through the broadcast of the diary on national television, displayed before a wide audience. The irony of individual, private moments expressed nationally points to the way in which identity in the era of camcorder videos and broadcast television connects directly with the public collectivity that is the nation. This is not to argue, however, that the *Video Diaries* concept supports the thesis of the collapse of public and private spheres in the electronically mediated domain. The circulation of the diaries suggests, instead, the realization of an effective private sphere within the mediated domain that is the public sphere.

The intersection of private and public, individual and collective, associated with the *Video Diaries* series is also apparent in the further irony that these 'autobiographical', nominally self-authored works, are the result of a collective process of production. The production practices associated with the autobiographical mode in the era of access television underline the way in which *Video Diaries* problematizes basic notions of autobiography by raising questions concerning the degree of autonomy that diarists are able to command in the authorship in production of the works. Jeremy Gibson at the Community Programmes Unit alluded to the degree of professional intervention in the postproduction phase of a video diary when he commented that 'Your ego, and your attitude and approach can come across from the rushes in a very off-putting way that an outsider wouldn't like. It's our job to identify that and try and turn the diarist to take a less egocentric approach ...' (quoted in Wayne, 1997: 65). Jon Dovey (1994: 165) highlights the place of the professional in the production process when he comments:

Crucially, access programming is made under the editorial control of the accessee or author, who has the final say; not the producer, series editor, commissioning editor or any of the numerous supremos in the media hierarchy the programme-makers usually have to satisfy. For this power to be in any way meaningful, the authors should have control over the whole process of representation. In practice this is rarely possible ...

As Dovey points out, each video diary is the result of collaboration between the amateur video diarist and various people possessing professional skills in video production. Peter Keighron (1993: 25) notes that professional input occurs throughout the production process of each video, particularly the editing stage, which is heavily informed by the technical assistance provided by the producers. The intervention by a professional broadcaster in the post-production process threatens in this case to erode the understanding that autobiographical works are self-authored. The video-maker's personal points of view are present in the final edited video, though the degree to which the work is the result of self-authorship is, arguably, compromised in the context of television.

Ironically, the 'anti-professional' or amateur quality of the video diaries compensates to a degree for any compromises to the authenticity of the works resulting from the involvement of professionals. Amateurism is encoded in a visual style which operates in

association with the first person point of view to position a work as a self-produced, less manufactured, more truthful expression of the autobiographical impulse. The visual language of authenticity is articulated within effects which bear the traces of amateurism, including low resolution shots, images in which the subject may appear off-centre, variations in lighting, imbalances in sound levels, voices from behind the camera heard on the soundtrack, a narration composed of on-the-spot reactions spoken on camera by the diarist, and editorial cuts produced in camera which do not necessarily align scenes. Such a language has, as Patricia Zimmermann (1995) has pointed out, traditionally been associated with the self-produced low-resolution home movie/video that in its virtually exclusive focus on familial relations, establishes and reinforces a connection between amateur video and subjectivity. In this way, questions concerning the degree of self-authorship in the works screened in the *Video Diaries* series are displaced by the host of meanings attached to the term 'amateur video' and its associated visual style which functions to legitimate and authenticate the autobiographical, subjective, component of the works.

Video Fool for Love: the visual language of camcorder autobiography

The visual styles expressed within the *Video Diaries* series contribute to a certain recognizable language within the camcorder diary format which is now deployed in a variety of contexts to signal authenticity and the personal mode. One of the more significant contributions to the mode is the feature length *Video Fool for Love*, a camcorder diary kept by Robert Gibson, a professional film editor living in Sydney. *Video Fool for Love* (1995) is reminiscent of McElwee's *Sherman's March* in its self-portrait of the romantic entanglements undertaken by a self-described 'serial monogamist'. Gibson, though, is more explicit (and narcissistic) in his self-revelations and confessions than McElwee, including in his tape, for example, a scene in which he proposes marriage sitting naked in a bath, and a segment in which he talks to camera as he enters an operating theatre to have his vasectomy reversed.

Gibson's willingness to document the most intimate aspects of his life approximates Dennis O'Rourke's similar act of excessive self-exposure in his film *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1992). O'Rourke's controversial autobiography depicts his act of purchasing the services

of a Thai prostitute, Aoi, whom he films during their months together. In many of the sequences involving Aoi, O'Rourke is also positioned in frame, the dual subject of the film. Nearly a third of the shots of Aoi are made as Aoi, seated, speaks into a mirror which reflects O'Rourke standing behind her filming the scene. The method constantly positions O'Rourke as the authoring presence who structures and manipulates the representation. O'Rourke acknowledged his degree of intervention in the structuring process of the film when he called his film a 'documentary fiction film', one which relies on certain techniques of the traditional documentary but which, as O'Rourke puts it 'nevertheless, clearly asserts its own aesthetic – one which is recognisable as being related to the fiction film' (O'Rourke, 1997: 212).

In a similar way, the appearance of 'spontaneous' moments and a life that is messy, even chaotic, is achieved within Gibson's film through a tightly structured narrative that bears elements of the fictive. Unlike 'slice of life' video diaries, Gibson's film recounts a story, replete with characterization, causation and plot. At the beginning of the film Gibson is in love with the impetuous April, whom he films – as with all those who enter his life – relentlessly. Their relationship is one of emotional outbursts followed by lengthy sulky silences. This pattern of behaviour is an intimation of what follows: April leaves Gibson, travelling to London to be with friends. Two days after April's departure, Gibson falls in love with Gianna, though he soon follows April to London and proposes to marry her. When April travels to Europe, Gibson returns to Sydney and Gianna moves in with him. Having discovered the situation, April plans to disrupt the romance. Gibson evokes April's destructive wrath through television footage of the Gulf War, then in progress, and symbolizes April's attack in the form of Scud missiles striking Iraqi targets. To defend themselves from April's vengeful onslaught, Gibson and Gianna decide to marry – as Gibson documents what becomes an increasingly troubled and disintegrating relationship with Gianna. The film ends with Gibson finding a new lover, Cindy.

Gibson fills his romantic narrative with particular 'characters'; his voice-over comments describe Gianna as his 'holy grail', Caterina, Gianna's friend whom he suspects of plotting against him is the 'black witch', and his new lover Cindy is his 'guardian angel'. Despite Gibson's reductive verbal identifications, the images reveal identities which overflow any strict categorization. In an astute reading of Gibson's film, Jon Dovey (2000: 74) outlines

the dimensions of various identities defined in and through relations with others present within the work when he states:

within the terms of his own fabulous narcissism, [Gibson] presents himself as *at once* loving, arrogant, romantic, sexist, duplicitous, vulnerable, idiotic, addicted, confused, jealous, violent, conciliatory, happy... As to the other main characters in the film, April and Gianna, they again are portrayed in a constant state of flux: nobody stays the same, feelings change... The film offers a view of the subject that is at once emotive and sentimental in the necessary manner of the 'human interest' story, but which, in contrast to the conventional genre, refuses to offer the comfort of unified, coherent accounts of subject identity. The typical video diarist is messy, contradictory, difficult, opinionated, narcissistic *with* a good story to tell.

The mutable and contradictory identities represented in *Video Fool for Love* reflect what Dovey nominates as the film's central feature, its 'formal fluidity' (2000: 73). This feature is evident in the way Gibson treats his footage as completely malleable, to be cut and re-cut, and inserted in different scenes, or used in an associative way to construct and complete a scene. The latter method is exemplified in a scene in which Gianna and Gibson talk of the night they visited the tally room during a national election. Gibson then 'flashes back' to the incident by cutting to footage they both filmed that night. Though released in 1995, Gibson's diary is composed of taped footage shot from 1983 onwards. As such, the diary contains segments of varying image and sound quality, each segment reinforcing the passage of time (a central feature of a diary) and Gibson's changing personal experiences.

The fluidity with which the footage is treated is extended through the camcorder's portability – a camera that can be handed from one person to the next – resulting in images shot by Gibson and images of Gibson shot by others, a mark of difference between a camcorder video work and the less portable and less user-friendly film camera. Gibson also holds the camcorder at arm's length to film himself in close-up, a popular characteristic technique in the video diary format. Dovey notes that the shot creates 'high levels of identification with the film-maker. Aiming the camera at yourself, using your own body to record your own body, you, the diarist, whisper into the lens.' The effect is a different form of connection with the viewer than that achievable in traditional representational techniques: in the shot's 'separation

of foreground and background I am given to understand that as an individual viewer I have been chosen for privileged information which the rest of the scene is not party to. I am being brought much closer, intimately closer, to the diarist and his or particular subjective experience' (Dovey, 2000: 72–3).

While *Sherman's March*, a work which inaugurated many of the techniques adopted by Gibson, includes a number of scenes in which McElwee, sitting alone late at night, talks directly to the camera, such scenes are statically arranged and bespeak a certain amount of preplanning. In these ways McElwee's to-camera dialogues resemble the 'talking heads' mode of expository documentary (albeit that McElwee is, in each case, speaking in a low whisper). Gibson's to-camera pieces, in contrast, spontaneously capture various moments (as when he films himself on a hospital trolley awaiting his vasectomy reversal operation), replete with ambient sounds and background action. The effect intensifies viewer identification with the diarist, and opens the diary up to otherwise unrecorded and unrecordable thoughts, contextual details and effects. Drawing on such techniques, Dovey (2000: 76) points to a number of significant qualities of *Video Fool for Love* which, he argues, mark it as a paradigm of the first-person-based camcorder documentary form: its focus on individual relations in domestic settings; a form of self-reflexivity focused on the work's authenticity (a process exemplified in Gibson's self-conscious comment to Gianna in his film, 'I'm trying to turn us into a media event'); and the shocking effects achieved through a voyeuristic and unrestrained self-exposure.

In these ways, the paradigmatic features of the camcorder diary displayed in Gibson's work, and the visual language in which they are expressed, suggest an emergent 'grammar' of the expanding diaristic mode (Dovey, 2000: 71). The grammar of the video diary, coupled with the range of forms and practices displayed in the work of McElwee and Tajiri, constitute a set of formal features and productive practices which begin to situate first-person records of identity as a central form within the established field of documentary film, video and television. From this position, autobiographical documentary examines a range of subjective issues within the field of what are, otherwise, the objective concerns which conventionally occupy documentary representations. As such, autobiographical documentary reflects the rise of 'the personal' to a place of prominence in contemporary social life, a situation which, in turn, points to the continued expansion of autobiographical forms.

CHAPTER 7

Finding and Keeping: Compilation Documentary

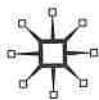
The compilation filmmaker is a collector and an editor who creates an object – a film or television programme – from a variety of so-called found footage. Footage that can serve as the basis of the compilation film includes, among other sources, newsreels, television programmes, government produced films, instructional films, home movies and fiction films. From among these diverse sources the compilation filmmaker constructs a work that in its 'pure' form is composed entirely of archival footage, devoid of interviews and voice-over narration. The pure form of compilation film has been encoded in definitions such as: 'the compilation film is a documentary made solely from already existing footage. The filmmaker may never use the camera, functioning primarily as an editor, presenting and analysing new footage (made by others for other purposes) through juxtaposition and ordering of material in the editing process' (Sobchack and Sobchack, 1987: 355). This definition, with its emphasis on a film constructed solely from existing sources, reflects the approach to compilation film taken by film historian Jay Leyda (1964) in one of the few book-length studies of the form in which he characterized the process of compilation as one in which 'films beget films'. Though many definitions foreground 'pure' works which contain only archival footage as the pre-eminent form of compilation, found or archival footage has been recycled in other compilation works. Notably, the interweaving of archival footage with interview footage and a voice-over narration is a common feature of contemporary compilation forms on television.

Documentary Screens

*Non-Fiction Film
and Television*

Keith Beattie

palgrave
macmillan



© Keith Beattie 2004

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 4LP.

Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The author has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published 2004 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN-13: 978-0-333-74116-0 hardback
ISBN-10: 0-333-74116-1 hardback
ISBN-13: 978-0-333-74117-7 paperback
ISBN-10: 0-333-74117-X paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3
13 12 11 10 09 08

Printed in China

*For my mother, and to the memory of my father,
Reginald Joseph Beattie (1922–1998)*